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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 23 May 2017

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. This morning, we awoke to the tragic news that a terrorist incident in Manchester has taken the lives of many people and injured dozens more. The Parliament will shortly have the opportunity to express its sadness and to show solidarity with the people of Manchester.

Just before that, I am grateful to the Rev Graeme Clark, the minister of Central Baptist church in Paisley, for reflecting on these tragic events in his time for reflection.

The Rev Graeme Clark (Minister, Central Baptist Church, Paisley and Scottish Baptist College): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, it is with heavy hearts that we gather here today following the multiple deaths in Manchester. Luke's gospel chapter 19, verse 41 reads:

"And when Jesus drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!'"

Tears might be more appropriate than words today.

In a moment, we will together observe a brief time of silence—the proper time of silence will come later—in remembrance of all those who have been killed and injured. Just before we do so, I want to read these words from Jonathan Sacks:

"Too often in the history of religion, people have killed in the name of the God of life, waged war in the name of the God of peace, hated in the name of the God of love and practised cruelty in the name of the God of compassion. When this happens, God speaks, sometimes in a still, small voice almost inaudible beneath the clamour of those claiming to speak on his behalf. What he says at such times is: *Not in My Name.*"

Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. Together we remember in silence.

Lord God,
encircle in your comfort today all who are torn apart by grief;
encircle in your healing today all who are hurting and injured;
encircle in your peace today all who are overcome by fear;
encircle in your courage and strength today all those in the emergency services and health services.

On a day like this, we remember that the challenges that we face together are greater perhaps than we have yet seen or articulated. May God give all of you wisdom and strength.

Amen.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Rev Clark.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The Parliamentary Bureau has proposed that we amend this afternoon's business, to begin with a statement from the First Minister. The party leaders will then follow, and we will conclude by asking members and all colleagues in the Parliament to observe a minute's silence.

I ask Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the bureau, to move motion S5M-05756.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 23 May 2017—

delete

followed by Member's Oath/Affirmation

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill

and insert

followed by Urgent Statement by the First Minister: Attack on Manchester

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill

followed by Member's Oath/Affirmation—[Joe FitzPatrick]

Motion agreed to.

Attack on Manchester

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):

Colleagues, there is a tangible sense of shock and sorrow in Parliament as we come together today and reflect on the events of last night in Manchester. The fact that those deliberately targeted in the attack were innocent children and young people, who had come together to enjoy a concert, makes the news all the more devastating. However, with our sorrow comes compassion and a sense of determination—compassion for the victims and their families; gratitude for the emergency services and all those who rushed to the scene to offer help and comfort; and determination to stand with the people of Manchester in the face of such horror.

Flags are flying at half mast at Holyrood today, as a mark of respect for the victims. I have, this morning, written to the mayor of greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, on behalf of the Scottish Parliament, sending our thoughts, prayers and support to all those affected by these awful events. Members will also wish to know that a book of condolence has been placed in Queensberry House that all are invited to sign.

I now call the First Minister.

14:05

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is with great sadness that I rise to speak today. Last night, in Manchester, we witnessed a horrific attack on innocent people enjoying a pop concert. My thoughts and those of this Parliament—indeed, the thoughts of all the people of Scotland—are with those who have lost loved ones or who have sustained injuries in this dreadful atrocity. There can be nothing more cowardly than attacking children and young people enjoying a fun night out.

Across Scotland today, we stand in solidarity with the people of Manchester—a great city with which so many people in Scotland share a close affinity. This morning, I, too, have written to Andy Burnham, the mayor of Manchester, offering the condolences of the Scottish people and pledging any possible practical support that the Scottish Government or any of our agencies can provide.

We express our gratitude to the emergency services who continue to work to ensure that people in Manchester and around the country are safe. Their dedication and bravery in running towards danger as others run away stands in sharp contrast to the cowardice of those who carry out such atrocities.

Shortly after we received the first substantive reports of the incident, in the early hours of this

morning, the Scottish Government's resilience room was activated. At 8.30 this morning, I chaired a meeting of the resilience committee, which was attended by the Deputy First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, the Lord Advocate and senior officers from Police Scotland. In the past half hour, I have received a further update from Police Scotland, and I will chair a further meeting of the resilience committee later today.

The Scottish Government and Police Scotland have been liaising closely with colleagues in the United Kingdom Government and with police colleagues in England and Wales throughout the night and during today. I was also updated by the national security adviser earlier this morning.

At this point, as has been confirmed, tragically, 22 people have lost their lives and 59 have been injured—many of them, no doubt, very seriously. Within the past hour, an eight-year-old girl has been named as one of the victims. We know that there will be much more heartbreak like that to face in the days ahead.

Currently, we are aware of four people who have presented at hospital in Scotland. I understand that two have already been discharged and that a third is likely to be discharged during the course of today. Indeed, I have received information that none of their injuries is life threatening. I confirm that Police Scotland are also in contact with and offering support to the families of Laura MacIntyre and Eilidh MacLeod, the two young girls from Barra who are still unaccounted for having attended the concert last night. It is hard for any of us to imagine the anguish that their families are going through right now. They are in our thoughts, and the Scottish Government and Police Scotland will do all that we possibly can to ensure that they have all the support that they need.

We cannot be sure, at this stage, that no other Scots are affected, but we continue to liaise closely with Police Scotland to gather information and to provide all appropriate support. What we do know is that there may be some people travelling home today or in the days ahead who will have been witnesses to the events of last night. Therefore, as part of Police Scotland's efforts to assist with the on-going investigation, police officers will be present at motorway service stations and will work with the British Transport Police at major train stations to identify any possible witnesses returning to Scotland from Manchester.

What happened last night was a brutal terror attack. At times like this, it is understandable—unavoidable—that people feel scared and anxious. That is why it is my priority, working with Police Scotland, to ensure that we offer reassurance, but

also to ensure that all appropriate protective and precautionary measures are being taken.

It is important to emphasise that, at this stage, the security threat level remains unchanged, at severe. I also stress that, at this time, there is no intelligence of any increased threat or risk to Scotland. However, as a precautionary measure, Police Scotland has increased security at key locations such as transport hubs and city centres. There has also been an increase in the number of armed police and armed response vehicles being deployed across Scotland.

Police Scotland will keep all those arrangements under review, as well as the arrangements for security at the various events that we know are upcoming over the next few days, which range from the small daily events and celebrations that make up the fabric of our society to large-scale football matches, marathons and VIP events. That includes reviewing every event that is due to take place over the next 14 days to ensure that a consistent and appropriate approach is taken across the country. For example, a full review of the Scottish cup final will be carried out with the Scottish Football Association to ensure that there is an appropriate deployment of police officers. That is in addition to the work that will be done to ensure public reassurance around the night-time economy and crowded places more generally.

I am being briefed regularly and updated on the police response, and I am sure that the public will draw reassurance from the substantial uplift in visible policing on the streets. However, I stress—as others have done and as it is important to do—that such measures are precautionary. My message to the public is that they should remain vigilant and report any concerns that they have to the police, but that they should also go about their everyday business as normal.

Presiding Officer, as you and others have said, last night's attack was particularly cruel in its targeting of young people enjoying a pop concert—an event that many of them will have been looking forward to for months. That they should have been confronted with such horror is utterly heartbreaking.

There will also be many other young people across the country who will see on the news and on social media the kind of images that we wish they never had to see, and many young people might feel particularly vulnerable. This is a time to ensure that we talk to our children, at home, at school and when we hear them talking among their friends. We have been in touch with Young Scot this morning, as well as with Education Scotland and local authorities, to provide guidance and support to help with those conversations. Young Scot has issued the details of an information line that offers a safe space for any

young person in Scotland to make contact and get information. It is also developing an online resource with key information and content to help meet young people's needs, which will emphasise the importance of respecting other people and their opinions, the emotional impact of the event and how to differentiate between accurate and false information.

We know that terrorists and extremists seek to divide us and to destroy our way of life. As human beings, we cannot comprehend the twisted motivations that lead people to carry out such atrocities, particularly when they target children and young people in such a callous way. Our best response now—and always—is to stand firm together, with determination and in solidarity, to make it clear to those who seek to undermine our values, target our children and destroy our way of life that they will not succeed now or ever.

Today, there are many people who are suffering pain and grief that we can scarcely imagine, and there are others who are still consumed by worry and uncertainty about their loved ones. Let us hold them firmly in our hearts today and in the many difficult days that lie ahead.

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): I associate myself and my party with every word of the First Minister's statement. We extend our deepest sympathy and condolences to all the families of those who were murdered last night. Our prayers, too, are with those who, as we speak, are being treated in hospital, many of whom have injuries that are life threatening.

Today, the terrible personal cost of last night's outrage is becoming clear, as the names of those who died begin to emerge. We know that many of those affected are young—they are children, teenagers and young people who were experiencing the thrill of a night out. They were enjoying a carefree evening that was ripped apart by terror. They left behind parents, family and friends who are asking why someone they do not know and with whom they had no quarrel decided last night to target their daughter, their grandson or their sister. We simply cannot imagine their pain today, nor can we contemplate how someone could deliberately choose to target innocent children and young people.

It feels beyond our simple comprehension. There are no words, but as the Prime Minister said earlier today and as the First Minister has just articulated, we must try to find them. We must repeat that we will not be beaten by the twisted ideology of terrorism and that we will not ourselves descend into hatred or rage. We will repeat, repeat and repeat that we stand tall, we stand together and we respond to every act of terror that strikes our nation by shouting from the rooftops that our values and freedoms cannot and will not be

diminished. They are the values that are shared by people of all religions in this country and of none: the values of tolerance, openness and respect for one another; and the values of common humanity, bravery and generosity that saw hundreds of police, paramedics, doctors and nurses work through the night to respond to a situation that they could never have conceived, and saw householders and taxi drivers opening their homes and offering lifts to help those affected.

Let us all in this Parliament extend our solidarity with the people of Manchester who, like the people of Paris, London, Brussels and Nice, have responded with courage and decency in the face of cowardice and evil. Manchester will now be added to the grim roll-call of those cities across Europe that have been affected by this terrorism. Like those other cities, it will first cry, then grieve and then continue with spirit unbroken, showing that terrorism will never win.

We are informed today that the terrorist threat level across the UK remains at severe. What further reassurances can the First Minister give people that our exceptional police, defence and security personnel are doing all that they can to keep us safe?

The First Minister: I thank Ruth Davidson for her comments. As I said earlier, the security threat level remains at severe. It is of course for the joint terrorism analysis centre—JTAC—to assess the on-going situation. However, Police Scotland has already confirmed to me that, following this incident, it has reviewed security across Scotland to ensure that the right level of policing is in place to meet operational requirements and ensure that the public are reassured that security will be provided to an enhanced level.

As I said in my statement, the police have significantly increased the number of firearms officers who are on duty and there has been a proportionate increase in armed response vehicles and officers on duty. As members will understand, it is not appropriate to go into all the detail of the deployment of police resources, but I am assured that the police are taking all appropriate steps. As I also said earlier, they will review security around all the events that are coming up in the days ahead. I will continue to liaise closely with the chief constable and other senior officers in Police Scotland in the days ahead to make sure that all appropriate steps are taken to keep the population of our country as safe as possible.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): They would have been dressed in pink and in sparkles, with bunny ears perched on their heads and grins on their faces: the very picture of innocence. The children who went to see American pop star and Disney television actress Ariana Grande at the Manchester Arena last night would have been

unable to contain their excitement and the atmosphere would have been electric. Every one of us has been there and been one of them, enthralled by the sound and vision of a pop star at their peak, and desperate to see in the flesh the person whose image we have plastered on our bedroom walls.

Being at a gig is a moment of sheer joy, but last night that joy was destroyed in a despicable act of cowardice. All that excitement and innocent elation turned to fear, shock and horror. Just hours after they arrived, children left that concert crying, screaming and utterly bewildered by what had just happened, their ears ringing not with the echo of pop music but with the blast of a bomb. Today, those children will know that 22 of those who had shared the joy of that concert alongside them are dead, that 59 people are in hospital with terrible injuries and that too many parents are still desperately searching for the children who have not come home.

Those children will know, too, the phrase “suicide bomber” and the appalling reality of what that means. A story that they might have watched on “Newsround”, couched in age-appropriate language to soften the roughest of edges, has brutally intruded into their young lives. For us, as adults, hearing news of terrorist atrocities, be they bombs, bullets or cars mowing people down in the street, is, sadly, all too commonplace now. We tend to cover our children’s ears and eyes to protect them from that knowledge and we hold them closer, all too aware of the fragility of their precious lives. However, for those children and young people who witnessed last night’s abominable act, there is no softening the blow, no making it better and no suggesting that these things do not happen here, or to us, or to people we know. They are now fully aware that, when someone determines to kill others, when someone purposely straps a bomb to their body with a twisted plan to detonate it amongst innocent children, there is nothing that any one of us can do to prevent the inevitable horrific outcome. And we cannot explain it to them. How can we tell an eight-year-old that there is a justifiable reason why children died last night? How can we explain the actions, the thought process, of someone who can look at a concert full of young people and see nothing but a target?

However, what we can do is respond well. We can teach our children that the only way to counter such barbarity is not with hate and fear but with compassion, tolerance, kindness and love, like the people of Manchester did last night, flocking to help, taking people home, offering places to stay and searching for children who had become separated from their parents; and like those who work in our emergency services did—as they always do—running unflinching towards horror

rather than away from it, to offer comfort, care and rescue.

No doubt, over the coming days, we will discover the name of the coward who chose to kill excited children at a concert, and there will be attempts to understand why they did it. For those who are grieving, there will be no worthy answers. For those left traumatised, there will be no comprehension. Does the First Minister agree that what there will be, though, is a toughening of our resolve in the face of terror, a renewal of our belief in the enduring British values of tolerance and respect and a determination to make sure that such horrific acts will never undermine our freedom or our democracy?

The First Minister: Again, I thank Kezia Dugdale for her comments. She has described very powerfully and in a very poignant way the excitement that so many children and young people would have felt last night setting out to a concert that, for many of them, would have been their first experience of such an event.

I do not think that a single one of us, when we have been listening today to the news of these events, will not have pictured a child or young person in our own lives—for me, it is my 10-year-old niece, herself a massive fan of Ariana Grande and somebody who could have been at a concert like that last night—and it brings it home so personally to all of us.

The truth is that there is no way that we can explain to young people why those people died last night, because there is no justifiable reason for it, but we can help those young people to process and come to terms with what happened. That is why, as well as the Government’s duty to work with the police to keep our population as safe as possible and the duty that we all have to support and give gratitude to our public services, we all have a responsibility in the days ahead to help not just those young people who were at that concert in Manchester last night but those other young people who will have watched the scenes on their televisions today to understand, to process and to come to terms, and that is why the work that I have described, which Young Scot is leading, is so important.

However, above all else, I agree with Kezia Dugdale that the most important response that we can give to terror and to terrorists is to stand firm in defence of the values that we hold dear. It is those values that they seek to destroy, and it is those values that we must defend and protect with everything that we have got.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): On behalf of the Scottish Green Party, I express our deepest sympathies to those who have been affected by this vicious attack—those who are grieving the

loss of loved ones, those who are desperately seeking news and those who are recovering, some of whom may be living with their injuries as well as with the impact of this horrific experience for the rest of their lives.

I express our gratitude to those who responded: the emergency services, the staff at the venue, concertgoers and passers-by, and all those who acted out of common humanity in opening their doors or offering help of any kind to those who needed it in the aftermath.

In recognition of the grotesque motivations behind such an act—the intention to divide our society and to sow further hatred—I agree with the First Minister that our response must be grounded from the first moment in a determination to stand together and to strengthen the bonds between us.

The First Minister said that she is being regularly briefed on the security aspects of the situation, and I am sure that the Scottish Government will wish to keep the Parliament informed. As we move forward in that regard, we must always keep in mind the need to preserve our commitment to being a free and open society, in which security measures are used where needed, but are not allowed to become a way of life.

I wish to ask the First Minister about the Scottish Government's preparedness for any possible reaction expressed in the form of hate crime. She is right that our best response is to stand firm in solidarity. That means ensuring that terrorism never achieves its goal, and also that those who react to it out of hatred, prejudice or a demand for retribution also never achieve their goals.

What actions is the Scottish Government taking by way of communication between the Scottish emergency services and those in the north-west of England? Are there opportunities for us to share resources, skills and experience and to support one another?

Finally, a brief reflection on Manchester. I lived there for around five years, as a student and shortly after. Not long after I left Manchester, it experienced a terrorist bombing in the city centre. Manchester came together. Its people stood together and supported one another. They became strong and showed their resilience. I have no doubt at all that Manchester will do the same again.

The First Minister: I thank Patrick Harvie for his contribution.

Two points are worth making in response. First, I reassure Patrick Harvie and the Parliament that our emergency services, the Scottish Government and all of our agencies stand ready to provide whatever support and assistance we are able to

give, today and in the days ahead. Our police service and our national health service have already made it clear that they stand ready and able to provide assistance, and we will ensure that there is an awareness and understanding of what assistance we are able to provide as the situation further develops. As I have said, Police Scotland, as will always be the case in such situations, is doing what it can to assist with the on-going investigation.

The second point to touch on is that of community cohesion and the need to be vigilant against hate crimes. We must not speculate at this stage about the identity or background of the individual who carried out this atrocity. That information will undoubtedly become known over the course of the next few days. We must be clear, even at this stage, that the individual was not acting on behalf of any section of our community or of any faith in our society; this was an individual committing criminal, terrorist atrocities. Part of the purpose of such atrocities is to seek to divide us and turn us against one other, and we must be absolutely determined that that will not be allowed to happen.

One of the issues that was discussed at our resilience meeting this morning was the need to guard against hate crimes and to do everything that we can to protect the cohesion within our communities. I assure the chamber that that will be one of the priorities that will remain at the forefront of our minds in the next few days.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the First Minister for coming to the chamber to make her statement. I express my absolute condolences to the people and to the children affected, to their families and to the support services that are helping them as best they can.

