

Conveners Group
Meeting with the First Minister
Wednesday 18 April 2018

CONVENERS GROUP

CONVENER

*The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- *Clare Adamson (Convener, Social Security Committee)
- *Bruce Crawford (Convener, Finance and Constitution Committee)
- *Graeme Dey (Convener, Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee)
- *Bob Doris (Convener, Local Government and Communities Committee)
- *James Dornan (Convener, Education and Skills Committee)
- *Clare Haughey (Convener, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee)
- *Johann Lamont (Convener, Public Petitions Committee)
- *Gordon Lindhurst (Convener, Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee)
- *Lewis Macdonald (Convener, Health and Sport Committee)
- Jenny Marra (Convener, Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee)
- *Joan McAlpine (Convener, Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee)
- *Christina McKelvie (Convener, Equalities and Human Rights Committee)
- *Margaret Mitchell (Convener, Justice Committee)
- *Edward Mountain (Convener, Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee)
- *Graham Simpson (Convener, Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Susan Duffy

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Conveners Group

Wednesday 18 April 2018

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 12:30]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I am pleased to convene the third meeting in session 5 of the Conveners Group with the First Minister. I welcome the First Minister and members of the public to the meeting. This session gives conveners the opportunity to question the First Minister about the programme for government from the perspective of the Parliament's committees. We need to finish by around 1.55, as business in the chamber starts at 2 pm. That means that time is tight, so I will allow five minutes for each exchange between a convener and the First Minister. I know that you are all very disciplined—I see that you are agreeing with me. First Minister, do you want to make some opening remarks?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No. In the interests of time, I am happy to move straight to questions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Adamson, the convener of the Social Security Committee.

Clare Adamson (Convener, Social Security Committee): Good afternoon, First Minister. My committee's main focus has been on the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill and the Social Security (Scotland) Bill, which will, we hope, be passed next week, following stage 3. We have included in the Social Security (Scotland) Bill the statement that the social security system has a role to play in reducing poverty. Can you give us further insight into what the Government's programme will do to alleviate and, it is hoped, eliminate child poverty in Scotland?

The First Minister: I absolutely agree that the social security system has a role to play in that regard. That was one of the central comments that the independent commission on poverty and inequality made in its report. It looked at work and earnings as well as at housing costs, and it made the point that our actions in regard to social security must contribute to the alleviation of poverty and the reduction of the inequality gap.

The Scottish Government's programme spans all areas of Government when it comes to tackling poverty and reducing inequality. Some of the areas of the Government's work that are not badged as anti-poverty work are, nevertheless, all about tackling the long-term drivers of poverty and

inequality. Those include our work to expand childcare, our work to close the educational attainment gap, work to reduce the disability employment gap, the broad range of work that we are doing around the gender pay gap and gender inequality more generally, the work that we are doing around health inequalities and, increasingly, work on adverse childhood experiences in recognition of the fact that many of the drivers of poverty and inequality in later life are rooted in the early experiences of children. All of that work has a part to play.

Specifically, in terms of the immediate remit of your committee, the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 sets targets for 2030, with interim targets for 2023—making us the only part of the United Kingdom to have such binding statutory targets—and the delivery plan that was published just before the parliamentary recess, which relates to the three areas that I spoke about. That act is backed by the tackling child poverty fund, which represents investment of £50 million over the course of the parliamentary session. In addition, there is a range of work to mitigate welfare cuts that are coming from Westminster, which involves investment of about £100 million every year. The biggest element of that is, of course, the mitigation of the bedroom tax.

You mentioned the Social Security (Scotland) Bill, which will, I hope, be passed by Parliament next week. It will enable us to design our own social security system that very much has respect, dignity and a determination to tackle poverty at its heart.

That is a brief run through, and I can go into more detail on any aspect of that. The point that I want to make is that our work to tackle poverty spans the immediate, short, medium and long terms. Tackling the longer-term drivers of poverty is as important as mitigating its impacts in the short term—in fact, it is possibly more important.

Clare Adamson: This week, the Social Security Committee took evidence from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The powers that are coming to the Scottish Parliament through the Social Security (Scotland) Bill are substantive—they represent perhaps the biggest new set of powers that are coming to us. However, there are questions about the roll-out of universal credit, as research shows that the income of a one-parent family could be reduced by up to £2,380 a year and that the income of a two-parent family could be reduced by nearly £1,000 a year. There are also questions about the two-child limit on tax credits. When universal credit was planned, it was supposed to cause no detriment to anyone in that regard. What challenges will there be for services in Scotland as universal credit is rolled out?

The First Minister: There will be enormous challenges, to be blunt. I have deep and profound concerns about the impact of the roll-out of universal credit, and I do not think that the lessons from pilots are being learned sufficiently. There are inherent flaws in the design of universal credit and in the mechanisms that lie behind the delivery of it. Taken as a whole, the cuts that have still to come to social security provision at the UK level will hit a significant number of people very hard—you have given some of the numbers that independent organisations have cited previously. That presents an immediate challenge, because, as we saw from the projections on child poverty and poverty generally that were published a few weeks ago, those numbers take us in the opposite direction from the direction in which we are trying to go on poverty.

Universal credit is a headwind that makes what we are trying to do much more difficult. It raises questions, which we hear all the time in this Parliament, about the extent to which the Scottish Government can mitigate the cuts that are coming from the UK Government. Although we have a definite role to play in using the substantial powers that are being transferred and we are determined to use them—one of the things that the child poverty delivery plan that I have spoken about looks at is the idea of an income supplement, which we will do more work on over the next couple of years—those powers account for something like 15 per cent of the total welfare budget. Even some of the limited powers that we have on making modifications to universal credit involve getting the Department for Work and Pensions to agree to implement such modifications.

Universal credit makes the job that we are trying to do much more difficult, and it makes the need for us to use our powers cleverly, imaginatively and to their full extent all the more important. That is what we are determined to do, but we should not pretend that we can mitigate every impact of the welfare cuts that are coming at the UK level, because we cannot until the entire budget is in our hands. We are not in that position yet, nor are we anywhere near it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Margaret Mitchell, who is the convener of the Justice Committee.

