



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 9 March 2017

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 9 March 2017

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Oil Prices (Assistance)	1
Prisoners (Privileges)	3
Aquaculture (Environment).....	4
British Transport Police (Integration).....	6
General Practitioner Out-of-hours Services (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde).....	7
Ambulances (Moray)	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Engagements.....	10
Engagements.....	12
Cabinet (Meetings)	16
United Kingdom Budget.....	20
Life Expectancy	22
“Dying from inequality”	23
Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism	24
COMMUNITY JOBS SCOTLAND	27
<i>Motion debated—[Adam Tomkins].</i>	
Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con)	27
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	30
Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	32
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)	33
Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD).....	35
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP).....	36
Bill Bowman (North East Scotland) (Con)	37
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)	39
Rachael Hamilton (South Scotland) (Con)	40
The Minister for Employability and Training (Jamie Hepburn)	42
SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY QUESTION TIME	45
Food for Life Catering Mark.....	45
Payslip Service	46
Payslips	46
Exhibition Space.....	47
Direct Debit Payments	49
Garden Lobby (Floor)	49
LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE (SCOTLAND) ORDER 2017 [DRAFT]	52
<i>Motion moved—[Derek Mackay].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Alex Rowley].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution (Derek Mackay).....	52
Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	54
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	57
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP).....	59
Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con).....	60
Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab).....	62
Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green).....	64
Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD)	65
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP).....	68
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	69
Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP).....	71
James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab)	73
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)	74
The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart)	77

BIODIVERSITY	81
<i>Motion moved—[Roseanna Cunningham].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Maurice Golden].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Claudia Beamish].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Mark Ruskell].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham)...	81
Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con)	84
Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab)	85
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)	87
Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)	89
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)	91
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)	93
Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD).....	94
Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)	96
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)	97
David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	99
Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con).....	101
Roseanna Cunningham	102
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTION	105
<i>Motion moved—[Joe FitzPatrick].</i>	
DECISION TIME	106

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 9 March 2017

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

General Question Time

Oil Prices (Assistance)

1. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to assist businesses in the north-east that have been affected by changes in global oil prices. (S5O-00752)

The Minister for Business, Innovation and Energy (Paul Wheelhouse): The Scottish Government continues to support both businesses and individuals affected by the downturn in the oil and gas sector. The energy jobs task force is developing long-term solutions to the structural challenges that affect the sector, and our enterprise agencies have engaged with more than 700 companies in the oil and gas industry.

In addition to support for individuals through the transition training fund, we have provided a further £12.5 million to support innovation and business resilience, informed by the work of the energy jobs task force. That included £10 million of Scottish Enterprise funding to help firms to reduce risks associated with carrying out research and development. To date, around 78 innovation projects with a total project value of around £16 million have benefited from around £7 million of Scottish Government support. Some £2.5 million was set aside for business resilience reviews and for providing targeted support from industry experts, and there has been over £2.5 million of investment committed, so far.

Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise are providing practical assistance to the supply chain. They have run six resilience in oil and gas events, and welcomed 217 delegates from 144 companies to hear from experts on strategy, operations, finance and market resilience.

In addition, our competitive business rates package targets support where it is most needed, and rates increases are capped for around 1,000 offices in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, which is the local area that is most adversely affected by changes in the oil and gas sector. Councils are able to apply further rates reductions, and we continue to work with Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council to inform that consideration.

Gillian Martin: Will the minister outline what he believes to be the industry's key asks of the United Kingdom Government at this time, to support the considerable work that has been done within the Scottish Government's limited powers, and which might also allow companies and the oil and gas workforce to plan for the future?

Paul Wheelhouse: I certainly recognise the balance between devolved and reserved powers. It is encouraging that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has finally listened to the calls that I, my predecessors and the industry have been making repeatedly for some time, to ensure that the right assets are in the right hands. We have seen recently deals of that nature in asset transfers from Shell to Chrysaor and from BP to EnQuest. However, it is crucial that the UK Government turns talk into action rather than simply forming more talking shops.

Although a panel has been established, we really need it to come forward with concrete proposals that can help the industry. This week's Oil & Gas UK bulletin highlighted the urgent need for fresh capital investment to stimulate activity and maximise economic recovery. We believe that steps must now be taken to incentivise investment and exploration. That would be of particular help to the supply chain, which is likely to continue to experience some tough times ahead.

As I outlined in my original answer, we are doing everything that we can within our devolved powers, but we really need the UK Government to step up, stop talking and do something to help the industry.

Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con):

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution and the Minister for Business, Innovation and Energy have said that business rates that are raised locally and collected locally stay local, but Aberdeenshire Council councillors were advised this morning that, of the £116 million that they expect from business rates next year, they will get only £93 million from the Scottish Government. Can the Scottish Government tell us where that £23 million has gone?

Paul Wheelhouse: Ross Thomson raises an important issue. However, as I stressed to tenants at an event in Inverurie—I think that Mr Thomson was present—revenue is retained by councils, but on a multiyear basis. I will ask my colleague Derek Mackay to provide further details on that mechanism so that Ross Thomson and other members understand it.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland)

(Lab): The minister will know that 8,000 of the 10,000 businesses in the north-east that have been hit by the recent rates revaluation have had no benefit from the selective cap that was

announced on 21 February. Will the Scottish Government now offer some support to businesses such as that which is owned by my constituents Graham and Linda Dawson, who have faced not only a 50 per cent increase in their rates liability, but have been taken out of any access whatsoever to the small business rates relief scheme as a result? Is Stewart Spence of the Marcliffe hotel and spa right? He told this morning's edition of *The Press and Journal*:

"I just don't think they have grasped the problem in Aberdeen".

Paul Wheelhouse: As I hope Lewis Macdonald knows, and as has been explained in Parliament on several occasions, individual rates valuations are set by assessors; Scottish Government ministers do not have any role in such valuations. Any business, including the one that is run by Graham and Linda Dawson in Lewis Macdonald's constituency, can appeal. I have spoken to the assessor for Aberdeenshire, who is very keen to engage with businesses informally to see whether there have been mistakes in valuations, and to take forward any changes that would arise from that. If the Dawsons were to be unhappy with the outcome of that, they could still make a formal appeal: they have up to six months to do so. I encourage them to engage with the assessor—who seems to be willing to have detailed discussions about individual businesses on an open-book basis—to see whether there has been unfairness in the valuation.

We continue to support businesses as best we can with national reliefs, and local authorities continue to provide local reliefs.

Prisoners (Privileges)

2. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason prisoners contesting their convictions are reportedly denied privileges afforded to the wider prison population. (S5O-00753)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): Prisoners contesting their convictions are not denied privileges afforded to the wider prison population. A system of privileges is in place in every prison in Scotland. Although the system may contain different provisions, dependent on the security category of prisoners, or for prisoners detained in specific parts of the prison, it does not restrict privileges for those contesting their conviction.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: My constituents Steven Green and Alan D'Ambrosio are both serving seven years in HMP Edinburgh. They both maintain their innocence and I find their grounds for appeal most compelling. They have already suffered unacceptable delays in the appeals

process and have been told that while they contest their verdicts they cannot progress to HMP Castle Huntly and the significant privileges that that would afford. Does the cabinet secretary agree that denying prisoners progression in such a way puts unfair pressure on people who might be innocent to abandon their appeals? What steps does he plan to take to address that?

Michael Matheson: It would not be appropriate for me to comment on an individual case relating to two of Mr Cole-Hamilton's constituents. If an appeal is being pursued, it is a matter for the courts to determine.

Denying the index offence does not automatically exclude an individual from progressing to less-secure conditions. However, the Scottish Prison Service must consider the risk posed by an individual before considering whether they should move to less-secure conditions. The process in the Scottish Prison Service is that such work goes through an establishment's risk management team, which is responsible for considering whether a prisoner should move to less-secure conditions. When an individual denies all or even part of their index offence, and that restricts their access to participation in any behaviour programmes that the SPS operates, the risk management team can also consider the findings in the context of a psychological risk assessment. Denying the index offence is not a provision that completely prevents a prisoner from being able to progress to less-secure conditions, but such matters are considered and decided upon by the risk management team within the establishment.

Aquaculture (Environment)

3. **Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address environmental concerns regarding aquaculture industry production targets. (S5O-00754)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity (Fergus Ewing): Aquaculture in Scotland provides world-class products, namely farmed salmon and trout, that have the potential to contribute £3.6 billion annually to the Scottish economy, supporting 18,000 jobs across the supply chain by 2030.

The sector, supported by the Scottish Government, must strive to be a world leader in innovation and demonstrate a global model for sustainable growth. At the same time we need to ensure that there are appropriate measures in place to protect Scotland's water environment from any adverse impacts.

Claudia Beamish: The industry is significant for employment in fragile coastal communities. As the

industry develops and the Scottish Government consultation goes live—I understand that it is about to open—it is important to consider environmental and welfare issues, too. Will the Scottish Government and the cabinet secretary consider welfare assessments of delousing treatments and the success or otherwise of cleaner fish, which are a more environmentally friendly way of dealing with an intractable problem?

Will the cabinet secretary also consider the approach that I proposed in an amendment that I lodged to the Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Bill, which the Scottish Government rejected, on farm-level assessment and reporting, with a delay, to give companies an opportunity to sort out problems and protect their reputations?

Fergus Ewing: In principle, the member makes reasonable points and takes a view that we all share; as I said, we need appropriate measures in place to protect our water environment. The member is quite correct to say that there is a forthcoming consultation on the new licensing framework. The new framework will seek to help aquaculture to expand, within sustainable limits.

I am pleased to inform members who might not follow the issue as avidly as I do that the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation published figures on 13 February that showed that reported sea lice levels during quarter 4 were the lowest since 2013. That is welcome news. However, we need to do a lot more work, including the thorough assessment of all planning applications—I assure members that that is the approach that we take.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I hope that the cabinet secretary accepts that fish farming is one of the most regulated industries in Scotland and that it needs to be supported through that regulation.

On Claudia Beamish's point, does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that the North Atlantic Fisheries College marine centre in Scalloway is undertaking field trials into the use of lump sucker fish as a mechanism for dealing with sea lice, which are a grave problem for the industry? Is that the way forward that he foresees for the industry? Will he ensure that his research funds support such initiatives?

Fergus Ewing: I am happy to agree with the member. I was in Shetland not long ago and—more recently—in Fort William last week, where I was able to speak to people about the success that fish farming in Scotland is generating for our most rural communities, where there are not many obvious employment alternatives. I think that Tavish Scott would agree that salmon is the most climate-friendly food, with—as far as I know—the lowest carbon footprint of any food in the world. It

is a great Scottish success story and we are determined to write new chapters thereanent.

British Transport Police (Integration)

4. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the proposed integration of the British Transport Police in Scotland into Police Scotland. (S5O-00755)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government's Railway Policing (Scotland) Bill was introduced on 8 December, with the objective of paving the way for the integration of the British Transport Police in Scotland into Police Scotland. The bill is currently subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

Liam Kerr: It is the opinion of, among others, the rail operators, the rail unions, the travelling public, the British Transport Police Federation, the BTP itself and now even Police Scotland that the merger is unnecessary and threatens passenger safety. Deputy Chief Constable Hanstock has said that the BTP has not been able to identify any operational or economic benefits, and the BTP Federation has said that the force

“is an established and successful model”,

and has highlighted a recent inspection, which was so successful that no recommendations were made.

The British Transport Police is not broken. What is the Scottish Government trying to fix?

Humza Yousaf: Let me make a couple of observations on the member's remarks.

First, I remind the member that the devolution of the British Transport Police was the result of the Smith commission agreement that all parties reached by coming together in consensus. [*Interruption.*] Ah, the Conservatives do not like that very much, and they will not like my second point, either.

I was looking through the consultation responses to the bill that we have introduced, desperately looking for the alternative that the Conservatives are proposing, and I could not find any consultation response whatever from the Conservatives.

We are ensuring that the British Transport Police has the same level of accountability to this Parliament as Police Scotland has—previously, the BTP has not had that. In the interests of being constructive, I say to Mr Kerr that if he would like to join in my next meeting with rail operators—yesterday I met Assistant Chief Constable Higgins of Police Scotland, and the British Transport Police—he will be more than welcome to do so. He will very soon find that his characterisation of

their view on the British Transport Police integration is not their view at all.

I ask Liam Kerr to be constructive, to come forward with alternative proposals and to have a conversation with rail operators, when he will find that the way in which he characterised their view is not how they view integration at all.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the minister confirm that integration of the British Transport Police will mean a more efficient and effective service and that rather than people occasionally having to wait for a considerable time for BTP colleagues, local police officers will be able to be drafted in much more quickly to deal with crimes on our railway network?

Also, the minister touched on this in his earlier answer, but is he not surprised at the Tories? If the Tories in this place are so opposed to the measure, why were their Westminster colleagues so keen to devolve it?

Humza Yousaf: The UK Government is looking at the integration of the British Transport Police with other infrastructure authorities south of the border. An announcement has not been made on that yet, but I assume that the Conservatives in this chamber will be as vocal in their opposition to that as they seem to be to our plans.

At the Justice Committee on Tuesday, ACC Higgins gave an absolute assurance that the expertise that we know the British Transport Police has will be maintained in the railway policing division in Police Scotland. The expertise that has been gained over many years will be protected, as will the funding that goes to the British Transport Police, and there is a triple-lock guarantee on jobs, pensions and pay. As Kenneth Gibson says, the safety of the commuters and passengers who use our railways is paramount in the Government's mind and in the minds of Police Scotland and the British Transport Police.

General Practitioner Out-of-hours Services (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde)

5. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's review of GP out-of-hours services. (S5O-00756)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The out-of-hours primary care system has been facing increasing challenges, with pressure of work rising due to significant numbers of people seeking help and a lack of available general practitioners who are willing to participate in the out-of-hours service.

It was with that in mind that we published the report "Pulling together: transforming urgent care for the people of Scotland" in November 2015. The

report was led by Professor Sir Lewis Ritchie and it followed extensive consultation with stakeholders. It highlighted the need to think anew about what is best for urgent care for the people of Scotland and the requirement for transformational change across many sectors.

The review by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is being undertaken to ensure a safe and sustainable out-of-hours service. We have been assured that the board will undertake meaningful engagement with the public to shape its future provision of out-of-hours services.

Jackie Baillie: The cabinet secretary will be aware that, over the past three weekends, no GPs have been available to cover the out-of-hours service at the Vale of Leven hospital. Although I understand that the health board is reviewing the service, it has given no guarantee about operating hours continuing. Will the cabinet secretary guarantee today that current evening and weekend services will be fully retained after the review, or will there be cuts at my local hospital?

Shona Robison: NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has advised that the closure of the out-of-hours service at the Vale of Leven on the dates to which Jackie Baillie refers was a temporary measure that was taken to protect patient care because of a staff shortage. The hospital continued to have medical and nursing staff on site in the minor injuries service, and patients who required emergency medical attention were treated by that service. For those who needed a primary care service but were deemed not to be in an emergency, transport was offered so that they could be transferred to an alternative out-of-hours service.

The review will be getting under way and we need to wait until we see its outcome. However, it is clear that we need a robust, safe and sustainable out-of-hours service to be available to people, whether they are in Jackie Baillie's constituency or elsewhere in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area. We should allow the review to take its course, then I will make sure, in discussion with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, that that aspiration is delivered.

Ambulances (Moray)

6. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of ambulance provision in the Moray area. (S5O-00757)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The deployment of ambulance resources is an operational matter for the Scottish Ambulance Service. The service reviews demand and resourcing throughout the country to ensure that it is delivering a safe and effective service that

meets the needs of people and their communities across Scotland.

Douglas Ross: The cabinet secretary will be aware that, last week, 95 per cent of ambulance staff who are Unite members supported the call to start official dispute talks with management. Staff have said that bosses are clueless and more interested in spin than in sorting the service.

In Moray, we have a new ambulance that has not been used for months because of a lack of driver training and administrative errors that meant that the stock of oxygen in Elgin was so depleted that it had to be rationed by ambulance staff because their tanks were in the red. What is the cabinet secretary's response to the catalogue of problems in the area, and will she agree to meet me and members of the Scottish Ambulance Service to urgently discuss these issues to ensure that local ambulance staff are properly equipped to do the job and that the public in Moray get the service that they expect and deserve?

Shona Robison: I am aware of the issues that have been raised in the north of Scotland and I have been in contact with the Scottish Ambulance Service to discuss the matter. In fact, I discussed it with the chair of the service, David Garbutt, just this week. I am reassured that work is on-going to address the concerns that have been raised. It is very important that the concerns are addressed and I have asked to be kept informed of any development.

The Scottish Government has invested an extra £11.4 million in the Scottish Ambulance Service, which has helped with the recruitment of 200 additional paramedics this year, 30 of whom will be working in the Grampian area. I hope that the member welcomes that, because those are important resources that his constituents will benefit from.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): To ask the Deputy First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S5F-00983)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The First Minister is in London today at the unveiling by Her Majesty the Queen of a memorial to commemorate those who have served in recent international conflicts. The First Minister has asked that I respond to questions on her behalf.

Later today, I will have engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Ruth Davidson: In the 2014 independence referendum, did the Scottish Government consider oil as just a bonus or as the basis of the Scottish economy?

John Swinney: I certainly consider oil to be a big bonus. It has certainly been a huge bonus for the United Kingdom—there has been £300 billion-worth of revenues for the United Kingdom. Of course, I am not the only person who thought that oil was a bonus. In 2014, the Prime Minister came to Aberdeen and said that, if Scots voted no in the referendum, there would be a £200 billion oil boom bonus for Scotland. I say to Ruth Davidson that yes, oil is a bonus and it has propped up the UK economy for many years.

Ruth Davidson: The Deputy First Minister is sticking to the line that oil is a bonus and not the basis of the Scottish economy. It is what would make every single person in Scotland richer if we were independent—that is how he tried to sell it just three years ago, yet this week, Andrew Wilson, the head of the Scottish National Party's growth commission, finally exposed the truth when he admitted that

"we did have oil baked into the numbers and it was indeed a basis."

In other words, the economic prospectus on which the SNP based its entire case for independence was bogus. I have a simple question for the Deputy First Minister—is Andrew Wilson right?

John Swinney: I have already explained to Ruth Davidson the importance of oil to the UK economy and the huge bonus that it has been to the UK over these 40 years.

When the Prime Minister was in Scotland in 2014, he said that there would be a massive oil bonus for Scotland if we voted no. Other promises were made to Scotland about what would happen if we voted no—on the same day that the Prime Minister suggested that there would be a £200 billion oil bonus, he said to people in the north-east of Scotland that, if they voted no, there would be a £1 billion carbon capture project for Peterhead. That project has been cancelled. Then, of course, there was the other almighty commitment of the no campaign—vote no to stay in the European Union. Oil, carbon capture and the EU—the no campaign was shattered by those broken promises.

Ruth Davidson: The question was about John Swinney's oil claims being taken apart by his own side—no wonder that aspect is the one aspect that he did not want to talk about. Of course, we all know what has happened since the Deputy First Minister spoke about all our big bonuses—oil receipts have collapsed. People across Scotland now have a simple question: without those oil receipts, can the Deputy First Minister point to any independent analysis that shows that Scotland's economy would fare better right now if we were outside the United Kingdom?

John Swinney: What people in Scotland want to hear is more action to support the North Sea oil and gas sector. That is what this Government and the finance secretary have been arguing for. What the UK Government has been doing is talking about possibly setting up a talking shop, which it talked about setting up a year ago. Even that has not materialised yet.

We know why the Tories are not interested in supporting the oil and gas sector. Their spokesman, Alex Burnett, let the cat out of the bag. He argued that no measures should be taken to support oil and gas in Scotland. We know that Mr Burnett is a bit poor at declaring his own interests. He is certainly bad at standing up for the interests of the north-east. At a time when the onshore productivity of Scotland is increasing at four times the rate of the rest of the United Kingdom, which the chancellor cited in his budget statement yesterday, there are grounds for a great deal of optimism about the strength of the Scottish economy.

Ruth Davidson: I have here the response from the oil and gas industry to yesterday's budget:

"We welcome the chancellor's response to our call to ... maximise recovery of remaining UK oil and gas reserves."

The oil and gas industry can welcome the moves from the UK Government. It is no surprise that the Scottish Government does not, because it does nothing for the north-east.

Again, people at home will have noticed that the Deputy First Minister did not answer the question. It is a shame that there is nobody on the SNP front bench who is prepared to be as up front as Mr Wilson was on the radio.

This morning, we had the First Minister gunning for a referendum on independence next year. She called it "common sense". I call it nonsense, because most people in Scotland do not want it. Most Scots do not want to go back to the division and uncertainty of an independence referendum. Most Scots think that it is irresponsible to talk of a second referendum, which is only going to damage the Scottish economy yet further. That is common sense. Why is the Deputy First Minister not listening to it?

John Swinney: On the substance of action to help the North Sea oil and gas sector and the north-east, let me set out for Ruth Davidson three things that this Government has done in the recent past. The First Minister launched a decommissioning challenge fund to support the development of the supply chain to tackle oil and gas decommissioning. Secondly, we launched a £12 million transition training fund to support individuals to retain their skills in the sector. Thirdly, the energy jobs task force has remained focused on supporting those affected by the downturn in the oil and gas sector and will remain so in the years to come. That is the concrete action that we have taken to support the north-east and the oil and gas sector.

It is interesting that Ruth Davidson moves on to the question of the constitution. That is no wonder, because it has been very topical today. Today, an opinion poll on the constitutional question that was published just before question time shows support for independence at 50 per cent. We should not be at all surprised by those numbers, as that is the people of Scotland being exposed to the hard-right politics of the Tory party, seeing the mess that it is getting us into about Europe and deciding that it is time for this country to choose its own future.

Engagements

2. **Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Deputy First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the week. (S5F-00999)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I have engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Kezia Dugdale: Before the independence referendum, John Swinney said:

"the early years of an independent Scotland are timed to coincide with a massive North Sea oil boom."

However, yesterday, the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed that North Sea oil and gas actually cost the Treasury money last year. Can the Deputy First Minister tell us why the Scottish National Party did not tell the people of Scotland the truth about oil?

John Swinney: Is it not revealing that at the first available opportunity Labour and the Tories have come together again? [*Applause.*] It is like they have never had a moment apart. I would have thought that, after the calamity that Kezia Dugdale led the Labour Party into in the 2016 election, she might have learned to have nothing to do with that lot over there. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Can we have a little bit of order, please, and slightly less applause?

Kezia Dugdale: The Deputy First Minister can shout and scream and clap all he likes about better together alliances, but he cannot escape the reality of his own words. Here are more:

“it is clear that future tax receipts”

from North Sea oil and gas

“will be substantial and represent a significant resource for the people of Scotland.”—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2013; c 21967.]

The reality is that people in Scotland were given false hope by the SNP, based on a false prospectus. They were told that we could build a fairer country only with independence, but we now know beyond all doubt that that was just not true. New analysis published by Labour today reveals that the SNP’s—[*Laughter.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me. There is too much noise in the chamber today.

