



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 26 November 2015

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Scottish Parliament

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Question 1, in the name of James Kelly, has been withdrawn. I have an explanation that I am satisfied with.

Town Centre First (Progress)

2. Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress with the implementation of the town centre first principle. (S4O-04865)

The Minister for Local Government and Community Empowerment (Marco Biagi): We will produce an update on progress with the town centre action plan in due course. That will include an update on the implementation of the town centre first principle as well as the other wide-ranging actions stemming from the plan.

Jayne Baxter: Given that there is all-party support in Dunfermline for the relocation of Fife College to Dunfermline town centre, does the minister agree that Fife College must examine that option and should publish all the details of the business case relating to each site being considered before any decision is made?

Marco Biagi: The town centre first principle applies to public bodies and requests that the health of town centres is at the heart of decision making. However, the principle recognises that town centres are not always the most suitable location for services; it simply asks that they be considered first, and asks for transparency in the decision-making process. There can be reasons not to locate in town centres, but I emphasise that they must be good reasons, and explained.

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): As the convener of the cross-party group on towns and town centres, I was at a Scotland's Towns Partnership event that the minister attended last week, at which he said that he would be happy to meet anyone regarding town centres. Will he meet Fife Council, which is actively trying to keep Fife College in Dunfermline, and discuss the issue with it?

Marco Biagi: I would be happy to meet Fife Council on issues of town centre regeneration or any other issues that it wishes to raise. I last met it some months ago, on another issue. I am always

happy to meet local authorities to discuss matters of importance to them.

Knife Crime (North Ayrshire)

3. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the current incidence of knife crime in North Ayrshire compares with 2007. (S4O-04866)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): The number of crimes of handling offensive weapons, which includes knife crime, recorded in North Ayrshire has decreased by a massive 85 per cent since 2006-07.

That success is down to the local partnerships making a real difference and shows that we are going in the right direction for North Ayrshire. We are making progress in other parts of Scotland, too. Violent crime is at its lowest level for 41 years and, since 2006-07, crimes of handling an offensive weapon have fallen by 67 per cent nationally.

Kenneth Gibson: I thank the justice secretary for that encouraging answer. Although there is no room for complacency, it is reassuring for the people of North Ayrshire to know that, under the Scottish National Party Government, knife crime in North Ayrshire has fallen by a whopping 85 per cent.

Can the cabinet secretary tell us what part the no knives, better lives campaign has played in educating young people about the risks and consequences of carrying a knife?

Michael Matheson: The no knives, better lives programme has been delivered and developed locally in North Ayrshire since 2012. Partners include youth services, education, Police Scotland, Ayrshire Communities Education and Sport—ACES—the national health service, youth justice services and KA Leisure. The partnership working has been the foundation for the positive shift around the carrying of knives in North Ayrshire.

There is also a dedicated team of campus officers delivering no knives, better lives workshops in schools and colleges across Ayrshire. ACES has visited 32 primary schools and three secondary schools, as well as six problematic areas. It continues to provide programmes in schools on the risks of carrying offensive weapons.

Young's Seafood (Fraserburgh)

4. Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many jobs have been lost at Young's Seafood's processing plant in Fraserburgh and how many remain at risk. (S4O-04867)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): When Young's Seafood commenced the consultation process regarding its site in Fraserburgh in July 2015, the company employed 580 people. At the end of October, the company employed 534 people. The reduction of 46 was fully attributable to resignations. Since the end of October, 15 employees have been issued with notices of redundancy and have left the business in November.

The company has informed its joint consultative group that it expects to issue 152 employees with notices of redundancy in January and, based on present employee numbers, to issue a further 130 employees with notices in May. That would leave the company with 238 employees post May 2016. The final numbers will depend on transition decisions and customer demand.

In July, Stafforce Recruitment, the temporary labour agency, had 377 agency placements with the company, which reduced to 210 by the end of October 2015

Lewis Macdonald: The cabinet secretary will be aware of reports that some of Sainsbury's Scottish salmon is now being processed in Poland or in other countries because the company that won the Scottish salmon supply contract has failed to deliver. Will ministers look into those reports and meet Sainsbury's as a matter of urgency? Will they stand up for the hundreds of workers in the north-east who are facing redundancy early in the new year, and press Sainsbury's to give those workers hope for the future instead of exporting their jobs?

John Swinney: As Lewis Macdonald will know, the Scottish Government at all times acts to protect employment in Scotland. We have been actively involved in all the discussions about trying to preserve and protect employment in Fraserburgh. I will certainly ensure that the reports to which Mr Macdonald referred are looked into, and that any relevant issues are raised with Sainsbury's.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment, Richard Lochhead, engages regularly with the supermarkets as part of his wider responsibilities in supporting the development of the food sector in Scotland. Mr Lochhead has been very successful in encouraging supermarkets to produce in, and to retail produce from, Scotland. That significantly benefits the sustainability of many companies in Scotland and I can see no good reason why companies would not see the advantage of working with a plant such as Young's at Fraserburgh.

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): Is the task force that has been set up looking at relocating and helping to find jobs for the vibrant community of small and medium-sized food processors based in Fraserburgh and Peterhead? That will help to ensure that those fishing communities will have the sustainability that they require.

John Swinney: Mr Allard makes a strong point. In recent years, a range of small and medium-sized food processors have emerged in Scotland. That sector is one of the great strengths of the food sector overall and it has been advanced by the promotional work undertaken by the cabinet secretary. The task force will look at the opportunity that Mr Allard mentions and there will undoubtedly be an opportunity to address the difficulties that face the workforce at Young's by looking at employment opportunities that will exist with other processors.

Care Careers (Men and Young People)

5. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing and what funds it has allocated to make care a more attractive career choice for men and young people. (S4O-04868)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport (Shona Robison): Recruitment, retention and the development of career pathways in the social services sector is a key area of action in "Social Services in Scotland: a shared vision and strategy 2015–2020", which was published earlier this year.

The Scottish Social Services Council has produced a number of different resources to support those who are looking to recruit staff and for those who are looking at a career in the care sector. A key resource is the ambassadors for careers in care scheme. Those ambassadors are staff who currently work in the sector who attend events and visit schools and careers fairs to promote careers in the sector. There are currently 100 ambassadors.

Earlier this year, we agreed to provide funding of £10 million per year, as part of a tripartite arrangement with local authorities and care providers that is worth £20 million, to improve the quality of care in care homes for older people as part of our wider approach to tackling issues of recruitment and retention in the sector.

Rhoda Grant: I wrote to the cabinet secretary last month asking her to meet my constituents who are GMB Scotland members and have real concerns about pay, conditions and job security for care workers. Those issues make careers in caring very unattractive. The cabinet secretary turned down that request, saying that she was too

busy to meet my constituents. How on earth will she deal with the crisis in the care service if she will not even listen to the views of the people who are working at the coalface?

Shona Robison: I certainly do listen to the views of those at the coal face. I regularly meet staff from not just the health side but the care side. Of course, we continue to discuss with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the sector what more can be done to improve pay and conditions. I am certainly more than willing to look at the request for a meeting with the GMB, but Rhoda Grant should be assured that the issue is a key priority for us. I am very happy to engage with front-line staff, and continue to do that.

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Does the minister recognise that low pay is a major barrier to recruitment and retention in the sector? Is she willing to consider the Government's role in introducing a living wage across the care sector, as that would seem to be the correct way to move forward?

Shona Robison: I am sure that Alex Rowley is aware that we have given, and continue to give our full attention to that issue. Some progress has been made and the guidance published on 6 October makes it clear that the Scottish Government regards the payment of the living wage to be a significant indicator of an employer's commitment to fair work practices. That is one of the clearest ways in which an employer can demonstrate that they take a positive approach to their workforce.

In addition to the £20 million deal with the care home sector, we continue to discuss with that sector, the care at home sector and COSLA what progress we can make towards implementing the living wage as quickly as possible. What we must also do within that, though, is protect capacity in the sector. We must ensure that progress is made at a pace that protects that capacity. Those discussions are on-going and I am happy to keep the member updated as we move forward with them.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, has not been lodged. The member has provided an explanation that I am satisfied with.

Tail Docking

7. Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether, in the light of reported evidence of injury to working dogs, it will revoke the ban on tail docking in breeds that have traditionally been docked for their own protection and safety. (S4O-04870)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment (Richard Lochhead): As the

member will be aware, I recently wrote to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee explaining that the case has been made to the Government that it could be possible to introduce a tightly defined exemption regime in Scotland that would allow vets to exercise their professional judgment to dock specific breeds. The Government has indicated a willingness to formally consult to ascertain whether there is wider support for such a course of action, and I will shortly write to the committee to clarify our proposed course of action.

Alex Johnstone: The minister will be fully aware that there are divided opinions on this matter. However, those who are involved in hunting in Scotland are only too aware of the injuries that can occur to working dogs, particularly during this season. Given that MSPs are now being inundated with photographs of injuries that have taken place, will the minister undertake to make as many moves as possible to ensure that the suggested change is made in order to avoid this problem in the future?

Richard Lochhead: Believe me, I am well aware that there is divided opinion in Scotland on this sensitive issue. We believe that there is possibly a case for allowing the docking of, for instance, spaniels and hunt, point and retrieve breeds that are likely to be used as working dogs only, but only a third of the tail would be removed, as research has found that shortening tails by more than that would provide no additional benefit for reducing injury. However, we have to strike a balance between protecting the welfare of puppies and protecting the welfare of adult working dogs. These are difficult issues, and if we proceed to consultation, as I indicated, it will be a genuine consultation. Alex Johnstone, other members and, most important, the relevant communities will have the opportunity to have that debate and submit their views. We will take forward the issue in a serious manner.

Planning Documentation

8. Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it considers that planning applications and their associated documents are easy to understand. (S4O-04871)

The Minister for Local Government and Community Empowerment (Marco Biagi): The larger or more complex the planning proposal, the greater the complexity and volume of information submitted is likely to be. Consequently, some planning applications may be more difficult to understand than others.

Cameron Buchanan: It is all too common to think that placing a lot of documents in a corner of a local authority's website counts as transparency; it does not, especially when some residents have

to hire planning experts to analyse the documents. What assurances can the Scottish Government give that communities' desire for open planning processes will be met with genuine clarity rather than just a box-ticking exercise?

Marco Biagi: I emphasise the importance that we place on early engagement. One of the core values that are set out is that the planning service should

"be inclusive, engaging all interests as early and effectively as possible",

and that is picked up in our guidance on planning application procedures through circular 3/2013. Planning advice note 3/2010, on community engagement, also recognises the variety of methods of engagement and states:

"What is important is that the approach adopted suits the scale and impact of the project, the people participating and the particular situation."

In addition, applications for national and major developments must comply with the requirements for pre-application consultation with communities, which include holding a public event and advertising in a newspaper with details of how to make a written submission. Planning authorities can require additional consultation measures in such cases.

The current review of the Scottish planning system has identified community engagement and streamlining of the processes as two of its six key issues. The independent review panel's call for evidence closes on 1 December and, if the member has not already responded, perhaps he would like to do so.

Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill

9. Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with universities regarding the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill. (S4O-04872)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): Scottish Government officials have met representatives of our universities on several occasions in the past few months. I met key higher education stakeholders, including Universities Scotland and the rector of the University of Edinburgh, on 4 November to discuss the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill. I also met Anne Richards, vice-convenor of court at the University of Edinburgh, on 2 November to discuss the bill.

Jim Eadie: Does the cabinet secretary agree that the size of the senates in our universities should be proportionate to the size of the universities and that a one-size-fits-all approach therefore does not meet the needs of institutions

such as the world-leading University of Edinburgh? Given that, will she, in the spirit of reasonableness for which she is renowned, agree to look again at the issue?

Angela Constance: The 2012 von Prondzynski review of higher education governance recommended that academic boards should feature no more than 120 members. The recommendations in that wide-ranging report have informed the provisions in the bill. However, I remain open minded on the final form of the provisions. As Mr Eadie knows, the Scottish Government is considering the evidence that has been put to the Education and Culture Committee on this point. I reassure him that we will consider the matter very carefully.

Black Friday

10. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it anticipates any public order issues arising from so-called black Friday events being run by retailers. (S4O-04873)

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Paul Wheelhouse): Sales promotions at Christmas are not new and are an important part of the retail offering at this time of year, but the importation of the concept of black Friday from beyond our shores and the hype that goes with it is a new phenomenon. As the member will be aware, it resulted in some very irresponsible behaviour and quite disgraceful scenes last year, including scenes of physical violence towards staff and other shoppers.

It is not for the Scottish Government to dictate to retailers their practices or how and when they choose to promote certain products, but we fully expect that they will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure the safety of their staff and customers and to encourage responsible behaviour. I am confident that retailers are fully aware of the events of last year and will make every effort to ensure that they are not repeated.

Patrick Harvie: I am pleased that some retailers have decided not to participate in these events this year, but others are going ahead with this recent innovation, which seems to be deliberately designed to whip customers up into a frenzy of aggression and, in some cases, violence. Will the Scottish Government hold retailers accountable if any issues arise in relation to public order or public safety as a result of this deliberate new innovation?

Paul Wheelhouse: I repeat that retailers have a responsibility to look after the safety of their staff and customers. I commend the work of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, as the trade union that represents shopworkers, on its

freedom from fear campaign, which is welcome. Indeed, we had a debate recently that celebrated respect for shopworkers week.

The Scottish business resilience centre is also doing important work with Police Scotland and 20,000 copies of a violence reduction handbook have been issued to retailers across Scotland to ensure that they are aware of their responsibilities to their staff and customers and to encourage good practice. That has been widely shared. The Scottish Retail Consortium also recognises the value of the advice from Police Scotland and is taking the issue very seriously this year.

I assure the member that we will keep an eye on the issue, but I believe that the retail sector is taking its responsibilities very seriously.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to the next item of business, members will want to join me in welcoming to the gallery Mr Abdul Quddus Bizenjo, speaker of the Pakistani Provincial Assembly of Balochistan. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-03080)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Later today I will reply to the email that Jeremy Corbyn sent me yesterday, asking what he should ask at Prime Minister's question time next week. In the email, he said that in

"just over two months ... already we've achieved so much together."

I think that Jeremy Corbyn is being modest. He and Chairman Mao are doing much more to destroy the Labour Party than even I have managed.

Kezia Dugdale: Alongside the Chancellor of the Exchequer's misguided budget statement yesterday, the impartial and independent Office for Budget Responsibility published updated oil revenue figures. To say that they make grim reading is not to talk Scotland down.

Yesterday was a significant day, and so is today—it is an important anniversary. Two years ago today the First Minister published a white paper on independence. In that document, the First Minister promised a future free from Tory austerity, based on oil revenues of £8 billion a year at the point of independence. Will the First Minister say how much oil revenues are expected to be this year?

The First Minister: On the day after Labour's partners in the better together campaign—otherwise known as the Tories—announced plans to cut the Scottish revenue budget in real terms by £1.5 billion by the end of this decade, for Kezia Dugdale to stand up and talk about cuts, or anything like that, is breathtaking hypocrisy.

This is a challenging time for the oil and gas sector, which is why the task force that I established earlier this year is working hard to support the industry at this time.

Every time people hear Labour gleefully crowing about the challenges in the oil and gas sector, they realise how little Labour actually cares about people's jobs and livelihoods. They realise that for Labour, this is all about getting one over on the Scottish National Party.

If Kezia Dugdale wants to cast her mind back to the pre-referendum period, I will give her something else on which to ruminate—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

The First Minister: Does Kezia Dugdale remember when the better together parties told us before the referendum that the only way to protect jobs in HM Revenue and Customs was to vote no? Can she explain why it is that after the referendum the United Kingdom Government has announced plans to slash those jobs? Perhaps she might want to reflect on that.

Kezia Dugdale: I was born in Aberdeen and I grew up in the north-east, so I know the damage that decline in the oil and gas industry will cause to communities. I ask the First Minister, please, not to question my motivation when I bring the subject to Parliament.

I asked a specific question about oil revenues. The problem for the First Minister is that she was not just a wee bit wrong. She did not tell a half-truth or even a quarter-truth. She was not out by a factor of 10, 20 or 30. The SNP's oil figures were wrong by a factor of more than 60, because according to the OBR, oil and gas revenues this year are expected to be just £130 million. The Weirs won more than that on the lottery.

We know from today's "Oil & Gas UK Activity Survey 2015" that things are not going to get much better any time soon. Will the First Minister tell us where the SNP's failure on oil lies? Does it lie in the SNP's ability to do the numbers or in its ability to tell the truth? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: The hypocrisy is breathtaking, because—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order!

The First Minister: Back in the period that Kezia Dugdale is talking about, she was in a campaign with the Conservatives, and the Conservative Government at that time was forecasting oil prices even higher than the forecasts of the Scottish Government.

I have to say to Kezia Dugdale—I am sorry to have to say it—that I question the motivation of a party whose members were happy to tell Scotland to leave its finances in the hands of George Osborne, but who now have the cheek to stand up in the Scottish Parliament and complain about cuts.

The fact of the matter is that the choice that is facing Scotland today is the same as the choice has always been: do we allow the Tories to control our finances or do we take control of our destiny into our own hands? I know which choice I prefer.

Kezia Dugdale: The First Minister accuses me of hypocrisy; she is the one who promised a second oil boom. It would be bad enough if the Government that is responsible for collecting an

increasingly large share of our taxes had been out by 10 per cent or 20 per cent, but the First Minister was out by 6,000 per cent—6,000 per cent, Presiding Officer—on the money that is needed to fund our schools, our hospitals and our pensions. The Government's ability to get those things right—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Kezia Dugdale: The Government's ability to get those things right really matters to our future, because this Parliament will be responsible for more tax and spending than ever before. We will have a chance to make different choices and to take a break from Tory austerity, so we cannot ever again be in a position in which our Government's numbers are wrong on such a grand scale. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Kezia Dugdale: What we need is a real financial watchdog with teeth—not the pup that John Swinney is proposing. Will the First Minister back our plan for a Scottish office for budget responsibility?

The First Minister: As Kezia Dugdale would know if she had bothered to read the draft legislation, the Scottish Fiscal Commission will have a veto over the projections that John Swinney brings to Parliament.

However, I think that what Kezia Dugdale does says everything that Scotland needs to know about the priorities of the Scottish Labour Party. On the day after George Osborne's budget—a budget that announced plans to reduce the revenue budget of this Parliament by £1.5 billion in real terms over the remainder of this decade—what does she come to the chamber and do? Does she criticise the Conservatives? No. She wants to play politics with the SNP instead. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: While this party stands up for Scotland, it is that approach—being arm in arm with the Conservatives—that has left Labour in the doldrums. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: If Kezia Dugdale wants to know some real facts about the oil and gas sector, I know that she will not take my word, so let us hear what Oil & Gas UK's economics director had to say just yesterday about the OBR figures. He said:

"Oil & Gas UK believes there is room for greater optimism, given the fact that production from the industry is likely to increase this year—for the first time in more than a decade—and is set to continue throughout the remainder of this decade."

We in this Government will get on with the job of supporting the industry, supporting the Scottish economy, and standing up for Scotland against the Conservatives, and we will leave the Labour Party to the slow and painful death that it is currently experiencing. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Kezia Dugdale: If I wanted real facts about the oil and gas industry, the First Minister is the last person whom I would be going to.

"The idea that you could have a Scotland with"—

[Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Kezia Dugdale: Again,

"The idea that you could have a Scotland with high public spending, low taxes, a stable economy and reasonable government debt was wishful a year ago—now it is deluded."

Those are not my words. They are the words of Alex Bell, the man who drafted the white paper. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. Let us hear Ms Dugdale.

Kezia Dugdale: We are on the cusp of major change. With new powers heading our way, Scottish politics will never be the same again. This Parliament needs impartial and independent oversight of Government finances. Scots cannot be let down like that ever again.

The question for the First Minister is this—with all her power, with her majority in Parliament and after eight years in power, is she humble enough to change her ways?

The First Minister: I think we will recall—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: I think we will recall that it was at the recent Labour Party conference in Scotland that "CHANGE" was emblazoned across the backdrop. The only party in Scotland, apart from the Conservatives, that badly needs to change its ways is the Scottish Labour Party. *[Interruption.]* I am being heckled by Conservative members to say that the Lib Dems need to change their ways. I am happy to concede that that, too, is correct. *[Laughter.]*

Kezia Dugdale quoted a former adviser to the Scottish Government. I often enjoy quotations from former advisers to political parties. I particularly enjoyed this one, from a former adviser to Kezia Dugdale—a Mr John McTernan:

"If Scottish Labour were a football team it would be in Division 3, struggling to avoid relegation."

