

Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Coronavirus and Scotland, HC 314

Thursday 14 May 2020

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Mhairi Black; Andrew Bowie; Deidre Brock; Wendy Chamberlain; Alberto Costa; Jon Cruddas; David Duguid; Sally-Ann Hart; John Lamont; Liz Twist.

Questions 1-59

Witnesses

I: Alister Jack MP, Secretary of State for Scotland; Douglas Ross MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary at Scotland Office; and Gillian McGregor, Director, Scotland Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alister Jack MP, Douglas Ross MP and Gillian McGregor.

Q1 Chair: I welcome you to the Scottish Affairs Committee's first evidence session on coronavirus and Scotland. Today we are joined by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Alister Jack. With Alister, we have Douglas Ross, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland. With them is Gillian McGregor, director of the Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland. Welcome to you all, and to all of you who are witnessing our proceedings today.

We will kick off with you, Secretary of State. We do not have much time. You gave us only two dates, either today or the end of June, and we have you for only an hour and a quarter. I will ask you to make a very brief—with the emphasis on brief—introductory statement, then we will get straight to questions, because there are lots of things to get through.

Alister Jack: Thank you, Chairman, and I congratulate you on your reappointment. I welcome all that the Committee will do. You will be relieved to know that I am not going to make an introductory statement. It was going to be 15 minutes long, but I have canned it in the interests of brevity. I must apologise in advance that I do have to go to an interdepartmental Government Ministers meeting, but I can probably give you another 10 minutes—I have managed to get a little bit of leeway at the end, so that is good. I will not be wasting your time with my 15-minute introduction, so I think we should just crack on.

Q2 Chair: Excellent. That is most satisfactory. Thank you for that, Secretary of State. What we particularly want to look at in this inquiry is the four nations approach, how well that has operated, the issues that have arisen and what there is in the way of operational independence for each nation. Given what we have observed this week, with the divergence between the UK Government and the Scottish Government, have we really got anything in place that we can call a four nations approach, or is it more like a three nations approach with the UK Government doing its own thing for England?

Alister Jack: No, I think that is very unfair. It is absolutely a four nations approach. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister have said that they intend to continue with that four nations approach and they support it. As you know, there was a divergence at the weekend over the messaging, and some disagreement over timing. Everyone has a different opinion of what their R number is, which is fine; although the R number is scientific, it is created from a broad range.

We are still pooling our resources and expertise and we are co-ordinating, but we completely respect the right of the devolved nations to move at a different pace if they need to. That can be nationally, regionally or locally, because as we come out of this, I suspect that we will see spikes in the



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virus that we will have to tackle, with the alert system, regionally, nationally and locally, as I have said.

I still attend a lot of meetings with officials and Scottish Government Ministers, almost on a daily basis; we are still working together. Going back to what John Swinney said at the beginning of the week, anonymous briefings do not really cut it. The reality is that we are working well together and co-ordinating well together, and we are taking a responsible approach across the UK towards defeating this virus.

Q3 Chair: Thank you for that. If anybody was observing proceedings and what has happened in the course of the past few days and concluding that there was a four nations approach—surely something as important and significant as leaving lockdown would be firmly agreed by all four Governments, and would not just involve the UK Government unilaterally doing something on its own.

Alister Jack: The short answer to that is that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and I attended meetings last week with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and the Prime Minister spoke to the First Ministers, and their officials obviously had meetings. It was made very clear that we were going to change the messaging. The detail and context of the messaging change was to be left to the communications experts, but the fact that a change was coming was made crystal clear. Everyone knew a change was coming. The First Minister said she had not been consulted on the message, and that is correct, but many Government Departments were not consulted on the message, because the message was for the communications experts to bring forward.

However, we had to acknowledge that we wanted to change people's perceptions. "Stay at home" is a very strong message, and it was hugely successful—more successful in the United Kingdom than anywhere else in the world, with more than 90% compliance. The decision was taken that we need to get people thinking about going back to work. Staying alert was the message that was brought forward, but it was to change the nuance and the psyche of people as they face moving into different environments.

Change causes confusion, but equally, when you do not change the message—I will give you an example. The devolved nations did not change the message, and in Scotland we went from people being able to go out for another piece of exercise to their being able to go out and exercise as many times as they want, but still with "stay at home" as the message. That could be arguably confusing, and there is evidence that people found that confusing.

On a more light-hearted note, in Wales there is a golf course with three holes in England and 15 holes in Wales. You can walk as often and as much as you like around that golf course's 15 holes in Wales, but you cannot take your golf clubs or hit a ball. The message in Wales is "stay at home", yet you can walk around that golf course all day if you want to, so long as you do not hit a golf ball.



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- Q4 **Chair:** I am sure that is a fascinating example, but I want to explore with you a little how the UK Government's "stay alert" message should apply to Scotland. You previously said that Scotland should be completely "in lock step" with the UK. I presume that you are not telling us that any more. Are you, in effect, saying to the Scottish people that they should just ignore the UK Government's alert warning and stick very carefully and closely to the instructions of the Scottish Government?

Alister Jack: I am saying that they should stick very closely to the instructions of the Scottish Government. Health is a devolved matter, and it is entirely a matter for the First Minister to determine the messaging. However, I still maintain that, in all the stakeholder meetings I have had—Minister Ross has had many as well—the message is consistent, not only on behalf of workers from the Scottish trade unions but also from the business organisations that we have spoken to: they would like one unified message, so that there is no confusion.

If we can get the R rate to fall a bit faster in Scotland—I think Scotland is only a few days behind; I have seen the numbers across the whole of the UK, by nation and by region—I would say that within a couple of days, Scotland can catch up. Certainly within less than a few weeks, Scotland can catch up, and we can hopefully all move forward with the same messaging and the same guidelines across the UK, because that is what keeps people on the straight and narrow—when they can see consistency.

- Q5 **Chair:** Could you tell us a little more about what "stay alert" actually means? We will forgo the experience of the Welsh golf course. I went out for a walk yesterday. I am usually quite an alert person. I am pretty certain I was staying alert. Is there anything in particular I should have done? When the Prime Minister was asked what this meant, he said it was about exercising good old British common sense. What does that mean? Are there people in Scotland whose common sense is more British than others?

Alister Jack: Luckily, from the Government data that we have now for over the last week and the focus groups, the British public are showing that they do have a lot of common sense because they completely understand what it means. It means exactly what the First Minister has been saying for the last few days, which is remain vigilant. Stay alert and remain vigilant are exactly the same message. You should only go to work—I am giving you the English message, not the Scottish message now—if you can't work from home. You should apply all social distancing when you are at work. You should be working in a covid-safe environment, obviously. You should continue to wash your hands and do all the other sensible things that we have suggested, but you should stay alert to the risks. It is as simple as that.

- Q6 **Chair:** Do you not agree that the Government has made a pig's ear of this new messaging? Looking at the scenes yesterday from London, where we saw packed trains and buses, is this new messaging not just putting at risk all the good work that the "stay at home" message achieved?



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Alister Jack: We deeply hope it isn't. We have asked Sadiq Khan today to put on many more tubes. We need a lot more trains running to deal with that problem and we are tackling that issue today. Again, I hope we do not see a spike. We have to, at some point, make some baby steps. I would make one point, and it is a point that Scottish Government Ministers have made as well. Although there has been a lot of noise in the media about this, the differences between the UK Government and the Scottish Government are absolutely miniscule, and that is an important point to make. That point has been made not just by me, but also by John Swinney. We want to pull out of this together. We want to work together. We want to co-operate together. I believe we will, and I believe we will defeat this virus as one United Kingdom.

Q7 **Chair:** Lastly, you said that you would be in your place for Scottish Office questions on Wednesday. What is your advice to the rest of us Scottish Members of Parliament about travelling to London to be at that session? We understand that the UK Government is going to end all the virtual proceedings next week, with the expectation that we should all just therefore turn up to Parliament; there will be no more remote voting, so if we are going to exercise our democratic right, we will have to turn up. Surely, as the Secretary of State for Scotland, you must have some view about this. What risks do you think that presents to us and our staff?

Alister Jack: I don't think it is next week that it is going to end, but I will be corrected on that if it is the case. Chairman, I agree with you, or the nuance of what you are saying. I don't think Scottish Members of Parliament should be going into Westminster next week. The Speaker wants to have Ministers at the Dispatch Box. He cannot conduct questions without a Minister in the Chamber, for fear of failure in the virtual proceedings, but it is certainly the case that when Parliament does go back, it won't be 650 Members crammed together; it will be 50 members only sitting in Parliament and social distancing being observed. I can't speak to the timing of that. That is a matter for the Speaker and others—the House authorities and the Leader of the House.

As to next week, I am going to London, because it is my duty. As you acknowledged on the radio this morning, as an MP, we are all key workers, so if I have to travel, I will travel. As you say, you would rather be in bonnie Perthshire, and I would rather be in bonnie Galloway for the whole experience. But that is not possible because I have to be at the Dispatch Box.

Chair: Thank you, Secretary of State. We now go across to Sally-Ann Hart.

Q8 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Good afternoon, Secretary of State. I just wanted to explore a bit your comment that everyone knew that a change was coming. There had been discussions, but Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, says that she heard about the UK Government's new "stay alert" message from the media and she was not consulted on that message. Was there an issue with communications? Should she have been informed of that particular message? What went wrong there with



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communications, if anything?

Alister Jack: As I said to the Chair in answering his questions, I do not think anything went wrong, as such. We highlighted to the devolved nations that we would be changing the messaging. What we did not do—as Nicola Sturgeon carefully worded it, she was not consulted on the change. It was not the case that her officials and Ministers, and even her from the meeting that I attended, didn't—we knew there was a change coming, but as to the wording and the detail of the change, that was not shared across Government Departments. That is no different from how the Scottish Government will operate. There are things that you work on behind the scenes to work out the detail on, and then make them public.

Can I ask one question? I do not know why, but on my screen, I am not seeing Minister Ross. Is he with us?

Q9 **Chair:** Douglas, are you there? I don't think he is, Secretary of State. We will try to get him back on.

Alister Jack: I have noticed quite a few go blank—that's Alberto Costa back—but it would be nice if we can get him back, because he has some specific points he wants to make. Anyway, fire away.

Q10 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Obviously, everyone knew a change was coming. Did the UK Government realise that they might be sending a different message from Scotland if Scotland was sticking with "stay at home", or was it a surprise to you to find that Scotland was sticking with the "stay at home" message? What steps could or should have been taken to minimise any potential confusion there? Lastly, one could say the "stay alert" message is a small step to perhaps encouraging people to become more confident in going out and about, because at some stage, we are going to have to ease restrictions and get people to become more confident in going out. I just wonder how the "stay at home" message in Scotland is going to help people to become more confident.

Alister Jack: You make a fair point, and I go back to the point I made earlier: we need to slowly move people's thinking from "stay at home" to "stay alert", or remain vigilant, because it is the case that if the R number stays below 1 and continues to fall, we are going to start to open up the economy, and we have to open up the economy if it is safe to do so. Clearly, saving lives is at the forefront of everything we are doing, but once we are confident that we are doing that, saving livelihoods comes next. That messaging—it is clear that the changes are happening in England. I hope that they will happen soon in Scotland. We did want the devolved nations to come with us on the change in messaging, but they made it clear that they weren't ready to do that and the Prime Minister, in the conversation he had with the First Ministers, completely accepted that that was their choice to do so.

I saw the director of the Scotland Office put her finger up—I think she wants to add something, possibly. In better news, Minister Ross is back.

Q11 **Chair:** We have got Douglas back. Over to you, Gillian.



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Gillian McGregor: Thank you, Chair—I hope you can hear me okay. I just want to amplify what the Secretary of State was saying about the messaging. It is true that it quickly became clear that the First Minister of Scotland was going to stick to the “stay at home” message. What I would underline is the fact that underneath the two messages—“stay alert” and “stay at home”—the actual building blocks for them are not that much different. Speaking as someone who is managing an organisation that operates both in Scotland and England, we were able to work out pretty quickly that it still means that if we can work from home, we will, and that is what we are continuing to do.

As for the other step that we took, the First Minister made a specific request that the “stay alert” messaging should not be pushed through in the Scottish media and that is something that we as an Office have tried very hard to respect. So, for example, on our website, when we are communicating issues about covid-19 or other subjects, we have taken care to provide the necessary and appropriate links to Scottish Government guidance, and to make sure that our website does not have the “stay alert” messaging on it, respecting the First Minister’s position.

Q12 **Chair:** Great. Thank you for that. Is that okay, Sally-Ann?

Sally-Ann Hart: Yes. We will call it a day, to fit people in. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much for that. Now, we are going to cross to Mhairi Black.

Q13 **Mhairi Black:** Thanks, Chair. Everything that we are hearing so far is saying how things became clearer in the aftermath—it became clear that the First Minister was sticking to the original health advice. I am just wondering what considerations were made prior to the Prime Minister’s statement as to the fact that he was broadcasting advice that was effectively irrelevant to three out of the four nations.

Alister Jack: Mhairi, it was not clear in the aftermath; it was clear beforehand. We knew a few days before Sunday. Indeed, on Sunday morning, I cleared with the Cabinet Office, ahead of Cabinet and ahead of COBRA, that the UK Government’s messaging would be for England only. To be absolutely correct, what I cleared was that it would not be for Scotland, because the Scottish Government had made a request that any change in messaging would not apply to Scotland. I said that was absolutely the right thing to do, and that we would respect that. It is part of the devolved settlement, and it is right that we do that. Even before Cabinet met on Sunday, that decision had been taken.

Q14 **Mhairi Black:** So why was it broadcast throughout the whole of the UK, if it was advice that was for England only? If it was going throughout the whole of the UK, why was the Prime Minister not making clear that his advice only applied to England?

Alister Jack: In terms of the change in the messaging, that part of it did only apply to England, as you correctly point out. I think it did cause some confusion, and that is where the press, over the next couple of days, sought to clear things up. However, the message from the Prime Minister



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was very much one that we were moving on to a new phase. He did respect the devolved settlements; he made it very clear to the First Ministers that we would all move at different paces. I think you are talking about the broadcast on the Sunday evening, and I accept—I think we have all accepted—that that could have been more specific, but we were very quick to make that clear. The UK Government were very quick to make the position clear immediately afterwards.

- Q15 Mhairi Black:** That is helpful, thank you. My last question, just quickly. The evidence that we heard suggested that the Government's scientific pandemic influenza group on behaviours, which obviously feeds into SAGE, were not consulted about this "stay alert" message. If the scientists were not providing the advice, I am wondering who was. You have already said that it was communication experts, but when we have Government Back Benchers and Ministers on the telly giving conflicting advice, clearly something has gone wrong there. Are there any reflections on that?

Alister Jack: The only thing I would say is that the scientific pandemic influenza group were involved in all aspects of the plan to adjust the measures. As I said earlier, they were not involved in developing the actual communication message; that was done by the communications team, and they obviously would have tested those different messages to find out which one cut through with the public. However, in terms of the fact that the change was coming, the SPI, as they are known, were absolutely up to speed on that, every step of the way.

- Q16 Mhairi Black:** I know I said that the last question was my last one, but if I could have one last one, Chair, it would be about this issue. When we have this situation where the First Minister and all the devolved nations are saying, "Look, we don't know what this means. We weren't spoken to about this," is there a reflection that maybe the meetings that took place were not enough, and that there has to be some kind of transformation in terms of how we work with the devolved Administrations?

Alister Jack: I think, funnily enough, you've put your finger right on it. There was a transformation, and the transformation was that we came to a point, having pretty much done everything in lockstep—certainly, going in, we took all the decisions together. I was at those COBRA meetings. We all worked off the same science. The scientific advisers from the devolved nations are on the panel and are feeding in, and we were all as one on that. But we came to a moment where, coming out, we recognised that some regions or nations were moving at a different pace and that we needed to have a more flexible approach. I slightly regret that, and I did at one point suggest that we should move at the pace of the slowest. But the reality behind that—and I conceded the argument—is that you are better to move out when a large amount of the country is able to move out of lockdown, but you take provisions to protect other areas that are not. As I say, that may not be national; it may be regional or even local. It may be by a town or a city as we go on, and I think this story has many more months to run. I do think, though, that the "stay alert" messaging captures the behaviour that we expect of the public, both in and out of

their homes. That was the point: ultimately, we still want to save lives, but we want people to realise that, whether they are indoors or outdoors, they have to take the safety measures that all four nations have outlined.

- Q17 **Chair:** Just to clarify that, you were advising the UK Government that they should wait for the Scottish Government until they were happy.

Alister Jack: I didn't advise them that they should wait, but I asked the scientists, when I was in one of the meetings with them, a simple question: should we move at the pace of the slowest? It may not have been Scotland; it may have been Northern Ireland. The point was, do we move at the pace of the slowest, or do we go for a different model? The advice was that we try to take the nation as a whole out of lockdown, but we recognise that there will be national, regional and even local differences. That's simple. I am just filling you in on a conversation that took place. The two options were on the table, but clearly the Government has chosen the route it has gone down.

Chair: Okay, that is helpful. Thank you. We are going across the Wendy Chamberlain, and after that, John Lamont.

- Q18 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Thank you, Chair. We have heard a lot about meetings and briefings, and you have described yourself, Secretary of State, the daily meetings that are taking place. A previous Scottish Affairs Committee report describes the Joint Ministerial Committee as being at the heart of the UK's formal system of intergovernmental relations. What has been the primary form of communication? Has it been the JMC? If it has been something else, can you describe that?

Alister Jack: No, it hasn't been the JMC, although we have got JMCs getting going again. But during our dealing with this pandemic, there has been a lull in JMCs. We have been instead operating pretty much daily on what we call MIGs: ministerial implementation groups. There are a variety of different MIGs on health, the economy, the public sector and so on. The Scottish Government Minister or officials—usually both—and those from the other devolved nations will be present, feeding into and debating in those meetings.

Chair: I know that Gillian wants to come in to answer that question, too. Is that okay, Wendy?

Wendy Chamberlain: Yes.

Chair: Douglas, just to say that if you want to comment to help with the responses, please just raise your hand. I will make sure that we can accommodate you.

Gillian McGregor: It was just to add a bit from the official perspective. The Secretary of State has described the interactions at ministerial level. I would also describe a real ramping up in engagement at official level between all the devolved Administrations and the UK Government. We have tended to build on existing structures, but we have had to create new ones as well, just because of the complexity of the challenge that we are facing. We have tended to build on the good relationships that we



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have already, that we have developed over the years, but we have created some new channels for communication, bringing in parts of the government machine that may not have interacted with the devolved Administrations before, such as procurement and technical expertise and some of the scientific community that have obviously worked very well together but perhaps haven't interacted so much with civil servants. I would describe it as an expansion and an augmentation of what we already had at official level.

- Q19 **Wendy Chamberlain:** You have described that—thank you very much—as a sort of expansion and building, but I suppose what is interesting for me is that the JMC hasn't been utilised. Are the current mechanisms fit for purpose? Secretary of State, you have described these new mechanisms, the MIGs. Is that something that has come into being purely as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, or are these things that have previously been tested and planned for? I go back to the Cygnus exercise in 2016. Were these kinds of structures explored at that time?

Alister Jack: The structures that have been used have been used in Government before. I think you raise a very good point. I have no doubt they have been expanded and I am absolutely sure that they will continue to be used, but often through a crisis comes invention. This hasn't replaced the JMCs, because the Joint Ministerial Committees will carry on and they have specific roles and things to challenge—intergovernmental relations, European negotiations, those sorts of things. But around the detail on the pandemic, they have been very effective. JMCs tend to happen once a month. There are two or three MIGs every day, and quite often at weekends. Obviously, the COBRAs come in on the back of them when there are major decisions to be taken, and all four nations are at the COBRA meetings as well, as you know.

- Q20 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Thank you very much. I absolutely appreciate that during crisis things can change and develop, but I do wonder if that sort of organic growth that we have been talking about over this period has potentially led to some of the communication issues that other Members have alluded to.

I want to give an example here in relation to the contact tracing app. Jeane Freeman, the Scottish Health Secretary, said on 5 May that she was awaiting "detailed technical information from the UK Government about it," and assurances about confidentiality and security and, at a very basic level, that the system would work with the Scottish NHS system. That is an example of where communications are an issue. You have obviously described some of the mechanisms that are developing, but what do we think can be done to improve that intergovernmental communication, going forward?

Alister Jack: I feel that the communication is at a very high level, and the app has been discussed at a number of those meetings. The issue for Jeane Freeman with the app is how it works alongside and complements the other processes that the Scottish Government intend to put in place. On 5 May, the app is still going through its trial phase; it is still a beta



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version, if you like, and things are being ironed out—issues are being ironed out. Also, with the app, it is not the panacea to solve everything, because not everyone will be carrying a smartphone, not everyone will be connected to Bluetooth. It will help.

Funnily enough, the First Minister and I had a conversation where she talked about a portal for people with symptoms to put in all the people they have had contact with. But, of course, if we have moved out of the lockdown phase, you won't necessarily know all the people you have had contact with. And as I pointed out to her, the app would supplement the people that you may have had contact with when shopping or wherever, who you have been close to—but it is a question of how close, because we will still be practising social distancing. The app will register those people who you may have been in contact with. The tracing process, which is going to require a lot of people and a lot of manpower, then kicks in not just for the people you registered who you knew you had met, but for the people you may have bumped into and didn't know who they were. So it is a complementary thing but, as I say, it is still under development.

Chair: We will have to move on. Thank you, Wendy. We will go across now to John Lamont, and after that it will Andrew Bowie.

Q21 John Lamont: Thank you, Chair. I want to explore a bit further the impact of having these different lockdown conditions on either side of the border. That impacts on my constituency, which is right on the border, but it also has a wider impact in Scotland. Has the Scotland Office considered what the long-term economic impact will be on the Scottish economy if it is kept in lockdown for longer? In addition, clearly there have been different packages of support available for businesses in Scotland. A lot of businesses in my constituency have been very frustrated not to have the same level of support as those just across the border in Berwick-upon-Tweed or Carlisle. Have the UK Government assessed the impact of those differences on the Scottish economy?

Alister Jack: Crikey. That was a lot of questions. We have not done an impact assessment at this stage, as you would imagine. We are very early in the process. We have not done an impact assessment on the Scottish economy—it has not happened yet—but we have given £3.5 billion of support to the Scottish Government for the covid crisis, and we know that has been successful. Without taking just the border issue, John I just want to make the point that the recent survey released showed that 374,000 people had basically had their jobs saved through the furlough scheme—that is 15% of the Scottish economy. The average proportion of furloughs per company is 58%, and employers said that if they had not furloughed, they would have had to make 34%—I am throwing a lot of stats at you—of their workforce redundant. The furlough scheme has been a fantastic support to the economy and workforce.

As regards the support to businesses in Scotland, that is entirely devolved and a matter for the Scottish Government, and I am sure you can interrogate them on that when they appear in front of your Committee for your inquiry.



- Q22 John Lamont:** On the lockdown and the different approaches either side of the border, an SNP MP, the hon. Member for the Western Isles, suggested that the police be used to police the border and the different lockdown conditions. Many of my constituents are anxious about that proposal. Can you reassure them that there is no suggestion of that coming forward from the UK Government?

Alister Jack: I can absolutely reassure your constituents that that will not happen. The chief constable of Scotland has made it clear it is not going to happen. He has also made it clear that the border does not present the police with any problems. Whether rules for drink driving or other things, there are different laws either side of the border. Police Scotland, like the English constabulary, is used to dealing with that. There is no intention to put up the barricades at the border. That is not happening.

- Q23 John Lamont:** Excellent news. My last question concerns press reports this morning in *The Times* that leading SNP politicians are drawing up a renewed case for Scottish independence while Britain is in lockdown. Can you reassure me that the UK Government are not focused on that, and can you reassure my constituents that you will be reinforcing the point to the First Minister of Scotland that her focus should be on tackling this pandemic, not independence?

Alister Jack: You would be surprised if I did not agree with you, John. As has been said by the First Minister herself, this is not the time for politics; this is the time for us all to pull together, co-ordinate our approach and defeat this virus. Maybe with lockdown, some people have too much time on their hands, but if they have, they should be thinking about the future and recovery, not about separation.

Chair: There's your press headline today: "Secretary of State for Scotland against independence". We now go over to Andrew Bowie, then it will be David Duguid, then Deidre Brock.

- Q24 Andrew Bowie:** Thank you very much, Chair. We have already spoken today about the success of the UK Government's support for business, the economy and workers. Secretary of State or Minister Ross, do you know how many businesses have benefited from the support offered by UK Government and separately by the Scottish Government?

Alister Jack: Now that he is back with us, Minister Ross is very keen to say a few words, so I will defer to him.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful, Secretary of State, and thank you, Chair and Mr Bowie, for the questions. The Secretary of State has already said that the UK Government have given the Scottish Government £3.5 billion to respond to the covid outbreak. Of that, £2.3 billion is in business support alone. Figures released that I saw through the Federation of Small Businesses on 12 May this year said that—because the support goes from Scottish Government down to local government—of the more than 70,000 applications for that support, local government have turned around and approved more than 59,000, worth more than £679 million.



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That is money going from the UK Government, to the Scottish Government, and directly to our local authorities, helping businesses. As the Secretary of State has already outlined, 374,000 jobs have been supported through the job retention scheme. We have seen an awful lot of companies in Scotland that are also being supported through the bounce back loans or the CBIL scheme.

- Q25 **Andrew Bowie:** Minister, do you think that that process has worked well and has been smoothly and well understood by businesses—from the UK Government, to the Scottish Government, and then to local authorities?

Douglas Ross: Speaking from a constituency MP's point of view, to pick up Mr Lamont's point, there was clearly a lot of concern about the divergence in the Scottish Government decision over multiple properties. There was a strong campaign that was released across the country, and it was welcome to see that the SNP Scottish Government did change. It did not change it fully, and still businesses in Scotland are at a disadvantage compared with those around the rest of the UK.

I would also say that there is a varying degree of success in terms of how local authorities have been able to turn around these grants. The £10,000 and £25,000 grants are crucial to companies. It is slightly concerning—this is something that I raised in a stakeholder call that I had with COSLA—that it has taken different authorities different time to get this money out to the businesses that need it.

- Q26 **Andrew Bowie:** On the job retention scheme, obviously two days ago there was great news that it was going to be extended at least until October. A lot of businesses in Scotland, and a lot of people in Scotland, as we have already said—374,000 individuals—are benefiting from the scheme as we speak right now. But a lot of small and medium-sized enterprises, for example involved in tourism especially, are looking at a completely lost season over the next few months. I wondered whether there had been discussions that you were aware of between the Scotland Office, the Treasury and individual sectors on whether they might be looking at separate schemes for different sectors that will take longer to recover from the lockdown because of the impact and the date that it has hit.

Douglas Ross: We have had these ongoing discussions through various sectors, and both the Secretary of State and I have regular stakeholder calls. Issues are raised with us. We feed it in, and make representations to a variety of different Departments. I have started issuing a weekly document to all our stakeholders to say, "You said; we did," to show that the impact that stakeholders can have by informing the Scotland Office, having dialogue with us and then getting policy changed.

One of the biggest changes is, as you say, the extension of the job retention scheme, but also the flexibility. Flexibility has been called for. It has been delivered, and the Chancellor has announced that by the end of this month we will have more details about how that can benefit individual businesses and, indeed, sectors.



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Q27 Andrew Bowie: My very last question is on the coronavirus action plan that was announced by Secretary of State Matt Hancock on 4 March. It was the first time, I think, that the phrase “four nation approach” was used, in response to a question from me actually. Is the Scotland Office aware that that approach is continuing, and that that is the plan and the model that all four nations are continuing to work towards? Are all four Health Departments around the UK still dedicated to that plan, which was signed off by all four Departments at the beginning of this outbreak?

Douglas Ross: The Secretary of State may want to come in and answer this, but the dialogue between all four Health Secretaries around the nations, all four Chief Medical Officers around the nations and all four clinical leads around the nations has been exceptional. People have rightly expected politicians to work together, and we are also seeing our health authorities and our health leaders across the country working together. Despite some messaging issues, which I know you were discussing when I got cut off earlier, there has been a great deal of cohesion among the approach across the four nations, and I would expect that to continue.

Chair: Thank you. We have David Duguid, then we will go to Deidre Brock, and beyond that there is Jon Cruddas. *[Interruption.]* Sorry—Secretary of State, do you want to come in there? I see your finger up.

Alister Jack: Thank you, Chairman. I just want to make a slight correction. Mr Bowie said that 374,000 people had benefited in Scotland from the job retention scheme. By “benefited”, what he actually meant was saved from redundancy. The number of people drawing down on the job retention scheme is far greater than 374,000. I just wanted to clarify that.

Chair: We are ever so grateful to you. Thank you, Secretary of State. We now go across to David Duguid.

Q28 David Duguid: Thanks for that clarification, Secretary of State. I wonder if you could clarify one more thing from the things you were saying earlier. You said that the First Minister for Scotland knew that the message was going to be changing over the weekend. Was that just a high-level “she knew the message was going to change, but she didn’t necessarily know what the wording was going to be”?

Alister Jack: Correct.

Q29 David Duguid: Because obviously, much was made of this in the media over the weekend before there was any official statement about the change of the words from “stay at home” to “stay alert”. I don’t know about anybody else, but I found it did become a lot clearer, first of all when the Prime Minister made a statement on Sunday; then there was the “Our Plan to Rebuild” document that came out on Monday, and the Prime Minister’s own statement and questions in the Chamber later on. As well as the clarification he gave in the Chamber on Monday, the document itself—I will just quote out of it—says, “Different parts of the UK have different R figures. The devolved administrations are making their own assessments about the lifting of measures...All governments



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continue to work together to ensure a coordinated approach across the United Kingdom.”

On Monday, when the document came out and the Prime Minister made a statement, can you tell the Committee whether it was your understanding that that UK Government plan supersedes the four nations action plan that Mr Bowie was referring to earlier, or that it supplements it?

Alister Jack: It supplements it. It takes things on to a new level. The action plan, again, was communicated at both official and ministerial level across the four nations. BEIS, particularly, has put a lot of work into this. Again, we want to come out with working practices and guidelines around covid safety that are the same wherever you are in the United Kingdom. Businesses do not necessarily respect borders, inasmuch as they can have branches of their particular business in lots of different parts of the UK, and therefore we would like them all to not have complicated messaging.

Q30 **David Duguid:** Again, as the Prime Minister said on Monday, is it indeed the case that although there is a UK Government-wide strategy, there is a complete and utter understanding that different nations within the UK—or, in fact, different regions within those nations—may apply the lifting of restrictions at different rates, depending on the rate of infection?

Alister Jack: That is absolutely right. That is correct; I have said this before, and it is more than that. It is very possible that within Scotland, about which we are particularly talking today, the First Minister may take a different approach to the pace of coming out of lockdown in the highlands or the south of Scotland than in, say, Glasgow or Dundee. I do not want to be difficult, and I am not saying who will be going faster, but it is also possible—this is agreed and recognised as a UK-wide approach—that it may be even more local than that, and very specific on flare-ups. We hope the covid alert system will be able to give us those specific flare-ups.

David Duguid: Thank you for that, Secretary of State. I know your time is precious, so I will let other people in. However, I would like to come back and ask questions of Minister Ross later, if that is okay, Chair.

Chair: Indeed it is, and thank you for that. We now go across to Deidre Brock, who will be followed by Liz Twist.

Q31 **Deidre Brock:** Secretary of State, continuing on the issue of confused messaging, why did the Health Secretary of the UK Government dismiss the use of face coverings as “weak science” after the Scottish Government issued advice recommending their use in enclosed public spaces, only for the UK Government to do a volte-face less than two weeks later and recommend the same?

Alister Jack: It is all about the science, and the Scottish Government announced the use of face coverings two weeks earlier, as you say. In terms of what is meant by that, it is acknowledged now by scientists across the UK that face coverings give protection to others if someone is showing symptoms, but wearing a face mask does not protect you, per se, from others with symptoms. Also—this is very important—we must not use up PPE that is valuably needed by the care home sector and the frontline.



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To answer your question, my understanding is that the science advice that the Scottish Government got—it is completely right, as health is devolved, that they can do this—is that it would help, and they decided to go with that. For the UK Government, feeding into the scientific advice that they take, there was further information coming in, and they wanted to drill down on that before they went with it because they did not want a run on PPE stocks.

- Q32 **Deidre Brock:** I just wonder, if we are intent on trying to respect each other's viewpoints in the different Administrations, why it was right for the Health Secretary to dismiss that out of hand, knowing that the Scottish Government had made that recommendation, and describe it as "weak science". It seems highly critical and inappropriate.

Alister Jack: That is entirely a matter for him. Minister Ross wants to come in on this; he may know something I don't. I have not had any detailed discussions with the Health Secretary on this subject, other than the fact that we agreed that it was absolutely right that the Scottish Government could make these decisions, and that we would communicate with them on the PPE challenge, which we have done.

Douglas Ross: To add to what the Secretary of State said, the evidence from Scotland and across the UK was weak in terms of proving a significant benefit of it. I think the First Minister alluded to that as well. It has not been compulsory in Scotland, and the uptake has not been considerable. The scientific advice was that the evidence that there would be a considerable benefit from doing it was weak. However, there may be a marginal benefit, and that is why the First Minister took the decision she did, and the UK Government have taken the decision that they have done.

Deidre Brock: Indeed they did.

Alister Jack: Can I further add to that? The healthy debates that take place among the four nations around issues like this actually better inform the public in the final outcome. The fact that we have these debates is actually quite a positive thing. People are much wiser to the benefits of facemasks and the fact that they shouldn't be using up PPE as a result of this debate.

- Q33 **Deidre Brock:** Okay. Well, I suppose that is one way of looking at it.

You previously suggested that the scientists were involved every step of the way in the sudden change in the UK's corona advice from "stay home" to "stay alert". We have heard since that neither the Chief Medical Officer for England nor the UK Government's Chief Scientific Adviser was asked to agree to the sudden changes. Whose advice on this, then, did the UK Government take? Professor Whitty said later, "Neither Sir Patrick or I would consider ourselves to be comms experts, so we're not going to get involved in actual details of actual comms strategies". That almost suggests that it was primarily a comms-led decision. How appropriate do you think it is for such important decisions to be potentially influenced in that way?



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Alister Jack: I don't agree with your interpretation of what was said. It was very clear at the press conference, when Professor Whitty was asked, that he was involved in the change. They all knew about it; it wasn't something that came up and caught them by surprise. As he pointed out, the nuancing of the words, the change to "stay alert", and the focus group research that had gone into trying different, simplified statements for people to move to, was not his thing, but he absolutely knew that they were moving from "stay at home", understood it and was involved every step of the way. Was he involved in the discussion about what terminology we were going to use and how we were going to redesign this to communicate the message that we were stepping away from "stay at home"? He said that the actual comms side of it was not for him, but he was absolutely signed up to the principle of it, as was Sir Patrick Vallance.

Q34 **Deidre Brock:** Okay. Well, that is certainly a relief.

Lastly, Secretary of State, as we have heard, you have been sending a few mixed messages of your own recently on the pandemic lockdown measures. Given that the Prime Minister has now acknowledged that the Scottish Government's approach is right for Scotland, and that you agree that people in Scotland should follow the advice of our First Minister, could you perhaps dedicate some of your legendary social media advertising to promoting that message and keeping the people of Scotland safe?

Alister Jack: My MP Facebook page has the banner headline "stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives", so I am doing it.

Deidre Brock: Okay, thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Deidre. We will go across to Liz Twist, then Alberto.

Q35 **Liz Twist:** Secretary of State, on Sunday, the Prime Minister said that the UK is currently at point 4 of his new five-point alert system. Will the UK be assessed as a whole against that system? Will the UK Government make it clear if it considered Scotland to be at a different point in that alert system from England?

Alister Jack: The covid alert system, which is colour co-ordinated, 1 to 5, blue to black, is absolutely intended to work on a national and a regional basis, so across the UK but identifying variations in different parts of the UK.

Q36 **Liz Twist:** What about making the different levels of alert clear for England and Scotland, or, in this case, the UK and Scotland? Will that be made apparent by the Government?

Alister Jack: I have asked about this and a form of communication is being worked out. I do not have the detail at the moment, I am afraid.

Q37 **Liz Twist:** Maybe that is something that you could come back to us on when that is clearer?

Alister Jack: Yes, we will write to you as soon as we have the detail on that, but I know that the proposal is that it is a system that not just works



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for the whole of the UK but is broken down into constituent parts. I have to say that the system is being worked on across Government. There is a biosecurity centre that all four nations are feeding into, and through that biosecurity centre and the detail, we will hopefully improve the quality of the covid alert system.

- Q38 Liz Twist:** Moving on to differential rates of lockdown being removed, what are the implications of Scotland moving out of lockdown at a different rate from the rest of the UK? How will you manage that?

Alister Jack: I think we reached that point already last weekend, to be honest, and we are managing it. There was a risk that it was going to happen. We got to that point and it has happened. As I said, I am disappointed that due to the lack of clarity in the messaging uniformity across the UK, we are in that position. I hope that in the next few days, or certainly weeks—not months, but weeks—Scotland's R rate will fall. We should all wish that. If it falls a bit faster, as it is intended—I believe it will; I think the Scottish Government have recognised where they need to take steps and are taking the right action—we should see results from that and all be on the same messaging quite soon.

But if we have moved out of lockdown too quickly in England and we see a flare-up, the Prime Minister has been very clear in saying that he will take a step back or he will slow the next steps, whatever is required. We will be led by the science in this. That is the absolute key thing. We will be led by the science on a UK-wide basis, on a regional basis, and particularly on a national basis where health is devolved.

- Q39 Liz Twist:** In practical terms, there are some real practical issues. For example, would the Government consider imposing travel restrictions in and out of Scotland to prevent possible localised outbreaks affecting the rest of the country? We have already mentioned travel in the context of your own plans for next week.

Alister Jack: Key worker travel is something quite different. Close to me here lives a nurse who, for the last eight weeks, has been working in the hospital in Carlisle and crossing the border every day to go to work. That is absolutely right, but we have made it very clear that we do not expect people to travel across the border to Scotland for recreational purposes. That is the position at the moment, which has been agreed between the UK Government and the Scottish Government. We do not expect people to come on holiday in Scotland, much as they would love to and we would love to have them in a normal state of affairs, nor do we expect them to come across the border for recreational purposes, or similarly into Wales. That has been made quite clear.

- Q40 Liz Twist:** You are making the distinction between recreation and work. I think there will be a lot of people quite perplexed about what the best advice is for them.

Alister Jack: I recognise that, but Police Scotland's regulations are very clear that, if people have to go to work, they can do. But equally, if they can work from home, they must stay at home and work.



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Liz Twist: Okay, thank you very much.

Chair: We are going to Alberto Costa, then Jon Cruddas.

- Q41 **Alberto Costa:** My South Leicestershire constituency is home to one of Europe's largest logistics parks, called Magna Park, which is currently doubling in size. There are hundreds of thousands of individual items delivered across Scotland at the request of Scottish consumers and businesses. Three major motorways go through my constituency, and it is for that reason that it is called the golden triangle of logistics within Great Britain as an island. Can the Secretary of State reassure me and my constituents that items that are transferred to Scotland, and indeed items that are manufactured in Scotland and transferred down to Magna Park, will continue unimpeded by any of the health restrictions that we have been discussing?

Alister Jack: I absolutely can confirm that, and I can also confirm that delivery drivers, lorry drivers and so forth are key workers—essential workers, in fact—which is agreed across Governments. It is no different from the situation with the channel tunnel, where we have over 2,000 lorries a week coming in carrying medicines and drugs that are much needed—not just for the United Kingdom, but for southern Ireland. Those lorry drivers are deemed essential workers. If we move towards some form of quarantine, they would obviously be exempt from that. But equally, delivery drivers—that arrangement is not relevant to them, because they are operating within the UK—are deemed essential workers.

Chair: Are you finished, Alberto?

Alberto Costa: Yes, thank you.

Chair: Clear and to the point—we like that—and concise.

- Q42 **Jon Cruddas:** I will be concise as well. Secretary of State, you have talked about learning from our comparative experiences across the Union. I want to talk about the drivers of the so-called R number. How have Scottish demographic factors or other factors in Scotland affected the R number, compared with other parts of the Union?

Alister Jack: The straightforward and honest answer is that we don't yet know enough about this virus to be able to determine on the demographics. There is evidence that some rural areas have been hit hard, and there is evidence that some cities have been hit hard. To be honest, I think we are too early into this to be able to give you any specifics. I have got a note on this, funnily enough: the National Records of Scotland and the Office for National Statistics in England and Wales will be publishing data about the age and occupational factors—*[Inaudible]*—dying from covid-19. The Committee might find it useful, once that data has been published, to get some experts to come and talk to them about it. I am afraid—as the old expression goes—it is above my pay grade, and the data is just not available. I fear that I have to give you an unsatisfactory answer.



- Q43 Jon Cruddas:** We will come back to that in the proceedings of the Committee and get some of those experts in. To look at it another way, the death rate appears to be lower in Scotland than in England. Is there anything that can be learned from the Scottish handling of the situation to date that might inform those comparative statistics?

Alister Jack: All politicians regret every single death from this terrible virus. As to whether the death rate is higher or lower in certain parts of the UK, we do not actually have the data to back that up at the moment; it is too early to say. When we have the data, and when we have a proper look back at how we went into this pandemic and how we have handled it, we must learn from the lessons. That is absolutely critical. It is possible that coronavirus may become endemic and that we have to live with it, as we live with the common cold and flu. It is possible that that is the case. Or it is possible that we will defeat it, only for it to return in some variation. As Asian countries have learned over SARS and MERS, it is key that we learn very quickly and learn a lot from how we have handled this and how we may handle it if it comes back in the future.

Jon Cruddas: To be revisited. Thank you.

- Q44 Chair:** We will have time for a few supplementary questions, and I will come to those Members in a minute. Just on the question of the death rate, I know that we cannot take all the numbers at face value, but it does look very likely that the UK will have the highest rate of deaths in the whole of Europe. What do you think are the reasons for that? Is there anything in particular that you—as the Secretary of State for Scotland and a member of the Government—think can account for the fact that we will probably have the worst rates in the whole of Europe?

Alister Jack: Chair, I would say that, at this stage, that is jumping the gun. As I said in an interview last night, we are recording our death rates faithfully, as you would expect. But not all countries record them in the same way as the Scottish Government and the UK Government, so at the moment we know that we are not comparing apples with apples. We will obviously never know the true numbers—that has been made clear by many of the scientists—but time will tell how the UK has fared compared to others. As I said to Jon in my previous answer, what is key is that we learn from this going forward.

I would finally stress—this is a four nations answer—that we absolutely went into this following the science and taking the advice, and we may look back and find that we went into lockdown too early, too late or at the right time, that the NHS across the UK was not set up properly for a pandemic, or that there were issues around PPE. All these things will be analysed to the full, but right now our energy is entirely focused on saving lives and making sure that our frontline workers are safe. The Government's energies are entirely focused there, and that is key to what we do.

Chair: You are going to have to indicate when you have to leave us, Secretary of State. You generously said that you would be able to spend a



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little bit more time with us, so we will continue to take questions. There are a few supplementary questions from colleagues. If you indicate when you have to leave, I know that the Under-Secretary will be able to step up and answer any outstanding questions. Let's first go across to John Lamont.

- Q45 **John Lamont:** I have just one other small point in relation to the differences north and south of the border, which is particularly an issue for my constituency in the borders. The UK Government were able to share the data on vulnerable people with supermarkets for the purposes of securing delivery slots. The Scottish Government seem to have difficulty sharing that information with supermarkets here in Scotland, and it caused all sorts of confusion, particularly here in the borders. I am sure that it was the same in your own constituency. Do you have any information about why the Scottish Government were not able to share that data in the way the UK Government were able to?

Alister Jack: I know very well the problem that you are alluding to—from my own MP postbag, apart from anything else. The short and honest answer is that I do not know what the reason for that was, but I think the problem has been broadly sorted out, and obviously that is to be welcomed. Maybe this is something that your Committee should look into with other witnesses.

- Q46 **Wendy Chamberlain:** My question is for either the Secretary of State or Minister Ross. We know that a quarter of the UK workforce are currently under furlough. We also know that there is a higher proportion of Scots, generally, employed in the public sector. I am sure that we all have constituency casework showing that there are gaps in the scheme and that people are falling through those gaps. It is particularly true in my constituency of North East Fife, where tourism and hospitality is a key sector. We have seen measures during this pandemic that we would never have expected from a Conservative Government, but I would like to understand why the Government are still refusing, point blank, to look at something like a universal basic income as a way of supporting people through the pandemic.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to Wendy Chamberlain for the question, on an issue that she has raised a number of times during the weekly MP call that I chair, which brings together MPs from across Scotland and across parties. All the issues that have been raised so far are not unique to Scotland; a number of these issues are concerns for people across the UK.

On universal basic income, it is important to note that reports from the think-tank Compass and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that a universal basic income would be prohibitively expensive and create too many losers among the poorest families. I know that the Scottish Government were looking into the idea but have stopped their investigation of universal basic income at the moment. There are various models of universal basic income, but when it comes down to it, many people are better supported by our system of universal credit.



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Q47 **Wendy Chamberlain:** Except those who are currently falling through the gap, but thank you, Minister Ross.

Douglas Ross: Well, they do have access to universal credit.

Chair: We have still to hear from Mhairi, David and Andrew. First, Mhairi Black.

Q48 **Mhairi Black:** First, very quickly, you referred to the focus group on the messaging and how it was planned, Minister. Could we possibly see that research at some point? Could you send it in to the Committee?

Secondly, you were just talking about the fact that we actually do not have a lot of the data yet, so we cannot really be making assumptions at this time. I am wondering on what basis the UK Government are deciding that it is safe for people to go back to work if they can, so long as they stay alert. There is a lot of confusion—if I was in England, I would be wondering why I am expected to see my boss before I am allowed to see my mum. Could you explain that a wee bit for me?

Alister Jack: To answer your first question, the communications team will have tested various slogans. As I said, it was not shared across Government Departments, so I cannot give you that information.

Q49 **Mhairi Black:** Could you point us in the direction of who could?

Alister Jack: The Prime Minister.

Mhairi Black: Thank you.

Alister Jack: I would have thought so, because as you well know, Mhairi, No. 10 came up with the slogan.

As regards the science and the data, the data that is available is the R number. We are seeing the number of deaths falling, we are seeing the number of hospital admissions falling and we are seeing the rate of infection falling. We probably have better data in England than we do in Scotland because, by a considerable percentage, the NHS in England is testing a lot more people. The testing capacity in Scotland is at the thick end of 10,000 tests; only a few days ago the number was somewhere just over 2,000 being utilised, and the last stats I looked at showed just over 4,000 being utilised. It is still 50% less than the capacity available.

In terms of nursing homes, those tests should be utilised. The First Minister has acknowledged that the problem, and the reason why the R number has been slow to fall, is there has been the care home outbreak. We need a stringent testing regime in Scottish care homes, using the extra capacity that is available, which will then, once those people are identified and isolated, bring down the R number and Scotland can move out of such a strict lockdown. That is the short answer.

Q50 **Mhairi Black:** So if you were in England, so long as you were following the precautions and advice and were staying alert, would you be able to go and visit your loved ones if it is safe for you to go and work?



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Alister Jack: Yes; I think you have probably heard the answer to that. You are allowed to meet another member of your family from a different household outdoors on a one-to-one basis, and that person can vary on a day-to-day basis, so that is available in England, yes.

Chair: We have David Duguid and Andrew Bowie to come. Over to you, David.

Alister Jack: Can I just say that I am probably on about a three-minute gun before I have to jump across to the other meeting?

Q51 **David Duguid:** This is a very quick question. What are the key sectors in the Scottish economy that have been most impacted by this coronavirus outbreak?

Alister Jack: Unquestionably, tourism and hospitality. They will be the sectors that need the most support, and for the longest. As we come out of lockdown, we have seen some manufacturing businesses putting in covid-safe practices and getting going again in Scotland. We know that the virus reproduces less outside, so it is safer to work outside. Without a doubt, tourism and hospitality will be the two sectors hardest hit.

Q52 **David Duguid:** What is the Scotland Office doing to help prepare for that, working with the UK Government?

Alister Jack: Minister Ross and I have had many stakeholder meetings. The Tourism Alliance has been there, along with the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, the STUC and so on—many stakeholder groups have been there. All the time, we feed back on issues; for instance, the desire to move the furlough scheme on to some sort of part-time regime was very much a request from the tourism sector, which I fed back to the Chancellor. That will be available under furlough after 31 July. However, whether we can get parts of tourism and hospitality moving again before the winter is the real challenge, because some of those businesses will undoubtedly not survive if we cannot get them moving again and get some cash flow into them this year.

David Duguid: I want to go into more detail, but can I do that with Minister Ross, and let Andrew in with his question?

Q53 **Chair:** You most certainly can. Do you have time for one more question, Secretary of State?

Alister Jack: Absolutely, yes.

Q54 **Andrew Bowie:** Secretary of State, I am obliged to you for remaining for my question. Obviously, we had the great news today that Public Health England has given approval to an antibody test. In discussing the four nation approach to this, do you think that, in these extraordinary times, that approach might be extended to the testing, approval and purchasing of such things as antibody tests, so that, all across the entire UK, we can get the benefit of these tests?

Alister Jack: Yes, I absolutely do. We have a centralised PPE facility in Liverpool, I think, from where we have supplied millions of units of PPE to



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the Scottish NHS, under request. I expect that having some sort of centralised purchasing for this antibody test would be a very good thing, and tests should be fairly distributed throughout the UK. I will be arguing that strongly.

Andrew Bowie: Thank you.

Q55 **Chair:** And thank you, Secretary of State, for your attendance today. There are a few issues that we will get back to you about. I know that Minister Ross and the director are remaining on this call. We have many more questions. Thank you very much for your attendance today.

Alister Jack: Chairman, do you mean issues that have come up in the session?

Chair: Yes.

Alister Jack: Okay. Doable. Thank you very much everyone.

Chair: Thank you, Secretary of State. There are a couple of questions that people put their hands up for there. Could you do a note on our WhatsApp chat so I can see you? I am going to go back to David Duguid, who wants to ask a specific question to Minister Ross.

Q56 **David Duguid:** Thank you, Chair. I want to expand on the previous question to the Secretary of State on the economy. Obviously, hospitality and tourism is huge. As large a component of the economy as they are, they are also probably going to be the hardest hit.

However, I am also thinking along the lines of, obviously, the food and drink industry and—my favourite topic—the fisheries sector and the seafood industry as a whole. Minister Ross, what support has been supplied so far—working with the Scottish Government, obviously, because there is a huge devolved aspect to this—not only for the immediate impact of the coronavirus, but also to help the seafood sector recover as we come out of the health crisis?

Also, and maybe more importantly in the in the long run, what can you tell us about the UK Government's commitment, which was stated previously—before the crisis—to support the seafood industry 10 or 20 years into the future, as we come out of the common fisheries policy? Could you tell us a bit about that?

Douglas Ross: The fisheries sector is one of the key areas that I have been in dialogue with throughout this crisis, including the Scottish Seafood Association, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation and the Communities Inshore Fisheries Alliance. We are regularly in contact with a range of different stakeholder bodies and are feeding in their concerns.

To begin with, it was issues over key workers, because there was a difference in key workers in Scotland from other parts of the UK. We were able to have dialogue with the Scottish Government about that. Now we are looking through the current crisis. There have been some good news



stories, in terms of an increase in people cooking at home with fish. The service market and hospitality has been lost, but we are potentially getting new people who are looking to cook with fish at home. I joined a campaign that Minister Victoria Prentis was launching through DEFRA to highlight UK species that people tend not to buy here and that tend to get exported; there is an abundance of them at the moment. We are working across Departments and across Governments to continue to support the fishing industry.

To take your second point, this Government is 100% committed to leaving the common fisheries policy and to giving powers back to fishermen over who catches what, where and when. I think we have seen in the reports on the current negotiations that that is a clear red line for the UK Government and one that, certainly from the feedback from stakeholders that I have heard, the fishing communities and fishermen across Scotland welcome.

Q57 David Duguid: Can I just confirm one point before I move on? The Scotland Office is continuing to engage with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, the Scottish Seafood Association and all the others you mentioned, not just in terms of the current crisis but on how the Government can support the whole sector going forward in the long term.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. The way I have done my stakeholder calls, sometimes it is a group of big organisations. I had the NFUS on a call with the Scotch Whisky Association, along with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. That was a general discussion about food and drink across Scotland. Then I have had more detailed stakeholder calls with the new leadership teams of the Scottish Seafood Association and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation so we can drill down on their individual issues and feed their comments to the UK Government through the Scotland Office. Maybe Gillian wants to come in at this point.

Gillian McGregor: I just want to stress as well that the Minister and the Secretary of State have been doing lots of engagement personally. There has been an unprecedented level of meetings and engagements. We have been doing that also at official level.

It is probably worth mentioning that some of my colleagues in the Scotland Office join a joint stakeholder session very regularly—more than once a week—with the Scottish Government, where we can speak together to some of the key stakeholders from these sectors, which has been really helpful to them, because they are able to talk about the issues that are devolved to the Scottish Government and the areas that are reserved; in a lot of areas, there is intersection, and we just can't operate without the other.

The Minister is correct: there has been some really good engagement going on, which we have had good feedback from. We are not just doing that as the UK—we are also doing it jointly with the Scottish Government.

Q58 Chair: We have been here for almost an hour and a half, and I am keen



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to make sure that everybody can get away and do something much more interesting and useful, so, lastly, what happens now, Minister? Obviously, there is divergence in the four nations approach. There does seem to be quite significant difference in approach between Scotland and the UK Government. I was hearing the Secretary of State saying that he would like to see all Governments pursuing the same strategy objectives. Would he be equally happy if it was decided by the Scottish Government that they wanted to do something different as we leave lockdown? Would that be respected by the UK Government, and would you then do everything possible at the Scotland Office to ensure that that worked?

Douglas Ross: I am interested that you say that there are significant differences, because, actually, in policy substance, the four nations approach has been sustained on many of the approaches to tackling coronavirus. That is a quote from earlier this week from John Swinney, the SNP's Deputy First Minister of Scotland. The Scottish Government are seeing that, where there has been divergence on messaging, there has not been significant divergence on policy.

You asked specifically what the Scotland Office's response would be, should there be any divergence. We accept fully that public health is devolved to the Scottish Government, and they can and do make decisions based on the advice that they get. For example, construction stopped in Scotland, while it continued in England. That was a decision of the Scottish Government, and it has been maintained throughout the eight weeks so far of the current restrictions.

Q59 **Chair:** So there would be respect, and the Scotland Office would have no issue at all if the Scottish Government decided to continue to pursue a different approach as we consider leaving the lockdown period?

Douglas Ross: I do not think you have to ask that question, because it has already been proven. We have shown that throughout this period. Where there is slight divergence, we think it sometimes makes it more difficult for local people and businesses, but should the Scottish Government decide to diverge on a UK policy, it is perfectly within their remit to do that. We have had discussions with business leaders, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the CBI, and they want to get out of the current restrictions as one, but it is ultimately down to the Scottish Government to do that. If they believe that that is in the best interests of Scottish businesses, individual people and communities, it is up to them to do that.

Chair: I think your broadband connection just about survived the end of that answer. We are grateful for that.

If there is nothing further, I want to thank you, Minister Ross, and the director for coming along today with the Secretary of State. It has been a very helpful session, and there are a few issues that we want to follow up to make sure we get clarity and maybe an answer. I am sure the director will have taken a note of that. Thank you all for appearing today. I am pretty certain we will be getting in touch once again as this inquiry



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proceeds. Thank you for your attendance today. I call this session to a halt.