Kezia Dugdale: SNP members will not be laughing when they realise that the analysis is based on the SNP’s own numbers and record. The SNP’s estimate for oil revenues in what would have been the first two years of an independent Scotland could be out by as much as £21 billion—£21,000 million in old money. That would have delivered turbocharged austerity and would have made that fairer nation all but impossible to build. Does the Deputy First Minister feel any guilt about offering the people of Scotland such false hope?

John Swinney: If we are to pass accusations about guilt around the chamber, the Labour Party has to think long and hard about how it has enabled the Tory party to govern the United Kingdom because of the Labour Party’s awful stance in the 2014 referendum, which ushered in a Tory Government that is taking us out of the European Union, punishing vulnerable people in our society and damaging people’s life chances. The Tory budget yesterday has been assessed by the Resolution Foundation as consigning people in

this country to the lowest level of wage growth in more than 200 years. That is what the Labour Party is guilty of ushering in by its stance in the referendum. [*Applause.*]

Kezia Dugdale: Despite that rant, the truth that John Swinney cannot escape from is that the economic case for independence is well and truly bust. We all remember his leaked paper—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. Will members please settle down? There are too many interruptions and too much applause and shouting. Will members please listen to the questions and the answers? I call Kezia Dugdale. [*Interruption.*] Excuse me, please. Thank you.

Kezia Dugdale: We all remember the leaked paper, which was the one in which John Swinney admitted privately that the sums did not add up, that oil revenues were volatile and that pensions would be at risk under independence.

Today, Nicola Sturgeon has again backed herself into a corner on a second independence referendum. Maybe the Deputy First Minister can apply some common sense to help her get out of it. He has looked at the numbers and he knows that the case for independence lies in tatters, so why will he not scrap the plans for a second independence referendum?

John Swinney: I say to Kezia Dugdale that the Labour Party, if it wants to progress, has to learn the lessons of the mistakes that it made in 2014. The arguments, the narrative and the explanation that Kezia Dugdale is coming out with today—her entire line of attack—could have been delivered by Ruth Davidson. It is almost as if Kezia Dugdale wandered into the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre last weekend and listened to the speeches by Theresa May and Ruth Davidson and has come to this Parliament to deliver them to members. I have some helpful advice for the Labour Party: it should get on to Scotland’s side, and then it might progress.

The Presiding Officer: We have some constituency supplementaries. The first is from Christine Grahame.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The Deputy First Minister may be aware that FirstBus is pulling out of all services across the Borders and Midlothian in my constituency. I have already written to the Minister for Transport and the Islands and had a lengthy conversation with the commercial director of West Coast Motors, which will be taking over as of 25 March. A further meeting is already pencilled in.

There are 113 employees across the piece. The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of

Employment) Regulations apply and I am hopeful that the change of provider will be good news, but what reassurance can the Deputy First Minister give my constituents, both employees and passengers, about their jobs and their rural bus services, which are so vital?

John Swinney: I acknowledge the significance of the issue that Christine Grahame raises. We are aware of the proposed sale of First Scotland East's Borders operation to West Coast Motors. The proposed deal will of course be a commercial transaction, as she will know, but we are engaging with the operators and the relevant local authorities to understand the situation and any implications for the staff and the travelling public.

We welcome the assurances that First has given that all jobs, pay and conditions will be protected. The Minister for Transport and the Islands will be speaking with the managing director of First Scotland East next week to discuss the issue, and we will consult publicly later in the year on measures in the transport bill to address some of the issues that are raised. The transport minister will be happy to have further discussions with Christine Grahame and other interested members if that would be helpful.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): My constituent Mrs Norma Henderson, who lives in Airdrie, requires an operation for a very serious and worsening gynaecological condition. She is aged 61 and is the primary carer for her disabled daughter. She first went to see her general practitioner in August. Since then, her treatment, if it can be called that, has been woeful. She has had two provisional operation dates cancelled, and the 12-week Scottish national health service treatment guarantee was reached on 13 February without her having had an operation. She was then given another provisional date for this month, but that has been and gone. Would the Deputy First Minister like to apologise to Mrs Henderson? What can he say to assure her that this on-going disgrace will not continue?

John Swinney: First of all, I say to Mr Simpson and directly to Mrs Henderson that the national health service undertakes a huge volume of clinical activity on a daily basis and members of staff around the country work extremely hard to put in place services that are designed to address patients' needs and to support them. I recognise the particular circumstances that Mr Simpson raises. Mrs Henderson is the primary carer for her daughter and, obviously, we must do all that we can to try to support her in that circumstance.

We have seen data published just this week that shows that the level of operations that are cancelled for non-clinical reasons is just 2.5 per cent, so 97.5 per cent of operations go ahead as planned.

We will look at the specific issues that Mr Simpson raises about the case. If he would care to pass the details to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, they will be looked at immediately to determine the circumstances, and the health secretary will be happy to meet Mr Simpson to address any issues that come out of that analysis.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Staff at Heriot-Watt University, which is in my constituency, are concerned about the sudden announcement on Friday of 100 job losses. The university stated that the move is a direct result of "a number of factors", including post-Brexit uncertainty over immigration and research grants, which has led to a shortfall in postgraduate applications. What assistance can the Deputy First Minister offer my constituents who face an uncertain future?

John Swinney: I am aware of the issue, which the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science has discussed with the principal of Heriot-Watt University. As autonomous bodies, universities are responsible for their own finances and staffing. However, I would expect Heriot-Watt to work closely with staff and unions on the matter. It is absolutely vital that student experience is not diminished.

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science and I have had discussions across the sector, and we are acutely aware of its unease about Brexit's implications. Any member who is listening to the higher education sector could not fail to see and recognise its concerns.

On the Government's part, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council has increased the resources that are available to Heriot-Watt University for the forthcoming academic year, and that is welcome. However, the university is wrestling with significant uncertainty around the position on European Union citizens. I would encourage the United Kingdom Government to provide clarity on the ability of EU citizens and students from across the globe to study at one of Scotland's universities in the future. We hope that the chancellor can give further reassurance to our excellent universities, so that they can maintain the income that they draw from competitive EU research funds, which is central to the strengthening of our university sector.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Deputy First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S5F-00984)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John

Swinney): The Cabinet will next meet on Tuesday.

Patrick Harvie: Given the volume in the chamber a few minutes ago, when the other political parties debated their shared desperate attachment to the economics of the fossil fuel industry, people might find it hard to believe that later this afternoon the parties will join together to promote earth hour and demonstrate a claimed shared commitment to action on climate change. Yet over recent weeks, parliamentary scrutiny of the Government's draft climate change plan has exposed serious omissions and contradictions.

We have seen the environment secretary defending a plan that includes nothing to improve bus use and saying that car journeys are destined to go up by 25 per cent, whereas the transport minister said no, that is only the worst-case scenario. We have had the environment secretary telling the chamber about a Government policy for compulsory soil testing to reduce fertiliser use. A fortnight later, the rural economy secretary wrote to committees to say that no, that is definitely not happening.

Although the finance secretary admits that there has been no attempt to build a credible economic case for his plan to cut aviation tax, he tells us that the rest of the economy can make up for the extra emissions from all that flying—even though the climate change plan is utterly devoid of detail on how that is to happen.

The draft climate change plan is barely half baked. Is it not clear that major changes are needed if we are to ensure that the ambitious choices that Scotland needs to make are actually written into the plan?

John Swinney: The Government committed to publish a climate change plan in 2016-17, and the draft plan was published on 19 January, as Patrick Harvie knows. The detail that Mr Harvie has gone through demonstrates the rigorous scrutiny that parliamentary committees exercise on the Government, as they should—these issues should be properly tested in committee. My experience of interacting with Parliament committees is that we have that rigorous interaction.

The Government's climate change plan includes a huge number of measures and interventions across Government to enable us to meet the targets that we have set for ourselves. I remind Patrick Harvie that the Government has already met—early—the 2020 targets for carbon emissions reductions that we put in place. We should all, as a Parliament, be proud of that. We passed that ambitious legislation a number of years ago, and we are now seeing it fulfilled as a consequence of the Government's leadership and actions.

There is a process of parliamentary scrutiny to be undertaken, but I ask Patrick Harvie to consider the achievements that have been made so far and to work with the Government on taking forward measures that will have a substantive effect on reinforcing the targets in years to come.

Patrick Harvie: The low-hanging fruit are now pretty thin on the branches, and I suspect that the Parliament will need to see far more consistency and detail from the Government before this climate plan passes. The four parliamentary committees that have produced reports on the plan are due to publish tomorrow, but even looking at the submitted evidence that is already in the public domain and the questions that MSPs have asked, I think that it is very clear that there is serious concern and that there will need to be equally serious changes to the draft plan.

I will say, though, that the situation is not as bad as it is with the United Kingdom Government, even if that is setting the bar pretty low. Climate change was the elephant in the debating chamber during yesterday's budget statement, with not a single mention of climate change by the chancellor either on the challenges that we face or on the opportunities arising from the low-carbon economy that the UK Government's policies have done so much to undermine.

I regret the fact that the Scottish Government's criticism of the chancellor with regard to the North Sea is probably that he is not doing enough to support the polluting oil industry in extracting fossil fuels that the world cannot afford to burn. Can the Deputy First Minister give us one commitment, which is to ensure that the extra capital funding that is going to be available will be committed to low-carbon infrastructure to help break our reliance on fossil fuel consumption and build up the new industries and genuinely sustainable jobs that the country will need in the post-oil era?

John Swinney: I am very surprised that Mr Harvie thinks that my criticism of the chancellor might be limited to one issue—I have lots to criticise the chancellor about.

I certainly agree with Mr Harvie's analysis that the United Kingdom Government has not done all that it could have done to help us advance the agenda that this Parliament has been interested in advancing, principally in respect of renewable energy. The First Minister was in the Western Isles on Monday, and on Tuesday she reported to Cabinet the frustration in the Western Isles at the lack of progress that is being made, despite the sterling efforts of Fergus Ewing and Paul Wheelhouse over a number of years with the support of many parties in Parliament, on securing an interconnector to enable the renewable potential of the Western Isles to be fully realised.

I am quite happy to balance out the criticism to ensure that those issues are properly put on the record. We will work with the United Kingdom to try to make progress on that interconnector; indeed, it is an issue on which the Conservatives here, if they have influence with the UK Government, might be able to help us. That would allow an economic opportunity that could really transform lives and attack fuel poverty in the Western Isles to be realised for the people in the Western Isles.

Mr Harvie asks me whether I will commit the extra capital that was announced by the United Kingdom Government yesterday, but I have to say to him: times have changed. I no longer control the purse strings in the Government; indeed, I am now a supplicant entering with trepidation the office of the finance secretary to try to secure capital assistance. If it is okay with Mr Harvie, I will properly respect the role of the finance secretary, who will make announcements to Parliament on these questions in due course. However, I will commit to putting in a good word for Mr Harvie's objectives.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Audit Scotland report on the failed i6 project makes grim reading. It is yet another botched information technology project on the Scottish National Party's watch, and it clearly should have been abandoned far sooner. True to form, the Scottish Government's response has been to welcome a number of areas of good practice highlighted in the findings while shamefully ignoring the conclusion that

"Police officers and staff continue to struggle with out-of-date, inefficient and poorly integrated systems."

Does the Deputy First Minister recognise the difficulties that police officers and staff face as a result of this IT shambles, and what reassurance can he give officers and staff who face the prospect of using these worn-out systems for years to come?

John Swinney: The first thing that I would say is that I acknowledge the importance of the system redesign that has to be undertaken. That work has to be done, and it has to be done in an orderly fashion to ensure that our police services have access to the high-quality information technology that can assist them in their work. The Scottish Police Authority and Police Scotland are absolutely committed to doing that.

I think that the best thing for me to do to answer Mr Ross's point is to quote the Auditor General for Scotland, who said on the radio this morning:

"One of the positive things about this particular project is that because of the strength of the contract that Police Scotland has signed with Accenture, they were able to recover both the £11 million they had paid over to their contractor and also to recover an extra £13.5 million ... to

reflect staff time and payments that had been made for hardware and software. So in purely cash terms Police Scotland isn't out of pocket."

That is what the Auditor General for Scotland said this morning in reflecting on the fact that although, because of the scale of the challenge between Police Scotland and the contractor, the programme has not been taken to completion, the public purse has not suffered as a consequence. As we would expect, Police Scotland will now take forward an organised approach to ensure that we have in place systems that give police officers access to modern IT in the period to come.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): With the substantial reduction in oil revenues, it is surely time for a new oil and gas bulletin. The last publication was in June 2015, and the First Minister promised me in June 2016 that the new one would be published soon. Frankly, if the Scottish Government was on performance-related pay, it would get nothing. Will the Deputy First Minister ensure that a new bulletin is published before June 2017 and before another year passes?

John Swinney: If the Labour Party was on performance-related pay, it would be paying back for that IT system that Douglas Ross talked about.

The Government has published a range of information on oil and gas. We published a compendium of energy statistics and analysis on 23 February; I encourage Jackie Baillie to refer to that document, which is a substantial compendium of statistical information.

United Kingdom Budget

4. **Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Deputy First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the United Kingdom budget. (S5F-01019)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The chancellor's statement confirmed that the Scottish Government faces a £2.9 billion budget cut over the 10 years to 2019-20. Although the limited consequential cuts that were announced yesterday are welcome, they do not represent an end to austerity. Recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggests that the UK Government's austerity will continue well into the next decade. The budget provided no support for low-income families, who face deep cuts to their incomes as a result of the chancellor's cuts to social security and who will bear the brunt of the costs of Brexit. We will continue to do everything that we can to boost the economy, tackle inequality and provide high-quality public services, but yesterday's budget does little to support those aims.

The Presiding Officer: I call Liam—I am sorry; I mean Bruce Crawford.

Bruce Crawford: Ian somebody? I do not know who that is.

We all welcome the additional £350 million of funding for the Scottish budget as a result of the chancellor's announcement yesterday, albeit that that is over three years. However, does the Deputy First Minister agree that we should not let that welcome news blind us to the real and hard reality that Scotland's budget will face a real-terms cut of £2.9 billion as a result of 10 years of a Tory Government that the people of Scotland did not vote for? That £2.9 billion cut will do untold damage to the economy, to vital public services and to the cause of equality in Scotland. It is obvious that the Labour Party in Scotland would prefer to have that Tory Government than to have Scotland take control of its own affairs.

John Swinney: Mr Crawford makes an important point, as he always does. UK austerity is cutting the funding that is available for Scottish public services. Moreover, the UK Government's austerity measures are cutting the incomes of some of the most vulnerable in our society. The latest Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts show that, by 2021, real average earnings will still be below the level that they were at in 2007, which represents more than a decade of lost growth. The Treasury's distributional analysis demonstrates that low-income households will see larger cuts to their incomes than virtually everyone else, except the richest households, as a direct result of the UK Government's policies over this Parliament. That is the consequence of UK Government policies in Scotland.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The chancellor's budget decisions will deliver a welcome additional £145 million in Barnett consequential for next year. Given that a lot of the consequentials arise from money that the chancellor is allocating to English councils to address business rates rises, how much of the additional money that will be at the Scottish Government's disposal will it allocate to councils such as those in north-east Scotland that want to set up local rates relief schemes?

John Swinney: That question is a bit odd, because the Conservatives in Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council voted against the business rates relief schemes that were proposed. That is the first point about Mr Kerr's question.

The second point is that the Conservatives have been arguing that the consequentials provide our opportunity to cancel the removal of the tax cut for high earners. That was Murdo Fraser's proposition, and he and Mr Kerr are sitting cheek

by jowl in the chamber. The Conservatives are trying to spend the same money twice.

Maybe that is something to do with sitting on the Opposition benches, because that is what Labour members used to ask us to do when I was the finance minister and they were sitting where the Conservatives are, in second place. Labour used to ask us to spend the same money twice and, now that the Tories are the second party, they are asking us to spend the same money twice.

The finance secretary will continue to do what he is doing magnificently. He will make decisions that sensibly steward the public finances, and there will be wise investments in the future of the Scottish economy.

Life Expectancy

5. **Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Deputy First Minister for what reason life expectancy is no longer increasing in Scotland. (S5F-00982)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Reducing health inequalities is one of the biggest challenges that we face. They are a symptom of wider economic inequalities, which is why the Government will continue to take action and has invested £296 million since 2013 in mitigating the harmful effects of the United Kingdom Government's welfare reform. It is concerning that, between 2012 and 2015, life expectancy rates remained static, although we have seen an increase over the year from 2015 to 2016.

The causes of Scottish mortality are complex, multiple and interwoven. That was the conclusion of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health's landmark report in 2016. Danny Dorling, who is a professor of geography at the University of Oxford, said over the weekend that austerity measures may have contributed to the stalling in life expectancy. He said:

"I don't think it has anything to do with the SNP government. I think the same thing would have occurred had Labour held power in Scotland. It is the fall in funding due to the financial crash of 2008."

Adam Tomkins: The Deputy First Minister will know that life expectancy levels in the east end of Glasgow are dramatically lower than those in other, more affluent parts of the city. The Commonwealth games offered an unparalleled opportunity to take specific action to reduce health inequalities and mortality rates in the neighbourhoods that hosted the games, yet it seems that no targets were set to achieve that. The London boroughs that hosted the 2012 Olympics set themselves the explicit target of narrowing the gap between male and female life

expectancies in the east end and those in the rest of London. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that Glasgow should follow London's lead on that? What actions will the Scottish ministers take to address the health inequalities that persist in Glasgow?

John Swinney: I reiterate the point that I made in my initial answer. The implications of austerity have increased the challenge that we face in addressing long-term health inequalities that have been present in Scottish society for the whole of my lifetime.

The Government is taking a co-ordinated approach to tackling the issues through the measures that Mr Brown is taking on the regeneration of the east end of Glasgow and the support that we have put in place for the Clyde Gateway; the work that Shona Robison undertakes with the health service to ensure that we have an integrated service in areas of multiple deprivation that addresses not just the health needs of individuals but the whole wellness agenda; and the work that I undertake through measures such as the pupil equity fund, which is targeted directly at supporting young people from deprived backgrounds to achieve their potential in our education system. Schools in the east end of Glasgow are—rightly—benefiting enormously from such measures. There are also the measures that Angela Constance is taking as part of the Government's social security work, to ensure that we focus on supporting the vulnerable in our society.

I reassure Mr Tomkins of the Scottish Government's determination across all our responsibilities to focus on ending the income inequalities that have bedevilled so many individuals in our society and to ensure that every individual has the opportunity to progress in our society, although people's health difficulties and background may have undermined that.

“Dying from inequality”

6. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Deputy First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the Samaritans' report, “Dying from inequality”, which suggests that there is an increased risk of suicide in the most deprived communities. (S5F-00979)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Any death by suicide is a tragedy. Sadly, the link between deprivation and the risk of suicide is well known. We will take the report's recommendations into account, including by placing an emphasis on inequalities as we develop a new suicide prevention strategy for publication early next year.

Although suicide rates are higher than average in most deprived areas, it is important to recognise that that inequality gap has narrowed over the past decade. Scotland's suicide rate has reduced by 18 per cent over the past 10 years, and the number of suicides in 2015 was the lowest in a single year since 1974.

Monica Lennon: We heard from the Minister for Mental Health in the chamber just last week, shortly before publication of the Samaritans' report, that there has been no formal evaluation of the last suicide prevention strategy. There appears to be no plan to embark on one before the next strategy is produced. The World Health Organization tells us that evaluation is a central pillar of effective suicide prevention strategies. Now that we have the Samaritans' report, will the Deputy First Minister commit the Government to an evaluation of the actions in the previous strategy before it embarks on the next one?

John Swinney: Monica Lennon raises a significant issue. In policy terms, we have to be open to questioning whether particular interventions have been successful, given that we all recognise the importance, the imperative, and the necessity of ensuring that the measures that we put in place are effective in supporting individuals in those circumstances.

If Monica Lennon will forgive me, I will not give her a definitive answer today, but I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to look closely at the serious point that she has raised. We will reply to her on the specific point about an evaluation of the strategy.

I give Parliament the assurance that the Government is determined to take all the measures that we can possibly take to support vulnerable individuals in those circumstances.

Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism

7. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the report by the chair of the advisory group on tackling sectarianism in Scotland. (S5F-01017)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I take this opportunity to thank Dr Morrow for undertaking this important review. He gathered evidence from a wide range of sources, including all parties in Parliament, and I thank everyone for their constructive contributions.

It is clear from the review that work remains to be done and that we all have a responsibility to meet the challenge. The Scottish Government is fully committed to building on Dr Morrow's work. We have invested £12.5 million over the past five years to tackle sectarianism, including £9.3 million

directly invested in community-based projects across Scotland—more than any public expenditure in this field in advance of this announcement.

John Mason: One of the responses that came to Dr Morrow was from Action of Churches Together in Scotland, which covers a number of denominations. It mentioned the concern and the worry that, if any changes were made to the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012, that could be viewed “as ‘legitimising’ sectarianism.” Does the Deputy First Minister share my concern that we must not do anything that would legitimise sectarianism?

John Swinney: I agree that we must do absolutely nothing to legitimise sectarianism.

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs made a statement just the other week about the steps that the Government has taken to commission a review into all of our hate crime legislation to ensure that it is fit for purpose in the coming period.

The approach that we are determined to take is to look for alternatives and to see how the measures in the 2012 act can be improved. In line with constructive views that have been offered by the Equality Network, Stonewall and the Law Society of Scotland, the independent review of hate crime legislation will include an analysis of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012. That will set out the issues that we must address in ensuring that we have legislation that is fit for Scotland in the 21st century.

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): I do not doubt the Deputy First Minister’s words on opposing sectarianism. However, they are undermined slightly by the fact that the Government has cut by £2 million funding to initiatives that have been fighting sectarianism in their communities.

The Government’s flagship policy for combating sectarianism has been the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012. Unfortunately, one of the policy outcomes of that act has been to criminalise young men and introduce them to the criminal justice system for the first time. That is not consistent with Scottish Government justice policy, and it was not the intention when the Government introduced the legislation. Will the Deputy First Minister take the opportunity to rethink the Government’s approach to that failed legislation, and its overall approach to tackling sectarianism?

John Swinney: The Government has taken such steps by commissioning the independent review to consider the issues that are raised on sectarianism in the context of hate crime

legislation. That is an open process that should be welcomed across Parliament.

The financial commitments that the Government has made to tackling sectarianism have resulted in the investment of £12.5 million over the past five years. That is more than any other Government has done in the past and it is a measure of our commitment to ensuring that we tackle the issue effectively through the support that is in place.

I appreciate Mr Kelly’s strong views on the question, and he acknowledged my commitment in the points that he made. However, I ask him to accept that the Government is determined to tackle the issues in a way that addresses the wider questions that have to be considered on the matter, which is important.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister’s questions. We will take a few moments to change seats before we move to members’ business.