That was just before he talked about the stupidity of the Scottish Labour Party under Kezia Dugdale. I will tell you what, Presiding Officer—I and the Scottish National Party in this Scottish Government will continue to stand up for Scotland. We will continue to fight Scotland's corner against the Conservatives and we will leave the Labour Party wherever it is that it has ended up in Scottish politics.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when she will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-03084)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will next meet the Prime Minister on 14 December.

Ruth Davidson: Yesterday, the chancellor unveiled the biggest home building programme since the 1970s. Responding, the trade body for house builders, Homes for Scotland, said that the sentiment of the announcement was clear:

"to back those who aspire to buy their own home."

The chancellor also announced that he would be pushing forward with his commitment to help to buy—supporting first-time buyers on to the property ladder. Homes for Scotland says that that is

"in marked contrast to the position here where the announced successor to the Scottish Government's scheme faces budget reductions of up to 50% and will likely be less accessible to buyers."

Will the First Minister today reverse those cuts and give a decent leg-up to those aspiring to own their own home?

The First Minister: What an utter cheek for a Scottish Conservative to stand in this chamber the day after George Osborne's cuts to this Parliament's budget were announced and utter the word "cuts". It is absolutely unbelievable.

This Government has consistently supported the help-to-buy scheme. We have done that in partnership with Homes for Scotland and we will continue to do so. John Swinney will outline our budget plans in the chamber in three weeks' time.

I have already said that, in the next session of Parliament, it will be the aim of this Government, if we are re-elected, to build 50,000 affordable homes. We had a target of 30,000 in this session of Parliament, which we are more than on track to meet.

I take issue with the plans that were announced by the United Kingdom Government yesterday. Yes, they are about building homes—I welcome that, in as far as it goes—but there is no commitment whatsoever on the part of the UK Government to build new social homes for people

who need to rent. That says everything about the Tories. They are not interested in helping the poorest and the vulnerable in our society; all they are interested in doing is harming them even further.

Ruth Davidson: Only the Scottish National Party could find grievance in a 14 per cent increase in the Scottish capital budget. Of course, if we had listened to the First Minister's fiscal autonomy plans, we would be sitting here with a £20 billion black hole in Scotland's finances right now.

Getting back to housing, the truth of the matter is this: the number of new homes built each year is down 40 per cent from when the SNP took office—10,000 fewer homes built in Scotland. Furthermore, we know now that ministers are about to halve the help-to-buy scheme in Scotland, ripping £65 million-worth of help away from first-time buyers. In short, this SNP Government is slashing support for home building and slashing support for home buying.

The First Minister wants to make plenty of political points today about George Osborne, but there are thousands of people out there who are trying their best to get on the housing ladder. Why is she cutting their support?

The First Minister: Let me pick up Ruth Davidson on the point that she made about the capital budget. She will be well aware of this, but I know that she will not want the people of Scotland to hear it. Despite the chancellor yesterday claiming to be increasing capital spending, the fact is that, based on the plans that were announced yesterday, Scotland's capital budget in 2019-20 will be £600 million—17 per cent—lower than Scotland's capital budget was in the year that David Cameron became the Prime Minister. That is the reality of the Conservative Government's spending plans.

On housing, we have helped thousands of people into home ownership through our help-to-buy scheme and our shared equity scheme, and we will continue to provide that help. The Government will also continue to have a commitment that the UK Government no longer has—a commitment to build social and affordable housing as well. That balanced housing policy, which will help people across our country, is the right one and the Government will continue to pursue it.

The Presiding Officer: Stewart Stevenson has a constituency question.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Yesterday, the chancellor made the disgraceful decision to pull £1,000 million in funding from the development of carbon capture and storage technology in the UK, which could

have created the world's first commercial-scale gas-powered CCS plant in Peterhead. Has the First Minister been in touch with the UK Government about that? Does she have any observations as to the effect of that on the negotiating position that the UK might have at the upcoming Paris talks on climate change?

The First Minister: Stewart Stevenson is correct in describing that as a disgraceful decision. It is a shocking example of how the Conservative UK Government is treating businesses. We have two FTSE 100 companies entering a £1 billion capital funding competition in good faith, committing resource, time and money to a bid that was due at the end of the year, only to be told at the very last minute that the money is no longer available. We were not consulted on the matter before the decision was announced and, as everybody will have realised, the chancellor actually neglected to mention it in his autumn statement—we were only told afterwards.

Fergus Ewing has made clear to the UK Government our opposition to the decision, which is the latest in a long list of UK Government energy decisions that harm energy generation in Scotland and that, as Stewart Stevenson rightly says, ahead of the Paris talks, undermine our efforts to tackle climate change. I call on the UK Government to reverse its decision, because it is utter folly, it is unfair to businesses and it is downright wrong.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):

To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-03081)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Matters of importance to the people of Scotland.

Willie Rennie: I agree with what the First Minister just said about the carbon capture and storage project up in Peterhead, and I know that she agrees with me about the chancellor abandoning his plans for tax credit cuts. Will she agree with me on something else? A cross-party campaign led by my Liberal Democrat colleague Norman Lamb has persuaded the chancellor to add £600 million to mental health spending in England. Bearing in mind the news that we have heard this week about child and adolescent mental health services in Grampian and Tayside, will the First Minister guarantee that she will use the new national health service money for mental health services here?

The First Minister: I thank Willie Rennie for raising this important issue. John Swinney is due to announce his budget in three weeks' time. Parliament will hear the Government's spending

plans in that budget and will have a chance to scrutinise and debate those plans.

Willie Rennie is right to point to the importance of mental health. He will be aware that we are already committed to investing an additional £100 million, over the next five years, to equip the health service to provide the support and treatment that are needed. That funding will deliver a three-year programme to support the child and adolescent mental health services workforce, including through further training and more specialised supervisors. It will invest money to improve mental health support in primary care and will also support the development of innovative approaches to the delivery of mental health services, including the provision of support for people who need mental health care in community settings. In addition, we are developing a new improvement programme, which is working with all NHS boards to identify how their performance can be improved and to plan for that.

We are doing all that, but I recognise the need for us always to look to do more. The fact is that more people today are accessing mental health services. That is a good thing, because we should encourage people to come forward. Nevertheless, when they do, we must ensure that the NHS provides the services and treatments that they need.

Willie Rennie: I look forward to the budget, but I gently say to the First Minister that we have heard an awful lot of that before and it simply is not enough. We asked the Minister for Sport, Health Improvement and Mental Health in June about the shocking waiting times back then. He said that he had a recovery plan. However, since then, the problem has worsened. In Grampian, 50 per cent of young people are not seen on time. That figure rises to a staggering 70 per cent in Tayside. Hundreds of teenagers are waiting for months to get help that they need urgently.

Does the First Minister accept—I hope that she does—that matters cannot carry on in that way? Will she give an early commitment that the new NHS money will be committed to mental health?

The First Minister: As I said, we will bring forward our spending plans in our budget—I think that that is a reasonable thing to say. Willie Rennie will have the opportunity to ask questions about those spending plans when John Swinney outlines them to Parliament in three weeks' time.

I am trying to be consensual, because the issue is important. I am determined that the plans that we have set out and will set out will be commensurate to the scale of the challenge that we face. Willie Rennie talked—rightly—about a number of health boards that are facing significant challenges. We are establishing an improvement

team to work with them to address those challenges.

I will not repeat what I said in my previous answer about the money that we have committed over the next five years, but we are seeing progress towards what we need to achieve. In the past year, for example, we have seen a 4.5 per cent increase in CAMHS clinical staff and, since 2009, the CAMHS workforce has increased by more than a quarter.

Those are the steps that we need to take. We must ensure that we continue to have the capacity in place in our health boards to meet the increase in demand for mental health services.

Autumn Statement and Comprehensive Spending Review (Impact)

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the impact on Scotland will be of the combined autumn statement and comprehensive spending review. (S4F-03079)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The spending review represents a continuation of the United Kingdom Government's failed austerity programme. As a result of its cuts, funding for day-to-day public services in Scotland will be cut by almost 6 per cent over the next four years, representing a real-terms cut of more than £1.5 billion. Those further cuts are damaging and needless, and they will continue to hit the poorest hardest.

What is to be welcomed from yesterday's statement is the Chancellor of the Exchequer's U-turn over tax credits. We have repeatedly called for that change—a few weeks ago in the chamber, I called on people to unite to persuade the chancellor to change his mind. However, notwithstanding the U-turn, the welfare budget cuts are set to continue, and we will want to scrutinise carefully where the axe will fall.

Kenneth Gibson: The First Minister will know that, last May, the Tories obtained their lowest share of the vote in Scotland since 1865. Does she agree that it not only makes no economic sense for the Tories to impose further austerity cuts on an unwilling Scotland that will only damage this Parliament's ability to grow our economy and deliver services, but shows their contempt for Scottish democracy?

The First Minister: I saw a flicker of memory on Jackson Carlaw's face there at the mention of 1865. I think that he is probably the only member on the Tory benches that still remembers the heyday of the Scottish Conservatives. [Laughter.] Actually, I think I just woke Mr Carlaw up, if the look on his face—

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): Our heyday is coming again!

The First Minister: The Tories are going back to 1865—that is what Jackson Carlaw has just shouted out at me across the chamber. Some of us think that they went there rather a long time ago.

Back to the question, the member raises an important point. Rather than supporting economic growth and prosperity, the chancellor's cuts will undermine this Government's measures to support households and businesses. We will continue to do everything in our power to protect the most vulnerable from the austerity measures. That will very much be our focus as we draw up spending plans ahead of next month's Scottish budget.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the chancellor's tax credits U-turn. The First Minister has said that the Scottish Government will mitigate the UK Government's austerity measures. Of course, new powers are coming to this Parliament. Will she tell us, as George Kerevan was unable to do so today, of any specific measure that she will take to combat Tory austerity?

The First Minister: We will first bring forward proposals in our budget, and then we will bring forward proposals in our manifesto—I hope that Labour will do the same—but let me tell Jackie Baillie what this Government is already doing to mitigate Tory welfare cuts. We are spending £104 million this year to make sure that no one has to pay the bedroom tax. Interestingly, Labour in Wales is not making sure that no one has to pay the bedroom tax. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: We set up the Scottish welfare fund. We are supporting advice agencies to give people the advice that they need.

The Scottish Government will continue to do everything that we can to help the most vulnerable in the face of further cuts from the Conservatives. We will leave Jackie Baillie over the next few months to continue to argue that, instead of investing in our public services, our economy and support for the vulnerable, we should spend £167 billion on Trident nuclear weapons. She seems to be in a minority of one on her own benches these days, which says everything about the stupidity of the position that she takes.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the First Minister tell us what level of budget cuts we would now be facing had we followed the Scottish National Party's policy of full fiscal autonomy?

The First Minister: What can you say to the—*[Interruption.]* Hypocrisy really knows no bounds. I just remind—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I remind the chamber of what Murdo Fraser and all his Tory and Labour colleagues said before the referendum. We had to vote no to protect welfare; now, £12 billion has been cut from the welfare budget. We had to vote no to protect Scotland's budget; yesterday, 6 per cent real-terms cuts were announced to the Scottish revenue budget over the remainder of the decade.

I will continue to make the case that it is better to control our own resources with independence than it ever will be to leave them in the hands of Murdo Fraser and his colleagues.

Undercover Police Operations

5. Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will hold an inquiry into undercover police operations in Scotland. (S4F-03086)

The First Minister: The Office of Surveillance Commissioners, which carries out annual inspections of Police Scotland undercover activities, has never raised an issue with the Scottish ministers. The Scottish Government takes all allegations of police impropriety seriously, and I assure the chamber that, should there be evidence of such activity, appropriate action will be taken. Of course, the Government has already taken a range of actions to ensure that strong safeguards are in place regarding undercover activity.

Neil Findlay: The Home Secretary, Theresa May, has established the Pitchford inquiry to examine the role of undercover policing in England and Wales since 1968. As policing is devolved, Scotland is not included in the inquiry. Given yesterday's revelations about Police Scotland's monitoring of journalists and their sources and the *Sunday Herald's* weekend exposé of Mark Kennedy, an undercover officer who monitored environmental activists at the G8 summit at Gleneagles, there is growing concern about the past and present role of undercover police. Is the First Minister seriously telling us that, under a Tory Home Secretary, there will be an inquiry in England but, under her leadership, truth and justice will not be offered to victims in Scotland?

The First Minister: The difference, which I am pretty sure that Neil Findlay knows, is that Her Majesty's inspector of constabulary for England and Wales produced a report in 2013 that recommended actions to ensure that strong safeguards are in place regarding undercover activity but the Office of Surveillance

Commissioners carries out annual inspections of Police Scotland's activity in relation to undercover investigation and has never raised an issue either directly with the Scottish ministers or through its annual report about Police Scotland—or, indeed, about the legacy forces—in relation to undercover activity.

If such concerns are raised with us, of course we will act appropriately. We will, of course, carefully consider the Pitchford inquiry's conclusions and, if there are measures that could sensibly be taken in Scotland, we will discuss with Police Scotland and other interested stakeholders how they might best be implemented.

Care Homes (Abuse of Patients)

6. Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to eradicate abuse of patients in care homes. (S4F-03088)

The First Minister: No care home resident should ever be subject to any form of harm or abuse, and it should be remembered that the vast majority of care homes provide high-quality care to their residents. The Care Inspectorate investigates complaints against registered care homes and carries out a rigorous inspection programme. Complaints about registered social service workers are investigated by the Scottish Social Services Council.

Through the Health (Tobacco, Nicotine etc and Care) (Scotland) Bill, we are legislating to introduce a new offence of wilful neglect. That will improve current powers and complaints procedures, and it will ensure that effective legal action can be taken against a care worker or care provider whenever necessary.

Roderick Campbell: Ranald Mair, the chief executive of Scottish Care, is reported to have said that the rise in abuse allegations that was referred to in an article in the *Sunday Post*

"might be down to a greater awareness of how to report issues."

Notwithstanding that, does the First Minister agree that abuse in any circumstances cannot be tolerated and that the increased frailty and demands of care home residents demands a workforce that is better trained, better skilled and better paid?

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Hear, hear.

The First Minister: I absolutely agree with that. I completely agree that abuse in any circumstances cannot and will not be tolerated—

Dr Simpson: Pay staff the living wage.

The Presiding Officer: Dr Simpson, stop shouting across the chamber.

The First Minister: I have made it clear and will continue to make it clear that, should abuse occur, we expect employers, the Care Inspectorate and the Scottish Social Services Council to take a very firm approach. Improving workforce skills and recruiting and retaining the right people are absolutely essential to that. Those are key areas for action in the vision and strategy for social services in Scotland. We are also working with the SSSC and a range of partners to achieve the full roll-out of regulation of care workers and to further progress fair work practices across the care sector.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That ends First Minister's questions. We now move to members' business. Members who are leaving the chamber should do so quickly and quietly.

Is it Coeliac Disease? Campaign

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-13123, in the name of Nanette Milne, on the new campaign, "Is it coeliac disease?" The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes Coeliac UK's new campaign, Is it coeliac disease?, which focuses on finding the estimated 40,000 people in Scotland, and 500,000 across the UK, with undiagnosed coeliac disease; understands that around 5,000 people in the NHS Grampian area are living with the condition; is concerned that, of the estimated one in 100 people in Scotland with it, only around one quarter are believed to be diagnosed; understands that the time between the onset of symptoms and a clinical diagnosis can be a staggering 13 years; notes that the condition is treatable by switching to a lifelong gluten-free diet; acknowledges however that, if it is not treated, it can lead to serious health problems, with symptoms including stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, regular bouts of diarrhoea, constipation, bloating, ongoing fatigue, anaemia, weight loss and constant mouth ulcers and can further lead to osteoporosis and small bowel cancer; believes that too many people have been living in the dark with the condition for too long a period, and notes the view that the Scottish Government and the NHS should help charities such as Coeliac UK in aiming to raise awareness among the public and the medical profession about the symptoms of coeliac disease so that as many as possible get the diagnosis that they need.

12:32

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

Living with an undiagnosed health problem can be painful and exhausting and can pose a challenge to going about one's daily life, at best, but for someone with coeliac disease, something as simple as eating a piece of toast or a bowl of pasta can result in nausea, bloating, abdominal cramps, and even anaemia, fatigue and weight loss after a time. If it is left untreated, the condition may result in osteoporosis, and occasionally it may even lead to bowel cancer.

Coeliac disease is an auto-immune condition, in which the immune system's reaction to gluten, which is found in wheat, rye and barley, causes damage to the small intestine, and there is a resultant failure to properly absorb the nutrients from ingested food. Once it has been accurately diagnosed, it is easily treated by a lifelong strict gluten-free diet. The symptoms start to improve as soon as gluten is removed from the diet, but it can take from three to five years for the gut to heal completely.

Coeliac disease affects nearly 1 in 100 people across the United Kingdom, including nearly 5,000 people in the NHS Grampian part of my region, but at present only a quarter of those who have

the condition have been diagnosed, and it can take up to 13 years from the onset of symptoms to the final diagnosis.

In Scotland, it is estimated that around 40,000 people are living with coeliac disease without being aware of it. In an effort to resolve that ongoing problem, this year Coeliac UK launched a new national campaign to raise public awareness of coeliac disease and its symptoms, and to increase the number of people who are diagnosed with the condition. By promoting the "Is it coeliac disease?" campaign in general practitioner surgeries and pharmacies and through traditional and social media, roadshows and social marketing, the charity aims to have the diagnosis confirmed in 250,000 more people across the UK by 2020.

The campaign website gives information about the disease and offers an online assessment to help to determine whether a test is required. After completing the assessment, users are given a recommendation, which they can print out and take to their GP if further investigation is required. Since the website was launched in May this year, more than 30,000 people have already completed the online questionnaire.

It is known that certain groups of people—for example, people with other auto-immune diseases such as type 1 diabetes and those with a family history of coeliac disease—are at increased risk of developing the condition. If a first-degree family member, such as a mother, father or sibling, has the condition, the risk of developing it increases from one in 100 to one in 10.

Unfortunately, coeliac disease is another long-term condition in respect of which there is a wide variation in practice across health boards in Scotland, which results in the much-derided postcode lottery of care for children as well as for adults. For example, a very recent study has shown that children from the most affluent socioeconomic groups have a coeliac disease diagnosis rate that is 80 per cent higher than that for children from the most deprived areas. It really should be borne in mind by the health professionals who regularly deal with children from such areas, where some children may have malnutrition issues with similar presenting symptoms to those of coeliac disease.

Many adults are fobbed off with a diagnosis of irritable bowel syndrome when they suffer from coeliac disease. I have no doubt that contributors to the debate will have a number of examples from their constituents that will illustrate the widespread delays in achieving an accurate diagnosis. I look forward to hearing those experiences.

As of September this year, there has been a National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

guideline on the recognition, assessment and management of coeliac disease, which will, I hope, encourage GPs and other healthcare professionals to promote improved diagnosis and care. It is clear that there are currently shortcomings in the system, but the benefits of early diagnosis and treatment are undeniable, and by reducing the risks of further complications or long-term morbidity, they would undoubtedly lead to cost savings in the national health service.

The variations in diagnosis and treatment of coeliac disease are of significant concern to clinicians in Scotland. Those variations are found in GP identification of symptoms, which, as I said, are often interpreted as IBS symptoms; in GP referral practice; in endoscopy waiting times from GP referral; in follow-up care; and in access to gluten-free food on prescription, although I hope that that will improve following the Government's review of the gluten-free food additional pharmaceutical service. I would welcome the minister's comments on that.

The endoscopy waiting time is one of the most trying for patients because by the time of referral they will usually have had a blood test to identify the antibodies that gluten consumption produces and, if that is positive, they can be 90 to 95 per cent sure that they have coeliac disease. However, they cannot start to treat that by embarking on a gluten-free diet until their diagnosis is confirmed by endoscopy and biopsy, as the result could be compromised if the gut has begun to heal by the time the biopsy is carried out. Therefore, patients have to go on suffering while they wait for an endoscopy appointment. A wait of around four to six weeks is acceptable, but I have been told that in Grampian, for instance, people can wait up to six months, which is not acceptable. I know that there are huge demands on endoscopy services as a result of the successful bowel cancer screening programme, but it is not right that coeliac patients have to suffer as a result of that.

