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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 30 May 2017

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. Our first item of business today is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is the Rev Carol Anne Parker, who is minister of Alloa Ludgate church.

The Rev Carol Anne Parker (Alloa Ludgate Church): Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament, I bring you the good wishes of Alloa Ludgate parish church, which sends me here today.

A few years ago, my mum moved from Bathgate to Methil. I joked with a colleague that she was working her way through the Proclaimers song, "Letter from America"—

"Bathgate no more ...
Methil no more"—

and that her next stop was likely to be Irvine.

It is 30 years this year since the release of "This Is the Story", the Proclaimers album on which the song featured. I remember a Friday night in a church hall way back then. I was sitting on a table, my Girls Brigade uniform on, feeling way too cool to be there, and I was singing. I was singing with great gusto,

"When you go, will you send back",

until one of the leaders cut in on my performance and asked, "Carol Anne, do you know what that song is about?"

I should have known. My dad had worked for British Leyland in Bathgate for a time before his death. He left a sound job with the postal service simply because he fancied a change, which must have felt in the end like delivering his own redundancy notice. I should have known, but it was almost 30 years before I began to work out what the song was about.

Conversation with the same colleague with whom I joked about my mum's move led to a period of joint study on the clearance of land, of industry and of people, and the more I watched what was happening in the world, with its continued clearance and stranded peoples, the more I read between the red-topped headlines, the more I imagined myself into the heart of the God of my faith, who weeps at love withheld and people left vulnerable, and the more determined I became to create space and place each day for

listening, space and place for a gentler voice to be heard, and place and space for stories that are often denied or distorted.

Those who shout the loudest are not always the most reliable voices. Those who insist on telling their own careful version of events can steer us away from a matter's heart. Maybe the trick is, in all our comings and goings, to listen precisely for the voices that would never presume to press upon us. Maybe then we will know precisely what we are singing.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Scottish Police Authority (Meetings)

1. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Justice last met the Scottish Police Authority and what issues were discussed. (S5T-00571)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): I have regular meetings with the chair of the Scottish Police Authority and meet the board approximately once a year. We discuss a range of key strategic issues in policing.

Mary Fee: As the cabinet secretary is aware, last week, the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing published its report on the governance of the SPA. That report says:

“the Sub-Committee does not have confidence that the current chair is the best person to lead the Board.”

That follows similar concerns from the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee.

We know that, under the current leadership of Andrew Flanagan, public meetings were held in private and critical letters were hidden from board members, and we have heard about the disgraceful ousting of now former board member, Moi Ali.

Andrew Flanagan was appointed chair of the SPA to improve openness and accountability. He has failed. Does the cabinet secretary agree with me, with the Justice Sub-committee on Policing and with his own back benchers that Mr Flanagan’s position is untenable and that he should go?

Michael Matheson: I am conscious of the issues that have been raised by the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing, which provided us with a copy of its report last Thursday. As I am sure that the member will recognise, we will give careful consideration to that report and its findings, along with the issues that have been highlighted by the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee and the evidence that that committee and the member’s sub-committee received. Once we have considered all those issues, we will be in a position to state clearly the Government’s response and our decision on the position of the chair of the SPA.

I am sure that the member will recognise that it is important that the ministers and Government consider these issues carefully. I can give the member an absolute assurance that we will consider the findings in the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing’s report as we arrive at the Scottish Government’s position on this matter.

Mary Fee: Andrew Flanagan has lost the confidence of MSPs from all parties, including back benchers from the governing party. It is clear that his position is untenable. It seems that Mr Flanagan and the justice secretary are the last two people to see that. We need a drastic overhaul of how the SPA is run, and that must start at the very top of the SPA board. We need leadership from the SPA, but we do not have that at the moment.

If Andrew Flanagan is not going to do the right thing and resign, we need leadership from the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government approved Andrew Flanagan’s appointment as chair. If the cabinet secretary will not withdraw that now, I simply ask what it will take for the Government to take action.

Michael Matheson: I have given the member an assurance that we will consider the findings of her sub-committee’s report. Once we have had the opportunity to consider them in detail, as well as the issues that have been raised by the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee, we will be able to respond to these matters. I am sure that the member will recognise that it is important that ministers give thorough consideration to these issues in coming to a determination.

On the wider issue of the SPA’s structure, and the way in which the SPA operates, the member will be aware that I have asked Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary for Scotland to bring forward the governance aspect of its statutory inspection that was due to take place this year. HMICS has agreed to do that and intends to publish a report by 22 June on those issues. In its letter to me, the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee welcomed my decision to ask for that work to be undertaken.

It is important that we consider these issues, and I assure the member that we are considering them carefully, and we want to ensure that they are appropriately addressed.

On the wider issue of the governance and structure of the SPA, there is no doubt that there are aspects of the way in which the SPA has operated over the past few years that have not worked as well as they should have and that there are areas in which I believe further improvements could be made.

I have been clear about the need for the SPA to operate in an open and transparent manner as it undertakes its processes and considers matters, and I have repeatedly made that clear. However, there is no doubt that there have been improvements in the way in which the SPA has been operating. For example, as was set out in evidence that was given to the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee, there have been improvements in the way in which the SPA

has considered issues such as the contact, command and control division; improvements in the relationship between the SPA and the executive team in Police Scotland; and improvements in the way in which it has taken forward work on the development of the 2026 strategy.