This morning was a moment when, as we woke up to the news on the radio, we tried to turn it off—as if, by not hearing it, we could make it not true. We are all horrified that such an attack could take place on young people who were full of joy and fellowship.

When we confront such heartbreaking news, we have to be clear in our answer to the question, "What did you do?" Ordinary people in Manchester threw open their homes to give shelter, and there were queues to donate blood. Let it be the case that we said that we will live for hope, joy and fellowship. We will work to end division. We will stand with all those communities who want peace. We will use intelligence and devoted duty to seek out and stop those individuals who choose to kill fellow humans and sow fear. They will not succeed. Our better human values will prevail.

It is hard today, here and in Manchester, to say that, but our better human values will prevail. Will the First Minister take forward those sentiments?

The First Minister: I thank Willie Rennie for his comments. I thoroughly endorse those sentiments. I assure the chamber that, in everything that we do in response to the incident, we will seek to take forward those sentiments and to make sure that they lie at the heart of our response, not just to this or any atrocity, but to how we live our lives.

It is an important point that, out of the darkness, the sadness and the horror of last night's event, hundreds upon hundreds of acts of simple human kindness very quickly began to shine. Probably more than anything else today, that should give us all strength, confidence and belief that the terrorists will not succeed, because they are up against something that is much stronger than any of them: the kindness of humanity and the values that hold us all together.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister. I thank all the party leaders for their thoughtful and moving contributions this afternoon. I ask members, all the staff who work across the parliamentary estate and our visitors to the public gallery, if they are able, to stand and to join together in observing a minute's silence.

Members observed a minute's silence.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. I suspend proceedings until 2.40.

14:32

Meeting suspended.

14:40

On resuming—

Topical Question Time

NHS Board-run General Practices

1. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take in response to the reported increase in the number of GP practices being run directly by national health service boards. (S5T-00559)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Directly run practices are a legitimate way in which NHS boards can tailor services to meet local needs, ensuring that primary care services are provided to all patients. Wherever a practice hands back its contract, the local NHS board will ensure that primary care services will continue to be provided in the area and patients will be able to see a GP. If a practice cannot routinely accept new patients, boards must work with practices to help to manage the situation and to ensure that all patients are informed of the options that are being considered.

In support of general practice, I announced on 10 March investment of £71.6 million. The new funding forms the first stage of the Scottish Government's commitment to provide an extra £250 million in direct support of general practice per year by 2021 and will increase the investment in primary care by £500 million. By the end of this parliamentary session, for the first time at least half of front-line NHS spending will go to community health services.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Further to the contributions that we have just heard, I put on record my thanks for everything that our health and emergency services do for us. They do heroic work in our communities every day and, as we saw so tragically overnight, during the darkest of moments as well. There will not be a soul in this building whose heart does not go out to those working today in the most testing of circumstances.

The emergency services deserve the full support of the chamber and the Government, but they do not always get it. Last year, doctors at East Craigs Parkgrove medical centre in my constituency attached letters to prescriptions asking their patients to contact me for help, such was the strain on the practice. Is the cabinet secretary confident that her Government is doing enough to identify and help surgeries that are in the early stages of distress, before they have to be taken under health board control?

Shona Robison: I say to Alex Cole-Hamilton that our NHS has offered support to services in the

NHS in the Manchester area, particularly in the plastic surgery and paediatrics specialties, which can be in short supply. I reassure the chamber that that offer has been made, as well as the offer of beds in Scottish hospitals if required. We are in touch with the services down there.

In reply to the question on the specifics of medical practices and support in the early stages, I say that I very much encourage boards to have early discussions—indeed, I encourage practices to have early discussions with the health board and to alert the board if they are entering difficulties—and to provide support in order to avoid some of the difficulties that we have seen.

Alex Cole-Hamilton will, I hope, be aware of the intensive work on the new GP contract negotiations. That will be important in providing a better future for primary care and for general practice within it, and providing a more attractive proposition in order to attract young doctors into general practice rather than other specialties. We also have the GP recruitment and retention fund, which we announced is increasing fivefold from £1 million to £5 million in 2017-18; that investment will enable us to expand and continue to explore the issues around GP recruitment and retention across Scotland that we know can be particularly challenging in certain areas. There are a lot of initiatives: the GP fellowships; the development of a locum pool of retired GPs in Lothian; the Royal College of General Practitioners recruitment programme; the GP returners scheme that is run by NHS Education for Scotland; the new national GP recruitment website; and local initiatives by boards. I hope that that reassures Alex Cole-Hamilton that, despite the difficulties, a lot is being done, and will be done, to encourage young doctors into general practice and, meanwhile, to support those practices that have challenges.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful for the information that the cabinet secretary has shared with the chamber, particularly in respect of the help that is being offered to Manchester by Scottish health boards.

One of the commitments of the Government's recent mental health strategy was to hire 800 link workers for GP practices, accident and emergency departments, police stations and prisons. As the health secretary knows, my party has stated its view that, instead of link workers, we should seek to recruit talking therapists for GP surgeries, to offer early intervention and de-escalate crisis situations. One patient in four presents at a doctor's appointment with an underlying mental health condition. Does the cabinet secretary agree, therefore, that having a talking therapist on hand in a surgery would be far more likely to reduce GP workload than a link worker, who may

only be able to refer a patient to the back of a waiting list for psychiatric treatment?

Shona Robison: Let me say a couple of things about that. First, the 800 staff that Alex Cole-Hamilton described, and that the First Minister has announced, will be particularly focused on A and E departments, GP surgeries and the police environment—not just around the cells but, potentially, when the police go out to a call that may involve someone with a mental health issue.

Link workers provide an important role in ensuring that a person gets access to the right resource, whether that is a mental health voluntary organisation or a mental health service in the NHS. Those 800 staff will have a variety of skills and backgrounds, which we will ensure are appropriate for the skills that are required in each setting.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary outline any benefits for GP practices in being run directly by NHS boards?

Shona Robison: When GP practices are run directly by boards, it connects those practices into a wider network of services and helps to ensure that patients continue to receive safe, effective and timely care. It can sometimes be a board's contractual choice to run GP practices directly. For example, half of all practices in Orkney use 2C contracts, which means that they are run directly by the board. That has worked well for Orkney and allowed it to provide the types of services that are needed by the local population. There can be benefits for practices when they are run directly by boards—I hope that I have been able to give Ben Macpherson examples of that.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I associate myself with Alex Cole-Hamilton's comments about last night's events and, likewise, welcome the information that the cabinet secretary has given us about assistance.

One GP surgery in 20 is now under the control of a health board, which will inevitably lead to additional costs that will require to be borne by health boards. Has the Scottish Government quantified that expenditure and is the cabinet secretary satisfied that health boards are able to meet those costs?

Shona Robison: Yes, we are satisfied that health boards are able to meet those costs. We have been expanding the resources that are going into primary care. In my initial answer, I described investment of an additional £71.6 million for 2017-18. That is the first stage of a commitment to provide an extra £250 million per year by 2021 in direct support of general practice, as part of a wider £500 million investment.

Health boards would be contracting with the GPs to provide those services if they had independent contractor status, so they would be funding the same services through a different route. I hope that I can assure Donald Cameron that we are working with boards to ensure that, whether it is through independent contracting or direct provision, every community has access to good-quality primary care services.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): My son is eight years old. I have seen the joy on his face at a concert, and I can only begin to imagine the tragedy that every family in Manchester is going through. I want to put on record our thanks to all our amazing NHS first responders. People naturally run away from danger, but first responders run towards danger, to help and care for their fellow citizens.

GPs regularly raise the obligations that they feel that they have as a result of running a business practice, rather than purely caring for patients. One of those obligations is looking after a property. GPs often ask whether, through the GP contract process, health boards can take responsibility for GP properties and let GPs get on with running the practice. Has that been actively considered as part of the GP contract process?

Shona Robison: I thank Anas Sarwar for his initial remarks and for his question. He may be aware that the GP premises short-life working group reported in December. It recommended that the Scottish Government recognise and support a long-term shift that moves general practice towards a model that does not presume that GPs own their practice premises. We are implementing the group's recommendations and we are moving to that service model. We will issue a code of practice to guide health boards when deciding to purchase a GP-owned property or take on some or all of the contractor's responsibilities under an existing lease. We will issue revised premises directions and carry out a nationwide survey of all GP premises to better understand the challenges that the estate faces.

We very much recognise the issue and we are working closely with the British Medical Association to move it forward.

Cycling Infrastructure (Road Safety)

2. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve cycling infrastructure, in light of recent research by Sustrans Scotland, which highlighted that T-junctions and roundabouts possess the highest number of collisions. (S5T-00560)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): Transport Scotland welcomes

the report, which helps to inform our partnership work with local authorities and Sustrans to make our roads and cycle network safer by tackling dangerous roundabouts and junctions. Local authorities are funded through the cycling, walking and safer streets fund, and they are encouraged to apply to Sustrans Scotland for further Scottish Government funding through the community links and street design projects for exactly those types of junctions and roundabouts.

Our "Scotland's Road Safety Framework to 2020" mid-term review identified cyclists as a key priority area. Through our programme for government, we are committed to maintaining the record levels of funding in active travel, which includes capital funding for improving infrastructure.

Alexander Stewart: The minister will be aware that in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, Dunfermline and Perth have been named as two of the top 20 cycling collision hotspots in Scotland. Why is the Scottish Government overseeing cuts to cycling infrastructure?

Humza Yousaf: I must clarify that that is misinformation from Alexander Stewart; I am sure that it was unintentional. As I said in my previous answer, we are making available record levels of funding to active travel: £39.2 million per year to 2021. There is a record level of investment. Other members will no doubt want us to go further than that sometimes, and where additional money can be spent on active travel, I will certainly do that.

It is worth highlighting some of the successful projects in the region that Alexander Stewart represents that have been funded, many of them through Sustrans, which we help to fund. In Cowdenbeath there is the placemaking scheme, through which redesigned town centre junctions will improve access. Rothes Road has been improved with a toucan crossing, which got money from Sustrans and community links funding of £870,000. There is the Carnegie Avenue shared-use path—1.2km of new 2.5m-to-3m shared-use path—and further extension of the cycle Dunfermline network.

A lot of funding is going into Mid Scotland and Fife. I would encourage local authorities—many of which have new administrations, although of course many have existing administrations—to work with Sustrans where, on the basis of the Sustrans report, there needs to be an improvement, and to bid for the community links funding that is available.

Alexander Stewart: I thank the minister for identifying areas around my region that are being tackled, but there are still some areas that require to be tackled. Additional support such as traffic lights and other quality infrastructure around

roundabouts and T-junctions have been proven to reduce accidents and fatalities. Many cyclists have endured serious injury or even death as a result of the infrastructure. Will the minister clarify what the Scottish Government is attempting to bring forward? As he said, it seems to be working in some parts but not in others.

Humza Yousaf: The report was commissioned because, although we had good analysis and good data on where the cycling injury hot spots were on our trunk road network, we did not have such data for local roads. Sustrans thought that it was eminently sensible to gather that data. That was the whole purpose of conducting the exercise.

Now that we have the evidence, we are in discussions with Sustrans about schemes other than the community link scheme that I talked about and, for example, about whether there would be merit in having a community links junction improvement scheme, which might be of interest to local authorities.

My strongest advice to the member is to continue to engage with the local authority that he knows well, to look at the evidence base that Sustrans has provided, and to continue to apply to the current programme of funding that exists for such infrastructure. If there are other funds available, I will make sure that the member is made fully aware of them. However, there is a pot of funding available to help and, with the evidence base that the report helpfully gives us, that will make cases very strong.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I apologise: there is not enough time for additional supplementary questions.

Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-05655, in the name of Gillian Martin, on the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

14:57

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to open today's debate on the general principles of the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill. The measures follow the devolution of the relevant competence, and it is particularly heartening to bring legislative proposals to the chamber that take forward new powers that have been acquired for Scotland.

Every weekday morning around Scotland, parents and carers wave their children off to school. Rightly, they expect robust measures to be in place to keep those young people safe not just in the classroom but on the journey to and from school. Speaking about the safety of young people is particularly poignant on this terrible day and we might all find the debate quite difficult.

As a representative of a rural community, I am acutely aware of the distances that some pupils travel to school and of the importance that is given to such journeys. Additionally, as a parent, I know what it is to entrust my child's safety to the care of others. The responsibility to keep young people safe is something that we all share—from teachers and education providers to those of us in elected positions who set the national legal and policy direction.

The bill that is before Parliament will make important strides in those endeavours. Seat belts can play a vital role in the event of a road traffic accident, as is borne out through a wealth of internationally recognised research. We also know that encouraging children to buckle up has the benefit of fostering productive and positive lifelong habits in relation to road safety.

It is welcome that much of local government shares those sentiments—18 councils already voluntarily stipulate the need for seat belts in all dedicated home-to-school transport contracts. However, I want the practice to become universal across every local authority in Scotland as a matter of law. My local authority, Aberdeenshire Council, was one of the first to insist on seat belts on all dedicated school transport in awarding contracts, and I want every parent to have the same peace of mind as I have. The powers to legislate for a stipulation in contracts for school

transport have now arrived in this place, and many local authorities have been moving towards implementation in preparation for a new legal duty coming in.

Before I move on to key points from the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's report, I thank all those who contributed to the call for evidence and the witness sessions. I also thank all members of the seat belts on school transport working group and the Government ministers and officials who have advised and assisted me.

I welcome the committee's support for the general principles of the bill and its constructive comments and recommendations. That support chimes with public feedback. A national consultation in 2016 showed that respondents overwhelmingly thought that such measures would contribute to road safety, and many questioned why a law had not been implemented sooner.

I turn to the detail of the measures. The bill will place a legal duty on local authorities, grant-aided school providers and independent school providers to ensure that vehicles that are used for dedicated school transport have seat belts fitted. That includes taxis, minibuses, coaches and buses. Some of those vehicle types are already covered by existing United Kingdom laws that require seat belts, so it is the larger coaches and buses in which changes will be required.

Members will be aware that, unlike some countries, Scotland has no bespoke model of vehicle that is used for dedicated school transport. A wide range of vehicles is used, especially in local authority provision, from double-decker buses that are designed for urban use to single-decker coaches that are associated with longer-distance travel.

Grant-aided and independent schools report that their dedicated school transport is already universally supplied with seat belts, so it is in local authority provision that the transition has to be made. Collaboration has been key to ensuring that the measures will be clear and workable. That is why the seat belts on school transport working group has been so important. The group was set up in 2014 as the Scotland Act 1998 (Modification of Schedule 5) Order 2015, which devolved power in this area, was being processed.

The group's formation has allowed for extensive dialogue with stakeholders, experts and delivery organisations such as local government, the bus industry and parenting and education groups. The proposals that have been brought to Parliament have therefore been shaped and influenced by those whom they will affect, which will ensure that the bill's contents are practical and fit for purpose.

It is important to put in place a considered and reasonable implementation timescale that does

not put partners under undue pressure. In 2018, the legal duty will come into force for vehicles that transport primary school children, and in 2021 it will be introduced for vehicles that carry secondary school pupils. The lead-in time will help local authorities and bus operators to adapt to the change, and it will mean that no contract should have to be broken as a result. I am glad that the committee has endorsed that approach in its report.

An assertion that comes through strongly in the committee's findings is that the measures should extend to vehicles that are used to take pupils on excursions during the school day, such as trips to the swimming pool, in addition to those that are used for home-to-school transport. I welcome the committee's comments on that and the views that witnesses have expressed in recent committee evidence sessions.

The logic of such an extension is not hard to see, but the practical implications will require consideration. The two kinds of transport are distinct in terms of organisation and administration. One type is generally arranged through three to five-year council-wide contracts, while the vehicles that are used for school trips can be booked singly and ad hoc, and they are organised by individual schools.

However, school excursions are already covered by robust risk assessment guidance that stipulates that seat belts should be fitted in the vehicles. Initial discussions with our stakeholders have revealed that that guidance is rigidly adhered to. I have no objection in principle to putting that stipulation on a statutory footing, and I am working with the Scottish Government to gather views and see how that could work on the ground. Since hearing the committee's views on that suggestion, I have made contact with teaching unions, local government and other stakeholders, and I will consider the matter closely ahead of stage 2.

One of the undeniable traits of school transport in Scotland is that there is no one-size-fits-all formula for delivery. There are approximately 2,500 schools in the country, which are spread across a range of diverse geographies in our nation's local authorities. We are talking about everything from pupils being driven to school on a double-decker bus in a bustling urban centre to pupils in remote areas, such as my constituency in Aberdeenshire, travelling relatively long distances in coaches on country roads.

Any attempt at a top-down diktat on how the legislation should work will hamper flexibility and restrict councils' ability to implement the type of school transport that works best for them and their school pupils. It is therefore welcome that the committee recognises and agrees with the need to maintain that flexibility. I firmly believe that

individual local authorities should use the methods of implementation that suit them.

I am aware that methods such as using adult bus monitors or supervisors were considered during evidence sessions. Likewise, committee members highlighted how some local authorities stipulate a maximum age of vehicle in their contracts. The bill does not restrict school authorities' flexibility on such matters. We will point out options in guidance, and we will also point to different areas of local authorities' good practice. However, making any single measure a statutory requirement could hinder the legislation's effectiveness and could ultimately be counterproductive.

The issue of flexibility brings me to the consideration of young people who have additional support needs and smaller children, whom a normal seat belt might not fit or be effective for. Those issues have been looked at in detail with stakeholders and the bill has been drafted to consciously allow such pupils to be catered for. The bill does not mandate a specific type of belt, and it leaves options open for school authorities to use adjustable straps, booster seats or lap belts for smaller children.

In practice, young people who have additional support needs are often transported in taxis or minibuses, in line with existing equalities and support for learning duties on school authorities, and the bill does not restrict that. I welcome the committee's recognition of the benefits of that in its report.