Community Jobs Scotland

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-03984, in the name of Adam Tomkins, on community jobs Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises and celebrates the continued success of the Community Jobs Scotland employability programme, which is run by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO); understands that Community Jobs Scotland is not a training programme, but provides a paid job for young people in the third sector, with targeted efforts to help hard-to-reach and vulnerable young people into employment; notes that it was established in 2011 when levels of youth unemployment were high and, since this time, phases 1 to 5 of the programme have created paid jobs for 7,049 young people, with an average of 52% being retained by their employer after their job had ended, and a total of 68% positive outcomes into jobs, volunteering or education; welcomes that Community Jobs Scotland adopts a competitive application and interview process before a young person is offered a job and considers that this, alongside compliance with employer policies and procedures, is extremely important for young people in terms of instilling a sense of belonging and collaboration in a real work environment; notes that phase 6, which is currently underway, will support a further 700 job opportunities for vulnerable young unemployed people aged 16 to 29 through a range of third sector organisations across all 32 local authority areas; welcomes the recent announcement of the 7,500th Community Jobs Scotland job, which will see Ryan Brown from Glasgow take on the role of Trainee Development Worker with Move On for one year, and looks forward to welcoming further phases of Community Jobs Scotland long into the future, to help support vulnerable young people in the Glasgow region and across Scotland who have been left behind but who wish to play their full role in Scottish society.

12:50

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): This is an apt week to be debating an aspect of policy relating to jobs, employment and skills, for it is Scottish apprenticeship week. On Monday, as many MSPs from around the chamber have done during the course of the week, I visited a local employer not far from where I live in Glasgow and met a number of apprentices who started their careers there with help from Skills Development Scotland. For employers such as the one that I visited—the Little Me Nursery in Anniesland—apprenticeships are an invaluable source of recruitment, and the hands-on skills and career development that an apprenticeship offers is an ideal way for many young people to manage the transition from school to work.

In that context, I am delighted to bring to the chamber this afternoon my motion that not merely recognises, but celebrates, the continued success

of the community jobs Scotland employability programme, which is run by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

I thank members from across the political spectrum who have supported today's motion, and I thank all those who will take part in this afternoon's debate. None of it would have happened without SCVO, so I am delighted that Craig Wilson and others from SCVO are in—or on their way to—the gallery this afternoon. They have brought with them several young men and women who have benefited from, and taken part in, community jobs Scotland, with organisations such as Move On, North Edinburgh Arts, the Bethany Christian Trust, LEAP Sports Scotland, and LAMH Recycle. We will gather at the foot of the garden lobby steps after the debate and I invite all members to join me in meeting those young men and women. I understand that photo opportunities will be available.

Community jobs Scotland is an employability programme that is designed and delivered by SCVO. It was started in 2011, when levels of youth unemployment were much higher than they are now. It has seen job creation by third sector organisations across all 32 of Scotland's local authority areas and has now helped some 7,500 young men and women around the country. Supported—I am pleased to say—by the Scottish Government, its latest phase is targeted at young people who are furthest removed from the labour market, including carers, people with disabilities, young people leaving the armed forces and young offenders. It is a competitive process that requires a full application and regular interview.

Every CJS position benefits the community as well as the individual. CJS has allowed overstretched charities to build capacity and to provide improved services, while offering disadvantaged young people the chance to gain skills, experience, confidence and—of course—a wage. They receive at least the minimum wage and, where possible, the living wage. In addition, every CJS employee has access to a £200 flexible training fund.

CJS has an impressive track record of success. The most recent data show that just under half the young people who have used CJS moved into employment, and that 68 per cent of people who used it had positive outcomes in terms of jobs, volunteering or further education. Given that the programme is focused on people who are hardest to reach—people whom some other employability programmes do not reach at all—those are impressive numbers.

Behind the numbers are real human beings. Let me share two stories from my city—Glasgow—that illustrate the great work that community jobs Scotland undertakes. In Govan, just across the

river from where I live, a gang of seven young men with a history of offending ran amok and terrorised the community. All the familiar ingredients were there: drugs, violence, vandalism and antisocial behaviour. Govan Housing Association stepped in, as local housing associations so often do, and after a period of working with the members of the gang, the chief executive of Govan Housing Association approached CJS to establish paid jobs for the young men. As a result, they have now learned skills in landscaping, paving and brickwork, and housing stock has been repaired and maintained.

Then there is the story of Ryan Brown—the 7,500th person to be helped by community jobs Scotland. I think that Ryan is here today. Born in the mid-1990s, he grew up amid family breakdown, the tragedy of a baby brother's cot death, drug and alcohol addiction, and domestic abuse. He was taken into care, but he developed alcohol dependency and gang violence problems of his own. He was convicted and spent some time in prison. He also suffered a number of family bereavements.

However, Ryan was helped by CJS, and he now works with Move On's housing education service, where he is responsible for working alongside volunteers in education to provide advice and information on housing, life skills, employability and homelessness. I am told that he has now secured his first tenancy and is in a stable relationship. Thanks to CJS, he has a bright future ahead of him.

Those stories and so many more like them underscore two truths that Conservatives have prioritised in developing policy. The first truth is that, for those who can, work represents the best route out of poverty. It also represents the best route out of the chaotic lifestyle of drug and alcohol addiction, violence and antisocial behaviour. That is why it is so important that there are more jobs in the British economy than ever before, more women in employment in Britain than ever before and record numbers of disabled people in work in Britain today.

The second truth is that, unless we address the underlying problems of addiction, family breakdown, disorder and—yes—educational underattainment, we will never break the cycle of multiple deprivation. Robustly confronting and beating those problems requires much more than warm words; it requires bold action, early intervention, transformational investment and—of course—very close working between Government, the private sector and voluntary organisations such as the SCVO.

Across the chamber, every member of the Scottish Parliament is concerned about tackling poverty and deprivation, and getting people away

from crime and into work. We have our differences on priorities, of course—I have my list of complaints about the Scottish National Party's record, just as the minister and his back benchers have, I know, their lists of complaints about the Conservatives—but I have brought this debate to Parliament this afternoon in the hope that it will not be the occasion for a rehearsal of such party-political arguments, but might instead be a moment when we can come together, united in our admiration for the work of the SCVO and in our celebration of the continued and on-going success of community jobs Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. We are a wee bit pushed for time, so I ask everyone to be disciplined and to stick to speeches of a maximum of four minutes.

12:57

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank Adam Tomkins for lodging the motion and securing today's debate on the development of such an important programme, and I thank Craig Wilson of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations for his comprehensive briefing.

In national apprenticeship week, there is much to celebrate regarding the success of the community jobs Scotland employability programme. Aimed at helping unemployed and vulnerable young people between the ages of 16 and 29 into paid job-training opportunities, the programme has recently reached the milestone of its 7,500th created job.

First established in 2011 in response to high levels of youth unemployment, this SCVO-run programme created 1,861 paid jobs for young people in its first year alone. By 2016, the number had risen to 7,049 paid jobs. Its success rates are unmistakable, with 52 per cent of participants being reported to have been retained by their employer after the end of their initial job, and a further 68 per cent achieving positive outcomes in jobs, volunteering or education.

Through its competitive application and interview process, community jobs Scotland prides itself in laying the groundwork for the sense of belonging and teamwork that is conducive to young people's successful integration into the real work environment.

Funding of £6.1 million for phase 6 of the programme, which is currently under way, was announced by the First Minister on 16 February 2016. That extension of an already successful initiative aimed to support a further 700 job opportunities for vulnerable young people through a range of third sector organisations across all 32 local authorities. In North Ayrshire, more than half

of which consists of my Cunninghame North constituency, 330 jobs have been created. The young people involved work for 38 different employers.

By including opportunities that are specifically focused on the “Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy” recommendations to support young people who are deemed hardest to reach, the programme now contributes to the efforts that were initiated by the commission for developing Scotland’s young workforce to create a world-class vocational education system that is capable of reducing youth unemployment by 40 per cent by 2021.

The opportunities include ones that are aimed at care-experienced young people, young people with criminal convictions, early service—armed forces—leavers, and carers; 100 ring-fenced places for people with a disability or a long-term health condition; a further 100 places for young people who are progressing from a pilot of pre-CJS work experience opportunities; and continuation of the living wage.

Although the figures that I have mentioned outline the overall success of the programme, it is also rewarding to look at the personal accounts of people whom it has directly benefited. One such commendable individual, about whom we have heard much already, is Ryan Brown from Glasgow; Adam Tomkins talked a lot about his background. Ryan Brown’s was the impressive 7,500th CJS job to be created. He is taking on the role of trainee development worker with Move On for an initial period of one year.

The 20-year-old was recently invited to Holyrood and was commemorated as the 7,500th CJS employee. He remarked that, after making his decision to “choose a new lifestyle”, the programme has allowed him to put the past behind him, and he is now confident that a “really bright future” lies ahead. The programme has assisted him not only in the realm of work, but in his personal relationships and domestic life. He is now in a stable relationship, and he has recently secured his first tenancy. In many cases in the lives of young people, a permanent job creates a sense of security that may previously have been absent. Ryan Brown is but one of the thousands of success stories that the remarkable CJS programme has produced, and it is certain that he will not be the last.

In 2012, the SCVO’s chief executive, Martin Sime, said:

“Investing in young people through the third sector works—it works for the young people who go on to find sustainable full-time jobs and it works for the sector whose capacity to deliver is being stretched like never before.”

It is six years since the programme’s inception, and I am sure that members will agree that those words have stood the test of time, much like the project itself.

As we celebrate its milestone, we acknowledge—of course—that there is always more to be done and that there are always more people to be helped. Therefore, it is vital that we maintain the support that CJS offers in reaching out to vulnerable young people throughout Scotland, who have perhaps been overlooked in the past but who wish to play an active and recognised part in Scottish society, as they deserve to do.

We look forward to welcoming the continued success that future phases of the community jobs Scotland employability programme will undoubtedly bring, thereby granting a bright professional future to as many hard-to-reach young people as possible.

13:01

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

I congratulate my friend and colleague Adam Tomkins on bringing this important debate to the chamber and highlighting the many achievements of the community jobs Scotland programme. I commend everyone who is involved with the programme, including the SCVO, for their hard work, which has made it a success. The programme has had a very positive impact on the lives of many young people throughout Scotland. I welcome those in the public gallery who have benefited from the programme and have helped to make it a success.

Since its inception in 2011, the programme has created jobs in all 32 local authority areas in Scotland, including in Stirling, which is in my region. The programme has created almost 150 jobs in the Stirling area in sectors as diverse as conservation and hospitality and in the Scottish Gymnastics Association. In particular, the programme has reached into disadvantaged areas in Stirling through collaboration with bodies such as Raploch Community Enterprise, which has become recognised as a quality training and learning company. With the programme’s help, it has expanded rapidly since its creation less than 10 years ago.

The programme’s successful impact in Stirling is reflected across Scotland. As we have heard, the programme was initially established to address youth unemployment. We have also heard that it has created more than 7,500 jobs in Scotland. That level of job creation in itself is very welcome, but the programme goes further. It provides jobs for vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, who often find themselves the furthest away from

the jobs market, and provides the opportunity for those young people to acquire skills and training that they can carry forward into the world of work. The programme's ability to reach young people who are furthest from the market is a unique part of it.

I want to highlight specific examples of CJS helping young people who are furthest away from the market. For example, it helps young people with disabilities or poor health, young people with convictions or care-experienced backgrounds, early service leavers from the armed forces, and young people from ethnic minorities. Often, it gives young people a second chance.

CJS also serves to clearly illustrate that vulnerable young people can and do bring valuable skills to the workforce and the economy. They can become role models by showing that barriers can be overcome and that long-term and sustainable employment or other positive outcomes are possible. As we have heard, the ratio of total positive outcomes from the programme, including jobs, volunteering and people going on to further education, is over 60 per cent. That is a very positive outcome and performance.

In addition to the positive outcomes on jobs and developing the employability of young people who might not otherwise achieve sustainable employment, the programme is further evidence of the efficacy of the prevention agenda as outlined by the Christie commission—targeting those who, we know, face barriers to a successful future. Ignoring those challenges is not an option and virtually guarantees that vulnerable and disadvantaged groups will face poverty, inequality and poor health in the future.

By proactively helping people who face challenges to get into work and furnishing them with skills, confidence and experience, we can improve their life chances and reduce the need for costly state interventions; crucially, we can be optimistic about their futures. The programme clearly demonstrates that.

The programme is unique in the sense that it offers only jobs within Scotland's dynamic third sector and roles that demonstrate a community benefit. That allows Scotland's charities to increase capacity, while also helping communities and unemployed, vulnerable young people.

Once again, I thank Adam Tomkins for bringing the issue to the chamber and I congratulate everyone involved in the successful programme.

13:06

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Adam Tomkins for leading the debate on

community jobs Scotland, which as we have heard is a programme designed and delivered by the SCVO to help bring down youth unemployment, aimed at people who are furthest from the labour market. I apologise to the Presiding Officer and Adam Tomkins for being unable to stay for the minister's response, as I have another meeting. However, I wanted to make a speech on a subject area that should preoccupy the Scottish Parliament and to speak up for those who have had the most difficulties in life and who want to make it in the world of work, to get a better life for themselves. That is why most of us came into politics.

The programme that we are discussing is one of the best examples of an initiative that has made a real difference. It shows how important the third sector is as a critical partner for the Government in providing support for vulnerable people. As many members have said, the third sector deserves due recognition for its work at a very difficult time for people who are in work and who need a step up.

Providing a real working environment with a competitive application system is essential in order to prepare people for the real world of work, which includes applying for jobs. We have heard many important stories. Adam Tomkins talked about Ryan Brown's story, which I have also read about. Ryan has not had an easy life. Many people need a second chance in their life and all they need is a step up, especially when they have the motivation and the talent to get on.

Two particular groups of people have benefited from the programme: people with disabilities and those with care experience. By the time that they are 19 years old, 34 per cent of care leavers are not in education or training. It is very worrying that they have already lost out when they have reached only the age of 19.

Naomi Eisenstadt said, in her advice to the Scottish Government on tackling poverty, that there should be a focus on the 16 to 24 age group because that is a key time in a person's life that can determine much of their future. One of the key aspects of the community jobs Scotland programme is that it gives young people experience, confidence and—importantly—a wage. Phase 6 of the programme is open only to vulnerable people with disabilities, young people with convictions and homeless people.

One million people in Scotland, which is one in five, have a disability. We will not improve their employment figures without the kind of help that is provided by community jobs Scotland. We know from previous debates that that should be a real focus for the Government, given that half of young disabled people of working age are out of work. Disabled people are more than twice as likely not to have qualifications. According to Inclusion

Scotland, disabled people are also significantly more likely to experience unfair treatment at work. A scheme such as CJS, which lets them gain experience in an environment that is set up to help them succeed, will make a life-changing difference to many people with a disability.

I am delighted to support the debate and the work of the SCVO in its community jobs programme.

13:09

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): After the political knockabout of an hour ago, I am grateful to Mr Tomkins for bringing some sane and more dignified debate to the Parliament for this brief members' business debate.

The debate is useful because it gives many of us the chance to say something positive about a community project or something that is happening in our respective areas, as was illustrated by Mr Gibson's speech. I thank Adam Tomkins for giving me the chance to talk about the Shetland community bike project, which absolutely depends on and would not exist without the community jobs Scotland scheme and the subsidy that is available to help with paid placements.

The bike project depends on all of us in Shetland who have outgrown their bikes, or whose children have outgrown their bikes, to donate old bikes to it, which the team can regenerate—for want of a better word—into something that the retail trade will accept. It is a classic bit of recycling, and it happens because of community jobs Scotland and its placements.

I thank everyone who has been through the scheme, which helps people who have mental health issues, who have a criminal conviction, who are struggling with disability, who have no work experience or who are long-term unemployed. I was talking the other day to the brilliant Caroline Adamson, who runs the Shetland community bike project. The word "outcomes" is beloved in the world of the Parliament these days, but I would rather say that people are the better for undertaking the work. They come out of the programme substance free, the risk of reoffending is reduced and they stay off benefits and pay taxes. They also come out with improved confidence and self-esteem, which in my humble opinion might be one of the most necessary and profound improvements that can be made in a person's life.

The programme matters. It provides the Shetland community bike project with a training fund of up to £200 per trainee, which enables the project to give individuals valuable training, and it gets people back into work and into areas that they want to get into. In that sense, it is a vital part

of the infrastructure in Shetland for helping people who are less fortunate than the rest of us.

That is why community jobs Scotland and the SCVO should be applauded for all their work in the area, on which Adam Tomkins provided a much wider perspective than I have done. Schemes such as the Shetland community bike project make me proud to be a constituency representative, because they make a difference to people whom I cannot dream of helping, and they do so in a very real way.

13:12

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I thank Adam Tomkins for lodging his motion and bringing the debate to the Parliament. I am glad that we are seeing a glimmer of cross-party agreement that the Scottish Government is right to intervene proactively to help marginalised and disadvantaged groups to enter the workplace.

The Scottish Government recognises that some people in our society have specific needs and that many people need support to help them to transition out of unemployment. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, working with the Scottish Government, pioneered the community jobs Scotland programme, which aims to help vulnerable young people into paid job training opportunities in the third sector, as we heard.

I am a mental health nurse, so I was pleased to read the stories from the East Neuk Recovery Group Initiative, in Fife, which provides support for people who have mental health and/or substance abuse issues and has been involved in the community jobs Scotland project. Because the initiative has CJS employees, its drop-in centre has been able to open for an extra two days per week and it has been able to extend its free soup service over the week. In addition, each week, four more people have benefited from outreach and housing support services than would have been possible without community jobs Scotland. Fern, who is one of the CJS employees, now hopes to work in mental health; I wish her all the very best in what is an extremely rewarding and worthwhile career.

Fern's success is repeated across the programme. The most recent figures show a positive outcome rate of 69 per cent, with more than half the trainees moving into employment. In South Lanarkshire, 370 jobs have been created in CJS programmes, and the positive outcome rate is 55 per cent. That shows that if we invest in people and work with them to help them to build a career, we can change lives.

Let us contrast that positive, progressive, compassionate and highly successful project with

the approach of the Department for Work and Pensions. The director of employment services at the SCVO said in 2014 that community jobs Scotland

“stands in stark contrast to the failing Work Programme which is only getting 18% of people into a job”

and that she was “appalled” that the Westminster Government had extended the DWP’s “failing” work programme.

At the DWP, cases are handled not by a passionate, committed body like the SCVO, but by companies such as Atos. Their aims are not to help people such as Fern, and the 370 people in South Lanarkshire, get into the workplace and turn their lives around, but purely to process numbers on a screen. For the DWP, people are there to claim and be moved on. If they can be prevented from claiming, that is all the better.

I know that the Conservatives do not like to talk about it, but the DWP has caused untold stress and worry to people the length and breadth of the country. It has been reported this week in *Third Force News* that questions such as, “Why have you not killed yourself yet?” have been routinely asked of people who have mental health issues by staff working on behalf of the DWP. I ask everyone here today to reflect on the differences between that approach, and the approach that is taken by community jobs Scotland.

All people who are looking for work need support, and I am so proud of this Government’s work to help those who are most in need of help to establish themselves in the job market with a CV and real prospects. Just imagine what we could do if the Government also had control over the DWP in Scotland. We could extend the successful solutions that even the Scottish Tories acknowledge to everyone who needs help finding a job.

I want to see a benefits system that looks after people when they need it, but which also supports them to get back on their feet when they are ready. In Scotland, we have proved that, with the right support, most people can get into work and build a career and their own self-confidence. I am glad that the Scottish Tories have perhaps inadvertently recognised that. Perhaps they can tell their Westminster colleagues to devolve the DWP so we can help all of Scotland’s unemployed people kick start their careers.

13:17

Bill Bowman (North East Scotland) (Con): I will continue with the consensual approach that we saw earlier.

I am pleased to be able to participate in this afternoon’s debate and I thank my colleague

Adam Tomkins for securing it. At the outset, I commend the community jobs Scotland employability programme and highlight its success in the north-east, where there was a 61.6 per cent positive outcome rate for those who took part.

The topic is particularly pertinent this week given that it is Scottish apprenticeship week. I know that colleagues from across the chamber either have already visited or will be visiting employers and speaking with staff and apprentices to hear more about the positive differences that such opportunities can make to our young people and their career paths.

On Monday, I visited an employer in Dundee who has been taking on apprentices for the past six years, including some vulnerable young people. During that visit, we spoke about the importance of making sure that, in such a competitive employment market as the one that exists today, our young people are as ready as they can be to enter the workforce. Initiatives such as community jobs Scotland and the apprenticeship employers, such as the ones I visited this week, have a role to play in assisting with that.

For example, as part of their apprenticeship, the young people I spoke to were given advice on putting together a CV, filling out an application form, and familiarising themselves with the various tests that are a common feature of the application process nowadays. I found it particularly interesting that they were also involved in mock interviews so that they knew how to present themselves and what to expect the first time that they walked into a live job interview. Although the practical experience of working in a company will stand those young people in good stead, such helpful skills will be even more important when it comes to looking for employment at the end of their apprenticeship.

According to the February 2017 labour market statistics, Scotland’s unemployment rate among 18 to 24 years olds was 11.5 per cent, which is 11.5 per cent too much. While those figures represent a decrease when compared to the previous year’s statistics, it is clear that more still needs to be done to engage with those young people in Scotland who are that bit harder to reach, but who would benefit enormously from an opportunity such as those that are offered by the community jobs Scotland employability programme.

That is why I supported the announcement last month that funding has been made available for phase 6 of the programme, which, as stated in the motion, will support the creation of up to 700 job training opportunities, including opportunities that are specifically designed to support young people in our care system, people with criminal

convictions, carers and early service leavers from the military. I am also pleased that there will be 100 ring-fenced places for those who have a disability or long-term health condition.

Every young person in our country deserves the chance to succeed and to reach their full potential. Anything that we in this chamber can do, together, to support them and nurture their talent, we should do.

13:20

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I add my thanks to Adam Tomkins for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is important that we celebrate this fantastic scheme that the SCVO is responsible for. It is a fantastic opportunity to talk about what we need to do to boost employment and employability. It is also a huge pleasure for me because I was the sponsor of the SCVO reception at which Ryan Brown received his award as the 7,500th CJS employee.

It was a huge pleasure for me; it was also a huge pleasure to be complimented on what I said that day. I was complimented mainly on speaking for less than a minute—I know that members across the chamber hope that I take that hint today. However, it was a good thing that I spoke for less than a minute that day mainly because it meant that we could hear Ryan tell his story. It is only by hearing such stories that we truly understand the frustrations and difficulties that so many people have in finding employment. Ryan's story illustrates that truth. I do not want to embarrass him—I see him up in the public gallery. Colleagues have already spoken about the facts. However, for me, it was about the emotions in his story; we could all feel the frustrations that he felt, growing up in a family that was loving but blighted by both drugs and alcohol addiction.

