



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 12 January 2016

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 12 January 2016

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection and our leader is the Rev Dr Robert Calvert of the Steeple Church in Dundee.

The Rev Dr Robert Calvert (The Steeple Church, Dundee): Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to come here and wish members of the Scottish Parliament a happy new year—if it is not too late to do that.

If we learned one thing last month, it is that just a moderate increase in storm activity creates complete havoc across our land. Storm Frank made Scotland's towns and glens into disaster sites. The other big issue that our continent and country face is refugees and migrants. It is not a new issue and it is not likely to end. In this era of the highest human migration in history, people travel from lands that are wasted by war and climate change.

Before we returned to Scotland in 2014, my wife and I lived in Rotterdam for 19 years. Our home was on an island in Europe's largest port city, where we were situated between Manhattan-style apartment blocks and office buildings along the River Maas. In the Netherlands they built dykes and barriers to protect the land from rising sea levels. The Dutch are used to water problems and that is why they have some of the world's best marine engineers.

My simple point is that, even if we can control water flows, we cannot do the same with migrants. We cannot control travellers and make them a commodity. Some social commentators speak of migration "flows" and "highways", but when we use that language we disrespect those who are most affected by this humanitarian crisis. They must not be treated like excess water or bad weather. Being likened to traffic subtly changes migrants from humans into commodities, and when that happens we are little better than traffickers, who see those people as less than human. We think in terms of us and them. We can turn a tap on and off but we cannot turn off the coming and going of people who seek a better life.

There is a little story in the middle of the Old Testament book of Genesis about Abraham giving hospitality to strangers. Three men arrived without warning

"in the heat of the day."

It was siesta time, but the elderly couple provided water for tired feet, rest in the cool of the shade and a sumptuous feast. The narrative ends with news of a baby that would lead to the birth of a child refugee, whom we call Jesus.

That story, which is shared by the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, tells how home is not necessarily where we are born or brought up. Home is where we are received and welcomed and where we get recognition and respect. May God give us Abraham's grace, so that migrants will be proud to call Scotland home.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-15292, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a revision to the business programme for today.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 12 January 2016—

after

followed by Topical Questions

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Flooding—[Joe FitzPatrick]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:05

Bird Flu (Suspected Case in Fife)

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

To ask the Scottish Government what restrictions it is implementing in response to the suspected case of bird flu in Fife. (S4T-01269)

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

Laboratory tests have revealed that a very mild form of H5N1 avian influenza virus has been identified in a broiler breeder's flock near Dunfermline. It is quite distinct from the highly pathogenic form of H5N1 that has caused significant problems over the past decade or so around the world.

Robust action was immediately taken following the reporting of the initial suspicion to minimise any potential risks from the birds to either public or animal health. As a result, the farm is under restrictions and the local area is subject to the control of bird movements and gatherings by means of a 1km temporary control zone.

The eggs supplied by the unit are not for human consumption but are sent to a company hatchery, which is also under similar movement restrictions. No eggs laid during the period in which the flock is believed to have been infected have hatched.

A thorough investigation to identify the likely infection source is under way. All our actions are in line with requirements under European Union law. A cull of the birds on the premises will be started not later than tomorrow morning. I have been advised by the professionals of both Health Protection Scotland and Food Standards Scotland that there is a minimal risk to public health, though precautions were put in place to safeguard those involved in the depopulation and cull of the birds. We have been in communication with our stakeholders, who support all our actions to date.

Willie Rennie: I thank the minister for his reassurances about public health, because that is critical with this episode. After years of contingency plans and exercises, this is a live test of the system. I know that it is early days, but will the minister tell me more about how the outbreak was identified, how long it took for the authorities to be involved and whether there is an early indication of the outbreak's source? Will he give his overall view about whether the system is working effectively?

Richard Lochhead: As Willie Rennie rightly said, there are tried and tested contingency plans for such outbreaks. The disease control group met

early doors, as soon as the suspicious case was identified by a private vet who had been called in by the company that owns the farm. I commend the farm manager for reporting the suspicious illness of the birds in question and the private vet who in turn reported it and took the necessary action with the authorities. That, of course, is the responsible action that we would expect all poultry keepers and their vets to take, and I thank them for that.

On the source of the outbreak, quite clearly there have been a number of similar instances elsewhere—in 2015, there were three in England, albeit that they involved different strains of H5N1 avian flu; there were instances on the continent, too. It is widely accepted that the wild bird population plays a role in spreading the virus but, of course, it is early days with the Dunfermline incident and investigations are on-going to identify what the potential source of this incursion may be. Those investigations will continue, and I will keep Parliament updated as they progress.

Willie Rennie: The minister is right to commend the vet and the farm manager for how they conducted themselves; the outbreak could have spread and become a wider incident, so their swift and professional action is to be commended. Will he guarantee that he will come to Parliament again to present a full report into the incident, so that we understand fully whether the system has worked effectively in this case? Although it is a low-risk incident on this occasion, a future incident may be different, so we need to know whether the system is working effectively.

Richard Lochhead: I certainly give the guarantee to Willie Rennie and other members that I will keep Parliament updated as the investigation progresses and on any wider issues that may arise from that. I have notified the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee of steps taken so far, and I will continue to do that.

Roadside Emissions Testing (Local Authority Powers)

2. Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what powers are available to local authorities to carry out roadside emissions testing. (S4T-01278)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): The Road Traffic (Vehicle Emissions) (Fixed Penalty) (Scotland) Regulations 2003 provide powers for designated local authorities in Scotland to carry out roadside emissions tests and to issue £60 fixed-penalty notices for emissions offences under the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 that the tests identify. The Scottish Government

provides financial support to local authorities for that work.

Alison Johnstone: There are clear discrepancies between local authorities in how they are implementing the 2003 regulations. The Scottish Government published its national air pollution strategy in November. Will the minister say whether all the actions that were identified for delivery in 2015-16 are on track and what budget is assigned to the delivery of those actions? Can he assure us that the strategy to end air pollution is fully funded?

Derek Mackay: This is a complex area, and I will be happy to come back to Alison Johnstone with more detail on implementation. We debated the issue in November 2015 when we published “Cleaner Air for Scotland—The Road to a Healthier Future”, and it is clear that there is a lot to be done in a very challenging area. It is right to keep up the pressure in that regard and to maintain our partnership with local authorities.

There is funding in the system to execute many of the actions that have been identified. On Alison Johnstone’s point about the key action by local authorities, which is roadside testing, I can say that 13 out of 32 local authorities are implementing roadside testing. I encourage other local authorities to implement the regulations; discussions are continuing in that regard. If Alison Johnstone wants further information on implementation, I will be happy to supply it. Implementation is at an early stage and we have an ambitious strategy to improve air quality, which is necessary given the health impacts in our country.

Alison Johnstone: Professor David Newby’s research demonstrates a clear link between air pollution and heart disease. Indeed, Professor Newby has said that air pollution is one of the top avoidable contributors to heart disease. The minister frequently cites his “record” levels of investment in walking and cycling but, given that that record amounts to a lowly 1.9 per cent of the transport budget, it is clear that the minister is making transport investment decisions that put Scotland’s health at risk. Will he say when he will start to take the issue seriously and invest in the transport options that will enable us to eradicate air pollution?

Derek Mackay: A range of work is going on that can be welcomed. On roads investment, for example, the new Queensferry crossing is a necessary investment and should not be criticised, and the dualling work on the A9, which is partly about road safety and protecting lives, should not be criticised.

Alison Johnstone makes a fair point when she says that emissions from vehicles damage the

planet and damage the health of individuals and communities. Some premature deaths are brought about because of emissions, which is why we support the decarbonisation of transport and the move to electric and low-carbon vehicles—there is specific funding for that.

I would not criticise the record investment in active travel that I inherited from Mr Brown. I have sustained that record funding despite the financial pressures that we face. More than a billion pounds is spent every year on encouraging people to get out of the car and to use public transport. That is the right budget decision in a challenging environment.

I do not in any way underestimate the challenge of improving our environment and encouraging people to make healthier life choices. That is what the Government will continue to do, through our cleaner air for Scotland strategy and our many other interventions.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the minister for those thoughts. Is the point not that, although lots of good work is being done, we need more concerted action in areas in which air quality standards are being breached? Is that not where we need leadership from the Scottish Government, in working with local authorities to target action in urban areas where it is clear that people are dying preventable deaths because of poor air quality?

Derek Mackay: Sarah Boyack makes a fair point, and to support areas where there have been breaches or concerns have been identified, air quality management areas have been designated. A range of interventions can be made, which are not necessarily just about environmental enforcement, to tackle local hot spots. I am more than happy to continue to work in partnership with local authorities who identify such areas, to try to improve local air quality.

Hawick Knitwear (Administration)

3. John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support those affected by Hawick Knitwear entering administration. (S4T-01266)

The Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): I am deeply concerned that Hawick Knitwear has been placed in administration, with the loss of 119 jobs. My thoughts are with staff and their families at this difficult time. I will visit the site tomorrow to speak with the administrators, KPMG, with Scottish Borders Council, I hope, and with members of the workforce and their representatives to assure them that we will do everything possible to support them.

I can confirm that the Scottish Government and its agencies, in partnership with Scottish Borders Council, are exploring every possible avenue of support with the company. We are also working very closely with the administrators to secure new owners for the business.

I can also confirm that we are providing support for the employees who are facing redundancy through our initiative for responding to redundancy situations, partnership action for continuing employment. Through providing skills development and employability support, PACE will aim to minimise the time that the individuals who are affected by redundancy are out of work.

All affected employees have received information on pay support. A PACE redundancy support event and jobs fair will take place this Friday, 15 January, at Hawick rugby club, where PACE partners and local employers with vacancies will be available to meet individuals to assist them with future employment opportunities.

John Lamont: I thank the minister for that answer and for the very constructive dialogue that he has had with me over the past few days about this important matter. The loss of at least 120 jobs in a town the size of Hawick will have a far greater proportional effect than did the closure of Tata Steel. For that reason, I repeat my request that the minister consider setting up a task force to give additional support to the textiles industry in Hawick. Will he consider that request further?

Fergus Ewing: Yes, we will consider it further. We are open minded as to whether a task force is required. As John Lamont and I discussed this morning, it is prudent first to take a short while to assess the situation, while working closely with the administrators—as we always do—the workforce representatives and the local authority. However, I will revert to the member on that point. Similar concerns have been expressed to me by the member of Parliament, Calum Kerr, and by Paul Wheelhouse. As Mr Lamont knows, I seek to take a bipartisan approach on all such matters, so if there is a task force, we will seek to have appropriately balanced representation on it.

I hope that that is a sufficient answer at this point to Mr Lamont's question.

John Lamont: From a practical perspective, I know from my discussions with the employees and trade union officials that there are concerns about the online application process that is contained in the PACE pack. Can the minister ensure that additional support is provided at the PACE event on Friday to assist the employees who are struggling?

Fergus Ewing: Yes, I can. Following my discussion with Mr Lamont this morning, I asked the head of PACE to ensure that the online

applications process does not pose a hurdle. We will take steps to ensure that that aspect is dealt with.

I emphasise that we hope to continue the support that we have provided to the textile industry, including regional selective assistance awards over the past 18 months that total £536,000 to five individual companies, including, in fact, Hawick Knitwear. I know also that Paul Wheelhouse and John Swinney have been involved in textile events over the past years, as have previous Administrations.

The problems are not new, but I think that there is a shared determination across the chamber both to promote the excellent, high-quality work that is done in the industry, which has great successes—it is not all doom and gloom—and to address the extremely unfortunate position that Hawick faces now, particularly in the light of the fact that the move into administration took place at around the same time as the town was affected by flooding.

That double whammy will be felt strongly in Hawick. Therefore I very much look forward to hearing tomorrow, from those who are most directly involved, how we can work together to tackle the challenges that Hawick and the people of Hawick face.

Flooding

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on flooding. The Deputy First Minister will take questions at the end of his statement; there should therefore be no interventions or interruptions.

14:20

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): Since the start of December, Scotland has faced a series of storms, one following quickly on the heels of another. These have brought tremendous disruption, particularly through flooding events affecting many communities across much of Scotland.

“Exceptional” is a term that can be overused, but in the context of the past six weeks it is indeed appropriate. December 2015 and January 2016 saw many records broken. Rainfall was the greatest in the past 100 years of available records; water levels in Newton Stewart were the highest in 53 years; in Inverurie, water levels were the highest in 45 years; and the Dee at Ballater was at its highest level in 87 years. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency recorded over 50 new record river levels across Scotland and, in many cases, previous records were exceeded by substantial margins.

The scale of the events was exceptional but so, I believe, was the response to protect our communities. The collective efforts of our responders, working very closely together, were first class. The timing of storm Frank could not have been worse, with communities and responders planning for the new year. That is usually a period of festivity and hope but, for communities such as Ballater, which I visited on hogmanay, and Newton Stewart, which was visited by the First Minister and the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, it was far from festive and hopeful. However, although those communities saw a terrible start to the year, they continued to demonstrate a strong community spirit.

The Scottish Government resilience room—SGoRR—was actively engaged with the situation throughout, with frequent ministerial resilience meetings to ensure that all that the Scottish Government and its agencies could do was being done. We heard first-hand reports from the national police and fire services, which demonstrated the benefits of the new structures. Those benefits included getting specialist support such as water rescue craft quickly from one part of the country to another and the provision of relief to

local teams who had been at the heart of the initial responses.

That first-class response was greatly aided by planning and preparation that were supported by forecasts from the Meteorological Office and SEPA, which allowed preparations to be undertaken and resources to be stood up in advance of their immediate requirement. Their forward look also allowed good planning to respond to needs, ensuring that individuals and teams were not strained too heavily.

Local authorities were at the heart of the efforts to respond, putting in place immediate defences and, where required, setting up rest centres. There was a concerted effort involving a range of functions in response to the flooding, including social care as well as emergency response. Their efforts were based on a substantial foundation of preparation, response and recovery, and I recognise their achievements in what were challenging circumstances.

While the efforts of local authority staff and emergency responders were critical and deserve recognition, I should also highlight the role played by third sector organisations and communities. None of us will have failed to be impressed by the spirit that was shown in many of the communities, particularly by firefighters, who put to one side their concerns about the flood risk to their own households to support their communities. Communities have joined together to deal with both the response and, now, the recovery, and I pay tribute to all those who are involved in that process.

We will review recent events with the aim of learning lessons to help with future emergency responses. That is regular practice following a SGoRR activation, with officials and responders reviewing the circumstances of the event to identify lessons to be learned, which will be acted on to provide a continuous improvement regime. Ultimately, the learning that is identified is captured and utilised to review and improve the delivery of response and recovery actions by statutory organisations, voluntary agencies and central Government in order to provide the best possible service to our communities, such as was seen in the tremendous joint efforts to tackle issues arising from this winter's storms.

The Government has also been quick to respond to the move from response to recovery. On each occasion, we have been quick to activate the Bellwin scheme. It was triggered on 7 December 2015 as a result of storm Desmond and on 30 December 2015 as a result of storm Frank, and it remains active in the aftermath of the latest severe flooding. The Scottish Flood Forum, which is financially supported by the Scottish

Government, has been swift to offer local support and advice.

On 16 December, I announced as part of the budget statement the allocation of £4 million of Barnett consequential to support those who were affected by storm Desmond. Last Thursday evening and Friday morning, we saw some very significant impacts in the north-east of Scotland. On Saturday, as the communities there dealt with the immediate clear-up, the First Minister announced a further round of support totalling £12 million.

The first key element of that package is the provision of funding to local authorities to allow them to make payments of £1,500 for households, businesses, charities and community groups that have been affected by flooding. That money would be paid from allocations made to local authorities by the Scottish Government. If a local authority did not receive an allocation, it can seek recompense from the Scottish Government to make such a payment, thereby ensuring that any individual in any part of Scotland can receive support if they have been affected by flooding.

Secondly, a flat-rate grant payment of £3,000 will be available to businesses in any part of Scotland where there is evidence that their ability to trade was severely impacted by flooding at the beginning of January. The grant will be a one-off payment to offset costs that cannot be covered by existing insurance—for example, clean-up costs, the cost of materials and exceptional costs to help the business to restore trade, such as marketing and promotion costs. That will be funded by the Scottish Government in addition to the local authority allocations.

Thirdly, the Scottish Government will make available £5 million to assist with the reinstatement of infrastructure that has been lost as a result of the recent flooding. A specific allocation will be made to Aberdeenshire Council to support the reinstatement of the A93 between Ballater and Braemar. The exact sum will be dependent on discussions with the local authority. Further bids from local authorities are now invited.

Finally, the Scottish Government will open an agricultural flood bank restoration grant scheme that will be available to the farming community to seek financial support to restore damaged flood banks. The total available will be up to £1 million. Further discussions will take place tomorrow between the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment, SEPA and NFU Scotland to discuss how we effectively involve and support the farming community in managing such conditions.

The Government has made those announcements as swiftly as possible after the

conclusion of the weather events. That ensured that all partners maintained a clear focus on resolving the emergency situations, and it enabled us to gather a picture of the scale of the events to give clarity about the financial support that could be provided.

Today, the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities is writing to the United Kingdom Government to ask it, as the member state, to make an application to the European Union solidarity fund. The solidarity fund was established after the severe flooding in central Europe in 2002. Payments can be made to help fund emergency operations to deal with non-insurable damage such as salvage operations, repair of infrastructure and cleaning. Applications can be made only by member states. The UK received €162 million after the 2007 floods, but it has so far declined to make an application in relation to the recent flooding. We are asking that it now does so, as a successful application might well provide additional and welcome funding to local authorities to deal with the impact of the past few weeks.

December 2015 was the wettest on record. Climate change brings the likelihood of even more frequent severe weather events. It is important that we are prepared and, to that purpose, the Parliament approved the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009. Yesterday, the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform launched our first-ever flood risk management plan and 14 local strategies, which set out investment plans of more than £235 million in 42 flood protection schemes that will protect more than 10,000 properties. The national plan allows us to target investment and co-ordinate actions that will reduce flood risk. The strategies contain measures such as natural flood risk management, where it is appropriate, as well as initiatives such as flood warning and community engagement.

The flood risk management plan and the local strategies are the culmination of a number of years of work to identify current flood risk. They set a clear agenda for action over coming months. The strategies, which have been developed collaboratively, are not static plans, and they will continue to be informed by the work undertaken by SEPA and other bodies, overseen by the Cabinet sub-committee on climate change, to ensure that our approach adequately addresses the latest climate change projections. SEPA provided excellent technical support and advice in informing those plans, and worked closely with local plan partnership teams. The public were also engaged before the strategies were finalised.