I turn to an issue that has come through strongly in consultation with people and stakeholders, which is how we ensure that children wear the seat belts. The laws that cover the wearing of seats belts are reserved to Westminster, but the bill represents an opportunity to promote successful approaches and raise wider awareness among young people of the safety benefits of wearing seat belts.

That is why comprehensive guidance as well as publicity and educational materials will be created to accompany the new legal duty. We have had dialogue with parenting, education and youth group stakeholders, as well as Road Safety Scotland. We will ensure that young people are involved; I know that the committee supports that approach.

It is crucial that we take a positive approach to instilling safety messages and allowing young people to see the benefits of good habits. Correct behaviour is not unique to the school bus. There is the same need to promote good behaviour in the classroom and when representing the school in the community at lunch time, for example.

Approaches are taken to ensure good pupil behaviour every day in schools across Scotland.

Stakeholders at the evidence sessions used the analogy of society's changed views on smoking or wearing seat belts in cars. I whole-heartedly agree that habits change and practices become second nature. That does not happen overnight but, through consistent and concerted effort, we can achieve the desired outcome.

Let us not forget that, although Wales does not have devolved powers over the liability for wearing seat belts, it has successfully implemented similar measures on seat belts, and so will we.

Aberdeenshire Council has been proactive on school transport. That council and other local authorities can give many successful examples to draw from as we refine good practice nationally.

Stipulating an additional feature, such as seat belts, in a contract with private bus operators can lead to a cost increase. That happens regularly as contracts end and are renewed, such as when councils add new requirements for vehicles to have CCTV, to be of a certain standard or to follow new routes.

In helping with the new statutory duties that will fall on councils, the Scottish Government has worked with local government to forecast the cost implications, which are set out in the financial memorandum. The committee has commented on that exercise and the overall estimates—which cover a 14-year period from 2018—and we will look at what can be done to explain further the detail of those figures. I have asked the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to provide a representative to give a fuller explanation of how the cost analysis was completed and I have written to the convener and the deputy convener of the committee to advise them of that, since COSLA could not attend the committee session that it was invited to.

I repeat my thanks to the committee for its support for the principles of the bill and the helpful recommendations that it has made.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Edward Mountain to speak on behalf of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee.

15:10

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): First, on behalf of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, I welcome the opportunity to summarise our findings on Gillian Martin's Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland)

Bill. I thank all those who gave evidence to the committee. The evidence that we received came from a wide range of people—parent groups, councils, transport operators and the Scottish Youth Parliament, to name but a few. We also received evidence from school pupils: I thank the Parliament's education outreach service staff for helping to gather that information during school visits. I also thank the committee's members and clerks, who have worked diligently on preparing our report, which I believe is a helpful report.

The bill has a single purpose—to introduce a legal requirement that seat belts be fitted on all dedicated home-to-school transport in Scotland. The committee notes the broadly positive responses that have been received from stakeholders and witnesses, who are all keen to improve the safety of children.

There was, however, among those from whom we heard about the bill's purpose, some disquiet expressed about its being too specific and narrow. Before I speak about our key findings and recommendations, I would like to make a general comment. The committee heard that the position across Scotland is mixed regarding provision of seat belts on school transport. It appears that in excess of 18 councils—more than half the councils in Scotland—already demand seat belts on school transport.

Furthermore, we heard that the number of councils that are demanding that seat belts be fitted on dedicated school transport is increasing, as is the number of councils demanding that seat belts be fitted on transport that is used for school excursions. Thus, it appears that the bill may be overtaken by events, in that the aim may well be achieved before the staggered implementation dates are reached—a point that may be picked up in the open debate.

To turn to our key findings, the committee was surprised that the bill covers only home-to-school journeys but not school trips or excursions. We heard repeatedly from witnesses that that is a failing. It is felt that not having seat belts available on all school transport would send out a mixed message and dilute the safety message that the bill is trying to achieve.

We also heard that wearing seat belts on school trips, on which there is greater supervision, would encourage children to continue to wear seat belts on home-to-school commutes, on which there are fewer adults present. In response to the committee's stage 1 report, the Scottish Government has indicated that officials have been in touch with teaching unions, local government and other stakeholders to ascertain the practical implications of extending the legal duty to transport for school trips. I heard Gillian Martin's words on that. The committee, however, is clear

on the matter and strongly recommends that the bill's provisions be extended to cover excursions or trips that are organised by schools. The committee looks forward to hearing the outcome of discussions, with an amendment possibly being lodged for stage 2.

As far as wearing seat belts is concerned, the committee fully understands that the bill will make it a requirement that seat belts be fitted in dedicated school transport. It is important that everyone understands that that is very different from a requirement that seat belts have to be worn. It became evident during the committee's consideration of the bill that its purpose is limited to fitting seat belts on school transport. Many witnesses were concerned about whether seat belts, once fitted, would actually be worn. Indeed, the committee heard that children under the age of 14 are not required by law to wear seat belts on buses. As Gillian Martin said, that is not a devolved issue: it falls under the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom Government. As a result of questions that were asked in the committee, the Scottish Government raised the issue with the appropriate UK minister, who was not able to support a change in the law but understood the point that was being made. The committee will look to the Scottish Government to progress the issue after the election.

We heard examples from witnesses of ways in which wearing of seat belts is being encouraged. They include bus monitors, prefects, educational programmes and closed-circuit television. We are convinced that pupils need greater awareness of the safety benefits of wearing seat belts and that young people need to be involved in creating the guidance. We also heard that the guidance needs to be based on positive action rather than on a disciplinary approach. We heard from the Scottish Government that it intends to work with young people to create the guidance, which the committee supports.

On non-statutory guidance, the committee heard that some children may choose not to wear seat belts when they are fitted, and believes that that needs to be addressed, as I mentioned briefly earlier. We believe that a package of guidance and practical support should be provided to supplement the bill's provisions. It is clear that there will need to be behavioural change in schools to encourage children, in order to make wearing seat belts on school transport as natural as wearing them in the family car. The committee believes that the Government must also seek to clarify where the duty of care lies so that bus drivers, teachers and all others who are involved know where responsibility for making children wear seat belts sits.

The committee also heard about servicing of seat belts. There is a statutory annual testing requirement in UK legislation. The committee feels that that is the bare minimum and that more regular checks should be done on school transport. We also believe that guidance should be given to operators on what to do should seat belts be found to be defective when they are checked in the morning.

The financial memorandum, which has been mentioned briefly, probably raised more questions for the committee than any other subject. The memorandum suggests that requiring that all dedicated school transport vehicles be fitted with seat belts would result in increased costs for bus operators, mainly through retrofitting seat belts, purchasing new vehicles and increased maintenance costs. The Government anticipates that the costs will be passed on to local authorities through higher contract prices. The financial memorandum estimates that the total cost between 2018 and 2031 will be £8.92 million.

The Government is not clear how that money would be paid to all the local authorities, or that the money would be ring fenced to achieve the aim for which it is to be paid. The committee heard that the money could be seen as a reward to operators that have not already fitted seat belts and could undervalue those that have. Furthermore, the committee heard evidence from the transport industry that fitting of seat belts is becoming viewed as a minimum standard anyway.

On European Commission approval, we had our first evidence session on the bill with Scottish Government officials on 15 March, but it was not until last week that we heard that the bill has to go before the EU for approval before it can be passed. That surprised the committee, given that the Welsh Assembly passed a bill in similar circumstances in 2011.

The committee supports the member's bill and welcomes the response to its final report, which we received on 19 May. Although we have reservations about fitting of seat belts on transport for school excursions and about the financial memorandum, we support the general principles of the bill and recommend to Parliament that they be agreed to.

15:19

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): I associate myself with the remarks that Gillian Martin made at the beginning of her speech. Some people will be wondering why Parliament is continuing to sit, but it is important that we continue Parliament's business in defiance of those who seek to disrupt our lives. Also, there can be no more important issue for us

to work on collaboratively—for individuals, MSPs, committee members, and for committees and the Government—than the safety of children. In today's debate, we perhaps feel that responsibility more heavily than ever before.

Road safety is an issue on which we place the utmost priority, so we are taking forward a raft of measures across Scotland to reduce risks as we move towards the ambitious casualty targets that are set out in our road safety framework to 2020.

Members will be aware that the Scottish Government fully backs the legislative proposals, which are not new to the Scottish Parliament—indeed, they emanate from considerations at the Public Petitions Committee in a previous session. Subsequently, in 2014, the Scottish ministers announced their intention to legislate following confirmation from the UK Government that it was willing to transfer competence through a devolution instrument that would be drafted specifically on the issue, just as it had done for Wales. The Government has been able to undertake significant in-depth work with stakeholders to ensure that there has been a collaborative approach to formation of the proposals, so it has been very pleasing to see Ms Martin utilise that work and build on it in refining the proposals that are being considered here at stage 1.

I convey my thanks to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. I follow its proceedings closely and have seen at first hand the thoughtful scrutiny that its members have given the bill. My gratitude extends to all those who gave evidence, whose contributions will greatly aid Parliament's ability to give the matter due consideration. I will touch on some of the themes that the convener touched on and the committee's reservations. We will continue to work with COSLA to explore whether more robust evidence on costs in the financial memorandum can be found, and what can be done to look again at the costings. I will address enforcement later in my speech.

The committee's report notes its surprise—which the convener reiterated—that there are no UK laws that create liability for ensuring that youngsters between the ages of three and 14 wear seat belts that are fitted on buses or coaches. As the convener said, it is a reserved issue. The Scottish Government has been pressing the UK Government on the matter for some time, but the UK Government has said that it has no plans to create such legislation. However, on the committee's recommendation I will pursue the matter again, after the general election.

We welcome the committee's recognition of the need for greater flexibility in seat belt specification. The bill will not be able to stipulate the type of seat belts that are to be fitted—for example, whether

they are to be three-point belts or lap belts—because that is beyond the scope of the competence that has been devolved. However, local authorities have reported that greater flexibility in such matters would be very welcome.

The committee also commented on seat belt maintenance, so it may be useful if I set that in the wider context. Vehicles that are used for dedicated school transport are subject to a roadworthiness testing regime, which is a reserved matter that is undertaken on behalf of the UK Government by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency. In addition to the scheduled vehicle-inspection cycle, DVSA officers and the police have powers to undertake unannounced roadside vehicle inspections of buses and coaches.

Local authorities also have the option to employ or appoint their own vehicle inspectors to monitor buses or coaches that are used for their dedicated school transport contracts. Additionally, school authorities can make vehicle standards or maintenance a condition of contract and can include punitive measures for any breaches. We will seek to highlight in guidance best practice in checking and maintenance of seat belts, as per the committee's suggestion, which I hope gives the committee some comfort.

On European Commission notification, I noted the committee's surprise when I answered questions on that during my committee appearance with Ms Martin a couple of weeks ago. I reiterate that the bill is different from the Welsh bill, which was wider in scope. Nonetheless, I thank the committee for agreeing to the amended timetable, which proposes that stage 2 proceed before notification takes place, with stage 3 scheduled for after the summer recess.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I invite the minister to address an issue that the committee has raised repeatedly, but on which we have not yet had an answer. When the bill was introduced, we were told that 18 local authorities had a seat belt stipulation in their contracts: therefore, the rest did not. We have asked repeatedly for up-to-date information on how many local authorities have, or are about to have, such a requirement in their contracts, but we still do not have that information.

Humza Yousaf: I will try to get that information for Mike Rumbles and will respond to him, if I can, in my closing remarks.

I asked for the latest information from local authorities. In January 2017, it was estimated that there were 110 vehicles in which seat belts had still to be fitted, compared with 323 in 2014. That shows that councils are moving towards compliance. As far as we can gather, that number

has not changed—110 vehicles is still the latest estimate.

I say to Mr Rumbles—I think that I made this point in committee—that even if all 32 local authorities were stipulating in their contracts that seat belts must be fitted, it would still be necessary to legislate to future proof provision of vehicles with seat belts, because there would be nothing to stop local authorities rolling back on that. I admit that, politically, it would be incredibly difficult for them to do so, but the bill will be important in future proofing such provision.

I have touched on the financial memorandum. We will re-examine that with COSLA, now that council administrations—and COSLA itself—are taking shape.

I look forward to listening to the debate and to hearing about people's concerns and reservations, but I hope that there will be broad support for Ms Martin's very good bill.

15:26

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I echo the sentiment that has been expressed in the chamber today: there can be no better subject matter for us to be discussing than the safety of children.

I am pleased to open this stage 1 debate on behalf of my party, and I thank Gillian Martin for bringing the issue to Parliament. As a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, I, too, have sat through many evidence sessions on the bill over a number of weeks.

The Scottish Conservative position on the bill is that we are largely supportive of its aim—in that regard, we have a common ambition. However, we share some of the concerns that members have voiced before and might voice again today. I will take each of them in turn.

The first concern relates to liability and enforceability. Although we appreciate that the legislation on the wearing of seat belts is not a devolved matter, it was originally quite unclear whether a third party would be liable if an incident occurred. We had concerns about whether any responsibility could fall on a driver, a prefect, a monitor, a teacher or even the local authority in the unfortunate event of an accident. Some clarification on that point is necessary.

We are disappointed about the possibility of the bill's progression being delayed because of the need for it to be approved by the European Union on the grounds of competition law under its technical standards directive. We are aware that a similar case arose in relation to legislation that went through the Welsh Assembly in 2011. Although that situation was not exactly the same, it

has some parallels with the situation here. With foresight, the delay might have been avoided. Nonetheless, due process must be followed, and we look forward to the outcome of that decision.

I turn to the financial components. As has been mentioned, it is estimated that the total cost of fitting seat belts on 110 buses and coaches could come to £8.92 million, which, in effect, will be covered by the Scottish Government. It is, of course, entirely normal for the financial repercussions of a bill to form part of its scrutiny, and although that figure might be a worst-case scenario, there seem to be some unanswered questions about the allocation of the subsidy.

For example, will all local authorities get a portion of the budget? If so, how will it be carved up? Will any historical payments be made to local authorities that previously spent funds on ensuring that seat belt provision was part of their school transport contracts? Will any funding that is made available to local authorities by the Scottish Government for that purpose be ring fenced for that purpose alone, or will it simply be allocated through block grant and on a trust basis? In our view, clarity on the funding elements of the bill is required as we progress through the stages of its consideration.

That leads me to my next point, which is a more fundamental one: the Scottish Parliament will need to consider whether there is a need to legislate at all on the matter. Given that at least 18 of our 32 local authorities currently stipulate the need for seat belts in dedicated school transportation, that seems to be the general direction of travel. According to MVA's research, in 2013, 85 per cent of dedicated school transport already had seat belts fitted. Best practice is welcome, but is intervention the only way to ensure that it happens across 100 per cent of local authorities and 100 per cent of vehicles concerned? We are open minded about the need for a bill, but only if it is a bill that is adequately structured, impactful and offers good value for public spending.

My final point is one that members will no doubt hear much of in the debate, because it is around the bill's inclusion or, rather, exclusion of other school-related trips on buses. As it stands, the bill will not cover school excursions, field visits or other trips and will apply only to dedicated school commuting, which makes very little sense to us. Surely the duty of care should be applied to all circumstances where a child is on board a school bus. I appreciate that that point opens up a separate debate around the fact that schools often contract directly with operators for ad hoc trips, but we should not avoid having that debate. My colleagues will go into more detail on that and other points that they want to raise.

I agree in principle that tackling the issue of seat belts on school buses will make a difference. The World Health Organization published statistics recently showing that seat belts substantially reduce the risk of minor injuries and can reduce fatalities resulting from collisions by up to 25 per cent. However, the fitting of seat belts is just a cog in the wheel of a much wider road safety campaign, and the Scottish Parliament should also consider the issue of education and responsibility. We believe that education is absolutely key to the success of schemes such as putting seat belts in school buses. Children should want to wear a seat belt on a bus in the same way that they do, without hesitation, in their family car. The tone and method of the education and enforcement message is vital to changing mindsets, especially among older pupils.

I thank Gillian Martin for her enthusiastic pursuit of the bill, but we feel that it has many loose ends that need to be tied up before we progress to stage 2. We will support the general principles of the bill, but we would like to see the inclusion of trips and excursions in the bill's scope as a baseline for progress on the bill. I therefore request that Gillian Martin and, indeed, the Scottish Government carefully consider many of the comments and concerns that will be shared in the debate today. We will monitor the bill's progress carefully.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Neil Bibby—up to seven minutes, please.

15:33

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): At the outset, I acknowledge the work of Gillian Martin in bringing the bill to the Parliament and I thank the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for its stage 1 report. As the committee's convener, Edward Mountain, said, in addition to the usual committee pattern of scrutiny and evidence taking, members also found the time to visit schools and gauge the opinion of young people. At this point, I commend the Parliament staff who made those external visits to schools possible and I welcome the input of all those young people who participated. The bill affects them more than anyone else, so it is only right that they are given the opportunity to have their say.

The bill marks a step forward. It might be a small step, but it is a step forward, nonetheless. Thankfully, according to what evidence is available to us, there are very few injuries involving children travelling on school transport, with just 45 children injured per year on buses and coaches. However, when it comes to preventable injuries on transport to and from school, I am sure that we would agree across the chamber that any injury that brings harm to a child is one too many. It is therefore only

right that we collectively consider what preventative steps we can take to make school transport safer.

Although the focus of the bill is narrow and specific, it raises a number of wider issues relating to the safety of school transport. In its report, the committee addressed some of those issues alongside the specific provisions of the bill; it considered not only the merits of fitting seat belts on school transport but the behavioural changes and wider legislative changes that might be required in order to protect young passengers.

For that reason, in addition to endorsing the general principles of Gillian Martin's bill today, I welcome the wider debate that has been initiated about the use of seat belts and the safety of children. It is important that we consider what changes could be made at stage 2. The bill could be broader and more ambitious. Rather than echoing the Government's intentions, it could stretch further. We could have used similar legislation to that which applies in Wales as the starting point for our proposals. In Wales, every bus that is provided or secured by a relevant body and used for the purpose of learner transport must have a seat belt fitted to every seat. Service buses that are used for dedicated learner transport, even if the majority of their journeys are not for such transport, need to be fitted with seat belts.