It was a sad story; I do not think that there was a dry eye in the house when we heard about the deaths that Ryan has encountered. Because of that tragedy and those frustrations, we could see how that cycle could so easily have repeated itself and gone on. We could see why it was of such huge benefit that community jobs Scotland existed and was able to hold out that helping hand to Ryan. Finally, we could feel the emotion of pride—we could all see the pride that Ryan had because he had secured his first tenancy and was in a stable relationship. For me, it was also about the pride that he felt about being the role model for his younger brother, because we all need role models if we are to see how to take opportunities in life. If people do not have those role models or that assistance, how can we expect things to be different?

That is why the scheme is so important, because the barriers to employment are not simply about the ability to take a job; people need active assistance, which is what this scheme provides. It is about supporting and reaching out to those who are far from the job market. For me, ultimately, work is the most important and precious thing to ensure that people have in society because it is work that provides opportunity, breaks poverty and breaks the cycle of despair that blights so many of our communities.

Dean Lockhart did an excellent job earlier of explaining how many different groups can get help through such schemes. It is fantastic that we are here to celebrate community jobs Scotland because, apart from anything else, it represents a truly successful partnership between Government and the third sector. I do not want any members on the SNP benches to fall off their chairs, but we should celebrate what the Scottish Government has done in this partnership.

It is partnerships such as this that can make a difference. I congratulate the Scottish Government on investing £50 million in community jobs Scotland, because it is exactly the sort of thing that we need to do to break the cycle of poverty—and, frankly, frustration—that occurs in too many communities. It is exactly the sort of thing that we should be looking at in apprenticeship week. We should be looking how we can form partnerships between Government and third sector organisations to boost opportunity, increase employment and, ultimately, improve opportunity for everyone in our communities.

13:24

Rachael Hamilton (South Scotland) (Con): I welcome this debate, which my friend and colleague Adam Tomkins has secured, on the important topic of community jobs Scotland. I also welcome everyone involved in CJS who joins us in the public gallery today.

As the motion rightly points out, community jobs Scotland is not a training programme; it provides a paid job for young people in the third sector, with targeted efforts to help hard-to-reach and vulnerable young people into employment. That is an important distinction to make. Community jobs Scotland offers paid work for those who want to get up and go—those who want to get involved, get to work and contribute. It provides that opportunity to those who might well struggle to find it otherwise.

This is not a handout. There is a competitive application process and an interview before any offer is made. That places much value on the job and gives a sense of ownership and pride in the role. It also gives a taste of the real work

environment and provides valuable experience of the recruitment process. As an employer, I understand the significance of that.

The programme has been a success. Since 2011, it has created paid jobs for just over 7,000 young people and a total of 68 per cent positive outcomes into jobs, volunteering or education. However, on average, just 52 per cent of people have been retained by their employer after their job has ended, and I would like to see that figure improve.

The motion highlights the successes from Glasgow. The latest we have heard about today is Ryan Brown, who will soon take on the role of trainee development worker with Move On. The stories of the seven young men—Dominic Gibbons, Callum McLeod, Lee Mulheron, Calum Borland, Kevin O'Donnell, Barry O'Donnell and Gordon McCabe—show how they turned their lives around with help from community jobs Scotland. They helped to repair and maintain housing stock in the Govan Housing Association, as Adam Tomkins pointed out earlier. All I would say is, "Where are the girls?"

In the South Scotland region, more than 1,000 jobs have been created and there have been 64 per cent positive outcomes. The jobs range from administrative assistant to assistant hockey development coach, from multimedia and publicity assistant to interior design assistant, which sounds quite appealing. There are many different jobs out there that can provide the level of experience to allow the person to go on and be successful in the field that they want to get into. For example, if an applicant has an interest in bikes, a related role can be found.

Community jobs Scotland caters for all and is open to all. It does not force anyone in a particular direction but instead helps people enter their preferred profession.

The good work continues: phase 6, which is now under way, will help to create a further 700 job opportunities for vulnerable young unemployed people aged 16 to 29, through a range of third sector organisations, across all 32 local authorities.

I would briefly like to touch on some of the organisations that participate in my region. The aim of Apex Borders is to reduce reoffending, tackle deprivation and make communities safer. Those who have been involved with Apex Borders have said:

"My confidence in myself and other people has increased. By attending this course I now feel more confident in getting out of the house, travelling on public transport and doing something for me."

Another said:

"Apex has given me the tools, support and confidence in order to get me where I want to be in life."

Those statements are testament to the great work that Apex Borders does and the positive impact that it has.

The Dunbar community kitchen, which is situated in the community centre where I hold my surgeries, makes the best use of local produce. The cafe has strong links with the local fishmonger, butcher and greengrocer and will happily use up garden surplus from local allotments. Most importantly, it gives opportunities to those who want a career in hospitality and catering. I can unreservedly recommend the homemade scones.

Peebles CAN is another example in the Borders, working towards building community resilience and sustainability.

Ultimately, all those organisations play a great role, giving opportunities to those who want to go and get them and who have a hard-work ethic and can-do attitude. I pay tribute to all those involved and those in the gallery attending today. I wish you the best of luck in the future.

13:29

The Minister for Employability and Training (Jamie Hepburn): I join others in thanking Adam Tomkins for bringing forward the motion for debate. As he, Bill Bowman, Daniel Johnson and possibly others mentioned, this week is Scottish apprenticeship week, so it is a timely juncture at which to have this debate, although we debated apprenticeship week last week when Fulton MacGregor brought forward a members' business debate.

I know that many members, as we have heard, have undertaken a range of visits associated with apprenticeship week. As members might expect from me, given my ministerial role, I have undertaken a range of visits as well, and I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity. I tie the apprenticeship week to the community jobs Scotland programme because I have encountered, as I am sure other members have, a number of modern apprentices who began their journey to undertaking an apprenticeship by engaging with exactly the same type of programme. That allowed them to begin their employability journey and progress towards an apprenticeship. That is an important reminder that the community jobs Scotland programme is part of a family of employability and training initiatives that we offer.

For apprenticeship week, we will be out visiting and seeing opportunities for apprentices in our constituencies. However, members have rightly highlighted, as sometimes happens in a members' business debate, activities in their constituencies

that are associated with the subject of today's debate, which is the community jobs Scotland programme. I have an example in my constituency in that the Scottish Wildlife Trust in Cumbernauld takes part in the programme. I encourage all members taking part in the debate—and, indeed, those who are not here—who have not yet availed themselves of the opportunity to go along and see some of the community jobs Scotland activities taking place in their constituencies.

I join other members in welcoming the community jobs Scotland employers and employees who have come to the public gallery today to listen to the debate, and I will be happy to join them in the garden lobby afterwards. As I am sure members are aware, the Scottish Government values our community jobs Scotland offering, which we fund the SCVO to deliver. The First Minister announced at the recent gathering event in Glasgow that we will continue our commitment to community jobs Scotland, with a further £6.1 million for the coming financial year, which will be phase 7 of the programme, maintaining the £6.1 million that we provided in this financial year for phase 6.

I, too, had the pleasure of attending the gathering event, where I outlined some of the detail of the programme for next year. I will not reiterate that, because I think that it has already been highlighted in the debate. However, the theme of the gathering this year was celebrating the success of community jobs Scotland. I was delighted to have the opportunity to highlight from my perspective some of the successes of the programme. Since taking up my role as Minister for Employability and Training, I have been hugely—overwhelmingly—impressed by the dedication and commitment of the third sector in ensuring that young people are afforded the opportunity to achieve successful outcomes through programmes such as community jobs Scotland. It is, of course, one of our most valuable and successful youth employability interventions. Participating in the programme gives young people the chance to experience the world of work and acquire skills through training and industry-recognised accreditation. That is an important foundation that young people can build on as they continue on their career path.

Adam Tomkins, Pauline McNeill and Rachael Hamilton made the important point that we should recognise that people get community jobs Scotland opportunities through a competitive interview process. Not all our programmes are based on that methodology, but the community jobs Scotland programme is. That interview process is an important element, because it reflects the reality for most in the labour market. Young people participating in the community jobs Scotland programme will therefore acquire a skill

set and gain valuable experience from going through the interview process as well as from participating in the programme.

Attending the gathering event allowed me to put on the record what I view as the success of the community jobs Scotland programme, but Daniel Johnson was right to say that the best people to hear from about that are those who have participated in the programme. Ryan Brown, who has been mentioned, was at the gathering event and I was happy to speak with him. The Govan Housing Association, which Adam Tomkins mentioned, was also at the event, which provided a good opportunity to hear about the benefits not only for the young people who take part in the programme but for employers. The housing association was effusive in its praise for the programme.

I also heard from Andrew Marshall, who works for LEAP Sports Scotland, which I believe is here at the Parliament today—Andrew may himself be here. He talked about the experience of going through university and graduating and then finding it hard to access employment for a variety of reasons. He was able to get into work through taking part in the community jobs Scotland programme.

With due respect to those individuals, who were all very compelling speakers, I was really taken with the experience of Jamie Rowan, who works with the Neilston Development Trust as a cycle mechanic and chief of facilities, delivering workshops in schools and in the community. Jamie was a young man who had a difficult start in life and ended up being detained in custody at Low Moss prison. He spoke compellingly about the great benefits to him as a result of interacting with the programme—not only in gaining access to the labour market but in turning his entire life around. It was a salient reminder of the importance of this type of programme, not only in providing young people with the opportunity to get into the labour market but in enabling them to get their entire life on track. That is why the programme is so important, because it is about the critical element of providing training and getting people into work and is a chance to turn lives around.

We see very positive outcomes—the term that Tavish Scott likes—through the initiatives and, more fundamentally, we achieve great things for individual human beings through the programme. That is why I am very proud that we support it as an Administration. I look forward to the programme continuing to achieve great success in phase 7 in the coming financial year.

13:36

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body question time. I will try to get through all the questions, but time is tight, so short questions and answers would be useful.

Food for Life Catering Mark

1. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will work with Sodexo to improve the food for life catering mark in the garden level restaurant from bronze to silver. (S5O-00766)

David Stewart (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I share Mr Ruskell's ambition to gain silver status. The garden level restaurant was awarded the Soil Association's food for life catering mark in May 2015, achieving the bronze level. As part of our reaccreditation in 2016, we began to investigate further the possibility of obtaining the silver level. The work is on-going and we are working closely with Sodexo.

We hold a number of other important accreditations, including under the healthy living award plus, the Marine Stewardship Council certification for sustainable food, red tractor status, the British Lion quality mark for free-range eggs and the RSPCA freedom food scheme, and coffee is triple certified.

Mark Ruskell: Today is international school meals day. Some 20 million food for life meals are served annually in Scotland, and many of those are served in our schools. One of the challenges in moving up through the food for life programme is the need to allocate enough budget for ingredients. Perhaps the corporate body and Sodexo would like to take some advice from our schools in Scotland, which are doing some excellent work. A number of schools have reached the gold standard and have high levels of ethically sourced ingredients and even organic ingredients in their school meal menus even though they work to tight budgets.

David Stewart: Mr Ruskell makes some excellent points about looking at best practice. I will ask officials to liaise closely with schools to look at the work that they have carried out. As members will be aware, to achieve the silver award, there is a requirement to include more organic produce. We are looking closely at that,

but I will welcome any examples of best practice from any member.

Payslip Service

2. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what plans it has to make the online payslip service more user friendly and easier to access. (S5O-00762)

David Stewart (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The eHR online payslip service was introduced in 2010 to ensure that payslips were readily accessible on demand to members, members' staff and Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body staff. That has provided enhanced security along with environmental benefits, such as saving paper, and significant cost savings.

We welcome user feedback, of course, and supplementary systems are based on previous user feedback. An upgrade was completed in 2015, making it easy for users to reset their password on an automated, self-service basis to avoid delays in access outwith normal business hours.

John Mason: It used to be that the onus was on the employer, or the Parliament, to get the payslip to the employee or member. Now, the onus has been switched and the staff member has to go and look for it. I have met staff members who have given up because the system is so hard to use and who have not seen their payslip for months. The issue also raises the wider question whether the information technology system is there to serve us or we are there to serve it. Previously we lost the *Business Bulletin*, we have lost the committee papers, and now we have lost payslips.

David Stewart: It will perhaps be useful if I spell out the current position on hard copies. Hard copy payslips and P60s are issued to the home addresses of those users who do not have online access, such as users who are on a career break, long-term sick leave or maternity leave and MSP pensioners.

We have no plans to change our current system, but I will ask officials to contact Mr Mason directly in order to be as helpful as possible and try to resolve the problem.

Payslips

3. Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will consider sending hard copies of payslips to members and staff on request. (S5O-00763)

David Stewart (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): As I identified in my previous answer, we have a system for hard copy payslips

and P60s, but they are issued only to users who are on a career break, long-term sick leave or maternity leave and MSP pensioners.

Mike Rumbles: It is not often that I agree with John Mason.

I raise this issue not only on behalf of myself and other MSPs, but, more importantly, on behalf of staff members. As John Mason said when he asked his question, which was on the same issue, some staff members have given up and do not access their payslips any more. I gently remind the corporate body that, as John Mason said, employment law requires employers to provide a payslip to their employees. That is not happening.

I am not asking the corporate body to change the paperless system for everybody. However, could those people who have a problem please be given the option of asking for a hard copy—or even a PDF—to be sent to them?

David Stewart: I am obviously sorry that Mike Rumbles's staff and other members' staff appear to be having difficulty with our eHR online payslip service. I will arrange for a senior member of staff to meet Mr Rumbles as soon as possible to resolve the problem. I am advised by officials that we are currently complying with the law on payslips. Perhaps Mr Rumbles could contact me directly if the matter is not concluded as soon as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that someone else will now get a shot at answering a question.

Exhibition Space

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, in light of exhibition places being oversubscribed, whether it will consider having a third exhibition space in the garden lobby area. (S5O-00730)

Liam McArthur (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I recognise that the issue has been a concern to Christine Grahame; indeed, it has been the subject of written parliamentary questions. As I said in response to those questions, there are no other suitable spaces in the garden lobby or elsewhere to support an additional member-sponsored exhibition space. In addition, an extra exhibition space would have resource implications.

As she is someone who has made excellent use of member-sponsored exhibitions, Christine Grahame will know how popular they are. She will be equally aware that there are other ways that members can support organisations to share information and network with members, for example by holding a member-sponsored event.

It may be helpful to Christine Grahame and other colleagues if I confirm that bids for member-sponsored exhibitions for the period September to December 2017 will open next month.

Christine Grahame: I thank Liam McArthur for his reply, but I am not happy. There is already a putative queue for the September to December period.

Which spaces have been dismissed? If Liam McArthur cannot tell me that now, I hope that he will respond at a later date. It seems to me that we could very well have one more in the garden lobby or in the area around the top of the stairs, which would not impede parliamentary business. It would be good to know which spaces have been dismissed, so I would be obliged if he would tell me.

Liam McArthur: I will certainly ensure that Christine Grahame is provided with the information that she has asked for. As she will appreciate, not least in her role as Deputy Presiding Officer, space in the building can be in considerable demand at key periods. The garden lobby, in particular, is used by a great number of building users. The request that she has made for more detail on the spaces that have been looked at and the reasons why they have been rejected is perfectly reasonable, and I will ensure that she is provided with that information.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): In the spirit of supporting international women's day, will the SPCB give consideration to having a specific exhibition space, perhaps in the front lobby, to celebrate women?

To put that request in context, last night at the women's dinner I was told that in Edinburgh there are more memorials to animals than to women. I was also made aware of a project about Edinburgh women abolitionists, in particular Eliza Wigham, who in 1840 took self-freed American slave Frederick Douglass up to Arthur's Seat to carve political messages. Will the corporate body look at the Scottish women's history group's suggestion of having an engraved flagstone outside Parliament, with a view up to Arthur's Seat, as a fitting tribute to Eliza and her sister abolitionists?

Liam McArthur: Elaine Smith's request about the main hall in the Parliament is reasonable. It would be an impractical area for member-sponsored exhibitions, as it is a public space rather than a space that is routinely accessed by members. Nevertheless, she makes a reasonable point about international women's day.

With regard to the engraving, I would not want to give the member a response at this precise moment, because I think that there are rules, procedures and protocols around the issue. As

she will know only too well, the Parliament is in receipt of many applications to commemorate a variety of worthy causes. Nevertheless, I will make sure that the proposal that she has put to us this afternoon is considered and a full response provided.

Direct Debit Payments

5. Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what support it provides to allow constituency offices to pay invoices by direct debit in order to take advantage of available discounts. (S5O-00765)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Although we are not currently able to pay individual members' invoices by direct debit from the corporate body's central bank account, we provide support to members who have set up direct debits on their personal bank accounts by reimbursing them through scheduled payments. That ensures that they have the moneys in their account in advance of the direct debit being paid by their bank and enables them to take advantage of any available discounts. However—and I do not want this to cause a rush of blood to the member's head—we are currently evaluating the possibility of implementing a direct debit payment facility from the SPCB's bank account for members' local office utility bills, and we aim to pilot that later this year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alison Harris.

Alison Harris: I have no further questions, Presiding Officer. I am pleased to hear what the member has said.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That response is very welcome, Ms Harris. I think that it is probably a first for the Parliament.

Garden Lobby (Floor)

6. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what measures it takes, especially during inclement weather, to ensure that the garden lobby floor is as safe as is possible for staff and visitors. (S5O-00731)

David Stewart (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): To make the garden lobby as safe as possible, we have barrier mats at all the entrances to the Parliament, and we will increase the number of mats from October through to April when more inclement weather is likely. The mats, which are designed to help prevent dirt and moisture from being walked into the building, are removed every two weeks for laundering and are immediately replaced. In addition, when there is

heavy rain, the janitorial team do more regular checks of the garden lobby.

In order to prevent any build-up of grit or dust, the garden lobby floor is cleaned on a nightly basis. That happens between 1 am and 2 am to ensure that the area is completely dry before the building opens. Janitorial staff also respond immediately to any reported spillages anywhere in the building.

Alexander Stewart: The member might be aware that during the day of the Doris—by which I mean the day when we had the bad weather caused by the storm—my secretary found herself a victim when she fell coming through the garden lobby. Could risk assessments be carried out and signage thought about? I am sure that that was not the first time that such an incident has happened, but I want to highlight for the record the support that my secretary received from the janitorial staff and the security staff, who dealt with first aid and took her to accident and emergency. That proves that, when such situations arise, people are able to support the individuals in question.

David Stewart: Obviously I am very sorry to hear that a member of Mr Stewart's staff had a fall, and I am sure that we all wish her a very quick recovery.

Of course we keep our procedures under review. Mr Stewart has already given us a couple of very good ideas, which I will pass to officials, but we also encourage staff and members to ensure that, if there are any spillages or problems in the garden lobby, the facilities management helpline is used and those staff told immediately so that they can take action. Again, I ask the member to pass on our regards to his staff member.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank Alexander Stewart for asking the question, because it is not just a matter of the floor being wet. There are surfaces in the building that are always slippy, particularly for women who wear court shoes, and there have been a few near misses and falls. What assessment has been made of the general floor areas not just when they are wet but with regard to the shoes that people wear?

David Stewart: The member makes a useful point. There are different surfaces in the Parliament, and more slip accidents appear to have been reported in respect of the Kemnay granite surface than other floor surfaces. Obviously, we take slip accidents seriously. I should say that I am not responsible for the member's footwear, but we are looking very carefully at ensuring that there are no slips,

because as employers we have a duty of care to ensure that our environment is safe.

Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2017 [Draft]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-04472, in the name of Derek Mackay, on the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2017. I call Derek Mackay to speak to and move the motion. You have up to eight minutes, cabinet secretary.

14:45

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution (Derek Mackay): The excitement continues, Presiding Officer.

The purpose of today's debate on the draft local government finance order is to seek Parliament's approval of the guaranteed allocations of revenue funding to individual local authorities for 2017-18. We also seek agreement to the allocation of additional funding for 2016-17 that has been identified since the 2016 order was approved at this time last year.

The 2017-18 settlement is a strong settlement for local government, because we recognise that local government is essential to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of every community in Scotland. The Scottish Government is committed to working in partnership with local government, and the total package of funding that will be available in 2017-18 will continue to be focused on delivery of our joint priorities to deliver sustainable economic growth together with protecting front-line services and the most vulnerable people in our society.

In 2017-18, the Scottish Government will provide councils with a total funding package of over £10.4 billion, which includes revenue funding of over £9.6 billion and support for capital expenditure of over £786 million. The order for which we seek Parliament's approval today deals with distribution and payment of over £9.3 billion out of the revenue total of over £9.6 billion. The remainder will be paid out as specific grant funding or other funding, which will be distributed later, as agreed with local government.

As part of the overall package, we will provide an additional £107 million to support integration of health and social care services, and we will assist local authorities in raising attainment and closing the attainment gap by providing attainment Scotland funding of £170 million. We will maintain the pupil to teacher ratio, and we will remove the council tax freeze and implement council tax reforms. On that, I was pleased to see that all 32 local authorities have set their council tax levels for next year—all councils will increase their levels

by no more than 3 per cent. That will provide most councils with increased spending power while providing an element of protection to some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

A further £160 million of funding for local government was announced during stage 1 of the Budget (Scotland) Bill, and the revenue funding element of that—£130 million—is included in the order that is being debated today.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

The cabinet secretary will know that, in the budget yesterday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an additional £144 million in Barnett consequentials coming to the Scottish Government for the next financial year. Has the cabinet secretary reflected on how much, if any, of that money might be given to local authorities, particularly given the pressures on some of them to introduce local rates relief schemes for businesses that have been hit by the rates revaluation?

Derek Mackay: I can confirm that no decision has been made on that. On local rates relief schemes, the £160 million that local authorities are anticipating is certainly to be used at their discretion. I encourage local authorities to think about relevant local rates relief schemes using the resources that they have. I have looked at the 32 local authority budgets and the spending decisions that they have taken; it is interesting to see that many local authorities will have that option, and some are actively considering whether a local rates relief scheme is appropriate for them.

Taking the additional funding along with next year's settlement, plus the other sources of income that are available to councils through the reforms to council tax and funding for health and social care integration, the overall potential increase in spending power to support local authority services amounted to over £400 million, or 3.9 per cent. As a result of 11 councils not increasing their council tax levels by the maximum allowable 3 per cent, the figure for overall support for services has reduced to £383 million in cash terms, or 3.7 per cent. That represents a very strong and fair settlement, under the circumstances.

For information, I say that, in addition, over £112 million of revenue funding is not covered by the draft order, but will be distributed later. That includes £37.5 million for the teacher induction scheme, £22.5 million for temporary accommodation funding, £42.9 million as the balance of the council tax reduction scheme funding, and £9.4 million as the balance of discretionary housing payments funding.