Those variations in practice have led to Coeliac UK suggesting to the Scottish Government and Healthcare Improvement Scotland the idea of a Scottish clinical standard for coeliac disease. I would be interested to hear from the minister whether the Government is supportive of further investigation of that idea. It certainly seems to me that the adoption of an appropriate standard would iron out some of the variations in practice and lead to more equity in diagnostic and treatment times for patients.

It is clear that there is a real need to improve the rate of diagnosis of coeliac disease so that the many people who suffer its symptoms without realising what is wrong with them can be identified and started on the gluten-free diet that will resolve

their problem. I congratulate Coeliac UK on its ongoing efforts to make that aspiration a reality, not least in its "Is it coeliac disease?" campaign, and I hope that the Government will give serious consideration to its suggested development of a Scottish clinical standard for the diagnosis and treatment of that common long-term condition.

Finally, I record my thanks to parliamentary colleagues across the chamber for their interest in and contributions to the debate; all those who made the debate possible by signing my motion; Coeliac UK for its extremely helpful briefings; and all the coeliac sufferers who have been in touch by email and those who are in the gallery today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks, and I thank Mary Scanlon for her helpful note pointing out my mispronunciation of "coeliac".

I call Jim Eadie, to be followed by Richard Simpson. We are pretty tight for time today, so speeches should be four minutes, please.

12:40

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in the debate on behalf of my constituents who live with coeliac disease. I warmly congratulate Nanette Milne on introducing the debate to the chamber and I pay tribute to Coeliac UK for the valuable work that it does for people with coeliac disease and their families and in raising awareness in the wider community. I thank Myles Fitt, the Scotland lead for the charity, who has worked hard to educate parliamentarians about the disease and to help inform the development of Government policy in the area.

As Nanette Milne said, coeliac disease is a serious medical condition that, if left undetected, can cause long-term ill health. Therefore, we should all be concerned that only one in four people with the disease currently has a diagnosis. Like a number of members, I have been struck by the personal stories of people with coeliac disease. I am aware of one young woman in her 20s who lives in Edinburgh. She had a low iron count from the age of 16, but GPs did not detect coeliac disease and instead attributed the low iron count to hormonal issues. Her mood was also affected by the undiagnosed coeliac disease and she went for a couple of years thinking that she was depressed. She said that having a low mood was like having the energy sucked out of her body. She was eventually diagnosed with coeliac disease.

There needs to be greater awareness among our healthcare professionals of the symptoms of coeliac disease, which can include low iron count, tiredness and low mood. As Coeliac UK and Nanette Milne have said, certain groups are at a

greater risk of coeliac disease and it is therefore vital that there is greater awareness among healthcare professionals of those groups as well as greater availability of testing of people who are at risk. One of the at-risk groups is people with irritable bowel syndrome. It is estimated that one in four people with coeliac disease has previously been misdiagnosed with IBS. Therefore, Coeliac UK would like to see testing for coeliac disease among people who have an existing diagnosis of IBS.

As Nanette Milne said, coeliac disease is genetic and can run in families. The condition is more prevalent among those who have a history of it within their family, which increases the chances of having it from one in 100 to one in 10. If we are to treat the 40,000 people in Scotland who are currently living with undiagnosed and untreated coeliac disease, there is a role for the Scottish Government and for the NHS to encourage more testing of those who are at risk.

Coeliac disease can be treated without medication, and currently the only treatment is a gluten-free diet. For that reason, I am pleased that, following an 18-month pilot, Scotland is now leading the rest of the United Kingdom by providing a gluten-free food service, which is available from pharmacists. That means that coeliac patients and those with a clinical need for gluten-free food will be able to access it directly from their local pharmacy, rather than needing to go to their GP. That allows patients direct access to the gluten-free food that they need and reduces the workload of GPs.

Sarah Sleet, the chief executive of Coeliac UK, said:

"Coeliac UK is delighted the Gluten-Free Food Service is being incorporated into NHS services provided by community pharmacies in Scotland. The Service received strong backing from our members as it empowers them to make informed, varied and responsible decisions about the gluten-free food they need, whilst freeing up valuable GP time."

She went on:

"Gluten-free food on prescription plays a vital part in helping those with coeliac disease stick to the diet and to stay healthy."

The decision recognises that, at present, the provision of gluten-free food in supermarkets is not adequate or affordable for people who have coeliac disease. For that reason, gluten-free food on prescription remains essential for people who are diagnosed with the condition. I hope that the minister will commit today to continue to provide that essential service within the NHS for as long as is necessary to meet the needs of people with coeliac disease. The charities, the public, the Scottish Government, the national health service and all our healthcare professionals need to work

together to raise awareness of the disease among healthcare professionals and the wider public. If we do that, we can make further progress in diagnosing and treating people with coeliac disease, so that those people receive the treatment that they need and are entitled to receive.

12:44

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Lab): I join other members in congratulating Nanette Milne on obtaining this debate. I think that it is the first debate on the issue since Margo McDonald's in February 2007. The figures remain roughly the same. At that time, Margo McDonald said that some 50,000 Scots could be sufferers and that significant numbers—almost the same as Nanette Milne quoted today—had not been diagnosed.

The website to which Nanette Milne referred, which provides a questionnaire, is helpful in its signposting, because a lot of people are unaware of the condition. The blood test, which was only just becoming available in 2007, is very helpful, but it can result in false negative results. It is not a sufficient test on its own, although it works better on children.

More than 40 years ago, when I was a very junior doctor in paediatrics, I remember trying to administer a Crosby capsule, which children had to swallow so that a sample of the bowel could be obtained. Obtaining such a sample is the only way in which a definitive diagnosis can be obtained.

I also remember, in my first year as a general practitioner, being called to see the older child in a house in which there were two young children. When I entered the room I went straight to the larger child, only to be told that I had been called for the smaller one. I could not really understand why the child should be small, given what the family was like. Some very simple questions elicited the fact that the child had symptoms of coeliac disease. I am glad to say that we achieved a diagnosis within a few weeks. Within a few years, the child was larger and taller, and could beat up his brother instead of being beaten up. That demonstrates that recognition and diagnosis are really important.

Has the Government had any discussion with the Royal College of General Practitioners, to ensure that every adult who has been diagnosed with coeliac disease has their children tested? It is a genetic condition. Are people with conditions such as type 1 diabetes, auto-immune thyroid disease, Down's syndrome and Turner's syndrome—conditions that are associated with a higher prevalence of coeliac disease—being tested? Do GPs automatically do that? We have

the electronics and the computer systems that should automatically flag up the issue, and those people should be tested.

Once people get coeliac disease, associated conditions need to be excluded, including, as Jim Eadie said, irritable bowel syndrome. The symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome can be caused by coeliac disease, but someone who has coeliac disease can get irritable bowel syndrome. Other conditions include lactose intolerance, bacterial overgrowth, microscopic colitis and inflammatory colitis.

Many adults are not diagnosed until well into adult life. If the condition is not treated adequately, osteoporosis becomes a significant factor. The annual review proposal in the NICE guidelines should include a review of possible osteoporosis. There is a need for dual energy X-ray absorptiometry—DEXA—scans, in line with NICE guidelines. I regret the fact that, despite undertakings given to me in 2010 by NHS Forth Valley that it would have a full osteoporosis service, that is still to be delivered. It is the only health board in Scotland without such a service, so I ask the minister to use her office and authority to require NHS Forth Valley to introduce it. It is at least five years behind everybody else.

People with coeliac disease can suffer from anxiety and depression, and they can get lymphoma and small bowel cancer. Like Nanette Milne, I cannot find Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guidelines. There are the NICE guidelines, but we need a Scottish standard. I would very much support a call for that.

Genius Foods in Edinburgh, which was founded by Lucinda Bruce-Gardyne, is a fantastic company that has grown enormously to be a brand leader. It is exactly the sort of company that we need to promote in a niche market. Its growth is extremely welcome.

12:49

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The last time that I debated coeliac disease in this chamber was, as Dr Richard Simpson just pointed out, at the behest of the late Margo McDonald, in the second session of Parliament. I had not intended to speak in the debate, but it was attended by Gordon Banks MP, who was in the visitors gallery for the debate as chair of Westminster's all-party parliamentary group on coeliac disease and dermatitis herpetiformis. I am afraid that I could not resist the temptation of pointing out the unique nature of the debate in bringing together those two footballing giants: Gordon Banks and Alex Fergusson. *[Laughter.]*

Coeliac disease, on the other hand, is no laughing matter. As the statistics highlighted in the motion before us so accurately show, the fact that, 10 years on from that debate, we still have an estimated 40,000 undiagnosed coeliac sufferers in Scotland is just not good enough, particularly given that diagnosis is advancing and becoming easier and that dealing with the disease is becoming ever easier as gluten-free products become commonplace in more retail outlets.

The difference that diagnosis can make is absolutely stark. I will quote from an email that I received from a constituent, who wrote:

"My mother was diagnosed in 2006 by her GP following a mental breakdown. We think her body was so malnourished from years of malabsorption that it was not functioning properly. She is unable to recall the events that took place over a number of weeks. The transformation following diagnosis has been unbelievable. She is now back to her usual self and is also now a healthy weight, having been underweight all her life. Interestingly, it runs in our family. My mother's twin sister is also coeliac and we have another three family members who ... are not coeliac but feel that their health is much improved on a gluten-free diet."

My own family has members who would absolutely relate to that last point. She finishes off by saying:

"To think that there could be 40,000 people in Scotland who have the condition but are undiagnosed is alarming."

It is indeed.

That is as good an example as I can find of the literally life-changing difference that an accurate diagnosis can make. The answer must be to make GPs more aware both of the need to test for coeliac disease and of the need for earlier intervention.

I welcome Coeliac UK's campaign to raise awareness among the public, but particularly among the medical profession.

I commend my colleague Nanette Milne for bringing this debate to the chamber and I am very pleased to support the motion in her name.

12:52

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I, too, congratulate Nanette Milne on securing this important debate. As Dr Milne explained, around 40,000 people in Scotland are estimated to have the condition, yet about 75 per cent of them do not have a coeliac diagnosis. For those who do, it took on average 13 years from the onset of symptoms to a proper diagnosis. Every time I hear that statistic, I am shocked. Coeliac disease is a serious medical condition and, for those with severe symptoms, going undiagnosed can result in a hugely debilitating condition.

That is why I am pleased to welcome Coeliac UK's "Is it coeliac disease?" campaign, which was

launched earlier this year. That should be a simple question that is much more at the forefront of GPs' and pharmacists' minds. That is because a proper diagnosis followed by a gluten-free diet leads to the symptoms abating and leads to reduced risks of long-term complications. Importantly, that significantly improves individuals' day-to-day quality of life.

Thousands of people are unnecessarily suffering fatigue, nausea and sore stomachs. They face repeated visits to their GPs and often end up being misdiagnosed as having IBS or a stress-related illness. That is why early intervention is important.

I was interested to learn of the proof-of-concept project managed by the National Association of Primary Care to explore the use of community pharmacies in recognising coeliac disease early. In that, customers who presented at a community pharmacy with a prescription or who purchased over-the-counter medicines for IBS and/or anaemia, which may be consistent with having coeliac disease, were given information about the project.

Those who agreed to participate were offered a finger-prick blood test that looks for the antibodies that are produced in coeliac disease. They were also asked to complete a brief questionnaire about their symptoms. The pharmacist discussed the results of the test with the customers and gave them an information sheet about the proof-of-concept project and the results of their tests. The customers could then decide, where appropriate, to discuss the results with their GPs, including discussions about further blood tests.

Out of 551 participants over a number of months, there were 52 positive tests for coeliac disease. That 9.4 per cent level of detection is very good, given that only 1 per cent of the general population has coeliac disease. It shows that targeting those who present with similar symptoms can be effective, and I hope that that proof-of-concept project can be built on.

In the short time that I have left, I will mention teenagers and young adults with coeliac disease. My daughter was diagnosed with coeliac disease while she was a student, after some years of discomfort that interfered with her studies. Not once was gluten intolerance considered, until the family suggested testing.

Too often, particularly with young students, GPs tend to assume that the sometimes vague and varied symptoms are stress related. I would be keen for Coeliac UK to take its campaign into student health centres, campus pharmacies and GP practices in areas that have high concentrations of students.

For young people who are away from home as students, there can be a lack of continuity, as they are no longer registered with the family GP. Even once they are diagnosed, there can be difficulties for young people. It is difficult to stick to a strict gluten-free diet; they can be anxious about eating out and socialising; and they have concerns about cross-contamination when accommodation and kitchens are shared.

That is why it is good to know that Coeliac UK runs a support group that is specifically for young adults, which is called gluten-free under-thirties—GUTs. The group aims to provide a supportive network to young adult members in which they can all give each other helpful advice on living with coeliac disease. That can be anything from tips on gluten-free restaurants or beers to advice on moving out of the family home, starting in a new workplace or explaining coeliac disease to new university friends.

I again thank Dr Milne for highlighting the campaign and Coeliac UK for its continuing work to highlight this underdiagnosed condition.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Because of the number of members who wish to speak, I am minded to accept a motion under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Nanette Milne.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the next speaker, who is—[*Interruption*—it is Bruce Crawford, to be followed by Jim Hume.

12:57

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am glad that you grasped my name so easily.

I sincerely thank Nanette Milne for bringing this important motion to the chamber. We sometimes forget the power of members' business debates. Today's debate is a good example of the power of the words that we can speak in this chamber to increase not only our knowledge but the knowledge of those further of the Parliament. Nanette Milne has done us a favour in bringing us here to debate this subject.

Others have well described some of the symptoms that their constituents have suffered and some of the agonies that they have gone through during their lives. I cannot imagine what it must be like to have such a long delay in diagnosis—that has an impact not only on a person's health and on them as an individual but

on their family and friends, too, because the condition is debilitating for all who are involved.

One of my constituents from Stirling, a lady called Grace Tweddle, asked me to tell members her story. It is a short story that moved me, which is one of the reasons why I wanted to take part in the debate. She said:

"I began to exhibit symptoms of this disease at 18 and was not diagnosed until I was over 40.

This meant my working life was dogged by health problems and I had to abandon my chosen career—teaching.

I undertook further training and became a University of Glasgow secretary and had to abandon this job. Last of all I became a bookseller but had to abandon that too.

This meant my earnings were severely affected as was my pension.

Worse than that, I suffered a miscarriage and problems with conceiving afterwards and such problems have been attributed to the effects of coeliac disease.

I became so ill after 20 years that I considered suicide. I was only saved from that drastic step by diagnosis."

That story told me a great deal about people in such circumstances. It is not acceptable that Grace Tweddle had to wait so long for a diagnosis. I thank her for being courageous enough to give me that story to share with Parliament.

Before the debate, I went to the back of the chamber to pick up some of the printed evidence for members on the topic. I was somewhat heartened to see the circular that NHS Scotland issued on 23 September regarding the review of the gluten-free food service. The Scottish Government has agreed to a number of the review's recommendations and it has noted the favourable responses from patients and stakeholder groups to the trial of the gluten-free food service. The service has been permanent as part of the NHS community pharmacy contract since 1 October.

That is a step forward, but we have heard members describe the other actions that need to be taken to produce further steps forward. The NHS circular recognises and reflects on the variations in approach between the various health boards—Nanette Milne mentioned that—and asks the boards to take that into account in formulating their future policies.

It will be helpful for people such as Grace Tweddle, following their diagnosis as coeliac, if we ensure that the review's recommendations about further monitoring and evaluation of the annual pharmacy coeliac health check are taken on board.

Those are helpful steps forward, and I hope that the Government will outline today the further steps

that it is taking. I thank Nanette Milne again, and I thank my constituent Grace Tweddle.

13:01

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): I congratulate Nanette Milne on bringing to the chamber this important debate. Like other members, I have friends and constituents who are affected by this debilitating disease. It affects tens of thousands of people in Scotland, most of whom are unaware that they are coeliacs. Approximately one in every 100 people has the disease, which can be debilitating.

There is debate about how many people are undiagnosed. Coeliac UK states in its briefing that 24 per cent of those with the disease have been diagnosed, whereas the Government's review of September 2015 suggested that the figure lies between 10 and 15 per cent. Nonetheless, we know that a large number of people remain undiagnosed, and Coeliac UK estimates that the total is in the region of 40,000, which is a significant amount.

I back Coeliac UK's campaign to reach out to those people and inform them of the support that they can receive. Just like diabetes, coeliac disease and dermatitis herpetiformis can affect the quality of life of any person if they are left undetected. With an average 13-year timespan between symptom onset and a clinical diagnosis, the time to raise the warning flag is now, so a discussion of the subject is a good use of a members' business debate.

Anyone who suffers or is suspected to be suffering from coeliac disease must be supported to obtain the correct diagnosis as promptly as possible. Given that there is as yet no medical treatment for the disease, it is equally important that information is available for all those who are diagnosed as coeliac on how to manage their lifestyles.

As Coeliac UK notes, the only treatment is a strict lifelong gluten-free diet. The health secretary's announcement last month of the gluten-free food service is to be welcomed. The ability of people to continue their lifestyles with the right support is critical if we are to create sustainable health programmes. The programme also shows how much we can achieve and improve patients' lives by listening to their needs.

Giving staple foods such as bread, flour and pasta to clinically diagnosed coeliac patients is a step in the right direction. Where we can support patients to have the information and knowledge on how to self-manage coeliac disease, we must do so.

I was contacted recently by constituents and experts about coeliac disease. While the experiences of those constituents with their doctors and nurses have always been exceptional, there still remains—as we have heard from other members—a risk of misdiagnosis.

Coeliac disease, and the fact that the only solution is a gluten-free diet, has not garnered the necessary attention, which contributes heavily to the problem. Patients and doctors both risk misattributing the characteristics of coeliac disease and not getting the correct diagnosis and treatment. I hope that, through the debate, people will become more aware of a condition that might cause ill health for them or someone they know or love.

Obtaining the right diagnosis is important as soon as a person begins to feel unwell. Given that on average there is 13 years between the onset of symptoms and the diagnosis of coeliac disease, and given that we have an ageing population in Scotland, the disease could be a compounding factor that affects the capacity of our NHS.

I welcome the progress that we have seen through many eating establishments and retail outlets marking their products as gluten free, and I encourage all to do that. I reiterate my support for the provision of staples through the NHS gluten-free food service and note the need to continue the innovation in providing treatments and creating a more sustainable, proactive and supportive NHS. I thank Nanette Milne again for raising awareness of the issue and I reiterate my support for Coeliac UK's campaign.

13:05

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Nanette Milne on securing this debate on Coeliac UK's campaign to advance public awareness of coeliac disease.

We in the Parliament have been not too bad on the issue. Dr Simpson, Dr Milne and I are aware of how the Parliament in its early days raised awareness of the disease, when I had no idea what coeliac disease was. Members have talked about the NHS, but I will talk about the dangers that lurk out there for those with coeliac disease when they eat out.

One of the unseen dangers for those with coeliac disease lies in sauces and gravies that accompany meals. I defer to my medical colleagues for professional analysis of what can happen, but I had a colleague who suffered from coeliac disease who made intense inquiry in a restaurant as to whether there was any wheat in the food and was assured that there was not. However, the restaurant completely forgot about

the gluten in the sauce and the gravy, with the result that in a very short time my colleague was very ill, because they were poisoned by the gravy that they had eaten.

That was a lesson to me that we need to make restaurants and fast-food retail outlets more aware of the issue so that they are alert to what coeliac disease is and to the impact that eating food containing gluten—particularly sauces and gravies—can have on those with coeliac disease. Establishments are already aware of what happens when people have nut allergies—we are all very aware of that—but I do not think that they are aware of what can happen to someone who has to have a gluten-free diet.