That is not to detract from the merits of the proposal that is before us, but simply to point out to the Parliament that the bill could be different. As has been acknowledged, for example, it does not cover dedicated transport that is used for school excursions or trips. The committee recommends that it be extended to cover such transport, and we agree. Why should there not be the same protection for a 20-minute journey home after school and a school trip that could take children further from home and last 60 minutes, 90 minutes or even more?

As members will be aware, the bill requires that seat belts be fitted but not that they be worn. The fitting of seat belts does not in itself make school transport safer—a point that the Scottish Parent Teacher Council made in its written evidence. There needs to be a concerted effort to change behaviour, to promote safety and responsibility on school buses and to ensure that seat belts, which are already widely fitted anyway, are properly used.

I note that secondary pupils are described in the committee's report as a

"tough audience to convince to wear seat belts".

That was certainly the case on my school bus when I was a child. At one of the high schools that were visited during the consultation,

"74% of pupils said that they were 'not at all likely' or 'unlikely' to wear seat belts".

That is a clear illustration of how far we still need to go with some age groups to change behaviour. If the safety of children is paramount, we need to look at a range of issues in changing that behaviour. We also need to look at the role of escorts, who have performed an important role in ensuring safety on school buses.

The committee also makes the sensible recommendation that the Scottish and UK Governments work together to ensure that all children aged three to 14 are covered by a legal requirement to wear seat belts. In doing that, the Scottish Government could begin to consider who should be responsible for ensuring that such a requirement is met. Is it the school, the local authority or the driver? That is a different matter from the one that is before us today but, nonetheless, it demands our attention. The Scottish Government might also wish to consider requirements relating to nursery transport, given the expansion of the early years sector.

In its written evidence to the committee, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents said:

"We ... support the fitting and wearing of appropriate restraints on all methods of transport including school transport."

However, it points to evidence that adult-style three-point seat belts and lap belts are not necessarily appropriate for children under 12. I seek an assurance from the Scottish Government that attention will be paid to the society's concerns.

There has been some debate already regarding the financial memorandum on the bill. The cumulative cost of implementing the provisions in the bill is estimated to be around £8.92 million, but the committee says that it is "unconvinced" by that figure. Meanwhile, evidence from Strathclyde partnership for transport and the Confederation of Passenger Transport suggests that the costs involved in tendering for the necessary work will not be as high as anticipated. Clarity is needed.

The Scottish Government has indicated that it will work with stakeholders to assess whether further work needs to be done to refine the forecasts. Whatever forecasts it settles on, however, it is important that councils have time to plan for any changes that could increase their costs and that there is certainty about any contribution to those costs that might come from central Government.

It is important that, ahead of stage 2, the Parliament understands not only the purpose of the bill but its limitations. It could be different and it could go further. If implementing the provisions for secondary schools is the right thing to do, we

should consider whether we should do it sooner than 2021. Also, it must stand alongside measures to drive a change in behaviour because, alone, it is not enough.

The bill represents a modest proposal, but it is one that we are prepared to support.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Greene and Mr Bibby, for finishing well within time. We are already over time, so I ask for speeches of absolutely no more than five minutes.

15:39

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The starting point has to be that there was widespread support for the bill at committee because, I think, all of us saw it as a way of trying to improve safety for young people on their way to school.

The question was whether the bill was actually necessary. We were told that 18 local authorities out of 32 already require seat belts on school buses, and that Strathclyde authorities are expected to follow suit after the summer. The financial memorandum refers to 323 buses not having seat belts in 2014, and we understand that that figure recently went down to 110, so the number has fallen quite dramatically.

Would full implementation happen without legislation? We probably cannot say for sure, and it may well be that the promise of legislation is spurring on the other local authorities. My feeling is that we are better to be safe than sorry, and that having the proposed legislation gives us a belt-and-braces approach.

We quickly came across the issue that, even with the proposed legislation, seat belts would be available to some pupils but not to others. Many young people travel to school on service buses, and they clearly do not have seat belts. The bill cannot affect that, although there could be a change on buses for school trips, and I would support that, too.

It is one thing to ensure that there are seat belts on the buses; it is another to ensure that young people actually wear them. We understood from the evidence that, for some young people, it is not cool to wear a seat belt. Clearly, there will have to be guidance and educational materials on that.

Committee colleagues will go into more detail on the committee's thinking on all those points, but the issue that I wish to concentrate on is finance. Because of the tight timescale, the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee, rather than the Finance and Constitution Committee, examined the financial memorandum, as is explained in paragraph 89 of our report.

We were immediately struck by the potential cost of £8.9 million, given that we had been told that there were only 110 buses operating without seat belts. That seemed an extraordinarily high cost of more than £80,000 per bus to get seat belts fitted retrospectively. However, we were then told that that was not how the figure had been calculated. In fact, the figure is based on all local authorities receiving a payment, whether or not they have compliant buses, and on potential increases to contract prices with bus operators over the next 14 years. We also heard that the figure had been agreed by COSLA.

I will take those points in turn. First, I take the point that, by paying all local authorities for the changes, councils that have been proactive and have already had seat belts fitted are not losing out. As paragraph 96 of our report says, funding will be distributed

“subject to the established Settlement & Distribution process”,

and, therefore, not according to the needs of particular councils. On other hand, given the relatively small number of buses not meeting the standard, it seems to be a huge amount of money to be paying. As the money is not ring fenced, any local authority will be able to use any excess for any good purposes, and, although I am sure that none of us would begrudge local authorities a bit of extra money, I do not think that that was the aim of the bill.

Secondly, the financial memorandum gives a lower figure of £2.35 million purely for changing the non-compliant buses. That was based on a number of 323 buses, so the amount could well be considerably lower for 110 buses. I am not clear why that figure is not being used as the planned cost.

Furthermore, we got the impression from witnesses that, where contracts had been renewed and included seat belts, the increase in contract cost had been pretty minimal, as paragraphs 93 to 95 say.

Thirdly, COSLA and local authorities agree the figure of £8.9 million—I think that they produced it themselves. I have to confess that that sets alarm bells ringing for me. If those are the figures that COSLA and councils submitted, I wonder whether they are a bit on the high side. Committees have often been concerned that the proposed cost of a bill in the financial memorandum was too low, and that councils or other organisations might be left footing any extra. However, this time, we seem to be in the slightly odd situation where those incurring the cost seem very happy with it, and it is the committee that is concerned that it is not good value for money. As the report says,

“The Committee remains unconvinced that the £8.92m cumulative costs of implementing the Bill’s provisions, as outlined in the Financial Memorandum, are justified.”

I am very happy to support the bill, even though it is possible that buses will all have seat belts fitted anyway. I would also support any amendment to widen the coverage of the bill. However, my key concern is the proposed cost and whether £8.9 million is really necessary to achieve the end of safer bus travel, which we all support.

15:45

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome today’s stage 1 debate on the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill and join my colleagues across the chamber in supporting the legislation in principle.

There is no doubt that failing to wear a seat belt exposes people to unnecessary danger. I accept that the provision of seat belts on school buses can help children to develop good habits, which ultimately translate into greater safety. Accordingly, the bill is a commendable attempt to improve children’s safety, and I am comfortable in voting for the bill’s passage at stage 1.

In my remarks, I will highlight three areas that, before stage 2, might benefit from greater reflection. First, there is the issue of enforcement. We were all schoolchildren once, and we know what school buses can be like. It is hard enough to get some children to sit down, let alone to get them to put on a seat belt. As Moray Council stated in its submission to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee:

“Seatbelts are not seen as cool or necessary by many young people, particularly when they move up to secondary school and face new peer pressures.”

As we have heard a few times in the debate, the bill covers only home-to-school transport and not school trips or excursions. That means that, for example, minibuses might not be fitted with seat belts. Indeed, a whole tier of transport could exist on which seat belts are not mandated. I was pleased to hear Gillian Martin say that she is working on that issue, including its messaging. However, I have a concern. If we are saying to children that seat belt fitting is mandatory as it is so important for safety, but we have an entire subset of transport on which seat belts are not mandated, we risk diluting the message to such an extent that seat belts will not be used where they have been fitted.

Secondly, I have concerns about costs and the clarity of the bill. With nearly 95 per cent of dedicated school transport fitted with seat belts, is there not a risk that the Scottish Government would be hit with an £8.9 million bill while

rewarding the small percentage of bus companies that have not fitted seat belts?

I, too, am a little bit concerned about whether the £8.9 million figure is the absolute figure for the retrofitting and would prefer a more detailed breakdown. I was glad, again, to hear Gillian Martin’s comments in that regard, but where will that almost £9 million come from? In an era of tight public finances, which budget might need to face cuts in order to fund the provision? The figure does not even take account of the on-cost and responsibility of maintenance. Imagine—I ask that members run with me on this line of thought—if the seat belts were fitted but did not work in an accident. Who would be liable? Would it be the operator, the council or the Government? Furthermore, given that the funds might not be ring fenced, would that put pressure on hard-pressed and underfunded councils?

The final point on which I want to reflect is that the bill’s policy memorandum highlights that local authorities are increasingly moving towards stipulating the need for seat belts in their dedicated school transport contracts voluntarily. National guidance already states that seats belts should be fitted as a condition within dedicated school transport contracts. As we have heard, nearly 95 per cent of dedicated school transport has seat belts fitted and 18 local authorities—up from four in 2009—require the provision of seat belts in all dedicated school bus contracts. A further six local authorities require seat belts on some contracts.

As John Mason mentioned, is there not a strong possibility that, by the time the bill becomes law—in 2018 and 2021—all buses will have seat belts fitted as a function of councils’ demanding seat belts as part of their contracts? If so, there must be a risk that we are legislating for legislating’s sake. I understand John Mason’s thinking on that issue; it is an interesting debate. Bringing in legislation often simply succeeds in making compliance more difficult. An excessively crowded legislative landscape can hinder economic activity, create burdens for individuals, businesses and communities and obstruct good government. I simply pose the question that Jamie Greene asked earlier: is adding to the legislative jungle the best and most effective way of achieving the endgame?

I reiterate my support in principle for the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill, but prior to stage 2 a period of reflection is in order, particularly on whether a bill that does not cover all school transport is sufficient to promote the wearing of seat belts, whether the Government is inadvertently rewarding those companies that have not yet fitted seat belts and whether we really need more legislation to achieve something that

would be more appropriately achieved in other ways.

15:49

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Like many other members, when I heard that Gillian Martin was introducing a member's bill to ensure that seat belts are fitted on dedicated school buses, my first thought was to wonder why that had not been done already. It turns out that some local authorities already require seat belts to be fitted. As we heard, that is the case in 18 local authorities, and a further six require seat belts on some routes and vehicles. That progress is good, but we have 32 local authorities, so there is a long way to go.

I want to give members a bit of background to the bill. In 2007, Lynn Merrifield brought a petition to the Scottish Parliament on school bus safety, on behalf of Kingseat community council. The petition called on the Scottish Government to make provision for every school bus to be installed with three-point seat belts for every schoolchild passenger. It was unfortunate that the Scottish ministers could not compel local authorities to do that, because the law in that regard was reserved to Westminster.

However, the power was devolved to the Scottish Parliament in 2015, and we are debating the measure, here in the Scottish Parliament. This is a proud moment, and I thank Lynn Merrifield and Gillian Martin from the bottom of my heart. I am a mother, and nothing in this world is more important to me than ensuring that my son is safe. The presence of seat belts on school transport is a vital part of that, for many parents.

When I was a child I took a bus to and from school every day. There were no seat belts on school buses then, and no seat belts in the backs of cars—[*Interruption.*] It was not that long ago. As a result of changes to legislation over time, we have come to realise what an essential part of travel seat belts are. When I get in a car, the first thing that I do is put on my seat belt—I do that automatically; it is a habit. The aim is to make that the first thing that kids do when they get on a bus to or from school. It is about awareness, education and reinforcement. I say to Liam Kerr that being safe is cool, and seat belts keep us safe.

The big question is how schools and local authorities ensure that when seat belts are fitted they are actually used. The committee scrutinised every aspect of the bill and took evidence from a number of experts. The Scottish Youth Parliament gave a powerful account from young people and advised that guidance be prepared with young people. Young people need to have ownership of the approach, whether that is done through bus

monitors, mentorships or educational events. Many different, successful schemes are in place in schools throughout the county, and we should look at those schemes.

During the committee's deliberations, I raised the maintenance of seat belts. I have travelled all over the Highlands on buses and I have encountered seat belts that do not work. Under no circumstances do we want to find that children and young people are not wearing seat belts because belts are broken or they are unable to use them. I was told that seat belts are covered by the bus's MOT and will be checked regularly. We must encourage frequent and thorough checks and maintenance. We must also ensure that young people are comfortable with telling the driver or other responsible person on the bus that a seat belt is out of action. The guidance that local authorities are given should emphasise that all seat belts must be in working order. I welcome the minister's commitment in that regard.

According to the policy memorandum to the bill, in each year from 2010 to 2015 an average of 42 children were slightly injured while travelling by bus or coach in Scotland and a further three children were seriously injured. Luckily, no children lost their lives while travelling on buses or coaches during that period. The proposed safety measure cannot wait any longer. Legislation needs to be in place. Neil Bibby was correct when he said that one injury is one too many.

Some members of the committee questioned whether the bill is needed, if all local authorities are planning to have seat belts fitted on school transport. I have talked to a few of my colleagues since then, and one said, "We have been trying to get our local authority to do this for years and they keep putting it off. There is no guarantee that it would happen if they were not forced into doing it." That is why we need legislation. We simply cannot base our children's safety on a "what if?" scenario.

I have been consulting locally. I thank William Gilfillan, head of community services at Highland Council, and all the teachers who replied to me. Their responses were extremely useful, and every teacher to whom I have spoken is in favour of the bill. I have supported the bill since its introduction, but the responses have strengthened my resolve to see it pass. We owe it to our young people, as a Government, as a Parliament and as a society.

15:54

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): This debate is fundamentally about child safety. On a day such as this, it is difficult not to think about the tragic events in Manchester last night. One of the most difficult things that we can do as parents is to step back and give our child the

space that it needs to explore the world. Undoubtedly, a child's first concert is one of those important milestones, so I cannot even begin to understand what parents are going through who have lost children or do not know where their children are. Our thoughts go to those families and are with those 22 lights whom we have lost from the world.

Today we are talking about seat belts and school transport in Scotland, which in a sense is about that parental trust. There is a "duty of care", as Edward Mountain put it, and it is vital that we explore every safeguard and every feature that we can put in place to protect our children; nowhere is that more so than on the journey to school. I thank Gillian Martin for introducing the bill, which is an important step forward. I remember that when she mentioned that she was doing so, on the steps of the garden lobby, I was one of those people who said, "You mean it is not the law already?" This is an important step to close the loopholes and take the additional steps so that we can honour the trust that parents put in us. It also touches on the wraparound school day, because increasingly parents work—we do not have stay-at-home parents who are able to take their children to school. The journey to and from school touches on the wraparound care that we need to work towards, whether it is breakfast clubs, after-school clubs or school transport.

I ask whether the bill goes far enough, and a number of members have already raised questions about that. Gillian Martin said that the bill could not go further in the interest of "flexibility" and "effectiveness". As the bill proceeds through further stages, it would be good to hear more about her concerns, so that we can explore the full scope and possibilities of this law. We need to look at the context; we have already seen significant improvements in the safety of minibuses and coaches, with the legislation that was brought forward in 1997 and 2001. The points about school excursions are extremely well made; it is because of the tragic accident on the M40 in 1993, when several 12 and 13-year-old children returning from a school excursion lost their lives, that the bill that required seat belts in minibuses was introduced in 1997. In 2001, legislation required seat belts in coaches as well.

Given that coaches built from 2001 are required to have seat belts, what change are we talking about? As John Mason pointed out, the number of coaches that are old is 110. Why do we take our children to school in old buses that no longer meet current standards? John Mason's lesson in the mathematics of the costs was useful. We should question the costs carefully: £8.9 million divided by 110 gives £80,000 per bus. Surely with £80,000 we could upgrade those buses or maybe buy new ones. Let us probe the costings and look at what

we can do. Should we give those moneys directly to bus companies to pay for the upgrades, rather than give them to local authorities? Those are the questions that we need to ask and the issues that we need to explore.

Although we have come so far on road safety, progress has often been slow. The first three-point seat belt was installed in a car in 1958; the UK legislation to install seat belts in new cars came forward only in 1967; the requirement to wear seat belts came in only in 1983; and the law required seat belts to be fitted in the back seats of cars only in 1987. We cannot tolerate such tardy, slow progress when it comes to road safety. We cannot tolerate any complacency about safety when it comes to the transportation of our children.

When we consider the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill at stages 2 and 3, I urge members to think about how we can improve it. The bill is welcome and an important step forward, but we must ask whether it can go further. We cannot afford the complacency of the past and we must do everything that we can to protect our children.

15:59

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Sometimes we legislate to fix a problem; sometimes we legislate to prevent a problem; sometimes we legislate to reform or simplify; sometimes we legislate to create opportunity; and sometimes we legislate for the benefit of institutions or individuals. The reasons why we legislate are many and diverse—my list is far from complete. Each bill must stand on its merits or fall because of its shortcomings. The Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill lies in the territory of fixing a problem and of preventing one. As a member's bill, it is, of necessity, relatively limited in its scope.

Why this bill and why now? My late constituent Ron Beaty from Gamrie turned his attention to the safety of school transport after his granddaughter was severely affected by an accident after alighting from a school bus. I have met Ron Beaty's granddaughter, and I met Ron not long before he died, as did Gillian Martin when she discussed the prospective bill with him.