The strategies set the framework for the first six-year planning cycle. In June, the local authority-led partnerships will set out the detailed plan of action,

which will provide additional local detail on delivery between 2016 and 2021. This massive programme demonstrates the seriousness with which the Government takes flood risk and the steps that we are taking to reduce that risk across Scotland.

As a Government, we are committed to investing in flood risk management as an investment in the future. The recent budget identified the need to maintain future investment in flood protection schemes and protected support for flood warning and forecasting. Recent events have shown the importance of that.

I repeat the Government's appreciation for those involved in the front-line response in protecting communities across Scotland from the recent severe weather events. We recognise that flood risk management is a long-term priority. We are committed to reducing the risk, we have put in place a framework to deliver improvements and we are working to ensure that investment continues to be made available to support delivery across the country.

The Presiding Officer: The Deputy First Minister will now take questions on issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. It would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question of the Deputy First Minister would press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the Deputy First Minister for the advance copy of his statement, and I echo his comments about the huge effort that has been made to help people throughout the floods and their immediate aftermath. I particularly welcome the commitment to a review of the emergency response. However, we ask specifically that the issue of flood equipment in communities at risk being available to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service be addressed across the whole country.

I support the suggestion in the Deputy First Minister's statement that there should be a UK bid to the EU solidarity fund. That would make a huge amount of sense, given the severity of the floods that communities across the country have experienced.

However, I repeat that I believe that we need a proper formal review. The Deputy First Minister finished his statement by reassuring us that the money that is needed is there for flood defences, and that local strategies are in place. However, surely the events of the past fortnight tell us that the extreme and more unpredictable weather conditions that we are now experiencing will cause devastation to communities and businesses.

Although the Scottish Environment Protection Agency estimates the annual cost of flooding to be in the region of £250 million, the costs of the past fortnight's flooding are estimated at more than £700 million. I would like more detail about the £235 million that the Deputy First Minister referred to and exactly what it will buy. My understanding of the schemes that he has referred to is that they have not all been tendered, so we do not know the final outcome bills for them or whether they will all be affordable. We also need to know about timescales. The Deputy First Minister's statement suggested that we will not have that information until after June this year. Can he clarify that?

It is important to say that it is clear from having looked at the schemes and at SEPA's flood prevention strategies that even if all the schemes that are being suggested are built, many communities and tens of thousands of households will not be protected by those flood defences. Last week, the First Minister told me that she does not want a long-running review, but I am not asking for that—

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Ms Boyack, but you need to end. You get one minute and 30 seconds, but you are now at two minutes 11.

Sarah Boyack: I apologise, Presiding Officer.

Surely we need to look urgently at future flood mitigation and resilience for our communities.

John Swinney: I hear what Sarah Boyack says and I welcome what she said about EU funding and about the provision of flood equipment being looked at in the light of experience, which will be part of the operational reviews that will be undertaken.

On the remainder of her question, I am at a bit of a loss to understand what she wants the Government to do. We set out on an orderly process that was activated by an act of Parliament that was passed in 2009, and which requires us to produce flood risk management strategies. We have done that: they have been published and were launched by the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform just on Monday. They cover the length and breadth of the country. Some plans will require us to undertake investment in flood protection schemes of the type that we are just completing in Selkirk, where the minister was on Monday, or in the type of scheme that was completed some years ago in the city of Perth—which I represent—and the money for which has proved to be extremely well spent.

In other circumstances, it is about working with nature to utilise its advantages as a component part of our flood risk management strategy. That work has been done and the Government is now focused entirely on implementing the strategies to

provide the maximum protection that we can provide to people who are affected.

Sarah Boyack is right that there will be instances of acute weather intensity affecting different parts of the country. However, when I was in Ballater on hogmanay, not one single person said to me that a flood defence scheme could have protected Ballater, because the event was of such a magnitude that no design scheme would have managed to do that. What is required is examination of catchment areas, exactly as the flood risk management strategies do, in order to identify what cumulative actions can be taken to provide maximum protection. That is what the Government is focused on implementing and taking forward. Those strategies have been informed by the best available research, which we will continue to update, as I said in my statement.

On funding, the Government has made available £42 million as part of the local government finance settlement to support flood prevention schemes, and that money has been used across a range of areas. It has been used in the city of Elgin to provide schemes there, and it has been used in Forres, Selkirk and Brechin. Although the Selkirk and Brechin schemes are just half built, they have provided essential protection to communities there.

The Government's commitment to maintain that funding for the duration of the period to 2020 has been assured by the commitment that I have given to local government that it will command 26 per cent of the capital budget that is available to the Government over the period to 2020, which is an extension of my previous commitment to local government. The resources are there for us to work with local government to introduce the flood risk management strategies that have been carefully prepared in advance of their requirement.

The Presiding Officer: Alex Fergusson has up to a minute.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I, too, am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for the advance copy of his statement, and I entirely endorse the sentiments that he expressed on the professional and voluntary services that rose, with the communities that were affected, so whole-heartedly to the occasion in the wake of the recent devastating floods.

The First Minister's announcement on Saturday was very welcome, although I believe that it was a statement that should surely have been made to Parliament before it was made to the media. However, many questions arise from it and from the statement today.

Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that the £4 million of consequential funding that he

announced on 16 December will not be made available to councils until the end of March? If that is the case, will he fast track it?

Will the Government work with SEPA to ensure that communities such as Carsphairn in my constituency—which has now been flooded three years in a row yet is not recognised by SEPA as an area of potential vulnerability—will be fully taken into account in the flood risk management plan that was announced yesterday? Currently, they are not.

Finally, as we begin to look at how better to deal with future flooding, will the Government undertake to look at prophylactic measures, where appropriate, to slow down the flow of water from our hills and forests before it gets into the river system? That is increasingly successful in all parts of the UK and it has proved to be much more economical and efficient than the purely reactive building of barriers in towns and cities once the water is in that system.

John Swinney: I have seen a bit of traffic over the past two days about the money that I announced in December not being available until March. I suspect that that has come from the letter that was issued to local authorities on 17 December, which indicated that the money would be paid through the local government settlement as a redetermination, and would be paid out in the last two weeks of March 2016. If that is the source of that piece of what I will call poorly analysed information, it does not say much about people's knowledge of local government finance determinations.

Ministers constantly make announcements in Parliament; statutory allocation of the money—actual parliamentary approval—might not come until a redetermination order at the end of March, but that does not prevent local authorities from spending the money. There is absolutely no problem about local authorities having to wait until the end of March for the money. I have announced in Parliament that the money is coming. If that is not good enough for any local authority, we need to look at the whole system of local government finance in every other respect. I have a list of other schemes—the council tax reduction scheme, the teachers induction scheme, free school meals, the looked-after children policy and the discretionary housing payments system—the money for all of which was paid out to local authorities by the same means, which did not prevent local authorities from spending the money. I do not know what people are thinking about on that matter.

I have a lot of sympathy with Mr Fergusson's point about efforts to try to slow down water as it comes down the straths. A substantial conversation has to be had—we have already

embarked on it with the agricultural community and land-use interests—about the various components that can play a part in trying to retain as much water as possible in the hills before it ends up in coastal communities and the river routes through our country. Indeed, if the temperature had been a bit lower, most of the rain that fell in my constituency would still be in the Grampian hills and mountains, and we would be having a fabulous skiing season into the bargain, but it was not thus.

There is a substantive discussion to be had. The thinking that Alex Fergusson mentions is implicit in the flood risk management strategies and will continue to play a part in our discussion with agricultural and rural interests about how we can best use Scotland's natural resources to provide protection from flooding.

The Presiding Officer: As members will expect, I have a large number of members wishing to ask questions. Keep your questions as short as possible, please, and in that way I will allow everybody who has an interest to get in.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): The people of Dumfries and Galloway in my region welcomed the First Minister's announcement of £1 million for the region in addition to the £700,000 that was allocated in December. However, the Labour council in Dumfries and Galloway refused until yesterday to let people know about the £1,500 grants that were made available to them in December. It still claims that it has no money to distribute until March, despite the Deputy First Minister's explanation today and the fact that it has considerable reserves and unspent revenue from this year.

The Presiding Officer: Can we have a question please?

Joan McAlpine: Dumfries and Galloway Council also claims that the December money is restricted to victims of storm Desmond, but I can reveal today that victims of storm Desmond in Dumfries were told that there were no grants available—

The Presiding Officer: Ms McAlpine, please sit down.

Joan McAlpine: —as late as last week.

The Presiding Officer: Deputy First Minister.

Joan McAlpine: Does the Deputy First Minister agree with me—

The Presiding Officer: Please sit down.

John Swinney: In my answer to Mr Fergusson, I went through the issues at length. I have made an allocation of money. The statutory force behind that will be applied later on in the financial year, but the money is available to be spent and there

should be no impediment to its being allocated to individuals who require the support.

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I was interested to hear the cabinet secretary repeat the assertion that councils should pay out now. I suggest to the cabinet secretary that, instead of asking cash-strapped councils to make payments on the basis of an IOU from the Scottish Government, the Scottish Government should make payments as soon as possible to help councils to assist hard-pressed households and local business.

John Swinney: I am at a loss.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): You are indeed.

The Presiding Officer: Order!

John Swinney: Dr Murray is a former minister of the Scottish Government who knows how local authority finance works. Every week we pay money to local authorities. Every single week in life a cash payment is made by the Government to local authorities. Is Dr Murray trying to say to me that Dumfries and Galloway Council is so hard pressed that it cannot find £1,500 this week to pay out to somebody because it has no money available? Local authorities are sitting on £1.8 billion of cash reserves that could be used to support cash management. They know fine well that what we have announced is not an IOU: they know fine well that I have given a commitment and a redetermination that the money will be paid. Dumfries and Galloway Council should just pay up to the people to whom we have allocated the money and stop finding excuses.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Thankfully, many homes in my constituency were spared the impact of the River Don flooding. However, Dyce Juniors Football Club in my constituency has seen its home pitch severely flooded, the perimeter fence damaged, and the clubhouse facilities suffering significant damage. Although the announcement of cash being made available to community groups is welcome, will the Deputy First Minister advise whether the local football club falls into such a category? Given the significant damage that has been caused to the club, what future support might be available to enable it to continue to fulfil fixtures at the earliest possible stage?

John Swinney: We have said that the £1,500 payment can be made to an individual, a business, a charity or a community group. I hope that that definition is broad enough to take in organisations of the type that Mr McDonald has asked about.

Individual judgments on eligibility will be applied at local level, but we believe that the guidance is

broad enough to enable individual authorities to determine what ventures can be supported.

As for longer-term support, organisations have access to a wide range of provisions that can assist them in ensuring that their grounds are rehabilitated. However, the Government is trying to provide early cash support to enable organisations and individuals to get back on their feet after what has been a serious set of circumstances.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank the Deputy First Minister for his statement. First, will he agree to review the Bellwin plan, given the concerns that have been expressed by councils across Scotland, not least in his own area? Secondly, when he mentioned the welcome letter to the UK Government about the EU solidarity fund, he said that there had been some previous discussions. Can he tell Parliament what those were and his reading of why the UK Government seems to be so reluctant to apply to that fund, given the good that it would do to Scotland?

John Swinney: I will certainly look at the Bellwin scheme. I would be very surprised if there is not a successful Bellwin scheme claim out of the events of the past few weeks. I should clarify to Parliament that I will be judging claims not on a storm Desmond basis and then separately on a storm Frank basis; rather, I will be considering the flooding damage that was done over the entire period, which I think is only reasonable in the circumstances.

As I indicated in my statement, the UK Government has been a beneficiary of the EU solidarity fund in the past—in 2007, quite understandably. It represents the type of fund to which we contribute on an on-going basis as part of the financial contributions that member states make to the EU. It is important that when we require that support, we make propositions to obtain it. There would obviously be a benefit to communities in England as well, because there was severe damage in the north of England into the bargain. I have no inside knowledge as to the UK Government's thinking, but I encourage it to embark on an application and to try to receive some of that support, which would be of benefit to us and to local authorities.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I ask the Deputy First Minister to confirm that I have already had discussions with him about flooding that has taken place in the city of Stirling, Aberfoyle, Callander and the wider Stirling area in the past couple of weeks.

Does the Deputy First Minister agree with me that it is now urgent that people who were affected and who qualify for a grant as householders or businesses find the money in their accounts as

soon as possible? To that end, what positive discussions have taken place with local authorities to make sure that they put in place the necessary arrangements to ensure that as many grant payments as possible can be achieved?

John Swinney: We are communicating with local authorities about the arrangements. As I have already explained to Parliament, there are no impediments to that money being made available or to it being financed by local authorities. The properties and businesses that have been affected in Stirling in particular are in quite a range of different geographies within the communities involved.

There will be isolated properties in local authorities that have not been influenced by the allocations that I have made. For that reason, I took the decision to make a facility available to local authorities that do not have an allocation to enable them to make payments and then seek recompense from the Scottish Government so that no individual in any part of Scotland who has been flooded in the recent events in any way loses out through the process.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the Deputy First Minister agree to consider further research and development funding for the development of integrated catchment management, recognising as he does the link between upland management and downstream flooding, to better protect our towns and villages?

In that context, will the Deputy First Minister and his colleagues consider increasing Scotland rural development programme funding to support new initiatives such as the new co-operation fund for joint strategy implementation?

John Swinney: Claudia Beamish will be familiar with the fact that there is provision within the agriculture support scheme to encourage and motivate greater attention on that element of our thinking in the approach to agricultural management.

As I said in my statement, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment will meet the NFUS, which has expressed its enthusiasm for being a participant in that important discussion. In the area that I represent, if agricultural land had not retained the volume of water that it did, the implications for urban communities would have been much more significant, and I am profoundly grateful to the farming community for how that situation was handled.

In relation to research, Mr Lochhead has regular dialogue with the research institutes that are active on that question. I am sure that the points that Claudia Beamish raises can be reflected in that thinking.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I associate myself with the Deputy First Minister's comments on the work of the councils, the emergency services and the army of volunteers.

The Deputy First Minister has visited Ballater and is very much aware of the situation there. I welcome the announcement that moneys will be made available for the repair of the road between Ballater and Braemar. In my constituency, the area between the Dee and the Don has been significantly affected. Will he put on record a mechanism for people to make applications for compensation, and will that information be on the Scottish Government's website?

John Swinney: The most important thing is that there is a ready means by which individuals can make themselves known to local authorities in order to secure financial support. We are encouraging local authorities to make that information available to people. Clearly, the priority is to provide practical assistance to individuals who have been affected by what is a serious set of circumstances and to do so in a fashion that meets their needs.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the Deputy First Minister confirm that the allocation of funding to local authorities will fully fund the £1,500 payment that is intended for households in the relevant council areas? Will he also confirm that there is no expectation or requirement that the payments should be means tested in any way?

John Swinney: On the first point, I would be staggered if the money that I have allocated does not meet all the £1,500 payments in all local authority areas. However, if local authorities can provide evidence to me that that is not the case, I will of course consider that evidence. I do not intend to apply any means testing to the process.

John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Hawick's flood prevention plan has been prioritised as number 16 of 42 plans in the pipeline for the next five years. SEPA has identified 683 residential properties and 283 businesses that are at risk of flooding in Hawick. Of the 15 plans on the list that are above the one for Hawick, all but two affect a smaller number of properties. Given the scale of the damage that was caused last month in Hawick, will the Scottish Government consider giving greater priority to the Hawick flood scheme?

John Swinney: As Mr Lamont will know, as individual schemes take their course, a variety of tests have to be passed, not least of which are those in the planning and design process. Therefore, he should not attach too much rigidity to the order in which schemes emerge. The

priority is to ensure that the funding support is in place and is used to ensure that schemes are taken forward as timeously as possible. I know from the evidence that has been marshalled in relation to the scheme in Hawick the significance of the benefits of that scheme. I am sure that that will be considered as part of the decision-making process.

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): In Caithness, communities such as Halkirk and Staxigoe near Wick were not considered to be flooding hotspots but flooded mainly as a result of excessive surface water. In the medium term, will the rolling flood management plans reassess whether areas that were previously considered low risk should receive investment? In the short term, will the Scottish Government encourage local authorities to review drainage and culvert maintenance to cope with much heavier surface water flooding?

John Swinney: On that last point, there is a lot of substance in what Mr Gibson says. One of the biggest issues that have been faced, particularly with the most recent storm damage, has been the enormous volumes of surface water from the prolonged period of heavy rain. That puts enormous pressure on drainage systems, which might not all be designed to cope with such volumes. Therefore, it is important that, throughout the country, those systems are well maintained, because good maintenance regimes can help. It is also important that we consider where improvements to the drainage system might make a significant difference. It is an issue for us to take forward at local authority level. Surface water is a particular impediment to the effective flow of water and to the alleviation of some of the difficulties that are experienced.

The Presiding Officer: That ends the statement by the Deputy First Minister. I apologise to the two members whom I was unable to call.

Education

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-15282, in the name of Angela Constance, on delivering a world-class education system.

14:55

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): It is a pleasure to open the debate, particularly at the start of a new and exciting year for education in Scotland. Just six days ago, at the international congress for school effectiveness and improvement in Glasgow, the First Minister launched the national improvement framework, and four weeks ago, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development published its review of our progress with curriculum for excellence.

We are extremely grateful to the OECD review team for its thoughtful and comprehensive report, entitled "Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective". We very much welcome the report and its 12 recommendations, which provide us with a strong platform to help us to reach our goal of an excellent and equitable system in which every young person is able to achieve their full potential, irrespective of their background or needs.

It is important to reflect on the many strengths that the report highlights about curriculum for excellence. For example, it states:

"The Curriculum for Excellence ... is an important reform to put in place a coherent 3-18 curriculum",

which rests on

"widely-accepted tenets of what makes for powerful learning."

The deputy director of the OECD's directorate for education and skills, Montserrat Gomendio, said:

"We applaud Scotland for having the foresight and patience to put such an ambitious reform as Curriculum for Excellence in place".

The OECD report notes a picture of

"positive attitudes, engagement and motivation, partnerships outside the school, supportive ethos and teamwork",

and notes that

"learners are enthusiastic and motivated, teachers are engaged and professional, and system leaders are highly committed."

