Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Last week, the SQA sent a panic directive to schools advising them of the need to apply "appropriate penalties" if pupils have been found sharing assessment papers online. Given that, in any normal year, pupils are allowed to take their exam paper when they leave and discuss it afterwards, it should have been entirely obvious that this year's senior pupils would also wish to discuss their assessments after they had taken them.

The SQA is engaged in a process of allocating blame to everyone but itself for an entirely avoidable series of problems for which it is responsible. Will the education secretary instruct the SQA to drop that threat and accept that pupils are going to discuss their assessments after they have sat them, that those discussions will take place online and that fair enforcement of that directive will be impossible?

John Swinney: First, I welcome Gillian Mackay to Parliament—I hope that Mr Marra will forgive me for omitting to do so in his case earlier, but I do so now, generously. He is, of course, someone with whom I have engaged in electoral contest in the past, so it is nice to see him here.

On Gillian Mackay's point, the status of the assessments that young people are undertaking just now is not equivalent to the status of examinations, and those assessments are undertaken in a different way from examinations, because examinations would take place in all the centres on the same day at the same time. The material for assessments has been made available to centres on the basis that they can use all of it, adapt it or use parts of it if they consider that appropriate. However, fundamentally, they must handle that information securely because it will be used at different times in different ways in different schools around the country. It is for that reason that the SQA is asking the system to respect the fact that materials are being used in a different fashion from the normal way in which any examination papers or assessment papers are used in the normal exam diet.

The Presiding Officer: Again, I give my apologies to members I have been unable to call.

Covid-19 (Moray)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, welcome you to your new position, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Covid-19 situation in Moray and what additional support will be made available to residents and businesses.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I also welcome you, Presiding Officer, to your post, and I welcome Douglas Ross back to the Parliament.

I am grateful for the opportunity to update Parliament on the situation in Moray. With your permission, Presiding Officer, I will also take a bit of time to advise Parliament of the difficult decision that we have reached in the past hour or so in light of the significant increase in cases in Glasgow over the past few days.

The latest available data shows that the number of cases in Moray is 69 per 100,000 and the test positivity rate is 1.9 per cent. I am pleased to say that the rates for both those measures are declining, so there are grounds for cautious optimism that the situation is improving as a result of the public health interventions that have been taken.

However, case numbers remain more than double the Scottish average, and the local incident management team's judgment, which has informed this decision, is that it is prudent for Moray to remain at level 3 for a further week, so that we can be more confident that the situation is firmly under control. The position will be reviewed again at the end of next week, at which point I hope that Moray will move to level 2.

I know that that will be disappointing for residents and businesses in Moray—I will come back to the question about business support shortly. However, in my judgment, although it is difficult, it is sensible to be cautious now and allow Moray to move with more confidence to level 2, rather than ease restrictions prematurely and risk going backwards later.

The Government is applying a similar reasoning to the situation in Glasgow city, which I must say is causing even more concern at this stage. On the latest available data, the number of cases has increased to 80 per 100,000 and the test positivity rate is 3.5 per cent. Both measures suggest an increasing level of infection. However, an additional and significant factor is evidence suggesting that the outbreak, which is currently heavily centred in the south side of the city, is being driven by the so-called Indian variant.

We do not yet have a full understanding of the impact of the variant, including on the protection afforded by the vaccines. I want to stress that nothing at this stage suggests that it is causing more severe illness. However, it is thought that the variant could be significantly more transmissible than even the Kent variant that was identified before Christmas. That alone calls for an appropriate degree of caution.

It is important to stress that public health teams are optimistic that enhanced testing and vaccination will be capable of getting the situation