This is a short contribution, but I want to mention an angle that has not been spoken about. I do not know whether, at cook schools, the novice cooks who will become the chefs of tomorrow are expected to learn about allergies to nuts, gluten and so on. If they do not learn about that, I have a suggestion for Coeliac UK. I have been busy watching "MasterChef: The Professionals" on the television. The programme has a skills test, which last night was a horrendous one that involved taking the skin off a pig's trotter. I suggest that it should have a skills test that involves providing a gluten-free, three-course meal. That could look at whether the cooks included ingredients that contained wheat products, whether in the main meal or a sauce, to test whether they knew what they were doing. That is something for the BBC to consider: a skills test on "MasterChef" that involves making a gluten-free, three-course meal.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Bon appetit.

13:08

The Minister for Public Health (Maureen Watt): We have had a very interesting debate with interesting contributions. I thank Nanette Milne for bringing the campaign and the issue to the attention of Parliament. I, too, welcome the campaigners to the public gallery.

I very much welcome the work that Coeliac UK does in providing advice and a supportive service to many, including newly diagnosed patients and their worried relatives and carers. Coeliac UK's research funding has helped to highlight important issues such as the increased incidence of children developing coeliac disease. The "Is it coeliac disease?" campaign that was launched in May is to be commended for raising the profile of this life-changing condition among the public and healthcare professionals. I am aware that public events are being held across the country next year to continue the campaign and alert the public to the symptoms of the condition.

Like other MSPs, I have had constituents with the condition contact me with their problems to do with a lack of diagnosis and some of the related conditions that members have mentioned. It is hugely concerning that many people live with the symptoms for many years before they are correctly diagnosed with coeliac disease. As others have said, Coeliac UK states that the average time between the first onset of symptoms and a clinical diagnosis can be a staggering 13 years. Those delays can be down to various factors including delays in individuals seeking help and misdiagnosis. Campaigns that raise awareness of the condition and its symptoms are therefore vital.

The delays are especially concerning given the complications of coeliac disease. It is interesting that the helpful online questionnaire that Nanette Milne mentioned has already been filled in by 30,000 people. That absolutely shows the need for it. The symptoms of coeliac disease range from mild to severe. It is unacceptable that too many people with such worrying symptoms have to wait so long to find out that their condition can be effectively managed by a strict gluten-free diet.

As Bruce Crawford outlined, NICE guidelines on the recognition, assessment and management of coeliac disease were published in September.

Richard Simpson and Alex Fergusson mentioned our previous debate on the subject. I recall being in the chamber at the time and I remember that George Reid, who was in the Presiding Officer's chair, undertook to ensure that gluten-free products were available in the restaurants in this place.

Making the adjustment to a gluten-free diet can be significant, and that is why I am proud that we recently made the gluten-free food service easier for patients to access. Gluten-free food products have been available on prescription for a number of years on the advice of the UK Advisory Committee on Borderline Substances, which is responsible for advising on the prescription of foodstuffs and toiletries. In Scotland, those who are clinically diagnosed with coeliac disease can be prescribed essential staples such as bread, flour, pasta and cereal.

To support that important service and make it easier to access, we have introduced the gluten-free food service in NHS community pharmacies across Scotland. Through referral by GPs, the service enables eligible patients to register with a community pharmacy of their choice and collect their repeat prescriptions for gluten-free food directly from the pharmacist rather than having to request individual prescriptions from their GP.

Following a substantial review of the service this year, I am pleased that patients are finding it

easier to vary their orders, and pharmacists tell us that they have a positive experience of delivering the service. The scheme benefits patients by offering them easy access to the gluten-free foodstuffs that they need and it frees up GP time from writing repeat prescriptions for gluten-free products. I am also pleased that the Scottish Government has provided funding to improve priority specialist services including gastrointestinal disease services.

It is hoped that improvements to care pathways will mean that diagnosis, treatment and follow-up reviews can be improved. NHS Tayside, which started work in that area in 2010, has produced an adult care pathway that meets the new 2015 NICE guidelines. Its pathway aims to reduce variation, harm, waste and health inequalities, and it has provided support to staff and patients in adhering to the pathway. That work has been closely aligned with Coeliac UK in Tayside, which has allowed for constant co-design of the pathway.

I understand that overall waste, variation and harm around the patient pathway have reduced since implementation, and that improvement is to be welcomed. I encourage NHS boards to do all that they can to share that best practice and, where possible, adapt it locally so that it can be used for the best care of patients.

Nanette Milne: I welcome what the minister has said about the development of a coeliac disease patient pathway in NHS Tayside. Does she think that we can explore the possibility of extending the approach to the whole of Scotland?

Maureen Watt: Yes, I absolutely do. We want to ensure that other health boards are aware of the clinical pathway in Tayside and how it has reduced health inequalities among people with coeliac disease. The approach should be adopted by other health boards. Coeliac UK recently convened a group to look at developing a national Scottish coeliac disease pathway, and I very much welcome that development, as I do the development in Tayside.

I also welcome the collaboration between Coeliac UK and Fife Council on the introduction of gluten-free options in primary school menus, as a result of which a new school menu was launched throughout the area in October.

Christine Grahame: On that issue, my comment about "MasterChef" was not light-hearted. Is there a role for the health minister in getting the food industry and particularly the catering industry to understand coeliac disease and its impact on people? I think that there is a little crack in the system in that regard, and that people can accidentally eat something that contains even just a little bit of wheat and be made very sick indeed.

Maureen Watt: I agree with the member. This is where consumer choice comes in, so that people ensure that they go to restaurants that offer gluten-free food and urge restaurants that do not do so to change their approach. To be fair, more gluten-free products are on the menu in restaurants than was the case many years ago—we have probably all seen that. Sufferers and others need to constantly chivvy along restaurants and eating places to introduce gluten-free options on the menu and make chefs aware of the extent to which products such as gravy thickening contain gluten—the member has privately told me her story about that.

The project in Fife is something from which other schools can benefit and is enabling primary school-age children with the condition to benefit from healthy social interaction with their classmates in the canteen at mealtimes, rather than being excluded. Such interaction is an important part of a child's development. Fife Council's efforts in realising the project are laudable and its supplementary schemes, such as training programmes to improve staff's knowledge and awareness of coeliac disease and the products that exacerbate it and parental meetings to gather feedback, illustrate the council's commitment to the project's success.

The Scottish Government welcomes Coeliac UK's awareness campaign and what the charity is doing to highlight the condition. Members of the Scottish Parliament and I, as Minister for Public Health, have a duty to highlight the condition. I wish Coeliac UK every success with its campaign and continued success in the future.

13:18

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Scotland's Public Finances (Update)

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business is a statement by John Swinney, on an update on Scotland's public finances. The Deputy First Minister will take questions at the end of the statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): I am grateful for the opportunity to update Parliament on Scotland's public finances. As well as using this opportunity to respond to yesterday's United Kingdom spending review and its implications for Scotland, I will provide an update on the fiscal framework that will underpin the Scotland Bill, the outlook for devolved taxes, and our non-profit-distributing and hub investment programme.

Yesterday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out his spending plans for the period 2015-16 to 2020-21. Those spending plans clearly show that he has continued with a programme of austerity with deep cuts to spending on business, transport, local government and the environment. Looking ahead, our fiscal resource departmental expenditure limit budget—our budget for day-to-day spending in Scotland—will decrease in real terms by almost 6 per cent over the next four years. Taken with the cuts that have been imposed in recent years, that means that, by 2019-20, the Scottish Government's total discretionary budget will be £3.9 billion or around 12.5 per cent lower in real terms than it was in 2010-11.

We recognise the need to ensure that the public finances are on a sustainable footing, but the scale of the cuts is unnecessary. The Scottish Government has consistently advocated an alternative approach that would ensure that the deficit was reduced while also allowing for significant additional investment in public services compared with the chancellor's plans. Instead, the chancellor has continued to pursue an ideologically driven programme of austerity.

I would like to comment on three specific decisions in the chancellor's statement. First, the decision to scrap the proposed changes to tax credits was a welcome change of direction. The proposed cuts were targeted at working families on low incomes and would have affected around 250,000 households in Scotland. That is a victory for those who campaigned against those cuts, and it highlights the importance of continuing to voice opposition to UK Government policy. The Scottish

Government remained steadfast and focused on defeating the tax credit cuts.

However, the chancellor was clear that planned cuts of £12 billion to welfare in future years will still go ahead. Delayed cuts are still cuts. The chancellor should cease his unnecessary attack on those on benefits and protect rather than punish those who find themselves in need of financial support. The Scottish Government will continue to do all that it can to protect the most vulnerable in society from the UK's austerity programme and will continue to pressure the UK Government to reverse those cuts.

Secondly, the chancellor announced welcome increases in capital spending that will enhance our ability to invest in long-term infrastructure investment over the spending review period. However, we need to see that improvement in the capital position in its proper context. By 2019-20, our capital DEL budget will still be lower in cash terms than it was when the Conservatives came to office 10 years previously.

Thirdly, the decision to scrap the carbon capture and storage proposal that could have been taken forward at Peterhead is a short-sighted decision that undermines a global economic opportunity for Scotland. We are making the strongest possible representations to the UK Government to reverse that decision.

I will set out the Government's budget proposals to Parliament for consultation on 16 December.

I will now provide a brief update on devolved taxation. Our forecasts for devolved tax receipts for 2015-16 were considered by the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission, which endorsed them as a reasonable assessment. The revenues from the land and buildings transaction tax remain on track and in line with our expectations.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): What?

The Presiding Officer: Order.

John Swinney: We forecast total LBTT revenues of £381 million in 2015-16 before allowing for forestalling losses, and we have collected around £218 million in the first seven months of the tax. The Scottish Fiscal Commission provided an assessment of devolved tax outturn against the forecast to the Finance Committee yesterday. That assessment supports our view that overall LBTT revenues remain in line with expectations.

The revenues from the Scottish landfill tax are performing well against our original forecast of £117 million. Over £37 million was declared for the first quarter of 2015-16. Revenue Scotland will publish data for the second quarter tomorrow morning.

The Office for Budget Responsibility has published updated forecasts for devolved taxes. Those have no bearing on our budget, our forecasts or our revenues, but I welcome the fact that they are now more closely aligned with the forecasts of the Scottish Government.

I continue to discuss the fiscal framework with the UK Government with regard to the taxes that are due to be devolved under the Scotland Bill. The discussions are focused on securing a fair and workable outcome on a financial settlement that is faithful to the recommendations made and principles articulated by the Smith commission. Smith was absolutely clear that the Barnett formula should continue as the major determinant of Scotland's spending power, and that Scotland's budget should be no larger or smaller simply as a result of further devolution.

The risks of an unfair fiscal framework were made clear last week by the Scottish Trades Union Congress and Professor Anton Muscatelli, the principal of the University of Glasgow. Professor Muscatelli warned that changes to funding methods that do not properly reflect the Smith commission's recommendations could leave Scotland worse off by hundreds of millions of pounds. Those are credible independent voices who should be listened to.

We need a fiscal framework that will ensure that, as the Smith commission intended, further devolution provides the right incentives and increases the accountability of the Scottish Parliament by linking the Scottish Government's budget to Scottish economic performance. Scotland should retain the rewards of her success in the same way as we must bear the risks into the bargain.

It is absolutely essential that the fiscal framework allows us to pursue our own distinct policies that meet the needs and wishes of the people of Scotland, and that it does not tie us to UK Government policies. We aim to complete that work as soon as possible in order to give the respective Parliaments time for due consideration of both the fiscal framework and the Scotland Bill. However, I have been clear that, without a framework that is fair to the people of Scotland, the Scottish Government will not recommend that Parliament approves the Scotland Bill.

I conclude by updating Parliament on our engagement with the Office for National Statistics about the impact on the Government's infrastructure programme of recent updates to European Union accounting guidance. On 9 September, I advised Parliament that the Scottish Futures Trust had submitted to the ONS proposals for revised arrangements for the hub model. I can today advise Parliament that the ONS has offered the view that the proposed model would be

classified to the private sector. That means that I can today advise relevant local authorities and health boards that they can proceed to contract award with hub projects under the revised model. Confirmation of a private sector classification from the ONS means that Scottish Government support for the projects can be drawn from long-term resource DEL budgets as intended.

The revised arrangements for the hub programme will maintain the current balance of public good, with projects taken forward by special purpose companies that are owned 60 per cent by the existing hub private partners, 20 per cent by a charity, 10 per cent by the SFT and 10 per cent by the procuring authority.

More widely in the NPD programme, it has become clear that a rapid reversal of the ONS's public classification of the Aberdeen western peripheral route project under the revised Eurostat rules will not be possible. I have asked the SFT to continue to review options for the potential amendment of the AWPR project and potentially other NPD projects in the light of the ONS's welcome decision on the revised hub model. The Scottish Government continues to discuss the budgeting implications with Her Majesty's Treasury, including for our capital spending plans, and I intend to reflect the outcomes of those discussions in the budget in December. That will have no impact on the delivery of the project, which is on time and on budget.

The Scottish Government has always prioritised public infrastructure projects as a critical tool for growing our economic recovery. I am therefore delighted to be able to confirm that the 10 school and two health centre projects in the hub programme will now proceed. That is around £330 million of capital investment in our children's education, our national health service and Scotland's economy. Those 12 projects will make an enormous difference in their communities, both in the immediate boost that is provided by the jobs that their construction will bring, and through the long-term health and education benefits that the projects will provide to local communities and people.

Although the Scottish Government welcomes the chancellor's U-turn on tax credits, we will continue to argue for him to abandon his policy of austerity and to make the case for greater emphasis on public sector investment. We remain committed to investing in our infrastructure and public services. The ONS decision on the hub programme allows us to continue on that track by moving forward with projects that were previously on hold.

When we set out our plans for the Scottish budget next month, we will be driven by our principles of establishing a system that is fair and

progressive and of creating a sustainable economy that ensures opportunities for all within Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The Deputy First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the Deputy First Minister for the advance copy of his statement.

I welcome the Tories' dramatic U-turn on tax credits. Labour campaigned long and hard to reverse cuts to tax credits. However, the chancellor will still be making cuts that affect some of the poorest in our society. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Jackie Baillie: Both Labour and the Scottish National Party are anti-austerity. There is no doubt that this is a difficult budget settlement and that there are tough choices ahead. I will focus on how we deal with those choices to protect people from austerity, which I believe is a shared ambition.

We have new powers now, from the Scotland Act 2012, and substantial new powers will come in the future. Scottish Labour has set out some of the choices that we would make with air passenger duty and a top rate of income tax—all progressive measures. I am disappointed that the Deputy First Minister looks like he is setting out plans for only one year. Surely, if we are serious about the sustainability of the nation's finances and about using our new powers, we should have a full Scottish comprehensive spending review. He knows the numbers for the next three years, so why can he not tell us the outline plans? Surely, he should take the opportunity to consider how the new powers can be used to protect people from austerity.

The Deputy First Minister is no shrinking violet. I expect him to stay the course in the negotiations on the fiscal framework, to secure a good deal for Scotland.

John Swinney: I welcome Jackie Baillie's remarks on the question of a difficult budget settlement. It is perhaps the start of an acceptance by the Labour Party that the choices that have to be made on these questions are difficult, and I look forward to that being reflected in the dialogue that we have on the budget settlement.

I assure Jackie Baillie that I intend to set out in the budget a range of plans for future years. She will not be disappointed in my perspective on the issues that we face over the course of this spending review.

On the use of the new powers, I hear what Jackie Baillie says about air passenger duty and the top rate of income tax. I suppose that the

chancellor's decision liberates the Labour Party from having to explain how it was going to spend the air passenger duty money twice—that was a little local difficulty that it managed to get itself into. The new powers are there to be used. We in the SNP have our own views about how they can be used effectively, and we will set them out in due course.

From her remarks today and at the weekend, I take it that Jackie Baillie is in what I would describe as supportive mode on the fiscal framework. That is what I am cheerfully telling myself, anyway—perhaps that is my one moment of optimism this week. I hope that the Labour Party engages seriously on the substantial questions that are at stake in the fiscal framework. Regardless of the political leadership of the Government, the issues that are involved in the fiscal framework affect every one of us and every one of the individuals whom we represent. The stronger and more cohesive the view that can be expressed from this Parliament to advance those issues, the better.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the Deputy First Minister for the advance copy of his statement. I thought that he might have had a more cheerful disposition today. For years he has been calling for more money for capital spending and the chancellor has delivered a 14 per cent increase. In addition, following the chancellor's decision not to proceed with the cuts to tax credits—thanks to the interventions of my colleague Ruth Davidson, among others—the Deputy First Minister no longer has to find the money from his budget to fulfil his colleague Alex Neil's rash promise to make up any difference.

The Deputy First Minister refers to welfare spending. Will he confirm that the devolution of extensive welfare powers in the Scotland Bill will give this Parliament the option to take a different approach to welfare in future, if it wishes and if it can find the money? As he now has his long-awaited increase in capital spending, when will the Deputy First Minister be in a position to publish his list of shovel-ready projects that can now be pushed ahead?

John Swinney: First, Murdo Fraser tells me that I have got a tremendous uplift in capital expenditure.

When the Conservatives came to office in 2010-11, the capital budget in cash terms was £3.293 billion. By the end of the decade, after 10 dark years of Conservative Government, the capital budget in Scotland will be £3.187 billion. Even after 10 dark, long, weary, cold years, in cash terms, the budget will not have recovered to where it was in 2010-11. If inflation is taken into account, the capital budget will be £600 million less than when the Conservatives came to office. It should

be no surprise to Mr Fraser that I am not of a more cheerful disposition today, although I am trying my best to cheer him up.

There will be choices and options available for the Parliament to take a different course in relation to welfare expenditure. The Government is already doing that; we are taking a different approach on council tax benefit and council tax reduction; we are taking a different approach in relation to the mitigation of the bedroom tax; and we are taking a different approach in relation to the Scottish welfare fund.

There is ample evidence of our Administration taking action to take a different course on welfare where the opportunities arise for us to do so, and that will remain our position in the years to come.

The Presiding Officer: Before I take other members' questions, I point out that time is very limited. The longer members take, the less time there will be for a colleague; indeed, a colleague may drop off the list. If members ask more than one question, they are to blame if there is no time left for their colleagues.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The Deputy First Minister mentioned the carbon capture and storage proposal that is being scrapped. Could he expand on that and explain the impact in Scotland?

John Swinney: It is really a missed opportunity. When the Government came to office, the possibility of a carbon capture and storage proposition at Peterhead was very much on the agenda. It then shifted from Peterhead to Longannet. It did not go forward at Longannet, went back to Peterhead and now it is going nowhere.

The technology is innovative. Professor Stuart Haszeldine spoke very powerfully on the radio this morning about the missed opportunity to take a significant step forward in technology development and also make a contribution to our ambitions on climate change. That would be significant not only for Scotland or the UK but could be important globally into the bargain. We are making the strongest possible representations not just because it is a lost economic opportunity in the north-east of Scotland, but because it is a major opportunity through which Scotland could be exporting technology right across the world, helping to address a major issue that affects all jurisdictions.

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I thank the finance secretary for the advance copy of his statement.

I urge him, when he is considering his budget, to think about the mental health issue I raised at First Minister's question time and also about the

possibility of accelerating the programme for dualling the A9 with the extra capital expenditure.

Despite his claims about LBTT, the cabinet secretary is falling behind his forecast. The OBR has revised its projections downwards, not just for the present year but for future years as well. Can he tell me what projections he has, whether he agrees with the OBR and whether he thinks that the decline will continue?

John Swinney: First, I recognise the issues raised by Mr Rennie about mental health. Mr Rennie had the opportunity to question the First Minister about the issue and she made it clear that the Government will pay attention to it.

I know that Mr Rennie will be pleased to welcome the work on the stretch of A9 from Kincaig to Dalraddy, which is the first part of the A9 dualling proposition that the Government is taking forward.

I welcomed what the OBR said yesterday about revising its forecast in line with the Scottish Government's forecast. Mr Rennie is correct to say that it has reduced its forecast. It is absolutely right to do so, because its forecast was way off beam in terms of the preparation that it undertook. I cannot remember whether Mr Rennie was critical of me with regard to that estimate when I set that out to the Parliament—I might also be accusing Gavin Brown of something that he did not do, but I am pretty sure that he was critical of me about it—but it looks as though my position was closer to the one that will eventually transpire.

We will set out in the budget in December our forecasts on land and buildings transaction tax and they will be available to be scrutinised by the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Parliament.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I know that, over a decade, the Tories will have cut our budget for public services by a cumulative 12.5 per cent, which is a substantial cut in anyone's book. Can the cabinet secretary advise how that might impact on the policing budget, particularly when there will undoubtedly be increased demands on our police due to heightened security issues?