I am particularly heartened by the OECD's findings that our education is inclusive and that our children are resilient. That is exactly what curriculum for excellence is designed to foster. I assure members that our response to those

endorsements, and to all the recommendations, will be bold, focused and resolute.

What parents and other family members around the country will recognise above all is that schools are completely different now from what they were when those people were at school, whether that be 10 or 20 years ago. In my many visits to schools, I am always struck by how confident, articulate and enthusiastic our children and young people are and by how they really own their learning. That is due in part to the freedom that schools have, under curriculum for excellence, to adopt a curriculum that is relevant to learners' needs and to local contexts and settings and which builds on teachers' expertise and talents as well as on learners' interests.

Curriculum for excellence has given us a broader, more flexible and child-focused curriculum, and it will ensure that young people have the opportunity to develop the right range of skills, qualifications and achievements to allow them to flourish. Learning at school is now exciting, stimulating, lively and—crucially—fun. Children are highly motivated and enthusiastic, and teachers are professional, engaged and committed, and all of that is delivering higher standards of achievement.

Last year, there was a record number of passes at higher and advanced higher, and more young people received qualifications that relate to wider skills for life and work. More students are staying on at school until sixth year, fewer are leaving with very low or no qualifications, and all young people can now undertake relevant, work-related learning as part of their curriculum. More than nine out of 10 of last year's school leavers are now in employment, education or training nine months after leaving school.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Has an analysis been done of the proportion of the one out of 10 who have not ended up in satisfactory destinations who have come from poor or deprived backgrounds?

Angela Constance: Ms Lamont knows as well as I do that the relationship between young people not being in positive destinations and their having a poor socioeconomic background is strong. Along with colleagues who work on the fair work, youth employment and skills portfolio, I have worked on moving towards more meaningful, real-time measurement of where individual young people are in terms of positive destinations. The Government is committed to opportunities for all and has led the way across the United Kingdom in ensuring that every 16 to 19-year-old in Scotland who requires a place in education and training is entitled to one.

The OECD noted that

“Scotland has an historic high regard for learning, education and teachers, and the trust it invests in teachers' professional judgement is an admirable counterbalance to the trends in many systems”.

The quality of our teaching workforce and the excellence of our educational leadership provide the bedrock of our education system. The Scottish Government will continue to do all that we can to support and strengthen teacher professionalism. That is why we are investing in our teachers—in initial teacher education, professional learning and maintaining the numbers of teachers who work in our schools. It is also why we have worked with partners to embed the core ideas of the “Teaching Scotland's Future” report and will continue to do so through a new strategic board for teacher education.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): The cabinet secretary rightly made a point about teacher professionalism. With regard to her new headteacher qualification, does she accept that it is important to recognise the difference between rural schools and small schools in rural local authority areas and larger schools in other local authority areas, and to recognise the difficulties with recruitment that will arise occasionally in rural areas as a result of the requirement for that qualification?

Angela Constance: I appreciate that there are particular challenges for rural communities and especially ones with small schools. I discussed that last summer when I attended the first ever islands education summit. We are working closely with partners on how we roll out our commitment to ensuring that, by 2018, all new headteachers possess the headship qualification. Being a headteacher is a professionally and personally demanding role, and we must ensure that all headteachers are supported to achieve the very best in that post, because all the evidence shows us that that is necessary if our children are also to achieve their best.

We have established the Scottish College for Educational Leadership, committed £4 million over the past three years to supporting masters level learning for teachers and created partnerships between universities and local authorities to improve teachers' experiences in the early part of their careers and provide high-quality learning opportunities for experienced teachers. We are also taking steps to require all new headteachers to be qualified before appointment, as I outlined to Mr Scott.

We are in a good place. However, the OECD's recommendations give a clear sense of the steps that we can take to improve our system further, specifically to close the attainment gap and deliver excellence and equity in education for all. They include the need to ensure an approach to

improving equity that is based on what is known to work well; to strengthen the professional leadership of curriculum for excellence locally; to simplify and clarify core guidance on curriculum for excellence; to further support strong relationships between schools and the wider communities that they serve; and to develop an integrated framework for assessment and evaluation that encompasses all system levels.

The OECD report states that

“CfE is at a ‘watershed’ moment”

and suggests that what is needed now is

“a bold approach that moves beyond system management in recognition of a new dynamic and energy ... generated nearer to teaching and learning.”

I whole-heartedly agree, which is why, after three months of extensive consultation with thousands of teachers, parents, educationists and—crucially—children and young people, we launched the national improvement framework last week. The framework is based on four key priorities for education: raising attainment; closing the attainment gap; improving health and wellbeing; and improving employability. The framework is broad and comprehensive and sets out measures for school improvement, school leadership, supporting teachers and engaging parents.

I want to be clear that our faith in the expertise and judgment of teachers is central in assessing pupil progress and in the continuation of the curriculum for excellence assessment framework. That approach will support an understanding of what works and will therefore enable rapid and significant improvement.

Teacher judgment lies at the heart of the system. From 2017, following pilots later this year, teacher judgment will be informed by a system of new national standardised assessment at primaries 1, 4 and 7 and at secondary 3, which will help teachers and parents to make better, more objective and more consistent judgments about children’s progress towards the different curriculum levels. That teacher judgment data, underpinned by the new assessments, will be collected and published nationally each year to give us, for the first time, a clear and consistent picture of how children and young people are progressing in their learning.

The national improvement framework creates a system that strikes the right balance between supporting the development of children and providing information and accountability about national and local performance. Teachers will be able to use the new assessments during the school year to help to inform their judgments about children and action to support those children. Assessment must be used in a way that not only

informs but elicits timely action to improve outcomes for children.

For parents, that will mean clear and meaningful information on their child’s progress that is consistently presented, no matter where they are in the country. For teachers, local authorities and community planning partnerships, it will mean better data for identifying areas for improvement. For the Scottish Government, it will mean that we have clear information to guide national policy. Crucially, it will mean that everyone gets enough information, early enough in children’s education, to pinpoint issues—for individuals, schools, local areas and at a national level—and address them with the right support at the right time.

We can be rightly proud of the success that our education system delivers for most of our children, as evaluated and reported on by a thorough and independent team of experts at the OECD. Those experts have broadly endorsed our approach and given us 12 recommendations for action in areas in which we can make further improvements. In particular, they concluded that we have a great opportunity to lead the world in developing an integrated assessment and evaluation framework. That is what our new national improvement framework is designed to achieve.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that success is elusive for some children—particularly those from deprived communities. The gap in attainment is narrowing but, if we are to achieve our ambition of delivering a world-class education system for all our children, we must and will do more. The Government has already started work on taking forward the OECD report’s recommendations with vigour and energy. We are considering how to capitalise on the watershed moment that has been identified for curriculum for excellence. We have launched the national improvement framework and are now very much focused on its implementation.

We have put education at the heart of our agenda so that we can create a system that is focused on attainment and achievement and built around delivering equity and excellence and, crucially, aspiration and ambition—in other words, a world-class education system.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the OECD’s review of Scottish education, published on 15 December 2015; welcomes the findings of the review that much in the curriculum for excellence is positive, including the holistic approach, the four capacities, professional engagement, trust in teachers’ professional judgement and enthusiasm for learning and teaching; agrees that it paints a picture of a successful and effective school system, but one in which there are important areas for improvement; acknowledges the recognition of the Scottish Government’s determination to focus on achieving both excellence and equity in the education system; supports work to make the framework of

the curriculum for excellence simpler for teachers, parents and carers, reducing bureaucracy and supporting a new sense of dynamism and energy; agrees with the OECD that the National Improvement Framework has the potential to provide a robust evidence base and that it will be a key means of driving work to close the attainment gap and strengthen formative assessment approaches; further agrees that Scotland has an opportunity to become a world leader in providing an integrated framework for evaluation and assessment, and believes that action taken as a result of this report will help to reach the Scottish Government's goal of an excellent and equitable education system in which every young person across the country is able to achieve their full potential regardless of their family circumstances or the background that they are born into.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Thank you for finishing on time. We are very tight for time today. I remind members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Iain Gray to speak to and to move amendment S4M-15282.3. You have up to 10 minutes.

15:10

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): We all want Scotland to have a world-class education system. The Labour amendment is designed to strengthen the Government motion, in which there is little to object to, apart from the usual complacency and a complete absence of any action to be taken towards achieving the end that it purports to be pursuing. No wonder—given that no aspect of this Government's record moves us closer to having a world-class education system. Indeed, quite the reverse is the case, as after nine years in power the Government has achieved almost 4,500 fewer teachers in our schools, 140,000 fewer students in our colleges, bigger class sizes, although it promised smaller ones, student debt that has doubled, although it promised to abolish it, fewer level 3 and 4 apprenticeships than we had even 10 years ago, falling standards in literacy and numeracy, and the attainment gap between the rich and the rest remaining as bad as ever.

In next year's budget we will see cuts in spending in real terms to higher education and further education and £500 million being slashed from council budgets—the very councils that have to deliver our school education. One simply cannot claim to be taking education forward if one is clawing back education funding year on year.

Of course, the Government founds its argument now on the OECD review, as the education secretary just did.

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan): Iain Gray mentioned the challenging time for local authority budgets. Has he yet reached a view as to where in the budget he would seek the money and what he would cut to achieve that?

Iain Gray: I simply say that to come here and say that one is supporting school education while taking £0.5 billion from local government cannot be an honest approach either to politics or to budgeting.

In summary, the OECD report says that we are above average but that the world is catching up. It says that

“there are declining relative and absolute achievement levels on international data”

and that performance in literacy and numeracy is declining. As I said last week, the Government might be satisfied with damnation by such faint praise, but it is not good enough for Scotland.

Once, we could claim to have a world-leading education in reality and not just as an aspiration. Our system has been a world leader through history, going right back to the world's first education act of Parliament, which in the 17th century provided for a school in every parish. In the 20th century, Scotland led the way in the creation of comprehensive schools that serve the whole community. Breadth of curriculum, flexibility, equity and high attainment have always been the principles on which we have, in the past, led the world. We have to nurture those values anew in the 21st century.

That is why the pernicious attainment gap matters so much. The OECD report tells us that the gap is increasing, as measured by literacy and numeracy standards. It acknowledges Government initiatives to address that, but it also tells us that there is no strategy to be seen and warns of the danger of what it calls a “scattergun approach.” It is right, because no framework of any kind will close the attainment gap; at best, it will just describe it. In our view, the dangers of the national improvement framework are wildly overstated in the Liberal Democrat amendment. However, the framework will at best only give us information on which we must act or it will be of little value.

The Scottish Government's attainment challenge fund is simply underresourced and badly targeted. The First Minister reannounced bits of it again yesterday in another new and apparently random initiative. The attainment fund has been announced a couple of million pounds at a time and has been salami sliced into a plethora of projects that are giving every appearance of being made up as they go along. In truth, it looks less like a focused strategy to close the attainment gap and more like a convenient instrument to fill the First Minister's media grid.

I have talked before about Cochrane Castle and St David's schools in Johnstone—two schools that share one building in their community. One, however, gets attainment funding but the other

does not. Last week I was in Kilmarnock, in East Ayrshire, where a child at one end of a street goes to one school and a child at the other end goes to another. One child will get attainment fund support in their school but the other will not. It makes no sense.

Labour's fair start funding proposal would fix that. Indeed, East Ayrshire would receive more than £2 million instead of a few thousand pounds for half a dozen primaries. In my constituency of East Lothian, schools would share almost £900,000, instead of not a penny. Nurseries would benefit from our proposal, too. We know—and the OECD report tells us—that the attainment gap is already established by age five.

The attainment gap persists. At the weekend, we saw new figures regarding the attainment gap in senior school. The gap between those from poorer families who achieved three highers or more and those from the richest families who did so grew yet again last year. The OECD report has nothing to say on that, because it only reviewed primary 1 to secondary 3. Today, however, we have placed in the Scottish Parliament information centre an important submission that the OECD received from education expert Jim Scott on the impact of the new national level 3, 4 and 5 exams. Dr Scott showed last year that the new qualifications have narrowed the curriculum and reduced attainment. Ministers dismissed his concerns. Analysis of the second year of the new exams shows that that trend has continued. The teachers whom the education secretary purports to respect so much gave similar warnings and have had to ballot for industrial action just to get a hearing.

Dr Scott showed that, overall, level 3 to 5 enrolment has dropped by 17 per cent compared to standard grade enrolment, and attainment has dropped by 24 per cent. In French and German the drop is almost 50 per cent and in Gaelic it is 60 per cent. At level 5—which was credit level—pass rates have dropped from the low 90s to below 80 per cent.

Dr Allan: Will Iain Gray give way?

Iain Gray: I have given way to the minister once already.

Dr Scott is very clear on who is suffering. He said that

“less able and middle ranking learners appear to have differentially disappeared from both passes and enrolment.”

Ministers cannot dismiss the figures. They amount to the loss of 92,672 level 3 to 5 enrolments and to 120,035 grade A to C passes at those levels. It is exactly the pupils at the wrong side of the attainment gap who are affected.

That threatens the historical progress that the education secretary has claimed as her own. It is true that there has been progress. In 1965, when comprehensive education was introduced, 70 per cent of pupils left school with no qualifications at all; reforms such as raising the leaving age and introducing standard grades took that figure to less than 5 per cent. However, the truth is that we never completely pushed comprehensive education through to senior years, and the figures show that curriculum for excellence has created an unintended narrowing of the curriculum there, too.

A world-class education system must have more, not fewer, paths for young people, and there must be vocational paths as well as educational paths. It is time to make that reform of senior phase, encompassing colleges, universities, learning hubs and work experience as well as schools. Such a reform would properly reflect the recommendations of the Wood report and it would learn from systems elsewhere—for example, those in Germany and Finland. It would be built on a new parity of esteem between academic and vocational attainment, and a new trust between sectors. It would require proper reinvestment in colleges, so that they can re-establish their central position in a world-class system of education and training.

Instead of reducing and narrowing the qualifications of thousands of young Scots, we should seek ways to broaden and raise attainment. Perhaps we should create a Scottish graduation certificate, which could, if done in a way that was properly resourced, pull together and recognise exam results, vocational training, work experience, structured voluntary work, foundation apprenticeships, and Open University young applicants in schools scheme courses.

The OECD reports calls this time “a watershed”, and it is right to do so. To make best use of this moment, we must have the honesty to admit and to face up to the problems in our education system, the political will to provide the resources that we need and the courage to push through curriculum for excellence to the senior phase. Only then can we claim to be delivering a world-class education system. One matter is for sure: cuts and complacency will not do it.

I move amendment S4M-15282.3, to leave out from “and strengthen” to end and insert:

“if, and only if, adequate and effectively targeted resources are made available; commits the Scottish Government to introducing a 50p income tax rate on those who earn more than £150,000 per annum as soon as that power is available to it; further commits the government to use these resources to provide Fair Start Funding, which would provide £1,000 per annum for every pupil with free school meal eligibility to be used at head teachers' discretion on measures to close the attainment gap, and

believes that a reform of the senior phase in secondary schools is now required to create a comprehensive education system encompassing schools, colleges, universities, the third sector and the workplace, as well as a resolution to the unintended consequences on both enrolment and attainment of the new national 4 and 5 qualifications."

15:20

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):

Aspiring to a world-class education system is absolutely where our sights should be set. That is not to denigrate the work of those who work in our schools, colleges, universities and other parts of the education system. Many are pioneers who are delivering exceptionally high-quality education to those who are in their care, so I pay tribute to them for their efforts. However, the issue is about how we build from that base, while recognising the challenges that are set out in the OECD report, as Iain Gray said, and those which are presented by an ever more globalised world in which change is remorseless and rapid.

Our young people need the skills to equip them not just to cope, but to thrive. That, in part, was why curriculum for excellence was developed to provide the depth, breadth and richness of learning that allow successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to emerge. However, the evidence suggests that, all too often, people from disadvantaged backgrounds are still not able to fulfil their potential. By the time they arrive in formal education, the gap has opened up for many and is never successfully narrowed—far less closed.

Ministers are right to identify closure of the attainment gap as a priority—albeit that they are eight years into their time in office. The question is whether its approach is likely to be effective. Indeed, as Iain Gray said, academics at the University of Dundee have warned that we are going in the wrong direction in certain respects.

Clearly, closing the attainment gap and achieving greater equity of outcomes is not something that can or should rest with our education system—crucial though it undoubtedly is. That said, ministers have presented the national improvement framework as the centrepiece of their strategy, and improving school leadership, teacher professionalism, parental involvement and performance information are all sensible and necessary components of any such strategy.

Where I have a problem—the minister will not be surprised by this—is in the determination to reintroduce national testing in our primary schools. That move, whose sole advocates were the Scottish Conservatives, goes against the very

ethos of curriculum for excellence. Assessment of pupils is, of course, at the heart of good teaching. Teachers do it daily—they observe what happens in the classroom, mark pupils' work, glean information from the standardised tests and have, crucially, an in-depth knowledge of the young person as an individual. The Scottish education system has no shortage of such data—particularly at classroom and school levels. The focus should be on making better use of that wealth of information.

National literacy and numeracy tests simply will not provide a rounded evaluation of student learning. The risk of error is high, but the information will inform Government policy and decisions. Whether or not ministers believe that they are sanctioning teaching to the test or league tables, those are the likely—perhaps inevitable—consequences of introducing national testing in primary schools.

Teaching unions, individual teachers, parent-teacher councils and parents are all expressing concern. A one-size-fits-all approach that one education expert recently denounced as "hopelessly blunt" has also been described by teaching unions as "a backwards step". However, it is not all that far backwards because, not so long ago, the former education secretary, Mr Russell, described the previous national testing regime and its league tables as "Thatcherite". I recall the Scottish National Party hailed the scrapping of those Tory tests by the Labour-Lib Dem Executive; it even sought to claim credit for it.

Of course, the cabinet secretary prayed in aid the recent OECD report, but even there there are warnings about the dangers of crude testing systems. Historically, with education reform,

"outcomes-based learning is succeeded by high stakes testing ... and a broad but inconsistently interpreted curriculum gives way to a prescriptive and more basic one."

For all the First Minister and the education secretary's assurances, the Scottish Liberal Democrats remain unconvinced by the case for national tests either to help to close the attainment gap or to achieve a world-leading education system. That scepticism may partly be informed by what has happened with ministerial reassurances on early learning and childcare. Under pressure from my party, last summer the Government promised to deliver free provision for 27 per cent of two-year-olds from the poorest backgrounds. However, new figures show that only 7 per cent of such children currently benefit.

On the twin aim of raising attainment and closing the gap, it is interesting that the Royal Society of Edinburgh appears to question whether the two are compatible. The RSE said that

“universal approaches ... aimed at raising attainment may do so but in a way that does not lead to greater equity”,

and went on to say that increased parental involvement, for example, “could increase the gap”. I presume that the society made the point to underscore what it describes as a need for

“re-prioritisation and re-deployment of existing education expenditure”.

Ministers will point to the attainment fund and its recent extension to additional local authority areas, but to do so will still rather miss the point: eleven councils remain ineligible for funding, despite the fact that children in need are to be found in communities the length and breadth of Scotland. To have ministers pick and choose postcodes flies in the face of the reality of poverty and need. That is why Scottish Liberal Democrats think, as Save the Children does, that the right approach is a pupil premium that links funding to individual children in need, as happens south of the border, thanks to the previous coalition Government.

In addition, the attainment fund must be seen in the context of Mr Swinney’s brutal cut of £500 million from local authority budgets for next year. Orkney Islands Council had been preparing for a cut of 1.6 per cent; the reality is an eye-watering 4.3 per cent cut and a settlement that the convener described as “wholly unacceptable”.

Given that education accounts for about half of what councils do in budgetary terms, the cuts are likely to fall most heavily on the education budget. That torpedoes the Scottish National Party’s claims about prioritising education and leaves councils to carry the can for the Government’s failure to put its money where its mouth is.

The ambition of creating a world-class education system is one that I whole-heartedly support, just as I support the objective of enabling every child and young person to fulfil their potential. However, I question whether the SNP’s obsession with a return to national standardised testing, its underachievement on early learning and its cuts to council funding are a recipe for achieving those aims.

I move amendment S4M-15282.1, to leave out from “acknowledges” to end and insert:

“notes the OECD’s warnings about the risks associated with crude testing systems; believes that the Scottish Government’s plans to reintroduce national testing has the potential to lead to teaching to the test, high stakes testing, league tables and a system akin to that rightly abolished by the Scottish Government in 2003, which the SNP described as ‘Thatcherite crass and cursory’; considers that national testing risks undermining the work of teachers and is incompatible with the spirit of the curriculum for excellence and, therefore, joins unions, individual teachers, parent teacher councils and parents in opposing this proposal; recognises that improving early learning for those from the most deprived backgrounds is key to closing the attainment

gap; is deeply disappointed, therefore, that the school census published in December 2015 showed that only 7.3% of two-year-olds were registered for early learning and childcare; notes that this is well short of the 27% promised for this year by the Scottish Government, highlighting the need to focus on implementation of this flagship policy and raising questions about its ability to deliver its further promises in this area; welcomes the Scottish Government’s decision to dedicate more resources to tackling the attainment gap; however, considers that the Attainment Scotland Fund will still make a difference only in selected areas, ignoring the needs of children facing poverty in 11 local authorities, and continues to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a pupil premium that targets funding at individual school-age children in need, wherever they may live, as a means of helping close the attainment gap, enabling each child to achieve its potential and delivering an excellent education system.”

15:26

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

This is unusual: the Conservatives are supporting the Government’s motion today. The reason is that the Government has accepted the OECD’s recommendations, acknowledged that there are areas for improvement and expressed its determination to focus on excellence and equity, which will involve not just considering councils and teachers but ensuring that no child is left behind, so that, as I would like, every child can

“achieve their full potential regardless of their family circumstances or the background that they are born into.”

We fully accept that. It makes a nice change to have a Government motion that is constructive and considers the facts.

It will come as no surprise to Iain Gray that we are not supporting a 50p tax rate. It will come as even less of a surprise to Liam McArthur that we are not supporting his amendment, given the Liberal Democrats’ opposition to testing.

I ask the cabinet secretary to clarify when she sums up her point about publication of information. I listened carefully to what she said, but I am still not sure whether it will be mandatory on every local authority to use the new assessment tests in the national framework. There seems to be a bit of doubt in that regard, so clarity would be helpful. However, we very much welcome the Government’s reintroduction of national assessment in primary and secondary schools. As I said, the main point is that no child should be left behind.

On literacy and numeracy, the new teachers will be welcome, but another issue is the time that is allocated to literacy training in teacher training colleges. Freedom of information requests have been made over the years by Stewart Maxwell and others, and we have learned that as few as 25 hours are spent on literacy training in Scottish teacher training colleges, compared with an average of 90 hours in English colleges. When we

consider the teacher training programme, it would be enormously helpful if the Government committed to giving teachers the tools and the support that they need to do the job that we expect them to do.

We also welcome the investment of £100 million for the attainment fund, but we want to make sure that the money is effectively spent. We would like to see the attainment fund money go directly to schools that have a high proportion of children from socially deprived backgrounds, so that individual pupils with poor attainment are identified and supported in order to improve their attainment levels.

If we look at the OECD report, despite its 180 pages—which I did look at—we see that it has picked out quite a few figures from the Audit Scotland report, which I have highlighted many times. My main concern is in the transition from primary 7 to secondary 2. Attainment is not perfect but it is not that bad between primary 4 and primary 7. However, between primary 7 and secondary 2 something strange happens in Scottish education and attainment dips dramatically.

Scottish adolescents are also less likely to report liking school than are students in many other countries, and liking drops sharply in secondary school, according to the OECD.

The figures show that in order to close the gap we need to increase the percentage of pupils who are performing “well” and “very well” at any given level, but that percentage is falling. It fell between 2011 and 2013, with the proportion of primary 7 pupils who were performing well going down by 6 per cent in those two years, and it also went down in secondary 2. However the dramatic difference was that in 2013 in primary 7, 66 per cent performed well, while in secondary 2 only 42 per cent did so. That is too huge a reduction not to take a significant look at it. The figures were for numeracy.

In respect of reading, there is also fall. In primary 4, primary 7 and secondary 2, there was between 2012 and 2014 an overall fall in performing well, and there was also a drastic fall between primary 7 and secondary 2. If the money is to be spent wisely, we have to understand what that has happened—why there is such a deterioration in performance between primary 7 and secondary 2 and why performance has deteriorated in the last couple of years.

We all want pupils with low attainment to do better and we all hope to close the attainment gap, but I do not think that any of us want standards for those from deprived backgrounds to fall. People from the least deprived backgrounds, as well as

those from the most deprived backgrounds, are performing less well.

I appreciate that my time is almost up, Presiding Officer, so I will leave it there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. We are extraordinarily tight for time today, so in order to protect the closing speakers in this debate, less would be more. You have up to six minutes, please.

15:33

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Is it me? Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sorry. I call George Adam, to be followed by John Pentland.

George Adam: You have already bitten into my time, Presiding Officer.

Like many of my colleagues and fellow MSPs, I became involved in politics—as I have said in previous debates on education—to try to make a difference in our community. Education is the cornerstone of that. It is the foundation of all those desires to change lives. However, changing lives is not easy, and that is why it is important for us to put in place a world-class education system that enables us as a nation to close the attainment gap, thus giving each child the best possible start in life and improving the life chances of our sons and daughters.

The OECD report highlights many positive areas in the Scottish education system, including the fact that our schools are highly inclusive and our levels of academic achievement are above international averages and are distributed evenly. The report stated that

“There are clear upward trends in attainments and positive destinations. Over 9 in 10 of school leavers entered a positive follow-up destination in 2014, and nearly two-thirds of school leavers continue on in education. There has been a continuous upward trend in recent years.”

A key point that I have taken from the report is that the OECD shares the Scottish Government’s view that we have a great opportunity to lead the world in developing an integrated assessment and evaluation framework. I firmly believe that the framework will play an important role in the drive to close the attainment gap and continually improve Scottish education.

I whole-heartedly share the First Minister’s view that improving a child’s life through education is the most important thing that we can do as a Government. Although the OECD report is positive in noting the many strengths of our education system, like the First Minister it notes the areas that need improvement.

In launching the new national improvement framework, the First Minister stated:

“Despite the progress we are making, nobody can be comfortable living in a country where different levels of wealth create such a significant gap in the attainment levels—and therefore the life chances—of so many children. That’s why the Scottish Government is taking concerted action now.”

I feel that her point goes to the heart of the debate, and what we are trying to do is highlighted in the report. Children in Scotland are performing well, and we are still producing the doctors and scientists of the future. We are getting a lot right, but we need to do more—and quickly—to support all children in Scotland and raise attainment across the board.

The national improvement framework allows the Government, local authorities, teachers and parents to quickly see where there are issues and move swiftly to address them. Although teacher judgment will always be at the heart of the system, we will see new national standardised assessments for pupils in P1, P4, P7 and S3. The Scottish Government believes that, to be able to act swiftly, we need to understand whether what we are doing now is working. Although we have a form of standardised assessment already monitoring children’s progress in local authorities, those assessments have not been conducted consistently and, as a result, there is a lack of information on overall performance at both national and local levels. We need to identify where we need to improve and get on with doing the hard work.

The OECD report makes 12 recommendations for actions to improve Scotland’s education system across areas such as leadership in schools, issues presented by existing data sources and complexities around curriculum for excellence. However, all the indications are that we are already working towards improvements in those areas. Larry Flanagan, the general secretary of the Educational Institute for Scotland, said:

“The OECD Report paints a largely positive picture of Scottish education and the ongoing implementation of Curriculum for Excellence.”

The improvements are being achieved and will continue to be achieved by the many initiatives that have been set up and funded by the Scottish Government. It is currently investing £1.5 million a year in the read, write and count campaign to ensure that every child in P1 to P3 has access to library books and education materials to improve early literacy and numeracy. Further investment will see more than £1 million over three years, from 2014 to 2017, in national and local numeracy hubs to raise standards and share best practice in the teaching and learning of maths and numeracy at all levels.

That is all on the back of the many achievements that the Scottish Government has already made in education. The pupil teacher ratio is the same as last year. However, not resting on that, on 3 January this year the Scottish Government announced that funding of more than £2 million is being made available to train an extra 260 teachers—60 primary and 200 secondary teachers—next year.

I could go on all day about the good work that the Scottish Government has achieved in education, but it is important to look at where we have come from, how we got here and how we have improved. We know that 40 per cent of pupils from the most deprived 20 per cent of areas are gaining at least one higher—the figure is up from 23 per cent in 2007—and that a record percentage of young people are in work, education or training after leaving school. In 2006-07, only 87 per cent of school leavers were in positive destinations. The OECD 2012 programme for international student assessment survey shows that we have halted the decline in Scotland’s relative position in maths and reading that began under Labour, and, since 2009—under this Government—we have seen improvements against other OECD countries.

Are we getting everything right in Scotland? No. It would be foolish to say so and to think so. However, is this Government committed to delivering a world-class education system? I would say yes. Just as the Scottish Government has worked in partnership with other organisations and everyone else in education, it is time for us all to work together in this chamber, as we did for curriculum for excellence, for the benefit of every child in Scotland.

15:35

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw)

(Lab): I believe that we are having this debate today not through the Scottish Government’s choice but as a reaction to criticisms of its education policy. It is easy to see why the SNP is under attack. Young people from wealthier families are twice as likely to go to university as those from poorer backgrounds; more than 6,000 Scottish children leave primary school unable to read properly; and teacher numbers are now at their lowest level for 10 years.

Finally, after nearly nine years in power and nine years of Scottish Labour pressure, the Scottish National Party has admitted that it needs to up its game. If it gets back into power, it will make education its focus—unless, of course, it decides to have another referendum.

What do we get? We get a framework that is designed for soundbites, that does not address the

gap between the rich and the poor, that offers little by way of real change and that, for its big idea, has the reintroduction of national testing. There was an outcry from the professionals about that, and rightly so, because they thought that they had got rid of unhelpful league tables a decade ago. What we will now have is called standardised testing and definitely not—as the First Minister insisted in the newspapers—league tables. However, on January 6 the First Minister tweeted that the percentage of pupils who achieved curriculum levels in literacy and numeracy would be published by school. How will that work? How will the SNP stop people turning published results into league tables? Perhaps the cabinet secretary can explain that when she closes the debate.

Scotland has dropped down the European education league tables but, alongside the bad things that are happening, the latest OECD report highlights some potentially good things. It says that curriculum for excellence could be the basis of a good system but needs to be strengthened, and that there needs to be a more rigorous strategy that gives local authorities a stronger role. That might be a tad more difficult to achieve, given that councils are getting hammered by SNP cuts. The report also notes the poor literacy of primary and secondary school students, and the

“decline in relative and absolute achievement levels in mathematics”.

Since the OECD report’s publication, we have heard that pupils from well-off backgrounds were seven times more likely to get three As at higher than those from poorer areas, while 14 local authorities had fewer than five poorer pupils achieve three As. Enrolment in national 3 to 5 subjects has dropped by nearly 17 per cent since the introduction of curriculum for excellence, which means that pupils are doing fewer subjects. Overall attainment in those subjects has dropped by 24 per cent. Enrolment and attainment in modern languages are in steep decline, to the point where some subjects may no longer be viable in Scotland.

It is clear that if it is to rise again the Scottish education system, which used to be held up as a model for others, needs some TLC—it has not been getting that recently. We need to make education the first priority. Instead of just paying lip service to it, we need to invest in the early years and education as our most important economic policy. We need to tackle the vicious circle of poverty and educational underperformance, and we need radical action to change the way in which we fund education so that opportunity and achievement are not dependent on wealth.

Funding to tackle the attainment gap should be targeted, but not through the blunt instrument of providing grants to some schools and not others. It

is a nonsense that one school can get funding while another school next door gets nothing, even though both have pupils who are suffering from deprivation.

That is why Scottish Labour wants to set up a fair start fund that will give an extra £1,000 for every child from a poor background in primary school, and £300 in nursery school. That would ensure that attainment funding was based on need. Like the Labour Government in Wales, we want that funding to be managed by headteachers, because they are the people who are best placed to decide which of the available measures will work best in their school with their children. That would be a permanent arrangement, not just a temporary sticking plaster.

If education is to be a national priority, we should not be viciously cutting the budgets of those who provide education, which is not only unfair but very short-sighted. To neglect the education of our young people is to neglect the future of our economy. For many reasons, education should be our priority. There should not be just lip service and sound bites on education; there should be real action to make a difference.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gordon MacDonald, to be followed by Cara Hilton—up to six minutes, please.

15:45

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I apologise for my voice, which I hope will last for six minutes.

Scotland has a fine history of achievement in education, starting with the establishment of church schools in the middle ages and of five universities by 1600—compared with only two south of the border. In 1696, Scotland passed the world’s first national education act, which provided for a school in every parish and a fixed salary for the teacher, with financial arrangements through a property tax to pay for it. The Education (Scotland) Act 1872 took control of the education system from the churches and handed it to local authorities. That was followed by the establishment of a single external examination system for Scotland in 1888. Scotland was then at the forefront of innovation in education.

More than a century later, international comparisons were introduced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development through the programme for international student assessment in the three areas of reading, mathematics and science. In 2012, 65 countries took part in the international comparison, and the Scottish results highlighted that levels of academic achievement here are above international

averages in science and reading and close to the average in maths.

In science, Scotland has been above the OECD average in each PISA round since 2006. In reading, Scotland's performance in 2012 was above the OECD average, as it was in 2009, after falling under the Labour-Lib Dem Executive between 2003 and 2006. Scotland's relative position compared with that of OECD countries and the rest of the UK has improved since 2009, with a greater number of countries performing significantly less well than Scotland and fewer countries whose performance is similar to that of Scotland. In maths, the OECD found that Scotland's performance was similar to the average for all countries, and there was clear evidence that the decline in Scotland's performance between 2003 and 2006 had not continued. Again, Scotland's position in 2012 improved, with fewer countries outperforming Scotland and greater numbers performing significantly below Scotland. That was the position in 2012, and we await the 2015 PISA scores, which are due out later this year.

The report "Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective", which was published in December 2015, gives us an indication of progress. It states in its overview:

"Learners are enthusiastic and motivated, teachers are engaged and professional, and system leaders are highly committed. As many as 9 in 10 inspections report improvement in confidence, engagement, staying on in school and national qualifications over the recent past, broadly coincident with the implementation of CfE in schools."

The report highlighted that there was much "to be positive about", that there was a high level of social inclusion and that a large majority—nine out of 10—of students feel positive about their school and teachers.

Part of the reason why students feel positive about their school might be that the number of pupils who were reported as being in schools of good or satisfactory condition increased from 61 per cent in April 2007, just prior to the first SNP Government taking office, to 85 per cent in April 2015. The reason might also be that the latest national performance report shows that 90 per cent of schools were graded satisfactory or better, including 69 per cent that were graded as good, very good or excellent. As a result, students across Scotland achieved a record 156,000 higher passes in 2015, with the number of advanced higher passes increasing by 4 per cent to record levels.

Although there has been progress since 2007, that does not mean that there are no challenges facing Scottish education. Last autumn, at the Wester Hailes education centre in my

constituency, the First Minister outlined her twin priorities of improving attainment for all children and tackling the attainment gap between children in deprived areas and those in better-off areas. The £100 million attainment Scotland fund to improve literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing for primary school pupils was extended to a further 57 schools, including three in my constituency, taking the total number of primary schools that are benefiting from the fund to more than 300.

The December 2015 OECD report states:

"Scotland has been among the OECD countries with the most equal scores of mathematics achievements among 15-year-olds and the spread by socio-economic background in Scotland is narrower than across the OECD as a whole. A third of disadvantaged students were identified as 'resilient' in 2012, meaning those from the bottom quarter in status terms who perform in the top quarter of international performance. This is higher than the OECD average of 25%."

EIS general secretary Larry Flanagan said that the report

"confirms previous data that indicates that Scottish schools and levels of pupil attainment compare well both internationally and with other countries within the UK"

and that it

"paints a largely positive picture of Scottish education".

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will you draw to a close, please?

Gordon MacDonald: As the OECD recognised, curriculum for excellence has the ability to deliver a world-class education system for all, putting Scotland once again at the forefront of innovation in education.

15:51

Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab): We all want Scotland to have an education system to be proud of. We want a Scotland in which every child in every community can achieve their true potential at school and in life. Nothing is more important than ensuring that every child gets a fair start. Today, the SNP Government is keen to highlight the positive aspects of the OECD report, but the fact remains that the achievement gap between the most and least deprived children is continuing to grow under the SNP's watch and that, so far, its solutions have fallen well behind what is needed to end the inequality in our classrooms.

We must use this Parliament's powers to change people's lives, to reshape our country and to transform life chances so that opportunity and success at school, at work and in life are determined by hard work, effort and talent, and not by who someone's parents are or how much they earn.

Iain Gray talked about the attainment fund that the Scottish Government has set up. In my Dunfermline constituency, two schools are benefiting from the fund, yet in every nursery, primary and secondary school in my constituency there are children and families from poorer backgrounds who need extra support. One of the schools in my constituency that is receiving attainment fund support is Inzievar primary school in Oakley, which shares a campus with Holy Name primary school. They use the same gym hall, assembly hall, library and playground, yet Holy Name gets no funding to close the attainment gap.

That is why our amendment calls once again for us to be more ambitious and to use the powers that are coming to Holyrood to invest more in the children who are being left behind. We need to ensure that every child from a poorer family gets a fair start in life through a fair start fund that is based on need and not on what school children go to. We need to make support available not just to schools but to nurseries, too. Across Scotland, we are asking people to take a fresh look at Scottish Labour. Maybe the cabinet secretary will take a fresh look at our plans to give every child a fair start at nursery and school.

The Liberal Democrat amendment mentions the importance of pre-school provision in improving outcomes for children from more deprived backgrounds. That is important, too, because we know that the attainment gap begins well before children start school. By the age of three, 15 per cent of children already have speech and language difficulties, with children from the most deprived areas being more than twice as likely to have issues. By the same age, children from deprived backgrounds are already nine months behind on average development and readiness for school, and on starting school there is already a 14 per cent development gap between the most and least advantaged children and a 16 per cent gap in vocabulary.

All the evidence shows that children who start school with those early development difficulties are much more likely to fall behind other children in their attainment at every stage of the education system, so it is vital that we get it right for every child in the early years, yet in December 2015, as Liam McArthur said, just 7.3 per cent of two-year-olds were registered for early learning and childcare. That is well short of the 27 per cent that was promised. There is also evidence that many children across Scotland are missing out not just on the free childcare for two-year-olds but on the free places that are available for three and four-year-olds.

The SNP will go into the election in May promising parents a doubling of pre-school hours, yet it is still unable to deliver the hours that were

promised in policies that are already in place, never mind saying how the 30 hours will be delivered or paid for.

Research by the fair funding for our kids campaign has found that as many as one in five children is missing out on their free place, and the doubling of free hours could make the situation even worse by reducing the number of spaces available in council nurseries by as much as 40 per cent. That falls into line with what the commission for childcare reform said in the summer, when it found that many parents across Scotland are unable to access the 600 hours and concluded that the focus on delivering the policy was

“at the expense of broader childcare provision”.

Given the fact that only 15 per cent of councils in Scotland have enough capacity to meet the childcare needs of working parents, parents across Scotland who want to work and make a better life for their families need much more than a promise of free hours. We need a radical overhaul of childcare so that it is affordable, flexible and available for children of all ages where and when parents need it.

In its briefing for today's debate, Save the Children highlights its excellent “Read on. Get on.” campaign, which has Scottish Labour's support. It is unacceptable that Scotland's poorest children are already struggling with language and literacy when they start school, and that many of the same children leave primary school unable to read well. There must be much more emphasis in the national framework on the importance of pre-school intervention in closing the language gap and ensuring that every single child has the support that they need to meet key milestones in early language and literacy before they start primary school.

We cannot look at education policy in isolation, and members from across the chamber have already referred to the budget cuts that will hit our councils. Certainly, those cuts will not help us in our mission to close the gap. Cuts to council budgets will hit our schools, early years services and measures that are being taken to close the gap. In Fife, where the council already had a £21 million budget shortfall to make up in the coming financial year, the additional cuts that were announced in the budget before Christmas mean that the council will need to make a further £17 million of savings.

In the chamber, we have quite rightly heard many attacks on the Tory austerity agenda and its impact on Scotland. Right now, in the communities that I represent in Fife and in communities right across Scotland, the austerity agenda is not being imposed just by the Tories; it is being imposed by

Holyrood, too. Our children and young people should not be paying the price of cuts, and they should certainly not be paying the price of austerity. Cuts to our schools, cuts to our colleges, cuts to our universities and cuts to our youth work services are not a route to educational success.

I see that I am running out of time. If the Government is serious about making our education system world class once again, action is needed now to protect our education budgets and to give our councils a fair funding deal.

15:57

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): For those of us who are not experts, the OECD report can be a challenging read at times. It is positive about Scotland's achievements to date and the potential for Scotland to be a world leader in education. It describes the curriculum for excellence as being at a watershed moment and says that 10 solid years of patient work has taken place, which has presented us with the opportunity to move the agenda on to a new phase

"beyond system management in a new dynamic nearer to teaching and learning".

The report says that we need to strengthen what it calls the middle area, which involves networking and collaboration. I take that to mean that we need more engagement among professionals up and down the country, and among education authorities, so that we can truly bring about the improvements that we need and begin to close the various gaps that concern us. Principal among those is the attainment gap, but I hope that we can also do something about the opportunity gaps that exist in the system.

The report acknowledges a number of improvements and particularly mentions Scotland's

"above international averages in science and reading".

It says that our achievement levels are spread fairly equally, that a high number of students from the lowest socioeconomic status groups perform in the top quarter of international achievers, that our schools are inclusive and that there are clear upward trends in attainment. Of our school leavers, 90 per cent are entering a positive destination, and such levels have been continuously improving in recent years.

Improvements are also noted in relation to pupils' positive attitudes towards their schools and teachers. There has been a welcome drop in negative behaviour such as smoking, alcohol abuse and general disruptive behaviour. They are all on the decline, thankfully.

There is evidence of an improving picture of current performance in a number of areas. A

higher number of our young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are getting better qualifications, and almost double the number we saw in 2007 are getting at least one higher. We have record exam results, with numbers of passes in highers and advanced highers rising, and we have the highest number of youngsters ever applying to go to university, with a huge 50 per cent increase in the number of those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

More needs to be done, of course, but good progress is being made. What then lies beyond the watershed that the report says that we are at?

At the heart of this, according to my understanding, is how we assess and evaluate and how that leads us towards improvement. The report applauds our teachers for their ingenuity in devising a variety of methods to collect information but says that there is

"concern that insufficient use is made of assessment information to support children's learning progress and curriculum development"

and that too many teachers are still

"unclear what should be assessed in relation to the Experiences and Outcomes",

all of which serves to blur

"the connection between assessment and improvement."

In other words, if we are all measuring things differently, we have little chance of concluding anything meaningful from those measurements and we have less ability to claim that improvements are evident across the system.

We need a robust and consistent evidence base to help us with our assessment methods and the OECD report supports the view that the national improvement framework has the potential to deliver that for us. Standardised assessment gives us the chance to move forward from this watershed, to provide a clearer and more concise narrative in the assessment process and to begin the important next phase in the life of curriculum for excellence.

Keir Bloomer's comment that measurement systems in themselves do not raise standards or close gaps is spot on. However, measurement systems should provide us with consistency in the assessment process, from which I hope we can make informed judgments that are more reliable than anything that we currently have.

The First Minister has made it clear that using new standardised assessments in P1, P4, P7 and S3 will help our teachers to form the crucial judgments about the progress that our children are making and to provide the required support when it is most needed. Offering parents access to that information means that we can extend the scope

of interest to the wider family and the crucial role that they play in our children's education.

As usual, we will rely heavily on the good services that we obtain from Education Scotland to drive the process forward. Education Scotland has been in the vanguard of curriculum for excellence for many years and I know that many colleagues in that organisation are totally committed to improving excellence in education.

I will add a little note of caution in winding up. As Keir Bloomer said, systems and processes do not in themselves do very much. They act as enablers to help us to get things right and we must still work hard to improve things. Closing the attainment gap between our wealthiest and our poorest communities in the next decade will be an amazing achievement if we manage to do it, but an opportunity gap still exists.

Members might recall the story last year about the young student from Possilpark who achieved all the necessary qualifications for medical school at four of Scotland's finest universities but was still refused entry. Attainment and opportunity are two very different things; I am glad that our universities are aware of that and are doing something about it through their reach initiative.

Closing the attainment gap will surely help many more talented young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. We have a duty to make that possible for all our young people in Scotland and I hope that the new framework will take us closer to that goal than we have ever been before.

16:03

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): We will continue to be challenged as individuals and as an educational system by the youngsters of today. Most youngsters do not carry a pen or a pencil. That is very different from my time as a youngster. However, most have an intelligent phone and are perhaps more adept at operating the on-screen keyboard on that than they are at using a pen or a pencil.

The modern world is very different from the world in which my grandfather started teaching 135 years ago, and it will keep changing. In 1881, my grandfather was a pupil-teacher in Bo'ness. By 1890 he was a schoolteacher in Eyemouth, and in 1900 he had his own school in a rural location in the Black Isle. The school photograph for that year shows that the majority of pupils were barefoot. At lunch time, they depended on my grandmother preparing soup for the school lunch, which was made from the vegetables that the pupils took to school.

When my grandfather retired from teaching in 1926, he had achieved the lofty heights of a

fellowship of the Educational Institute of Scotland. The experience of teachers and pupils in my grandfather's school was very different from the experience today.

Today, other members of my family are teachers. My niece Morag teaches in England. She has taught in the public and private sectors, and she looks with some envy at aspects of the Scottish system. My nephew Jamie is based in Denmark and is married to a Dane, with a Danish family. The educational system there is also very different, and it is not without its difficulties. Because of a dispute with the unions, the Government in Denmark chose to lock out all the teachers for more than a month. My nephew did not enjoy that much.

I will give another illustration of how things change. When I was a student studying mathematics in the 1960s, in my intermediate honours year, one of my digs landlady's friends sent their 12-year-old to get help with his maths. He was studying topology at school, but we at university had yet to reach that subject. We cannot expect the past to be repeated in the future.

Although the OECD report is about the formal education system, we should not imagine that all education takes place in school. It is important that parents and relatives are equally equipped to answer the intelligent questions that our youngsters inevitably come up with. A couple of months ago, I did a little experiment with my four-year-old goddaughter. She asked about a rock crystal that we had, and I explained crystals by showing her salt crystals, dissolving them in water and then evaporating the water on the stove. She was fascinated by that and we had a discussion. I hope that that is typical of discussions that are going on across Scotland.

One point in the OECD report that I was taken with, particularly because of my parliamentary constituency, is the comment that

"Scotland enjoys one of the smallest proportions of low performers among its immigrant students."

That is important to me because, on average, the four secondary schools in my constituency have 20 languages spoken in them. At Peterhead academy, the number has just become 28, with the addition of Hungarian. It is not new in the north-east of Scotland that we interact with the rest of the world and that language is an issue. As long ago as 1853, the post office directory listed three foreign consulates in Peterhead.

Of course, that is both a challenge and an opportunity. In some of our schools, I have seen immigrants successfully passing on aspects of their culture and, more critically, their language to the local population. In return, the locals have taught those who have come to our community

how to speak Doric—only a minority of the people who are in the chamber are likely to be able to do that. Education is and will always remain a work in progress. Informal learning is important, and it is important to provide opportunities for it.

The OECD report refers to international examples, including the Ontario teacher leadership and learning programme and the Alberta initiative for school improvement. That gives a fascinating insight into what can be done elsewhere. We have to accept that there is no single answer and that, actually, the most important thing is that those who are engaged in education are committed to picking up and trying new ideas.

There is no single idea. If there was a magic bullet, somebody would have found it and we would be applying it. Equally, we have to be slightly conscious of the Hawthorne effect, whose name comes from a factory in the United States in the 1920s and early 1930s. The idea is that the mere intervention of change can deliver short-term value. There is excellent work in the OECD report that leads us to where we are.

I again say to the minister that it would be good to use the Trachtenberg system. Speaking from the lofty heights of my many years, I think that it would be worth using the experience of older people and getting them into schools to impart their knowledge and experience to our students. We have to be adaptable.

The OECD report is a good interim report. There is more to do, but I am confident that the Government is willing and able to do it and is actually doing it.

16:09

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the EIS. I was a teacher for 20 years, and I probably still am at heart. I always welcome the opportunity to be involved in a debate on education and I recognise its role in creating a stronger, fairer economy and in tackling inequality, releasing potential and offering an important means out of poverty.

I am sad to say that debates on education too often become a theoretical argument—an exchange of figures that can prove almost anything—and there has been an element of that today. We are at our best when our debates on education are rooted in the real world and the real-life experience of people across Scotland, and I urge the Scottish Government to reflect on Jim Scott's report rather than try to find a way of explaining it away, because it has highlighted important issues.

As a young teacher, I taught non-certificate classes before standard grade came in. If a young person was in a non-certificate class, it basically meant that there was no course, there were no resources and there was no recognition of the effort that they made. With standard grades there came a recognition that every child is entitled to have a course and resources put behind them so that they can show what they have achieved. I would be concerned if we were moving away from that, and I urge the Scottish Government to look at that again.

There is an argument to be had about the benefits and merits of testing, but my concern is that the proposal will simply describe the situation without action then being taken to address what that situation tells us. We know that poverty and disadvantage are key issues in relation to attainment. If all that we are doing through testing is reflecting that, we are—to be frank—wasting our time.

The Scottish Government has announced its attainment grant fund, but I contend that any drive to close the attainment gap must be mainstreamed into our education policy. It is not an add-on or an extra; it should inform all our policy and budget choices. Again, I urge the Scottish Government to have the confidence to look at the choices that it has made in that context and, against the test of closing the attainment gap, to examine whether the things that it is spending money on in education will make the situation better or worse.

I will give an example. I would argue strongly that, if addressing the attainment gap had been at the heart of education policy, the further education sector would not have suffered the ruthless cuts and attacks that it has experienced from the Scottish Government. Early intervention is even more effective when parents are supported, and what is better than a parent taking a second chance at education or securing skills to get into work? The college sector has offered such opportunities in the past, but they are less likely to be there now.

Education in Scotland is relatively good at supporting and developing young people who are settled with supportive families and families who can step in and fill the gaps that cuts in school funds have left, but I also congratulate all those in schools who support young people who have greater challenges—perhaps because of barriers created by additional needs—not least the parents and young people in school communities where families face problems in their lives. We know that schools cannot just be buildings, teachers and jotters; they need to understand the needs of and pressures on young people and how current spending decisions have an impact on them.

We should be clear about the fact that there are pressures on young people from all kinds of families, not just those living in poverty. Bereavement, bullying, neglect and abuse are no respecters of person or class. They can happen to any child, and it is essential that schools are alive to the danger that young people who face those pressures will simply fall out of the system. We know, however, that poverty and disadvantage are key determinants in attainment and require a rigorous approach, not short-term initiatives that are not sustained.

If it is serious about its commitment on attainment, the Scottish Government must review its approach to the funding of local government—not just its approach to cuts in general but the lack of rigour in ensuring that education spending follows need. If a young person is vulnerable to falling out of the school system and is attending less, achieving less and becoming less engaged, action needs to be speedy and proactive, or it becomes too late and we live with the consequences of that for a generation. That is why I urge the cabinet secretary to enable schools to fund properly the attendance officers, support staff, learning support, behaviour support, classroom assistants, personal assistants, educational psychologists, home link staff and admin staff who allow a school to reach out to children who are vulnerable and not supported.

Those resources are not a bonus or an added extra; they are critical to supporting young people to come to school so that they can benefit from the learning that is on offer. In spotting problems, addressing challenges for families and addressing additional needs, there is an opportunity to give those young people the chance to learn. If those elements are stripped out, the consequences will be massive, but all the evidence suggests that that is exactly what is happening.

Through the years, Scottish education prided itself on developing inquiring minds that were open to new ideas and willing to scrutinise and test ideas and established views. That is the challenge for the Scottish Government now. It should not close down the debate on education or simply defend the choices that have been made. If it opens the debate up, we will be with it. We need to resource communities and local government properly so that we can genuinely address the attainment gap and secure the potential for our young people that education offers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I regret that I now have to reduce the speaking time of the remaining open debate speakers to five minutes.

16:16

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): Listening to Stewart Stevenson's speech, two things struck me. The first was the issue of children's questions. I have two daughters and some of the questions that they have asked in the past few months have been particularly challenging, not so much in scientific areas but in other areas. I am sure that the cabinet secretary can relate to that.

The second thing that struck me concerned a trip that I made to Sweden a number of years ago to visit some friends. While I was there, I was asked to speak to two classes in a high school—it was informal learning in a formal setting. I was asked to go in because the kids, who were learning English, were used to only English or American accents, and the school wanted them to hear English spoken by someone with a different accent. It was a fascinating experience and I genuinely thought that it was a great thing to do.

I was encouraged by the recent OECD review of Scottish education. As others have mentioned, the report paints a largely positive picture of Scottish education and the on-going implementation of the curriculum for excellence.

We share the OECD's view that we have a great opportunity to lead the world in developing an integrated assessment and evaluation framework. We firmly believe that the framework will play an important role in driving work to close the attainment gap and continually improve Scottish education. I am sure that everyone in the chamber wants to be able to say, with confidence and with evidence, that there is no better place in the world to be educated than here in Scotland. We want to know that that claim holds true for all young people, regardless of their background or circumstance. Scotland must seize the opportunity to be a world leader in assessing and driving forward educational progress for all children.

It is no secret that the past eight years have been tough. The recession and the deep public spending cuts that followed have created pressures for the Scottish Government, for local government and for many families. However, the fact remains that education in Scotland has made progress.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry, but I only have five minutes.

In every part of the country, Scotland has good schools and good teachers, and our young people are good learners. Standards have risen and continue to rise.

We are committed to protecting teacher numbers. All 32 local authorities have committed

to protecting teacher numbers and will share in £51 million in investment from the Scottish Government to support that. As we have already heard, on 3 January, the Scottish Government announced an additional £2 million of investment to train an additional 260 teachers next year—60 in primary education and 200 in secondary education.

A child who is born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time that he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child who is born in one of our most affluent communities. We want to close the attainment gap completely. That will not happen overnight, but it is more than an economic and social challenge for all of us; it is a moral challenge.

Last week, the First Minister launched the national improvement framework for education, which will help to eliminate the attainment gap between the least and most deprived children. The framework has been developed in consultation with teachers, parents and local authorities. Considering the range of people who support the framework, it is clear that it will be a positive development for Scotland and our education system. The framework means that new and better information will be gathered throughout primary and early secondary school years to support the progress of individual children and identify where improvement is needed. It will be backed by the attainment Scotland fund of more than £100 million over four years to drive forward improvements in educational outcomes in Scotland.

We will defend the achievements not just of the Government but of students, pupils and teachers across our country. However, we will also be open to where we need to do better. In every walk of life, we can always improve and must always strive to be better. Sustained investment in learning, from early years to further and higher education, will continue to drive up attainment and mobilise all of Scotland's talents.

16:20

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank the Government for bringing the debate to the chamber, as it provides Parliament with an opportunity to scrutinise our education system and proposed changes to parts of that system. As the motion acknowledges, it is important that we look not only at what is working well but at what could be improved upon.

There is much in the motion to welcome. It talks about the more holistic approach of the curriculum for excellence, stresses

“trust in teachers’ professional judgement”

and recognises that it is essential that we reduce energy-sapping, frustrating and time-wasting bureaucracy. The motion tells us that the OECD report suggests

“that the National Improvement Framework has the potential to provide a robust evidence base and that it will be a key means of driving work to close the attainment gap”.

Key education partners such as the EIS tell us that good evidence is part of the equation and that assessment is absolutely central to teaching and learning. However, such bodies say that we already have that evidence and that assessment is on-going—and not only in literacy and numeracy. Teachers assess pupils daily and use that knowledge to help our young people to progress. The EIS does not agree that standardised tests are the key to improving education. In fact, 30 out of 32 local authorities use standardised tests, yet the attainment gap persists. Perhaps, in closing, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning can confirm whether the tests that currently take place will be replaced or whether there will simply be more tests.

We all appreciate that there are drivers within school, between school and beyond school—particularly home and family—that can help to close the attainment gap. It is really important that we take the broadest approach to attainment, as well as ensuring that we make progress where formal attainment is poor. I appreciate that the Government knows that good evidence is only one part of the equation. I would hope that, at the end of this debate, Parliament is clear about how the Government intends to avoid unintended consequences such as national league tables. The EIS, in its response to the consultation on the national improvement framework, asks that protections are put in place to ensure that that does not happen. I would be grateful if the cabinet secretary would address that.

I would also like to understand what the Government will do with that evidence that it has been unable to do so far or is unable to do at the moment. I would ask the Government to focus instead on areas such as teacher recruitment and class sizes—which are clearly linked—and teacher workloads. There should also be a greater focus on the quality of early years childcare. Like parents and the Scottish children's services coalition, I am very concerned about the fall in the number of additional support needs teachers. Other members have also raised that issue. I recognise that the Government is working to fill vacancies, not just in ASN, but has it considered making support for learning a promoted post? The cabinet secretary is aware of a marked increase in children with additional support needs since 2010 to 153,190 pupils. Currently, 22.5 per cent of

children in Scotland's schools have additional support needs.

Local authorities are facing budget cuts on a staggering scale but the cost of not ensuring that adequate provision for young people with additional support needs is in place will outweigh any savings. Exclusions will increase and positive destinations will be harder to secure for those young people. Those positive destinations include our further education colleges. I recently spent a very cold Friday afternoon outside the offices of the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council with members of the EIS further education lecturers association. The cold was matched only by their passion—passion for the invaluable work that they do and passion for an equitable and secure future and equal pay for those working in the sector.

Our colleges have as much to offer as our universities and we should treat them, and those who study and work in them, equitably. We must ensure that more financial assistance, beyond fees, is available for students who require it. Many potential students cannot afford to feed, clothe and house themselves without a wage, so grant funding is essential. We do not want young people to opt out of further or higher education through necessity rather than choice.

I, too, thank all those working with young people, on whom today's debate has concentrated, but education should be encouraged and enabled from the cradle to the grave, because parents, grandparents and carers are children's first educators and they clearly have a central role in any education system. We have to be absolutely clear that austerity should not impact on those who study in local community centres across the land, which enables them better to bring up and educate their own children.

Our young people's future choices are impacted by their time at school, but that is not the whole story. Will every child in nursery education in Scotland have access to a nursery teacher? As we have heard throughout the debate, inequalities in literacy often begin in early childhood. Increasing nursery teacher numbers would help address the issue of equal access to early years education.

16:26

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The independent review, "Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective", which the OECD published last month, clearly shows me that the Scottish Government is on the right lines with the progress that it has made to date in our education system. Further, the review confirms that the steps proposed for going forward are without doubt the

correct ones, although there can be no resting on our laurels.

The aim for Scotland's education system is clear: we aim to have an exceptional and fair system where every young person in this country has the tools that they need to achieve their potential, regardless of their background. I hope that everyone would agree that that is a worthy goal.

In that regard, the OECD review highlighted many positive developments in Scottish education, including levels of academic achievement being above international averages and distributed evenly; the high inclusion rate of Scottish schools; a clear upward trend in attainment and positive destinations; positive attitudes in schools and among pupils; and noticeable drops in alcohol consumption and smoking among children and young people.

The report also highlighted that more than nine out of 10 school leavers entered a positive destination in 2014, with nearly two thirds continuing on in education. Those are figures that we can be proud of, especially when we put them in the context of the years before this Government came into power.

The statistics show that 40 per cent of pupils from the 20 per cent most deprived areas are getting at least one higher, which is a substantial increase from 23 per cent in 2007. Meanwhile, 91.7 per cent of young people are in work, education or training after leaving school, which compares favourably to 2006-07, when only 87 per cent of school leavers were in positive destinations. It is encouraging that we have also seen a 50 per cent increase in university applications from 18-year-olds from the most deprived areas since 2006.

Of course, we must ensure that equity and excellence in our education system go hand in hand. The OECD review highlights some of the improvements in that context, including the fact that academic achievement is above international averages in science and reading and near average in maths, while the most recent studies show that we have halted the decline in maths and reading that was seen in Scotland's relative position prior to 2006.

Performance in literacy, maths and numeracy can be improved further and we are taking ambitious steps to continue the work that has been done to date. Those include investing £1.5 million per year in the read, write, count campaign to ensure that every primary 1 to primary 3 child has access to a library of books and educational materials to improve early literacy and numeracy; the introduction of a draft national improvement framework, which will focus on improving

outcomes for children by providing better evidence on progress in literacy and numeracy; focusing Education Scotland inspections on raising attainment in literacy and numeracy, whereby each school will be expected to demonstrate a very clear strategy for raising attainment in literacy; investing £1 million over three years from 2014 to 2017 in national and local numeracy hubs to raise standards and share best practice in the teaching and learning of maths and numeracy at all levels; and launching the making maths count programme to drive up maths and numeracy attainment in primary and secondary school by championing the importance of maths.

We need to ensure that we have the right number of highly trained teachers to preserve our educational standards and teacher pupil ratios. Last year, we worked with local authorities to maintain teacher numbers, and we will do that again this year, with a further £51 million in funding. Those steps ensured that the pupil teacher ratio stayed constant at 13.7 over 2014 and 2015, despite an increase in the number of pupils in that time.

As recently as 3 January, the Scottish Government reiterated its commitment to teacher numbers with the announcement that more than £2 million of funding is being made available to train an extra 260 teachers next year. The increase of 60 primary and 200 secondary student teacher places will bring the total intake to 3,490—a rise for the fifth year in a row.

The OECD review endorsed the Government's introduction of a national improvement framework that features standardised assessment at its heart. At present there is a significant lack of information about overall performance at both national and local levels. A national framework will ensure that we can gather the right evidence about children's progress to show that everything that local authorities, schools, teachers, parents, and children and young people themselves are doing to raise standards is working.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): You need to bring your remarks to a close.

Colin Beattie: There can be no doubt that Scotland's education system will always face challenges, but it is clear that the steps that we have taken and will continue to take—including the national framework, the £100 million attainment fund, and the recent announcement of the £1.5 million innovation fund that will identify and fund projects to improve literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing for children who have been adversely impacted by deprivation—can truly give Scotland the potential to become a world leader in education.

16:31

Liam McArthur: It has been a useful debate, with considered speeches across the chamber. I am particularly grateful to Johann Lamont for her contribution. I did not necessarily agree with all of it, but she usefully reminded us of why this debate matters, which is the ability of education to unlock the potential of not only individuals but communities and Scotland as a country. The shared objective of creating a world-class education system was evident in all the speeches that were made.

The OECD report probably wins the prize for most namechecks. Colin Beattie, Willie Coffey and Gordon MacDonald legitimately pointed to elements of the report that highlight things that are performing well in the Scottish education system and, indeed, trends that are moving in the right direction. However, there was a tendency to adopt a bit of a year zero approach to those positive trends.

Mary Scanlon, Iain Gray and other members were right to highlight areas where there is cause for concern, whether that is in terms of progress that some of our competitor countries are making compared to ours, or in specific areas such as literacy and numeracy.

In my speech, I made a number of criticisms of the Scottish Government. They were intended to be constructive in the context of the approach that we as a party have taken to a range of areas, not just education. They stem from a recognition of the crucial importance of the early years in shaping and determining later attainment.

Cara Hilton made salient points about the speech and language difficulties that those from deprived backgrounds present when they arrive in formal education. Those difficulties are why we prioritise investment in early learning and childcare, particularly for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. We refused to accept ministers' assertions that it required the powers of independence to achieve that investment, and we pressed for more ambitious targets.

We welcomed the agreement to move from providing early learning and childcare to less than 2 per cent of two-year-olds from such backgrounds to providing it to 27 per cent of those children. However, we are disappointed that the figure is currently only just above 7 per cent. I would be interested to know how the gap is to be bridged to the 27 per cent, let alone the 42 per cent that we see south of the border.

We have sought to engage in the national improvement framework debate. The way in which the consultation has been taken forward has not necessarily helped, but, as I said, much in the

framework makes absolute sense. On the focus on leadership, evidence shows that improvements can be made in the areas of teacher professionalism and parental involvement, and that such improvements can deliver real results.

The focus on literacy and numeracy is absolutely right. George Adam referred to the read, write, count campaign, and Cara Hilton was right to draw attention to Save the Children's efforts under the "Read on. Get on." initiative, which I very much support.

As the Scottish Association for Mental Health made clear in its briefing, the extent to which happy and healthy children are those who are likely to fulfil their potential is somewhat underplayed. We may need to revisit that issue in the context of the framework.

The obsession with national testing, which was previously the preserve of Conservative education spokespeople and which Mary Scanlon gave a glowing endorsement of, is wrong-headed. It is the implied reference to that in the Scottish Government's motion that prevents us supporting it at decision time. Assessment is key to good teaching but, as the Education and Culture Committee heard in evidence, that already takes place but a wealth of information is not being used—a point well made by Alison Johnstone.

As Children in Scotland pointed out,

"the educational inequalities that stem from socio-economic disadvantage are complex and multifaceted".

Highlighting "real concerns" within the sector over aspects of the framework, it accuses ministers of

"reducing what is a complex set of issues to an easily identifiable slogan with the hope that these issues will be amenable to equally short-term solutions".

I will turn briefly to the issue of funding and to the attainment fund in particular. As I have said, that fund is fine in principle but flawed in practice. The pupil premium, which we support, is targeted at an individual's need. It seems to bear some relation to the fair start initiative to which Iain Gray referred. His description of salami slicing and reannouncing of the fund was apposite. In addition, set in the context of a £500 million cut to council budgets, it is hard not to see how the Government's approach works entirely against the grain of what it says about education and, indeed, children's services.

Stuart McMillan referred to the teacher numbers guarantee but, as councils have pointed out, in order to honour that agreement we are seeing classroom and learning assistants and other school staff being laid off, as well as cuts to additional support needs teachers. It is hard to see how that will not impact most significantly on the

education or service on which those from the most deprived households rely most heavily.

The OECD report gives the basis for optimism. Much of what we are doing is good; some of it is world leading. Equally, there is enough in the report to stave off any sense of complacency.

All share the ambition to create a world-class education system and the objective of enabling every child to fulfil their potential, whatever their background and wherever they live. However, I again question whether the Government's apparent obsession with a return to national testing in primary schools, its underachievement on early learning and nursery provision, and the cuts to council funding are a recipe for achieving those aims.

16:37

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This interesting debate has obviously centred on the key question of what makes an education system world class.

In previous generations, when that was the generally accepted description of Scotland's school system, the best of the Scottish enlightenment was enshrined as a fundamental principle of the system. All people, whoever they were and whatever their background, had a democratic right to access the intellectual capital of the nation. Learning was seen to be egalitarian, rigorous in its approach and respected by every class in society. There was a healthy balance between what and how things were taught and learned, and a strict self-discipline was expected to accompany the education experience. As such, great pride was taken in schools and what they stood for, irrespective of their community environment.

We now know that the eagerly awaited OECD report commends much about Scottish education along those lines. Indeed, most of that related to the traditional features. It compliments schools on their egalitarian approach and the fact that pupils are valued for who they are rather than where they have come from; it praises teachers' commitment and professionalism and pupils' general contentedness and enthusiasm; and it reflects positively on the curriculum for excellence's basic principles. However, I was surprised that it chooses not to say much about the accompanying assessment, and I will come back to that issue in just a minute.

The report also issues stark warnings, which I will deal with now. I begin with the curriculum for excellence because that is clearly the centrepiece of what schools do. While praising its concept, the OECD says something rather worrying about its delivery. Indeed, it tells the Scottish Government

to come up with a new narrative for it as some of the benefits have failed to materialise as a result of the lack of clarity and too much complexity in the accompanying guidance.

The poor authors of the OECD report clearly felt obliged to go through the teacher and parent guidance with a fine-tooth comb. They found four capacities, 12 attributes, 24 capabilities, five levels, seven principles, six entitlements and no fewer than 1,820 “experiences and outcomes”. They question what exactly all that means, and they are right to do so, because, as teachers themselves tell us, sometimes nobody in Education Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority or any other Scottish Government quango can explain what it all means in plain English. That is a serious charge from the OECD, which must be urgently addressed.

Part of the reason for the growing concern about the boundaries of discrete school subjects, which was mentioned by two Labour members, is the fear that we might end up with a slightly narrower curriculum, which will undermine subject choice. The curriculum for excellence was designed to deepen learning but not to the extent that subject choice is compromised or that failures of the English system are mirrored in Scotland.

I suspect that the OECD chose not to comment too much on the accompanying qualifications in curriculum for excellence because they are too new to assess, but I find it strange that little mention was made of the qualifications structure, which is a key part of measuring the success of any education system.

National assessments matter, not in the context of the number of people who are assessed, which is something that the Scottish Government is always keen to present as a key measure, but in relation to results, because results depend on effective subject choice—something that is a matter of concern in some schools.

There must be no weakening of the distinction between subjects on the curriculum, which would dilute the process of identifying what the pupil learns. In that regard, we have moved a little too far in the direction of focusing on how pupils learn. That move threatens to undermine some of the best traditions in Scottish schooling.

The First Minister is right to put more emphasis on the learning and testing of the three Rs, especially at the end of primary 7. I say to members who have grave doubts about tests that it is time for them to come up with evidence that explains the decline in basic standards over the quite long period over which there has been a lack of consistent and standardised testing. It is important that that point is answered.

It is a matter of having not more tests but better quality tests and striking a healthy balance between formative and diagnostic testing. That is the most important point. I make a plea again for the Scottish Government to go back to the data from the trends in international mathematics and science study and the progress in international reading literacy study, which are important when it comes to the quality of assessment.

Some excellent things are happening in Scottish education, but worrying things are happening, too. There is a decline in literacy and numeracy; a third of schools fail to be classed as at least “good” in inspections; there is a deficiency in the hours that are spent in teacher training in literacy and numeracy, as Mary Scanlon said; teacher numbers, including at nursery level, are declining, although we have agreed how important the early years are; applications for headships are declining; and, of course, there is the awful attainment gap.

There is much in Scottish education that is positive, but there are also a lot of stark messages. I hope that the cabinet secretary will address them when she sums up the debate.

16:43

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate, which has shown that there is a growing cross-party consensus on tackling the attainment gap. As the saying goes, the first step towards fixing a problem is recognising that there is a problem. I commend the cabinet secretary for speaking honestly about the challenges that we face—after eight years of SNP Government. I am encouraged that all parties in the Parliament are committed to making education inequalities a top priority in this and the next parliamentary session.

As members said, there is an attainment gap between children from poorer backgrounds and those who are growing up in more affluent circumstances. The Scottish Government’s report card, after eight years, does not make comfortable reading. A pupil who entered primary 1 when the SNP began running our education system will now be hitting high school. Such pupils have borne the brunt of education budget cuts, falling teacher numbers and an increasing attainment gap, while watching classmates from wealthier families pull away from them academically.

The OECD report last month set out starkly what was already apparent to many of us: we are no longer world leaders in education. We are falling behind the rest of the world, and change is needed to get our education system back on track.

Much of the media attention and rhetoric so far has been on the reporting requirements and

national testing. That is understandable, as it animates the copywriters and gets stories on the news desks across the country. However, some clarity is needed from the Government on the issue of standardised testing. I hope that in her closing remarks the cabinet secretary will offer more details.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has rightly raised the point that the Scottish Government has to consider carefully the information that will be put into the public domain so as to avoid encouraging league tables or putting undue stress on pupils and teachers as a result of heightened media attention. It would appear that the Scottish Government has attempted to alleviate those concerns by not publishing the results of standardised testing directly. The question remains, though, of how ministers propose to prevent league tables from being created if data, although not published by anyone, will still be available through freedom of information requests.

Testing and reporting are a means to an end. That end is to effect substantial improvements in the educational outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. Scottish Labour believes that there is action beyond what the Government is proposing that can make a difference.

In the coming years, this Parliament will have a substantial suite of new powers that will open up new choices in education. We would use the additional revenues from a new 50p tax rate on the top earners in the country to redistribute money from those who can afford to pay it to those who need it most, by investing additional resources over and above the Government's proposals in tackling educational disadvantage.

The SNP Government's budget yet again slashes the funding for local schools, which will make the problem even worse. We would use the Parliament's new powers to introduce a fair start fund, which would give every primary school an extra £1,000 for every pupil from a deprived family. That money would go directly to headteachers, so that, choosing from a suite of proven methods, they make the decisions about how that money is spent best in their schools to close the attainment gap between the richest and the rest.

We would also offer support to parents to enable them to learn with their children, and we would introduce a special literacy support programme for looked-after children.

We believe that a strong legislative framework is needed to secure faster progress in closing the attainment gap in every part of Scotland. We particularly believe that an ambitious goal is needed to help close the socioeconomic

attainment gap in children's literacy. Specifically, we want to see set out in legislation a clear approach and ambitious timescales for making progress.

As part of the discussions on the Education (Scotland) Bill, we are offering an amendment that would set a target of reducing the attainment gap by half in the next decade. There is precedent for that approach, such as national targets on fuel poverty, climate change reduction and child poverty eradication.

It is our belief that enshrining such a target in legislation will clearly articulate the scale of the Scottish Government's aims in relation to closing the gap, promote greater public understanding of that key Government priority and raise the profile of the issue. It will demonstrate the changes that need to happen to make the Government's priority and ambition a success, and make sure that future Governments remain committed to that vital objective.

The achievement of those goals in Scotland will require greater focus on supporting improvement for the poorest children, who are most likely to fall behind, while being consistent with the responsibilities of education authorities to support the attainment of all children. Such an effort will therefore drive a more effective strategic approach to closing the attainment gap at national and local levels.

As I have said, we would use the additional revenue from a new 50p top rate of tax to redistribute resource from those who can afford it to those who need it most, ending the situation that members have highlighted of shared-campus schools where one school gets funding through the attainment fund while the other does not. All schools that have pupils who need the additional support would get it through our funding mechanism.

We would invest those additional resources over and above what the Government proposes to invest to tackle educational disadvantage in order to ensure that the pupils who face the greatest educational challenges have the opportunity to achieve the qualifications that they need to enter a career in science, maths, engineering, technology or whatever field they choose.

Additional resource is only part of the answer, but it is an integral part. Given the weight of support that we have found in the chamber in this debate and in numerous other debates on tackling our educational challenges and the attainment gap, it would be a shame if this opportunity were to pass us by.

16:51

Angela Constance: I am pleased that Mr Gray has returned to the chamber. In his opening remarks, he reflected—as he often does, along with the likes of Stewart Stevenson—on the history of education in Scotland. Like other members, he noted that Scotland used to be a world leader in education, whether that was in the 17th century or, as he specifically mentioned, in 1965, with the introduction of comprehensive education. He said that, in my opening remarks, I had claimed that history as my own. However, for the record I point out to Mr Gray that I was not born in 1965, and I have never looked at education in Scotland, either past or present, through rose-tinted glasses.

Iain Gray: The point that I was making is that although, over a long period—50 years of comprehensivisation—we have seen more pupils leave school with more qualifications, the evidence from Jim Scott suggests that, for a significant section of young people, that trend may now be in danger. I think that we need to pay attention to that.

Angela Constance: I accept that, as is stated in the Audit Scotland report to which Mary Scanlon often refers, we can demonstrate that attainment is increasing in Scotland according to a range of measures that have been used over the past decade.

I know that Dr Scott is a passionate advocate for languages in particular, but I do not always agree with the conclusions that he reaches in his analysis. I do not necessarily agree with how he has applied his research in terms of the changes in our curriculum, or with his taking a snapshot of achievement at S4 when the purpose of curriculum for excellence is far more focused on looking at achievement by young people by the time that they leave school. Nonetheless, I recognise his interest in the area and his remarks about local accountability and governance in local decisions. I hope that, across the chamber, we all accept that it is good news that the number of higher grade entries and passes in languages has gone up over the past year and over the Government's term of office. That is something to be celebrated.

Iain Gray: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Angela Constance: Maybe later.

My point about not looking at education in Scotland, either past or present, through rose-tinted glasses is not that we have never had a proud history or that we have never been top of the league; it is that we must accept that inequity in education is not new but has always been with

us, both before and after the introduction of comprehensive education.

Many of us need only look at our own families. Despite passing his 11-plus and going to the grammar school in West Lothian—Bathgate academy—my grandfather still had to leave school at 14 to go down a pit. My mother, who left school in the late 60s, post the introduction of comprehensive education, did so with better qualifications than my father had but was always paid far less. We must face up to the inequities in our system, past and present, and not demur from the challenge that that places on us all.

The debate about Scotland's history in education is important and interesting, but the debate about the future is far, far more important. Today's debate has been about a seminal report on Scottish education. Various members have highlighted particular aspects of the report. The quote that I want to mention is from Andy Hargreaves, who is a member of the OECD review team. It encapsulates our recent journey and what we need to do next. He said:

"Scotland has taken a bold and brave direction in developing an engaging and challenging approach to learning that is driven by the expert judgments of a strong teaching profession.

If it builds on this impressive foundation, Scotland can, should and will become a world leader of positive educational change.

To do this, Scotland will need to ensure that its curriculum achieves equity as well as excellence for pupils from all backgrounds, wherever they live.

It will need to communicate the effects of its educational efforts through a clearer narrative of progress and track that progress through better indicators of impact.

And its already strong profession will need to collaborate even more closely, among schools, across Local Authorities and with the wider community to achieve its vision.

To be bold is admirable. To stay bold and become bolder still in ways that benefit every learner is essential."

Liz Smith: I think that the cabinet secretary is absolutely right on that comment.

When it comes to the delivery of the curriculum for excellence, the OECD report asked for a new narrative. Will the cabinet secretary say something about how that might be delivered?

Angela Constance: Yes, indeed. I concur with Liz Smith on the need for less complexity and more clarity, and I will discuss that very point with the curriculum for excellence management board when I meet it tomorrow.

I want to pick up on some of the other remarks that colleagues made. Members will be aware that a new group on qualifications and assessment has been established. That is about providing more

clarity and getting the right balance on the burden of assessment without letting standards slip.

Many members spoke about the importance of the transition between primary 7 and S2, and I agree with them on that. I also point to the importance of the transition from early years education to primary 1 and the post-school transition. Universal provision, whether in the form of attainment advisers, the new innovation fund that the First Minister has announced or the access to education fund, needs to be balanced with a more targeted use of resources through the Scottish attainment challenge, for which we are providing £100 million over four years.

It seems to me that the only person who is obsessed with national testing is Liam McArthur. I stress to him that we are not returning to the high-stakes national testing of the past. I urge him to stop fighting battles that are long gone and to look to the future. He says that there is no shortage of data in the system; it is just that it is not available and not consistent.

Liam McArthur: On the one hand, the education secretary talks about not returning to high-stakes testing and league tables, but on the other, she keeps talking about the need for consistency across the country and for the information in question to be available on a national basis. How does she square those two statements?

Angela Constance: I urge Mr McArthur to read the national improvement framework and to look at the consultation document and the document that highlights how we responded to the very detailed consultation that we undertook.

We must accept that, as the OECD rightly pointed out, although the current national assessment arrangements do not provide significantly robust information, Scotland has the opportunity to lead the world in developing an integrated assessment and evaluation framework. I say to Mr McArthur and others that nothing trumps teacher judgment and that education is indeed about thinking outside the box and most certainly not about ticking the box.

I am often asked by members what my strategy is. I have never been one of those ministers who like to sit in their office, either upstairs in the Parliament or in St Andrew's house, with a map of the world at their back and a shelf full of glossy strategies. My strategy is, first and foremost, about weans. The introduction of national standardised assessments is about having the right information at the right time to intervene to help our children progress. They are diagnostic assessments, and teachers will have the flexibility to use those tests at any time in the school year, as and when they see fit.

One of the reasons why the national improvement framework is being put on a statutory basis is to ensure that the Scottish Government and our partners in local government are subject to annual reporting and are both accountable and transparent; that we do not just get into the cycle of describing what the problem is; and that we have the information to intervene at the right time in the right place with action that is firmly rooted in the real world.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, my first and foremost obsession is children and my second is the front line and what we need to do to enable our teaching profession to teach and to support our teaching staff.

The Presiding Officer: You need to wind up, minister.

Angela Constance: As recommended by the OECD, this Government will relentlessly and with rigour pursue closing the attainment gap and raising the bar simultaneously, because it is not acceptable on any level for wealth to determine educational achievement and life chances. This Government had the courage to invite the OECD in to review education in Scotland and the courage to open up the education debate. We will now act in the best interests of our children.

Business Motion

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-15305, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting a revision to the business programme for tomorrow, Wednesday 13 January.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Wednesday 13 January 2016—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
 Health, Wellbeing and Sport

insert

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

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S4M-15282.3, in the name of Iain Gray, which seeks to amend motion S4M-15282, in the name of Angela Constance, on delivering a world-class education system, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)

Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (Ind)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 34, Against 84, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-15282.1, in the name of Liam McArthur, which seeks to amend motion S4M-15282, in the name of Angela Constance, on delivering a world-class education system, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (Ind)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 5, Against 80, Abstentions 33.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-15282, in the name of Angela Constance, on delivering a world-class education system, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)

Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 108, Against 10, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the OECD's review of Scottish education, published on 15 December 2015; welcomes the findings of the review that much in the curriculum for excellence is positive, including the holistic approach, the four capacities, professional engagement, trust in teachers' professional judgement and enthusiasm for learning and teaching; agrees that it paints a picture of a successful and effective school system, but one in which there are important areas for improvement; acknowledges the recognition of the Scottish Government's determination to focus on achieving both excellence and equity in the education system; supports work to make the framework of the curriculum for excellence simpler for teachers, parents and carers, reducing bureaucracy and supporting a new sense of dynamism and energy; agrees with the OECD that the National Improvement Framework has the potential to provide a robust evidence base and that it will be a key means of driving work to close the attainment gap and strengthen formative assessment approaches; further agrees that Scotland has an opportunity to become a world leader in providing an integrated framework for evaluation and assessment, and believes that action taken as a result of this report will help to reach the Scottish Government's goal of an excellent and equitable education system in which every young person across the country is able to achieve their full potential regardless of their family circumstances or the background that they are born into.

Scottish Local Shop Report

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-14652, in the name of Gordon MacDonald, on "Scottish Grocers Federation Launches Scottish Local Shop Report". The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates the Scottish Grocers' Federation on the launch, at its annual conference, of the first ever Scottish local shop report; welcomes the findings in the report that there are a greater number of independent convenience stores per head of population in Scotland than in the rest of the UK and that the sector in Scotland provides 44,332 jobs; understands the importance of convenience stores to communities in Scotland, including in Edinburgh Pentlands; celebrates reports that 87% of independent retailers in Scotland were involved in some form of community activity in the last year and that the sector is highly entrepreneurial, with 65% of independent retailers in Scotland being the first person in their family to own or run a convenience store, and understands that turnover in the sector grew by 5% between 2014 and 2015, which resulted in a net growth rate of one new shop per week in Scotland.

17:07

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands)

(SNP): I welcome to the Scottish Parliament members of the Scottish Grocers Federation who are in the gallery tonight, and I thank John Lee of the SGF for his assistance.

Last October, the Scottish Grocers Federation launched the first ever report on the importance of convenience stores to our villages, towns and cities. The introduction states that the report is the

"richest ever picture of the economic and social value of local shops"

in Scotland. The report, which was produced by the SGF in conjunction with its sister organisation in England and Wales—the Association of Convenience Stores—found that convenience stores often provide the only local shopping option for rural communities, while those in urban areas serve as part of the mix of stores that serve the needs of the people who live and work in our communities.

The report found that 75 per cent of the 5,602 convenience stores in Scotland are run by small business owners, that the sector provides 44,332 jobs, and that their value to the economy in terms of gross value added is more than £0.5 billion per annum. With one convenience store for every 946 people, Scotland has more such shops per head than any other part of the UK.

We have read in the newspapers recently that some retailers are going through a difficult patch,

with at least one high-profile casualty being announced in the past week. A PricewaterhouseCoopers report for the first half of 2015 highlighted that five high street stores were closing every week in some of Scotland's largest towns and cities. The figures highlight that stores that are owned by multiple retailers have shut up shop with not enough new openings to prevent a net reduction, and PWC highlighted that store portfolios continue to be

"reviewed and streamlined in response to the relentless advance of online shopping".

How has that affected convenience stores? The report highlights that there are now more stores than there were in 2014, with a net growth rate of more than one new shop per week, which has provided more than 2,000 new jobs during the past year. Overall, sales are up 5 per cent year on year as a result of an increase in average spend, of more couples with young children using the stores, and of the increasing frequency of visits on foot to the local community store.

The range of services is increasing, which is helping to drive the increase in footfall, with many convenience stores offering mobile phone top-ups, bill payment services, free-to-use cash machines, community notice boards and cold food to go. Social media are helping convenience stores to take on the major supermarket chains with special offers and events being advertised via Twitter and Facebook.

The report found that another possible reason for the positive figures is the fact that 87 per cent of Scottish retailers engage in some form of community activity, with more than eight out of 10 collecting money for local or national charities, one in three providing funding or support to community events, and one in four providing sponsorship to local sports teams.

It therefore comes as no surprise that of the 12 types of retail outlet that are present in our communities, convenience stores were voted second by consumers in a ComRes—CommunicateResearch Ltd—poll in 2015 in respect of which have the most positive impact on their local area. That involvement in the community and the range of services that are provided are what help to create customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty encourages a new generation of young entrepreneurs in new store openings, with a 33 per cent increase since 2014 of business people below the age of 30 opening and owning convenience stores. The report found that the sector is very entrepreneurial, with 65 per cent being the first person in their family to own or run a convenience store in Scotland.

That does not mean that no issues need to be addressed in order that such success can

continue. Small independent retailers are under immense pressure to maintain margins and profitability so that they can have the funds to reinvest in their business. Many store owners have embraced new technology and installed LED lights, smart meters, chiller doors and so on in order to cut overheads and compete with the supermarkets.

That drive to efficiency is being assisted by the Scottish Government's environment agency, Zero Waste Scotland, which has made available a fund of £100,000 to enable convenience store retailers to carry out energy efficiency refits. That has proved to be highly successful and many SGF members are keen for it to continue.

Then, there are the issues that lie outwith the retailers' control but which impact on the viability of their stores. Although the report found that 58 per cent of convenience store customers travel on foot, 38 per cent drive to their local store. Parking problems impact on local shops, which means the loss of passing trade or impulse buyers. That is being evidenced in my constituency. I understand that lack of car parking provision by Edinburgh Napier University at Sighthill means that more and more parking in the adjacent local shopping and residential area is being used by students, which is resulting in a reduction of passing trade to local shops and is making it difficult for residents to park adjacent to their homes.

There are also the increased rents and non-domestic rates that are demanded of small retailers, which do not reflect the difficult trading circumstances that many find themselves in. Retailers in my constituency inform me that the Scottish Government small business bonus scheme has been welcome in its giving 100 per cent relief to properties with a rateable value of up to £10,000, and a sliding scale of discount for properties with a rateable value of up to £18,000. Across Scotland, 92,000 small businesses—many of them local convenience stores—have had their rates abolished or substantially reduced.

In August 2014, during the first ever parliamentary debate on the importance of convenience stores to our local economies, I quoted the Carnegie UK Trust, which stated:

"We recognise that for many towns, the contribution of independent retailers is a crucial factor in the long-term sustainability, diversity and vibrancy of high streets."—*[Official Report, 19 August 2014; c 33651.]*

"The Local Shop Report 2015" confirms and justifies the view of the Carnegie UK Trust that the long-term sustainability, diversity and vibrancy of high streets is down to local shops and the convenience store sector.

I urge members to pop in to committee room 1 on Thursday, where they can not only pick up a

copy of the report, but can discuss the findings with a number of retailers from across Scotland.

17:15

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I thank my colleague Gordon MacDonald for bringing the debate to the chamber and I welcome our visitors in the public gallery.

On 27 November last year, I had the pleasure of sending off a charity conga around Hampden Park. Participating in that event were a number of local primary schools, including additional support needs schools. The purpose behind the conga was to raise funds to ensure that no child in those schools went without a happy Christmas. All the funding that was raised on the day, which totalled thousands of pounds, was kept by the schools for their pupils.

Those responsible for that fantastic event—besides Glasgow the Caring City and the schools—included Hampden Park, which generously let us use the stadium, and the Scottish Grocers Federation, which made sure that every child was watered and fed. There might even have been some teacakes and caramel wafers from a well-known company whose name escapes me.

That generosity from the SGF is only one example of the community work that the independent retail sector does. The report provides an excellent breakdown of the sector's activities in communities. As Gordon MacDonald said, more than 80 per cent of independent retailers are involved in their community, and across the United Kingdom, Scotland is second in that only to the south-west of England. The sector is to be congratulated on that.

Community engagement has taken many forms, which include collecting money for national or local charities. Local stores provide funding or in-kind support to local events and sponsor local sports teams or other community activities. They play an important role in community, council and local business association meetings and projects.

I was amazed at some of the other statistics that the report contains. The convenience store sector is worth a staggering £5 billion to the UK economy, which equates to 6 per cent of the UK retail sector; 75 per cent of local shops are owned by small business owners, many of whom benefit from the small business bonus, as Gordon MacDonald mentioned; 32 per cent of owners are women, which is not parity but is an encouraging number to build on; 23 per cent of business owners have been in business for more than 26 years; and 36 per cent own their business in partnership with family members. Stability and

longevity appear to be just two of the benefits of running a convenience store.

We cannot forget that, when the word “convenience” is used, it is extremely appropriate: 78 per cent of customers travel less than a mile to their local store; 25 per cent use their local store every day; and, as has been mentioned, 58 per cent travel by foot to their store, so the stores are both convenient and environmentally friendly.

In areas such as the Cathcart constituency, the convenience store often stands alone as the sole source of shopping in parts of housing estates such as Castlemilk. In areas such as Croftfoot and Shawlands, where the stores are playing a notable role in establishing a new business improvement district, they operate with other service providers to give residents choice and diversity. They are such an important part of the local community that it was after consulting local businesses in Mount Florida and Battlefield that I helped to establish the business forum, in which the numerous convenience stores that are located in the area have continued to play an important role.

Many of us will remember Ronnie Barker’s popular sitcom “Open All Hours”. That title—although, thankfully, not the attitude and work practices of that old skinflint Arkwright—could not be more apt. The stores are indeed open all hours. They are often open 24 hours, seven days a week, which earns them the accolade of being a crucial mainstay of the community.

I congratulate the SGF and its partners on compiling the report. The sector deserves to be recognised for the role that it plays as an important part of Scotland’s economy and for its resilience in response to a changing business environment. It also deserves our recognition and praise for the important role that it plays in communities across constituencies such as Cathcart and for the many examples of support that it has given our communities.

17:19

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Gordon MacDonald on securing the debate and on giving us all the opportunity to note the findings of “The Local Shop Report 2015” and to speak more generally about the retail and grocery sector in Scotland. I commend the Association of Convenience Stores, the Scottish Grocers Federation and the Scottish Retail Consortium for all the work that they do to keep us in Parliament informed about what is happening in their industries and in the real economy.