The 2017 draft order also seeks approval for changes to funding allocations for 2016-17 of over

£51.7 million, which were either held back from the 2016 order or have been added in order to fund a number of agreed spending commitments that have subsequently arisen. Those include £37.5 million to fund the teacher induction scheme, £5 million to support the one plus two languages policy, £2.4 million to support the council tax reform changes, and £1.7 million to provide additional financial support to flooded communities.

Although it is not part of today's order, the settlement for local government includes £756.5 million to fulfil our commitment to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that we would maintain local government's share of the Scottish Government's capital budget at 26 per cent. That was before the extra £30 million that I announced at stage 1 of the budget bill, which is additional to that and brings the total capital to £786.5 million.

A fair and competitive business rates regime is critical to our economy. The early range of measures that I announced in the draft budget included cutting the poundage by 3.7 per cent, taking 8,000 businesses out of the large business supplement, raising the small business bonus threshold, and an overall tax cut that will be worth £155 million next year. Further measures were announced that will take the total amount of reliefs that will be available in 2017-18 to £660 million. That includes the additional support for key sectors: hotels, pubs, restaurants and cafes; renewables nationwide; and businesses with offices in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

It is, of course, up to councils to decide how best to deploy the additional funding that I have announced for local government, along with all the other resources that are at their disposal, but the measures that I have taken have freed councils to use their powers under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 to introduce local rates relief schemes to address local issues.

In summary, the total funding from the Scottish Government to local government for next year amounts to over £10.4 billion. The funding proposals deliver for local government a fair financial settlement that will be strengthened by joint working to improve outcomes for people, with the key commitments to improve educational attainment and ensure that health and social care integration is being provided for.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2017 [draft] be approved.

14:52

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I draw Parliament's attention to the report that was published this week by Audit Scotland. In

particular, I point to where the report talks about future funding. It says:

“If approved, the 2017/18 settlement means that total revenue funding will decrease by 9.2 per cent from £10.5 billion in 2010/11 to £9.5 billion in 2017/18.”

The report goes on to say that

“The Fraser of Allander Institute predicts a total reduction of £1 billion to local government revenue funding between 2016/17 and 2020/21.”

My key point for the Government is that it needs to get its head out of the sand and recognise the massive challenges that local public services face throughout Scotland.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Does Alex Rowley recognise that that reduction is less than the reduction in the Scottish Government’s overall budget?

Alex Rowley: I have been clear for the past number of years that failed Tory austerity is having a real and detrimental impact on public services throughout Scotland. I am absolutely clear about that. However, I am equally clear that this Parliament was not set up to be simply a conveyor belt for failed Tory austerity. We need to stand up for Scotland and for public services, and we must invest in public services. The deal that has been done between the Greens and the SNP will result in £170 million less going into local government budgets.

Yesterday, I spoke to a councillor who is retiring. I record our thanks to all the councillors, from all parties and none, who will stand down in May. The councillor asked me why anybody would want to be a councillor in the current climate. I asked him what he meant by that and he said that all that they seem to do, year in and year out, is decide what services to cut. That is the reality of local government at this time.

While Derek Mackay talks about £9.6 billion, we must remember what that means for real people in terms of cuts to services. It means that, up and down Scotland, tens of thousands of people are on waiting lists trying to get an assessment for a care package. There are people who have had an assessment and are told that they need a care package but are unable to get it. It means that people are trapped in hospitals and cannot get out because the local authorities do not have the money to put in place their care packages.

I pick up on what the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities said yesterday regarding Philip Hammond’s budget and its consequentials for Scotland. I highlight to Mr Mackay the case that COSLA is making for part of those consequentials to be passed on to local government to spend on health and social care, in which there is a clear need for further investment, and to spend on

education—the classroom and teaching assistants.

Mr Mackay mentioned the council tax. I make an appeal to him today. A few months ago, in a debate that was similar to this, Mr Mackay said that he was willing to get round the table with other parties to consider an alternative to the council tax. In 2007, the First Minister said that the council tax is unfair and that no amount of tinkering around with it can make it fair. I agreed with her then and I agree with her today. That is why we need to get together, work together and get a replacement for the council tax.

Will Derek Mackay consider bringing all the parties back together again, given that we previously took part in his commission and believed that that would lead to the unfair council tax being removed? We would need to agree a deal with the starting point that we are going to get rid of the council tax, and we would need to set a timetable for that. The Government should be willing to get round the table with other parties. The council tax is unfair; it cannot be allowed to continue because it is regressive. It must go. Let us work together to get rid of the council tax.

There are jobs in local government—but 27,000 jobs have gone in local government over the past 10 years. We need to be able to address that and to invest.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Could Alex Rowley explain something for me? Labour members complain in here about the settlement for local authorities. However Tory-Labour controlled Stirling Council just agreed a budget with £3.5 million of policy growth within it while freezing the council tax. Does that not clearly demonstrate the reality, which is that although it is quite a good settlement for local government on the ground, all that Labour members do in Parliament is continually complain about it? If they could stop complaining about it, we might be able to have a serious discussion about the future.

Alex Rowley: The council tax is regressive and it is unfair. Some local authorities have taken the decision that it would be unfair to impose an increase on residents of their areas. We need to get rid of the council tax. That is why I am saying to Derek Mackay today, “Let’s work together.” The council tax is unfair. It cannot continue. Let us work together to get an alternative.

As I was saying, 27,000 jobs have gone from local government since 2010, so we need to invest. Those jobs being gone has a knock-on impact on local economies. We need to work with local government to drive local economies and to drive the regional economies of Scotland, and we must invest in skills, apprenticeships and jobs. If we are going to grow the tax take—which we will

need to do in the future—our partners in driving the economy of Scotland are local government. Let us invest in local government. Let us work together.

I move amendment S5M-04472.1, to insert at end:

“but, in so doing, regrets that the Scottish Government has chosen to cut funding for local services; notes the concerns of the Chair of the Accounts Commission who highlights the use of reserves by councils to balance the books, along with increased charges and reducing employee numbers in order to make savings, stating that ‘these are neither sufficient nor sustainable solutions for the scale of the challenge facing councils’.”

14:59

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

It would be remiss of me to start without congratulating the finance secretary on his new look. I am not sure whether it is modelled on Clark Kent or on Geoffrey Howe circa 1981, but if it is designed to improve his focus on the figures under his command, that is something that we should all welcome.

I have some sympathy for the points made by Alex Rowley in his amendment, but I do not think that it would be responsible to vote against the local government finance order today after most, if not all, local councils have set their budgets for next year.

That should not in any way be taken as our endorsement of the Government’s deal for local authorities, which once again have been treated as the kicking boys in the SNP’s budget process.

As Alex Rowley pointed out, this week’s report from the Accounts Commission puts all that into context. According to the commission’s deputy chair, Ronnie Hinds, councils are operating in an “increasingly demanding environment”, with councillors after May facing

“major challenges from continued reductions in their funding from the Scottish Government, and greater demands for services from an ageing population and, in parts of the country, a growing school population.”

Councils are being asked to do more and more at the same time as their budgets are being squeezed. The combination of an ageing population and a greater priority needing to be given to schools increases the cost burden on councils. All that is happening at a time when, according to the Accounts Commission, the Government has slashed council budgets by nearly 10 per cent since 2010-11.

A continual mantra from the Scottish Government is that it has been fair in its settlement to local authorities despite Westminster cuts. However, the true situation has been laid bare in reports such as this week’s from the

Accounts Commission and previous publications by the Fraser of Allander institute. We know, for example, that the total managed expenditure available to the Scottish Government will be at its highest-ever level in real terms in the coming financial year, even before the Barnett consequential that were announced in yesterday’s budget.

According to the Fraser of Allander institute, before yesterday’s Barnett consequential were added, the amount of money available to the Scottish Government for discretionary spend, which is the Government’s preferred measure, was roughly the same in real terms as it was when the SNP came to power in 2007. Let us take as a baseline 2010-11, as the SNP prefers to do because that was previously the highest historic year. The Fraser of Allander institute says that the discretionary element has fallen since that date by just 3.8 per cent in real terms. That is nowhere near the figure of 9.2 per cent that SNP ministers routinely claim. In a contest for truth between the Scottish Government and the widely respected and independent Fraser of Allander institute, I know which I would believe first.

The Scottish Government’s discretionary spend is down by 3.8 per cent at worst in real terms but, in the same period, it has cut council budgets by nearly 10 per cent. How can that possibly be a fair settlement?

Kate Forbes: There are now 11 local authorities that have chosen not to increase council tax by up to 3 per cent, which is the equivalent of £383 million that councils could have but are choosing not to take for public services. Is the settlement fair? It is if councils are choosing not to use that additional income.

Murdo Fraser: Bruce Crawford referred to Stirling Council. I applaud the excellent work that has been done by Conservatives in administration in local government to keep council tax bills down. They have had to make some pretty hard choices and drive through efficiencies, which have been good. Nevertheless, we must also factor in the fact that council tax bills for many people are going up due not to action taken by councils but to legislation that the SNP forced through the Parliament with the support of the Labour Party and, if I remember rightly, the Green Party.

Council tax for some people is going up by 24 per cent, which many people on lower incomes will struggle to pay. The irony is that those taxpayers who face substantial hikes in council tax will get poorer services in return, thanks to the SNP Government’s approach. As the Accounts Commission put it this week:

“Paying more for potentially fewer or reduced services will be a difficult argument to sustain”.

It is hard to put the matter any more clearly than that.

Yesterday, the chancellor announced some £350 million extra for the Scottish Government over the next four years. At least some of that cash should go to councils to alleviate the pressures on them. If they followed the lead from south of the border, that would allow them to fund local relief schemes for businesses hit by rates revaluation.

The local government finance settlement penalises local authorities and means that local residents will pay much more in taxes but get poorer services in return. The only consolation is that, eight weeks from today, the council tax payers of Scotland will have the opportunity to cast their verdict on the performance of the SNP Government and the way that it treats local government. I, for one, look forward to hearing their voice.

15:04

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

We have to accept that, in general, times are tight and none of us can do as much as we would like. However, I welcome the Audit Scotland report that showed that the change to council funding since 2010-11 is approximately the same as the reduction in the total Scottish Government budget—that is, around 8 per cent.

I want to make some specific points. First, if anyone wants more money for local government, they must say where it would come from. Broadly speaking, that will mean either cutting money from somewhere else or raising more in taxation. I find it fascinating that Opposition parties are not daring to talk about cutting money from elsewhere. They bleat on about wanting more money for local government, but the obvious answer would be to cut the budget for health, universities or something else. Do they have the guts to say that? No, they do not. Instead, they try to be all things to all people and to say how much they support more spending on councils. They refuse to take the responsible position, which is that more money for one sector means less elsewhere.

Alex Rowley: Mr Mason is being a bit unfair; we were absolutely clear when we put forward our proposal to put up the top rate of tax to 50p, which would bring in between £70 million and £120 million in extra funds. We have been clear about how we would pay for extra funding for our schools.

John Mason: I will come on to taxation in a minute, but for now I will carry on with the spending alternatives.

I find it strange that Opposition parties all seem to agree that the way in which the Scottish Government has split up the cake is correct—they argue for a bigger cake, but they never argue that the slice for any one sector is too big.

The other option is to raise more in taxation, as Mr Rowley helpfully said. That is where the Tories are the most hypocritical, because they ask for more spending but run scared of taxation. Other parties—this is Mr Rowley's position—want to raise the tax on those on £11,500 and I do not accept that that can be fair. They also want to take the risk of a 5p jump in the top rate—a 5p differential from the rest of the United Kingdom—which runs the risk of raising even less revenue if people then leave Scotland. I accept that it is a balancing act, but I think that the Government has come to a reasonable position, with increases to council tax and some differentiation from the UK on income tax.

My second point is on the question of allocating resources between councils. Need is the key factor in allocating resources and not everyone will be satisfied. When we look at the per head allocations, the three island authorities are at the top—and it is fairly obvious that they have a lot of extra costs. In fourth place is Argyll and Bute Council, which also has a huge number of islands, so the same logic applies. The next three councils are West Dunbartonshire, Inverclyde and Glasgow, which is fair—most people's gut feeling would be that such councils need the most finance in areas such as health and for poverty and other challenges.

As a Glasgow MSP, I can accept that. I know that some Opposition members take the line of fighting only for their own patch and forgetting the rest of Scotland, but that is not a responsible approach to take. We all have a responsibility to our local area and to the whole nation. There are difficult subjects, such as the tourists Edinburgh has to cope with and the Clyde tunnel, which is a challenge for Glasgow, but we have to make decisions and it is up to national Government and local government to negotiate such things.

My final point is that councils must decentralise. There have been claims from the Labour Party that the Scottish Government needs to decentralise, yet the Labour-run Glasgow City Council has been one of the most centralised organisations that I have known. The SNP is promising £1 million per ward in Glasgow for local decision making if we win the election in May.

15:08

Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest as a councillor on Aberdeen City Council.

We hear from SNP ministers that the funding settlement for Scottish councils is fair. I want to make it abundantly clear to the Scottish Government that nobody in Aberdeen or Aberdeenshire is buying the SNP rhetoric—they see through it.

Despite Aberdeen having contributed so much to the wider economy, Aberdeen City Council has yet again been left at the bottom of the pile for local government funding. No offence to my colleagues who cover Mid Scotland and Fife, but Clackmannanshire gets more funding per head than does Aberdeen, and the people of Aberdeen do not believe that that is fair. To add insult to injury, Aberdeen City Council received one of the biggest cuts of any local authority in Scotland on top of being the lowest funded council—it will not even receive the promised 85 per cent of the national average for the year ahead.

Despite all the empty rhetoric from the cabinet secretary about fairness towards local authorities, when we cut through the SNP spin and look at the figures, we see that the Scottish Government has quite simply hammered the north-east of Scotland.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I understand what the member is saying, and he is quite right to say it. He is criticising the order, which will be terrible for the north-east. Given that he has been sent here by the people of the north-east, should he not use his vote to vote down the order and ask the Government to lay another one?

Ross Thomson: We have been very vocal on behalf of the north-east, but my colleague Murdo Fraser articulated why, at this stage, the Scottish Conservatives will not do what the member suggests.

Angus Council is getting a 2.8 per cent cut, Aberdeenshire Council is getting a 2.9 per cent cut and Aberdeen City Council is getting a 4.6 per cent cut. In fact, Aberdeen City Council is being squeezed almost twice as much as the average council in the country.

Derek Mackay: Will Mr Thomson take an intervention?

Ross Thomson: No, I would like to make some progress.

If the cabinet secretary is on top of his figures, he will know that Aberdeen City Council is in the quite unique position of getting two thirds of its income from business rates. Therefore, it was even more unfair of the SNP Government to attempt to dress up extra funding for all Scottish councils as income that could be used to mitigate business rates rises. I can assure the chamber that that fooled no one in the north-east business community. Aside from the fact that every council in Scotland received a top-up, with only Aberdeen

City and Aberdeenshire being expected to spend the income on rates relief, Mr Mackay and the SNP declined to mention the fact that the overall budgets for all local authorities were still being cut.

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart): Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Thomson: No, thank you.

A smaller cut is still a cut, and Mr Mackay would be well served to follow my colleague Murdo Fraser's suggestion that the additional funding from the UK Government could be used to support local relief schemes.

The SNP's council tax increases leave thousands of local people facing increases in their council tax bills of anywhere between £113, for those with band E properties, and £600, for those with band H properties. Across Aberdeen, more than 30,000 properties will be affected, and more than 45,000 will be affected in Aberdeenshire. Those figures illustrate the extent to which the SNP's council tax grab disproportionately hits north-east families and households. Many of those same families will also miss out on a UK Government income tax cut that the SNP has refused to pass on. That is putting a significant burden on household budgets across the region. What those families are getting is an SNP double whammy of paying more but getting less.

Given all of that, it is brave of SNP members to travel to Aberdeen for their party conference next week. When they are on stage, perhaps Mr Mackay and all of the central belt-biased SNP Government will have the humility to finally admit that Aberdeen is the SNP's forgotten city and that the SNP has let down the people of the north-east of Scotland.

15:12

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): It is clear from the recent Accounts Commission report that councils are doing what they can to keep their heads above water and deliver the vital services that our communities rely on. However, the SNP Government is not helping them. It has slashed the funds of councils across Scotland by hundreds of millions of pounds in the past year alone. It is clear that it is responsible for the cuts to our councils and for the inequality, unemployment and loss of service that come as a result of them. It cannot keep passing the buck to councils.

Overall, since 2011, the SNP has cut council revenue budgets by £1.5 billion. At what point will the Government stop cutting and start investing in our communities? Councils have shaved their services to the bone and there are no more efficiencies to be found. In the past five years

alone, 15,000 people have been made redundant as a result of Scottish Government cuts. That is not just a number—we are talking about people's lives and the loss of their families' futures and their local services.

Frequently, we hear about task forces being set up to help workers. When private companies pull out of communities and several hundred jobs are lost, the Scottish Government sends in partnership action for continuing employment. There is a Scottish energy task force to deal with employment and skills losses in the energy sector, and a Scottish steel task force was set up to protect jobs at the Dalzell and Clydebridge works. They have been welcome, but there has been no task force to deal with the thousands of job losses that have occurred across local government, which can sometimes be the biggest employer in our communities.

I say in response to John Mason that it is clear that the Government wants to drain councils of power and funds and to centralise functions, yet councils are best placed to identify the problems in their communities and to work in partnership with stakeholders and trade unions to find solutions. However, cuts on top of cuts mean that they are being forced to reduce services and increase charges, which impacts disproportionately on the most vulnerable.

In eight council areas in Scotland, the number of over-75s is set to double by 2039. That means that council services will cost more than they ever have before.

The Government is also letting young people down, because it is passing cuts on to the next generation. Last year, the number of Scottish children living in temporary accommodation increased by 17 per cent. Children are missing out on books and places to study because libraries are closing and staff numbers are down by a third since 2010. Support staff are being cut from our schools, which is leaving thousands of children who have additional needs without the help that they need. That is all the direct result of short-sighted Scottish Government cuts.

Council services are vital. They support the most vulnerable in society, save lives and benefit all of us, and they need to be properly funded.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): Elaine Smith is halfway through her speech and has said nothing yet about the Tory Government in London, which has cut Scotland's budget by £2.9 billion.

Elaine Smith: Interestingly, I am just about to get to the Tory Government in London, if Joan McAlpine cares to listen.

Sadly, between the Tories at Westminster and the SNP at Holyrood, there is not much chance of councils being properly funded over the next few years. However, Scottish Labour takes seriously the challenges that our society faces, and we believe that the richest should pay a bit more to stop the destructive cuts to our essential local services. That is a sensible and progressive approach to stopping austerity.

The regressive council tax should be replaced, as the SNP promised it would be years ago; it should not be tweaked, as the SNP is doing now. A local government finance package that decreases employment, depletes services and defunds the young is unacceptable.

We now have one of the most powerful devolved legislatures in the world. Two decades after the Parliament was established and 10 years since the SNP came to power, we should use the Parliament's powers to end austerity, support our children and communities, and deliver a fairer and more equal society for all.

15:16

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): This is an important debate because, with our decision on the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2017, it provides the funding for a wide range of vital public services, from services to educate Scotland's young people to environmental health, social care, leisure and recreation, transport and housing services and the very system of local democracy itself.

Scottish Green politics is founded on fundamental principles, one of which is radical democracy. We are a party that is committed to deepening and strengthening local democracy.

The finance settlement is a substantial improvement on the draft local government settlement—in fact, it is £160 million better—and communities throughout Scotland will welcome the additional resource, which has already mitigated the effect of many planned cuts in local services.

The settlement that we will vote on represents a change from the draft budget of December, with its 1.6 per cent cut in real terms, to a final settlement with a 0.1 per cent cut in real terms. That is evidenced by the Scottish Parliament information centre's analysis of 6 February 2017. It is important that, if we add that change to the council tax multiplier, which provides an additional £111 million of funding to local government, we are now looking at a 0.7 per cent real-terms increase in funding for local government from the budget for 2016 to the budget for 2017.

I accept that, as others have mentioned, local government still faces massive challenges, many

of which the Accounts Commission identified earlier this week. I also accept that other parties interpret the numbers in a variety of ways; indeed, that is part of the problem with the whole budget process. In its report on the draft budget, the Local Government and Communities Committee identified the lack of transparency as an issue.

It is important not only to have more transparent reporting; we believe that we need a completely new approach to local government finance. We have already debated the question of a local tax, and we got nowhere. The regressive council tax remains, but I sincerely hope that, now that the budget is agreed, we can have the further discussions on reform during this parliamentary session that Alex Rowley talked about.

More fundamental reform is still needed. I do not feel comfortable sitting in the Parliament and voting on how much money local government should receive. Together with council tax freezes and now rate capping, the growing centralisation of local government finance has undermined local democracy for too long. Only 12 per cent of the funding of Scotland's local authorities is under their fiscal control, and even that meagre autonomy is compromised by the Tory-style rate capping that has been imposed not by statute but by the Scottish Government holding councils to ransom by punishing them if they set council tax rates that do not meet its preferences.

In his opening remarks, the cabinet secretary talked about a 3 per cent council tax rise being "allowable". He knows that he has no statutory authority to impose that limit, which is precisely why it is not included in the order.

That is why we will tomorrow publish a paper that proposes a fiscal framework for local government. Just as we now have a set of rules to govern the financial relationship between the UK and Scotland, which provides a degree of clarity, certainty, transparency and predictability to the financial arrangements between the two, so a similar framework should be put in place to govern the process by which local government finance is agreed.

The draft finance order forms part of the budget deal that was agreed between the Scottish Green Party and the Scottish Government. Notwithstanding our concerns about how the finance settlement is reached and, in particular, about the constraints that are placed on councils' fiscal autonomy, we will vote for the motion. The vote is about providing the resources that will deliver vital services to people across Scotland.

15:20

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Seventeen years ago, I voted against the very first

local government finance order that was presented to the Parliament. The order was presented by the coalition Government of the day, which I supported. However, I did not support that order because, per head of population, Aberdeenshire Council was clearly underfunded and at the end of the queue.

I happen to be a Liberal Democrat, but I was first and foremost elected to represent my constituents. I say to the Conservatives in particular—and particularly those from the north-east—that that means that I was prepared to use my vote against my party's Government when I needed to. That vote against the Government resulted in ministers accepting the need for change and for improved funding for the north-east in future finance orders, which were brought back.

Things have changed since those early days of the Parliament, and not to the good. How many times have back-bench SNP members voted against their Government when their constituents have been harshly affected by that Government's actions?

Bruce Crawford: It has never happened.

Mike Rumbles: Well, there you go—how pathetic that is. That is my point. [*Interruption.*] It is worth listening, I think.

There are occasions when it is really important for members to put party interests to one side and vote in the interests of the people they represent. Today is one of those occasions.

John Mason: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: I have only four minutes; I will take an intervention if I have time.