Margaret Mitchell (Convener, Justice Committee): Good afternoon, First Minister. The Scottish Government has not committed to updating our defamation law or introducing legislation to do so, which would help to clarify the boundaries of investigative journalism and tackle online abuse. Would you be supportive of the Justice Committee using the powers that Scottish Parliament committees have, but which have been

rarely used, to introduce legislation on defamation as a committee bill?

The First Minister: I do not think that it is for me to say whether the committee should do that. I certainly would have no objections, and it is not for me to object to a committee bringing forward its own bill. As the committee is aware—because there has been some interaction between the Government and the committee on the issue previously—the Scottish Law Commission has recently concluded a very thorough consideration of reforms to defamation law. As things stand, the Government is considering the Scottish Law Commission's report very carefully, and I hope that, in the not-too-distant future, we will say whether the Government intends to bring forward legislation.

It is important that we consider the Law Commission's report carefully, because the area is sensitive and is one in which, for understandable reasons, there are strong views and feelings. There are areas in which there are differences of opinion. For example, the serious harm test that is contained in the draft bill in the Law Commission's report has attracted some criticism, and there are issues about whether there should be provision relating to defamation of the deceased and about the correct length of a limitation period. Those are some of the quite thorny issues that it is important to get right. We are going through that consideration, and we will continue to talk to the committee so that it understands our views and intentions on the issue. If we come to a point at which the committee thinks that it is appropriate to introduce a committee bill, I am sure that that will get the proper consideration.

Margaret Mitchell: The Justice Committee has been keen to consider legislating, but we have discovered that the process is quite complex and daunting. Would you support seeing whether the process could be simplified, given that very few bills have ever been introduced by committees? Crucially, when you consider the Government's legislative programme, will you factor in time to allow committees such as the Justice Committee, which tends to be heavily loaded with bills, to carry out that crucial function of the Scottish Parliament?

The First Minister: We have had this exchange before. When the Deputy Presiding Officer was the convener of the Justice Committee, she raised the issue with us regularly.

It is for committees to determine their own work programme. Yes, the Government tries to consider the committees' priorities when considering its legislative programme but, as I think I said in our exchange at the previous Conveners Group meeting, we do not introduce legislation just for

the sake of it; we do so for a purpose and because we consider that it is necessary.

The short answer is that we are always open to having a discussion. We have on-going discussions with committees about how to balance the Government's demands on a committee's time, through its legislative programme, and the committee's own priorities to undertake inquiries or to introduce committee bills.

As I understood it—correct me if I am wrong—the first part of your question was about the complexity of the process for committee bills rather than the complexity of the defamation issue. Again, I am not sure that it is necessarily a matter for the Government to pronounce on, but if the Government can be helpful in looking at how committees can be better supported or enabled to introduce legislation, we are open to doing that. However, as we all know, sensitivities would quickly develop if it was considered that the Government was trying to encroach on the work or the procedures of committees.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Bob Doris, who is the convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee.

Bob Doris (Convener, Local Government and Communities Committee): First Minister, the outcome of the Scottish Government's public sector pay policy creates an expectation about what local government workers might receive. The Scottish Government's own pay policy states that it is to act

"as a benchmark for all major public sector workforce groups across Scotland".

Given that the 2018-19 Scottish Government pay policy is to award a 3 per cent increase to workers within its pay control earning under £36,500, how will the Scottish Government seek to encourage a pay award of at least 3 per cent for those who are on the same income band within local government, and how will it monitor the progress that is being made?

The First Minister: I recognise the sensitivity of the issue, because pay for local government employees is a matter for local councils. In this Parliament and elsewhere, the Government is often criticised—unfairly, in my view, although others would no doubt say that it is fair—for seeking to intervene or interfere in decisions that are rightfully for individual local councils to make.

When we set our own public sector pay policy, we recognised that it inevitably sets a benchmark for the rest of the public sector. Our policy recommends a 3 per cent increase for staff who are paid less than £36,500 and a 2 per cent increase for those who earn more than that amount, and we know that it is a benchmark that

other parts of the public sector will be judged against. We have set that policy because it is right that the 1 per cent cap be lifted given the pressures that there have been on public sector workers over the past few years and particularly now that inflation is higher than it has been for some time.

When we set our budget, we took account of the public sector pay increase and—this is particularly relevant to the purposes of your question—the settlement for local government. Local government has received a real-terms increase in its revenue budget for this financial year. Local councils have also used their ability to increase the council tax by up to 3 per cent, which is still less than the average increase elsewhere in the UK. Those two things taken together give councils extra revenue of more than £200 million in this financial year.

Pay is one of the biggest inflationary pressures that councils face. I think that the pay bill is about 60 per cent of the revenue budget of local government. I do not speak for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, but I presume that this year's settlement has been partly what enabled it to set a pay policy that is in line with the Scottish Government's pay policy.

Bob Doris: I am glad that you recognise pay as one of the significant pressures on local authorities, First Minister. You mentioned COSLA. Would the Scottish Government consider, in partnership with COSLA, monitoring more closely local authority staff pay rates across all 32 local authorities in order to map where disparities exist as well as to understand better the financial impact of Scottish Government pay policy benchmarks on local authorities' budget settlements?

The First Minister: Again, I am cautious of getting into that territory, as some people—including COSLA, I suspect—would immediately suggest that it is not for central Government to monitor the decisions of individual local authorities. On the other hand, I recognise the concerns that people will have if there are disparities. Different local authorities will perhaps reach different settlements with particular groups of staff.

We would certainly be happy to discuss the issue with COSLA and to see whether there is work that we could do jointly to monitor—that might not be the best word to use in this context; perhaps "look at" would be better—whether there is consistency across all 32 local authorities or whether action could be taken to encourage greater consistency.

12:45

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Bruce Crawford, who is convener of the Finance and Constitution Committee.

Bruce Crawford (Convener, Finance and Constitution Committee): Good afternoon, First Minister. As I am the convener of the Finance and Constitution Committee, you will understand that I am concerned about the timescale of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Are negotiations between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on-going with regard to that bill, given that the UK Government requires consent from this Parliament?

The withdrawal bill is fast approaching the later stages of scrutiny in the House of Lords, and the UK Government has referred the Scottish EU continuity bill—that is what I call it—to the Supreme Court, despite the overwhelming vote in the Scottish Parliament in favour of its passing. Can you update us on where those negotiations stand?