Ron Beaty was one of those dogged campaigners that Scotland—perhaps Scotland in particular—throws up. He understood that there were no simple or quick solutions. For more than a decade, he attended Public Petitions Committee and other committee meetings and parliamentary debates—wherever road safety was being discussed. Even if the issue was likely to be given only procedural consideration, the odds were that Ron had made the journey of four-plus hours to

Edinburgh to show us all that he was holding us to account.

The bill is not the limit of what Ron Beaty campaigned for but it is a useful part of it. The power to require the fitting of seat belts on school buses is one that we can now exercise, but it is currently beyond our powers to require the wearing of seat belts. However, because we can do only a little—because we cannot do all that we want to do—we should not choose to do nothing. We can and should persuade people to use seat belts. As we have been reminded in the past couple of days by one bus company, even when every bus is fitted with seat belts, we need legislation in place to maintain that for the future, for everyone, for ever.

Let us consider the value of seat belts in our road transport system. Members have already mentioned some of the relevant dates and I will not repeat them. However, I will say is that thousands of lives have been saved by seat belts. The United States Department of Transportation has estimated that, in one of the early years after seat belts were fitted there, 12,000 lives were saved.

I first fitted seat belts to my car in 1964, after seeing the brain damage suffered by a patient for whom I was a nurse. I have worn them from that day onwards. More recently, I came upon an urban collision at comparatively low-impact speed in which a driver had not been wearing a seat belt and was scalped. It was not a pretty sight. I could tell members more but I shall not.

We have all but normalised the wearing of safety hats by cyclists, which shows what can be done. We now need to achieve the same breakthrough in the wearing of seat belts on buses, which, according to a fully referenced Wikipedia article, became a legal requirement in the Czech Republic in 2004 and in Finland in 2006. It is also a legal requirement in France, Germany, Japan and—from last year—even Burma.

The relevant regulations are the Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) (Amendment) Regulations 2006. I had a quick look at them in light of remarks by Liam Kerr and Gail Ross. Regulation 3 appears to suggest that seat belts must always conform to regulations. I take it that seat belts therefore have to be kept in working order. They will be checked at the MOT—that is for sure—but there is a legal obligation to keep them in working order.

Like lots of legislation, legislation in this area is complex and amends other legislation. The regulations require the driver to tell passengers to wear their seat belt. They also require a blue sign on every seat. I have seen that sign many a time and did not know what it meant. I wonder whether

it is particularly effective, but, again, it is something that needs to be done.

I very much welcome the bill and am happy to support its general principles. I wish the bill bon voyage.

16:04

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): Just as it is impossible to be against apple pie and motherhood, it is impossible to be against the bill. It is a simple and focused bill that aims to legally require seat belts to be fitted to all dedicated home-to-school buses in Scotland. Despite its simplicity, however, there are shortcomings in the proposals. [*Interruption.*] Sorry about my microphone, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I can always hear you, Mr Chapman.

Peter Chapman: There you go—one should always project, I say.

The most significant and obvious shortcoming is that the bill, in its current form, makes no provision for the same level of care to be provided to schoolchildren on school trips during school time as would be provided to schoolchildren on home-to-school trips. That is a serious and concerning omission. Following discussion between stakeholders and Gillian Martin—the member responsible for introducing the bill—it was agreed that there would be a more in-depth look at that issue, with the possibility that the bill would be amended to include a provision to deal with it. That is vital, as the issue must be addressed.

The committee heard that there are serious difficulties in persuading young people aged over 14 to wear seat belts when fitted; that issue must be urgently addressed, too. In evidence, it was highlighted that older pupils were cynical about the wearing of seat belts on school transport, with one young respondent even stating:

“No one puts seat belts on on my school bus as it’s ‘uncool’ and if the driver comes round and tells people to wear them, they just get taken off again once he’s driving.”

The consultation found that 74 per cent of young people were “not at all likely” or “unlikely” to wear seat belts. However, as First Bus said, if the issue is tackled correctly, we will have an opportunity to educate children and explain to them the benefits of seat belts and the need to use them.

In its written submission, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland raised the lack of clarity surrounding who will be responsible for ensuring that belts are worn. The Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee heard that it was impractical for the bus driver to monitor the situation while driving the vehicle. Regardless of

who has the duty of care, guidance and mentoring will need to be put in place.

Another matter of paramount importance that ought to be confronted is the type of belt that is fitted. There are issues with shoulder-type three-point belts, which are inappropriate and unsafe for children who are aged under 12 years old and those who are under 135cm tall. It appears that booster seats would be required in some cases. It is clear that discussions must take place between local authorities and bus operators regarding the most suitable type of belts to be fitted.

A further anomaly is the fact that children who are travelling to school on service buses that are open to fare-paying passengers will not be covered, as there is no requirement for those buses to have seat belts fitted. We believe that the option of using service buses needs to remain, because it is the most cost-effective option in built-up areas and can reduce congestion and pollution levels. However, the kids who use them will not have the same level of protection on their way to school as kids who use other bus types. During the committee's debates, there were no real answers to that problem.

The final issue that I have with the bill is the £8.92 million of cumulative costs that we have heard about from several members. Given that 18 local authorities have already fitted seat belts on their school fleets and that others are in the process of doing so, I remain unconvinced that that sum of money is necessary. Indeed, the authorities that have already fitted seat belts report that the additional costs were negligible. The costs appear to have been absorbed as buses were renewed and as new contracts were put in place.

The provisions will not come into force until 2018 for primary schools and 2021 for secondary schools, and some committee members expect that, by those dates, all local authorities will already have in place contracts that require seat belts to be fitted. If so, the bill will be obsolete by the time that it comes into force.

Although I agree that the bill is a positive step forward for the safety of our children, I urge the Scottish Government to go further and address the pressing, unanswered questions that many members have raised today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call John Finnie. I will possibly call Mike Rumbles: I put out a Rumbles alert.

16:09

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I support the bill's aims, which are laudable, and congratulate Gillian Martin on taking it this far. The Scottish Green Party will support its general

principles at decision time. It is important to start with that positive, because I will go on to the financial aspects.

The key phrase in the executive summary of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's report is that the committee "remains unconvinced" about the bill's £8.92 million costs. Members understand that the committee has the important role of scrutinising and understanding who benefits and why.

I looked at the financial memorandum, whose purpose is to set out

"the best estimates of the cost implications associated with implementation of the Bill ... the best estimates of the timescales over which the costs implications are expected to arise"—

projecting forward, rather than looking back—

"and an indication of the margins of uncertainty in these estimates."

I am keen to understand, as the committee was, the element of retrospection. We hoped to get some clarity on that from the transport policy road safety team, which says in a letter to the convener:

"Just as there is not a standard cost-per-pupil or cost-per-journey for local authorities across Scotland, it is not possible to count individual binary units in terms of buses to quantify the financial impact of the Bill. The most appropriate way to calculate this is to use professional expertise"—

I will come back to that phrase—

"to estimate the impact on the overall future contract costs borne by the school authority."

The transport policy road safety team goes on to say:

"it is not possible to isolate the precise role that a new seat belt requirement would play in affecting every future contract across Scotland using the cost of upgrades for individual vehicles."

At paragraph 22, the financial memorandum says:

"Existing dedicated school transport contracts between school authorities and bus companies are commercially sensitive and therefore cannot be scrutinised individually in order to provide case studies. Additionally, given the fluctuating nature of contract prices and the number of requirements within them, it is not possible to definitively calculate how they will change in future years. As such, the best estimates have to be based on forecasts from local authority professionals with contracting experience".

That takes us back to the professionals again.

Further on, the financial memorandum talks about what could be included in tables, saying:

"These include vehicle manufacturing costs, vehicle maintenance, part replacement and drivers' wages. The MVA model then estimates to what extent these costs are likely to feed through into school bus contract costs."

If it had not been for the particularly large sum of money that I mentioned, I doubt that I would have looked at that, as others did. Indeed, the letter from the transport policy road safety team specifically responded to a question that my colleague John Mason posed.

At paragraph 28, the financial memorandum says:

“Due to confidentiality arrangements with local authority finance directors, CoSLA was unable to share forecasts broken down by individual local authorities or to share the specific methodology each had used to calculate its figures.”

I find that quite damning. That said, I take reassurance from the fact that, as has been said, a further explanation will come from COSLA. The minister talked about “more robust evidence”, which is very important.

I do not know anyone who does not support the bill's aims. Modest devolution has facilitated its introduction. Some concerns about construction and use that I have heard colleagues express, including many of the factors that Mr Stevenson referred to, could be addressed if matters were devolved.

Societal change will drive the issue. There have been changes in relation to smoking and the wearing of seat belts. Many years ago, I was involved in a serious road accident, and I would not be here if it were not for seat belts. I am therefore a big fan of them.

The rural implications have been taken on board, and community and dual contracts have been touched on. Gillian Martin talked about tailoring practice, which picks up on the issue of rural communities and fare-paying passengers not missing out.

Gillian Martin told us that school excursions are covered by robust risk assessments. The reality is that everything should be covered by a risk assessment.

We need to understand the financial implications, but I am very happy to support the bill.

16:14

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): First, I congratulate Gillian Martin on introducing the bill. As we have heard, it has a single purpose: to introduce a legal requirement for seat belts to be fitted on all dedicated home-to-school transport in Scotland. That is a commendable aim; I am only astonished that it was not already a requirement for all dedicated school transport and that it has been felt necessary to introduce a bill to make it the law of the land.

All 32 local authorities in Scotland enter into contracts for school transport. As I said, it is astonishing that all 32 councils have not already made seat belts a requirement in their contracts with individual operators. On introducing the bill, Gillian Martin informed the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee that only 18 councils have so far made seat belts a requirement in all their contracts for home-to-school transport, while another six require it for some contracts only.

It would seem that our local authorities have been somewhat slow, to say the least, to ensure that their contracts contain a requirement to have seat belts fitted on dedicated school transport. However, as I said earlier when I intervened on the minister, every time the committee has tried to get up-to-date information about how many local authorities stipulate such a requirement in their contracts, and—more importantly—how many intend to do so, we seem to draw a blank. We have asked the Scottish Government for that information, and so far it has not been forthcoming. I simply do not understand why that should be so, and I was heartened to hear the minister say in response to my intervention that he would have the information available in his summing up. I would be very surprised if it is, but it would be delightful if he could provide it.

As we have heard, the committee also flagged up the issue of the financial costs of the legislation. The financial memorandum states that the Scottish Government believes that, if the bill is passed, it would cost up to £8.92 million. That is £8.92 million of public money for a bill that would simply incorporate into law a requirement that may already be implemented across Scotland by the time that that law comes into force.

Like John Mason, Jamie Greene and others, I question whether it is a good use of public money to spend such a sum unnecessarily. I am sure that other members will outline further concerns about the level of public money that would be allocated to the process.

Jamie Greene: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: Of course.

Jamie Greene: I just want to clarify for the record that I am not questioning whether any Government money is spent on the bill—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am being told that the member is Finlay Carson, but it is Jamie Greene—there is a bit of a dispute up here. I must not get names wrong again, Mr Greene—I will be rebuked by Adam Tomkins. [*Laughter.*]

Jamie Greene: It must be the beard, Presiding Officer—but mine is not grey.

Members: Oh!

Jamie Greene: I have forgotten what I was going to say; I apologise for taking up the member's time. I want to clarify that I was not questioning whether any money should be spent in addressing the issue—it is important that child safety is paramount. It is simply a question of how the money is spent.

Mike Rumbles: Absolutely—I agree with that entirely. I am not questioning that there might be a need for some money if there are still buses that require seat belts, but I am questioning the amount of money, at £8.92 million, that is to be spent on the bill. It seems odd that that is necessary. I support the bill, but if its aims have already been achieved, that should be a real success in itself.

At this point, I must comment on a report about the bill in this morning's *Press and Journal*, in which I am quoted. The quote is taken from the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's very first evidence session on the bill on 15 March, at which I questioned the two Government officials who were supporting Gillian Martin's bill. I put it to them that

"the bill is purely about the technical aspect of having seat belts fitted. It is not about any other issue related to whether kids are safe travelling to and from school on buses that have seat belts fitted. If we are to take legislation through, we should be comprehensive and attack the potential problem that we all",

right across the chamber,

"see, rather than go off at half-cock ... with a bill that does not cover people's worries."

My colleague on the committee, Richard Lyle, then said:

"The points that Mr Rumbles and the convener made are quite valid. Who will be liable for enforcement, if there is to be any enforcement?"—[*Official Report, Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee*, 15 March 2017; c 47.]

In this morning's *P and J*, Gillian Martin is quoted as saying that she was "shocked" by my stance, and that

"I am both relieved and pleased that his words have been met with no support".

She should listen to the debate.

Gillian Martin: If Mr Rumbles had read the whole article, which I am sure he did, he would know that I received a letter from a supportive coach company that provides a lot of dedicated school transport in Aberdeenshire, which he also represents. The company echoed my concern about Mr Rumbles's point that the bill does not need to progress because fitting seat belts is a foregone conclusion and will happen organically. The company wrote to me to support the matter being legislated, and it shared my shock.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was a long intervention, Mr Rumbles, so do not fash yourself; you are getting that extra minute.

Mike Rumbles: It is very strange that the paper reported two months after the date of the committee. I also find it strange that Ms Martin takes that position; she can hear members around the chamber and I am only echoing what every other member seems to be saying. There are issues with the bill.

I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues support Gillian Martin's bill and congratulate her on it, despite what she said about me in the *P and J* this morning. There is much room for improvement, and that is the whole point of the stage 2 and stage 3 processes. I hope that she will reflect on members' concerns, as expressed in the committee and in the chamber today, and lodge amendments to improve the bill. That is what we are talking about. We want the bill to pass, but we want to improve it.

This is all about the safety of our children and we have to get it right.

16:21

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I start by echoing other members and offering my condolences to the people who were affected by last night's events in Manchester. I also commend the emergency services for their response.

I also congratulate Gillian Martin on introducing the bill.

Before I travelled down here last night, I was thinking about what to say in today's debate. I have three children who get the bus to school every day, so I decided to ask them for their thoughts at the dinner table

The first thing that I was told was, "Nobody uses seat belts." They told me that children get teased for wearing seat belts on the bus and that it is not socially normal to wear a seat belt. My children would not dream of travelling in a car without wearing a seat belt, but it turns out they would not dream of wearing a seat belt on a bus.

My dad happened to be down visiting us, and the thought that nobody uses seat belts, even where they are available, really got to him. My dad used to be a fireman in Ullapool—part of the retained service that covers so much of the Highlands and Islands. He told us about an accident that he attended more than 30 years ago, when a tour bus went off the road. It had swerved, probably to avoid a sheep or a deer. It landed on its side and people were thrown free of it because they were not wearing seat belts. Unfortunately, the men from Ullapool had no equipment to lift the bus so all they could do on that occasion was wait

for the team from Inverness to arrive, and comfort the people involved. Seven people died in that accident. It was one of the worst my dad attended in a lifetime of service. He was horrified that my children thought that seat belts are not needed on a bus.

It is a simple truth that wearing seat belts can and does save lives. I have no doubt that we as lawmakers should try to ensure that seat belts are available and used wherever possible.

Of course, it is clear that seat belts on buses are not always used, even when they are available, and that is where we need to change the social norm. We need to get to the point at which, as in a car, it is unusual not to wear a seat belt on a bus.

We will all acknowledge that no single piece of legislation will change such a social norm, but legislation has a role to play. It has helped to bring about such changes in the past. When I was a child, the norm was not to wear a seat belt in cars. That changed incrementally with legislative changes. It was not until 1983, when I was 10 years old, that it became law for folk in the front of a car to wear a seat belt. Even then, seat belts were not often fitted in the back of cars. That only became law in 1986, and the law changed to make people use them in 1989.

When I was growing up, it was pretty common to have five or more kids in the back of our car, and none of us were wearing seat belts. When I was really young, my personal favourite spot in the car was standing between the two front seats, chatting to my parents with my dad, the fireman, driving.

That shows how things can change. That social norm has completely reversed and because of the developments in technology since the change, we cannot not wear seat belts in the car any more because, if someone is not wearing their seat belt, the car beeps endlessly and irritates them into wearing it.

I think that the questions over how to enforce this law are fair. Bus monitors and technology may both have a role. Ultimately, though, I think that the bill is about changing a social norm.

In rural areas such as the Highlands and Islands, which I represent, there is a much higher risk for children travelling on buses. Often the bus journeys that kids take to school will be significantly longer, on roads with higher speed limits, than in more urban areas.

I think that all parents would agree with the executive director of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council when she stated that the principle of the bill

“is absolutely right that when parents send their children off to school and entrust them to the local authority, the local

authority is in loco parentis. I cannot take my children anywhere in the car without strapping them in, and it is completely unreasonable to suggest that local authorities should be in any other position.”—[*Official Report, Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee*, 19 April 2017; c 34.]

16:25

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West)

(Con): I echo the words of other members in the chamber and send my condolences to those affected by the recent attack in Manchester. As the Prime Minister said this morning, Britain’s spirit “has never been broken and will never be broken”.

I welcome this debate on the bill. It is great to see that we are finally starting to debate issues that are within the jurisdiction of this Parliament and which can have a positive impact on people’s lives.

I think that we all, across the chamber, are in no doubt about the unnecessary danger that drivers and passengers put themselves in by not wearing a seat belt. Indeed, it was a Conservative Government that made wearing seat belts the law back in 1983. It seems unthinkable today that seat belts were not compulsory in all vehicles back in the 1980s and I think that we will all look back to school buses with the same feeling in the coming years.

This is a vital bill that will protect children from serious injury, so it is important that we get it right first time. That is why, on this side of the chamber, we support the bill in principle. Unfortunately, Ms Martin’s bill has severe limitations and some major omissions, as has already been discussed.

First, the bill will cover only school transportation between homes and primary education. Anyone who has children at school, including me, will know that a major part of travelling in education is done outside those two locations.

Gillian Martin: Will the member take an intervention?