The order that is before us is a fraud. It purports to show that the Government has kept its word and that no council will receive less than 85 per cent of the average of council funding, but independent research from the Scottish Parliament information centre shows that, by the Government's figures, Aberdeen City Council is being short changed by some £3.6 million by the order. The Scottish Government has fiddled the figures by taking the average not of the 32 Scottish councils but of only 28. The finance minister knows that.

Derek Mackay: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: I will if I have time, but I am only halfway through. The Presiding Officer is nodding his head, so I am happy to give way.

Derek Mackay: It is not the case that Aberdeen has not had its fair share. I have a wider question for Mike Rumbles. The issue is not about party

politics—for us to change the formula would mean changing the partnership arrangements with local government through COSLA. Is Mike Rumbles suggesting that I should not engage in that on-going partnership arrangement with COSLA and that I should arrive at a different decision about how we distribute local government finance?

Mike Rumbles: I have heard the same argument repeatedly from different finance ministers over the past 17 or 18 years—John Swinney was the master of it. It is entirely up to the finance minister to decide which funding formula particularly works.

I could have said that the Scottish Government is even worse with its own figures. I could have said that it previously promised that no council would receive less than 85 per cent of the average funding support from the Scottish Government. However, the Scottish Government has changed its promise. It now promises that no council will have less than 85 per cent of the spending power of the average council—that is the council's own revenues plus Government support. As I have shown, even after changing its promise, the Scottish Government cannot achieve the 85 per cent average without fiddling the figures.

There is no doubt that the people of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire are being short changed by the Scottish Government. Ross Thomson is holding his head in his hands and I can see why.

Ross Thomson: It is because I am listening to you.

Mike Rumbles: That was rather rude, but there we are.

Not only have nearly half the homes across the north-east—[*Interruption.*] This is a serious issue, as Mr Thomson said. Ross, if I am using your words, it cannot be that bad, can it?

Council tax for nearly half the homes in the north-east has risen by up to 25 per cent, for no increase in council services. Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council are once again at the end of the queue. Any north-east MSP can see that our region is being short changed. I do not understand why the five north-east Conservative MSPs are not going to vote against the order, and I do not understand where the three who are not in the chamber are—they are not even here for the debate. [*Interruption.*] I am the only Liberal Democrat from the north-east—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I ask members to speak through the chair, please.

Mike Rumbles: There are five Conservative MSPs from the north-east—where are they? Any north-east MSP who was worth their salt would see that it is time to put party loyalties aside. That

is what we should all do. It is what we have done, and it is what Conservative and SNP members should do.

As I said, 17 years ago, I voted against my own Government's finance order, because it was wrong. The order that we are considering today is wrong. We need all north-east MSPs to stand up for the people whom we represent and vote the order down. This has been a bad call, particularly from the Conservative finance spokesman.

15:26

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I am happy to speak in support of the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2017.

I am in no doubt about the crucial role that local government plays in the health, wellbeing and prosperity of every community and constituency in Scotland. The settlement that we are considering ensures that there is a strong and fair deal for local authorities. In the face of drastic cuts to our budget from the Tories at Westminster, the Scottish Government has treated local government very fairly.

That is not just the opinion on the SNP benches; it is shared by the Accounts Commission. As we heard, a report from the commission last year showed that the reduction in real-terms funding of councils since 2010-11 is the same as the reduction in the Scottish Government's total budget over the same period. The commission said:

"Taking into account 2016/17 funding, councils have experienced a real-terms reduction in funding of 8.4 per cent since 2010/11. This is approximately the same as the reduction in the Scottish Government's total budget over the same period."

Andy Wightman: Will the member take an intervention?

Ruth Maguire: Not at the moment.

Furthermore, the reductions that there have been here are nothing like the cuts that local authorities face in England, which amount to a 40 per cent real-terms reduction, according to the Local Government Association, and leave local authorities in England in a serious funding crisis, with many crucial services suffering.

We are often criticised from the Opposition benches for comparing the work of this Scottish Government with that of its Tory counterpart in London, but while we in Scotland remain at the mercy of the cuts and policies of a Tory Westminster Government for which we did not vote, I make no apology for drawing attention to the stark contrasts and to the hypocrisy of certain members of this Parliament, and I make no apology for commending the Scottish Government

for the job of mitigation that it so often finds itself forced to do in response to decisions that have been made in London.

The Scottish Government must also be commended for its commitment to listening and compromise during the budget negotiations. Such an approach is in contrast to the gung-ho approach of the Tories at Westminster. As a result, not only will additional attainment funding come from the national budget and not from local taxation, local authorities will receive £120 million—£20 million more than was previously committed—to support schools across the country to close the attainment gap. In addition, an extra £160 million has been pledged to local government as a result of compromise and negotiation.

The extra money, together with other sources of support that are available through actual and potential increases in council tax income, and through health and social care integration, amounts to an overall increase of more than £400 million. As we heard, the real-terms increase in available support for local government in 2017-18 is therefore considerably more favourable when it is compared with the real-terms increase in the overall Scottish budget. The contrast with the fate of councils in England, which are at the mercy of a right-wing, austerity-driven Tory Government, could not be clearer.

It is clear that this is a strong, fair and balanced settlement for local government, which has been reached through compromise and negotiation, and which ensures that our local authorities are supported to deliver the crucial services on which we all rely.

I will finish by quoting a councillor in North Ayrshire Council, who said:

“Delivering better outcomes in partnership with our communities, reducing poverty and building a better future for our young people is at the very heart of what we are trying to do here in North Ayrshire. We have managed to deliver a budget which not only achieves that balance but also helps those most in need while protecting both frontline services and jobs ... Indeed, there will be additional jobs as a result of our Budget.”

Those are the words not of one of my SNP colleagues but of Labour leader Joe Cullinane. It sounds like a fair settlement to me.

15:29

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): When discussing local government finance, we need to keep in mind that we are considering more than just entries on Derek Mackay's ledger. Real people are affected at the end of every decision that he and his Government make.

East Ayrshire Council is having to deal with a 3.5 per cent cut in its funding, which equates to £1.6 million. Although the council has been forced into a 3 per cent hike in council tax, that does not even come close to filling in the gap, so the council will have no option but to pass the cuts down the line.

One of the most important activities that councils undertake, and one of the least talked about, is their support for charities, community groups and other third sector organisations in their area. Whenever we talk about front-line services supported by councils, we would do well to include third sector organisations in that group. My concern is that, given that the third sector is very often the most cost effective way to deliver essential support services directly to local communities, and that third sector organisations can target community needs in ways that are impossible for central Government, what will be the fallout when services are cut for those receiving that lifeline? What happens to the service users at Addaction in Kilmarnock, which is a drop-in centre for recovering addicts, or Morven day services, which is a mental health drop-in centre, or to the players at powerchair football or to the Ace RaceRunning Club, or to WG13, which gives our young people another chance for learning? They are all reliant on life-changing services that are delivered by the third sector and volunteers.

What will happen? Increased physical and mental issues will result in medical interventions and accident and emergency admissions. Some will end up in the judicial system or welfare system. Those are not my words; they come directly from the service users themselves.

John Mason: Given the problems that East Ayrshire seems to be facing, does the member agree with his colleague that Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire should get a larger percentage of the money?

Brian Whittle: I know that the Scottish Government is always keen to have a constructive debate in the chamber even if the SNP dictionary's definition of “constructive debate” reads as “fawning agreement regardless of logical flaws; spineless acceptance of assertions regardless of factual accuracy; or comment on dogma-driven strategy regardless of expected outcomes; see also Scottish Greens.”

What I will say to the member is that there was a third option. With a capped payment on i6 and NHS 24, he had an overspend of £250 million, which could have meant a resolution.

Derek Mackay: What was the answer?

Brian Whittle: Shush.

Mr Mackay may wipe those service users off the council's ledger, but they will reappear on another page in the public ledger. However, the real cost is far more personal.

Derek Mackay: Will the member take an intervention?

Brian Whittle: I have had enough.

It is not just third sector organisations where cuts to local authority budgets will lead to greater pressures on other budgets. Last week, the BBC revealed the outcome of research that I undertook into where the food in our schools comes from. That revealed a number of examples of food being imported when it could have been grown locally. I have no doubt that the decisions that led local authorities to buy chicken from Thailand and frozen mashed potato from France were driven in no small part by budget limitations.

In much the same way, Aberdeen City Council warned last week that, if budgets are not increased, it might have to cut the amount of fruit and vegetables in school meals. That is a Scottish local authority openly stating that it might be left with no option but to offer school pupils meals with less fruit and fewer vegetables.

Derek Mackay needs to and should know that, rather than addressing the very issues he and his Government allegedly hold most important—the growing health inequality gap, the growing attainment gap, care of the elderly and infirm; in other words, the most vulnerable in our society—it is those self-same people who will ultimately suffer the most. I say to Mr Mackay that numbers and statistics are people. Where is the social justice that he keeps talking about? The SNP Government might talk about the importance of social justice but, with its actions, it shows us how little it understands it.

15:34

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I remind Mr Whittle and his colleagues that the Tories in East Ayrshire voted for the budget in its entirety. If it was that bad, why did they vote for it?

Today's order gives effect to the budget that has been approved by Parliament and puts vital cash into the hands of Scotland's councils. Roughly £10 billion is allocated to the councils and an extra £383 million will support local services as a result of the additional allocations that have been made recently on top of other support that has been added to the baseline allocations.

For my authority, East Ayrshire Council—here are the real figures—that means that our initial baseline allocation of £233 million, which in itself is higher than the previous year's baseline, is

enhanced by another £10.5 million when we take into account the further support that is provided. That means that, this year, East Ayrshire Council will have around £242 million, which is 4.9 per cent higher, to deliver all our local services.

That support allows our councils to fund education, health and social care, culture and leisure, roads, recycling and a host of other services. In addition, more than £2 million will come directly to schools in my constituency to help our young folk to raise their attainment in order to at least get on a par with their counterparts elsewhere in Scotland. Closing the poverty-related attainment gap is surely something that we all support, and there is a £750 million investment in that over this parliamentary session. Why on earth would anybody oppose that? Sadly, Tory and Labour MSPs did so by voting against that vital cash coming to schools in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley and everywhere else in Scotland. However, I bet that they will be first in line to get their photos taken at those schools when we celebrate the achievements of those young people. In fact, pupils from St Joseph's academy in Kilmarnock were in the Parliament earlier today and I did not hear Mr Whittle explain to them why he voted against that school getting £86,000 extra as a result of the attainment fund. He kept quiet about that.

Brian Whittle: As the member well knows, when there are school visits, I do not get involved in politics—unlike one of the member's colleagues, who went completely political and over the top. That is why I did not mention any of that.

Willie Coffey: That is now on the record and the pupils at St Joseph's now know that the Tories voted against that £86,000 going to their academy.

As part of the overall settlement, there is substantial support of £250 million to take forward the integration of health and social care and a further £107 million to deliver the living wage for social care workers. That means that those in receipt of war pensions, for example, will not be penalised when they are assessed for social care. As I mentioned, the attainment fund is a significant investment and has already resulted in the appointment of 160 full-time teachers.

We should try to remember that the last time Labour was in power, the council tax shot up by more than 60 per cent in my authority; it was the SNP that froze it for nine years in a row. Such undue rises will not be permitted again, but the councils can, if they choose to, raise an extra £70 million every year by deploying the 3 per cent uplift.

Alex Rowley: Will the member give way?

Willie Coffey: I have no time—I need to finish.

That 3 per cent uplift was supported by the Tories in East Ayrshire.

It is interesting to see which authorities have decided to continue the council tax freeze, despite all the shouting and screaming that we have heard in the chamber in the past few years that the council tax freeze must end. It is coincidental, perhaps, but they all appear to be Labour-led councils and they are all heading for an election in a matter of weeks.

The local government settlement is a fair settlement, which brings additional financial resources to support a wide range of local services. According to Audit Scotland, it broadly follows the same pattern of allocation from the UK Government, which I remind members involves a huge cut of nearly £3 billion to Scotland over the 10 years to 2020. That cut was supported by Scottish Labour MPs in Westminster at the time, which goes some way to explaining why 40 of them lost their seats.

Schools, pupils, teachers, social care workers and thousands of council staff across Scotland need this settlement to be agreed by the Parliament so that they can all get on with the good work that they collectively do on Scotland's behalf. I hope that the Parliament will back the order at 5 pm.

15:39

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): I rise to oppose the order in the name of Mr Mackay and support the amendment in the name of my colleague Alex Rowley. It has been a very interesting and important debate, because it has brought out some of the issues in relation to people's attitude to local government.

We have heard a series of speeches from members on the SNP benches telling us that it is a fair settlement. That is obviously the line that has come out from the SNP command. The reality is that £170 million has been cut from council budgets. In Glasgow alone, I remind Mr Mason, there is a £53 million shortfall. Those are not just figures on a spreadsheet. Those cuts will mean that jobs will be lost, libraries will be closed and care packages will be compromised. People on the ground will have to deal with the impact of those cuts.

Alex Rowley, drawing on his experience as a council leader, and after speaking to one of his colleagues, gave the example of the difficulties that local councillors face year on year in having to deal with budgetary challenges. That is brought out in the Accounts Commission report. We see from that report that there have been cuts of over £1 billion since 2011. The Fraser of Allander institute forecast another £1 billion of cuts coming

down the line to 2021. Local government is facing the brunt of those cuts and, as Elaine Smith pointed out, it is through the accumulation of decisions that have been made by the SNP in control of the Scottish Parliament that councils have been penalised.

There was another option, another way of doing it. In contrast to the Tories, Labour proposed tax changes that would have produced extra funding.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Kelly give way?

James Kelly: Let me make some progress.

For example, as Alex Rowley pointed out, a tax on top-rate taxpayers would have raised in the region of £100 million, and that would have made a difference to councils on the ground.

There is also an important point about the impact not just on local services but on the local economy.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Kelly mentions that the tax rises would raise £100 million. Mr Rowley said that they would raise between £70 million and £100 million, and their leader at one point said that they might not raise anything at all. The point that they have been disingenuous about—perhaps Mr Kelly can answer this for me—is whether they think that it is fair that those earning £11,500 a year should pay extra taxation to pay for Tory austerity.

James Kelly: That is not true. Those earning £11,500 would not pay any extra.

That comes to the nub of this debate. In my 10 years as an MSP, I have watched SNP minister after SNP minister stand up at various question times and say, "We could do more about the health service, more about local government and more about education if only we had more powers." Derek Mackay is the finance secretary who has had more power than any finance secretary in the history of devolution. He had tax-raising powers and he had the opportunity to make that difference and to alleviate the cuts that councils will have to make, but he did not do it.

As we move to the council elections that Mr Mason mentioned, the SNP MSPs on the front and back benches will have to account to the electorate and apologise for the cuts that they are passing down the line, which will mean jobs lost and services closed.

That is why we will oppose the order at 5 o'clock tonight.

The Presiding Officer: I call Graham Simpson to wind up for the Conservative Party.

15:43

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): How long do I have, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: Five minutes. We also have some time in hand, because you have all been very disciplined.

Graham Simpson: I declare an interest as a serving councillor in South Lanarkshire.

Murdo Fraser kicked off for the Conservatives by mentioning the Accounts Commission report. He also made reference to Derek Mackay's new look, comparing him to Clark Kent. In my eyes, it is more Proclaimers than Superman.

Brian Whittle mentioned cuts in East Ayrshire, and also cuts to school meals. Ross Thomson and Mike Rumbles got into a bit of a personal discussion about Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. That is their right, as they both represent that area and feel that it has been hard done by. Elaine Smith rightly talked about demographic pressures and Andy Wightman touched on the issue around lack of transparency and rightly said that the Local Government and Communities Committee, of which we are both members, had referred to that in its annual report.

The background to all this discussion is a local government settlement that, despite the smoke and mirrors used by the finance secretary, sees another year-on-year cut. This week, the Accounts Commission report laid bare a £216 million real-terms cut in revenue grant in one year and 15,000 full-time equivalent jobs lost in local government under the SNP since 2011.

Mike Rumbles: Why should anyone listen to what the Conservative Party says on the issue, given that despite its so-called "strong opposition" it refuses to vote down the order? Is that a strong Opposition?

Graham Simpson: We have had the debate about the budget, and the budget has gone through. If we vote down the order, local government will not get any money. Our position is very clear: we are not happy with the amount that local government is getting. However, if we vote down the order, local government will not get the money—that is the logic of the position that Mike Rumbles suggests.

If the local government settlement was as rosy as Derek Mackay would have us believe, not a single council in Scotland would be making cuts—that is the logic of Derek Mackay's position. In fact, the reverse of that is true, because all councils are making cuts. Maybe they cannot add up properly, or maybe Mr Mackay's sums are out—I will go for the latter.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: No, thank you.

Cuts lead, of course, to poorer services. The Accounts Commission noted, for example, that our streets are getting dirtier, which is one effect of making local government a Cinderella service. However, as we would expect, some councils cope rather better than others with the challenges.

Alex Rowley: Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: No.

I am sure that we would all wish to congratulate Conservative-run South Ayrshire Council on what the Accounts Commission says has been

"considerable progress in delivering improvements and meeting financial challenges as a result of effective political and managerial leadership."

[Interruption.]

I point out to Mr Mackay that that is a direct quote. All councils could learn from the example of South Ayrshire Council.

Derek Mackay: Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: On South Ayrshire Council?

Derek Mackay: On any council the member likes. *[Laughter.]*

I am curious about the front-bench Conservatives' position. If we are picking off individual councils, I can pick off the figures for each of them and talk about the increase in spending power. However, I am curious about the Conservatives' official position. Does Graham Simpson believe that, in the fashion that Ross Thomson suggested, money should be taken away from the central belt and given to Aberdeen?

Mike Rumbles: Just say yes.

Graham Simpson: No. I am not here to pick off individual councils; I am here to talk about the overall settlement, which is a rum deal for local government.

We have had a United Kingdom budget this week that sees an extra £350 million coming to Scotland. Perhaps the cabinet secretary can tell me whether any of that money will come to local government, as Murdo Mackay has suggested. *[Laughter.]* I am sorry; I keep getting them mixed up.

Will any of that money come to local government? The cabinet secretary has the opportunity to say yes.

Derek Mackay: I appreciate that Graham Simpson may now be looking for our assistance to help him fill the extra time that he was given for his speech. However, when did the Conservatives have their conversion to seeking extra support for local government? Given that it was in the public

domain that the Conservative asks were, in essence, all about tax cuts for the richest in society, at what point did they decide that what they really wanted from the budget was more money for local government? That was not an ask in any of the discussions that the Conservatives had with me.

The Presiding Officer: Will you conclude your remarks, Mr Simpson?

Graham Simpson: I will. The member did not answer the point that I gave him an opportunity to answer. We can assume that no extra money will be coming.

We will not vote against the order. That would be irresponsible. Local government needs the extra money and it needs to have a settlement. However, we will back the amendment, because we agree with every word of it.

15:50

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart): The importance of this debate should not be underestimated. The draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2017 seeks parliamentary approval for the guaranteed payment of almost £9.3 billion in revenue support to Scotland's 32 local authorities to enable them to provide the people of Scotland with the services that they need and deserve.

We can argue for as long as we want about interpretation of the numbers, but the fact is that, as can be seen in the table that has been provided for members at the back of the chamber, an extra £383 million will be available to support local services in 2017-18, which represents an increase of 3.7 per cent compared with this year.

Alex Rowley: Following yesterday's budget statement, there will be £350 million of consequentials, of which £190 million will be revenue. COSLA is asking for that money to go to health and social care and education. Will the Minister for Local Government and Housing put pressure on the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution to get some of that money into those areas?

Kevin Stewart: We have taken action on social care and education. We have created integration joint boards to pull budgets together and provide the best possible services for people. We also have the £120 million attainment fund, which many of the Opposition parties in this Parliament tried to vote down.

There will be a huge list of folk asking Mr Mackay what he is going to do with the consequentials. They sound like manna from heaven, but they will not make up for the £2.9 billion cut that Westminster has imposed on this

place. I wish that there had been more talk of that today, rather than some of the spurious things that have been talked about, because the simple reality is that the cuts that have been passed down from Westminster are having a major effect on people's lives here in Scotland.

Murdo Fraser: Will the minister give way?

Kevin Stewart: I will give way to the member in a moment.

The local government finance order that we are discussing today seeks agreement to the main allocation of revenue funding to local government for 2017-18 and updated funding allocations for 2016-17. The total funding for 2017-18 amounts to over £10.4 billion. That includes revenue funding of £9.6 billion, of which we will distribute over £9.3 billion under the order.

The overall 2017-18 settlement funding package will provide an additional £107 million to support the integration of health and social care services; assist local authorities in raising attainment and closing the attainment gap by providing attainment Scotland funding of £170 million; maintain the pupil teacher ratio; remove the council tax freeze; and implement council tax reforms. The Scottish Government has treated local government very fairly despite the cuts to the Scottish budget from the UK Government.

Murdo Fraser: Given that, according to the Fraser of Allander institute, the Scottish Government's discretionary spend is down by 3.8 per cent in real terms since 2010-11, why has the Scottish Government cut the funding to local government in the same period by nearly 10 per cent? How can that possibly be fair?

Kevin Stewart: I would dispute some of the figures that Mr Fraser has given—

Murdo Fraser: They are from the Fraser of Allander institute.

Kevin Stewart: We have a situation where £2.9 billion-worth of cuts have been passed on from your Government. If you were doing your job properly, you would be lobbying the chancellor—

The Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair, Mr Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: —for much more than the wee bit of consequentials that we are getting out of the budget. That does not compensate for the cuts that have been made to this place. The member should start standing up for his constituents here in Scotland.

The local government finance settlement, including the extra £160 million announced on 2 February, plus the other sources of support that are available through the actual and potential increases in council tax income, and the support

through health and social care integration, would have amounted to a potential overall increase of more than £400 million, which is 3.9 per cent in cash terms, or £249.7 million, which is 2.4 per cent in real terms.

Local authorities have now finalised their budgets, with the exception of Clackmannanshire, which set its council tax but not its budget, which should include provision for each of the elements included in the package. As a result of 11 councils choosing not to increase their council tax levels by the maximum allowable 3 per cent, overall support for services has reduced to £383 million, or 3.7 per cent in cash terms.

The figures for 2017-18 that are presented for approval today include two significant additions from the provisional distributed figures that were issued on 15 December: £130 million of revenue, which the cabinet secretary announced during stage 1 of the Budget (Scotland) Bill, and an extra £10 million in respect of the discretionary housing payments, which increases the total support that will be available next year to £52.9 million and will mitigate some of the worst excesses of Tory welfare reforms.

In addition to the 2017-18 allocations, today's order seeks approval for an extra £51.7 million for 2016-17. That represents sums either undistributed at the time of the 2016 order or funding that has become available during the year. It includes £37.5 million to fund the teachers' induction scheme, £5 million to support the one-plus-two languages policy, £2.4 million to support the council tax reform changes and £1.7 million to provide additional financial support to flooded communities.

The Presiding Officer: Minister, please conclude.

Kevin Stewart: I am in my last wee bit, Presiding Officer.