John Swinney: It is important to maintain an effective police force that can address all the requirements that we have, from local policing—although, of course, all policing is local policing, I suppose—to some of the more sophisticated work, such as the cyber-resilience issues that we discussed last week, when I set out the Government's cyber-resilience strategy, which has been heavily influenced by the contribution of Police Scotland. It is important that we ensure that the police service is appropriately resourced and those considerations will be part of the discussions that I take forward with the justice secretary in

formulating the budget that will be shared with the Parliament on 16 December.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Although the UK Government reduced spending overall, it increased investment in the NHS in England and allowed for further revenues to be raised for social care there. Does the cabinet secretary recognise that, if he passes on cuts to local government, the consequence could be a reduction in social care budgets? What will he do in his budget, and with the new powers coming through the Scotland Bill, to ensure that our councils can pay for social care?

John Swinney: The first point to make in addressing Jenny Marra's question is to acknowledge the fact, which has been quite properly understood within Scotland, that the budget that we face involves a real-terms reduction in the resources that are available to us over the course of the spending review. That is a serious reduction, on top of serious reductions that have taken place over the course of the past five years. That cannot be escaped. In a sense, that was my point in response to Jackie Baillie, because I thought that her question acknowledged that challenge and the difficulty that lies at the heart of the budget settlement.

I also accept that we operate an integrated health and social care system, whereby the contribution that is made by social care can have an effect on the delivery of healthcare, and the delivery of healthcare can have an effect on social care. That is why we took the decision to integrate health and social care, and why we are advancing with such speed to ensure that the gains and benefits of creating that integrated service are felt by members of the public and that the services that are delivered are sustainable. Those questions will be at the heart of the discussions that I take forward on the budget issues, and will be part of discussions that I take forward with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, with whom I am in regular discussion.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that, as a result of the hub projects that he has announced today, the multi-million pound Inverclyde continuing care centre project will now proceed?

John Swinney: I am able to give that confirmation. The Inverclyde care home is one of the projects that will be given the green light as a consequence of the announcement to reactivate the hub programmes, which is a consequence of the decision that we have reached with the ONS.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Yesterday's statement set out some details of expected income from the apprenticeship levy. Previous parliamentary answers in Westminster indicate

that, when it is spent, the consequential will flow to the Scottish block. There could be almost £1 billion in consequential over four years. Will the cabinet secretary today give a guarantee not only to me but to those companies that will pay the levy that he will use that to expand the Scottish Government's apprenticeship programme?

John Swinney: I hear what Iain Gray says, and some of what he surmises from yesterday's announcement may well turn out to be correct with regard to the revenue that is raised. However, we are at a very early stage in discussions on the implementation of the apprenticeship levy, and even in the design of the levy, with the UK Government. I do not feel that I am in a position to have any detailed information that I can share with Mr Gray today; that is a great frustration for ministers in this Administration.

The Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work, Skills and Training discussed the matter again with her counterpart in the UK Government, and she will update the Parliament on the progress that we make on the detailed issues that underpin Mr Gray's question.

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Lanarkshire's Labour councillors are engaged in a bit of a pathetic protest outside the Parliament today.

Does the cabinet secretary agree with the assessment from the Scottish Parliament information centre, which says that local government has been given a good deal by the Scottish Government and will continue to be given a good deal, and that the council tax freeze is overfunded? Can he tell us whether councils south of the border have had such a good deal?

John Swinney: It is always nice to welcome guests to the Parliament.

The work that SPICe has undertaken in the past few weeks demonstrates that the Government's council tax freeze has been fully funded—indeed, it has been overfunded given the level of inflation prevalent in Scotland over the years—and that local authorities in Scotland, in comparison with local authorities in England, have been given very substantial financial support and advantage in comparison with local authorities south of the border.

As I indicated in my answer to Jenny Marra, I will continue my discussions with COSLA as we work in a spirit of partnership to navigate our way through these challenging financial times.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): NHS funding south of the border will experience a real-terms growth rate of 3.6 per cent in the next financial year. Will the cabinet secretary give a similar commitment for Scotland next year?

John Swinney: The Government will fulfil its commitment to pass on to the health service in Scotland the Barnett consequential that arise from the comprehensive spending review. We have delivered, and will continue to deliver, on that commitment.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies highlighted at the UK general election that the Scottish National Party and Tory spending plans would result in equal cuts whereas Labour plans would result in an increase in public spending. Is it not therefore the case that the SNP's spending plans—*[Interruption.]*

As I said, that analysis is from the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Is it not therefore the case that the SNP's spending plans would also have meant that cuts to the budget would have hit our front-line services such as local government and the NHS the hardest?

John Swinney: I am not quite sure what conclusions Siobhan McMahon deduces from the analysis that she has highlighted that would suggest that the SNP was in any way taking a position of that sort. I encourage her to reflect on the outcome of the election, given that analysis of that type did not exactly work out convincingly for the Labour party in Scotland.

The SNP and the Scottish Government have argued that the Chancellor of the Exchequer—as I argued in a letter to him just the other day—has significant flexibility to take a different course to the austerity agenda than that he has chosen to take. He could have invested while still repairing the debt and the deficit and moving the public finances into a sustainable position, and he could have allocated an extra £150 billion to public expenditure. I wish that he had taken that course of action.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The cancellation of the carbon capture project is regrettable, but if that project does not go ahead it leaves in tatters the idea that energy policy in Scotland or the UK can be predicated on continued electricity generation from fossil fuels.

Is it not time to commit to a timescale to phase out fossil fuel electricity generation and commit instead to the infrastructure projects that are produced by the low-carbon infrastructure task force? Those are the kind of projects that would help to build the low-carbon economy that, year on year, we in Scotland have been failing to build.

John Swinney: Mr Harvie must take into account the fact that the Scottish Government has made very strong progress in expanding the proportion of our energy that is generated from renewable means.

We have made very significant progress also in reducing our carbon emissions over the period when we have been addressing the issue. Nobody can dispute the volume of the progress that the Government has made. However, our task would have been made a bit easier if we had had some degree of consistency and order in the energy policy from the United Kingdom Government, which has caused mayhem in the renewable energy sector, has just abruptly halted the carbon capture and storage programme, and is prepared, as Professor Haszeldine said this morning, to commit to unsustainable levels of subsidy for the Hinkley Point nuclear power station, which is just one example of the folly of the UK Government's energy policy.

Although we are making good progress in Scotland and will continue to endeavour to do so by following some of the examples to which Mr Harvie referred, we cannot disguise the fact that our challenge is made greater by the foolishness of UK energy policy and the damage that it has created for the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That ends the statement from the Deputy First Minister. I apologise to the two members I could not call.

Women and Social Security

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

As the Presiding Officer said, this item of business is a debate on motion S4M-14791, in the name of Hugh Henry, on women and social security. I call Clare Adamson to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Welfare Reform Committee. Ms Adamson, you have 13 minutes or thereby, please.

15:01

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP):

I welcome the opportunity to speak to members today in order to share the conclusions of the Welfare Reform Committee's inquiry and the recommendations in our report "Women and Social Security". The committee reported that the reforms to the social security system have had a damaging and disproportionate impact on women, particularly disabled women, lone parents, carers, refugee women and those experiencing domestic abuse. The cumulative effect negatively impacts on not only women's lives but those of their families and the people they care for.

Although the committee welcomed reports that there are more women in work than ever before, we cannot escape the fact that £26 billion-worth of cuts have been made to benefits, tax credits and pay and pensions since 2010. According to the House of Commons library, 85 per cent of the £26 billion has been taken from women's incomes. The committee heard that one of the reasons for that disproportionate impact is existing systemic inequality for women, which has been aggravated by the recent reforms to the social security system.

I am sure that all members are aware of the challenges that women face in finding accessible, good-quality childcare. In that regard, we heard about women being forced into lower-level, pink-collar jobs; women earning less in the workplace; and the overreliance on women as primary carers. Those situations impact on people over their lifetime and mean, for example, that women have fewer financial assets and less access to occupational pensions than men; that women are twice as likely to give up paid work in order to care; and that 92 per cent of lone parents are women. Overall, it is clear to see why women are twice as dependent on the social security system as men are.

I thank members of the Welfare Reform Committee, the clerking team and all those who contributed to our deliberations for the report. The committee published the report "Women and Social Security" in July this year. Based on the written and oral evidence received, the committee

made a number of conclusions and recommendations. I particularly thank committee member Christina McKelvie for suggesting the approach that our deliberations should take. I will not be able to cover all our recommendations, but I will try to give a flavour of our main findings, with the caveat that the Conservative member of the committee noted their dissent from certain conclusions and recommendations, as detailed in the report.

Let us look at some of the main changes. One of the biggest reforms, which is still in the roll-out phase, is to universal credit. The principles behind that can be seen as laudable; making it easier for everyone to gain and sustain employment should be a good thing. However, in evidence the committee heard that the financial arrangements for second earners, who are most likely to be women, may discourage them from entering the labour market at all. That is why we called on the UK Government to rethink the earnings disregard for second earners to make work more financially worthwhile for second earners, who are mainly women.

The committee welcomed the proposals to allow Scotland discretion over the administrative elements. We would like the Scottish Government to use those powers to move from monthly payments and single household payments in order to allow women to budget more effectively and to preserve their financial autonomy in the household. We would also like a return to housing payments being made directly to the landlord. Being able to choose what is best for them and their family and decrease the risk of rent arrears will improve women's security and their ability to provide for their children.

I turn to employment and job-seeking support. Working women need a new Scottish social security system that will overcome the barriers that prevent or restrict their labour market participation. For it to be at its most effective, we believe that job-seeking support should be integrated across health, housing and social care and tailored to meet the needs of particular groups. The committee would like the Scottish Government to think about how it can incentivise employers to provide truly flexible working arrangements for women with caring responsibilities and reduce the dependence on short-term and zero-hours contracts.

The committee recognises the work that has been done in Scotland so far on increasing childcare provision. However, more can be done. Efforts to improve the availability, quality and flexibility of childcare in order to allow women to return to work if that is their wish should continue to be a top priority.

We also examined the impact on lone parents. We heard that the system creates pressures, especially on lone parents, to apply for or take up work that does not fit in with their caring responsibilities. To avoid that pressure, we want the DWP to make jobcentres more welcoming, to train staff appropriately and to provide experts with specialist knowledge of particular circumstances. That is especially important given the announcement in the emergency budget earlier this year that, from April 2017, parents who claim universal credit, including lone parents, will be expected to prepare for work from when their youngest child turns two and to look for work when their youngest child turns three.

We need to make sure that the existing safeguards for lone parents work to avoid single mothers being threatened with or receiving sanctions inappropriately. That brings me to the S word and one of the areas of greatest concern—sanctions. The committee has always taken a strong view on the impact of sanctions. Although the necessity for some form of conditionality is welcomed and understood by the committee, we believe that the current operation of the so-called sanctions regime can be punishing and counterproductive. The committee will continue to demand of the Department for Work and Pensions a review of the application of its policies at a local level to ensure that sanctions are only ever a last resort.

We have also joined the UK Parliament's Work and Pensions Committee to call on the UK Government to conduct a comprehensive independent review of sanctions to identify whether they actually have their desired effect and encourage people into work. In addition, we want the UK Government to publish a tracking study to follow the true cost of being sanctioned and how it impacts not just on the immediate finances of the claimant but on local authority services, the third sector and the NHS.

The committee also took evidence on the impact on women who experience domestic violence. In talking about the true costs of the reforms, we need to consider the knock-on impact on particular groups.

Women who experience domestic and financial abuse have suffered a decrease in their financial autonomy, which increases the risk of their remaining with or returning to abusers. We found that that can be a particular issue for European Economic Area job seekers whose right to reside is based on their partner's status.

The UK Government should consider what further security and protection it can offer women who wish to leave abusive partners. We want the DWP to promote its domestic violence easement

flexibilities, to remove job-seeking pressure from women who are exiting abusive relationships.

The danger of a lack of financial autonomy is particularly experienced by refugee women. The committee heard that women in refugee households might not receive a national insurance number for several weeks. On some occasions, women do not receive their national insurance number until after significant advocacy work on the part of the third sector or an elected member. The lack of a NI number can leave women destitute, with no right to claim benefits in their own name and potentially no bank account or financial independence. We have raised the issue with the UK Government, so that it can do more to speed up the process and give such women the right to financial autonomy.

This week the committee heard about the impact of the sanctions regime and work capability assessments on women with mental health issues. We had looked at the issue when we wrote the report and we had heard about the reforms' disproportionate impact on women. The processes that must be undergone have a serious impact on women with mental health issues. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde cited evidence that women in its area have a significantly poorer mental health profile than men have and told us:

"Loss of income and stigma through sanctioning or changes in benefits are very large risk factors in precipitating mental health problems and suicide."

The committee was therefore shocked when witnesses told us that the recent tightening of the eligibility criteria for employment and support allowance discriminates against women with mental health issues. The new screening system places more requirements on women to prove that they are at high risk of self-harm or suicide than it places on men who undergo the same assessment. Therefore, not only is the impact of the cuts being disproportionately felt by women but women are having to go to disproportionate lengths to prove the negative impact on their mental health. The committee has written to the UK minister to try to understand why the UK Government has put in place such a potentially discriminatory policy.

The committee considered the impact of the social security reforms on carers and children. Of course, negative impacts are felt keenly not only by carers but by the people for whom they care. We know that 74 per cent of people in receipt of carers allowance are women. Women who take on caring roles make an essential contribution to society, but many take on significant challenges when they take on a caring role, as we heard. Carers often see a sharp rise in household expenditure, accompanied by a drop in income, because the earnings disregard is so low as to act

as a disincentive to work. That is why the committee supports the Scottish Government's proposal to bring carers allowance into line with jobseekers allowance.

The committee also believes that there should be a stronger link between the social security system and the Scottish Government's approach to child poverty and getting it right for every child. We encourage the Scottish Government to consider those links when it is planning the delivery of devolved benefits.

Given the potential for Scotland to use the proposed devolved powers over benefits, we are in interesting and challenging times. The committee welcomes the devolution of further social security powers to Scotland, which presents an opportunity to rectify some of the systemic inequalities that women face and to reverse some of the disproportionate impact that I have been talking about.

When the Scottish Government takes the opportunity afforded by further devolution to design a new system, we want it to embed gender and human rights analysis in the whole process. We need to examine our services and better support people who are in need. We need to get it right for the women of Scotland. Therefore, we want the Scottish Government to produce a dedicated action plan on mitigating the impact of the social security cuts on women. The plan should take stock of employability services, social care and childcare provision.

I am out of time, Presiding Officer. I look forward to hearing members' speeches in the debate.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the 3rd Report, 2015 (Session 4) of the Welfare Reform Committee, *Women and Social Security* (SP Paper 773), including its recommendations to the Scottish and UK governments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks. We are tight for time today. I call Margaret Burgess—you have nine minutes, please, minister.

15:14

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Achieving real, meaningful gender equality is right at the heart of this Government's core objectives. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that equality of opportunity is embedded in everything that we do.

I thank the Welfare Reform Committee and those who gave evidence to inform the findings in the report. It is a comprehensive report and makes for interesting, if disturbing, reading. I recollect that a number of thoughtful submissions were made

following the call for evidence that gave some quite compelling insights into the issues around the benefits regime that women face.

The cabinet secretary has already published the Government's response to the report recommendations. There is much that we are already taking forward in relation to the issues that have been identified. Unfortunately, there is also much that demonstrates why so many of us wanted full devolution of social security.

Rest assured that this Government will continue to make the case to the UK Government that its austerity regime is punishing some of our most vulnerable people. The chancellor's U-turn on tax credits shows that the Scottish Government was right to keep up its continued and constant pressure right up to the last minute, highlighting the damage that would be inflicted by changing the tax credit system and calling on George Osborne to reverse his proposal, as the changes would have had a devastating impact on the incomes of thousands of low-paid families—as the Scottish Government has consistently said.

Although I welcome the capitulation of the chancellor on tax credits, the Tories' ideologically driven austerity agenda is still on course, because make no mistake: the cuts are still coming. There will still be £12 billion-worth of cuts to the welfare budget over the next five years, around £1 million of which will land on low-income families and individuals in Scotland.

I want to touch on some of the specific recommendations made in the report and some of the actions that the Scottish Government is taking to address them. Our analysts estimate that the cumulative impact of welfare cuts in Scotland is some £6 billion. This year alone, there will be cuts of just under £2.5 billion here in Scotland. That demonstrates the scale of the challenge that we face, as the "Women and Social Security" report made clear.

On the impact of welfare cuts on disabled women, we absolutely agree with the committee on the importance of maintaining the existing budget. That is why the fiscal framework is so important to the negotiations between the Scottish Government and the UK Government. I would hope that, as John Swinney said earlier, we can unite across the chamber to ensure that the transfer of powers comes with the full budget.

We have invested nearly £300 million over three years in welfare mitigation funding. From fully mitigating the bedroom tax to providing funding for food banks, we have taken a range of actions to shelter people from the worst of the Tories' damaging welfare policies.

We are already using the powers that we have to improve outcomes; as Clare Adamson said, we

now have an opportunity through the new powers to make progress on providing a quality service that is more joined up and delivers a better service to women.

The committee, like the Scottish Government, has heard a wealth of evidence on issues to do with disabilities assessment. The Scottish Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that a Scottish social security system has at its heart a set of principles and values that ensure that people are treated with respect and dignity when applying for, being assessed for, and receiving disability-related benefits.

We will also ensure that people are provided with relevant information to make them aware of how the system will work for them and how long decisions will take. We will ensure that it is a fair, efficient and, importantly, person-centred system. That is how people will regain their trust in social security.

The Scottish Government has already announced measures that will help women, who are often carers. Earlier in the autumn, we announced that we would abolish the UK Government's 84-day rule so that families who face higher living costs due to their child's illness or disability will not be penalised when their child goes into hospital or has necessary medical treatment.

We have also said—as Clare Adamson alluded to—that carers will be placed at the heart of the devolved carers allowance and we will begin to increase the rate of the allowance to that of jobseekers allowance.

A number of recommendations in the committee's report relate to universal credit flexibilities. We welcome some of the flexibilities given through the Scotland Bill and have already stated our commitment to use them to allow households to request that we pay rent directly to social landlords and to move away from monthly payments.

I know that many organisations that work with vulnerable women want to see a split-payment option. We are listening carefully to such input and will monitor how that could work in practice when universal credit is rolled out fully.

The report touched on employment and women in low-paid work. Progress is being made in a range of areas. The female employment rate in Scotland is 71.1 per cent, compared with the UK rate of 69 per cent. According to figures from Skills Development Scotland, the number of female modern apprentices has increased from 27 per cent in 2008-09 to 40 per cent in 2014-15.

Female learners also outnumber males at college, when measured by head count and full-

time equivalent. More encouraging still, the number of women studying full-time courses has increased 15 per cent since 2006-07. The gender pay gap is lower in Scotland than in the rest of the United Kingdom but much more can still be done. As part of the delivery of our economic strategy, we have established the fair work convention and launched the Scottish business pledge. Those will all help to make a meaningful difference and ensure appropriate representation of all women in the workplace.

The report recognised the difficulties that women face in going back to work and having caring responsibilities. The Scottish Government is committed to supporting and helping to deliver family-friendly, flexible working in Scotland. One step that the Scottish Government is taking is to increase the provision of childcare to improve outcomes for children and support more women back into work. By the end of the next session of Parliament, we will double the number of hours from 16 to 30 and we will look at having flexible hours for childcare.

We acknowledge the committee's recommendation that employment programme support should include tailored English language support for refugees. That is important, particularly for women. It is recognised that women lose out in that respect because, while children can learn English at school and men can work, women experience various difficulties in getting a national insurance number. We have taken that on board with our current refugee programme and in the package that local authorities are building up for the refugees who we are taking in from the Syrian crisis. We will ensure that English language support is very much at the heart of that and that women are very much included in that support.

I want to say a bit about what Clare Adamson called "the S word". It is a matter of genuine regret to me that conditionality and the benefit sanctions regime were not devolved as part of the Smith settlement. We continue to believe that the sanctions system is harsh and pushes people into crisis. It is clear that it needs wholesale reform. We remain of the view that an independent review of the sanctions regime is necessary.