Alexander Burnett: No, there is not enough time.

For example, any after-school curricular activities—which are now chargeable thanks to reductions in sportscotland funding—will include bus journeys to facilities. How can it be the case that child safety on the same roads changes depending on their final destination? Are we seriously saying that the risk on the same stretch of road can change if someone is travelling for a different purpose? That is simply unacceptable and quite ludicrous drafting. It is a major blunder in the writing of the bill, which puts passengers at unnecessary risk.

It is no wonder then that the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents was clear in its

submission to the consultation that the legislation should apply to all school journeys and I hope that this commonsense approach is picked up by the member.

Secondly, the cost for implementing the policy should not be a hindrance. It is vitally important that, unlike when the Labour Welsh Government introduced similar legislation, extra funding be given to local authorities for the necessary changes. Local authorities in Wales had to fund those costs at a time when council budgets were being cut. Scotland's councils can ill afford the same fate.

We know that it is normal Scottish National Party practice to make promises that others have to pay for, but I think that councils across Scotland would like to hear from Ms Martin where they should find this money.

My final point on this policy is on education on the importance of seat belt usage. Just because the seat belts are available does not guarantee that pupils will wear them. That is why I am glad to see that my own council, Aberdeenshire, has a school transport leaflet for parents and pupils, which includes a section on the responsibility of each passenger to properly wear a seat belt at all times.

In summary, I welcome the bill as far as it goes, but it is clear that it has not been properly thought through. I hope that Ms Martin can give consideration to all those points before the next stage.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rhoda Grant to close for Labour. I ask Ms Grant perhaps to convey to Neil Bibby, who opened for Labour, that it is disappointing not to have the pleasure of his presence for the closing speeches. No doubt he will send an appropriate apology to the Presiding Officers.

16:29

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Gillian Martin on the bill, and I associate myself with some of the comments that members have made about the difficulty of having the debate today. However, debating children's safety is probably our best response to the events in Manchester.

We can all agree on the need to protect children as they travel to school, and there has been very little argument about the general principles of the bill. Mike Rumbles and many other members asked why it has taken so long to propose legislation for school buses, when we have had legislation for cars, which has been a lifesaver, and we have built and improved on that with legislation on baby seats and booster seats. It

must be strange for children to have that level of protection in their family cars but none on school transport.

Therefore, there has been no opposition to the bill, although we have debated some of the issues surrounding it and its limitations. As many members have said, the bill is dedicated to school buses that take children back and forth to school and does not cover school trips or children using public transport to get to school. My colleague Neil Bibby suggested that it should go a lot further, perhaps along the lines of the Welsh legislation.

Another concern is that, although the bill will ensure that school buses have seat belts, there is nothing in it to say who has responsibility for ensuring that children wear those seat belts. Although in normal circumstances it is the driver's responsibility, that is obviously impossible for the driver of a school bus, because someone cannot drive a school bus and check seat belts at the same time.

Daniel Johnson said that the bill does not go far enough, and many members echoed that. It seems strange that the bill will ensure seat belts on transport to and from school, but not on transport for organised school trips. The Scottish Government's response to that—it says that more rigorous risk assessments take place for school trips than for normal school transport—is a bit disappointing.

At stage 2, we need to address the issue of who has responsibility for ensuring that seat belts are worn. Neil Bibby pointed out that, as well as the fact that no one has that responsibility, there is nothing in the bill to say that seat belts should be worn at all. Liam Kerr talked about behaviour on school buses. Looking back to my school days, I know what behaviour on school buses used to be like, but we had evidence that young people now have smart phones and that, rather than creating a riot on the school bus, they are more likely to be texting, probably someone who is a couple of seats away.

We asked the Scottish Government about councils' role in loco parentis and the duty of care in relation to wearing seat belts. The Government acknowledged that councils have a duty of care but said that it would be for the courts to decide whether a council would be liable if a child was injured because they did not have a seat belt on. That is not good enough. Councils, parents and pupils need to know whose responsibility that is. We need clarity on that at stage 2.

We heard from the Scottish Youth Parliament that, rather than something being done to young people, they should be encouraged to be proactive. Young people should be educated and informed about the benefits of wearing seat belts

from an early age because, that way, there would be no need for supervision as they would deal with their safety proactively. A lot of members, such as Maree Todd, talked about changing social norms. That has happened in the past and it can happen again.

Many members asked whether the bill is required at all. Nobody is against the general principles, but it is clear from the evidence that the majority of councils have already made provision of seat belts on school buses a stipulation of their tender documents and that those that have not done so are working towards that. Therefore, it is likely that all councils will have that stipulation in their contracts prior even to the enactment of the bill. That is why there is a question whether the bill is required at all.

There are also concerns about the financing of the bill and the financial memorandum. Daniel Johnson talked about a figure of £80,000 per bus. That was a new figure to me, but it kind of sums up the concern that we heard in committee about the cost. Financial memorandums that the Parliament has considered have often underestimated rather than overestimated the cost of bills.

There is widespread support for the principles of the bill, but it may not be required at all. I look forward to strengthening it at stages 2 and 3 to make a better bill that will make a real difference for our young people.

16:35

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

Many members have spoken about the poignancy of debating the bill today. We should also not forget that it comes hard on the heels of a lot of the debate that we have had about the safety of school buildings. It reinforces parents' right to think that their child will always be safe and that their parliamentarians will always be guardians of that principle.

I come to the matter slightly differently, as somebody who is a regular driver of school minibuses and who has seen all the improvements that have taken place in school transport since the 1980s, when I first secured my minibus licence. Although virtually all those changes have been very much welcomed, progress has been somewhat gradual, as Daniel Johnson said. Therefore, it is important that this debate takes place to ensure that all school transport and all children are safe, and I thank Gillian Martin for making us think carefully about exactly what that means.

I also thank Stewart Stevenson, who posed the question about the rationale behind our wanting to legislate. In placing a duty on our local authorities

to ensure that a seat belt is fitted to every passenger seat in every motor vehicle that is used to provide a dedicated school transport service, there is a presumption that there will be a universal requirement, backed by law, to make the necessary changes. That is why the Scottish Conservatives, like other members, have been supportive of the principles of the bill. We also believe that the bill will have benefits in educating children about the importance of wearing seat belts. Maree Todd gave us a special reminder of the considerable danger of not doing so.

Notwithstanding that support for the bill's principles, we have some concerns about its basic provisions and consider that some key points have perhaps not been thought through. First, the bill should go much further and cover school excursions, not just daily commutes between home and school. As somebody who drives a school minibus, I would be concerned if I felt that the safety requirements were slightly different simply because of the circumstances in which I was driving children—because I was not taking them to and from their school. That is a major concern.

It is my understanding that the definition in the bill would not cover an educational excursion and that taking pupils to undertake extracurricular activities—as we hope they will do—either before or at the end of the school day would not be covered by local authority legislation because it is not core educational provision. The Scottish Government should look again at the method by which its road safety consultation seeks to adjust that legislation, as we will have to ensure that the bill is compliant with it; otherwise, we will be in danger of creating problems.

I am grateful to John Mason for explaining his concern about the costings for the bill. In the light of what Mike Rumbles and one or two other members have said, we must be clear not only about what the costs are but about the modelling of those costs. I would be much more comfortable if I felt that we could get the right information. I believe that the minister is going to look into the matter in more detail and provide us with some additional information—although, quite frankly, I think that we ought to have had that at stage 1.

Another point that I will address quickly is the fact that although the bill specifies the responsibility of grant-aided independent schools, greater clarity is needed about the transport used by special schools and to carry children whose schools have different governance structures. For example, special schools might have independent governance but might be used by local authorities, and there would be a big question mark over where liability for the vehicles that they used lay. Technical equipment, such as specialist

wheelchairs, could be used not only by children attending the grant-aided or independent school, but by children who attend local authority schools. If I was driving such a minibus, I would want to know where the responsibility lay; I am not sure that that has been explained.

I know that my time is up, Presiding Officer, so I will just say that although we are very keen on the basic principles of the bill, we have quite a few concerns. Some of its provisions need to be thought through to make it compliant with other legislation and consideration needs to be given to what opportunities might exist to ensure that we cover all the possible loopholes, which I think are quite considerable.

16:40

Humza Yousaf: I thank those who have contributed to what has been a very constructive, helpful and useful debate. The purpose of such debates is to highlight concerns and to get the member in charge of the bill—or the Government, if it is a Government bill—to provide more robust evidence and to consider other issues. I will do my best to whizz through some of the issues that have been raised. A number of key themes have been mentioned by almost every member who has taken part in the debate, and I will try to address some of them.

Liam Kerr asked why the bill is important—Mike Rumbles followed the same theme—given that many councils already stipulate the provision of vehicles with seat belts in their contracts for school transport. I reiterate that although that might be the case, a number of councils have still not got there. For Mike Rumbles's information, 18 is still the number of councils that stipulate the provision of vehicles with seat belts in their contracts, and six councils—Dundee City Council, East Lothian Council, Orkney Islands Council, West Lothian Council, Renfrewshire Council and West Dunbartonshire Council—are looking at some of the bill's provisions. However, I add the obvious caveat that we have just had local elections, with the result that new administrations with new leadership are coming in in some areas. I do not imagine that councils would have any desire to roll back on a commitment to ensure that seat belts are fitted on school transport, and those are the latest figures that we have, but it is important that the bill future proofs the provision of seat belts on school transport.

As I said, the debate has been constructive. Another key theme was the provision of seat belts on vehicles that are used for school trips, too. I welcome the view that the measure should cover vehicles that are used for excursions during the school day, too, as Liz Smith mentioned a moment ago—I did not know that she had a minibus

licence; next time we have a Parliament day out, we know who will be driving the bus. As I have said, such trips are covered by stringent risk assessment guidelines, which stipulate the provision of seat belts, and the feedback is that those are rigidly adhered to. However, I see no objection in principle to the intention to legislate further on the issue of school trips. Many members across the chamber favour that, as does Ms Martin. I know that from discussions that I have had with her, although she will speak for herself shortly.

Scottish Government officials have been in touch with teaching unions, local government and other stakeholders to ascertain the practical implications of extending the legal duty in this area. We continue that dialogue, and Parliament will be kept appropriately informed.

On the issue of enforcement and compliance, the requirement to publish an annual compliance statement and to put it in the public domain by putting it on a website or including it in a report to a council committee provides transparency but remains proportionate. There are already established recourse mechanisms that would be applicable in the event of a failure to comply with the legal duty, such as referral to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, which has confirmed that investigating the matter would be within its remit in relation to local authority schools, and civil legal action. Given that stipulating the provision of seat belts is already seen as good practice for school authorities and that there are clear precedents for how that can be implemented, those measures should be proportionate.

Liz Smith: In the discussions that he has, will the minister agree to look at where the liability would lie, particularly in relation to schools with different governance structures? My information is that that could be a problem.

Humza Yousaf: I was just coming to that. The point about independent and grant-aided schools raises a question that we will come back to. We will examine the matter, but it was a point well made by Liz Smith and we are aware of it.

One of the other key themes that has come out of the debate is that of costs. We have heard what the committee had to say on that and have heard what members across the chamber have said. We have written to COSLA about having a discussion to see whether we can get a more robust case around some of the finances involved. However, it is not quite as simple as dividing how much money exists by the number of vehicles—the 110 that still require to have seat belts fitted.

Daniel Johnson: Can the minister say why it is not as simple as that? What exploration has he made of whether there might be direct grant

possibilities to ensure that the old buses are brought up to spec?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, you have an extra minute.

Humza Yousaf: Thank you.

I will tell the member why it is not as simple as that. Given that the vehicles are mainly provided through contracts with the private sector, a range of commercial influences might have to be considered. For example, in a more rural area or in different areas across the country, there might not be as much provision through private providers as there would be in urban settings. For example, it is perhaps easier in Edinburgh and Glasgow to get private contractors than it would be in more remote areas. The idea that a linear formula can be applied is therefore incorrect. That is not to say that Daniel Johnson does not make a good point, as other members across the chamber have done, in saying that the costs must be tested and further analysed.

John Mason: The financial memorandum states in paragraph 29 that the cost of retrofitting would be

“£2,000 to £12,500 per bus”

The figures are not the same, but they are pretty clear.

Humza Yousaf: I thank the member for all his helpful contributions. [*Laughter.*] I said that with all sincerity.

The costs are estimated at £202,000 per year from 2018, rising incrementally to £765,000 per year in 2021 and continuing at that level until 2031. That is the cost envelope, and it should be said that independent consultants gave us that cost envelope as well—when the previous Minister for Transport and the Islands and I took the bill forward, we engaged the services of independent consultants, who gave us that cost envelope. However, let me not take away from what members have said, be it John Mason, Daniel Johnson, Liz Smith, Mike Rumbles, John Finnie or the committee convener, Edward Mountain, who have all said that they have concerns about the financial memorandum.

We will work with COSLA and see what can be done about the costs. I would encourage COSLA, once it is up and running again after the elections, with new council administrations and spokespeople in place, to engage with the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee directly on the matter. I hope that we can get to a position whereby everybody is finally comfortable with the financial memorandum.

I thank the committee for its consideration of the bill and Ms Martin for taking the bill forward. I also

thank members across the chamber for agreeing to support the bill at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gillian Martin to close, please. I can give you until 4.57, or thereabouts.

16:48

Gillian Martin: It has been an interesting debate and I think that we can all agree that the provision of seat belts on school transport is necessary and desirable. We all want to do the best thing for Scotland's young people and keep them safe on their way to school.

As a relatively new MSP who has been taking forward their first member's bill, which I hope will be enacted, I want to thank everyone, across the chamber, who has spoken to me about the bill over the weeks and months. I have had some tremendous support from people from all parties and some great chats about their experiences in their areas, which has informed my thinking on the bill as I have taken it forward. I particularly want to mention Dave Stewart from the Labour benches, who I had a great chat with, Jamie Greene from the Conservative benches, and Tavish Scott. I hung about in the members' tearoom when I was trying to get members to sign up to the bill in the first place and I recommend that tactic to any member who wants to take a member's bill forward.

I have also been overwhelmed by the amount of public support for the bill. I echo Daniel Johnson's point, because more or less everyone I have spoken to about the bill has said the same thing as he said to me in the garden lobby that day: "I thought that that was already law." It turns out that because quite a few local authorities do this already, there is an expectation that it is being done throughout Scotland. That, I think, is the issue here.

It is incumbent on those of us who are lucky enough to have a local authority that is way ahead of the curve and has addressed the matter on a voluntary basis—which means that we enjoy peace of mind when we put our kids on to school buses, because they have seat belts—to understand that it is just luck that we live there. It is incumbent on those of us who have that peace of mind to work to ensure that school transport throughout Scotland has seat belts.

I particularly thank members of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for their constructive comments. The issue of school trips came up quite a lot in the debate—as I expected it to, because it came up quite a lot in the committee, too. Although rigorous risk assessments are in place for school trips, I am 100 per cent behind looking at including them

through an amendment at stage 2. However, it is important that we speak to and engage with people, including teachers, as we did around the single issue of having seat belts fitted on school buses.

Liz Smith: I make the point that the risk assessment is not normally something that has legislative backing to it.

Gillian Martin: I was going to say that in considering amending the bill to include school trips, it is important that I explore the issues, including the ones that Liz Smith has mentioned. Enforcement has a bearing on the bill as it stands and I would like to get feedback from teachers and their unions on that proposal as well, just to find out their thoughts on it. So far, they have largely been very supportive.

I tried to intervene on Alex Burnett to correct him slightly on something that he said: he said that the bill covers only primary schools, but that is not the case. I put on record the fact it covers both primary and secondary schools already.

To me, the stand-out speech in the debate came from Maree Todd. I think that we are of a similar age, and she talked about the practices of kids in the—dare I say it?—1970s, when we travelled in our parents' cars and were not belted in at all, because there were no seat belts in the back. Actually, I am old enough to remember there not being seat belts in the front, either.

Gail Ross: Never. [*Laughter.*]

Gillian Martin: Yes, I know.

Now, it is unthinkable that people would get into the front seat of a car and not automatically put their seat belt on. I remember seat belts coming in for seats in the back. There was a period of time when people had to remind their kids to put their seat belts on in the back, but we do not have to do that any more. The teenagers who were mentioned, who said that it is uncool to wear seat belts on buses, would not think twice about putting them on in the back seats of cars. Of course, it would be terrific to have the powers to make laws about that. We do not, but we do have the opportunity to educate more young people about the importance of wearing seat belts on buses.

I come to the issue from a certain perspective, as I have a friend who is a head trauma specialist who has told me many times of the effects on people who have suffered head trauma in car accidents. For the whole time that I have been taking the bill forward, I have been cognisant of some of the stuff that she has told me. This is not just about cuts and grazes; it can be about something an awful lot more serious than that.

I want to pick up on some of the comments that members have made about implementation. In my

area, we have a lot of road safety issues. It is a rural area and we are constantly working with our teenagers to make them aware of road safety. For example, many members will have heard of the safe drive, stay alive project. Aberdeenshire Council and its schools have done a fantastic job in getting secondary pupils, when they get on a bus, to have the knee-jerk response of putting their seat belts on—they have worked with pupils so that it becomes the norm. One of the ways that the council and its schools have done that is by having senior pupils on the bus take responsibility for double-checking that younger children are putting on their belts. That is done with year heads or the head boy or head girl, for instance—or with prefects, as they used to be called. We put that in the guidance as an option.

Some people have mentioned bus monitors, which some local authorities insist on having. However—and to return to what Daniel Johnson was asking me about—we have heard that, in some cases, having a bus monitor can almost be counterproductive. In some areas, it has been found that schoolchildren have almost rebelled against the bus monitor. In addition, having a monitor is often not suitable for very long journeys in rural areas. They might have to be on a bus from half past 5 in the morning to get to an outlying area before coming back in, which is not really practical.