I must respond to Mike Rumbles's accusation that the Scottish Government is short changing Aberdeen City Council through the application of the 85 per cent funding floor. Mr Rumbles talked about voting against the order—against his own Government—when he first became a member of this Parliament. That shows his impotence on these issues. We have the 85 per cent funding floor only because of the work of the late Brian Adam, a former north-east SNP MSP who lobbied hard to ensure that the floor was put in place. I give thanks to Brian Adam for his efforts in that regard, and no thanks to Mr Rumbles, who was impotent when it came to those issues.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister.

Kevin Stewart: I find it extraordinary that he can criticise the Scottish Government about the 85 per cent floor.

The Presiding Officer: Minister, you need to conclude your remarks.

Kevin Stewart: Since the Scottish Government first introduced the 85 per cent funding floor—

The Presiding Officer: Minister, you are three minutes over time. Please conclude your remarks.

Kevin Stewart: —Aberdeen has benefited by more than £42.2 million because of it.

I encourage the Parliament to support the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2017, to ensure that our local authorities can get on with the delivery of our vital local services without the worry of knowing when and how their funding will be provided by the Scottish Government.

Biodiversity

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): We will move straight on as time is tight for the next debate.

The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-04493, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on Scotland's biodiversity. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

I call Roseanna Cunningham to speak to and move the motion. Cabinet secretary, you have seven minutes.

15:59

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): Given that the natural environment is worth more than £20 billion per annum to our economy and supports more than 60,000 direct jobs, I welcome the opportunity to lead this brief parliamentary debate on something that we too often take for granted. We should celebrate our biodiversity, but we should also be alert and we should be acting to address challenges and issues. I want to highlight three areas on which I will focus in the debate, although I know that there are many other issues that members will want to raise.

First, on our marine environment, 30 new marine protected areas were designated in 2014 to ensure protection of some of the most vulnerable marine species and habitats in Scotland. The MPAs will contribute to an ecologically coherent network of sites, and we are now midway through a programme to deliver the necessary management measures to protect that network. Last year, measures were delivered for 16 important locations in Scottish waters, and at the end of the year, proposals for 18 offshore marine protected areas were also published. That is an example of the Scottish Government's level of ambition with regard to protection of the marine environment.

However, protected area status alone cannot deliver all conservation; there have to be wider processes to ensure that nature outwith protected areas is not forgotten. The marine acts make provisions for marine planning as a means of delivering that, and "Scotland's National Marine Plan", which was adopted in March 2015, represents a significant milestone in improving management of our seas.

The second area of success that I would like to highlight is peatland restoration. Protection, management and restoration of our peatlands are important in protecting and promoting biodiversity

and in delivering a range of other benefits, all of which are highlighted in "Draft Climate Change Plan: the draft Third Report on Policies and Proposals 2017-2032". The Government has identified in the budget an additional £8 million to support peatland restoration, and Scottish Natural Heritage will shortly open the peatland action fund to new applications. That will help us to support land managers in delivering the public benefits that are associated with our peatland resource.

Thirdly, I cannot ignore the reintroduction of the beaver. Although we had the very well-run official trial in Knapdale, we also had unlawful—and, to be frank, irresponsible—releases of beavers in Tayside, which led to problems from the beavers' landscape engineering activities in some of the most productive agricultural areas of Scotland. However, thanks to the efforts of a group of stakeholders—including the NFU Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates, the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland—working with me, we were, through recognising reality and finding common ground, able to find a way forward. I am grateful to them all and for their continued engagement on the issue.

On reintroductions, we are hearing a lot about the lynx, so one might get the idea that its reintroduction is imminent. However, the reality is that we have a long way to go. We have limited budgets, and our hands are full with ensuring that the Scottish wildcat receives the necessary resources and support to ensure that it survives as one of our most iconic and loved species. We also have a long way to go with stakeholders. No single group has a veto on what happens in the Scottish countryside, and it is unrealistic to think that we can reintroduce a large carnivore without ensuring that we have the support of those who would be most affected by it. I should also say that anybody who is contemplating the sort of illegal releases that we saw with beavers should take note that we have learned a lesson, and will not hesitate to take immediate action if further such releases occur.

I do not really have time to focus on wildlife crime, but I want to make it clear that the illegal killing of our raptors remains a national disgrace. I advise Parliament that the review of the data from satellite-tagged raptors in Scotland should be completed by the end of this month. I very much hope that that will get us past the claims and counterclaims about the disappearance of tagged raptors.

I am sure that we all desire positive change for biodiversity both on the land and in the sea, and I am pleased that we have far more positive progress to report than I can cover in the few minutes that are available today. That progress is detailed in SNH's recent reports on progress towards the international Aichi targets and details

of delivery against projects in “Scotland’s Biodiversity—a Route Map to 2020”. The non-governmental organisations have also made a helpful contribution with the publication last autumn of the “State of Nature 2016—Scotland” report, which describes change over time and some of the long-term trends. Those trends illustrate the importance of the targets and the work that is under way through the Scottish biodiversity strategy and the route map to 2020.

Looking to the future and the issues that we need to address, I have made it clear that the European Union referendum result does not affect our commitment to maintaining, enhancing and protecting our environment. European legislation and regulation offer vital protection for our environment, and I have been pressing the United Kingdom Government to ensure that it will transfer in full after Brexit.

I have asked SNH to lead on delivery of our biodiversity targets, and delivery of the biodiversity route map will remain a key priority for SNH in 2017-18. I understand that SNH has confirmed to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee that it is increasing resources to support its leadership role for the Scottish biodiversity strategy in 2017-18.

However, enhancing, restoring and protecting our biodiversity are not the responsibility solely of SNH or of the Government. Other public bodies play important roles, but we all have a role and a responsibility to protect, nurture, sustain and enjoy our natural environment. That is why it is important to have an overarching approach to biodiversity. I will shortly lay the fourth biodiversity report in Parliament, which will set out progress across all aspects of the Scottish biodiversity strategy. The report will highlight the achievements over the past three years and will demonstrate the value of working together to achieve our shared aims for Scotland’s wonderful biodiversity.

I am minded to simply accept all three amendments, because I doubt that there is much separating us on this issue. I will, however, listen carefully and with great interest to the Opposition speeches.

Amazingly, I have finished 30 seconds ahead of schedule.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that Scotland’s biodiversity is one of its most precious and valuable assets, has intrinsic value and underpins a strong economy and healthy communities; agrees that significant progress has been made to protect and enhance Scotland’s biodiversity, and notes that, by working in partnership, Scotland can collectively achieve more for its biodiversity, help meet its international obligations and ensure that its biodiversity has a secure and healthy future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am very much obliged, cabinet secretary. If everyone does that, we will all be happy bunnies. There is a target for you.

I call Maurice Golden to speak to and move amendment S5M-04493.1.

16:06

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will do my best to make you a happy bunny.

I welcome the cabinet secretary’s recognition that biodiversity is one of our most precious assets, and I share her desire to see its intrinsic value being recognised. The range of benefits that we derive from Scotland’s biodiversity is huge and goes from crop pollination to eco-tourism, and from carbon capture to flood prevention. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that access to nature can boost mental and physical health. I was pleased to see the cabinet secretary’s recent comments acknowledging and welcoming such evidence.

The Scottish National Party Government has set ambitious environmental targets, and I offer my praise and support for those ambitions. I agree with much of the SNP motion today. My amendment seeks to clarify that although progress has been made, there is much to be achieved, and we as a Parliament must help to deliver it for Scotland. Ambitious targets have been set; they are important because they set the tone, narrative and direction. Although at times it can be difficult to agree ambitious targets across the Cabinet, it is even more difficult to then achieve them across the chamber and across Scotland. That is my rationale for the amendment in my name.

I also believe that the Green and Labour amendments will enhance and contribute to the motion. They enrich and are consensual where confrontation could have been sought. The Aichi targets, which are defined, and the national ecological network, which needs to be defined, are important and will help to support our biodiversity targets. However, setting an ambitious target is not the same as achieving it. The simple truth is that the SNP Government has come up short on its targets in many areas, and those shortcomings must be recognised. For example, one in 10 bird species faces extinction, as do 13 per cent of plant species. There has been a 40 per cent reduction in seabird numbers over the past 30 years, and 14 per cent of our ancient woodland has been lost over the past four decades. Woodland targets have been missed, with barely more than two fifths planted, and more than 30 per cent of native woodland is in poor condition.

Let us focus on urban biodiversity. We are seeing the steady erosion of our cherished greenbelt. Ask the people of East Renfrewshire, where swathes of the greenbelt are destined to be destroyed, including places like Broom park, where a concrete jungle could be poured over a precious community urban green space. Ask the people of Renfrewshire, whose greenbelt is being attacked by five different planning appeals at the same time, in Kilbarchan, Brookfield, Bridge of Weir—twice—and Elderslie, as well as a host of other communities across the west of Scotland and Scotland as a whole. Yes—there is a need for new housing but not at the expense of our greenbelt and our biodiversity.

We need to get to grips with those sorts of issues by creating specially designated zones to protect our greenbelt, and by setting up a green corridor network. We need to establish a biodiversity baseline to monitor and track conservation efforts, and we need to restore seabird islands and provide support to those who are fighting the spread of invasive species. We believe that measures like those can help to strengthen the common ground between the parties of this Parliament.

We are here to offer critical enhancement because we want to push the SNP Government to do more. Let us build consensus, let us praise the successes that there have been and let us recognise the challenges that remain. The time for talking up targets is over. It is time for action from all of us.

I move amendment S5M-04493.1, to insert after “and enhance Scotland’s biodiversity”:

“in certain areas; looks forward to delivering the ambitious targets that have been set”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much. I am handing out gold stars to everybody so far.

16:11

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): This is a very important debate. Our Aichi international biodiversity targets set us a considerable challenge, as is acknowledged across the Parliament, and it should be recognised that it will take a redoubling of our efforts if Scotland is to rise to that standard and contribute robustly to the United Kingdom’s contribution. Scottish Labour’s amendment highlights the need to embed biodiversity appropriately in all relevant land-use decisions, and the need to improve connectivity for habitats and species. We often focus on the land, so—as the cabinet secretary did—I am going to start with the sea.

Biodiversity should be a consideration in all marine activities and sectors. We all aspire to

having healthier, sustainable, productive and biologically diverse seas, so we cannot take a sectoral route. To reach that end goal, we need open dialogue and a holistic ecosystems approach. I look forward to working with colleagues to reinforce that in the emerging regional marine planning system, in the proposed inshore fisheries bill and in whatever Brexit splashes at us.

We all have some connection with the sea—be it food, employment or leisure—so protecting and enhancing our robust marine ecosystems serves all our interests. Scotland has iconic marine species—members may have seen the magnificent photos of the humpback whale who visited the Forth this week. As the cabinet secretary highlighted, 16 per cent of our marine areas are now under protection, which is a very welcome achievement. The next step is to plug the network gaps, including by creating nature conservation areas and special protection areas for colonies and feeding areas of seabirds, sea ducks, grebes and divers.

We have the benefit of increasingly sound science within which marine management should be anchored, and the Government’s report into the first marine protected area management measures found no significant socioeconomic impacts. It is welcome that, thus far, the MPAs are working for coastal communities, conservationists and our habitats. Continued monitoring, funding and resourcing are absolutely essential.

However, biodiversity enhancement is something to which many of us can contribute. It is important to do small things ourselves, such as leaving piles of leaves and cuttings for animals to hibernate in and planting wildflower seeds, even in a window box. What is the Scottish Government doing to raise awareness of the opportunities that we can all take to support biodiversity? When we work in partnership, we can take far greater steps in developing awareness of biodiversity and generating action.

Last summer, I had the pleasure of visiting Glenlude, near Innerleithen in my region. Glenlude is owned by the John Muir Trust; I took the opportunity to find out about great projects that the trust has involving schools and community groups in promoting biodiversity. The staff do a fantastic job in working with groups of people who have had alcohol and drug problems to take care of specific pieces of land that they can see regenerating. They also work with employability charities.

A wonderful example of that partnership working in south and central Scotland is the Irvine to Girvan nectar network. It is believed that Albert Einstein once said:

“If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe then man would only have four years of life left”—

and woman as well, of course. So, we must thank all those who work on the side of the bees.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust, which celebrated its 50th birthday here in the Parliament this week, is working with businesses, golf clubs and local councils to protect and, crucially, to connect pollinator hotspots by sowing, planning and changing the management of meadow areas and creating nectar pathways across Ayrshire. That is an encouraging model that should possibly be adopted across Scotland. Even University hospital Ayr is involved in promoting the benefits of wildlife and rich green space for the community's health and wellbeing. Sustrans, which is another partner, is exploring how cycle paths can form ideal pollinator routes. That is encouraging and progressive work.

Later in the debate, Pauline McNeill will talk about the national ecological network—not the “National Ecological Framework”, as I inadvertently and wrongly called it in my amendment, for which apologise.

Deer management is another serious ecosystem issue that remains unresolved in Scotland. Many areas are still without deer management groups, and local authorities do not always have the training or systems in place to provide control and support. My earlier example of Glenlude applies in this, too, as the John Muir Trust has developed an excellent circular-economy model there using brash waste to stop roe deer getting into circles of native saplings.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And on that, with the roe deer, we must conclude.

Claudia Beamish: That is a good place to end.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, it is a good place to end. Move your amendment, please.

Claudia Beamish: I move amendment S5M-04493.2, to insert at end:

“; agrees that the Scottish Government must redouble its efforts if Scotland is to contribute robustly to its UN Convention on Biological Diversity 2020 Aichi targets; recognises that reference to the Land Use Strategy is an appropriate way to embed biodiversity in all relevant decisions; agrees that the Scottish Government should take more robust action to develop the National Ecological Framework with partners, and recognises the importance of protection and enhancement of marine biodiversity”.

16:16

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I declare an interest as a councillor—albeit probably not for much longer.

I thank the Scottish Government for organising this afternoon's debate. We have had a series of thoughtful one-hour debates on biodiversity in recent months, but it is good finally to have one with a vote at the end. It appears that we are going to have a unanimous vote tonight, which is good.

It is important that we recognise the true state of our nature and the saddening fact that more than half our species have been in decline since the 1970s, with one out of 12 species still at risk of extinction today. Alongside the considerable success stories, we are still dealing with some of the catastrophes. More than a third of our seabirds have gone in the past 30 years, for example, and although it is welcome that a fifth of our seas now have marine protected area status, we have barely even begun to monitor their condition, let alone take the action that is needed for full recovery.

That decline in key species and habitats is not something for which any one single Government should feel directly responsible. Ministers from nearly every party in the Parliament have governed Scotland's environment, agriculture, fisheries and planning system at some point in the past four decades. We need to recognise collectively that putting nature first in decision making, both for its intrinsic value and for its role in providing the foundation of our economic and social wellbeing, has never truly happened. Opportunities to act in a joined-up way that challenges narrow economic interests and the traditional management of land and seas have been passed up along the way, and the environment has suffered as a result.

I will focus on one big positive action that is needed. It is time for a national ecological network that helps vulnerable species to move between landscapes, secures high-quality green space for communities and enhances the services that the environment provides for us all. We need such a network so that we can plan for our green infrastructure in much the same way that we plan for our grey infrastructure, and the network needs the same status in decision making.

Across the lowlands, a national ecological network could guide public funds towards enhancing and protecting habitats such as hedgerows and woodlands. In the uplands, it could guide catchment-scale work to deliver peatland and native woodland restoration, species reintroductions or flood management. In urban areas, it could join up the vital green spaces, parks and pathways, delivering wellbeing that is shared between communities and nature.

The land use strategy, in turn, should underpin such a network as a clear objective, and should place expectations on land managers, planners and communities to deliver it. So far, the land use strategy has been largely pushed to the

background of the climate change plan, which is surprising, given that it was a key tool in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009.

The need to line up the uses of land so that they work together to deliver common goals is greater than ever. For example, it is vital for our climate work that we pursue further development and repowering of onshore wind farms at the same time as we deliver on ambitious targets for forestry and peatland restoration. Those things can be creatively balanced through regional land use strategies. That approach should be at the heart of the Government's upland vision, which should be a progressive vision of community empowerment and sustainable land use, not a degraded vision where SNH's cries for voluntary restraint are met with truckloads of dead mountain hares, spiralling deer densities and raptor persecution.

I read that, according to the cabinet secretary, SNH is starting the conversation this year on what a national ecological network could look like. I very much welcome that but, given that it has taken six years for successive environment ministers to wrangle over extending the wildlife crime powers of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, I will watch the calendar carefully.

The work to put nature at the heart of the way that we plan as a society could drift unless the Parliament puts a firm marker down. A national ecological network should be the jewel in the crown of Scotland's infrastructure and define the value of our special places and the communities and nature they sustain. Let us take that first step towards delivery today.

I move amendment S5M-04493.4, to leave out "and notes that" and insert:

"while recognising the scale of the challenge remaining to address the decline in over half of Scotland's species since 1970, as noted by the *State of Nature Report 2016*, and considers that, by fully implementing a National Ecological Network, embedding the principles and objectives of the Land Use Strategy across all sectors of government and".

16:21

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): In November last year, the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee hosted a round-table discussion with stakeholders about where Scotland stands in relation to progress on biodiversity, which is a hugely important topic. It was sparked by differences in the tone and the picture painted by the RSPB's "State of Nature 2016—Scotland" report and SNH's first review of progress, and covered a wide variety of marine and land-based subjects.

On the back of that discussion, the committee entered into detailed correspondence with the cabinet secretary. Among other things, her expansive response to the letter from the committee confirms for me that, in some areas, there is a disconnect between what normally well-informed stakeholders understand is or is not happening and the reality. I say that not as a criticism of anyone but as a reflection of where we seem to be.

The concerns that the committee noted were all clearly articulated by, and widely supported among, the people who gave evidence. Those concerns included progress on completing the habitat map of Scotland and the fact that the high-level biodiversity strategy group had not met for more than a year. It turns out that the former is on course for completion in 2019, which I understand is the requirement. On the latter point, a governance review that was completed before last year's election but which has not yet been implemented appears to have placed the high-level biodiversity strategy group in stasis, albeit that other consultative bodies continue to operate. However, witnesses seemed to have an expectation that the group ought still to be operational.

It was also suggested to the committee that multilayered reporting structures on biodiversity, along with the number of strategies that relate to that hugely important subject, create an unnecessarily congested policy landscape. That may be required by the need to report at a Scottish, United Kingdom and international level, but might it be possible, if not to streamline the strategic purposes, at least to provide greater clarity on them and to review whether the various strands are sufficiently joined up? A rhododendron strategy is about to be added to the mix. However welcome that may be on one level, when the committee took evidence in November, it was indicated that even people who have a firm understanding of biodiversity would welcome some simplification.

I hope that the stakeholder meetings on land use and biodiversity that are planned for this year, which the cabinet secretary noted in her response to the committee, will provide clarity where it is seemingly needed, as well as progress on some of the points that have been raised, not least because the cabinet secretary, stakeholders and MSPs across the parties have the same ambitions.

As it should be, biodiversity will continue to be woven through the work of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee. We await with interest publication of the three-yearly update on progress and anticipate that it will be more encompassing in its reach than the six big

steps for nature report was and will offer us a real insight into where we are in responding to the challenges that climate change, among other things, poses to our natural environment.

Having started by highlighting concerns that stakeholders are identifying, I will finish by considering some of the undoubted progress that has been made. There are often two ways of looking at a situation. A perfect case in point is protected areas management. We could point out that, as the RSPB has highlighted, one fifth of our best sites for nature are in an unfavourable condition. On the other hand, between 2007 and 2016, the number of features reported as being in favourable condition rose from 76 per cent to 80.4 per cent. Therefore, we are on the right track, even if we all wish that the pace of improvement were greater. The introduction of marine protected areas is another positive. Personally, I am also very heartened by developments for peatlands and forestry.

On the subject of good news, was it not great to hear in the past few days that the Scottish Wildlife Trust has secured almost £2.5 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the saving Scotland's red squirrels project?

There is still some way to go and we will shortly see what the three-yearly Scottish biodiversity strategy tells us. We will also see the potential challenges that are to be faced around Brexit. However, progress is being made and, with regard to building on that, there are some encouraging signs of people reaching out to find common ground and agreement. The newly produced SWT land stewardship policy document is just one good example of that.

16:25

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to take part in this important debate on biodiversity. Biodiversity is vital to Scotland on many levels. It boosts ecosystem productivity and contributes to the maintenance of a healthy planet, and to healthy communities and people.

The benefits of enhancing Scotland's biodiversity have the potential to affect each of us. A boost to a farmer's crop pollination can create a potentially greater yield; healthier marine fisheries contribute to more sustainable stocks, securing the future of our vital fishing industries; and improved air, water and soil quality brings health benefits for us all and enhances what I believe are the most stunning scenery and landscapes in the world. Nature-based tourism is estimated to generate at least £1.4 billion per year and provides around 39,000 full-time equivalent jobs to the Scottish economy. There is no limit to the potential

to create value from enhancing and protecting Scotland's biodiversity.

The Scottish Government has taken some important steps in recognising the importance of biodiversity by committing to the European biodiversity strategy for 2020 and the United Nations Aichi targets with its publication of the "2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity" strategy. I think that the only contentious issue today could be the pronunciation of Aichi.

I take the opportunity to touch on a couple of areas in which further progress can be made. The peatland restoration programme that is currently under way contributes to the EU 15 per cent degraded ecosystem restoration target. Since 2013, 10,000 hectares of peatland have been restored. However, Professor Robin Matthews of the James Hutton Institute estimates that restoring 21,000 hectares annually—a figure that he calls modest—would contribute an 8 per cent reduction in total Scottish carbon emissions. We on the Conservative benches welcome the ambitious commitment to restoring degraded peatland, which will help to protect against flooding and act as a natural carbon sink. It will benefit not only the climate but the economy, by providing long-term investment security to projects that have the potential to encourage the creation of local jobs.

Colleagues will not be surprised to hear me mention national parks. Scotland's national parks are areas of very high value with regard to their landscapes, wildlife and cultural heritage. They provide positive management of areas as well as additional resources to safeguard and enhance those areas and ensure their stability for the long term. They also provide opportunities for the public to enjoy special natural and cultural heritage. We currently have two designated national parks in Scotland, but there is a great deal of scope to create more. There is a campaign in my constituency for the designation of a Galloway national park. I have been active in that campaign for many years and I will continue to push for it.

Joan McAlpine: I am aware of the campaign that the member cites. Does he agree that it is really important that there is community buy-in to such campaigns and that no national park should go ahead unless we are absolutely sure that the whole community is behind it?

Finlay Carson: Absolutely; that is fundamental to the whole project and I encourage the group in Galloway to make sure that every stakeholder is involved at every part of the process.