I thank the Welfare Reform Committee again and welcome the report and today's debate. The Scottish Government fully recognises the disproportionate impact that the UK Government's welfare changes have had on women and children. In our engagement, we have worked closely with women's groups to ensure that we understand the issues faced.

New powers on social security and employment provide us with an opportunity to have a Scottish social security system that delivers for women. Be

assured that this Government will do everything that we can to make the most of that opportunity.

15:24

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I start by thanking the Welfare Reform Committee for its wide-ranging and authoritative report on the impact on women of welfare reform. It strikes me that, if the UK Government had shown the same attention to the impact of its reforms, it might not have been so gleeful and gung-ho in pursuing the deep cuts to social security that will be felt by mothers, grandmothers, carers, low-paid workers, lone parents, victims of domestic abuse, refugee women, women suffering mental health problems, disabled women and of course children. All of that potential damage, often with multiple impacts on women, has been covered forensically and compassionately by the report's authors. It is a damning indictment of the welfare policies of the UK Government and its lack of regard for women who need social security to support their families.

Of course, that is not the whole story, as two important developments have emerged since the committee's good work. Just the day after the report was published, in July, the Chancellor of the Exchequer returned to the House of Commons with his emergency budget and announced £34 billion of additional cuts. The House of Commons library estimated that 70 per cent of those cuts will fall on women. We have yet to see whether the spending review that was announced yesterday will ameliorate or exacerbate this unfair targeting of women. Instead of using his new mandate to reduce the structural inequalities that have held many women back, the chancellor has made the decision to reinforce them. The Tory cry, "We're all in this together" has never seemed so hollow, and it will not be recognised by women throughout the United Kingdom.

Fearing those cuts, the women of Scotland have been given some hope in other developments since the chancellor deepened his welfare cuts. The emergence of the Scotland Bill as a considerable transfer of powers from Westminster to Holyrood gives all of us who oppose these unfair welfare cuts an opportunity to do something about them. The top-up powers over welfare and the devolution of income tax mean that we can now match our rhetoric with action and design a fairer social security system that protects women.

Yes, the Scottish Government already has considerable influence over issues relating to equality, and the Welfare Reform Committee rightly points out several areas that need to be improved here and now. To his credit, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights has given the committee a very full response on behalf of the Scottish

Government, which details some of the actions that are being taken to support women who are adversely affected by welfare reform. However, the real prize will be how the next Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament use the new powers over welfare to correct the wrong-headed approach by the Tory Government for the women of Scotland.

A good start would be for the Scottish Government to follow the Welfare Reform Committee's suggestion and call a high-level summit on women's social security. That suggestion is supported by Engender, Scottish Women's Aid, the Scottish Refugee Council and Close the Gap. It would allow us to determine what strategic action is needed to redress the gender impact of welfare reform and public spending cuts. I hope that the minister will address that suggestion in her closing remarks.

As the report outlines, there is much work to do and the situation continues to escalate. Yesterday, the chancellor performed a spectacular and welcome U-turn on tax credits that will mean many working people being spared these unfair cuts. He also spared the blushes of the SNP members, who, when we debated the matter in the chamber two weeks ago, failed miserably to show any real appetite for reversing the proposed tax credit cuts when the powers over them come to Scotland.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does the member think that Labour got its tactics right on this? Surely the best bet was to challenge the principle before worrying about where the money would come from to compensate.

Jenny Marra: My primary concern is not tactics but the working people who would be affected by the cuts to tax credits. The SNP members miserably failed to show any appetite to use the powers that are coming to the Scottish Parliament to mitigate or reverse those tax cuts. That was the shame of two weeks ago. I hope that they will not be found wanting as we look to address what is left of the UK Government's welfare reform programme. As we saw yesterday, there is still a substantial and pernicious agenda—I know that the minister agrees with me on that.

Scottish politics will have changed for ever when the powers promised by the Smith commission come to Holyrood. No longer will the Scottish people indulge us when we complain about cuts to the most vulnerable in society; no longer will it be enough to join the chorus of despair at the Tory welfare reforms; no longer will we be protected from the hard choices that come from power and responsibility. The people—indeed, the women—of Scotland will instead look to us to act and use the new powers to build the fairer and more compassionate Scotland to which we aspire.

15:30

John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I welcome not only the opportunity to speak in today's debate but the attention that the Welfare Reform Committee has given to the relationship between policy choices and the opportunity of women. Although I have little doubt that there will be areas of fairly robust disagreement, I am pleased that agreement was found on several areas in the report. That was reflected in the constructive contributions of my colleague and predecessor on the committee, Annabel Goldie, who will be speaking later.

Despite its title, it is worth considering that the committee's report and recommendations go further than the direct impact of benefits. The report touches on a range of issues from the status of women in the workplace, as parents—potentially lone parents—or carers, and the interplay of benefits, employment, childcare, flexible working and a variety of other measures. That is to its credit. However, I cannot shake the feeling that some of the context of changes to social security was missed.

When my party came into government in 2010, there was a very reasonable view that social security spending was too high, that it created perverse disincentives to employment and that it was extremely complex. The previous Labour Government, for its part, adopted a range of policies under the banner of welfare reform. The problem was that its vision was often contradictory, short-termist and, on some occasions—as with the introduction of employment and support allowance and the work capability assessment—poorly implemented.

I have no reservation in stating my ambition to see a lower welfare society. The best and most sustainable way to achieve that is to increase employment and financial independence. In terms of the latter, we should look towards the twin aims of higher pay and lower tax.

Across the United Kingdom, we have a record level of women in employment, with almost a million more in work since the 2010 general election. That is the benefit of delivering on an economic plan. The UK's recovery, with economic growth leading the advanced economies of the world, has been notable for being employment-heavy.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): A few weeks ago, John Lamont's colleague, Baroness Goldie, was in the House of Lords voting to get rid of tax credits, but the Scottish Tory party had wanted—apparently—to keep tax credits. What is the Tory party's position? Where is it on the issue?

John Lamont: Yesterday, the chancellor clearly set out the position on tax credits. I will leave it to

him and his explanation for that, rather than get involved and reopen that issue.

When we speak of a jobs miracle, it is not an idle boast. It can be seen in our constituencies and in every corner of the country. It is also not a dry statistic, but the reality of thousands more people with the security of a regular wage coming in. We know that many women are still more often found in low-paid, part-time and less secure employment. It is therefore welcome that we have seen greatest growth in full-time work and that wages are growing consistently while inflation remains effectively flat.

Part-time work will always afford a level of flexibility, and for many it will be a choice, but we should also consider the level of those who are in part-time jobs and seek full-time work—those classed as involuntary part-time workers. Therefore, we should celebrate the considerable advances in childcare provision across the UK. All the main parties represented in this chamber have had a hand in placing that on the agenda, albeit with a number of important differences in our respective approaches. That solid groundwork allows a widening of opportunity and aspiration for a great many women. That is beneficial not only on an individual level but across our society. It is harnessing the skills and knowledge that have in the past been absent—often not by choice—from the labour market.

The committee is of course right to consider where our welfare system may fall short for women. The report suggests that women have, for example, a poorer experience of the work programme. Although it is essential to see more evidence of that, it is important information and the Scottish Government should keep it in mind when crafting its replacement programmes following the passage of the Scotland Bill.

We should also consider the policies that have benefited women. I have already spoken of childcare and will consider some other measures. The increase in the personal allowance this year has taken a further 430,000 people across the United Kingdom out of paying income tax altogether, two thirds of whom will be women. The national living wage, announced by the chancellor in the summer budget, will directly increase the income of around three working women in every 10. That not only is a pay rise but will have a positive impact on the gender pay gap as well as providing a great deal of support for many women who are in part-time work.

As the further powers that were promised in the Smith agreement make us think seriously about the future of social security in Scotland, the committee should continue to reflect on the impact on women. We must also work to build on the

many significant successes that have already taken place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

We come to the open debate. We are tight for time, so speeches will be a maximum of six minutes.

15:36

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):

I thank all the members of the Welfare Reform Committee and all the people who gave evidence, because the report was a pretty tough piece of work. It was the last inquiry that Michael McMahon carried out as convener of the committee. I pay tribute to him for his fairness in that role. Over the piece in the committee, it has been rare for there to be any disagreement—other than from one party. I will leave that there for now.

In the opening speech, Clare Adamson highlighted the fact that research by the House of Commons library states that, since 2010, £26 billion-worth of cuts have been made to benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions. Of that £26 billion, 85 per cent has been taken from women's incomes. Therefore, I find it surprising that the Tory member of the committee dissented from the following sentence:

“The Committee believes that the cumulative impact of the reforms has had a damaging and disproportionate impact on women.”

How can anyone argue that the effect on women has not been disproportionate and damaging when research clearly shows that women have borne 85 per cent of the cuts?

We have heard that women are twice as dependent on social security as men are, with 20 per cent of women's income coming from the benefits and tax credits system, compared with 10 per cent of men's. Women have fewer financial assets and less access to occupational pensions than men do, and there are considerably more women than men in the lowest income decile in the UK. Moreover, 92 per cent of lone parents are women, and women make up 95 per cent of the lone parents who depend on income support. The statistics go on and on and clearly show that disproportionate impact.

The recommendations have not been touched on yet. One of the main ones concerns multiple impacts. Paragraph 29 of the report says:

“The Committee has been struck by the complexity of women's lives in relation to the benefit system. Many don't fit neatly into one administrative box and will be hit by reforms to carers, disability and children's benefits. The Committee calls on the UK Government to urgently conduct a cumulative impact assessment of all the welfare reforms to identify the true impact on families and households.”

It is shocking that such an assessment has not been conducted. That shows clearly that the Conservative Government and its predecessor, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government, really did not give a monkey's about the impact of their changes. Surely anyone who sought to make such major changes would want to know exactly what the impact would be.

John Lamont said that the aspiration in making those changes was to bring about higher pay and lower tax. In some ways, the Tories have achieved that—they have brought about higher pay and lower tax for the wealthiest in our society, but they have certainly not done so for folk who are struggling to make ends meet on a daily basis. It comes as no surprise to me that that is the direction in which the Conservatives have moved, because that has been their attitude throughout history—they have always favoured higher pay and lower tax for the rich and have never given a monkey's about those folk who are suffering: the most vulnerable and the poorest in our society.

We need only look at some of the statistics that have come out in recent weeks, such as those from the Trussell Trust on the rise in the use of food banks, to realise the extent of the problem. When I have visited food banks, I have always seen women with young kids. It is horrific that people in work are having to rely on food banks. Although I welcome yesterday's U-turn on tax credits, we must all remember that, for months, families in this country have been living in fear at the thought of losing those tax credits, which I believe is unacceptable.

If nothing else, we as a Parliament must ensure that the committee's recommendation of a cumulative impact assessment of all the welfare reforms is carried out by the UK Government as soon as possible—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Kevin Stewart: Then, the UK Government might realise the horrors of the policies that it has implemented.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I reiterate that I can give members only up to six minutes.

15:42

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank Kevin Stewart for the gracious comments that he made at the outset of his speech. I was a bit concerned that I would sound conceited when I say that I feel a degree of achievement and fulfilment from having been involved in generating the body of work that the Welfare Reform Committee produced in examining the impact of the current economic climate, which

has been created by the Tory party's welfare changes. The analysis that the committee has undertaken on matters such as the geographical and individual effects of benefit changes, the sanctions regime and the rise in food bank use will serve well not only the Parliament but the country whenever those issues are discussed.

The report that we are discussing might be the most important piece of work that the committee has so far embarked on. The statistics that concern women's welfare issues in Scotland are staggering. The fact that women are twice as dependent on social security as men are, have fewer financial assets and make up 95 per cent of lone parents who depend on income support is absolutely shocking. That the gender pay gap sits at 32 per cent for part-time workers, which furthers the divide between the financial status of men and that of women, is embarrassing in this day and age.

Those statistics lead us inescapably to the conclusion that women are disproportionately affected by social security reforms, so any unfavourable change that is made to the system will unavoidably be multiplied in its impact on women. For example, in theory, universal credit exists to ensure that everyone in Scotland can easily retain a comfortable level of employment, but many organisations have referred to the disregard for second earners in earnings calculations and said that second earners, who are predominantly female, will have a disincentive to work, as a result of the gender barriers to employment being ignored. That formula must change so that women feel that credit is given to them for the work that they perform.

The Tory Government has evidently been blissfully unaware of the needs of women in regard to social security programmes, or it simply would not be making the changes that it is making. The committee's report says:

"The Fawcett Society believes that the current job-seeking support system is too crude to be able to deal with the complexities in women's lives."

Jobseeking support is vital to ensure that every woman in Scotland has access to a job that is appropriate to her skill level.

The impact of the policies on disabled women and on victims of domestic violence is utterly unacceptable. Disabled women are far less likely to obtain full-time employment than non-disabled people are. Close the Gap's estimation that

"The employment rate for disabled men is almost 90 per cent compared with only 40 per cent for disabled women"

is an indicator that should set alarm bells ringing at many levels of authority. Discrimination and incorrect preconceived notions about mental and

physical capability are only two of the issues that women face day to day.

Similarly shocking information can be found when we look at domestic abuse statistics. Some 80 per cent of such cases involve a female victim. Attempting to leave an abusive partner is not only emotionally and physically challenging; it can be financially crippling. Scottish Women's Aid has noted that two thirds of women lose their jobs because of domestic abuse-related issues. No woman should have to fear for her economic and professional wellbeing while experiencing such a heartbreaking situation.

I pay tribute in particular to Engender, which played a pivotal role in steering the committee towards initiating its inquiry and took us through the deliberations. More than any other group, it put together a number of recommendations that would help Scotland to move in the right direction on these and other issues.

First and foremost, the Scottish Government must recognise that the policies that are being introduced disproportionately impact on women at all intersections of identity. Therefore, any programme that is proposed or put into place must be beneficial to women, and an evaluation of the impact on women specifically must be completed.

Jobseeking support needs to be updated to include groups of women who often face additional persecution, such as refugees, disabled women, survivors of domestic abuse, those who live in rural areas, older women, lone mothers and carers. It is our duty as a legislative body to ensure that those women are given special attention, as their individual needs are too often overlooked.

Investment in employability services and jobcentres for women who are looking to get back into the labour market is simply money well spent for Scotland. Appropriate training and skilled staff with specialised knowledge should be in place to ensure that those programmes are used as effectively and efficiently as possible.

It would be remiss to have a conversation about women's welfare without discussing the multiple identities that many women hold. As the committee succinctly stated in its report, many women

"don't fit neatly into one administrative box and will be hit by reforms to carers, disability and children's benefits."

A one-size-fits-all policy will not work for the women of Scotland, who deserve more than that.

Some 51 per cent of the Scottish population are female. It is high time that we recognised the complex needs of women as a workforce and properly considered the impact on women of the welfare policies that we introduce. Scotland will

have a chance to make a difference to those and many other issues with the new powers that we are to have. I hope that the report will help to guide the Parliament, others who will consider the issue and future Scottish Governments in the right direction.

15:48

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I will raise the issue of carers and those for whom they care. Those two groups feature prominently in the committee's report on women and social security. They are often interdependent groups who are extremely vulnerable, and they have suffered disproportionately from the cuts to social security and the reduced employment opportunities that have been caused by the economic downturn since 2008.

Unpaid carers save the Scottish economy £10.3 billion a year. As the report documents, 59 per cent of unpaid carers are women, and 74 per cent of those who receive carers allowance, which is awarded to those with the heaviest burden of caring responsibilities, are women.

Women are twice as likely as men are to give up work in order to care. As one of our witnesses, Helen Graham of Edinburgh Napier University, pointed out, much of the differential impact of welfare reform on women, which has been well illustrated by previous speakers, stems from the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between men and women.

In preparing for the debate, I was reminded that in the very early days of our welfare state—indeed, before Beveridge—feminists struggled in a patriarchal society to get understanding and recognition of the huge amount of unpaid work that women do in the home. A leading suffragette and social reformer, Eleanor Rathbone, campaigned tirelessly to challenge that and eventually secured family allowances. To be politically acceptable, family allowances were presented as support for children—they evolved into child benefit—but Rathbone was primarily motivated by the need to recognise the unpaid work of women in the home and the huge personal sacrifices that poor women made in neglecting their health and wellbeing to prioritise those for whom they cared.

The direction of welfare reforms in the 21st century suggests that we are still fighting the same battles as Eleanor Rathbone and other feminists fought almost 100 years ago to get recognition for women's unpaid work. In particular, the reforms and cuts do not adequately address the difficulties that are faced by those with caring responsibilities; indeed, they make life considerably more difficult for those people. Carers Scotland, Inclusion

Scotland and individual witnesses expressed concern about the change from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment, because the loss of financial support for the cared-for person has a considerable knock-on effect on the carer and on household income. The financial loss in Scotland from DLA and incapacity benefit reform is already estimated to be £600 million a year.

When a disabled person loses their benefits, their carer could be forced to claim jobseekers allowance. That introduces conditionality and the risk of sanctions. Let us remember that those with caring responsibilities are more likely to miss appointments, which invokes sanctions. Sanctions can put the whole family into crisis. They can lead to families running up rent arrears, which hastens eviction. Sanctions have a devastating effect on the ability not just to care but to live with a degree of dignity. I say to Ms Marra that sanctions are specifically excluded from the Scotland Bill, which she admires so much.

Once unpaid carers are on jobseekers allowance or in the work-related activity group of employment and support allowance, they can find themselves on compulsory employability programmes. As Close the Gap pointed out to the committee, those programmes force women into unsuitable gender-specific low-paid work, often on zero-hours contracts. Those zero-hours contract jobs often give women no opportunity to plan their lives and work around caring responsibilities. I point out to Ms Marra that addressing employability and zero-hours contracts remains reserved to Westminster.

Inclusion Scotland and Close the Gap highlighted the particular effect that the reforms at UK level are having on women who are disabled. In Scotland, 55 per cent of those who receive the higher-rate mobility component of DLA are women. However, we know that the DWP has a target of halving the number of DLA claimants who receive that higher-rate mobility payment when they are reassessed for PIP. That will have a disproportionate effect on women, particularly in Scotland.

For some of the people we spoke to, the fear of losing higher-rate mobility payments has caused anxiety. Disabled women already face a number of barriers to the job market. According to Close the Gap, the employment rate for disabled men is 90 per cent, compared with 40 per cent for disabled women.

The evidence that we took suggested that the minority of disabled women who can work—as a result of getting a Motability award, for example—could be further reduced because of DWP targets. Without a car or appropriate transport, they cannot work. One of our witnesses, Moira Sinclair,

illustrated the absolute counterproductiveness of that. She said that, if she lost her Motability car, she would have to give up work, and the loss of income tax and national insurance contributions would be £11,500 a year. What better illustration is there of how ill thought out the cuts have been?

A higher proportion of women in Scotland claim DLA and employment and support allowance than in the UK as a whole. We must not forget that, despite their disabilities, many of those same women have caring responsibilities, either for children, a sick partner or a relative. That is why I certainly welcome the commitment from the First Minister to look at carers allowance once it is devolved and bring it up to the level of jobseekers allowance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Joan McAlpine: I point out again that only 14 per cent of welfare spending is being devolved to Scotland under the Scotland Bill. When we have £12 billion of welfare cuts still to come and we do not know where from, I fear for women going forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry that there is not more time this afternoon. If members go over their time, that means that someone else will lose out.

15:55

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Welfare reform at Westminster has achieved two things. First, it has deprived the most vulnerable and needy in our communities of the capacity to feed and clothe themselves without anxiety and has left them struggling with having to go to a food bank or not having a warm home—or sometimes any home at all. Secondly, it has aggravated existing inequality for women.

The term “welfare” is popular with the chancellor. I cannot help but feel that he quite likes the Dickensian idea of the worthy poor and the magnanimity of those who offer charity—that big society that the Tories talked about. We live in the 21st century, not the 19th century, and we ought to have moved on from workhouses and soup kitchens, but the gap between rich and poor extends even wider. While international investors pour their millions into expensive houses in Kensington and Chelsea, many of my constituents are struggling to find a few pounds to put into their gas meters.