That is one of the reasons why I do not want to be too heavy handed in what we stipulate that local authorities must do. We must be able to give each local authority the flexibility to decide what is right for it, in partnership with schools and taking on board what they want. There is nothing stopping local authorities putting in place extra measures.

Peter Chapman said that this is a bill that it is “impossible to be against”. Peter and I have gone up against each other many times in political debates and it is great to hear that, finally, I have said something that he kind of agrees with. That is a personal achievement of mine, and I will go away from the debate with a skip in my step.

We must pay tribute to the people who went to the Public Petitions Committee. Stewart Stevenson, my friend and colleague, mentioned Ron Beaty, who came to see me as I was working on the bill in its initial stages. I thought that he was going to give me a row about everything that the bill was not—I was preparing myself for that, as I knew what a vociferous campaigner he has been for all types of road safety. Actually, he just wanted to say thanks, and that the bill was a step in the right direction—although, being Mr Beaty, he said that it did not take all the steps that he would like it to take. I was glad to have had the chance to meet him before his untimely death.

Lynn Merrifield was mentioned by my friend and colleague Gail Ross. Lynn initially came up with the idea that we should have seat belts on dedicated school transport.

How much time do I have, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): It is really time to wind up now, Ms Martin.

Gillian Martin: That is great, because I really do not have much else to say.

It comes across loud and clear that seat belts help to protect children, and many people are surprised that there are not laws on this already. Their opinions were reflected in the views of the general public on the Scottish Government's consultation. The Scottish Parliament now has the powers to act in this area and there will, quite rightly, be an expectation that we get on and take action on it. In my view, it would be remiss of us not to do so.

Oath

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is the taking of an oath by our new member. I invite Michelle Ballantyne to step forward.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): I, Michelle Lorraine Ballantyne, do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, her heirs and successors, according to law, so help me God. [*Applause.*]

Business Motion

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-05757, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a revised business programme for Thursday.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 25 May 2017—

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

4.30 pm Decision Time—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S5M-05655, in the name of Gillian Martin, on stage 1 of the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Seat Belts on School Transport (Scotland) Bill.

World Hypertension Month

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-05136, in the name of Maree Todd, on May 2017—world hypertension month. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that May 2017 marks World Hypertension Month; understands that this awareness month will highlight this silent condition, which is a preventable cause of stroke and heart disease, and provide information regarding its prevention, detection and treatment; notes that it is estimated to cause around nine million deaths globally each year; understands that 30% of adults in Scotland have high blood pressure, half of whom are not receiving treatment, and that 70,860 people in the Highlands and Islands region are living with the condition, and acknowledges and welcomes the work of Professor Rhian Touyz, of the British Heart Foundation Centre of Research Excellence at the University of Glasgow, which aims to understand the causes of hypertension.

17:02

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I remind those in the chamber that I am a pharmacist who is registered with the General Pharmaceutical Council. I am also a member of the Health and Sport Committee and a co-convenor of the cross-party group on heart disease and stroke.

It was because of my role on the cross-party group that I was keen to bring a debate about hypertension to the chamber, to highlight not only the condition but the great work of Professor Rhian Touyz and the British Heart Foundation in researching and tackling what is known as the silent killer.

As the motion states,

“30% of adults in Scotland have high blood pressure”,

and more than 70,000 people in the Highlands and Islands—the area that I represent—live with the condition. It is very common indeed.

Why do we need to raise awareness about the condition? Hypertension is a crucial risk factor for cardiovascular disease, which causes more than a quarter of all deaths in Scotland—that is nearly 16,000 deaths a year. In particular, hypertension increases the risk of heart attack and stroke. I will say a bit more about that later.

What is hypertension? Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is blood pressure that is consistently higher than the recommended level. A person has hypertension if their readings are consistently equal to or more than 140/90 millimetres of mercury and the target level is a wee bit lower for those with diabetes.

Hypertension can damage arteries, put extra strain on the heart muscle and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. It contributes to more than a fifth of all heart attacks and half of all strokes and increases the risk of conditions such as renal failure and dementia.

Hypertension can be prevented. Even a small decrease in blood pressure—say, 2/4 millimetres of mercury—at the population level could significantly reduce the prevalence of stroke and heart disease. Therefore, increasing public awareness is crucial, as is access to early detection and appropriate treatment.

I will tell members about the rule of halves and how it applies to high blood pressure. Only half the patients with high blood pressure in a population have been diagnosed; only half the patients in whom high blood pressure has been detected have been treated; and only half the patients who have been treated have been adequately treated so that their blood pressure has returned to a normal level.

One of the biggest problems in controlling high blood pressure is what we call compliance, or concordance, with treatment. Here is another half: as a pharmacist, I know well that only about half the people who are prescribed medication take it as the prescriber intended them to. Given that background, I know that my community and primary care clinical pharmacy colleagues, with their expertise in pharmaceutical care, will be able to improve outcomes for folk with hypertension.

A particular challenge with high blood pressure is that folk do not feel ill. That is why it is called the silent killer—a person does not know that they have it until they get their blood pressure checked, and they feel the effect of it only after some damage has been caused to target organs.

In my experience, most people would rather not take medication, especially if it causes side effects. It is pretty hard for a person to persevere with medication that can temporarily make them feel lousy, when they felt perfectly well before they started it. Another problem is that people stop or reduce medication when their blood pressure falls to normal levels, but the condition does not go away.

Therefore, although effective and cost-effective drugs are available, target blood pressure levels are often not reached. I am thankful that in Scotland we have free prescriptions. Although there might be many barriers to taking medication as prescribed, cost is not one of them.

I do not want to paint too bleak a picture, because we have made incredible progress in reducing cardiovascular morbidity and mortality rates in Scotland. However, given that so many

illnesses and early deaths are preventable, we want to do more.

I highlight the impact of high blood pressure on stroke—it contributes to half of all strokes, as members will recall me saying. Stroke is the most common cause of severe physical disability among adults, and half of stroke survivors have a disability. About 15,000 people in Scotland have a stroke each year, and up to 80 per cent of strokes could be prevented. Preventing and correctly treating hypertension is far less costly and much safer for patients than the interventions that might be needed when it has not been treated effectively and has led to damage.

The cause of most hypertension is unknown. In a very small number of people, there is a specific cause—for example, kidney disease—but mostly we do not know why someone gets it. Even though we do not know the cause, we know that maintaining a healthy weight, getting regular physical activity, cutting down alcohol intake, stopping smoking and reducing salt intake can help to maintain a healthy blood pressure.

The recommended daily allowance for salt intake is 6g, but about two thirds of us in Scotland eat more than that. We politicians need to make it easy for people to do the right thing. At the moment, energy-dense, high-salt foods are easily available, affordable and widely accepted, which makes an unhealthy lifestyle the default option. It is cheap and easy to eat badly in Scotland. If only it could be cheap and easy to eat more fruit and veg. As I have said before, we need, for many reasons, a programme of action that has at its core brave and bold fiscal, regulatory and perhaps legislative measures to change our food environment.

I will highlight some of the important research that the British Heart Foundation does and mention the work of Professor Rhian Touyz, who works at the institute of cardiovascular and medical sciences in the University of Glasgow and specialises in hypertension. Here in Scotland, she and her team are unlocking some of the secrets of the condition and discovering some of the molecular mechanisms, such as the enzyme NOX5—a protein that is involved in the inflammatory process and which damages the blood vessels, narrowing them and making blood pressure rise. Professor Touyz's research will increase our understanding and potentially enable the development of new therapies.

World hypertension day was on 17 May, and the International Society of Hypertension is running May measure month. As part of the programme, the British Heart Foundation has been encouraging people to know their numbers by offering free blood pressure and type 2 diabetes tests at 375 Tesco stores across the United

Kingdom. Blood pressure checks are also available in Superdrug. There is no excuse for people not to know their numbers this month.

I remind everyone that this common condition can be diagnosed with a simple test, and it is easy to treat. I encourage everyone to take the opportunity this month to know their numbers.

17:10

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Maree Todd for lodging the motion and for setting out the definition of hypertension and the difficulty in establishing its causes. She spoke about preventative measures. As a fellow member of the Health and Sport Committee, she knows well that we have, during this session of Parliament, touched on that subject on many occasions in committee and in the chamber. It is clear that many conditions that are prevalent in Scotland are largely preventable, through a combination of improving diet, increasing physical activity and reducing stress. We know, however, that that is easier said than done.

The motion notes that world hypertension month sets out to raise awareness of the condition, which affects about 30 per cent of adults in Scotland. Almost a third of adults is a very high proportion to suffer from one condition. The motion also highlights the need to understand and to improve knowledge of the causes of hypertension, and highlights the need for early intervention. I will discuss those three areas individually.

I begin with the need to raise awareness of the condition and the importance of people simply seeing their general practitioner regularly, even if it is just for a check-up. As Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland notes, it is difficult to know whether one has high blood pressure because there are rarely symptoms or visible afflictions—hence the importance of a visit to the GP or local pharmacy, where a free blood-pressure check can be provided. People can also buy digital blood-pressure monitors to take regular tests at home. Given the relative affordability of such kits, that is a viable option for many people, although clearly not everyone. I highlight in particular the option of using pharmacies, as we try to move care further into the community and enhance the role of pharmacists. As people begin to use fewer acute services and more community-based services, it is vital that we all do as much as possible to promote the services that are offered in and outwith general practices, so that we are able to strike the right balance.

The motion mentions the need to understand the causes of hypertension. We know that preventative options are fairly limited in some cases—cases involving genetic factors or old age,

for example. However, a variety of causes can be dealt with through lifestyle changes. A third of adults in Scotland are obese and 37 per cent of people do not do the recommended level of physical activity. Those issues can lead to high blood pressure, which can then exacerbate, or result in, a variety of conditions that are all too common in Scotland. Hypertension can lead to stroke, for example, from which there are about 26,000 hospital visits and 4,300 deaths each year. Heart attacks are another end result, from which there are 25,000 hospital visits every year.

Those and other conditions place a heavy strain on the NHS, so it is incumbent upon us all to identify solutions so that hypertension can be reduced and we can tackle the resulting conditions. Actions speak louder than words, and I am sure that Brian Whittle will tell us about his ideas for a healthy lifestyle strategy. He has already presented a document—which is by no means finalised or partisan—to kick-start a much-needed debate on early intervention and prevention.

I close by noting that we need more debates on issues such as world hypertension month; it is important that we raise awareness of specific conditions. Fundamentally, it is vital that we continue to debate and discuss the bigger picture of the need for early interventions and for policies that can achieve the ultimate aim, which is to cure Scotland of the many ills that continue to burden our nation.

17:14

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank my colleague Maree Todd for securing the debate. As the motion says, May is hypertension awareness month, and world hypertension day is 17 May. We are having the debate today to raise awareness of hypertension, which is more commonly referred to as high blood pressure. I support Maree Todd's motion and remind Parliament of my interest as a non-practising nurse and member of the cross-party group on heart disease and stroke.

High blood pressure rarely has noticeable symptoms. If it is untreated, it increases the risk of more serious problems—cardiovascular problems such as heart attacks, and cerebral vascular events or strokes. The only way to find out if one's blood pressure is high is to have it checked regularly. Health professionals—doctors, nurses or healthcare support workers—can check people's blood pressure easily while assessing other vital signs including pulse, respiration rate and temperature. Many pharmacies can check blood pressure, and health roadshows encourage public engagement and offer people screening to find out

whether their blood pressure is within normal limits.

There are various causes of high blood pressure. Being overweight can be a contributing factor. Too much dietary salt—as has been mentioned—alcohol and caffeine increase the risk of high blood pressure, as do smoking and lack of exercise. Even lack of sleep can be a contributing factor. It looks as though I may have five of those seven risk factors, although I will not tell Parliament which ones.

Once high blood pressure has been diagnosed, treatment involves pharmacological and non-pharmacological approaches. It is likely that one of the first approaches will be encouragement of lifestyle changes and help to achieve them in order to address factors such as smoking and diet.

Some people with high blood pressure may need to take one or more medicines to stop their blood pressure from getting too high, which requires their seeing the GP or advanced nurse practitioner for monitoring of the effects of prescribed medications. Studies show that many people do not take their antihypertensive medication regularly or at all. People must not omit their medications. The health consequences of prolonged high blood pressure can be catastrophic, including cardiovascular problems such as angina and heart attack, which require invasive procedures such as stent placement or coronary artery bypass.

The tiny wee blood vessels in the eyes can be damaged by hypertension, which can lead to retinal disease that can cause blindness. Eye tests are free in Scotland in any optometrist that provides NHS services. That helps with early screening, direct referral and faster access to treatment, and reduces the burden on GPs' time.

The tiny wee blood vessels in the kidneys do not cope well with raised blood pressure, either. It can result in the kidneys' ability efficiently to dialyse—or filter—waste products being compromised. Kidney damage leads to chronic kidney problems and electrolyte imbalance, which contribute to further health problems and potentially lead to lifelong dialysis.

One of the most high-profile consequences of high blood pressure is stroke. Increased public awareness of that risk is very welcome. Fantastic public information campaigns such as "STROKE—ACT F.A.S.T." have been very successful at highlighting symptoms and saving lives. The FAST acronym is useful and is worth spelling out. "F" stands for "face". Has it fallen on one side? "A" stands for "arms". Can the person raise them? "S" is for "speech". Is it slurred? "T" is for "time". Anyone noticing any of those signs should call 999 immediately. The FAST acronym means that

stroke can be recognised and dealt with quickly, which means that patients can be sent to dedicated stroke centres instead of waiting for assessment in a non-specialist place. I pay tribute to the four stroke liaison nurses in NHS Dumfries and Galloway—especially Christine Cartner, because I trained with her more than 30 years ago.

The message is that hypertension can be detected, checked, treated and controlled. I urge everyone to avoid potentially more complex health problems by having their blood pressure checked regularly, by making lifestyle changes where necessary and by not omitting to take their meds.

17:19

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): My thoughts and, I am sure, the thoughts of everyone in the chamber continue to be with our friends in Manchester, in particular as the tragic stories continue to be revealed and the victims are named.

Like Maree Todd, I want to record our thanks to all our amazing NHS staff—our first responders, our nurses, our pharmacists, our GPs or any of the rest who care for our fellow citizens all year round.

I thank Maree Todd for bringing forward the debate. What I like best about this kind of debate is that it gives us the opportunity to do some research on medical conditions that we might have, to articulate our thoughts and opinions on those conditions in the chamber and, I hope, to raise awareness of important issues and encourage our fellow citizens to access treatment and to contact healthcare professionals to get proper diagnoses.

I do not think that Emma Harper is alone in having many of the hypertension risk factors. The vast majority of members, myself included, probably have a higher rates of hypertension—high blood pressure—than the average person. I am sure that our party whips have nothing to do with that.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Hear, hear.

Anas Sarwar: My whip, who is sitting next to me, says, “Hear, hear.”

I thank Professor Rhian Touyz, whom Maree Todd mentioned, and the British Heart Foundation, which does a stellar job of bringing such matters to Parliament and of lobbying all parties on the important issues that affect the heart. Professor Touyz, who is a native of Canada, is based at the University of Glasgow, where she leads the cardiovascular research centre. Because of the BHF’s generous support of a combined grant of £2.75 million, she is able to do fantastic work,

which Maree Todd set out, on the NOX5 enzyme and treatment and prevention of hypertension. That work could be a leading light right around the world. I record our thanks to Professor Touyz and the British Heart Foundation.

We have heard about the risks of high blood pressure and the conditions that it can lead to, which include heart disease, heart attacks, strokes, heart failure, kidney disease and so many others. We need to get the public health arguments across to the wider public. Risk factors include a family history of high blood pressure—I know that high blood pressure has regularly occurred in my household. An individual’s ethnicity can lead to a higher chance of having high blood pressure, as can a high amount of salt in one’s food, lack of exercise, being overweight or obese, drinking large amounts of alcohol, smoking and long-term sleep deprivation.

I suppose that we need to make the plea to people across Scotland that they should, first, recognise the symptoms. Secondly, they should access their health centres, whether it is their general practice or pharmacy, and have their blood pressure checked. They should look at their lifestyle, including diet, salt intake, how active they are, how much alcohol they consume, whether they smoke, caffeine intake, and whether they are getting the right amount of sleep. I promise and resolve to take more interest in all those things from this day on.

I thank again Maree Todd, Professor Touyz for her hard work, and the British Heart Foundation. Above all others, I thank my wife for keeping my blood pressure low.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would be interested in her perspective on that.

17:23

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Like other members, I thank Maree Todd for the opportunity to discuss something that is probably of interest to every one of us, with regard either to ourselves individually or to a family member.

I am not a regular reader of *Hypertension News*, but in the February 2017 edition I read about the objective of screening the blood pressure of 25 million people in May. I advise the chamber that I have made my little contribution to that, with the very helpful co-operation of my MSP colleague Emma Harper. Earlier today she had her sphygmomanometer and her stethoscope at the ready, and she took my blood pressure. It was not good news, but I had just come up the stairs and had not yet sat down and done my calming down. My blood pressure was 158 over 70, which is okay on the diastolic and a wee bit high on the systolic,

and a wee bit higher than the previous time that I had it checked, when it was 130 over 75, which is kind of where I would like to be. However, I am going to go away and think about this salt business. I might even give up drinking for a couple of days. There are things that each of us can do.

There are a lot of quite interesting articles in *Hypertension News*. For example, there was an article about a slim and quite fit 54-year-old German lady whose systolic blood pressure is regularly over 300 and whose diastolic blood pressure is in the 170 to 180 range. She is quite healthy, but the drugs have stopped working for her. That is one illustration among many that each hypertensive person is likely to be individual and to require individual attention.

Hypertension News has also talked about a lot of work that has been done to identify DNA triggers that might create a predisposition to hypertension, or that one might address by resetting the DNA. It is fair to say that that has had almost no success whatsoever. It has been suggested that only 1 millimetre of mercury of blood pressure, which is but nothing—it is beyond clinical measurement accuracy—is attributable to DNA. Therefore, we do not know why hypertension happens, which is quite worrying in light of the number of people that it affects. We should continue to support the efforts of the British Heart Foundation and others to research conditions that adversely affect the heart. I know from the reading that I have done, at least today, that we know much less than I thought that we knew, and that is a bit concerning.