The First Minister: I will do my best. You mentioned the referral to the Supreme Court, which was announced by the UK Government yesterday. It is fair to say that I deeply regret that decision. In the weeks since the Scottish Parliament passed the continuity bill, I have seen it described variously in the media as my bill or the SNP's bill. However, the bill was passed by the overwhelming majority of members of this Parliament, and it is therefore the Scottish Parliament's continuity bill. It was done under emergency procedures, but it is fair to say that it had a significant degree of scrutiny—I am aware that I am telling you about something that you were very closely involved in.

The Westminster Government had to decide whether to respect the Scottish Parliament's decision. Unfortunately, it opted not to do so, and to refer the legislation to the Supreme Court. I mention that because it has a bearing on the spirit of the negotiations that we are currently engaged in. To some extent, the UK Government is asking the Scottish Government and, ultimately, the Scottish Parliament, to take on trust that the process of Brexit will not be used to ride roughshod over the powers of this Parliament, and I do not think that it helps to build that trust when we have decisions taken by a clear majority in this Parliament being referred to court in the way that we saw yesterday. I regret that, but I will put it to one side for the moment.

The negotiations are on-going—they continue. I do not think that I am betraying any secrets when I say that time is growing short and the clock is ticking. We continue to talk and progress is being made, but we are not there yet. Whether we will

see enough progress to allow me as First Minister to recommend that the Parliament consents to the withdrawal bill is still an open question. I have been clear that the consent of this Parliament is a fundamental issue of principle as far as I am concerned. However benignly the UK Government might want to express itself in this regard, when we get to the end of the negotiations and we have got as far as we will go, I and the Scottish Government will have to judge whether, ultimately, this Parliament's powers could be constrained, even for a limited period, without the consent of this Parliament. I have been clear that that is a key issue, and we are not yet at a point at which we would be able to recommend agreement, but we continue to negotiate in good faith.

Bruce Crawford: The Government will have to make its mind up in that regard, but the Finance and Constitution Committee will also have to make its mind up about whether its final report should recommend consent for the withdrawal bill. Therefore, what might happen next? Timescales are important to how the committee comes to its conclusion. What is your best advice with regard to timescales in that regard?

The First Minister: I am not going to give you a specific date because it is not within my ability to do that at this point. However, it is fair to say that we are reaching the end game and we know that the withdrawal bill is at report stage in the House of Lords. We would probably need to see an agreement being reached or not being reached over the next couple of weeks. We are talking now more about days than weeks; that is the sphere that we are in.

There have been further discussions this week; I think there is an intention to have a further meeting of the ministers dealing with this, perhaps next week, although to the best of my knowledge when I came into this meeting, that had not been absolutely finalised yet. However, we are definitely getting towards the end game.

I genuinely hope we can reach agreement but inevitably, when there are pretty fundamental issues of principle involved, the bar to agreement is not always easy to overcome, even when lots of people on both sides are trying very hard to reach an agreement. I hope that we can get there but we are not there yet.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Johann Lamont, who is convener of the Public Petitions Committee.

Johann Lamont (Convener, Public Petitions Committee): The Public Petitions Committee is unusual in that it deals with a massive range of issues. I do not intend to ask you about a specific petition since that would be a test of my memory as well as yours, but I have tried to look at some of

the themes that come out of public petitions, bearing in mind that those petitions are entirely driven by individuals and campaigning groups who want to petition Parliament. There is a common theme about people feeling let down by the system—the institutions they try to get help from do not respond to them. I am interested in how you think that can be addressed.

More specifically, given that 2018 is the year of young people, I want to ask about the rights of children and young people and how they have been reflected in the Public Petitions Committee over the last period. We have had a number of petitions across areas such as education, health and justice that raise fundamental issues about how the rights of children and young people are protected. Currently, there are some tragic examples in the petitions system to do with how young people access mental health services.

First, do you have a response to the question about how to deal with systems that do not respond, which means that people are reduced to coming to something such as the petitions committee? Also, how do you ensure that there is an assessment of the impact of anything that the Government does on the rights of children and young people?

The First Minister: There is a lot of important stuff there so I will try to unpack it a little bit, if I may. The first thing to say is that as a Government, we pay close attention to the petitions that come to the petitions committee. Obviously we pay close attention to the individual issues but, as you would expect, we also pay close attention to the themes that emerge from those individual petitions.

I do not want to give too many statistics but for example, if we look at all the petitions that have come forward in session 5 to date, three quarters of them relate to just four broad topical areas. Health and social care accounts for 40 per cent, followed by justice at about 16 per cent, the environment and rural issues account for about 10 per cent, and transport accounts for another 10 per cent.

Children and young people would be the next on that list—accounting for about 6 per cent of the petitions—but, as you rightly say, a lot of the health petitions, particularly those around mental health, will involve things that are particularly important to young people.

We try to have oversight of the themes so that we are not just responding to the individual issues but picking up general and emerging patterns. We try to deal with that systematically when it is about public bodies that are accountable to the Scottish Government, whether that is health boards or other public bodies.

This is the year of young people and a theme that goes across all parts of Government is how we are trying to see issues through the eyes of a young person, even when they are issues that are not normally seen in that way. The petitions that come to your committee are not the only way but they are one way of helping us to do that.

You also raised mental health. As mental health stigma reduces and demand increases, we know that access to mental health services and mental ill health prevention are becoming more important. Both from petitions and from other evidence, we know that that is a particular issue for young people and the prevention issue is particularly important—certainly that is what I hear from the young people I speak to.

I do not want to say that petitions are the only things that allow us to assess and react in a more systemic way, but they are an important part of the process.

Johann Lamont: On the question of young people and mental health, I ask you to look at a fear that has been expressed in evidence to our committee that, because of pressures on general practitioners, there is the possibility that young people are not offered the other services that they might need before they are offered a prescription. As you are aware, the issue is highly sensitive, but I urge you to look at that matter.

On a more general point, when the Public Petitions Committee looks to the Government for a response, it would be useful for specific information to be given on the impact of what the Government is doing around children and young people's rights.

The First Minister: I am certainly happy to take away that specific suggestion. I appreciate that there will not always necessarily be a consensus of views on the subject matter of petitions, but I hope that your committee believes that the Government responds positively, proactively and in detail to requests for information. We will look at whether we can almost routinely add a young people's perspective to our response on any petition. That might not be relevant for absolutely everything, but we will take away that suggestion and look at how it can best be done.