The Scottish Government has made good progress on the designation of marine protected areas, but we need to ensure that the aim of each MPA is defined and that there is full involvement by Scottish Natural Heritage, local groups and—

importantly—the fishing industry, which might be affected. It is regrettable that the Scottish Fishermen's Federation had to learn from a journalist that the MPA socioeconomic monitoring report had been published, having received no such notification from Marine Scotland. That is totally unacceptable and I hope that the cabinet secretary will ensure that, in future, proper consideration is given to all stakeholders.

We can all agree that enhancing Scotland's biodiversity brings many benefits and I support an ambitious programme to achieve that. However, we must always ensure that we follow an evidence-based approach with full engagement from all stakeholders at every stage in the process.

16:29

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The importance of biodiversity to Scotland's wildlife cannot be overestimated; it is certainly not a side issue. Three quarters of people in Scotland think that our landscapes are in good condition but, according to the RSPB's "State of Nature 2016—Scotland" report, several habitats and species in Scotland are in decline. That is an alarming fact for our world.

Scottish Environment LINK asked us all to champion a species, and the species that I chose to champion is the sea trout, so I hope that members will not mind me doing my job. Sea trout are a migratory form of brown trout. About 75 per cent of sea trout go to sea to feed and then go back to the river to spawn. For that reason, they stay in coastal areas close to the river that they were spawned in. When they re-enter the river from the sea, they are very silver in colour, like salmon, but once they have been in the river for a while, they look like the resident brown trout only bigger. Ensuring that sea trout continue to have access to their migration routes is essential to the ability of the species to flourish. Where would we be without the sea trout?

Biodiversity or wildlife corridors are areas of habitat that connect wildlife and are essential in allowing ecosystems to function properly. Some species need to travel long distances to survive. Without safe corridors that allow them to move around, animals are exposed to all kinds of dangers. That issue must be taken seriously in the context of planning. When we put up buildings in urban and rural areas, we must ensure that we protect species and animals. Biodiversity corridors also help to protect genetic diversity, which is essential. If it is reduced, inbreeding will raise the risk of disease and genetic defects.

There are many good examples of biodiversity in Glasgow, the city that I represent. I support

what Maurice Golden said about protecting green space, particularly in urban areas. I want to mention the new public park that is to be built over the M8 at Charing Cross. It will be no mean feat but, for the first time, it will give people in that area a nice green space.

A good example of biodiversity working well in Glasgow is Possil marsh near Bishopbriggs, which is a freshwater loch that is surrounded by marsh and swamp areas that support rare plants. The reserve is an important visiting place for water birds during their spring and autumn migration. At one time, the reserve was part of an extensive system of lochs and marshes in the west of Scotland. There is also the Glasgow and Clyde valley green network, one of the main aims of which is to help to create strong and diverse habitats.

We know that, in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, agreement was reached on stopping the decline in global biodiversity by 2020. If the UK is to meet the biodiversity targets that were set by the UN, it is essential that we maintain and develop areas of biodiversity.

Local government biodiversity officers are crucial to increasing biodiversity across Scotland. In 2015, my colleague Claudia Beamish asked Aileen Campbell how many biodiversity officers had been lost as a result of local government cuts. I would like the cabinet secretary to update us on that, if she can, in her closing remarks, or say whether she has any concerns about the loss of such officers, whose work will be essential if we are to meet our UN targets.

16:33

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): As Pauline McNeill did, I declare an interest as a species champion. The species that I champion is the Scottish primrose, which is under threat from habitat destruction.

I am delighted to take part in this brief but welcome debate. I support the motion and all three amendments. In passing, I welcome the cabinet secretary's comments in relation to raptor persecution.

In the limited amount of time that is available to me, I want to focus on a couple of local issues that underscore the importance of the interaction between different species and their impact on biodiversity—in this case, in an Orkney context.

As the cabinet secretary will be well aware from my joint work a number of years back on the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, the Parliament chose to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to invasive non-native species. It was

right to do so, but I have a tale of woe involving stoats and geese.

In Orkney, we pride ourselves on providing a warm welcome to most visitors, but we draw the line when it comes to stoats, which were first spotted in the islands back in 2010. As the RSPB has observed:

“Stoats on Orkney pose perhaps the greatest risk to Priority Species on these islands.”

Their predation of Orkney voles and impact on hen harriers, short-eared owls and ground-nesting birds could be dramatic.

Unfortunately, the initial volunteer trapping exercise did not prove successful, but I am delighted that SNH, working alongside the RSPB and other local partners, is now in a position to put in a bid for funding under Heritage Lottery Fund auspices to put in place a more ambitious stoat eradication programme. In the meantime, I very much hope that the interim measures to stop an expansion to the outer isles and to develop the skills of local volunteers who might be involved in that programme can prevent a bad situation from deteriorating further.

Greylag geese are, of course, indigenous, and there is an indigenous greylag geese population in Orkney. However, their number is swollen exponentially by the migrant geese that come in at certain parts of the year. The Scottish Government is to be commended for having introduced an active goose management scheme around five years ago, which was extremely helpful in containing numbers, but unfortunately it has not had the desired effect in reducing those numbers, which are now upwards of 25,000 or possibly 30,000 in total.

The scheme concluded last summer, and there is concern that the gains that have been made will be lost and that the objectives of the scheme will not be achieved. Therefore, I urge the cabinet secretary to look again at how we might be able to maintain the momentum in the interests of avoiding damage to land and protecting many of the ground-nesting birds that are affected by the explosion in the goose population.

Like other members, I welcome this debate. I am sure that we will have the opportunity to return to the issue in due course, and I note and acknowledge the collective commitment across the chamber to up our game in this area. That is just as well, because we are all in no doubt about the scale of the challenge that we face. It is not just an environmental challenge; as a number of members have pointed out, there are also the social and economic impacts.

16:37

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in this debate, and I thank the Scottish Government for giving us an opportunity once more in the chamber to highlight the benefits of biodiversity.

As we know, biodiversity is the key building block of our ecosystem. Therefore, it was with a degree of concern that “State of Nature 2016”, which the cabinet secretary mentioned in her opening remarks and which was discussed in my members’ business debate in November, presented a mixed picture of Scotland’s biodiversity. The report presented a number of warnings about Scotland’s biodiversity, which certainly made people sit up and think. However, it is important to note that it is not all doom and gloom and that it is not too late for Scotland to become a world leader in biodiversity and environmental protection.

The Scottish biodiversity strategy route map interim report highlights good progress with regard to the 2020 Aichi targets in areas such as peatland restoration, taking learning outdoors, restoring fresh waters and increasing the environmental status of our seas. However, as has already been highlighted, a lack of progress has been reported in creating a national ecological network, planting and restoring native woodland, preventing invasive non-native species and applying ecosystem health indicators at the landscape scale.

I thank the Scottish Wildlife Trust for its briefing in advance of this debate. It has called on the Scottish Government to make a lot more progress towards creating a national ecological network and increasing native woodland planting, both of which would increase Scotland’s biodiversity and help to restore ecosystem health. In turn, that would make Scotland’s wildlife more resilient to climate change and resistant to the threats of pests and diseases.

In previous debates in the chamber on biodiversity, I have, as members would expect, highlighted the great work that has gone on in my Falkirk East constituency, which has a varied terrain that ranges from prime agricultural land next to the River Forth to hill farms and moors in the south. There is a wide range of habitats in between, from mudflats and salt marshes to lowland raised and intermediate bogs, marshes, rivers and streams, not to mention canals and coal bins.

The local biodiversity action plan that is being developed and delivered by Falkirk Council and its partners has identified 20 primary habitats and 112 priority species of particular national and local value, which, as such, should be conserved both locally and nationally. For any biodiversity action plan to be successful, education, awareness

raising and understanding of biodiversity are essential. I am glad to say that in Falkirk district there has been excellent participation and joint working by local groups, NGOs and individuals on conservation measures.

Sadly, four minutes limits how much I can rave on about what is going on in Falkirk, but it would be remiss of me not to mention the consequences of Brexit for Scotland's biodiversity. The nature directives, water framework directive and marine strategy framework directive are perhaps the most important tools that we have for safeguarding Scotland's natural capital against degradation and loss. Although the cabinet secretary made assurances last summer following the EU referendum in June that there would be no weakening of a raft of Brussels measures that are regarded as crucial for conserving plants and animals and keeping air, water and land clean and healthy, there are still concerns that if the UK Government gets its way and those directives are repealed or diluted, the health of our fresh water, wildlife and seas will be severely compromised. We cannot allow the dismantling of all those acts of the Scottish Parliament that have transposed EU environmental directives. We should continue to implement them fully, whatever situation we find ourselves in in the next few years and decades. As the RSPB put it in the briefing that it provided for the debate,

"As the Scottish Government moves forward in the light of the EU Referendum result, there is an opportunity to secure world leading protection for our species and restoration of our nature."

I look forward—as I am sure we all do—to working with all the NGOs out there, our local communities and the Scottish Government, to ensure that that is the case.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:42

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): It has been a short but enjoyable debate. The cabinet secretary kicked us off by putting up a big yellow warning sign around the reintroduction of the lynx in Scotland. I took from her comments that there is a need for due process around that and strong partnership working. That is also an issue when we come to national parks. The comments made by Finlay Carson are absolutely supportable, but we need to see that strong partnership working and to build a case with communities, too. We can point to great successes in the two national parks that we already have.

We need a clear focus. That is why we lodged an amendment on the national ecological network.

Part of the issue is governance. Graeme Dey raised the issue of the Scottish biodiversity delivery group; we need to have certainty about the status of that group and its work.

We heard comments on the national ecological network from my fellow "watermelons", Claudia Beamish, Pauline McNeill and Angus MacDonald. I want to say a little about how the network can work in the urban context, where we find that our parks and green spaces are important. Last year, the Heritage Lottery Fund produced a report on the state of UK parks and, although there is good news in there—it is clear that communities are getting increasingly involved in the management of our parks and that visitor numbers are increasing, which is good and meets one of the targets in the 2020 biodiversity action plan—the bad news is that, unfortunately, the quality of many of our parks and investment in maintenance are going down.

That situation is related to the point that Pauline McNeill raised about the reduction in the number of local authority officers working on the issue. That point was raised by the Improvement Service just a couple of weeks ago in a report showing a reduction in council staff. The danger is that we could be at the tipping point for the quality of our parks, which are a hugely important part of the national ecological network that we are trying to create.

I will focus briefly on the nature of planning. We have an ecological network—the central Scotland green network—and 17 out of the 19 councils that are involved in that network have incorporated it into their local development plans. Indeed, 25 out of the 34 planning authorities in Scotland recognise ecological networks in their planning guidance. However, from a letter that the committee received recently from the cabinet secretary, it seems that the networks are there to protect the environment

"unless material considerations indicate otherwise."

That takes us to Maurice Golden's point about the need to protect the green belt and precious places through our planning system. I have some experience of the issue, which relates directly to the central Scotland green network, which is a key infrastructure priority in the national planning framework. In a planning hearing in Stirling Council, a plan to put 600 houses on the green belt, in a completely inappropriate part of the network, at Airthrey Kerse, was being pushed through. The argument was made that the green network is part of the national planning framework and should therefore be protected, but the network had a lot less status than, for example, the Beaulieu to Denny power line, which is another part of the national planning framework and which assumes

far greater weight in the planning system than biodiversity.

We have had a good, consensual debate this afternoon and I am glad that we were able to put down a strong marker on the national ecological network. I very much hope that, as Angus MacDonald said, Scotland can in time become a world leader in how we protect our biodiversity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Golden, I remind you, notwithstanding the fact that you were only about a minute late, that it is courteous to be in the chamber when members rise to give their closing speeches. I give you plenty of warning.

16:46

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank all members who have taken part in an interesting and well-informed debate.

This is an opportunity to produce a report card on biodiversity, to assess whether we are making the grade. As the great environmental thinker Wendell Berry said,

“the world is not given by his fathers but borrowed from his children.”

The UK ranks 189th out of 218 countries on the biological intactness index. Members know that that is the index that is used under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity to assess progress towards the convention targets. Of course, it is not too late to change our ranking, but we must act now.

We all know that climate change has already had a severe and damaging effect on our native species and biodiversity. The changing climate has disrupted mating patterns, hibernation and adaptation, leading to decline in populations.

Changes and intensification in land management and land use have also caused great decline in and damage to biodiversity. As the species champion for the great yellow bumblebee, I am very aware of how the intensification of farming and grazing and the decline in traditional crofting practices have meant that a species that used to be found across the whole of the UK is now found on just a few of the Scottish islands, with a tiny population on the north Highland mainland.

However, it is not just about declining species. Scotland is ranked in the lowest fifth of countries on the biodiversity intactness index, as I said, and our ecosystems have fallen below the point at which they can reliably meet society's needs. The maintenance and restoration of our ecosystems are vital to halting the decline, supporting our flora and fauna and our human population, and balancing our carbon budget and ensuring that we reach our greenhouse gas reduction targets. If we

are to do that, we need to support the recovery of species populations, improve habitat quality and develop green corridors between fragmented areas of natural land.

I think that all speakers made those points. The cabinet secretary made three good points when she talked about the marine environment, peatland restoration and the reintroduction of beavers—I was pleased that she mentioned the reintroduction of beavers, which is dear to my heart.

A key issue is what will happen after Brexit. I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary say that, in discussions with the UK Government, she is pushing for European protections to continue post-Brexit.

Maurice Golden made excellent points about the importance of biodiversity in the context of eco-tourism, flood prevention and mental and physical health. Claudia Beamish made an important point about embedding biodiversity, and I know that the point that she was going to make—before she was cut off so unkindly, Presiding Officer—was that we are pleased that every Labour member is a species champion. I am sure that other parties are looking to achieve that, too.

Mark Ruskell made an important point about putting nature first, and I support what he said about the ecological networks.

I have very little time left, so I will not be able to mention the other members who spoke in the debate. The truth is that we already know how to restore and support our biodiversity and ecosystems. We know what the main threats are. We need to ensure that the policy and regulation are in place and that firm, decisive action is taken to prioritise the health of our natural environment. This is urgent and the sad truth is that the damage has been going on for years—indeed, decades—and our nation is much poorer in nature.

The debate is about much more than biodiversity. It is about the sort of Scotland that we want in the future—a Scotland that is clean, green and sustainable, and a Scotland that is recognised around the globe for the quality of its natural environment, its stunning hills, glens and lochs, and its multicultural workforce. We need to focus on our route map from 2020 to 2030.

We need to build up ambition and investment in our environment to protect Scotland's habitats and wildlife for generations yet unborn.

As Barack Obama said,

“Our generation may not even live to see the full realisation of what we do here”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I say to the member that I am firm but I am not unkind.

16:50

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):

I refer members to my entry in the register of interests.

We have heard much today about how we must do more to secure the long-term future of biodiversity in Scotland and there has been a great deal of agreement across the chamber.

I will talk mostly about land in my speech, but healthy seas are equally important. The cabinet secretary, Claudia Beamish and many others talked about how important marine protected areas are to the health of our seas. I fully concur with that.

Another excellent example of how we can enhance our biodiversity is new forestry schemes that specifically place accessibility at their core to allow folks to get out there and enjoy nature first hand, even when they live in towns and cities. Such schemes also rightly cater for wildlife to flourish as part of a widely recognised desire to boost biodiversity.

My colleague Finlay Carson talked about how we might form a new national park in the south-west. I totally agree that there is room in Scotland for another national park.

Mark Ruskell talked about how land use strategy is one way to drive biodiversity and he said that we need to put nature at the heart of society. I cannot agree more with that.

Undoubtedly, farmers must and do play a crucial part in securing future healthy biodiversity. Farmers are custodians of our countryside, and they care passionately about it. Miles of hedges and millions of trees have been planted, ponds have been dug and grass and water margins have been put in place, and they are all contributing to the success of biodiversity in Scotland today.

Of course, more can be done, such as the restoration of peat bogs that were damaged by inappropriate drainage schemes and tree planting in the 1960s and 1970s. Those peat bogs are a vital carbon sink and help in the fight against climate change. Many other members today have talked about the importance of restoring peatlands.

I am a farmer myself, and I hope that members will permit me to provide some examples of what we have done on our farm. During the past 10 years we have created four ponds, planted 3 miles of hedges, created 2 miles of grass and water margins, as well as putting in place 10 acres of native trees. After harvest, we leave winter stubbles on the fields to provide feed for birds during the cold months and we do not plough until March. I emphasise that our farm is not unique in that regard. All across Scotland, mixed farming

and environmental measures similar to what we have put in place are common.

That said, we should look again at some of the less than helpful regulations. For example, as I have discussed before, greening regulations need to be reformed to make them a contributor to our rural landscape instead of a hindrance. The idea that the harvesting of ecological focus area land should not happen until the end of August because of ground-nesting birds ignores the fact that the ground-nesting birds are gone well before then. Similarly, having two-crop regulations that are designed to let bees have more options assumes that bees are confined to only one field, which is a bizarre basis for policy making.

In addition, we must be wary of the introduction of new species without proper thought for how they will impact on the rural economy in their areas. The illegal release of beavers in the Tay catchment is an example of how things can get out of control. I was also glad to hear that, in the cabinet secretary's opinion, the illegal release of lynx would not be tolerated.

Liam McArthur—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No—you do not have time to talk about Mr McArthur; you will have to conclude, much though I would love you to say something about him.

16:55

Roseanna Cunningham: I thank all members for their contributions. As anticipated, there has been a huge breadth of discussion and I am only sorry that I will not be able to refer to every single issue that has been raised.

Maurice Golden—and, indeed, Pauline McNeill and Mark Ruskell—referred to urban green space. No doubt Mr Golden has raised his particular planning concerns with the local councils involved, but I remind everyone that it is this Government that has ensured the existence of the central Scotland green network—Europe's largest green space project—which covers 19 local authority areas across the central belt and more than 10,000km². There are 3.6 million residents in the CSGN area and it includes 86 per cent of Scotland's most deprived communities, which equates to about 641,000 residents. By any measure, that is a huge achievement.

Both Pauline McNeill and Liam McArthur snuck in references to being species champions—quite rightly. In my job, I am a champion for all species, but I urge anyone who has not already signed up as a species champion to do so as soon as possible. Claudia Beamish referenced the pollinator strategy; both it and the implementation plan are currently being finalised. I hope to have

the strategy published this spring, so it is coming very shortly. I agree with Claudia Beamish's comments on the importance of deer management, but I am sure that she will understand if I wait to receive the committee report on that before commenting.

The issue of the national ecological network was raised by Mark Ruskell and one or two other members. SNH is leading on the development of proposals for the network. It has asked several environmental NGOs to develop a collective view on what a national ecological network should comprise in practice. A response from the NGOs is expected soon, with a view to reaching a conclusion on the topic and agreeing on further action, so things are happening.

On the governance issue that was raised by Graeme Dey and one or two other members, Graeme Dey is correct that a governance review was completed but not considered by ministers before the Scottish Parliament election in May 2016. The review concluded that revised arrangements should be introduced under the ambit of the rural affairs, food and environment—RAFE—delivery board, which brought together the chief executives or their equivalents from public sector environmental and agricultural organisations under the joint chairmanship of the then Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment and the then environment minister.

Since May 2016, the RAFE delivery board has continued to meet informally at official level to work on issues of common interest. We have yet to consider what formal arrangements we wish to see in place of the RAFE delivery board and how we wish to deal with biodiversity and land use governance. However, I can confirm that the delivery support structures—in the form of working groups and the Scottish biodiversity strategy co-ordination group chaired by SNH—have continued to meet regularly to support and co-ordinate the delivery of the 2020 challenge and the 2020 route map.

As many members have said, Scotland's biodiversity is one of our nation's most precious assets. Of course it has an intrinsic value and we should respect it for its own sake, but it also contributes significantly to our economy and helps to create the conditions for healthy and resilient people and communities.

We do not take risks with our most precious assets and it follows that we cannot, and will not, take risks with the environment. Good progress has been made towards the international Aichi targets and SNH has also reported good progress on the project-based route map to 2020 targets.

I accept that some areas are not progressing as quickly as we would like, but the value of the

interim reports from SNH is that we can identify the areas where we need to step up our efforts and not wait until 2020, when it would be too late.

I firmly believe that we should all shoulder responsibility for improving and maintaining Scotland's biodiversity. That means getting together and finding practical and workable solutions to problems, being willing to work in partnership—a very important issue, which Mark Ruskell raised right at the end—and, where necessary, putting aside sectoral differences. We saw the practical consequences of that in the decision about the beavers.

The Scottish Government is committed to meeting our international obligations for biodiversity. I will work across portfolios and across the chamber to ensure that we protect and enhance this most precious aspect of Scotland.

Today's debate has shown the level of commitment across the chamber for biodiversity and, although I cannot get drawn into all the conversations around national parks, stoats and one or two other things that were raised tangentially, I look forward to seeing that commitment translated into action and further progress on the ground and in Scotland's seas.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I call on Joe FitzPatrick to move motion S5M-04529, on substitution on committees.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Alexander Stewart be appointed to replace Donald Cameron as a substitute member of the Justice Committee.—[*Joe FitzPatrick*]

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question today is, that amendment S5M-04472.1, in the name of Alex Rowley, which seeks to amend motion S5M-04472, in the name of Derek Mackay, on the local government finance order, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (South Scotland) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Thomson, Ross (North East Scotland) (Con)

Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Evans, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 57, Against 66, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-04472, in the name of Derek Mackay, on the local government finance order, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Evans, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)

Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumarton) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (South Scotland) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Thomson, Ross (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 66, Against 26, Abstentions 31.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2017 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-04493.1, in the name of Maurice Golden, which seeks to amend motion S5M-04493, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on Scotland's biodiversity, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-04493.2, in the name of Claudia Beamish, which seeks to amend motion S5M-04493, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-04493.4, in the name of Mark Ruskell, which seeks to amend motion S5M-04493, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-04493, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on Scotland's biodiversity, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that Scotland's biodiversity is one of its most precious and valuable assets, has intrinsic value and underpins a strong economy and healthy communities; agrees that significant progress has been made to protect and enhance Scotland's biodiversity in certain areas; looks forward to delivering the ambitious targets that have been set, while recognising the scale of the challenge remaining to address the decline in over half of Scotland's species since 1970, as noted by the *State of Nature Report 2016*; considers that, by fully implementing a National Ecological Network, embedding the principles and objectives of the Land Use Strategy across all sectors of government and, by working in partnership, Scotland can collectively achieve more for its biodiversity, help meet its international obligations and ensure that its biodiversity has a secure and healthy future; agrees that the Scottish Government must redouble its efforts if Scotland is to contribute robustly to its UN Convention on Biological Diversity 2020 Aichi targets; recognises that reference to the Land Use Strategy is an appropriate way to embed biodiversity in all relevant decisions; agrees that the Scottish Government should take more robust action to develop the National Ecological Framework with partners, and recognises the importance of protection and enhancement of marine biodiversity.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-04529, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on substitution on committees, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Alexander Stewart be appointed to replace Donald Cameron as a substitute member of the Justice Committee.

Meeting closed at 17:03.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba