



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Thursday 23 December 2021

Session 6



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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 23 December 2021

*[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]*

## General Question Time

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Good morning. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many people as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and responses.

### Railways (Priorities in 2022)

1. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its priorities are for Scotland's railways in 2022. (S6O-00582)

**The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey):** Our priority remains the continued delivery of passenger and freight services to ensure a fair and green recovery from the Covid pandemic. We will mobilise ScotRail Trains Ltd, which will provide ScotRail services within the public sector, under Scottish Government control.

We must ensure that passenger services reflect changing passenger needs, and we must restore the financial sustainability of rail services. Our successful support for rail freight will continue as rail freight volumes grow. We will continue delivery of our rail decarbonisation action plan.

**Neil Bibby:** If the Scottish Government wants to grow passenger numbers in the new year, hiking fares is the wrong way to go about it. Further to my topical questions to the minister this week, which were not answered, I ask why the 3.8 per cent hike in fares is being introduced in January, when even the Tory Government is raising fares only in March. Why did the minister tell me on 16 December that rail fares remain "under consideration" and then, on 17 December, announce the biggest fare hike in over a decade?

**Graeme Dey:** We covered this subject the other day. It is a matter of deep regret that we have had to introduce the fare increase. The fact that it is taking place in January simply reflects that that was when we were due to introduce an increase if that was what we were going to do. We looked in very great detail at whether it was possible to introduce an increase that was below the retail prices index and at whether we could have no

increase. We worked on that over an extended period and late into the day.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** Can the minister assure us that there will continue to be investment in the railways? For example, I think that a hydrogen-powered train was trialled during the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. Will the Government continue to invest in order to maintain, improve and decarbonise Scotland's railways?

**Graeme Dey:** The hydrogen train is an exciting opportunity for us to develop as part of the decarbonisation agenda.

We are proud of our record of investment in our railways. Indeed, our budget for 2022-23 shows an increase from £173 million to £247 million—an increase of £74 million, or 42.8 per cent—in the investment to support the improvement of rail infrastructure, including through implementation of aspects of our decarbonisation action plan. Overall, the rail budget has seen a 4.3 per cent increase from 2020-21, which underlines our commitment to this important public service.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** We have fare hikes and service cuts, and infrastructure projects have been scrapped. Does the minister have anything positive to say about the future under a nationalised ScotRail?

**Graeme Dey:** I am glad to see that Mr Simpson is entering into the Christmas spirit, as ever. The infrastructure project that he is alluding to has not been scrapped at all. The project is proceeding and it will deliver the capacity that is required.

Mr Simpson and I exchanged views on this earlier in the week. I regret the fare increase, which is parallel to the increase in England, but that is the financial reality that we face, as we have to make rail services sustainable in the short, medium and long terms.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 2 was not lodged.

### Oil and Gas Workers (Green Skills Retraining Opportunities)

3. **Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that opportunities for retraining in green skills are available to workers currently employed in the oil and gas sector, to enable them to assist in reducing Scotland's carbon emissions. (S6O-00584)

**The Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work (Richard Lochhead):** The Scottish Government published the climate emergency skills action plan in December 2020, identifying the immediate and

long-term actions needed to ensure that our workforce has the skills required to support Scotland's transition to net zero.

As a priority action, and within the first 100 days of the parliamentary session—in August 2021—we launched the green jobs workforce academy, providing individuals of all ages with advice, support and training opportunities to help them to enter into, or progress in, good green jobs. Through the academy, we are committed to supporting workers in energy transition, including in oil and gas, onshore and offshore wind, hydrogen, electricity, and carbon capture and storage. That includes the delivery of a skills guarantee for workers in carbon-intensive sectors such as oil and gas that will be designed with stakeholders as part of our initial response to the just transition commission.

**Rhoda Grant:** In the Highlands and Islands, we have the highest level of fuel poverty. Added to that, very few companies retrofit, because microbusinesses do not have the resources to register for approved status, which would enable them to carry out work that is grant funded. What is the cabinet secretary doing to attract oil and gas workers to retrain in the area and to enable them and other local contractors to register as approved contractors, in order to ensure a supply of local contractors who are available to retrofit in the areas in which they are most needed?

**Richard Lochhead:** I thank Rhoda Grant for those very important points, with which I certainly identify in my own constituency of Moray, in the north of Scotland. That is one of the reasons why we set up the green jobs workforce academy. I am told that nearly 3,400 people—unique users—have already visited that website in the first couple of months since it was set up. That resource is available for anyone who works in the oil and gas sector, in addition to the official initiatives, many of which are in the north-east of Scotland, for finding out about the opportunities in renewables and how to retrain and get accredited for some of those sectors that are important for the transition, as Rhoda Grant has mentioned.

However, I absolutely accept that there is a long way to go. That is why we are working with our colleges and our further education sector. The minister for green skills, Lorna Slater, is also working hard on those issues.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. I need a little more brevity, please.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** The United Kingdom's £16 billion North Sea transition deal, which launched last March, aims to transition 40,000 oil and gas jobs in the next eight years. The Scottish Government has allocated just £20 million to a just transition fund. What precisely is

the £20 million for, and what are the stated year 1 outcomes?

**Richard Lochhead:** I say to Liam Kerr that I am delighted that the UK Government is investing resources into the North Sea after taking out more than £300 billion over the past few decades. It is good to get something back for the north-east of Scotland. It is an important initiative.

When it comes to the Scottish Government's transition fund for north-east Scotland over the next 10 years, we are working hard with stakeholders and will make further announcements in the new year on the first £20 million of that fund, which is in the draft budget that is before the Parliament just now.

**Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** Energy policy remains reserved to UK ministers. Will the minister advise on the opportunities for green skills and green jobs that have been lost through terrible decision making by UK ministers? While they have invested billions in expensive nuclear power, they have underinvested in what the tidal industry needs, they have shamefully chosen not to award track 1 status to the Scottish Cluster carbon capture project and they have cut subsidies for renewables.