On the mental health point, it is important that we are aware—and we are—that the possibility that Johann Lamont has raised is a risk. Without going off at a tangent too much, one of the things that I am particularly keen to build into our approach to mental health is that, although people who need appointments with GPs should get them, we need to get much more upstream—to use that terminology—with mental health. It should not necessarily always be the case that someone who presents with a mental health issue needs to

go to a GP or another part of the formal health service. As many members have said, it is about getting more mental health prevention support into schools and other settings in which young people find themselves. That is very much part of the mental health approach that we are keen to take.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Graeme Dey, who is convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.

Graeme Dey (Convener, Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee): First Minister, to what extent is the advice of the UK Committee on Climate Change sought, and then followed, by the Scottish Government in shaping climate change policy?

The First Minister: The UK Committee on Climate Change is the statutory independent adviser to the Scottish Government—I think that the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 established it as such. We are obliged to take into account the advice of the Committee on Climate Change, and we do so, but its advice will not be the only factor that we take into account when we come to decisions.

The issue is particularly pertinent and relevant just now as we come to what are not easy but finely balanced judgments about the extent to which we set targets in our next climate change bill. We consulted on the 90 per cent target that the UK Committee on Climate Change said was at the outside edge of what was achievable. We are being pressed, rightly and understandably, by many organisations to go for net zero. Net zero is our aspiration, but given that when something is put in legislation there needs to be a path to deliver it, we are considering carefully the extent to which, and the timescale in which, that aspiration can be translated into legislation, given the unique nature of Scottish legislation.

Graeme Dey: You have anticipated where I was going with my question. Obviously, the proposed climate change bill will come to my committee. I understand that you will not want to reveal what is in the bill and the decision that you will take on the target, but could you explain a little further about how the Government will balance the expert opinion that it has received—which, as you have said, suggests that a 90 per cent target is at the ambitious end of what is achievable—against the understandable aspirations of the environmental lobby? How will you do that in practice?

The First Minister: We are looking very carefully at that just now. I can be very clear: my aspiration is the same as that of the environmental lobby. I want to see us get to a net zero position as quickly as possible. Some have argued for that to be by 2050 or 2040, and some would probably argue that it should be earlier than 2040. Right

now, we could not say credibly that we can set a pathway from here to there. Those in the environmental lobby would say that that should not stop us because the science and technology is changing, and I recognise that.

13:00

The difficult thing comes when you are translating that aspiration into binding legislation. Some other countries—Sweden, for example—are often held up as having already committed to that, but there are two points of difference between our legislation in Scotland and the approach taken by many other countries. There are very few countries that have binding statutory targets, as we do, and there are fewer still that have binding annual targets.

Our targets are very tough and we only count domestic measures towards our targets, whereas other countries—including the ones that are often cited—use international credits, which we do not. If we are going to put something into law that we are measured against annually, we have to be able to look people in the eye and say that we know how we can deliver it. That is the process that we are going through just now.

The bill will be published before the summer recess and it is not an easy judgment. The difference here is not in aspiration; it is about the extent to which and the timescale over which that aspiration can be converted into binding annual targets.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gordon Lindhurst, convener of the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee.

Gordon Lindhurst (Convener, Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee): First Minister, I think that you will be aware that the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the performance of the Scottish economy. One of the recurring themes that arise in evidence—it arose again yesterday—is the cluttered landscape for business support. Different schemes are available through Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the business gateway. What can the Scottish Government do to ensure alignment and that a coherent set-up of business support is available to businesses? How can the Scottish Government bring that about quickly?

The First Minister: The establishment of the strategic board, which is now getting under way, is the key thing that we have done. I paid very close attention to the Fraser of Allander institute report just a few weeks ago. We have always sought to have as streamlined a landscape as possible, but I guess that, when you try to streamline a landscape, you quickly run into people—including,

dare I say it, members of the Scottish Parliament—who do not want you to streamline a particular organisation or strategy that they would prefer to be kept.

If you remember the early days of the process towards establishing a strategic board, you will know that we wanted to go a little bit further. We did not want to compromise the existence of HIE, for example, but we wanted a harder alignment between organisations, and that was pretty strongly resisted across the Parliament. Therefore, that is easy to say to a Government, but those who say it have to be prepared to will not just the ends but the means along the way, and that is where it gets much more difficult.

The strategic board will do a lot to bring strategic alignment. The spend on enterprise and skills in Scotland tops £2 billion a year. We need to ensure that we get maximum bangs for those bucks, so the strategic board, which Nora Senior chairs, is about ensuring that all those enterprise and skills agencies are actually—not just in theory—moving in the right direction of the overall strategy. That will help significantly and, given Nora Senior's experience, not least with the chambers of commerce, I am absolutely sure that she is the right person to drive that.

Gordon Lindhurst: On the energy aspect of the committee's remit, we probably all agree that the renewable energy programme should be progressed. Do you agree that national and local government have to work together to progress that? The Inch Cape application was called in by the Scottish Government before East Lothian Council could even take a view on it. Does that show respect for local democracy and build trust? A lot of people will say that it does not and, ultimately, that might not be of assistance to the renewable energy strategy.

The First Minister: First, as we know, that is a live planning application, so I will not go too far into its detail. Yesterday, the planning minister set out in Parliament the reasons why that call-in happened. That was because of the potential strategic importance of that particular development and its place in national planning framework 3.

To answer your question, yes, I believe that national Government and local government have to work together. Again, that comes down to the fact that, if we have a national strategic ambition—we are talking here about renewables—we have to ensure that we are doing the things as a country that enable that ambition to be delivered on.

Yesterday, I was at Burntisland Fabrications. The Scottish Government worked really hard to get a deal in place that could give BiFab a bright future. However, whether BiFab has a bright future depends in part on our ability to get some of the

big renewable energy developments up and running and into construction.

There will always be tensions in that regard. That is why we have the national planning framework, which identifies issues that are seen as being of national importance.

I will not bore you with statistics, but they bear me out. The Scottish Government uses its call-in powers under the planning legislation extremely sparingly. We do not do so lightly or overuse those powers; that is a part of the process that is there for that purpose.