Research provided to the committee by Child Poverty Action Group and others tells us time and again that most of the people who use food banks are in work or have had their benefit payments

sanctioned for sometimes the most absurd of reasons. Citizens Advice Scotland told the committee of a case of a woman who was heading to the jobcentre when her four-year-old needed the toilet—those of us who have had kids have all been there; they want to try out every bathroom. She was sanctioned for 12 weeks for being 10 minutes late.

Barnardo's told the committee:

"We are aware in Scotland that the current system of benefit sanctions is nowhere near fit for purpose. Sanctions are regularly applied unfairly, leaving people with little or no money at all for long periods. That causes severe hardship for many claimants and can have a very negative impact not only on their own health and wellbeing but that of their families too."

It added that when universal credit is fully rolled out, women will probably lose out even more. Women will be dependent on the male breadwinner for the money to run the house, and if he has other ideas about how to spend that money, it will be the partners who have to try and sweep up the mess of debt, lack of food and probably a housing crisis.

CAS evidence to the committee emphasised that women use social services more than men do. The reasons are straightforward: they tend to be the carers of children, elderly and infirm parents, and relatives with special needs, including their own children, and many are in low-paid and part-time work. They have missed out on making a prosperous career for themselves because they have put their families first. They should not be sanctioned for that.

This reality is borne out by CAS, which has found that women are more likely to seek advice on housing benefit, working tax credits, child tax credits, child benefit and income support. Changes to those benefits will have a disproportionate impact on women. Housing benefit problems are among the most common benefit problems that women bring to CAS. This Scottish Government does everything it can to mitigate the horrendous impact of the bedroom tax, but there are limitations on what we are allowed to do.

An east of Scotland citizens advice bureau reported the case of a client who had high rent arrears. She thought that she was in receipt of housing benefit but discovered that that support had stopped, as she had working non-dependents—adult children—living with her. The client had an arrangement in place to pay the arrears and wanted to apply for a discretionary housing payment, but she was advised that she could not do that if she was not in receipt of housing benefit. The complications of the system are absolutely impenetrable.

Changes to ill-health and disability payments have had a hugely damaging impact already, and

the situation is set to get worse. PIP will take tens of thousands out of what is currently the DLA system. CAS warned the committee that the endless confusion, delays and backlog will do nothing to support the introduction of PIP.

The concept that the state needs to help families on low incomes has vanished, yet pay rates are hopelessly inadequate. We have a moral and a financial duty to support people in need—for whatever reason—and we need the right framework in which to do that.

I do not accept the assumption of public school boys in London, who would never venture into a cut-price food store, that we can all make a decent income and support ourselves and our families. David Cameron once said that he was born with not one but two silver spoons in his mouth. I say, try a week living on benefits in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse. Perhaps you could learn a lot.

The Scottish Government rightly highlights the huge contribution made by carers, most eloquently described by my colleague Joan McAlpine in her contribution.

And there's the rub—or part of it. As CAS says:

"benefit conditionality remains reserved to the UK Government. The current draft of the Scotland Bill is silent on the matter and we do not yet know the extent to which Scottish employment services may be subject to that regime."

The Institute of Fiscal Studies has just reported that 2.6 million working families will be £1,600 worse off as a result of the chancellor's statement yesterday. What do we need? We need to face the facts. The current system discriminates against and fails women time and again: whether they are parents, carers, have a disability, are victims of domestic violence, have a long-term condition, are a refugee or have other cultural barriers, the system fails them. A future social security system for Scotland needs to have security at its heart. In order to get Britain working, we have to get Britain's women working, and that will not happen under the present system.

16:01

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): I was a member of the Welfare Reform Committee when evidence was being taken on this topic in June and, during the evidence sessions, we learned that inequality for women still exists within our society and that the recent welfare reforms have increased that inequality. Women are disproportionately affected by the welfare reforms.

A recent report produced by Engender found that women are twice as dependent on social security as men, with 20 per cent of women's income coming from the benefits and the tax credit system, compared with 10 per cent of men's.

The committee heard evidence that tax credits provided essential support for women who work, and I had real fears that the tax credit reforms would add to the pressure on women. While I am delighted with George Osborne's U-turn on tax credits, there is no doubt that the £12 billion cuts to welfare, which are still to come, will have an adverse effect on women and families over the coming years.

The Engender report found that 92 per cent of lone parents are women and women make up 95 per cent of lone parents dependent on Income Support. In committee meetings, I highlighted the shocking statistic from Inclusion Scotland that, at the time of giving evidence, sanctions for lone parents on JSA had risen from under 200 per month prior to 2008 to 4,700 per month. While I would like to say that that figure has fallen, I am afraid that it has not. Tory ministers seem to be in denial over the damage they are causing, especially to women and families, across the country.

I agree with the committee's recommendation of a complete and comprehensive overview of the sanctions regime. It is clear to me that sanctions are not encouraging people to find work; rather, they seem to be demoralising people. The committee also found that many people do not even understand why they were sanctioned; you cannot promote a change in behaviour if a person does not know what they did wrong, or feels that they have been wrongly penalised.

For example, during evidence we heard the story of a lone parent, a mother of three, who went to sign on during the summer school holidays. She was sanctioned because she had to bring her children to her interview as she could not get childcare; the jobcentre officer said that, if she did not have childcare, that meant that she was not available for work. Can anyone honestly say that sanctioning that mother of three was the right thing to do? That is a case in which sanctions, in my view, have been wrongly applied; it might have been more helpful for jobcentre staff to assist the mother to find flexible and affordable childcare, rather than placing her and her children in further hardship and distress.

That example leads me to my next point: the importance of flexible and affordable childcare and the barriers that lack of childcare can present. Close the Gap have argued that childcare can be prohibitively expensive and that it is one of the most immediate barriers for women returning to work. The situation is worse for those on low pay, part-time hours or a zero-hours contract, as they might not know how much they will get paid that week or even when they need childcare, but they still have to pay to keep the child's place open.

Provision of childcare is also a major issue, the Family and Childcare Trust's "Childcare Costs Survey 2015" tells us that, in Scotland in 2014, only 23 per cent of local authorities reported sufficient childcare provision for parents who work full time and that, in 2015, that fell to 15 per cent. The figure for those with a disabled child was 18 per cent in 2014, and that fell dramatically to 7 per cent in 2015. For people in flexible working, the figures were even worse. In 2014, only 9 per cent of local authorities reported sufficient provision for them, and that fell to a shocking 4 per cent in 2015.

I acknowledge the work that the Scottish Government has done on access to childcare and provision, but the statistics show that not enough is being done to support that across our local authorities and that the situation is getting worse.

It is good that we have childcare places for all three to four-year-olds for up to 600 hours a year, but it is not so good that those places are not available in reality. That was further emphasised by One Parent Families Scotland, who said in evidence that:

"Lone parents are trapped in the sense that, when children are under five and the parent wants to access training and education, it is a challenge for them to get childcare ... When the child reaches five, the doors to access training, education and higher education are closed, because the parent has to be available to work and to sign on."—[*Official Report, Welfare Reform Committee*, 1 April 2014; c 1403.]

It is clear that, if we want to develop a transformational childcare policy, we need to do much more to tackle the lack of places and the lack of flexible, affordable wraparound childcare. That is one barrier that we know that we can break down, and we need to redouble our efforts to do so. With the further social security powers that are coming to this Parliament, it is clear that we can do things differently to improve the situation for women in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close.

Margaret McDougall: I welcome the minister saying that that will be considered and that dignity and respect will be at the centre of Scotland's social security system.

On childcare, we have the power now. We just need the political will to create a fully transformational childcare system that works for everyone who needs it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give members fair warning: if you go over six minutes, I will have to cut you off.

16:07

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I thank the committee for what I felt, as an outsider to the committee, was a wide-ranging and thorough report. It is good that new welfare powers are to be devolved to Scotland, but, of course, the powers are only part of the question. I have a couple of main questions: can we do better with the money that we have or are going to have; and do we need more money to create a better system?

From what I can see in the report, we could do better with the existing money. Recommendations such as moving away from monthly payments and single-household payments would be positive, as would, in some cases, making rent payments directly to the landlord.

Some of the quotes in paragraph 49 of the report, in the section that concerns universal credit, are telling and struck a chord with me and, I think, some of my constituents. The paragraph deals with the issue of monthly payments, saying:

"In relation to monthly payments, it was recognised that this is not the lived reality for many benefit claimants whose lives are not so ordered. It will also give rise to issues around budgeting and being 'cash rich' at the start of the month".

It goes on to quote Morag Gillespie of Glasgow Caledonian University, who said:

"On the one hand, we are looking for people to live on quite a hand-to-mouth basis—lots of people still get paid and live from week to week or fortnight to fortnight—while, on the other, we almost want to pretend that they are white-collar workers with monthly salaries. Lots of people's lives are not quite that tidy, and we need to accommodate the differences."—[*Official Report, Welfare Reform Committee*, 19 May 2015; c 32.]

The committee and I certainly desire to accommodate the differences, but we do not see very much of that approach on the part of the DWP. Clearly, there can be a disconnect between the reality that many ordinary folk live and the theoretical existences that are imagined for them by some of the mandarins in Westminster.

The report highlights some particular issues of concern. The main one is sanctions, which I have been concerned about for a considerable length of time. I have always felt that, while the bedroom tax can reduce people's income unjustifiably, sanctions can completely remove people's income, which is so much worse.

One of the highlighted conclusions of the committee's report, at paragraph 80, states:

"The Committee has previously reported on the impact of sanctions. It continues to urge the DWP to review how its policies are being applied".

I broadly agree with that paragraph. However, I have some questions about paragraph 78, which states:

"The Committee has always agreed that some kind of conditionality is important."

Surely we must accept that every single person in the UK or in Scotland deserves food and shelter as the absolute minimum. After all, we accept that prisoners are entitled to those things unconditionally, so everyone else should get at least the same. Every individual and every family should get a certain minimum income that is completely unconditional, no matter what they do or do not do.

Engender made that point in referring to a citizen's income in its list of recommendations, and we need to think about that option as we move forward.

Employment is another topic that the report deals with. Paragraph 14 notes that universal credit was intended to encourage

"everyone to gain and sustain employment".

However, I agree with those who argue that employment is not the right course for everyone. Like it or not, a number of women—as has been mentioned in previous speeches—are still the main carers for the older generation, the younger generation and others, as Christina McKelvie highlighted. We as a society benefit from those carers performing that key role, and in turn we need to accept that there are some people whom we should support, in the long term if necessary. They should not have to seek employment, even though, technically, they might be able to do so.

I am happy with the suggestion that we move towards using the term "social security" rather than "welfare". On the subject of universal credit, things have moved on since the report was written and we welcome the relaxation of the proposed cuts. However, if the same overall savings are to be made in the welfare budget, there must be concerns about where that will hit.

Devolution of powers is a key element as we move forward. The fiscal framework, which members have mentioned, is meant to ensure fairness and no detriment to Westminster or Scotland as a result of powers being devolved. However, I remain sceptical about that, and the signs that we have seen so far have not been good.

The original theory was that whichever Parliament made changes would incur the subsequent costs. However, with the tax powers that we have so far, we have seen that Westminster has made the changes but this Parliament has had to write the cheque for all the costs. The precedents are not good, and that

concerns me with regard to welfare. Whatever new powers we end up with, we will still face a limited budget. If we want a more generous welfare system, especially for women, the question is where the money will come from.

The obvious options are to reduce spending in some other area or perhaps to raise taxes. We are being more consensual today because we are debating a committee report, and I support that. However, we will have real choices to make as we go through the budget process. That will be challenging, and I call on all parties to be realistic. If they want more money in one place, they will have to tell us where it comes from.

16:13

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The Welfare Reform Committee's report on women and social security is surely one of the most important reports that the Parliament has produced in the current session. It is a substantial piece of work that highlights the impact of welfare reforms on women and puts on record—possibly for the first time in one document—how many of those changes have served to aggravate existing inequalities that women experience.

There are numerous examples in the report that illustrate those inequalities across the whole spectrum of welfare reforms. Covering universal credit, the sanctions regime and the impact on women carers and single parents, the report shows how women in particular are affected as a result of the welfare reform agenda.

One of the most startling figures to come to light—as several members have mentioned—comes from the House of Commons library. Since the reforms began in 2010, some £26 billion-worth of cuts have been made, and a staggering £22 billion of that has been taken from women's income.

The committee has made a large number of recommendations for both the Scottish and UK Governments to consider, and I am pleased to read the detailed comments from the Scottish Government indicating that work is already under way to bring about the changes requested. I am not aware whether the UK Government has responded to the report as yet. We should pay tribute to committee members, past and present, to all those who gave evidence and to the clerks for putting the report together.

Some concerns were raised about universal credit and the system of single monthly payments, and the issue of a person in the household—usually the male—being the recipient of the payments, including those intended to cover things such as rent. The worry is that that makes it much more difficult for a woman to negotiate and

manage the household income in terms of family priorities. The Scottish Government's response supports a move to twice-monthly payments and direct payments to landlords in order to remove some of the concerns on the matter. People will have the choice of how they want to manage their account, giving them more control of their own affairs.

In addition, women are far more likely to earn less than their male partners and therefore to be regarded as the second earner. Professor Diane Elson commented that, when earnings disregards and tapers are taken into account, it is not financially worth while for many women to take on a job at all. The committee has asked the UK Government to re-examine the allowances for second earners to overcome that problem, which greatly affects the ability of women to enter the labour market.

One area where the committee heard about the severe negative impact, particularly on women, is in relation to sanctions. One of the most common problems was when appointments are delayed or cancelled by jobcentres and women in particular are unable to attend on the rescheduled dates due to childcare issues or the unaffordability of transport costs for repeat journeys. The Scottish Women's Convention noted the hypocrisy of the DWP, because if it makes errors and causes delays, there is no impact, but if a person makes a mistake, it usually leads to a sanction being imposed.

Sanctions and delays in benefit payments are one of the main causes of people being driven to food banks in order to survive. I have seen countless constituents in my Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley constituency coming to food banks citing both those reasons as being the main factor in their being there. The effectiveness of sanctions has been questioned. Howard Reed from Landman Economics told the committee that there was no relationship between sanctions and employment levels, and that areas where sanctions had been employed with greater "gusto", as he put it, showed employment rates that were slightly lower. He also informed the committee that there is no UK Government data on the impact that sanctions have on people and families as a whole. The committee therefore called on the UK Government to conduct an independent review of the sanctions process to establish the impact that sanctions are having and whether they help people into work, and to revise the appeals process so that it can be carried out much more quickly.

One of the biggest barriers to women taking up employment is finding suitable and affordable childcare. Carers Scotland said that women are four times as likely as men to have given up work

because of multiple caring duties and that 85 per cent of people who care for children and an adult—sometimes called sandwich carers—are also women. As members will know, the Scottish Government will double childcare provision to about 30 hours per week—on a flexible basis, too—by the end of the next session of Parliament. Barnardo's commented that the flexible and wraparound nature of that childcare is just as important as the funding itself. That should have a hugely positive impact on the ability of women—and men—to get into work and maintain their family duties and obligations.

I will just say a few words in support of lone-parent women. We note in the report that 92 per cent of single parents are women, which means that we have more than 150,000 single-parent women in Scotland. There are 12 safeguards that the DWP is supposed to apply to protect lone parents from having their circumstances worsened. However, we heard from the Single Parent Action Network that only a quarter of the women affected have agreements with their local jobcentres allowing them to restrict their job searches to school hours, which is one of the 12 safeguards that are particularly important for women.

The impact of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 on women in Scotland is particularly unfair. I know that the Scottish Government is working to mitigate much of that as far as it can, spending some £300 million already in undoing the damage that would have been done to thousands of women in Scotland had it not acted. However, it is not all about money; it is also about restoring a sense of fairness, dignity and respect at the heart of the system so that it values its citizens and offers genuine equality for Scotland's women. I hope that the new Scottish social security system will begin to put in place such a framework. Again, I commend the work of the committee in bringing this report to the Parliament.

16:19

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I begin by thanking all members of the Welfare Reform Committee for their work on the report. We all know that the recession has had a devastating effect on Scotland and the whole of the UK, but it has particularly affected certain groups—the young, disabled people and women. It has affected their prosperity and their sense of wellbeing. At that difficult time, instead of our welfare system offering relief and support to women across Scotland, the welfare reforms have made the situation more stressful. The system has disproportionately failed vulnerable people and it has disproportionately failed women in our society.

The committee has done a fantastic job of illuminating the failings of the system. For example, the report on sanctions pointed out that the system has led to a climate of fear rather than encouraging people back into work and the report on food banks revealed the direct correlation between the use of food banks and the welfare reform programme. In addition, it was the research from the committee that illuminated the fact that some 80 per cent of households affected by the bedroom tax contain a disabled adult.

The report that we are discussing today very much continues in that powerful vein. I was struck by some of the statistics in it and I think that they are worth repeating. Colleagues have already mentioned this, but since 2010 some £26 billion-worth of cuts have been made to benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions and 85 per cent of that has been taken from women's incomes. That is a staggeringly disproportionate impact on women.

The committee went on to quote figures from Engender, Close the Gap and many others, revealing that women are twice as dependent on the social security system as men, they have fewer financial assets and they are far more likely to be lone parents and carers.

It is right that we make common cause across the Parliament on the issue. Austerity and the welfare reform programme are bad for our economy and bad for the prosperity of individuals and communities. This is not, frankly, the kind of society that many of us wish to see. We want to see an end to punitive sanctions, to discrimination and to blaming people who are in need for their misfortune.

However, I hope that, this afternoon, we will do more than that. If all that we do is to blame the Conservatives and the UK Government, we will not be facing up to our responsibilities, nor will we be using the powers that are at our disposal for the purpose that I believe they were intended to have.

Like many members, I lived through the Thatcher years and I was frustrated by the fact that we would elect representatives of one particular party in Scotland and a party of a different hue would be elected in another part of the UK, but the answer to that is the Scottish Parliament. It is difficult to imagine the poll tax being introduced now that we have the Scottish Parliament, and the committee's work has revealed that the UK Government cannot impose reforms on this country with us being powerless to do anything about it. The bedroom tax in particular has revealed that. In fact, the committee's analysis showed that our mitigation of the bedroom tax particularly benefited women in Scotland.

I want to give a couple of examples. First, I want to comment on Motability. I do not know whether other members have recently received a letter from Motability, but changes are under way and a transition scheme is in place. As most members will know, the Motability scheme allows disabled people to lease a new car, scooter or powered wheelchair by exchanging their Government-funded Motability allowance. People qualify if they get the higher-rate mobility component under DLA or the new enhanced rate under PIP.

I made some inquiries and I discovered that 519 people in my Eastwood constituency use the Motability scheme, and 1,700 people across East Renfrewshire. I asked how many are expected to lose their allowance. Motability could not say exactly, but it said that, of the people who have been reassessed so far, 12,300 have been awarded the same level of support and retained membership of the scheme but 9,000 have lost eligibility. That is almost 40 per cent. A huge number of people have lost out on the Motability allowance. Disability News Service has pointed out that more than 100 people a week are losing their Motability vehicles because of the change from DLA to PIP.

I was very struck by what the committee's report had to say about the impact of that on disabled women. According to *Close the Gap*, disabled women are particularly affected by social security reform, because they are far less likely to be in full-time employment than non-disabled people. Moreover, *Close the Gap* said that the employment rate for disabled men is almost 90 per cent, compared with only 40 per cent for disabled women.

Inclusion Scotland said in its written evidence to the committee that in Scotland more than 55 per cent of people in receipt of the higher-rate mobility component—in other words, the people who qualify for a Motability car—are women, and concluded that women are therefore far more likely to lose out.

Why does that matter? I think that we all know that the point of welfare reform is to encourage people to access work, and the whole point of Motability is to enable people to access work and childcare.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to draw to a close.

Ken Macintosh: Instead of helping women to access work, the reforms will hurt women. In its response to the committee's report, the Scottish Government did not say much about the issue, other than that it will "work with Motability". I ask the minister to expand on that, in particular—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Ken Macintosh: In particular, I ask the minister to look at the concessionary travel scheme, which currently applies only to the higher-rate mobility component and not to the lower rate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks. I call Christian Allard—I am afraid that I can give you only five minutes now. Sorry.

16:25

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I have enough material for 20 minutes, but I will speak for only five.

I thank Ken Macintosh, who struck the right tone when he said that the poll tax and the bedroom tax would never have been introduced by the Scottish Parliament. We are in a different place, here in Scotland.

That brings me to Baroness Goldie, who will close the debate for the Conservatives. We have a Dr Who in the chamber—someone who, every week or so, can time travel, leaving this Parliament in modern, 21st century Scotland to go back one, two or even three centuries to the House of Lords at Westminster. Maybe Baroness Goldie, who is a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee, will enlighten us as to why her party at Westminster is targeting the poorest of the poor.

I will not give credit to Mr Osborne. A lot of members suggested that he is somehow targeting women, but I do not think that that is the case. He could not care less whether he targets women or men; what he cares about is targeting the poor. Maybe Baroness Goldie will tell us what that will do for equal opportunities in Scotland and throughout the UK, given that, as we know, most of the poorest people in society are women. Indeed, the poorest among the poorest in our society are women—that is the aggravating factor. Why does Baroness Goldie not speak to someone at Westminster—whoever she needs to speak to—to tell them that welfare cuts that target the poor will stop progress to equality between men and women in Scotland?

I will go even further. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament are making as much effort as they can do to narrow the gap, but what is happening at Westminster in the House of Lords and the House of Commons—two or three centuries away, although it takes only a day to get there, of course—is affecting what we do here. We might manage only to keep the gap as it is. Let us not forget that all the efforts of the Scottish Government and Parliament, which we heard about—and I thank the committee for pointing out so much of what we do—will be affected.

Let us quantify that. I have read a lot of reports on the matter, including the joint report “A Widening Gap: Women and Welfare Reform” by Engender, the Scottish Refugee Council, Scottish Women’s Aid, Close the Gap, and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, to which the committee referred in its report. In the joint report, we were reminded:

“Women did not enjoy equality with men in Scotland before welfare reform.”

That is true; they did not, and they do not. The issue is how we narrow the gap.

I thought a lot about that when the Equal Opportunities Committee did our “Women and Work” report about equal opportunities for women at work. I think that we need to go a lot further than this; we need to talk about men at home. What do I mean by men at home? I am talking about social security, of course—that is what it is all about. It is about how we help the people who care for children at home. How can we make sure that we are helping the carers, the people who are not at work full time, the people who are on low pay or who only work part time—the people who have those incredible zero-hours contracts? How can we help those people so that we can make sure that we have a gender balance? We will never have a gender balance if we do not sort out that problem.

I congratulate the Scottish Government and the committee on the language that they have used, because we should not talk about welfare; we should talk about social security. Similarly, we should not talk about benefits or allowances; we should talk about entitlements. It is important that we change our language when we talk about the issue. Perhaps more important than ever, let us talk about parenting as opposed to talking about gender difference.

16:31

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): This has been an interesting debate and there have been some genuinely thoughtful contributions. Let me respond to Monsieur Allard, who raised an important point—it is a point about political debate. In response to his question, my party, in government, has had to deal with an economic challenge. It is interesting that no one has disputed the need to reform the welfare system—that is what I find fascinating.

I hear a lot of criticism of what my party has done in government—that is perhaps predictable. I hear very little about what my political opponents would offer by way of substitute, but perhaps we will get more of that as time proceeds.

Clare Adamson: Will the member take an intervention?

Annabel Goldie: Forgive me—I really need to make progress.

By way of context for all this, in comparison with 2010, there are more than 170,000 more people in jobs in Scotland, and more than 2 million people getting more of their pay back at the end of the week because of tax cuts—I do not hear Mr Allard referring to that.

In his speech, my colleague John Lamont usefully placed some of the changes to social security in context and outlined a number of the lessons to be taken forward in the committee’s current work. This is undoubtedly an important period in the timeline of the social security system—or welfare state—in Scotland.

We have seen extensive reforms at the UK level, but interestingly, from my perspective, there is now a real impetus for this Parliament to consider our own approach to social security, and not least the position of women within it.

I served on the committee during the time of the inquiry and I think that the committee report produced a number of important findings, conclusions and recommendations. Yes, I dissented from some of them, either where they were in conflict with my party’s policy—I think that in Scotland, we are still allowed to have political disagreements—or where I disagreed with the analysis.

However, the inquiry report makes some important comments on aspects of universal credit. Although I indicated my dissent to paragraph 13, members might be pleased to hear that I have repented—I have changed my mind; I think that there is a need for greater flexibility and that it would be desirable.

On sanctions, I think that paragraphs 16 and 17 are powerful. I managed to clarify, despite what one or two committee members have indicated, that I understand that no political party supports the principle of the abolition of conditionality. I understand that the Scottish National Party currently supports a moratorium in applying it, but if people believe in the principle of a system and are not in agreement with how it is being implemented, they have to come up with their own suggestions on how they think it should be improved.

Having said that, I think that sanctions are an important area, and that more and better information needs to be provided to claimants. I entirely agree that it is completely unacceptable to impose sanctions in circumstances where there has been a genuine oversight or an unavoidable failure to attend a meeting, perhaps due to a carer’s responsibility or obligation.

The report also contains constructive comments on a whole range of issues, including employment and jobseeking support, carers, lone parents and women who are vulnerable for a variety of reasons—and, of course, the need to have a stronger link between the social security system and GIRFEC.

An important range of powers is coming to this Parliament as a result of the Smith agreement. I was privileged to be part of that process. What encourages me is that we are starting to see movement towards policy from the Scottish Government on those matters: there is one area where we have detail. This may stun the minister, but I especially commend the Scottish Government for its approach in that respect. Almost three quarters of those in receipt of carers allowance are women, and those individuals are a vital part of our society. Their fantastic work is estimated to be saving the NHS and social care services billions of pounds. Joan McAlpine spoke eloquently about that. I therefore welcome the First Minister's statement that she will support raising carers allowance to the level of jobseekers allowance, which will give a real boost to those extremely hard-working people. Indeed, I welcomed that policy when my own party leader, Ruth Davidson, proposed it just a fortnight earlier at my party's conference.

It is worrying that, over the past quarter, there has been a decline in the rate of women in employment in Scotland. The trend has gone in the opposite direction throughout the UK as a whole. While that trend has only recently emerged, we should all be concerned about its potential to grow into a longer-term issue. I hope that the minister will be able to address that, and will give the Scottish Government's analysis of that trend and set out proposals to address it.

I, too, welcome the chancellor's announcement on tax credits yesterday. I had some concerns, and I was public about those concerns and wrote to the chancellor to express them. I am pleased that that decision has been made. The committee's conclusions on tax credits were balanced. It rightly identified some issues, which I hope can be addressed as tax credits are brought into the structure of universal credit.

For the first time in the history of this Parliament, our debates on social security are moving on from simply offering a view on the decisions of the UK Government. Importantly, that was recognised by some contributors, not least John Mason, Willie Coffey and Ken Macintosh. These things matter. I may not have agreed with every conclusion in the committee's report, but it is a substantial body of work and a very useful step in ensuring that we have a Scottish welfare system.

16:37

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Mr Allard spoke about someone from another Parliament time travelling here and ending up in this one. I commend him for his impeccable timing because, just as he said that, James T Kirk himself walked into the chamber, following the unveiling of his new, very regal portrait.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Findlay, we try to avoid nicknames in the chamber.

Neil Findlay: I am sure that SNP members will be buying their copy to go above the fireplace for Christmas.

The report was written before I became a member of the Welfare Reform Committee, and I commend the committee for it and concur with the views expressed in it, especially in relation to the way in which welfare cuts have affected women. Many members, including Michael McMahon, Joan McAlpine and Ken Macintosh, have commented on the shocking statistics relating to these so-called reforms. They are right to do so, because women are bearing the brunt of the Tory Government's all-out attack on working people. Members have mentioned that 85 per cent of Osborne's social security cuts affect women's incomes. The important Engender report, which has contributed a great deal to the debate, makes grim reading. It shows that women are twice as dependent as men on tax credits and benefits. Women are in the lowest paid, most insecure work—work that is often part time or zero hours. Women are much more likely to be carers and to have to cut their hours or give up work altogether to take up their caring role. This is at a time of increasing pressure on household budgets and, all the while, the gender pay gap shows little sign of closing.

I have said for some time that Osborne and Cameron are engaged in a class war, but the report makes it crystal clear that it is a gender war, too. Osborne and Cameron's so-called reforms promote the idea that the benefits budget, funds for public services and the country's debt are all the fault of the poor, the disabled, the unemployed, the low paid and single parents. Several people have mentioned single parents, 92 per cent of whom are women—quite a startling statistic.

Annabel Goldie: I hear what the member says, but does he not acknowledge that, in Scotland, we have more women in employment than we have ever had before, which is positive progress?

Neil Findlay: Of course, we would all welcome more women—indeed, anyone—getting into work, but if that work is typified by low pay and zero-hours contracts it is hardly a basis on which they can build security for themselves and their

families. That is the problem with the jobs that are coming to Scotland.

I welcome the U-turn on tax credits. I even welcome Ms Goldie's U-turn on tax credits. She was in the House of Lords a couple of weeks ago, voting to abolish them. Now, she is repentant, and I welcome the repentant sinner. The fact that tax credits will not be cut is a good thing, irrespective of who takes the credit for it, because that money is going back into the pockets of working people.

The whole agenda around the social security system sees the media enthusiastically embracing the negative view of the system, buoyed by horrendous programmes such as "Benefits Street" and screaming tabloid headlines about the evils of single parents. I find all that utterly disgusting. According to the DWP's own figures, the reality is that just 2 per cent of the entire welfare budget is spent on unemployment benefits and only 18 per cent is spent on family benefits such as tax credits. By contrast, 42 per cent is spent on pensions. However, such facts do not fit with the prevailing narrative.

Against that backdrop and the backdrop of more cuts coming—another £12 billion of cuts were announced yesterday—and in the frenzied negative atmosphere that exists around the whole system, we are challenged with designing the social security system of the future. The first and central principle must be that it is a humane system that treats people with dignity and respect and which assists them to make the full contribution to our society that we all want to see. That has been a constant theme in discussions about the failings of the current social security system. A few weeks ago, women told us about the lack of understanding of their situation—whether they have a mental health condition, a caring responsibility or a training need. They also spoke of the failure of the work programme to recognise the value of self-help and voluntary work.

The main problem for women and men, young and old, is the lack of good-quality, full-time, permanent jobs in the economy, rather than any issues to do with employability. We heard from people who appear, more often than not, to be hindered by the system rather than helped by it. We heard of a culture of benefits and employability that seems to lack empathy and understanding. That is a criticism not of the people who work in the system, who are under huge pressure, but of the culture that is led from numbers 10 and 11 Downing Street and which permeates down to the front line.

On a range of other issues, such as the impacts on carers and the cared for, women fleeing violence, refugees, children and those with mental health issues, I share the committee's concerns.

We have the opportunity to address those issues with the new welfare powers and we should take that opportunity.

16:43

Margaret Burgess: This has been a useful debate that has included a number of excellent speeches from members across the chamber. I will touch on some shortly and respond to them.

Again, I thank the committee and the organisations that contributed to the report, "Women and Social Security", which has helped us all to understand how people really feel about the current welfare system and how it treats them. I pay tribute to the work that Michael McMahon did on the report and on previous committee reports; he was there at the setting up of the committee, which has produced a number of useful reports that have helped the Government to take things forward.

As I said in my opening remarks, the Government is absolutely committed to removing barriers that women face. We are already taking a number of actions to support that goal, but we are faced with the reality that our budget is being cut by a UK Government that takes a wholly different ideological approach to the one that we want to take.

Yesterday's news on tax credits was welcome, but as the Poverty Alliance and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations have pointed out—as have many members today—some £12 billion will still be taken from the pockets of some of the poorest people in society, and many of the cuts will disproportionately affect women and children.

Even worse is that the cuts have the potential to impact on the progress that we have made in Scotland. The "Annual Report on the Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland—October 2015" shows that we are, using the powers that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, making progress on some of the main drivers that cause child poverty. However, progress is at risk from UK Government measures that will hit thousands of low-income working families.

Yesterday, Peter Kelly from the Poverty Alliance said that the

"announcement on tax credits is welcome, but families still remain under financial pressure.

Families will still lose the family element of tax credit, and working-age benefits remain frozen until the end of this parliament.

We are now at the stage where there is nothing to cut. We are hurting the most vulnerable in our society."

I entirely agree.

I will now respond to some of the points that were made in the debate. Jenny Marra talked about the need for a summit on women's issues in social security. We are happy to consider that suggestion—the issue is certainly on our agenda, and we are progressing it. A range of discussions have taken place through our “Creating a Fairer Scotland: What Matters to You?” conversations. Organisations including Engender, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Scottish Women's Convention have been involved.

Michael McMahon talked about the equality impact assessment and women. The cabinet secretary has responded on that point and confirmed that gender, including maternity and pregnancy issues, is part of the assessment process. Those areas will certainly be looked at in any system that we put together.

A number of members talked about carers and welcomed what the Scottish Government is doing for carers and our proposals for the carer's allowance. It is interesting that Annabel Goldie supports that approach here in Scotland; I just wish that her party would support our position and apply it across the UK, so that we do not have to use our depleting budget to mitigate the impact of cuts.

A number of members spoke about sanctions. There has been no disagreement in what has been said in that regard or about their impact. Joan McAlpine expressed the matter well; she referred to carers having been forced into work because, for example, the person for whom they are caring has lost their benefit. That has such an impact on the carer: at a tremendously emotional and difficult time, a family may be faced with losing their only income and are sometimes, consequently, being forced to use food banks.

Margaret McDougall and Willie Coffey spoke about childcare, and both acknowledged what the Scottish Government is doing in that area. We are working hard with local authorities and we are committed to providing 600 hours of childcare, which will increase in the future, as well as to building in the flexibility that we know is required. In that vein, we are also committed to working with employers and their representative organisations to look at flexibility in the workplace, because we know that that will help women and get them back into work.

Kevin Stewart talked about the need for the UK Government to carry out a cumulative impact assessment on all the welfare reforms and benefit cuts. I, too, want to see exactly what the cumulative impact is.

Ken Macintosh talked about Motability. We recognise the trust that people place in the Motability scheme. When people get a Motability

vehicle, it gets them out, gives them a life and gets them to contribute to society.

On people's concerns about DLA changing over to PIP, the Scottish Government's position is clear: we have asked for PIP's roll out to be halted and for the budget to remain the same. The fiscal framework is important in that regard. I think that we all agree that we need to get that right for Scotland because we do not want people to be worse off.

A number of other contributions were made about sanctions. Christian Allard mentioned how women were not equal before the welfare reforms and how the reforms have simply increased their inequality in society.

I will speak about some of the more meaningful actions that the Government has taken. We have a strong record on taking action to support women and families, and we support a range of gender organisations to the tune of almost £900,000. More widely, our current and planned funding will result in investment of about £296 million over the period 2013-14 to 2015-16. A significant part of that funding will go on helping to support women's groups. I mentioned earlier some of the action that we have already taken under existing powers, such as the mitigation of the bedroom tax and the creation of the Scottish welfare fund.

More women get community care grants than men.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, minister.

Margaret Burgess: I am sorry—are you telling me to wind up, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you have to close. Your time is up, minister.

Margaret Burgess: Okay.

As I said before, the Scottish Government is fully committed to working co-operatively with stakeholders and members from across the chamber so that we can achieve a system that better suits women and the people of Scotland.

16:50

Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I join Kevin Stewart and the minister in thanking Michael McMahon for his sterling work as convener of the Welfare Reform Committee. He helped to shape the influence that that committee has had over a long period. From the speeches that have been made, I know that the committee members have valued his input.

It has been a good debate, but we would expect that. There has been a lot of consensus and—I do not mean this as a criticism—much of what was

said echoed what Clare Adamson said in her opening speech and reinforced the points that she ably made.

What is happening to women in the social security system, not only in Scotland but throughout the UK, is stark. It is hard to understand the scale of it. We keep saying that we take pride in the fact that, in 21st century Scotland and Britain, there is equality before the law. Women are now treated equally and there is no discrimination. That is fine, but it is true only up to a point. When we start to consider the reality that Clare Adamson and other speakers articulated, we see that there is still discrimination and we are not all equal.

It is hard to get our heads around the scale of it: 85 per cent of welfare cuts since 2010 have been to women's income. If we were to pass a law to introduce that level of discrimination, there would be howls of outrage. However, somehow, there is complacency that the decisions that result in 85 per cent of cuts impacting on women are acceptable. It is, to be frank, unacceptable. No decent society should tolerate that kind of discrimination. Yes, we are all equal before the law and, no doubt, the benefits system is supposed to treat women equally in theory but, as speaker after speaker pointed out, it is women who bear the burden of the child rearing, have to take time off work to look after the child when the child is sick and often have to give up their employment to look after children.

Christian Allard: I warn the chamber that, by saying too often that it is women who do the childcare, have the low-paid jobs and have to go home to look after the children who are sick, we may be reinforcing a stereotype and not encouraging men to do that.

Hugh Henry: If the reality is that women do that, it would be absurd not to mention it in case we reinforced it. To be frank, the more we say it, the more we challenge it. It is unacceptable, and being silent and hiding from it will not change things.

In many respects, it is women who have to be the prime carer; 74 per cent of people on carers allowance are women and 95 per cent of lone parents on benefits are women. Lone parents are more likely to be sanctioned than other claimants. Neil Findlay said that this was not just a class war but a gender war, and there is some truth in that. The committee started off by looking at social security from a gender perspective, but it quickly came to the conclusion that it is a gender issue. It is women who are bearing the brunt of the cuts that are being made in the social security system, and that is just unacceptable.

The fact that so many members have repeated much of what Clare Adamson said reflects the reality that they are finding expressed in their constituency postbags and the reality of their casework. Margaret Burgess was quite right to say that the Scottish Government should be committed to a family-friendly, flexible society but, as Jenny Marra said, the claim that we are all in this together is belied by the facts. That is just not true. We are not all in this together. I say to Christian Allard that women are bearing the burden of childcare, the burden of being responsible for providing care and the burden of the cuts to social security.

As Jenny Marra suggested—I hope that the committee would back this—the Government should call a high-level summit to address the gender impacts of the cuts. In its report, the committee refers to the evidence that it took from a number of organisations on the need to come together.

Michael McMahon said that women are disproportionately affected by welfare reform, but he also pointed to the complexity of women's lives, which speaker after speaker mentioned. He paid tribute to the contribution of Engender and talked about the issue of multiple identities. Despite being carers, having disabilities and looking after our children, women make up 51 per cent of the workforce. Annabel Goldie suggested that the fact that so many women are back in the workforce is something to be proud of. Of course it is, as Neil Findlay said, but when women are coming into the workforce on the minimum wage, on zero-hours contracts and without the security of long-term employment, and when they are the ones who are most likely to be paid off whenever there is a problem, there is still something to worry about.

It is not a case of rejoicing about the number of women who come into the Scottish Parliament or who go to Westminster to take up well-paid jobs with good pensions; it is a case of worrying about the women in my constituency in places such as Linwood, Barrhead, Johnstone and Neilston who do not know from week to week what their income is likely to be or what the future is likely to hold for them. As John Mason said, saying to them that they need to go out to work is not necessarily the moral or right thing to do, because I repeat that some women still have to look after the children or someone with a disability. To say to such women, who are often already on a low household income, that they need to go out and work and enjoy the dignity and respect that work brings is, frankly, to be inhumane to those women, given the circumstances that they are having to cope with in their household, day in and day out. We should be applauding and encouraging them and, as John Mason and others said, supporting them for doing the job that otherwise would not be done in caring

for those who are often ignored and overlooked. There are still double standards in our country, and John Mason was right to say that we need to nail the issue about forcing people into employment.

Willie Coffey again mentioned that women are more likely to have to give up work because of carer duties, and he made the link between food banks and sanctions.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): You should conclude, Mr Henry.

Hugh Henry: Certainly, Presiding Officer.

That issue has come out time and again.

Ken Macintosh made an interesting point about Motability that needs to be explored further.

It is all right moaning and groaning about how bad things are, but I hope that the Parliament and the Scottish Government will take what the committee has said to form the basis of a future that is totally different from what exists just now.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S4M-14791, in the name of Hugh Henry, on women and social security, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the 3rd Report, 2015 (Session 4) of the Welfare Reform Committee, *Women and Social Security* (SP Paper 773), including its recommendations to the Scottish and UK governments.

Meeting closed at 17:00.

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