**The Presiding Officer:** Be brief, minister.

**Richard Lochhead:** Neil Gray has highlighted the massive potential for creating hundreds of thousands of green jobs in Scotland. The recent decision by the UK Government not to place the Acorn carbon capture project in track 1 is, of course, a blow to the creation of those green jobs. More than 15,000 jobs are expected in the early stages of that project alone, and it is really important that the UK Government reverse that decision. There is massive potential. I do not have time to quote the many different reports that outline the potential for hundreds of thousands of new green jobs in Scotland.

#### **Local Bridge Maintenance Fund (Local Authority Applications)**

**4. Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what the total value of applications received from local authorities was, as part of the £32 million local bridge maintenance fund. (S6O-00585)

**The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur):** The Scottish Government received 131 applications for funding from the local bridge maintenance fund, at a total estimated value of £107.7 million. A total of 74 applications from 19 local authorities have been approved.

**Dean Lockhart:** The collapse of several bridges in rural Stirlingshire has caused significant

disruption for residents and businesses. Given the oversubscription to the bridge maintenance fund that the minister has just outlined, and the urgent need for bridge repairs in many regions, what assurances can he provide that more funding will be available in the future to carry out necessary repairs?

**Tom Arthur:** Within this financial year, £12 million has been allocated, and £20 million will be allocated next year.

It is also important to look at the wider context. The local government capital grant for next year will increase by £62.5 million, which is a 10.1 per cent cash increase or a 7.2 per cent real-terms increase. There is additional capital resource for local government; it is for local authorities to decide—based on their own priorities—how to deploy that capital resource, including for local bridge maintenance.

**Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** Does the minister agree that bridge repairs have been impacted by shortages of skills and labour and by problems with building supplies, which have been exacerbated by the Tories' hard Brexit, which was pushed through against Scotland's democratic will?

**Tom Arthur:** Evelyn Tweed has made an important point. We are all aware of the increasing costs of capital and investment as a consequence of skills and supply shortages. A number of factors have created that problem, a key one of which has been the United Kingdom Government's reckless hard Brexit.

### Pets for Christmas

**5. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures it has taken to prevent the casual purchase of pets for Christmas. (S6O-00586)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon):** We understand why some families might be tempted to get a puppy as a gift at Christmas, but we encourage people to think carefully about doing so. Christmas is probably the worst time of year to bring a puppy into a household, because it needs a calm environment and an established routine to help it to adjust to its new life and surroundings. We also know that unscrupulous puppy farmers seek to cash in on increased demand in the lead-up to Christmas, which makes the chances of buying an illegally bred or sick puppy even higher than usual.

In the run up to Christmas, and in support of the ongoing campaign by the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, we have released social media messaging to discourage prospective owners from buying a puppy for

Christmas. Our messaging also provides advice on how to spot the signs of an unlicensed dealer. There are key checks that can help to ensure that people are buying safely. They include meeting the puppy's mother with her litter and ensuring that all the correct paperwork is in place. If something does not feel right, buyers should walk away and report their concerns to the Scottish SPCA.

**Christine Grahame:** Campaigns and advice have their place and are very important. However, as the cabinet secretary has said, illegal trading from horrendous puppy factory farms and online purchasing continue. Those practices often involve sick animals and cause a great deal of distress and unhappiness for owners.

Will the cabinet secretary support, in principle, my new welfare of dogs (Scotland) bill—a version of which fell during the previous session of Parliament because of time pressures—which I intend to introduce early in the new year in order to encourage, in law, responsible dog ownership? A “Yes” from the cabinet secretary would make my Christmas.

**Mairi Gougeon:** I know that Christine Grahame is passionate about animal welfare and has pursued the matter for some time. The Scottish Government welcomes any proposal that seeks to improve animal welfare in Scotland. We will carefully consider the content of her bill. I look forward to discussing in due course the measures that will be set out in it, and to working with her on the measures that she hopes to introduce.

### ScotRail (Public Ownership)

**6. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how its plans to bring ScotRail into public ownership are progressing. (S6O-00587)

**The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey):** On 8 December, I provided the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee with an update on arrangements to mobilise a wholly owned company, Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd, and its wholly owned subsidiary, ScotRail Trains Ltd. ScotRail Trains will operate ScotRail services from expiry of the current franchise. Scottish Rail Holdings will provide oversight and management of ScotRail Trains.

The appointments of the chief executive officer and finance director of Scottish Rail Holdings were announced on 10 December. I will, of course, update Parliament as mobilisation arrangements progress and as significant milestones are reached.

I am also looking into the possibility of providing MSPs with access to an additional informal briefing session in order for them to hear directly

from some of the senior appointees and to ask any additional questions that they might have.

**Marie McNair:** The minister will agree that reliable and efficient railways are the backbone of the transport system. My constituents have raised concerns regarding the impact of the proposed changes to the trains on the Milngavie line. There is also no doubt that the pandemic has had a significant impact on passenger numbers. What assurances can the Scottish Government give that the views of my constituents will be fully considered by ScotRail?

**Graeme Dey:** I understand that ScotRail has been actively analysing about 3,500 responses to the recent consultation on services and will in due course inform stakeholders, including MSPs, about the consultation outcomes, together with its response. I anticipate that that will happen early in the new year. However, as the member will, I am sure, appreciate, ScotRail's immediate focus is on delivering services and mobilisation.

I reassure Marie McNair that Transport Scotland will seek assurances from ScotRail that the views of all respondents to the consultation have been appropriately considered. I am aware that ScotRail has developed a proposed timetable that seeks to offer service patterns that meet passenger forecasts, but it will, in the light of evidence that arises from the consultation, consider adjustments to that proposed timetable.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** It was heartening to hear about the plans for public ownership of Scotland's railways. Will the minister commit to full worker representation on the board and governance structures that he has just outlined?