Irrespective of that, I recognise the concerns that have been expressed by the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing and members of the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee. I give the member an assurance that they will be considered carefully, and that the Government will come to a decision once it has considered all these matters.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

The evidence from the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing, the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee, MSPs of all parties and, indeed, former board members is clear: Andrew Flanagan's time as chair of the Scottish Police Authority should be over, and his continuation in that post is untenable. Does the Scottish Government continue to have full faith in Andrew Flanagan as chair of the Scottish Police Authority—yes or no?

Michael Matheson: As I have just said to Mary Fee, we will consider the findings of both committees' work in this area and we will then come to a decision on this issue.

I am surprised that a member who is, apparently, his party's spokesman on justice would not want to ensure that we go through due process in considering these issues. It is important that Government ministers give careful consideration to these issues when coming to a decision, and that is exactly what we will do. Once we have completed that process, we will set out our decision on this matter.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green):

It is my personal view that Mr Flanagan's position is untenable and that he must go. The cabinet secretary will agree that we must have vibrant and diverse public boards. In his response to both committee reports, will he consider the impact that Mr Flanagan's conduct has had on the likelihood of our being able to recruit women and ethnic minority people to these boards?

Michael Matheson: The member raises an important issue. This Government is clear about the need to have greater diversity on our public bodies. I recently made some further appointments to the SPA, and I have written to the chair of the SPA board in recent weeks, highlighting the need to have greater diversity on the board, as that is extremely important. It is also extremely important that, when ministers consider such issues, we follow due process in considering

any concerns that are raised with us in order that we do not dissuade people from thinking about applying for appointments to public boards.

I assure the member that it is clear to me that we must do everything possible to increase diversity not just within the membership of the SPA board but on any boards within the justice setting and that the boards should take proactive measures to assist in achieving that. For example, it is not necessary to have direct appointments if there is no space for them, as members can be seconded to support the work of public bodies in order to encourage greater diversity and give those people experience of the work that the board undertakes with a view to their applying for a place on the board at some point in the future.

The Government is clear about the need for greater diversity in the scrutiny of legislation, and I am clear that we need greater diversity on all boards in the justice sector. Our recent track record on appointments to justice boards demonstrates that we are making significant progress by increasing the number of women members, in particular, and I am determined that we will continue to drive that forward.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The cabinet secretary will have heard Andrew Flanagan's statement at the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing last week. There is no doubting that he was extremely contrite and offered an apology. However, a number of members made the point that the position that he holds has been undermined and that the SPA will be inhibited in moving forward as long as he remains the chair.

Given that, at the most recent SPA board meeting, which was held last week, concerns were again raised by board members about the publication of papers in advance of the meeting, does the cabinet secretary not believe that the culture shift that we all want to see in the SPA will be impossible until there is a change at the top?

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware that the SPA board decided, at its meeting 25 May, to return to the presumption that its committee meetings would take place in public and that all papers would be published in advance. I have been very clear with the SPA about the need to ensure that it is open and transparent in conducting its business.

The member will recognise that, as has been highlighted, there is a need for private space in some of the SPA board's work, given the sensitive and confidential nature of some of the information that it is provided with. That is particularly the case when the information relates to operational matters for Police Scotland. A safe space needs to

be provided for discussions and for the sharing of that information to take place.

Notwithstanding that, my view is that the presumption that committee and board meetings will take place in public is the right approach. That is why I have asked HMICS to bring forward the early part of its statutory inspection, which was due to take place in the autumn of this year, and to look specifically at the issue of governance within the SPA. That work has already been started and HMICS will report by 22 June. I have no doubt that the report will support us in looking at what further measures the SPA needs to put in place.

I recognise the need for the SPA to operate openly and transparently, and I have been clear with it, over an extended period, that the processes and mechanisms that it has in place must be able to deliver that openness and transparency effectively.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): We know that the chair of the Scottish Police Authority did not tell his board about a letter from Derek Penman that advised of the forthcoming inspection. Now, we understand that, on a previous occasion, Mr Flanagan did not share an advice note on forensic services with the board. Does the cabinet secretary believe that that is a further example of a lack of transparency? Does the chair of any public body who behaves in that way meet the Scottish Government's own guidance for those who serve on public boards?

Michael Matheson: Jackie Baillie will be aware that Andrew Flanagan has accepted that he should have passed that note on to the other members of his board and that he made an unacceptable error. We need to ensure that chairs of any public bodies pass on relevant information to other members of the board to allow them to come to an informed position on matters when they are being discussed. The chair has also accepted that the advice note should have been passed on to board members. Again, we will consider that in looking at the matter as a whole.

I assure members that the Government will come to a position on the matter, but it is appropriate that we consider all the facts and information that have been provided. In part, that is for the reason that was highlighted by John Finnie, which is that we want to attract individuals to stand for and work on our public bodies. We need to ensure that ministers and the Government go through a due process in considering these matters and coming to a decision. My concern is that a failure to do that would dissuade people from taking up public appointments, and we want to avoid that. That is why we will consider these matters very carefully and in a detailed way, and we will then come to a decision.

M8, M73 and M74 Improvements Projects

2. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of disruption over the bank holiday weekend arising from the M8, M73 and M74 improvements projects, whether it will confirm the completion date of the work and provide details of how Transport Scotland plans to reduce the level of disruption. (S5T-00569)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work (Keith Brown): Following on from the opening of the new M8 motorway in April and the M74 Raith underpass in February, the final sections of the new and improved M8, M73 and M74 motorways will open fully across the M8, M73 and M74 project over the coming days. More traffic management is being removed across the project each day, with the motorways expected to be fully open by the end of this week.