My hobby is family research. I have read more than 2,000 death certificates in my family tree, and am relatively pleased that dying from heart failure has not been a major cause of death in my family, although strokes have been quite common in it. I will go away and have a think about that.

As a private pilot, I have an annual medical, which includes testing my blood pressure, testing my urine to see whether I am diabetic, testing my hearing and eyesight, and an electrocardiogram test. In nearly 30 years, I have had only a single ectopic heartbeat in my ECG, which is good news, but there has been a steady growth in my blood pressure. That will not be unusual.

I am going to think about my diet—maybe salt in particular. The association of diet and hypertension is quite well known, and it is relatively well known that the Mediterranean diet is not associated with hypertension. The really bad news this week is that there is an olive oil shortage because of weather conditions. I encourage colleagues to use Scottish extra virgin rapeseed oil, which is a good substitute for olive oil. People can get it in my constituency in the north-east of

Scotland. Do not worry: we have the solution in the north-east, even if the Italians are letting the side down by not producing enough olive oil.

The subject is fascinating, and I am sure that it will run. I am interested in hearing what Mr Whittle in particular is going to say, because I know that he is very interested in it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Follow that, Brian Whittle.

17:28

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I, too, will be interested in what Mr Whittle has to say, because he has not written down a speech, and he is going to wing it.

I thank Maree Todd for bringing the subject, which I am extremely interested in, to the chamber. Hypertension month is pertinent to members, because the past month has probably raised our blood pressure figures more than the average, as has been said.

The causes of high blood pressure have been mentioned. It is really about the heart having to work much harder to push blood round the system, which is, of course, dangerous, because that contributes to the hardening of the arteries, strokes, kidney disease and the development of heart failure, as has been stated previously. The cause that I am really interested in is age. I wonder what that means as I make my journey through my 50s.

Stewart Stevenson: Lucky you.

Brian Whittle: I know. I am buoyed by the fact that Mr Stevenson is still with us.

My family has a history of high blood pressure.

It is interesting that people who are of African or Caribbean origin have a higher incidence of hypertension.

I turn to the real meat of the issue. The risk factors include high amounts of salt in food, as Stewart Stevenson mentioned; lack of exercise, which I will say a lot more about; being overweight and obese; regularly drinking large amounts of alcohol; smoking; and sleep deprivation. Prevention measures can include a healthy diet; limiting alcohol intake for at least two days a week, as Mr Stevenson said; losing weight; cutting down on caffeine, which is one of my big problems; getting active; and stopping smoking. Lifestyle modification really helps in addressing hypertension.

It is also important that people have a fallback position when they feel stressed. We are probably all aware of stress, especially today. My fallback position has always been to pull my kit on and go

for a trot round the woods, preferably with my headphones on and some nice soothing music such as AC/DC. Plugging in my guitar and smashing out some AC/DC is really helpful too.

However, if I want to put my thoughts in order and think the problem through, I tend not to take my music with me when I run. I am trying to do that more now than I used to, especially for speaking in the chamber. I put my thoughts in order, but unfortunately my memory is not very good so I immediately forget everything by the time I go back into the house.

When I feel stress or a bit of pressure, I have a fallback position, which is important. I often wonder what happens to those people who do not have a fallback position. That allows the tension to build, as Donald Cameron described. That is where I focus most of my time in the chamber. Earlier this year, I tried to produce a document on healthy living. It was very apolitical—apart from the front cover, which said “Conservatives”, it did not mention politics. I wanted to look at how we make fresh fruit and vegetables more widely available across all demographics, as has been mentioned, and at how we encourage people to eat them.

Physical education is obviously of huge interest to me. It is about giving people tools for life so that they understand what physical activity does for their quality of life. We should certainly be looking at an educational intervention in that regard. As the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh states, physical activity should be embedded in

“primary care, secondary care, social care and health education as well as in the health and social care workforce and workplace.”

The primary objective of food procurement policy should be to ensure that meals are of the highest nutritional value. In Scotland, we have an issue with our health, and I am really keen on the preventative agenda.

I thank Maree Todd for bringing the debate to the chamber. I will stop there, Presiding Officer, because I could go on for a long time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was beginning to realise that, Mr Whittle.

17:33

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I played my part in addressing the issue of hypertension earlier this month, when I was given a monitor to wear for a day. I handed it in the next day, and the doctor phoned me and said, “You peaked at 240/190”. I said, “Oh, right”. He asked me where I had been at half past 7 the night before; I said that I was at my branch meeting. There is a clue: members should

not go to their branch meetings and their blood pressure will be all right.

I too thank Maree Todd for bringing the debate to the chamber in recognition of world hypertension month, which raises awareness of those who are suffering from stroke and heart conditions. It is crucial that we recognise not only those who are affected by high blood pressure, but those who remain undiagnosed with a silent condition.

The International Society of Hypertension presents, through its blood pressure awareness campaign—May measurement month—the ambitious goal of screening 25 million people who have not had their blood pressure measured for more than a year. That involves screening an average of 100 people on 100 sites in 100 countries every day throughout the month of May. It is an ambitious yet achievable goal and, by working together, we can make a difference by tackling the biggest single contributor to global death.

Sixteen million people in the United Kingdom have high blood pressure and one third of them do not know they have it, as high blood pressure rarely has any symptoms. Those people are also three times more likely to develop heart disease and stroke.

High blood pressure is entirely preventable and one of the most preventable conditions, but it still remains one of the leading causes of death in the UK. We face complex challenges to prevent and control hypertension globally and nationally, and I hope that the data collected during world hypertension month can be used to support research on a national, regional and global level.

There is only one way to identify blood pressure, which is by having a GP or other health professional measure it. That is why we need to educate people and increase awareness.

Hypertension risk varies with income. Those of lower socioeconomic status are much more likely to develop heart conditions than those who are wealthier and generally better educated. The risk persists even with long-term progress in addressing the main risk factors such as smoking and high cholesterol. That is why low socioeconomic status needs to be regarded as a heart disease risk factor in itself by the medical community as well as the political community, as the effects are cumulative.

Among women especially, it has been proven that levels of high blood pressure increase as income decreases. According to the British Heart Foundation, women are less likely to seek medical attention and treatment despite the warning signs. The risk of heart disease and menopause are correlated, and risk continues to increase with

age. Women's hormones might provide some protection from heart disease, but the risk rises post menopause.

It is crucial for women to recognise symptoms. Heart disease kills more than twice as many women as breast cancer every year, but society still perceives it as a "man's disease". The women in hypertension research network was

"established to encourage, support and inspire women in science and medicine in the field of hypertension and related"

heart conditions, and it creates avenues for women to communicate, collaborate and educate.

In 2016 in Scotland, 30 per cent of those tested had high blood pressure. The number is higher in Fife, where 39 per cent of those tested have high blood pressure. Keep well clinics—a Scotland-wide programme—seek to reduce the risk of ill health, and there are several clinics across Fife where community nurses can measure blood pressure.

Despite the tremendous services provided by the NHS, heart disease can place a massive emotional burden on people and create serious financial stress. In Scotland, Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland have appointed three benefits advisers to give advice and information about social security benefits for people who need assistance.

In conclusion, I applaud the efforts by those involved in world hypertension month to improve the population's overall health. We need to prevent people from developing high blood pressure in the first place by encouraging better diet and exercise, and by reducing stress. I hope that the initiative brings together communities, healthcare professionals, health systems, non-profit organisations, charities, and private sector partners to improve care and empower the Scottish population to make heart-healthy choices.

17:37

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I echo other members in thanking Maree Todd for lodging the motion and giving us the opportunity to play our part in raising awareness of world hypertension month and stressing the dangers of that silent killer.

I also thank the British Heart Foundation for its excellent briefing, which I found very helpful when I was preparing for the debate, and for all the work that it does to lead the fight against heart disease. I echo the comments of others in paying tribute to our healthcare workforce, today of all days.

Hypertension, or high blood pressure as it is more commonly known, affects almost 30 per cent of the adult population in Scotland. It is a crucial

risk factor in cardiovascular disease, which causes more than a quarter of the deaths that take place in Scotland each year. In fact, it is estimated that 670,000 people live with cardiovascular disease in Scotland, at a cost to our health service of £800 million a year.

As well as being a major cause of cardiovascular disease, hypertension also has a significant impact in relation to the risk of developing other serious conditions. It contributes to more than one fifth of all heart attacks and half of all strokes, and increases the risk of developing conditions such as renal failure and dementia.

However, despite the huge risks that are associated with hypertension, around 7 million people across the UK live with undiagnosed high blood pressure. Of the 30 per cent of adults in Scotland who live with hypertension, half receive no treatment. Of those who are diagnosed, one in six is not treated effectively enough to reduce their blood pressure to target levels. It is therefore not surprising that the British Heart Foundation recommends that everyone who is over 40 should have their blood pressure checked—looking around, I think that that probably means most of us in the chamber.

There have been Government-backed campaigns to encourage people to have their blood pressure checked, but many health professionals rightly argue that those campaigns often succeed in encouraging mainly the worried well to have checks, rather than those who are most at risk of developing cardiovascular disease, particularly those who live in the most deprived communities and are victims of the inverse care law.

Now, more than ever, we need creative solutions to what is a significant health challenge to ensure that those who are most at risk receive the diagnosis and treatment that they need. Our GPs will remain the first port of call for many people seeking healthcare and health advice but we all know that our GPs, in almost every area of the country, are stretched beyond capacity. We need not only to build capacity within our GP surgeries and make sure that we tackle the chronic shortage of doctors but to consider other services to ensure that everyone is made aware of the importance of checking their own blood pressure or having their blood pressure checked.

Extending blood pressure checks from GP surgeries into more community pharmacies and community outreach services could go some way towards reaching those who are most at risk of hypertension. When the minister sums up, I ask her to say whether the Government is encouraging that approach and what other measures the Government intends to take to overcome the current barriers to the diagnosis of hypertension.

Preventing and correctly treating hypertension is of course far less costly than the interventions that may be needed when hypertension is not diagnosed or treated effectively. Maintaining a healthy weight, getting regular physical exercise, cutting down on alcohol intake and reducing salt in our diet can all go some way towards maintaining a healthy blood pressure, but we know—as Donald Cameron highlighted—that two thirds of adults in Scotland are now overweight, with more than a fifth of children in Scotland at risk of being overweight or obese by the time they reach school. Determined measures are therefore needed.

I once again urge the Government to include in the new obesity strategy that is to be published later this year firm action on unhealthy supermarket promotions and restrictions on multibuy discounts on unhealthy food so that the healthy choice becomes a cheaper option for Scotland's families.

Reducing our calorie intake alone is not enough to mitigate the risk of hypertension. As Stewart Stevenson and Brian Whittle both highlighted, two thirds of adults in Scotland still eat too much salt, despite a reduction in recent years, so cutting the amount of salt in our diet as well as increasing physical exercise are key measures in maintaining a healthy blood pressure.

I once again thank Maree Todd for the opportunity to debate this important issue and—given the demographics in the chamber—I reiterate once again the importance of members, including me, getting our blood pressure checked. As Maree Todd said, it is important that people know their numbers and if those numbers are as high as the numbers that Stewart Stevenson and David Torrance quoted, we need to make sure that they get the help and support that they need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call young Aileen Campbell to respond to the debate.

17:42

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Aileen Campbell): Thank you. I was going to address that point later but, for the record and for Colin Smyth's information, I think that I, Anas Sarwar, Monica Lennon and Tom Arthur—I do not want to offend anyone—are all under 40. Maybe we are all suffering from a lack of sleep, and Colin Smyth has taken the sleep lines for age lines.

Brian Whittle: I was thinking about making a point of order.

Aileen Campbell: More seriously, before I respond to the debate, I pay tribute, as Anas Sarwar and others did, to all the health and social care professionals who are doing so much to help

those devastated by the brutal effects of what happened in Manchester last night. Our thoughts and prayers remain with everyone in Manchester and our gratitude goes out to the brave staff who are doing what they can to help others.

I am pleased to take the opportunity to raise awareness of hypertension and the work that is being done by the Scottish Government, NHS Scotland and others to prevent and treat it. I thank Maree Todd for bringing the debate to the chamber.

I specifically thank the British Health Foundation, which is an active contributor to our national advisory committee on heart disease and a partner in our out-of-hospital cardiac arrest strategy. The BHF does much in terms of research and, earlier this year, I had the pleasure of visiting at Little France its centre of research excellence in the University of Edinburgh. I also recognise the work of Professor Rhian Touyz from the institute of cardiovascular and medical sciences at the University of Glasgow. She is eminent in the field of hypertension and will no doubt continue to inform our approach to the condition.

Others have reflected on what hypertension is and on its impact on people. It often has no symptoms, but it is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke—major causes of death in Scotland—and it could be prevented.

A crucial point throughout Maree Todd's opening remarks and in the speeches of Donald Cameron and others was about the devastating knowledge that so many of Scotland's poor health outcomes can be avoided. Not avoiding them is costly for the public purse and has an effect on those who are suffering.

Overall, 28 per cent of people in Scotland have high blood pressure, and we know that prevalence increases sharply with age. Almost two thirds of people who are over 75 have high blood pressure. It is heartening that, between 2011 and 2013, the rate of hypertension in the Scottish population decreased significantly from 33 to 28 per cent, and the figure has remained level since, but we continue to take actions that will contribute to further lowering the incidence rate.

In Scotland, the prevalence of the risk factors for hypertension is high. I will talk about our action to tackle lifestyle modification, which Brian Whittle and others mentioned, but first I highlight our approach to diagnosing and managing hypertension in primary care. We expect GPs to consider routinely checking the blood pressure of people without symptoms or existing conditions who are over 40. In addition, GPs and their staff will check blood pressure when they see patients with a wide variety of symptoms. That can be part of the monitoring of people with long-term

conditions such as hypertension and diabetes as well as those who have experienced a stroke.

We are raising awareness of hypertension so that people know what they can do. NHS Inform has information on prevention, symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, complications and who to ask for help. For NHS Scotland clinical staff, HEARTE, or heart education awareness resource and training through e-learning, and STARS, or stroke training and awareness resources—both of which are part funded by the Scottish Government—offer e-learning resources in cardiovascular disease risk management, including hypertension.

Our population health improvement actions on alcohol, diet, physical activity and tobacco will also contribute to reducing the incidence of high blood pressure. Prevention is not just a key part of our approach to hypertension; it is also a key part and plank of our health and social care delivery plan, our national clinical strategy and the realistic medicine approach that the chief medical officer has outlined.

Colin Smyth made a point about exploring all avenues to identify high blood pressure. To give him some comfort on that, one example comes from the annual checks for diabetes, which we have promoted through our community pharmacy campaign. That involves nine checks, one of which is of blood pressure. We are using all avenues to promote positive health outcomes and ensuring that we have tangible things that community pharmacists and other health professionals can do to help to increase good health.

Limiting alcohol consumption can lower the risk of developing hypertension. Our alcohol strategy's framework for action is a package of more than 40 measures to reduce consumption, encourage more positive attitudes and choices and improve treatment and support services. Our refreshed alcohol strategy will be introduced in the summer and will focus on embedding and building on the framework.

We continue to believe that a minimum unit price for alcohol, as part of a range of concerted measures, is the most effective and efficient way to tackle alcohol misuse in Scotland. Minimum pricing will target heavy drinkers, as they tend to drink the cheap high-strength alcohol that will be most affected by the policy. We continue to be disappointed by the delay to minimum unit pricing, but we remain committed to the policy and we will continue to defend it in the Supreme Court. We have given an undertaking not to implement minimum unit pricing until the judicial process is fully determined but, if the Supreme Court finds in our favour, we will seek to implement the measure as soon as possible.

We know that a poor diet increases the risk of high blood pressure and we are investing in a range of programmes to improve diets in Scotland. We are promoting healthier eating as a simple and affordable choice for all in Scotland through our eat better feel better social marketing campaign. We fund the healthy living award and the healthy living programme, which support caterers and retailers to make healthy choices more easily available through the provision of guidance, support and training. We will bring forward our diet and obesity strategy, in which we will learn the lessons of the bold measures that we have taken on alcohol and smoking, which have made the impact that we desired. Maree Todd and Colin Smyth referred to those issues.

It is not just what we eat and drink that can help to reduce the risk of developing hypertension—what we do makes a difference as well. Being active has many health benefits and can reduce the risk of developing hypertension and other chronic conditions. A fifth of adults in Scotland are inactive, but addressing that requires lots of action by many of our partners. We will continue to put effort into that and to do something in all settings, as is set out in the Toronto charter for physical activity.

In addition to its many other health benefits, not smoking can help to reduce the risk of developing hypertension and other illnesses. We will therefore continue our efforts to reduce the number of people who smoke.

We welcome the contribution of those who seek to raise awareness of hypertension, and we remain committed to ensuring that the NHS builds on its commendable achievements in detecting hypertension and treating people who have it. We will also learn where we can do more, which includes through raising awareness, as members have done in the debate.

Today's debate has been informative. As a Parliament, we have collectively raised awareness of hypertension, and we will continue to work across party-political lines to do so. We have also learned that Stewart Stevenson likes to read death certificates, that Brian Whittle can often be found running in the woods while listening to AC/DC and that David Torrance continues to avoid branch meetings. We have learned an awful lot.

Alongside continuing the work that I have outlined on the preventative measures that we are taking to ensure that people can lead healthier lifestyles, we will continue to pursue preventative action to reduce the risk of people in Scotland developing hypertension in the future. That will contribute to better outcomes, a better quality of life and, ultimately, the healthier Scotland that we all wish to see, regardless of which political party we are here to represent. I thank Maree Todd and

other members for contributing fully to this important debate.

Meeting closed at 17:51.

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