As the motion says, there are well over 40,000 jobs in convenience stores in Scotland and many of the stores are family-run businesses with roots

in the community. The overwhelming majority are run by small business owners, which suggests that the sector is highly entrepreneurial. If we include independent shops that operate on petrol station forecourts, 75 per cent of the shops that the report studied are small businesses. Only 17 per cent of people said that they visit their local shop less than once a week and 25 per cent said that they visit every day. According to the report, 87 per cent of independent retailers are involved in the community in some way.

I have taken time to visit convenience stores. It is clear that local shops can be a social hub in the community. It strikes me that many stores have regular customers, particularly older people, who could have been shopping in the same place for decades. Convenience stores can be more than just a place to exchange money for groceries; they can be a place to exchange conversation and meet neighbours. It also strikes me that, for some people, their regular trip to pick up groceries or get a newspaper could be the only time that they leave the house on some days, and that the only people who they speak to all day could be the staff working at the till or stacking shelves.

Last week, I presented to the Parliament the Equal Opportunities Committee’s report on age and social isolation. I recommend that all members should take the time to read it, because it underlines the importance of social interaction and being part of a community, which many of our convenience stores are.

Some issues that are relevant to the debate have been raised at the cross-party group on towns and town centres. The Scottish Government has indicated that it is involved in reviewing and, I hope, refreshing the town centre action plan. I want a new, robust and comprehensive action plan to be brought forward at the earliest opportunity.

The themes of the Scottish town centres review, which Malcolm Fraser led, are useful for anyone who has an interest in turning around our town centres, regenerating our towns and supporting businesses that invest in our local economies. Those themes must be developed and taken forward in the coming months. One is the town centre first approach, which is about the public sector taking a lead and promoting investment in town centres to drive up footfall and promote accessibility. Another theme is town centre living, which is about making our town centres places in which to live again and not just places in which to work or shop. Then there is the enterprising communities theme, whose aim is to have a community estate agency established to audit town centre assets and to find better ways to use local properties and existing capacity. A fourth theme—digital towns—is about supporting wi-fi

and making sure that we have high-speed broadband in all our town centres.

It would be useful to know more about how the Scottish Government intends to proceed with the renewal of the town centre action plan. Retailers large and small will be interested in the result, as will be the communities that they serve.

"The Local Shop Report 2015" has clearly set out the importance of convenience stores to local communities and local economies. It is another valuable resource for us in the Parliament to draw on as we consider the future of our town centres and of the retail sector.

17:23

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I, too, thank Gordon MacDonald for bringing the debate to the chamber. I welcome the debate because, as many members will be aware, I represent the great town of Paisley, which has faced many of the challenges that have been mentioned in the retail sector over the past 10 to 15 years. The media automatically tend to take a picture of Paisley High Street when they want to make a point about how dramatically things have changed. However, although the retail giants have moved out of town, the convenience stores are still in my town centre, serving and working with the community.

That is important, because there is still a demographic among my constituents who do most of their shopping in the town centre. The elderly and those from poorer backgrounds have more difficulties shopping out of town. That is borne out in the report, which states that 78 per cent of convenience store customers travel less than a mile to use their local store; that 58 per cent travel to their local store by foot, compared with 38 per cent who drive; and that 25 per cent of customers use their local shop every day.

That is mirrored in my constituency, where there are small pockets of successful local shops throughout our town. For town centres such as Paisley to succeed, we must encourage those stores and ensure that they get the opportunity to develop further, because they are the ones that are still contributing to our local economy.

I remember a comment from a number of years back, when there was initial talk about welfare reform. It was said that, from a retail perspective, welfare reform would cost Paisley town centre about £1 million a year, because it is the old and the poorer individuals who shop in the town centre. All those things have to be taken into account, because they are the people who are making sure that we have a local shop to go to.

It is interesting that one of the top three stores that everyone wants to have in their area is a

specialist food shop, such as a traditional butcher, which we still have a number of locally. They were extremely busy during the festive period, although they tend to slow up, but they are still the only type of business where people can get certain products. Shops such as independent butchers and grocers make our town centres thrive because they offer something that is slightly different and a service that people can no longer get elsewhere. They hark back to a time when the shopkeeper knew everybody's name and knew who his customer base was, and we do not want to lose that.

Last week, I spoke—ironically, it was during a debate on lobbying—about an independent bookshop that we used to have in Paisley town centre. Three or four generations of the same family owned that store but, with the internet and the chance to buy a book and have it delivered straight to the door, and with the opportunity to buy e-books, they could not compete.

A town centre loses something when it loses that type of shop. The irony is that the rest of the top three shops that people want is banks and post offices—businesses whose business model has been changing over recent years. I have constantly spoken to the minister about the major banks pulling out of certain areas. They are part of the retail ecology of every high street and town centre as well, and they have to take on a responsibility, because shops and retailers need them, too.

I believe that small retailers are the solution to our town centre problems. I thank Gordon MacDonald again for bringing the debate to the chamber. I wish all the retailers all the best, but I encourage everyone to try to shop in local stores, as I did recently in my town when buying Christmas presents. We need to lead from the front and support such traders, because it is all too easy for a store to go the same way as the bookshop that I mentioned. When it is no longer there, people will wonder what happened to it.

17:28

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): I, too, wish to congratulate the Scottish Grocers Federation on the launch of the first ever local shop report, produced in conjunction with the Association of Convenience Stores. We must emphasise the word "convenience". As ever, the rich amount of detailed information provided is incredibly useful for us MSPs in order to know how the sector is doing, what challenges it faces and what we can do to help. We are probably all quoting the same statistics, because it is a large range of information in a targeted, concise report, which is a welcome development. I am sure that colleagues across the chamber agree that the

report paints a positive picture of the independent convenience store sector, and those entrepreneurs deserve our praise. They also deserve our help, which is why we should examine the areas in the report in which challenges remain, so that we know how to help.

The report highlights the welcome news that, as we all know from the statistics that we have heard, we have the highest concentration of convenience stores in the UK, with 5,602 in Scotland. The figure of one shop for every 946 people is impressive proof of the breadth and commitment of the sector to serving our communities. We do not have to look very far to find yet further proof of small retailers' commitment, as 29 per cent of Scottish shop owners work more than 70 hours a week, and 22 per cent take no holidays during the year. That is an incredibly strong work ethic and something that they should be congratulated on, although it is important that options for more flexible working should also be available if desired.

Although longevity is itself impressive, as evidenced by the fact that 26 per cent of shop owners in Scotland have been in the trade for more than 25 years, it is imperative that we look forward to where economic growth and the jobs with it will come from in the future. The answer of course is entrepreneurship. In that regard, the news in the SGF's report is again impressive. Some 65 per cent of people who own or run a convenience store in Scotland are the first person in their family to do so, and 57 new shops have opened in the past year, which hints at exactly the sort of start-up drive that we need in this country. Furthermore, there is an encouragingly large representation of young people in the sector, with 16 per cent of the managers being 30 or under.

The ability to drive economic growth in the future is, of course, tied up with the embracing of technology. Scottish shops have certainly been active in this area, with 23 per cent having a Facebook account, 20 per cent having a Twitter account and around a third offering contactless payments. As a businessman and frequent customer of local shops, I know that using technology to attract customers and make their transactions easier is key to competing with other, perhaps larger, shops, as is the personal service that those convenience stores give. As George Adam said, gone are the days when people used to know one's name when one went into their shop, although that still happens in certain areas.

There appears to be a bright future ahead for convenience stores in Scotland, but we cannot be complacent about delivering on that potential. I am sure that grocers do not need politicians to tell them which technologies to adopt to help their business, but it is important that we remain aware of any issues facing small business owners that

might prevent them from making the most of technological opportunities in the sector.

Finally, I would like to touch on another admirable feature of independent stores, which is their extensive contribution to their local communities. As we have just heard, over the past year, 87 per cent of those stores in Scotland were involved in some form of local activity such as charity or sports work. Time and again they have shown themselves worthy of our extensive praise and support, but the most important aspect is how that binds their relationship with local customers. That, after all, is key to cementing small stores' place in our communities and the continued health of the sector. As the SGF's report shows, the sector is growing in Scotland because it is providing customers with the local service that they want—that, after all, is what it is all about.

17:31

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Gordon MacDonald for bringing this debate to Parliament, and congratulate the Scottish Grocers Federation on its publication of the first Scottish local shop report.

Without any doubt, small retailers and convenience shops contribute greatly to our economy. In Scotland, nearly 6,000 such shops provide more than 44,000 jobs. In addition, by using local services and suppliers, small retailers also reinvest in their local economies. However, as Gordon MacDonald mentioned in his motion, independent convenience shops also play a vital role in communities across Scotland, with 87 per cent of independent retailers being engaged in community activity. Those activities are wide ranging. For example, since the introduction of the 5p single-use carrier bag charge, small shops have raised significant sums for charitable purposes. To make the benefits more lasting, the Scottish Grocers Federation now also works with the Scottish Government and Keep Scotland Beautiful to support smaller retailers to work together and make their donations more tangible.

I believe that acknowledging the benefits of small retailers and convenience stores is important. It highlights that small retailers and convenience stores are thriving aspects of communities across Scotland and contribute towards sustainable economic growth. However, those statistics should not lead us to neglect the fact that Scotland's town and city centres are affected by a large number of shop vacancies. Towns and cities have difficulties in attracting customers and have to compete with larger shopping centres on the periphery. Even though statistics show that shop vacancies are falling and that restructuring changes are having an effect, I believe that further improving the attractiveness of

our town centres is a crucial aspect of supporting local economies. However, creating more vibrant and active town and city centres is not an easy task. It requires the co-operation of a range of stakeholders, including the local council and business owners. To avoid conflict, that also demands the careful consideration of various interests.

In that regard, I want to mention Kirkcaldy4All, which is an excellent example of how to involve and work with local small retailers and businesses and of how beneficial such a partnership can be for customers and the local economy.

Kirkcaldy4All was elected in 2010 by the business improvement district in Kirkcaldy to deliver a business plan that, in its words, aims to

“promote Kirkcaldy Town Centre as a place where people want to work, shop and spend their leisure time in a welcoming environment which is customer focused and investment-friendly”.

To reach that goal, Kirkcaldy4All promotes Kirkcaldy town centre through various events, including the Fife international carnival, the big haggis Burns night, a lantern parade and the beach Highland games, as well as advertising in local newspapers and radio stations.

Kirkcaldy4All encourages small businesses and retailers to participate in small business Saturday, which, in 2015, took place on 5 December. In Kirkcaldy, the campaign, which encourages people to shop local, was celebrated with street entertainers and many offers and promotions in participating businesses. Participants also received free social media coverage for a period of five weeks leading up to the event.

Overall, 2015 has been a very successful year for Kirkcaldy4All. Besides being re-elected for another five-year term, Kirkcaldy4All launched a six-month trial for reduced parking costs in Kirkcaldy's town centre. Most notably, Kirkcaldy was named home of Britain's fastest growing small businesses. I believe that Kirkcaldy4All played a crucial role in that success. A recent Experian study ranked Kirkcaldy number 1 in the United Kingdom—higher than cities such as Birmingham and Aberdeen. Turnover in small retailers and convenience shops in Kirkcaldy has grown significantly in the past 12 months, reflecting a trend for growth in the sector.

The debate has been a great opportunity to discuss such positive developments. However, we need to think about how we can sustain that trend and ensure that small retailers and convenience shops continue to thrive.

17:36

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Gordon MacDonald on securing the debate. I also congratulate all those involved in the launch of “The Local Shop Report 2015”.

The independent retail sector is relatively strong in Scotland, with the highest concentration of such stores in the UK. As other members have said, new businesses are opening all the time. Most local shops are stand-alone businesses or family businesses, with many owners and family members working long hours and taking little time off because of their commitment to the enterprise.

Sadly, hard work alone does not guarantee the success or even the survival of a business. Even long-established independent convenience stores have found the financial climate of recent years a challenge. There are also pressures and temptations arising from the growing competition of supermarket chains entering the convenience store market. Let us take, for example, Kelly of Cults in Aberdeen—a local shop, complete with bakery and butcher's department, which was run by the same family from 1902 to 2015. The shop is now leased to Sainsbury's—no doubt a rational business decision for the owners but, inevitably, a loss of choice and variety for the customers.

Sainsbury's is a good employer, of course. It provides jobs, training and opportunities for its staff, negotiates terms and conditions with the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—something that other employers in the sector should also do—and is a popular and successful retailer. However, what supermarket chains cannot provide is the diversity of products for which local shops, such as Kelly of Cults, are rightly known.

The business model of a company such as Sainsbury's is to keep prices down by procuring produce from a single source; by definition, that reduces diversity and therefore choice. It also has unintended consequences. An example of that was when Young's Seafood lost the smoked salmon contract with Sainsbury's. At a stroke, the fish processed at Young's factory in Fraserburgh lost outlets throughout the UK. This month, as a consequence, more than 150 workers in Fraserburgh have lost their jobs.

Local shops, by contrast, are more able and willing to place orders with local suppliers, which is one of the ways in which they can contribute to their local economies. That is one of the things that is lost when local shops are taken over or driven out of the marketplace altogether.

Another challenge that faces new and existing businesses in the independent convenience store sector comes from the illicit trade in alcohol and

tobacco. Sellers of such contraband advertise their products and services through social media, making it difficult for the police and HM Revenue & Customs to track them down. A recent sting operation in Aberdeen, in which hundreds of illegal cigarettes were bought from two different street sellers in just a couple of hours, revealed just how easy it was to access those products and services.

Nevertheless, there has been some success in tackling that trade, including, in September last year, the seizure of 5,000 illegal cigarettes and 3.5kg of tobacco from addresses in Peterhead and Fraserburgh. Continued operations by the police, trading standards and HMRC will go a long way to tackle illicit sales, thereby protecting legitimate business in local convenience stores from that unwanted and illegal competition.

I was interested to note that the Scottish Grocers Federation has called on the Scottish Government to give responsibility for tackling that illicit trade a more prominent role in a ministerial portfolio. That might be a step in the right direction to show the seriousness with which the issue should be taken.

I welcome the debate and the report, highlighting as they do the important role of local shops in urban and rural communities. I hope that enough people will continue to choose to support their local shops for their important role to continue for generations to come.

17:40

The Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): I congratulate Gordon MacDonald on securing this important debate. He pointed out the huge importance of convenience stores to Scotland and set out his stall by summarising some of the salient facts—for example, the more than 40,000 jobs that are sustained by the sector, with £0.5 billion or more of turnover, and the enormous contribution that convenience stores make to the communities that they serve, not least in his constituency of Edinburgh Pentlands. I have had the pleasure of working with Gordon MacDonald and with some of his constituents and the Scottish Grocers Federation. He has been a champion of the cause, which he has persevered in pursuing. I note, incidentally, that the Scottish Grocers Federation is 98 this year and will be celebrating its centenary in 2018, which is something to look forward to.

The cross-party support that we have heard for the sector is extremely encouraging. This has been a very positive debate and I praise all members' contributions to it, which have given us the opportunity to discuss some of the enormous contribution that the sector makes.

These businesses are truly local businesses—perhaps more so than just about any other type of business, as “The Local Shop Report 2015” exemplifies. I think that they come second only to the post office in being the most community based and the most local of businesses, and in making the greatest commitment to communities of perhaps all the retail sector. That is the message that I took from the various contributions to the debate as we went on a sort of virtual geographic tour of Scotland, from Aberdeen and Kirkcaldy through to Glasgow Cathcart, which left me with the indelible image of Mr James Dornan leading a conga to raise money for a children's charity as a sort of Pied Piper of Hampden, as he might describe himself.

We know that Mr Adam always champions his native town of Paisley, which he always mentions, so I was surprised that he got a whole three seconds into his speech before he said the word “Paisley”, which showed uncharacteristic forbearance.

A number of issues were raised in the debate, some of which I will highlight. Business rates were mentioned; they are a necessary contribution to Scotland's finances and businesses make an enormous contribution to sustaining public services through the rates that they pay, but when did we last hear a business getting recognition for contributing enormously to helping maintain our health, education, police and environmental services?

Smaller businesses value highly the small business bonus, as we heard. I think that near 100,000 businesses now receive the small business bonus. My ambition—or one of them—is that the small business bonus becomes a sort of embedded part of policy—not something that is liable to be removed but something that will continue to be part of the system as long as we have the current rating system. Our party has made the commitment that we will, if re-elected, retain the small business bonus to the end of the next session—which, by my arithmetic, will take us to 2021. That is important, because that sort of certainty and long-term planning would be really appreciated by the smaller convenience stores that, as Mr MacDonald clearly set out, value the small business bonus that they obtain. I hope that the parties that do not presently support the small business bonus will join us in recognising the enormous contribution that is made.

However, the sector makes other contributions, including employment of young people. From a convenience store in Mr MacDonald's constituency I learned of the contribution that such businesses make to employment of young people through the provision of what used in the old days to be called Saturday jobs, such as paper

rounds—which, if I may say so, you and I can remember particularly well, Presiding Officer. Okay—the salaries are not high, but the experience inculcates the work ethic in young people and presents an opportunity for them to learn that they must arrive and finish at a certain time and get the job done. Businesses provide such work to local children, in a safe environment. That can be easy to overlook.

Problems such as parking, planning and regulation are at the heart of the nitty-gritty experience of running a small business. Such frustrations and irritations can be considerable, as I well remember from running my own small business. I will not share with members the frustrating experience that I had in relation to planning, although I might do so in a different environment.

When we are taking steps to encourage responsible use of tobacco and alcohol, we must, prior to making and implementing regulations, consider what they will mean in practice for the people who will have to apply them. It is easy to make a high-minded rhetorical speech about the value and rightness of such action; it is far more difficult to ensure that regulations can be applied in a practical, consistent and proportionate way, which does not impose an undue burden, as our better regulation policy sets out.

I think that almost every member in the debate mentioned convenience stores' enormous contribution to charity, which we cherish. That contribution perhaps explains why such stores are the second most popular type of retail business in the country, as it says in the independent report.

As the minister who has sought to build a close relationship with the whole retail sector and to recognise its value in employing around a quarter of a million people in Scotland, I have a particular affinity for the small and often family-run businesses that are rooted in Scotland and its communities—the convenience stores that are open from 8 til late and whose staff start work from 6 am or 7 am and work hours as long as anyone in the country works. It is a great experience to have the opportunity to thank all those businesspeople and their staff for the enormous contribution that they make to their communities and to Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:47.

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