The issue relates in some ways to your first question. I should say that I know that, to some extent, the nature of opposition is that, if you want to pressure Governments to meet those big national objectives, as you should, there comes a point at which you cannot always oppose the things that are necessary to allow us to achieve those big national objectives, whether they involve streamlining the landscape or doing some of the things that enable us to meet our renewables potential.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Christina McKelvie, the convener of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee.

Christina McKelvie (Convener, Equalities and Human Rights Committee): First Minister, you will be aware that, over the past couple of years, the Equalities and Human Rights Committee has considered the issue of Gypsy Travellers, and we know that they remain a marginalised group. Educational attainment, health inequalities and poverty all remain major issues for them. On human rights day last year, young Davie Donaldson told the committee that the discrimination that is faced by the Gypsy Traveller community is the

“last acceptable form of racism in this country”.—[*Official Report, Equalities and Human Rights Committee, 7 December 2017; c 5.*]

I know that you agree that that is something that we do not want to countenance.

How do we reassure Davie Donaldson and other members of the Gypsy Traveller community that that form of racism will be a thing of the past? Can you tell me about some of the initiatives that your Government is taking in order to tackle that issue?

The First Minister: This is an important issue. It is a remaining area of quite serious discrimination and disadvantage that flows from that discrimination, and we have a moral obligation to tackle it. The work that your committee is doing is important in that regard, as it continues to draw attention to that. I know that the current human

rights inquiry is looking specifically at the Gypsy Traveller community.

We have a range of work under way, much of which you will be familiar with. We have committed extra funding over the 2017 to 2020 period, with £1.5 million going to organisations that provide support to our Gypsy Traveller communities, including, for example, a flexible learning programme that is designed to meet the needs of Gypsy Travellers living on sites—that is one of the things that we announced in the child poverty delivery plan. We are also looking specifically at issues such as education and health, and the disadvantage of inequalities that exist there. There has been progress in that regard, but I would be one of the first to admit that there is work still to do.

Most centrally, the ministerial working group that is chaired by Angela Constance and includes ministers from all areas that touch on this issue is important. The group has already held a meeting, and I think that its second meeting is due to be held next month, with a focus on education. I believe that the young Gypsy Traveller whom you mentioned, Davie Donaldson, will give evidence to the group at that meeting, which is an important opportunity.

After education, the work plan of the group will focus on employment and health, and the group intends to produce a report by June 2019 to set out some of the actions that we will take, based on the review work that it will have done. What your committee is doing will continue to helpfully feed into the work that the Government is doing.

Christina McKelvie: An issue that I quickly picked up on is how the flexible learning programme will work, and I am keen to know how the Government will work with local authorities in order to deliver it. I am also keen to know about Gypsy Traveller children, particularly girls, who do not go on to high school. Will there be anything in the flexible learning programme that will allow their education to continue? In most cases, that is what is most important in dealing with health inequalities and lifting people out of poverty and into better employment opportunities.

The First Minister: I will give two quick responses to that. Working with local authorities through the flexible learning programme is essential, given local authorities' primary role in education provision.

Your second point is fundamental. We generally see education as one of the routes out of poverty and a way in which we tackle inequality. That has to apply to everybody, and you have identified issues with the Gypsy Traveller community. As I said, the ministerial working group is focusing on education at its next session. I am sure that the

issue of those children, particularly girls, continuing their education beyond primary school is one of the topics that it intends to look at but, following this meeting, I will make sure that the matter is firmly on the agenda. I hope that that process will allow us to focus on some of the actions that will help to tackle that issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Haughey, who is the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

Clare Haughey (Convener, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee): Thank you for joining us, First Minister. As you will be aware, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee is looking at some of the recommendations that came from the commission on parliamentary reform. I would like to hear the Government's view on the commission's recommendations on members' bills. The commission concluded that

"there is scope for greater collaborative working between MSPs and the Government to take forward"

back benchers'

"legislative proposals".

Do you agree?

The First Minister: I agree that we should try to achieve greater collaboration between Government and members when members' bills are being contemplated. That said, there is fairly good collaboration, so it is not an area where radical overhaul is needed.

I am aware of the commission on parliamentary reform's recommendation to remove the rule that says that a member's bill will come to a halt when Government decides to legislate on the same topic. I do not have really strong views one way or the other on the issue, so I would be interested in the committee's deliberations.

As I mentioned in the previous answer, the Government does not use that approach often. In fact, the current Government has only twice stepped in and taken over a member's bill—with the Lobbying (Scotland) Bill and the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Bill.

As I said, I do not have strong views on the matter. The commission's recommendation is maybe a solution searching for a problem that does not exist. Therefore, I am not absolutely convinced that there is an overwhelming case to take away the rule completely; it may be that modifications could be made to it.

Timescale is an issue that perhaps merits a bit of examination. For example, if the Government said that it intended to legislate and by doing so took away a member's right to introduce a bill, there should be a timescale in which the

Government introduces that legislation. If that timescale were not met, the member's bill would come back to the fore.

There are issues that merit examination, but I am not convinced that I have heard the evidence to suggest that there is a fundamental problem in how the system operates in this area.

Clare Haughey: If the Scottish Government takes on a legislative proposal first raised by a back bencher, how would it involve the member in the development of that bill?

The First Minister: As I said, that has happened only twice in a lifetime of this Government. Perhaps the members who first proposed those two bills—from memory, that would be Neil Findlay and Jenny Marra—are better able to give a perspective than I am.

What we would seek to do—and what I hope we did—in those circumstances is to continue to talk to the member about the process of consultation and the process of agreeing the terms of the bill. There would not necessarily be complete agreement, but we would certainly seek to continue to involve the member as the consultation and the bill develops.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have reminded me that I should have given Jenny Marra's apologies; she is unable to attend today's meeting.

I call Graham Simpson, who is convener of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

13:15

Graham Simpson (Convener, Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee): First Minister, I asked you a similar question in a previous meeting, but can you give an update on preparations for the secondary legislation that will be needed as a result of leaving the European Union? Can you give an indication of how many instruments will need to be laid, and whether they will all need to be laid before exit day? There could be a mountain of work, so how do you intend to balance that against your programme of domestic legislation?

The First Minister: There will be a mountain of work, and I would rather that we did not have to do it, because it will inevitably divert attention from things that Parliament might prefer to be doing. I am always slightly nervous when somebody says, "I asked you this question at the last session", in case I do not give you the same answer that I gave at the last session. *[Laughter.]*

As I am sure that conveners will understand, I cannot give Graham Simpson a specific answer to his question, because we do not yet know the precise terms on which the UK will leave the EU or

what the future relationship will be. There are some questions that remain to be answered, after which we will be able to answer Graham Simpson's question definitively.

I can give the estimates on which we are working. The UK Government estimates that between 800 and 1,000 regulations will be needed in the UK Parliament. The Scottish Government's current working assumption—I stress that it is our current working assumption, which is subject to change—is that around 300 instruments will be needed in the Scottish Parliament. However, we will not be able to finalise that estimate until certain other things have been completed.

As I am sure that Graham Simpson will be aware, work is already under way between the Government and parliamentary officials on drafting protocols that will ensure that there is clarity about what Brexit secondary legislation will be laid. We want to ensure that there is clarity as early as possible on the quantum and on how significant each of the different instruments will be, which is just as important. That will allow the committees to start to plan their work and ensure that they are applying a proportionate level of scrutiny, because it stands to reason that not every regulation and piece of secondary legislation will be as significant as every other one. Committees will want to apply scrutiny that is proportionate and based on the complexity or significance of the instrument.

I am sorry that I cannot give definitive information in response to the question, but I have given our current working assumption and we will continue to liaise very closely with Parliament as the picture becomes clearer.

Graham Simpson: That is very useful. I have a bit of good news for you: you will be pleased to know that yesterday we agreed to write to Joe FitzPatrick to commend him and Government officials for the number of Scottish statutory instruments in the most recent quarter that have had no technical points raised about them, which is the lowest on record. We very much hope that that trend will continue, because it helps me sleep at night.

You might also want to know that my committee has had long-running discussions with Joe FitzPatrick and Derek Mackay on the need to consolidate the council tax reduction scheme regulations. We want to ensure that the law is clear and accessible to everybody who needs to use it, but the regulations that relate to that scheme have been amended 13 times and have become increasingly complex. We think that there now could be a barrier for those who wish to use the law. Derek Mackay has become a bit of a pen friend to me. In February, he said that my committee would be updated on "ways forward" for the scheme in the "late summer", but he has not

confirmed any particular date by which the regulations might be consolidated. Could you commit to consolidate them and give me some sort of timescale for when that might happen?

The First Minister: That was a question in two parts—there was a good bit and a bad bit. I am glad that you have noticed an improvement in the number of SSIs without flaws. We work very hard on that, and I am sure that Joe FitzPatrick will be delighted to receive your letter. I hope that that will not mean that he will ask for a promotion, because I should put on the public record that he is not getting one at this stage. [*Laughter.*] I stress “at this stage”; I do not want to take all hope away from him.

On the second point, about council tax, I know that there has been a long-running discussion between the Government and your committee. If I can be as diplomatic as possible, I do not think that we entirely agree with the views of the committee on the issue, but Derek Mackay is trying and will continue to try to see whether we can find some common ground.

On consolidation, there have been two recurring issues about the vires of the regulations that we simply do not agree with. It is important to say that although consolidation may have some benefits—I do not deny that—it would not fundamentally change how the scheme works and it would not change how much of a council tax reduction somebody receives.

The regulations are implemented by local authorities that are familiar with them and the various amendments, and the system operates effectively. There is no suggestion that the system is not working well. Even if we consolidate—and we will continue to consider a way forward on that—it is likely that the consolidated text would almost immediately need to be updated again, particularly as the new devolved benefits are established.

I am not convinced—we are not convinced—that this is as big an issue as the committee, quite legitimately, thinks it is. However, we will continue to have that discussion and see whether we can agree a way forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: At least Graham Simpson is smiling.

I call Edward Mountain, who is convener of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee.

Edward Mountain (Convener, Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee): As you know, the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee is currently involved in an inquiry into aquaculture and, in particular, salmon farming, an industry that is vital to the Scottish economy—as are wild fisheries, in which I have a declared interest. The

report that the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee published on the environmental impacts of salmon farms suggests that the status quo is not acceptable. Does the Scottish Government have a view on that report?

The First Minister: We are considering the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee’s report carefully. As you know, it concluded that, in its view, further development and expansion of aquaculture should be predicated on resolving what it considered to be some current environmental issues and, fundamentally, on taking a precautionary approach. It concluded that, in its view, the current consenting and regulatory framework was not adequate to address the environmental issues. We are considering that carefully.

We would argue that we follow a precautionary approach already, but we are open to ways in which the regulatory and consenting system can be improved. It is important to strike a balance—you alluded to the fact that aquaculture is hugely important to our economy. It is worth more than £600 million a year in gross value added to the Scottish economy. At the last count, around 12,000 jobs were dependent on aquaculture so it is important that we support the industry to develop and to grow but we must do that sustainably. It is an industry that depends on the environment, so we must make sure that it has due regard to sustainability and environmental protection.

I hesitate to go too much into the issue of sea lice but that is obviously a particular issue. The industry itself has been doing a considerable amount of work on that, but we will continue to consider the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee’s report and we will be very interested in the work that your committee is doing to review that, and we will seek to work with the industry to make sure that we get this balance right in the future.

Edward Mountain: I think that the two key points that you picked up there are sustainability and the precautionary approach. Based on that, do you think that it is wise, precautionary and sustainable for the expansion of salmon farming to continue—it continues as we speak—before the REC Committee has completed its report and before you and the Government have had a chance to consider both reports, which you have said you want to do, or do you think that there should be a pause while the committee and the Government get a chance to get to the bottom of the problem?

The First Minister: The world rarely stands still while reports—important though they are—are under way, so it is important that we build that

precautionary principle into everything that is happening. That is what we are seeking to do.

There is more that the aquaculture sector can do to better demonstrate its current progress on some key issues and we recognise that we need to look again at making sure that we have the balance right in terms of regulation. We are working with the sector; we will work with agencies such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency as well as the external scientific bodies to pick up the pace of that work. There are a range of Scottish Government-funded initiatives—for example, there is the development of the Scottish shelf model, which is important in this regard.

It is about getting a balance. The environment is of huge importance in everything that we do, but it is particularly important for a sector that depends on the health of our environment. On the other side, there is an enormous economic benefit from the sector. Edward Mountain will know, given his interests in the area, that those balances are not always straightforward or easy to strike, but it is important that we continue the work that we are doing to get it right.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Joan McAlpine, who is the convener of—this is a mouthful—the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee.

Joan McAlpine (Convener, Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee): I will concentrate only on one aspect of my committee's work: culture.

There were sighs of relief all round when the Scottish Government came together with the private sector to find a funding package to save the Scottish Youth Theatre.

You will be aware that the Scottish Youth Theatre was refused funding for the second time in Creative Scotland's regular funding process. This time, that process came under severe criticism, not least because some decisions were reversed without explanation. The chief executive of Creative Scotland and its former acting chair came before my committee and admitted that the process was flawed. Although it is correct that such decisions are taken independently of Government, do you have a view on the process and how the matter was dealt with?

The First Minister: I have views on it. The Scottish Youth Theatre did not get regularly funded organisation funding, which has been the case in the past two years. It did not lose its RFO funding; rather, it did not succeed in its application. Many organisations will be in that position of applying to be regularly funded organisations and not succeeding. However, given the importance of the Scottish Youth Theatre, particularly in the year of young people, we were—I articulated this at

First Minister's questions a few weeks ago—determined to see whether we could get a package of funding together to allow it to continue its work, while we work with it to help it to be more sustainable.

Views have been expressed that, although it does fantastic work, there is room for the Scottish Youth Theatre to extend its reach and to be more accessible to more young people. The funding package that was put together by the Scottish Government and the private sector allows the breathing space for that to happen. I hope that we will come out through the other end with a sustainable future for the Scottish Youth Theatre.

On the RFO process more generally, as you know, we increased the culture budget by 10 per cent, and we put more than £6 million into the budget to compensate for the loss of lottery funding. That has allowed Creative Scotland to fund, broadly speaking, the same number of organisations through the RFO process, which is not its only funding stream. Some organisations received the funding for the first time; some dropped out of the allocation list. It will always be difficult for organisations that lose funding, and transitional arrangements are in place. Creative Scotland has reflected on some of its decisions, and it put more funding in to allow organisations that had initially not got funding to be funded.

The process is independent of ministers, which Parliament decided; it is part of the legislation that underpins the process. Therefore, ministers cannot intervene in the decisions. However, I would expect Creative Scotland—indeed, I have discussed the need for this directly with it as part of a routine meeting—to listen carefully to the views that have been expressed about the process. I think that the body has said openly that it is thinking about the process and looking ahead to how it improves it over the longer term.

Joan McAlpine: On the issue of youth arts funding, at the UK level, the National Youth Theatre receives portfolio funding from Arts Council England. We fund various national companies in Scotland through various ad hoc funding streams. However, when the SYT wrote to me, it told me that Creative Scotland had said that there was no strategy for national youth performing companies. Should there be a strategy, as is the case for national companies such as Scottish Opera and Scottish Ballet?

More broadly, what is your view on how the arts are treated with regard to young people in comparison to, for example, sport? We agree that every young person should be able to access sport for their wellbeing, but we also agree that there are very talented young people, as we have seen at Commonwealth games, who we invest in through elite sport. When it comes to culture,

although we agree that everyone should have access to it for their wellbeing, is there enough emphasis on the most talented young people with the most potential? Should we look at that again and treat culture in the same way as we treat sport?

13:30

The First Minister: There were two questions in there. First, on the one about whether we should have directly funded national youth performance companies, I think that we should consider that. As I understand it—my apologies to the Scottish Youth Theatre if I get this wrong—the SYT does not necessarily see that as an immediate solution to the position that it is in, but, over time, we should think about and consider that. The process that we will go through with the Scottish Youth Theatre over the next year or so to find a sustainable future for it is perhaps an opportunity to do that.

I am very sympathetic to the issue raised in your second question. We have Creative Scotland's time to shine programme and there is work under way just now on refreshing the youth arts strategy, which will be published in the not-too-distant future. Creative Scotland has also established traineeships for particularly talented young people, which is a step in the direction that you are talking about. A bit like with sport, we want everybody to be able to participate, and I am a passionate believer that participation in arts and culture for everybody is a really important part of the health and wellbeing of the country, as well as of individuals. We also need to make sure that we give the participants—the really talented people who are providing, producing and performing—the support that they merit. Creative Scotland's traineeship programme is a good foundation for looking at what more we can do on that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Lewis Macdonald, who is convener of the Health and Sport Committee.

Lewis Macdonald (Convener, Health and Sport Committee): The Health and Sport Committee has been inquiring into the governance of the national health service in Scotland and looking at, for example, issues of health board leadership and democratic accountability, and at the development of new spheres of governance at regional level and, locally, at integration joint board level.

I am sure that the First Minister will recognise that the current crisis at NHS Tayside has very sharply highlighted a number of concerns. There is your loss of confidence in the local leadership of that particular board, accountability issues, the relationship between non-executive and executive directors and, potentially, because your

Government's response to the crisis has involved other boards, implications for regionalisation. I would be interested to know what conclusions you have drawn about the governance of the wider NHS in Scotland.

The First Minister: You mention NHS Tayside, on which I have two things to say that perhaps sound a bit contradictory but are not intended to be. We must treat issues such as those that have developed and emerged in NHS Tayside really seriously. I hope that, whatever political differences there might be in the chamber, there is an absolute recognition that the health secretary and the Government have treated the issues extremely seriously in the actions that were taken to renew and change the leadership of NHS Tayside. When we see issues in one health board, we should never be complacent and assume that they do not exist elsewhere. That is why, if you take the endowment funds issue, for example, the health secretary is going through a process of asking all health boards to assure her that they do not have similar issues and, if they do, what they are going to do about it. We are not complacent about that.

On the other hand—this is the bit that I do not intend to sound contradictory—we should not assume that, because we have seen the issues that we have seen in NHS Tayside, those issues will occur in other health boards. In my experience, some of which was as health secretary in past years, the governance and the leadership in our health boards are very good and very strong.

Not just because of the NHS Tayside situation but—you have mentioned some of this—because of the regionalisation of the delivery of some services, the integration of health and social care and the general trends in the delivery of health care, this is an appropriate time to look at governance for good, positive reasons.

I welcome the work that your committee is doing, which will be very helpful to the Government in making decisions for the future. You are obviously aware that, at the tail end of last year, we commissioned a pilot review of corporate governance in NHS boards, which is being led by John Brown, who is the chair of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and now the interim chair at NHS Tayside.

That work started in NHS Highland, and it is expected that a report will be published before the summer recess. We are looking very closely at governance, and how we ensure that governance in health boards is about not just the standard and the quality that we would expect for them to be able to carry out their day-to-day jobs—I hope that we would take that for granted—but whether the governance is in place to allow health boards,

working with other parts of the public sector, to do some of the transformational work that is needed, because of demographic and other challenges of which we are all aware.

Lewis Macdonald: I think that we are on the same page in recognising that this is a critical time to be examining governance. In that context, and given regionalisation and the potential impact of the crisis at NHS Tayside on other boards, what are the First Minister's views on the accountability of the delivery of services at regional level, given that the existing accountability structures are designed for board-by-board responsibility to the public?

The First Minister: Again, I speak from past experience as health secretary. The accountability between health boards and the Government is very strong—Shona Robison has demonstrated that through her intervention in NHS Tayside. Under the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978, health secretaries have the ability to exercise ministerial powers, and that is what the health secretary did last week.

We have had some similar reason to think through that approach in the context of the integration of health and social care, in which we are dealing with the integration of health boards, which are accountable to ministers, and democratically elected local authorities. The building block of regionalisation is still individual health boards, and accountability matters with regionalisation just as it does with services that are provided within individual health boards. However, we are thinking increasingly about whether changes are required.

My view, which is not one with which everyone agrees, is that we need to allow regionalisation to evolve in the way that it is. I tend not to be of the view that hardwired structural changes should be embedded in a firmer way, because that would distract a lot of people in the health service. The health board should continue to be the building block, so the current link of accountability continues to be the appropriate one. However, as issues develop, and as we listen to and learn from the work of the Health and Sport Committee, we will continue to consider the matter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call James Dornan, who is convener of the Education and Skills Committee.

James Dornan (Convener, Education and Skills Committee): The Education and Skills Committee is looking at children who are experiencing poverty and how to support their attainment in schools. A number of submissions that the inquiry has received highlight the valuable work that community learning and development workers undertake, which links in with the work of

schools through local authorities. Is consideration being given to how CLD workers' links to schools will change under the proposed education reforms? For example, will CLD practitioners be required to approach individual schools to agree how to support children within those schools, or will they continue to work through local authorities?

The First Minister: The first thing that I want to say is that, in my view, CLD workers will continue to be very important in providing support to schools. Right now, there is no consistent pattern across the country either in how CLD workers are employed, because some are employed by local authorities and others are employed by voluntary organisations, or in the way in which they work, because some have a capacity-building function and others work more directly with children and young people. When looking at how that work will develop in line with the governance reforms in education, we should not make the mistake of thinking that a consistent arrangement is in place now. The governance reforms that we are embarking on will perhaps give us the opportunity to make the arrangement more consistent and uniform.

At the heart of the education governance review is the notion of empowering individual schools and headteachers much more. The pupil equity fund is providing the resources to allow headteachers to decide whether there is particular resource that they need to augment what they do. CLD workers will perhaps have a more central role as a result of some of that work.

James Dornan: It is interesting to hear that response, because I am about to come on to the pupil equity fund. At this morning's Education and Skills Committee session, we talked about the impact of the fund and how to target it. A number of examples of practice were given, some of which were good and others less so. You clearly see using the PEF to bring services into schools that are normally developed in the community, such as youth services and benefit services, as something positive and something that we should be encouraging.

The First Minister: The whole philosophy behind the PEF is that we do not dictate to schools how they use the money. Clearly, allowing headteachers to look at what works and the evidence base uses resources, but I am very clear that we should support them to use their judgment to decide how the money would make the biggest difference to the attainment of the young people in their schools.

As I said in an FMQ session not that long ago, I have seen examples with my own eyes of how the PEF is being used that would cause some people to raise an eyebrow and ask whether it is

appropriate. However, it is absolutely appropriate if a headteacher can say that an action can contribute to the performance of the school. The example that I gave in the chamber was a headteacher who had taken away some parents and children for a weekend, because he considered that that would improve the engagement of parents in the school and the attendance of the young people at the school. If a headteacher considers that the use of the money does that, we should support them, because the whole purpose of the PEF is to trust the professional judgment of headteachers and the teams that they have in place.

James Dornan: Another issue that came up at my committee today is that some schools seem to be less well-placed to take advantage of the PEF. Will more information or support be made available to those schools to make sure that they know what is available and how they can use the PEF to the best of their ability?

The First Minister: I have not heard the evidence that you are talking about today, but I would be interested in looking at it. As you know, part of the purpose of the development of regional improvement collaboratives is making sure that the professionals working in our schools have access to the best practice and the interventions that are evidenced to work—we do not then dictate to them which ones they should use. John Swinney is focused and working hard with the teaching profession on the issue, to make sure that those resources are available.

Again, in my experience—obviously, I have not visited every school in the country, but I am talking about some of the headteachers and classroom teachers to whom I have spoken—a lot of innovation is being applied to how the PEF is used. Inevitably, as we gain more years' experience in using the PEF, we will build up more of an evidence base on what interventions are particularly impactful. It is important that we gather that information.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the questions. Do you want to make any closing remarks, First Minister?

The First Minister: Not particularly. Thank you for allowing me to get out alive. If there are any final questions, I would be happy to take them. I am looking at the clock and seeing that we have a few minutes left.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As nobody has asked for an extra supplementary, I will just say thank you very much. This session, apart from questioning you, reminds the public of the crucial role of the committees in this Parliament. People tend to watch excerpts on television of the more dramatic stuff, but you have heard from those

around the table about all the committees' solid work, and they are to be commended on their independence, their scrutiny and holding the Government to account. It is a timely reminder of all the work of the committees, which we sometimes lose sight of.

I thank all my colleagues for their questions and the public for attending. As we have decided to hold these sessions with the First Minister twice a year, the next meeting with her will be in either October or November.

Meeting closed at 13:44.