**Graeme Dey:** As I have said previously, the intention is to have staff representation on the board.

### **Mental Wellbeing Link Workers**

**7. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that every general practitioner has access to a dedicated mental wellbeing link worker. (S6O-00588)

**The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart):** The Scottish Government is making significant investment in the development of mental health and wellbeing services in primary care services. That includes the implementation of our manifesto commitment to provide 1,000 additional dedicated roles by 2026 to help to grow community mental health resilience and to increase use of social prescribing.

The new services will be established in areas that are served by a group of general practices and will be made up of multi-agency teams providing assessment, advice, support and similar forms of treatment for people who have mental health distress or wellbeing needs. Every service will ensure that it provides access to a link worker for mental wellbeing.

The Scottish Government recently allocated £1.5 million of funding from the mental health recovery and renewal fund, and has issued local planning guidance to health boards and integration authorities to support early planning for those services.

**Karen Adam:** LGBT+ people have a higher need for mental healthcare, due to inequalities that are ingrained in our society, particularly in rural communities such as mine, where a natural support network is often not available. We lose such constituents to larger cities that have greater LGBT+ resources and support.

Does the minister agree that mental health workers are essential in ensuring that we can offer support to such individuals and reduce some of the inequalities in our rural communities?

**The Presiding Officer:** Please be brief, minister.

**Kevin Stewart:** I agree with Karen Adam that when such services are established they are often the first port of call for LGBT+ individuals who are accessing mental health support and treatment. People will be able to access those services quickly and easily in order to prevent mental ill health from escalating.

The guidance requires health and social care partnerships to carry out equality impact assessments of their local plans, which will be based on the specific needs of their local populations, including LGBT+ individuals.

We recognise that in remote and rural communities in particular we have to ensure that we have high-quality sustainable healthcare services. Our plans in relation to mental health will go a long way towards helping people in such communities.

**The Presiding Officer:** I am afraid that we have to conclude general questions at this point. I apologise to members whose questions we have been unable to take today.



## First Minister's Question Time

11:59

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is First Minister's question time. Members who wish to ask constituency or general supplementary questions should press their request-to-speak button during question 2. Members who wish to ask supplementary questions to questions 3 to 6 should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

### **Covid-19 (Self-isolation Rules)**

#### **1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)**

**(Con):** I wish everyone in Parliament and across Scotland a very merry Christmas and a happy and healthy new year when it comes.

I want to return to the issue of the self-isolation rules, which I have raised with the First Minister at the previous two Covid updates. We have been seeking changes to the household contacts who can end self-isolation with a negative test and a reduction in the 10-day self-isolating period if someone tests negative twice. Those changes would help to protect our essential services and our economy from grinding to a halt because of staff absences. The Government has already adapted its position on those rules. Will the First Minister now go further and make those necessary changes?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I wish the Presiding Officer, everyone across our Parliament and, indeed, everyone across the country a very happy and safe Christmas. I know that we all hope and wish for a much brighter and healthier new year.

The issue that Douglas Ross has raised is one of the most important issues that the Government is grappling with now and will grapple with over the days to come. In short, the answer to the question is yes, we will make changes just as soon as the public health advice says that the benefits of doing so outweigh the risks of doing so.

To be fair to Douglas Ross, I think that he has captured this point in his question. When we make changes to the self-isolation rules, I want us to try to do that not in a piecemeal way but in an overall, coherent way, so that there are not just changes to the isolation rules for index cases—for those who are infectious—but changes to the rules for contacts, particularly household contacts, who currently have the most stringent isolation rules.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I discuss these issues with public health and clinical advisers literally on a daily basis.

Given the very fragile stage that we are at with omicron, the advice right now is that we must be careful that, in easing self-isolation, we do not inadvertently allow further spread of the virus and thereby compound rather than alleviate a problem. However, as soon as the public health advice says that it is safe to do so, we will, of course, do so. I hope that, over the next days—certainly the next couple of weeks—we will start to move to a more proportionate system of self-isolation.

I recognise the impact on the economy of people becoming infected and having to self-isolate—in fact, I have cited that as one of the reasons why we need to take omicron very seriously. That is why, from today, we have updated guidance on sector-based exemptions for certain industries to try to alleviate the pressure now, while we consider the wider impact on key sectors of our economy.

**Douglas Ross:** The First Minister said that we need to be careful. We understand the need for caution, but the current rules are not sustainable. The First Minister started to say that it might be days, and she went on to say that it could be weeks. That is troubling, because the rules are leading to a shortage of workers in our vital services, in our transport system and across the public sector right now. The rules are forcing whole families and households to self-isolate for 10 days, even if they have tested negative.

The First Minister accepted that exemptions were necessary and introduced them, and she has just mentioned sector-specific guidance. However, we hear concerns about how long it takes to get those exemptions granted and, indeed, the numbers that have been approved. People throughout Scotland cannot afford the situation to continue for weeks, as the First Ministers said. Can we really afford to leave the rules as they are in the interim period when essential services and our economy are already taking a hit?

**The First Minister:** I will come back to the point about essential services and the economy.

I recognise the importance of the issue, and I ask Douglas Ross to recognise that there is a difficult balance to strike, particularly at the moment. The first and perhaps most fundamental point to make, because it feeds into the process of consideration that we are undertaking, is that it is not the self-isolation rules that are hampering the economy; it is the virus that is hampering the economy. The reason why we have tightened the isolation rules for household contacts is that one of the things that we already know about omicron is that it has a much higher attack rate within groups of people who live closely together. Therefore, even more than was the case with previous strains, if one member of a household tests positive or is positive for omicron, the likelihood is

that all members of that household, or significant numbers of it, will become positive in the days that follow.

That is why we need to be cautious. The danger is that, if we move away from that too quickly, all that we will do is spread more infection, and the impact on the economy, which I absolutely recognise, will get greater. We need to be careful about that. I absolutely agree that we should not take too long, but nor should we move too quickly at this critical stage of trying to manage our way through the omicron challenge.

The point about critical services and the economy is that quite a significant number of exemptions have been approved, but we have moved—the updated guidance has been published today—to a sector-based exemption process. The advice and the consideration that the Government has given is that that is more likely in the short term to alleviate the pressures on the economy in a safe and sustainable way than opening up the self-isolation rules much more widely now.

However, this is something that is going to change in the period ahead. I know that Douglas Ross picked up on my use of the words “days” and “weeks”. There is uncertainty about this. I hope that it is soon, but we cannot take a view that we need to base what we do on careful public health considerations and then arbitrarily set a date for doing it. This is something that, even over the Christmas period that is ahead, the Government will be reviewing very carefully. Just as soon as the public health advice says that the benefits outweigh the risks, we will move to a more proportionate system, but in the meantime, through the exemptions scheme, we will work to alleviate the pressure that is being felt on the economy, and particularly on critical services.

**Douglas Ross:** The First Minister has just said that she is basing her decisions on public health advice, so let us look at what experts in public health are saying right now.

The epidemiologist Irene Petersen said yesterday that a move to a seven-day isolation period is a good idea. Clinical advisers to the United Kingdom Government have also endorsed the move. Yesterday, we received a game-changing Scottish study on omicron. It is one of the most detailed and promising studies to date, and it says that the evidence shows that omicron is substantially

“less likely to result in COVID-19 hospitalisation than Delta.”

It confirms that the booster dose offers

“substantial additional protection”

and it suggests that the

“reduced severity may also have implications for isolation rules”.

Does that report, which was published last night, not give us a basis to change the rules now and avoid the risk of threatening the viability of essential services and our economy?

**The First Minister:** I will come on to the very encouraging study that was published yesterday in a moment. That is important, but I also think that it is important that we get the timing of all this right.

Douglas Ross talked about and quoted clinical advisers. He talked about the clinical advisers to the UK Government. I am not dismissing the views of any of those people, but I think that most people would accept that the clinical advisers that I have to listen to most carefully are the clinical advisers to the Scottish Government. We are basing our very careful considerations on the advice that we are being given and, of course, that advice will continue to inform the difficult judgments that we make.

Two studies were published yesterday—the Scottish study and another study from Imperial College London. They are very encouraging, because they suggest that the proportion of people with omicron who are requiring hospital care might be lower. They estimate that there is a 30 to 70 per cent lower risk of people needing hospital care than there was with previous strains. That is all good but, where we are right now, we have to take care that we do not allow the much higher transmissibility of omicron to outweigh the benefits of, perhaps, its lower severity.

Let me quote some of the authors of those reports. Professor Mark Woolhouse of the University of Edinburgh, who is one of the authors of the Edinburgh report, said:

“An individual infection could be relatively mild for the vast majority of people, but the potential for all these infections to come at once and put serious strain on the NHS remains.”

Professor Neil Ferguson from Imperial College London said:

“It is clearly good news, to a degree.”

However, he said that the reduction is

“not sufficient to dramatically change the modelling”

and that the speed with which omicron is spreading means that

“there’s the potential of still getting hospitalisations in numbers that could put the NHS in a difficult position”.

We need to take care at this critical moment because, if we allow the spread of omicron to get too far ahead of us, even if it is significantly less severe, that is going to overwhelm us. Therefore, anything that we do right now that risks increasing spread, such as removing or weakening self-

isolation rules too quickly, could be seriously counterproductive just at the point where we see some very good news on omicron.

These are difficult judgments and they require difficult deliberation. That is what the Scottish Government will continue to give these questions in a very serious manner.

**Douglas Ross:** The First Minister prefaced her answer by saying that she has to take advice from Scottish Government clinical advisers. Is she telling Parliament that their advice is different from the advice that I cited from the UK Government? I am not making a political point. [*Interruption.*] The First Minister says, “Clearly”. They are independent advisers so, if the UK Government is getting advice on self-isolation rules, what is the different advice that the First Minister is getting from her clinical advisers in Scotland?

The changes that we are calling for are necessary to protect essential services and our economy. The First Minister wants to be cautious, but she seems too cautious. Why do people who have tested negative for Covid need to remain in isolation for 10 days? That level of caution belonged before we had the data from the new study that was announced last night. Does the First Minister not recognise that, although we need to tackle Covid, we also need our services to function fully and our economy to keep running?

**The First Minister:** I accept all that, but I stress and underline the point that, if we act rashly in these days—I am talking days—we risk a counterproductive effect that makes what we are living through longer rather than shorter. That is the weight of responsibility that rests on the shoulders of those of us who have to take the decisions. The new studies are positive, but they are also early data, as the authors point out. When even the authors tell us not to get carried away yet with what the studies tell us, we should listen.

Clinical advisers advise Governments and it is up to the elected decision makers to decide how much weight to put on that advice. I accept that, ultimately, the buck stops with me in terms of decisions, but I listen carefully to clinical advice. It is for the UK Government to do likewise. I know that there will be clinical advisers advising the UK Government right now to do what the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive have done and impose a few more protections to try to slow down omicron but, as is its right, the UK Government is deciding not to do that.

We are all coming to our decisions. I am following the advice that is given to me by clinicians and experts, applying my judgment to that with my Government colleagues and coming to a balanced decision. Yes, we hope that, in the

very near future, we will feel much more confident about opening things up in all sorts of ways because we know much more about omicron. We are not quite at that stage yet, despite the positive reports and, if we move too quickly, by the time the Parliament returns after recess, I suspect that members from around the chamber would look at me and ask why I did it and prolonged the agony that we are living through.

Making these decisions is not a perfect or exact science all the time but, particularly at critical moments such as this one, these judgments are very important. If we err on the side of too much caution and things work out better than we hoped, we will be able to lift the restrictions earlier but, if we err on the other side, we do a lot more damage and some of that damage is measured in human lives. That is why these judgments are so important and why we must take them so seriously.

### Homelessness (Rough Sleeping)

**2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Presiding Officer, I wish you, everyone in the Parliament and everyone in the country a merry Christmas and a healthy, happy and peaceful new year.

During the first wave of the pandemic, a huge effort was made to reduce rough sleeping in Scotland. If we took urgent action then, we should take it now, although it should not take a virus for us to act. Covid remains a risk and, as we head into the coldest month of the year, the Government’s most recent homeless statistics show that nearly 2,500 people who made a homeless application had slept rough in the three months before. Nearly 1,500 had slept rough the night before applying. That is clearly an underestimation of the true numbers of people sleeping rough in Scotland. Will the First Minister guarantee that, as we head towards Christmas, no one will have to sleep on the streets this winter?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** The Government will certainly do everything in its power to ensure that that is the case. We are working with, and I pay tribute to the efforts of, organisations on the front line of the issue. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, one of those organisations made the point that the numbers of people rough sleeping in the city of Glasgow, which is home to Anas Sarwar and me, had reduced markedly, which is positive.

However, many people are still at risk of homelessness and of rough sleeping. We have updated the ending homelessness together action plan and we are investing significantly in making sure that there are support services for people who face the risk of homelessness or rough sleeping. We will continue to do what we can and

work with others to make sure that nobody is on the streets over this winter period.

**Anas Sarwar:** I welcome any reduction in rough sleeping, but those numbers are disputed. One person rough sleeping is one person too many. I hear what the First Minister says, but that still means that people will sleep rough this winter, and it does not need to be that way. We can eradicate rough sleeping now, but that means taking real action to end homelessness, too.

Once people find their way into temporary accommodation, it should be just that—temporary. A home is more than four walls and a roof above your head; it is a basic human right. Too many people will spend this Christmas in temporary accommodation. The most recent Government statistics show that there are more than 3,500 households, with children or a pregnant woman, in temporary accommodation. On average, a couple with a child stay in temporary accommodation for 341 days, but in some parts of Scotland it is as many as 865 days. That is more than two years without a home to call your own.

Scottish Labour has a housing strategy that includes new homes, fair rents and banning winter evictions—

**The Presiding Officer:** Can I have a question, please?

**Anas Sarwar:** Will the Government support our strategy?

**The First Minister:** I am certainly happy to look at any proposals that could help us collectively tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. The Scottish Government does not just have a strategy; we are implementing policies and proposals. We have funded record numbers of new affordable homes and we have investment plans to do more of that. We are investing in the housing first approach, which is an important way of making sure that those who have experienced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness move into settled accommodation and have support services around them, so that they can sustain that accommodation.

I agree with the point that temporary accommodation should be temporary. I know that local councils work very hard to move people from temporary to permanent settled accommodation. During the period of the pandemic, when the first priority has often been to get people off the streets and into accommodation, the numbers of people in temporary accommodation have risen. Temporary accommodation is often of good quality, but that is not always the case, and it can take time for local authorities to find the right accommodation, particularly for families and for larger families. The principle of temporary meaning temporary is a very important one.

This is an area of priority for the Government; even our critics would say that there is a lot of good work being done, but I am always open minded to other suggestions and proposals.

**Anas Sarwar:** The problem has been getting worse year on year since 2013, long before the pandemic. The Government was on track to miss its housing target before Covid, which is why we need a coherent plan to end homelessness, but we must act to eradicate rough sleeping now. Organisations the length and breadth of the country will be working through Christmas and new year to support the most vulnerable. I visited one of them recently, the Homeless Project Scotland, to see its amazing work. I pay tribute to all the charities and each and every one of the volunteers. They should not have to do it, but thank goodness that they do.

However, Government needs to do its job, too. To eradicate rough sleeping this Christmas, will the First Minister commit to outreach support during the night to help identify people sleeping rough on our streets and find them accommodation? Will she open up public buildings to allow volunteers to feed the most vulnerable in a safe, warm setting where support services are also present to help? Let us not deflect responsibility; let us act to end rough sleeping, because this is about who we are and what we are willing to tolerate.

**The First Minister:** I do not think that anybody listening to me would have heard me deflect responsibility on to anyone. This is a collective challenge. Central Government has a leadership obligation, local government has a big obligation—I will come back to that in a second—but we work with fantastic charities and voluntary organisations that do most on the front line.

In relation to affordable housing—this is a statement of fact—Scotland has led the way in the United Kingdom on the delivery of affordable housing. More than 105,000 affordable homes have been delivered since 2007, and more than 70,000 of those are for social rent, which is way in excess of anything that has been done elsewhere in the UK. However, it is about more than that, which is an important point to recognise; it is about the support that is provided to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Through the ending homelessness together fund, we have already increased funding to enable those on the front line to much more rapidly help people and have access to the funding to do that. I am certainly happy to ask the housing minister to look at whether there is more that we can and need to do ahead of the festive period and into the winter.

I am happy to explore the point about public buildings. Of course, many public buildings are in the ownership not of the Scottish Government, but of local authorities, and there are often issues that they have to deal with around that. We have seen that in Glasgow in recent times. We take all those issues really seriously and we are doing a significant and huge amount of work across all those strands.

I will end on a point of consensus. I agree that, for as long as one person is sleeping rough in our streets, there is more for all of us to do, which is why I will never close my mind to suggestions and proposals, no matter where they come from.

### **Breast Cancer Services (NHS Tayside)**

**Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP):** The First Minister will be aware of reports that relate to breast cancer services in Tayside. Can she provide an update on the Scottish Government's discussions with NHS Tayside regarding those issues? What assurances can the Scottish Government provide to my constituents about the on-going service in Tayside?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** First, I am aware of the concerns that have been raised, and NHS Tayside is also fully aware of those concerns. Let me be very clear—I expect NHS Tayside to properly consider and investigate any issues that are raised, and the Scottish Government has been advised that the board has thoroughly investigated the matters that have been raised. NHS Tayside has provided a comprehensive timeline of correspondence and meetings, which shows that issues relating to breast cancer oncology were openly discussed in a wide range of forums, and the individual who raised those concerns was present at and actively contributed to many of them. However, I repeat that I absolutely expect NHS Tayside to properly investigate any concerns that are raised.

Secondly—and finally, Presiding Officer—we are fully supportive of a continued breast cancer service in NHS Tayside. NHS Tayside currently offers a full breast cancer oncology service, with all patients treated in Tayside, and continues to ensure that there is a focus on recruitment, in order to continue that service for patients across Tayside.

### **Outdoor Education Centres**

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Like the rest of us in this chamber, the First Minister received a letter from Scotland's outdoor education centres earlier this week, which set out the blunt financial plight that they are facing. Many of those centres are facing closure, including those in Mid Scotland and Fife. What will the

urgent response from the Scottish Government be?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** The Scottish Government will respond, as we will respond to any organisation that raises understandable and legitimate concerns with us. Although we need to consider that letter and will respond in due course—albeit as quickly as possible—Liz Smith will recall that, around the last time that she raised these issues with me, the Scottish Government provided support to outdoor education. I say that only as an indication of the fact that we are always keen to help and will look positively at helping any organisation through the difficult times that they face now.

### **Ambulance Service Review (Prestonpans)**

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** Ambulance station staff in Prestonpans in East Lothian have approached me about the roll-out of a demand capacity review that began in 2016-17. I understand that the Scottish Ambulance Service intends to roll out that review across Scotland. The result in Prestonpans will be a reduction in ambulance cover to the public and a change in shift patterns, all because of a review whose findings are disputed.

Our ambulance workers feel a responsibility and pressure that I hope most people never endure, and our communities might look to those people over Christmas. Does the First Minister agree that forcing change without the agreement of drivers, technicians and paramedics at Christmas reflects a managerial approach that is inappropriate in Scotland, particularly in 2021, particularly at Christmas and particularly during a pandemic?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to look at the specific issue of the demand capacity review's implications for Prestonpans and to write to Martin Whitfield.

More generally, given that we are at Christmas, I pay tribute to our paramedics and ambulance technicians across the country. They do an outstanding job in circumstances that the rest of us can only imagine, and my gratitude to them is deep and very long standing.

It is important that where change in the health service is being contemplated, not just at Christmas and not just in the Ambulance Service—and let us not forget that the motivation for such changes, whether or not people agree with the detail, is to improve the service to patients—those who deliver the services should be fully involved in making those decisions.

When I previously did Humza Yousaf's job, as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, I would often have that discussion with the trade

unions, and with the Ambulance Service and its management, to ensure that that happened. It is really important that those views are taken into account.

Those are my views in principle. On the specific issues around Prestonpans, I will ask the health secretary to respond in more detail.

### **Lockerbie Air Disaster**

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Tuesday this week marked the 33rd anniversary of the Lockerbie air disaster, which resulted in 270 people from 21 nations losing their lives when Pan Am flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie in my South Scotland region. I remember the night well as I was working in Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary at the time, and I remember the huge emergency service response.

Will the First Minister join me in marking the 33rd anniversary of the disaster and sending our thoughts to the families of all those who lost their lives, and in paying tribute to all those who were involved in the huge emergency service response on Wednesday 21 December 1988? [*Applause.*]

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I thank Emma Harper for raising the subject. Like all of us of a certain age, I vividly remember switching on the television that night and being utterly horrified by the scenes that were unfolding.

Those memories, even for those of us who were not directly affected, do not dim with the passing of years, and for those who were directly affected, this time of year must be particularly hard.

I therefore take the opportunity to mark the sadness of the anniversary, which is a sad moment every year, and to remember all those in Lockerbie for whom those memories are very painful; all those who lost loved ones; and all those who were affected in any way. I thank the emergency services and those who responded that evening, who, I am sure, still live with those very painful memories. I also thank the journalists who reported on the disaster. I have spoken directly to some who reported from Lockerbie that evening, and they will never forget the horror that they encountered there.

It is a dark moment in Scotland's history that we will never, ever forget. For now, our thoughts are with everyone who was directly affected.

### **Covid-19 (Young People)**

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** I recently raised the plight of the silent victims of Covid: those who are dying of physical disease. Today, I raise the plight of those who are dying of non-physical causes. Job losses, financial pressures, social isolation and a lack of mental

health support are not only the hallmarks of a lockdown, but the causes of a breakdown. Scotland has the highest youth mortality rate in western Europe. Last year, tragically, one Scot took their own life every four days. Those statistics are not just sad—they are shocking.

I ask again today what I asked previously. In our efforts to curb the spread of Covid, what is being done to ensure that those measures are not failing a generation of young people, who will suffer and are already suffering as a result?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** It is important and right to highlight the impact on so many people, in so many different ways, of the steps that we have had, by necessity, to take to control Covid.

In many different ways, because many people have been affected in many different ways, we are seeking to provide support, whether that is by helping children to catch up with their education or through investments in mental health to help support people's wellbeing.

There is an important point, which I know that Jamie Greene will recognise. The person whom I have heard articulate this point best and most powerfully in recent days is Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England. At times, it can be tempting for us all—I include myself in that—to think that, if we did not take steps to control Covid, we would somehow escape the other impacts. However, that is not the case. If we did not control Covid, all the other impacts—the direct health impacts, and the impacts on the economy and on wellbeing more widely—would be even worse.

It is the virus that is causing all those problems, and until we deal with the virus, through vaccination eventually but in the meantime through action to suppress it, we will continue to see those cycles of impacts. There is no easy way through this, but we need to help all those who are affected in as many ways as we can, and we will continue to seek to do that.

### **Quantitative Easing**

**Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Twice in the past 13 years in times of great crisis, this country has relied on quantitative easing to save livelihoods, protect our economy and avoid a catastrophic depression. Earlier this week, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy posed a quite extraordinary question, which I hope the First Minister might answer. To be clear, this is not my question; it is one from the finance secretary:

“would it be such a great loss not to be able to conduct quantitative easing?”

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I think it would be a great gain if we had economic management that avoided the need for such things. Nobody should think that they are good things, because the situations that make them necessary are not good things.

That is the kind of question that I would expect from the other side of the chamber. However, I think that, over the past few years—and particularly now—it would have been so much better for Scotland if we had not been in the position of having austerity imposed on us, given its impact on individuals and communities. I think that it would be so much better if, right now, we were in a position—with financial arrangements to support that position—where our public health response to a global pandemic was not being constrained by the decisions of a Conservative Government that is in a complete mess. Labour may wish to reflect on that and leave that kind of question to the Tories.

### Cabinet (Meetings)

**3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** I wish you, Presiding Officer, and everyone else a merry Christmas, and I give thanks to those who will be working over the festive period, not least those who keep us safe and those who are caring for others.

To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-00615)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Cabinet is next scheduled to meet on Tuesday 11 January, following the parliamentary recess. However, I would be utterly astonished if Cabinet did not meet before that, during the recess.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** Yesterday, we learned that the Government's social care workforce strategy is to be delayed until the spring. That came on the same day that social work directors admitted that lives could be lost because of the growing shortage of home carers. In their words, "care is being rationed like never before".

Alarm bells are ringing across the country, in East Lothian, Fife and Glasgow. That means vulnerable people not getting washed for days on end, with meals, medicines and safety visits missed. One woman has been stuck in her bed for 19 hours a day for weeks, while a man was left soiled for hours because there was not a second carer on hand to help change him.

The Government has been warned about staff shortages before. I have raised the issue, as have others. The First Minister has to acknowledge that this is the deepest crisis that we have ever seen in social care. I ask her: what is the plan?

**The First Minister:** Alex Cole-Hamilton would know the answer to that question if he had listened to some of what the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care said.

First, I will address the point about the strategy. We have decided—I think rightly—to take a bit longer over a longer-term strategy for workforce planning so as to take proper account of the experience of and the lessons learned through the Covid pandemic, and to take proper account of our on-going work to integrate health and social care through a national care service. That is not the same as saying that we are not taking action now.

Perhaps the most important thing that we have done is to fund the recruitment of 1,000 more members of staff to deal, in the immediate term, with some of the issues that Alex Cole-Hamilton is addressing. There are short-term pressures that we are funding health boards and local authorities to deal with now, while we learn properly from the experience of Covid in relation to longer-term workforce planning. That is a sensible approach to take through what is an emergency crisis situation for health and social care.

I return to the point that we need to suppress the virus to allow all those services to start to get back to normal.

### Teachers (Wellbeing)

**4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the recent survey by the Educational Institute of Scotland, which found that at least 50 per cent of teachers said their wellbeing was poor or very poor. (S6F-00612)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** First, I acknowledge the dedication of teachers across the country. In particular, I acknowledge their exceptional efforts in helping to ensure that young people and children have been supported through this challenging time.

We take the health and wellbeing of teachers very seriously. Although local authorities have a key role to play in supporting staff—teachers are employed by local authorities—the Scottish Government has invested more than £2 million in teacher wellbeing in the past year, with a package of support having been developed with the education recovery group. The Government has also committed to reducing class contact time by 90 minutes per week to give teachers more time to plan and to ease their overall workload.

Of course, we continue to make good progress on recruitment, with teacher numbers increasing this year for the sixth year in a row. I am pleased to say that the ratio of pupils to teachers is now at its lowest level since 2009.

**Christine Grahame:** As a former secondary teacher—albeit that it was a wee while ago—and with teachers past and current in the family, I am aware of the dedication to the job and the stresses that go with it. With the priority to keep schools open and, as I understand it, to reintroduce exams in 2022, can more support be given to the profession, which is key to Scotland's future?

**The First Minister:** As I know how much Christine Grahame works to keep me on my toes in her current role, I have always considered myself lucky not to have been a pupil in one of her classrooms when she was a teacher. She is probably thinking that she is not old enough to have been one of my teachers—I am not sure whether she is correct there. [*Laughter.*] I can feel an unusual unity of sympathy for me right now across the chamber, so I will swiftly move on.

We will continue to do everything that we can to support teachers as we try to get education back to normal. I said the other day, and I will repeat, that our priority is to keep schools open and not to have further disruption to children's education. However, I recognise how difficult that is for teachers. Our main way of supporting teachers now is to recruit more of them into classrooms and, as I said, to reduce class contact time so that their overall workload is eased.

Christine Grahame raises an important point, which allows me to recognise again how vital the contribution of teachers has been during the pandemic.

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** The added workload from meeting the needs of children with additional support needs was in the top three causes of stress, according to the survey. Since 2010, the number of ASN teachers has fallen by nearly a fifth, while the number of children who require additional support has increased by almost 70,000. Does the First Minister agree that the need for ASN teachers has been overlooked and must urgently be addressed?

**The First Minister:** Some changes to definitions have taken place, which means that the figures need to be treated with a degree of caution, but it is important to recognise the overall point. The overall numbers of teachers are rising. Although teachers who focus specifically on additional support needs are vital, to support children with additional needs is a job and a responsibility for all teachers. Our investment in recruitment and the rise in the numbers of teachers are important for the support of children with additional needs as well as for pupils generally.

## Support from Charities and Community Groups (Festive Period)

5. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that vulnerable individuals are able to access support from charities and community groups over the festive period despite any required Covid-19 measures. (S6F-00614)

**The First Minister:** Charities and community groups can remain open over the festive period if they wish, in order to provide the range of services that they offer in line with the protective measures that are advised for everyone now. Those groups provide a range of really valuable support to service users, and the Scottish Government is committed to supporting them as much as possible.

For example, we recently invested £1 million to support organisations that tackle social isolation and loneliness, and we established the £15 million communities mental health and wellbeing fund.

I take this opportunity to express my appreciation and gratitude to all organisations, staff and volunteers that support so many people across the country, and to send my very best wishes to them for Christmas and the year ahead.

**Brian Whittle:** I recognise that the Scottish Government has put in place funding for third sector and community organisations, especially in tackling addiction. However, organisations in my area are saying that the funding does not always make its way to the front line.

In Kilmarnock, the foundation hub, which is part of Recovery Enterprises, has had 900 attendances since opening in April, delivering services that mainstream providers are unable to provide. However, it is reporting a chronic lack of funding. The Kilmarnock Station Community Village has 25 therapists who deliver mental health interventions, with a waiting list of only one week, but it has no central funding.

I am sure that the First Minister agrees that those services are needed now more than ever. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that the funding that is put in place ends up where it is intended to go?

**The First Minister:** There are two points there. I recognise that experience—it is one that is often recounted to me by community organisations in my constituency.

We must first ensure, as far as we can within our financial constraints, that the overall quantum of support for organisations is good and rising. I have talked about some of the additional sources of support that we have put in place.



It is then important—I know that local authorities work hard at this, and the decisions about which organisations are funded are taken not exclusively but often, by local authorities, not by central Government—to ensure that as much funding as possible gets to the organisations that are closest to the communities that they serve. In my experience, it is those organisations that deliver the best services, because they are the most responsive to the people who they are trying to help.

I recognise Brian Whittle's points, and it is incumbent on all decision makers to ensure that they are reflected in the decisions that are taken.

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** Thanks to the United Kingdom Home Office, vulnerable refugees in Scotland will be spending Christmas warehoused in run-down hotels, including in Perth. Such institutional accommodation has no place in Scotland. It harms people who are seeking asylum, infringes their basic human rights and has been described as being like prison.

Will the First Minister provide an update on any correspondence that the Scottish Government has had with the Home Office on using hotels in that way?

**The First Minister:** I am happy to ask the relevant minister to make available any recent correspondence. I do not think that I am exaggerating when I say that there are acres of correspondence going back a long time between the Scottish Government and the Home Office about all matters relating to immigration and asylum and, in particular, on the use of hotel accommodation. It is fair to say that the correspondence that comes from the Home Office to the Scottish Government is rarely satisfactory on those matters.

Through its asylum policies, the UK Government treats asylum seekers inhumanely. The use of hotel accommodation in the way that Mark Ruskell has described is just one aspect of that.

How we treat people who are fleeing circumstances that we can scarcely imagine and who are seeking refuge here reflects on who we are as a society. As we go into a new year, I can only hope that the UK Government and the Home Office reflect on those matters and start to treat asylum seekers with the dignity, respect and humanity that they deserve.

### Missing Person Investigations

**6. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister how many missing person investigations have been carried out in 2021. (S6F-00633)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** In the 2021 calendar year—I note that these figures are often reported by financial year—Police Scotland has conducted 15,839 missing person investigations. Police Scotland's management data suggests that there has been a decrease in the number of investigations since 2016-17. However, there is no complacency, and work continues to improve multi-agency efforts across Scotland through the implementation of the national missing persons framework. I pay tribute to the dedication and expertise of Police Scotland and its partners because, thanks to them, more than 99 per cent of the people who go missing each year are traced and found to be safe and well.

**Monica Lennon:** I thank the First Minister for her response. Paul Harley from Coatbridge has been missing since 2014, but there has been a potential sighting of him and, in today's *Daily Record*, his son Paul has sent the message to his dad that, "It's never too late to come home".

It is important that the missing and their loved ones are supported. The charity Missing People is working hard to reunite more families this Christmas. Will the First Minister help to get the message out that the charity's trained helpline staff can be reached by a call or text on 116 000? Will the Scottish Government do everything that it can to support the charity's mission, which is for every missing child and adult and every loved one left behind to find help, hope and a safe way to reconnect?

**The First Minister:** That is a really important issue to raise. All over Scotland and the United Kingdom right now, there will be families who are missing loved ones and worrying about their whereabouts, health and wellbeing. If you are one of those loved ones and you are able to pick up the phone to your family, that would be the most wonderful Christmas gift that you could give them. I say to Paul's family that I hope that you get some news.

I agree that it is important that, as well as the work that the police do, there are services in place to support people in such horrendously distressing situations. I absolutely reiterate Monica Lennon's advice that there is help available. The Missing People number, 116 000, is there should people need it.

The Scottish Government provides some funding to the Missing People charity to increase awareness and use of its support services among people who are or who have been missing, and their families. That important help is there for people and I encourage anybody who is in such a difficult situation to make use of it.

I end by thanking Monica Lennon for raising such an important issue.

### **SaxaVord Spaceport**

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** Given the £50 million investment of private sector funding in the Shetland space centre, does the First Minister agree that the SaxaVord spaceport on Unst will be of national strategic importance to Scotland's space economy?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** A development like that would be of strategic importance, as well as being important to the local community and economy. Scotland has many attributes when it comes to space technology and I hope that, next year and beyond, we will see that strength grow even further.

## **Point of Order**

12:46

**Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I should have noted earlier that I am a councillor at Stirling Council.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Thank you, Ms Tweed. That is now on the record.

## Decision Time

*Meeting closed at 12:46.*

12:46

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business. That concludes decision time.

I take this opportunity to wish all members and staff in Parliament a happy and safe Christmas.



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