As is usual for projects of this nature, the contractor will now focus on necessary finishing and snagging works, and local road improvements that have been held back until the new roads are available. Those works will continue until at least September, but they will not affect peak-time traffic flows.

Margaret Mitchell: I will be very surprised if, by the end of this week, we can properly describe the road works as having been completed. In the meantime, there are still major problems with the lack of, or inadequate, signage, an issue that I raised with the Minister for Transport and the Islands in February. His response was that he would look into the issue, but since then nothing has been done, particularly to indicate which lane drivers should take for the new East Kilbride underpass layout.

In addition to that, the delays that commuters are experiencing have been exacerbated by new road configurations and totally inadequate signage for diversions. As a result, countless numbers of drivers find themselves completely lost, with all the chaos that ensues. Furthermore, the delays and chaos are being added to by a lack of co-ordination between the works carried out by Transport Scotland and those by the local authority. Will the cabinet secretary categorically commit to looking at those vexing issues with a view to finding an effective solution?

Keith Brown: I have responded to every letter that Margaret Mitchell has sent me. If one has been missed out, I am happy to look at that. As she knows, I have had a number of representations from both her and other members. I have sought to respond to them all, and I will look to any that are outstanding to make sure that that happens.

I did not say that the road works would be completed by the end of next week. I said that the major roads will be fully open. I went on to say that the snagging works, necessary finishing and local road improvements will continue until at least September, but that they will not affect peak-time traffic flows.

Let us just remind ourselves that the half a billion pounds' worth of work on the Raith interchange was promised by the Tories more than 30 years ago, and that for the first time we have a motorway the whole way between Edinburgh and Glasgow. It has taken this Government to do that. Both those improvements opened ahead of schedule, but it is at this stage on such a project that roads have to be tied in. That can cause disruption, for which I apologise—we obviously do not want to see disruption. The contractors have tried very hard to do the work over the quieter period of the bank holiday, and overnight as well.

In relation to the final point, if there are any further issues on signage or other issues on which I have not responded to the member, I am more than happy to look at that.

Margaret Mitchell: The impact of the improvement projects does not stop with mere delays and potential chaos. It is also having a seriously worrying adverse effect on businesses in the Lanarkshire area.

For example, a number of businesses in Bothwell and Uddingston have contacted me about a substantial loss of revenue that has resulted in some of them closing or planning to close because of a lack of footfall and cancellations. Some businesses are reporting a staggering 80 per cent drop in turnover. Businesses in the Birkenshaw trading estate in Uddingston report having lost tens of thousands of pounds of turnover over the past few weeks as a result of the M8 no longer offering a turn-off to Uddingston. Similar problems have been reported elsewhere in Motherwell, Hamilton and surrounding districts. In view of that, will the minister undertake to join me in meeting those businesses to hear at first hand their concerns and to find a solution to mitigate the adverse impact that the project is having on their businesses and the local economy?

Keith Brown: As I said, I am more than happy to hear representations from the member if a letter has not been answered. She has raised these issues with me previously and I have responded to them. If she has new issues, perhaps she could let me know—I am more than happy to look at them.

I do not deny for a second that there has been disruption. It is simply not possible to have these long-awaited improvements without disruption to

traffic, especially in the online sections of the roads. It is remarkable that there is not one word of congratulation from Margaret Mitchell and the Conservatives on a fantastic infrastructure project that will bring major benefits to the central Scotland motorway network. I do not deny that there has been disruption—of course there has, and there always will be in relation to such projects—but it is a tremendous project that should have been done decades ago. Again, it has fallen to this Government to bring forward the improvements that mean that the M8 is now a motorway the whole way between Edinburgh and Glasgow. One would think that main street Scotland would have had a full motorway before now, but it has not. Many people have made representations to me about the Raith interchange dramatically reducing their journey times, but there has been not one word about that from the Conservatives.

Of course, I will look at the issues that Margaret Mitchell has raised, but perhaps, just once, the Tories could commend this Government and the contractors for the work done in bringing forward a fantastic project.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Both the M8 and the M74 are in my constituency. I was on both roads on Friday when I travelled to Glasgow airport. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the £500 million project is coming to an end, with the work that is still to be done being mainly landscape work? Can he personally communicate my thanks to the Scottish roads partnership consortium and to Transport Scotland for dealing with my constituents timeously? Most of the emails that have likely been sent to Margaret Mitchell have also come to me, and I have forwarded them to the cabinet secretary. I thank you for the work that you have done and for the fencing that you are putting up at St John the Baptist primary school, which is long overdue. It was not going to be done, but will now be done because of your work and the transport minister's work.

The Presiding Officer: I am not sure that there is a question in there, cabinet secretary. [*Laughter.*] If you wish to, you can briefly reply.

Keith Brown: Richard Lyle makes an important point. He has raised with me many of the issues that Margaret Mitchell has raised, and I have sought to respond to them as well. In relation to the M74, what we have talked about does not include the extension to the M74, another long-delayed project that has brought major benefits to the west of Scotland, right the way through to the airport. I am glad that Richard Lyle can acknowledge that, although there have been problems, there is a major benefit from those infrastructure projects.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I associate myself with Dick Lyle's remarks. As the cabinet secretary knows, I am full of praise for what is a wonderful project that should be praised for all the work that has been done. I know that it is the biggest project in Europe of its kind.

I want to ensure that the cabinet secretary is aware that most people who use the roads concerned believe that the lack of information is the only weakness. Only yesterday, someone wrote to me and said that they had been queued up for hours on the A8, around midnight. I want to ensure that the cabinet secretary is aware of that. I think that the weakness is in the lack of information and the diversions. If it was not for that, I think that people would feel a lot happier. However, I do not want to detract in any way from the project, which I think is to be commended.

The Presiding Officer: I am not sure that there is a question there either, but the cabinet secretary can respond.

Keith Brown: I thank Pauline McNeill for her remarks. I point out that the project is not even the largest in Scotland, as the long-awaited Aberdeen western peripheral route project is worth £750 million. I acknowledge Pauline McNeill's point about the disruption that has been caused. She gave an example of disruption at night, which happens because the contractor seeks to close the roads when there is the least traffic on them. I acknowledge that there have been issues with signage and communication, which I have raised a number of times with the contractor.

We are coming to the final part of the project, which is when a lot of very quick changes have to be made in order to tie in all the roads. I will pass on the remarks of both Margaret Mitchell and Pauline McNeill to the contractor for the final few days of the project.

Social Security Benefits

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement by Angela Constance on social security benefits. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): Today, I will outline plans for the first social security benefits to be delivered by the Scottish Government. They include the new best start grant, funeral expense assistance and the supplement to carers allowance. This is the next milestone in building Scotland's new social security system, and those are the first benefits that our new social security agency will deliver.

This is the largest and most complex programme of change in the history of devolution and we have made excellent progress since the election. We are building on four years' experience of delivering the Scottish welfare fund and using discretionary housing payments to mitigate the bedroom tax. We are also building on experience of the smooth devolution of DHPs at the beginning of April, and we have made progress with the Department for Work and Pensions to agree the implementation of universal credit flexibilities.

We have already announced that we will create a new social security agency with an efficient central function and a strong local presence across Scotland. Last year, we held a wide-ranging consultation exercise and heard from people about what they need from a social security system. People with lived experience will continue to inform our decisions and our deeds at every step of our journey. That is why we invited people to join our experience panels; I am delighted to say that about 2,300 people have volunteered for them.

We have also appointed the disability and carers benefits expert advisory group, which will advise Scottish ministers on policy options on disability and carers benefits, and on actions that will change lives for the better.

As the Minister for Social Security told Parliament in her recent statement on the social security agency, there will be no contracting with the private sector to undertake assessments for disability benefits.

Building on that momentum, my announcement today sets the timescale for delivering the first devolved benefits. During the current session of Parliament, 10 benefits will transfer to us. DHPs

have already transferred successfully and are being delivered by local authorities. Our top priority is that people receive the right payments at the right time. That is a big task. Once all the benefits have been devolved, we will make more payments each week than the Scottish Government currently makes in a year, so we need to get it right. That is one of the most important things that people have told us through the consultation and our other engagement.

One of the lessons from previous social security changes by the United Kingdom Government is that setting arbitrary target dates without a clear plan to meet them will lead to failure, as we have seen with universal credit. We have always been clear that the devolution of social security powers is a phased approach taking many incremental steps to the safe and secure transition of powers, as opposed to its being a one-off event.

Let me start with our plans for the best start grant and funeral expense assistance. Those early benefits will make an immediate difference to people and will fulfil commitments that we set out in our manifesto. We will start delivery of Scotland's first new benefit—the new best start grant—by summer 2019. This replacement for the sure start maternity grant is a substantial investment in a child's early years. As part of our wider work that aims to give each child the best start in life, it will contribute to tackling child poverty, improving health and raising attainment.

The current UK Government sure start grant is a single payment of £500 to families that are on low incomes. We will increase that to £600 for the first child, in recognition that the UK rate has not increased in over a decade. We will also reintroduce payments of £300 for second and subsequent children—which the UK Government cut in 2011. We will make no judgment about the number of children that people decide to have and will set no limit on the number of children we help in any qualifying family. We will also provide two payments of £250 during a child's early years, around the time when they start nursery and before they start school. That means that qualifying families will receive £1,100 over the course of the early years of their first child's life, compared with just £500 at present, plus further support for additional children. For a two-child family, that means an additional £1,400.

We have started work on the application process for the best start grant. From the earliest stage, we have been working with parents who would be eligible. We have shared and tested a draft application form and have made changes based on feedback from the people who will need the grant to ensure that it is clear, simple and easy to follow. We will reach more people by making the application process easier to follow and by

joining up support with the services that parents use day to day. That includes linking with healthy start food vouchers, which provide nutritional support to pregnant women and young children. Take-up of the sure start maternity grant is low, at about 50 per cent, so improving take-up and increasing the support that is provided will make an immediate impact on low-income families in Scotland.

We will deliver the new funeral expense assistance by summer 2019, thereby providing critical support to people at a difficult time. We heard through our consultation about the stress that is caused by the complexity of the application process and the time that it takes to make payments. We have already committed to the aim to process applications within 10 working days of receipt of the completed application. As with the best start grant, a key area of work is development of an application process that is easier to understand. We will listen to people who have experience of the current system and we will seek expert opinions, including from the funeral payment reference group. Simplifying the process and increasing awareness will increase take-up from its current level of about 60 per cent.

I turn now to carers allowance. We are all agreed on the vital contribution that carers make to Scotland: it is not right that people with caring responsibilities receive less support than others. That is why the First Minister committed in October 2015 to increasing the level of carers allowance to that of jobseekers allowance. We have been working hard with the DWP to investigate how to increase that support as quickly as we can, and I thank the department for its constructive and collaborative support in helping us to achieve that commitment as early as possible. I can announce to Parliament today that we will do so from next summer.

As an interim arrangement, in order to get that done as early as possible, people in Scotland will continue to receive carers allowance from DWP, but they will receive the increase from our social security agency, and they will receive that support twice a year. Although the first payments will be in the summer of 2018, they will cover the period from April 2018, so carers can be assured that they will get funding that covers all of the 2018-19 financial year. We will invest more than £30 million a year in increasing that support. I am delighted that the policy will now be delivered by the Scottish Government, and I look forward to seeing a future United Kingdom Government follow our lead.

All that is, of course, subject to the consideration of Parliament. When we introduce the social security bill next month, I hope that the support that we have had to date for our approach to

social security, from within and outwith Parliament, will continue.

Our plans for the first wave of benefits show the difference that we can make to the people of Scotland through our social security powers. The best start grant—our first new benefit—will greatly improve the support that we provide, and it aligns better with our other work to support children and families. Funeral expense assistance will make important changes to the way that we support people with the cost of funerals, and will provide more certainty and clarity for people at a difficult time.

We are working as quickly as possible to give carers in Scotland more money. It is right that the first act of the new social security agency will be to address the unfairness of the current system, in which carers receive less support than others.

The benefits that we will deliver may be different in nature, but there is one common thread that binds them: investment in the people of Scotland. The changes that we will make are changes that we know are needed, because we are listening to people with lived experience, responding to what they say and ensuring that they are treated with dignity and respect.

Those are the principles that we set out for social security last year, and the timetable that I have set out today shows our determination to bring them to life as quickly as possible.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for early sight of her statement today. Since before last year's Scottish parliamentary election, we have been calling on the Scottish Government to get on with the job of delivering the substantial array of social security powers that were devolved under David Cameron's Conservative Government, so it would be churlish of me not to welcome the statement, even though it comes some months later than it should have done. Even now, however, much of today's statement merely reheats things that we have known about for a long time, such as Scottish ministers not being able to deliver devolved social security without the on-going help and assistance of the UK's DWP—help and assistance that we on these benches warmly welcome.

Significant holes remain in the cabinet secretary's account. She talks of the new Scottish social security agency, but says nothing about where it is to be located, how many DWP and other job losses there will be as the new agency takes on its responsibilities, how its eye-watering £150 million annual running costs have been calculated or, indeed, how those costs are to be paid for.

The value of the best start grant for the first child is to go up as will the value of the grant for the second and subsequent children. In addition, there are to be two further payments to children in eligible families. Over this Parliament, what will that cost, assuming ministers are successful in increasing the grant's uptake, as they wish to be?

Angela Constance: Of course, it is too much to expect the Tories to give a whole-hearted welcome to the progress that we have made, collectively, over the past year. I remind the member that tranche 2 of the regulations commenced only last month, and here I am, less than a month later, on my feet, keeping Parliament informed—as I should—of every milestone and every step on the way. This is a journey on which we will travel together. This Government will be proactive in informing all members and those who utilise services—whether they are reserved or devolved—about the services, and we will ensure that their views inform our deeds and actions.

Of course, it is too much to expect the Tories to welcome the progress that we are making, or the fact that, starting from next year, we will be putting money into the pockets of hard-pressed families, the bereaved and those who care for a loved one. Those are the families and people who are most impacted by Tory austerity. Those are the people who are paying the price for Tory cuts, for Tory cruelty and for Tory complexity in the current system.

On Mr Tomkins's specific question on the best start grant, the cost will be £20 million. He will also recall that, not that long ago, the Minister for Social Security came to this chamber and made a full statement on the social security agency's operating model. In that statement, she said that there was a further appraisal of options to go through before we make a statement on the agency's location this autumn.

On the costs of the agency, I would have thought that, by now, Mr Tomkins, the good professor, would have read the outline business case that was published on 27 April cover to cover and would be standing in the chamber reciting it backwards in Latin.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Scottish Labour welcomes the announcement of the first social security benefits, particularly the plans for the best start grant, which will be introduced in the summer of 2019, replacing the sure start maternity grant. It is an important measure in tackling child poverty and an important measure for low-income families. Is the cabinet secretary able to say now, or will she write to me about, how many families will be helped? I am interested in getting that information. I am sure that she will agree that the high levels of in-work poverty require measures that include low-income families in work.

Furthermore, does the cabinet secretary agree that high priority needs to be given to improving uptake of the benefit, which is at only 50 per cent? I suggest that a radical approach is required, including a commitment to an advertising or promotional campaign, to encourage people to apply.

Will the cabinet secretary also consider working with local authorities on automating benefits, given the links to eligibility and the benefits system? Does she agree that a more radical approach is needed and that, as the transfer of the social security budget from the UK Government to the Scottish Government will determine the budget for the future, it is important to begin that work now?

Angela Constance: I thank Ms McNeill for the tone and tenor of her questions. She is right to point out the impact of the new best start grant and the additional income that it can get to low-income families throughout a child's early years. Later in the week, we will debate the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill. It is important to stress that the new best start grant can make an important contribution to tackling things such as material deprivation as well as to improving children's life, health and educational attainment.

We expect 62,000 claimants to benefit from the best start grant. The member is right that we have work to do to improve take-up. We are looking at the issue of automation. The member makes an important point about the link between the benefit take-up campaign and the resource that will be transferred from Westminster although, like me, she will be aware that Westminster has the habit of changing the goalposts before resources are actually transferred. However, I am sure that we will all be ever vigilant on that.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement, particularly the announcement that carers allowance will be increased for Scottish carers. That will provide much-needed additional support to carers, who as we all agree do so much to support families and friends. Can the cabinet secretary tell me and Parliament how many people will benefit from the increase when it is introduced?

Angela Constance: I am delighted to say that the increase will benefit almost 70,000 carers in Scotland and will cover the whole of the next financial year, starting in 2018. The increase has been a long-standing policy of our party and Government, so I am delighted to make the announcement and that it is our Scottish Government that is proceeding with the increase. As I said, I hope that the next UK Government will follow suit.

Opposition members, in particular, should perhaps remember that our progress is of course dependent on the Scottish parliamentary timetable, which, rightly, is in the hands not of Government but of members of the Parliament. The UK regulations that transfer to the Scottish Parliament competence over carers allowance came into force this month. The next stage is legislation, which is a vital part of our democratic process. I am confident that we will work together as the proposed social security bill goes through its legislative stages, so that we are in a position to deliver the benefit from next year.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): In the cabinet secretary's statement, she adverted to the fact that the Scottish Government has invited people with recent lived experience of benefits to join experience panels to help to inform decisions as the Government moves forward with its development of the Scottish social security system. I welcome that, because my understanding is that the stated intention is to ensure that the system works. Therefore, what is the Scottish Government doing to bring into consideration, in a similar fashion, the experience of individuals who work to deliver the services in question, from the other side of the equation, as it were? To be clear, I am talking about individuals rather than their representatives—whether trade unions or otherwise—which the Government no doubt will have consulted or spoken to.

Angela Constance: I thank Mr Lindhurst for his endorsement of the importance of the experience panels. It is a great success that around 2,300 people are volunteering their time and expertise to ensure that, as we progress on this journey together, at every stage, we get every milestone and every detail absolutely right.

Mr Lindhurst raises an important point about the experience of people who currently work in the DWP. We have former employees of the DWP now working in the Scottish Government. He is right that we liaise with employee representatives through the Public and Commercial Services Union and will continue to do so, but we are open to different forms of communication to liaise with and listen to people who currently work at the coalface under quite difficult circumstances, with the austerity agenda and the massive challenges that the UK Government faces with the roll-out of universal credit.

That coalface experience of DWP staff is important to listen to, but so is the experience of voluntary sector staff who work in advice services and who also see at first hand the impact of the cruellest cuts and uncaring aspects of the current reserved service.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The cabinet secretary said that take-up of sure

start and funeral assistance is low and, therefore, people have not been getting the financial support that they are eligible for. When the Scottish Government has successfully increased take-up, what additional resources could the UK Government provide to further encourage people to take up benefits that they are eligible for and entitled to, but which they do not currently claim?

Angela Constance: That is a good point. Under the fiscal framework, the UK Government will not provide the Scottish Government with additional resources if benefit take-up rates in Scotland are higher than those in the rest of the UK. Nonetheless, that will not stop us carrying out our duty to increase some of the abysmal take-up rates of benefits that people are eligible for.

To date, the UK Government has done little to encourage the take-up of benefits or, indeed, to help people with the application process by simplifying it. It is ridiculous and a damning indictment of the current system that we talk about people having to navigate their way through the benefits system. It can make a huge difference to people's lives if they get the financial support that they are entitled to. I see that as a key role of Government. Unfortunately, the Tories do not see that as a key responsibility for Government.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to make the application process for funeral expenses assistance more straightforward and to provide a timeous response to applicants for that assistance. Those are two of the key recommendations in the February 2016 Citizens Advice Scotland report on funeral poverty. Does she recognise that the other key recommendation in the same section of the report was that the payment should be

"set at a level to allow for the full payment of a basic funeral in any part of Scotland"?

Will she confirm whether she has come to a conclusion on that?

Angela Constance: I thank Mr Leonard for his thoughtful question. He and his colleague Mark Griffin have done a lot of work on funeral payments and the broader issue of funeral poverty. I hope that I can offer him and his colleagues some assurance when I say that the work that we are taking forward on funeral expenses assistance is at an advanced stage. However, it must not be out of sync with the broader work that we are doing to address funeral poverty. We have other commitments on which we are working with the funeral industry, local authorities and advice services.

During the summer, I hope to make a further announcement on our commitments on a funeral cost plan. We are still to finalise the exact eligibility criteria. There are a number of issues about

process, payments and what we can agree to in principle. We recognise that we need to remove uncertainty and complex details from the system. We are considering that in detail. That work is at an advanced stage.

I take Mr Leonard's views on board. We know that there is a real issue with funeral poverty in this country. We will do our damndest to address it. We will cut through the complexity and give more certainty to applicants as well as addressing the broader issues of the rising cost of funerals—the average cost has risen by 92 per cent over the past 10 years.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that, by no longer supporting third and subsequent children in low-income families, the Tories are determined to treat children as unequal? With the cap on child tax credits, larger low-income families will be significantly worse off, no matter the outcome of next week's election. Will she explain the difference that the new best start grant could make to low-income families with three or more children?

Angela Constance: By way of example, I reiterate that our best start grant will provide, for the first child in a family, three payments over the child's early years, totalling £1,100. Each subsequent child will receive payments totalling £800. That means a financial investment during the children's early years of £2,700 for a family with three children, and of £3,500 for a family with four children. That compares with just £500 per family from the UK Government's current sure start maternity grant.

As the Tories take income away from poorer families through major changes to universal credit and other benefits, many families, particularly larger ones, will struggle to manage. Although it might feel like we are fighting poverty with one hand tied behind our back, we are nonetheless determined, in the face of austerity, to provide a better future for low-income families through a number of measures, including our new best start grant.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of the statement and welcome the announcement that carers allowance will increase to jobseekers allowance level in 2018. However, there is evidence to suggest that carers allowance is used to meet the costs of caring as well as replace income lost through not working, and that that would not be covered by the proposed increase.

What assessment of the costs of caring has the cabinet secretary made in determining the increase? Is she considering a premium for carers

who care for more than one person, which incurs extra costs?

Angela Constance: Ms Johnstone will be aware that we have a manifesto commitment on carers allowance for people who care for more than one disabled child. That, in addition to the matters that she raises, will be for the carers benefits advisory group, which will give us expert advice, to consider. She will know from her engagement with the Minister for Social Security that we work closely with health colleagues to consider the most holistic response to the support that carers need.

Once again, I express the importance of the experience panels—the 2,300 volunteers who will walk this journey with us all and who will advise us about the issues that Ms Johnstone has raised today and on other occasions.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for early sight of her statement and I echo much of the praise that she has been given about it. I welcome in particular the funeral expense assistance scheme.

How we help those who are in grief is a measure of a civilised society. I was recently contacted by a constituent who, very sadly, was widowed in her 30s and is part of an organisation that is called Widowed and Young. She brought to my attention the fact that, following changes to the widowed parents allowance, newly bereaved spouses could miss out on as much as 17 years' worth of financial support.

What representations has the Scottish Government made to Westminster about that? Has the Scottish Government looked into options for using the new powers that are coming to this place to ensure that vulnerable families do not miss out on support that they should be entitled to in such a time of loss?

Angela Constance: I assure Mr Cole-Hamilton that the Minister for Social Security quickly wrote to the UK Government when it became apparent that it was withdrawing significant financial support from bereaved parents and their children. That went against the grain of what it had said previously, which was that it would look at reform but that that reform would not involve a cut. Of course, we have heard all that before.

Alex Cole-Hamilton's point about how we support people in their time of need—in bereavement, when they are working through grief—is well made. We are making representations to the UK Government and we have received representations from concerned citizens in Scotland.

Alex Cole-Hamilton made a broader point about mitigation. We can and do mitigate, and we will

continue to have a lively debate about that. However, our ability to mitigate is not an excuse for a callous Tory Government to do whatever it likes. We must recognise that, although we will have 15 per cent of welfare spend in due course, which will give us enormous opportunity, it will not necessarily address the inherent unfairness in the remaining 85 per cent. However, we are alive to all the debate on the matter.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I, too, welcome the progress and measures that are outlined in the statement, but I am concerned about whether the cabinet secretary expects any UK Government cuts to funding before the transfer of the benefits that she mentioned. I am especially concerned that, if the Conservatives get back into power at Westminster, we may face cuts to the winter fuel payment. What would be the impact of such cuts?

Angela Constance: As we have seen with the winter fuel payment, which Ben Macpherson mentioned, no benefit is safe in the Tories' hands. If any benefits that are due to be devolved are cut in advance of the funding being transferred, that will automatically mean a cut in the resources that are transferred to Scotland. The Tories have a track record on that, as they cut employability funding by 87 per cent before employability programmes were transferred to Scotland.

We see social security as an investment in our people. The Tory Government's most recent uncoded announcement, in its manifesto, is nothing short of an assault on pensioners at a time when pensioner poverty levels are rising. That demonstrates that the nasty party is back in town.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Funeral poverty is a huge issue. Has the Scottish Government assessed the cost of the new funeral expense assistance? Given that the fees that are charged by councils and funeral directors vary widely across Scotland, will the assistance cover all the costs, wherever they are incurred? Given that the costs of a basic burial vary from £701 in the Western Isles to £2,253 in Edinburgh and given that cremation costs range from £552 in Inverclyde to £849 in the Highlands, has work been done to ensure that those who are in the most expensive areas do not lose out?

Angela Constance: Graham Simpson raises important issues for our colleagues in local government. Going by the tone of his question, I think that perhaps he is not aware that at the end of last year I held a funeral poverty conference and that, before that, I chaired three round tables on the subject—one was with local government, one was with advice services and other experts and one was with the funeral industry.

Costs vary hugely across the country, and we will continue to have dialogue with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities as we move forward. I want to make progress over the summer months with our commitment to announcing a funeral costs plan. It is important not to see the work on funeral expense assistance in isolation from that broader work, with which it will be connected and done in tandem.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): There has been discussion about the timetable for introducing the changes. How does it compare with the timetable for introducing previous major changes, such as when Labour brought in child tax credits and the Tories brought in universal credit? Will the cabinet secretary commit to keeping to the timetable that she has laid out?

Angela Constance: I remain very confident that we will deliver on our timetable. Unlike the current Tory UK Government, we have not been pushed into making arbitrary or unreachable promises on dates. That is particularly important given that we have to work closely with the DWP to ensure the smooth delivery of benefits for the people of Scotland.

As John Mason rightly states, the implementation of other benefits that the UK Government has introduced, whether for good or ill, has taken much longer, and that is with an existing infrastructure in place. We are building Scotland's social security system from scratch, and the infrastructure is necessary, alongside the other essential component, which is the legislation that I spoke about earlier. In short, we are confident that we can deliver on the timetable that we have announced today.

Higher Education Access

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on widening access to higher education. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:01

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Shirley-Anne Somerville): This Government wants every child, no matter their background, to have an equal chance of going to university. Statistics show that, currently, that is not the case. Where a child is born and the area in which they grow up conspire to make it harder—much harder—for young people from Scotland's most deprived backgrounds to go to university. That is not acceptable.

That is why this Government established a commission on widening access and accepted all 34 recommendations in "A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access". Crucially, we accepted its ambitious targets to widen access so that by 2030, 20 per cent of students who enter university will be from Scotland's 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds. The Government also agreed to report on progress one year on, so I welcome the opportunity to do so today. I can advise Parliament that we have published a written report on progress, which is now available on the Scottish Government website.

I want to make it clear that, in addition to the fact that we are making progress on delivering the recommendations in "A Blueprint for Fairness", there are clear signs of progress on the outcomes for our young people. The latest figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service show that in 2016 a record percentage of 18-year-olds from the most deprived areas in Scotland entered university. The entry rate of 10.9 per cent represents a proportional increase of 51 per cent since 2006. Those statistics show that there is change; it is just that it is not happening at the pace that is required. That is why the widening access commission set out five "foundational recommendations" that it has determined are necessary in order to deliver the step change that is required. I can advise Parliament that two of those foundational recommendations have been implemented, and that the rest are currently on target to deliver to timescale.

In December, I was pleased to announce the appointment of Professor Sir Peter Scott as Scotland's commissioner for fair access. His

knowledge, experience and commitment to equality and fairness are already playing a pivotal role in driving forward the system-wide approach that is required to create equal access. I want that to continue; therefore, I can announce that Sir Peter has agreed to continue as commissioner for a further year.

The commissioner is tasked with delivering the framework for fair access, which will set out what works and how to deliver it. The framework will be based on robust evidence. Professor Scott has made it clear that those who are working on access should play a key role in the development of the framework, and that its main purpose should be to support and enhance the work that they do. To achieve that, he has convened a development group that is chaired by Conor Ryan, who is a former commission member and is director of research and communications with the Sutton Trust. The framework, which will be published in 2018, will, in effect, set out a route map for delivery of fair access.

The foundational recommendations also set an immediate challenge for the Government, which is that it provide a full bursary for students with care experience, and they set universities the challenge of guaranteeing those students an offer of a place. I can advise the Parliament that, from the current academic year of 2017-18, care-experienced students under 26 can apply for a bursary of £7,625 to support their living costs. That mirrors the current minimum-income guarantee for the least well-off students in higher education and will make a real difference to some of our most vulnerable young people.

We have taken an inclusive approach to determining and defining “care experience”, and have listened carefully to the voices and views of people with care experience. As a result, more than 100 young people with care experience have already been awarded a bursary for study in 2017-18. We have been assured by institutions and by Universities Scotland that care experience is already considered during the admissions process. However, it is vital that that translates into those students who apply for entry in 2017-18 who meet at least the minimum admission standards being offered places at university.

The final foundational recommendation concerned the 2030 target and the milestones that are to be met in 2021 and 2026 on increasing access. It also included the target for individual universities that, by 2021, students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent 10 per cent of all full-time first-degree entrants to each university in Scotland. The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council has integrated those targets in its outcome agreement guidance. Furthermore, institutions have been

advised that, from 2018-19, they will be expected to use additional widening access places solely to support intake of students from the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland.

I want to be clear today about my expectations of our universities. We can be very proud of our world-class university sector and the success that universities deliver. Indeed, statistics that were published only last week show that, in 2016, 35.8 per cent of workers in Scotland aged 25 to 64 were graduates, which is the highest percentage on record. However, there is disparity between universities in respect of the backgrounds of young people who study in them, and that must change. Every young person must have equal chances and choices to study at any of our Scottish institutions.

My first expectation for the coming year is that the funding council will ensure that the access targets that are set through the outcome agreement process are sufficient to deliver on our interim targets. By that, I mean not only the overarching national target but all the targets for institutions and full-time first-degree entrants. I also expect the funding council to monitor progress to identify where targets are not being met or where more challenging targets are required. I expect that to be done transparently in order to set out clearly and publicly the access-related activity and ambitions that are set by institutions through the outcome agreement process, and to report on the progress that is made against them.

Implementation of the commission's recommendations in relation to university admissions will be key to achieving those milestones and meeting those targets. In addition to its recommendation for more transparency around the admissions process, the commission recommended that all universities set access thresholds by 2019. I am pleased that Universities Scotland has commenced work on that through an admissions working group. It is one of three working groups, with the other two focusing on articulation and bridging programmes. All three groups are due to report by early autumn, after which universities will have to start implementing the recommendations.

I welcome the leadership that Universities Scotland has shown in those areas. However, I am acutely aware of the lead-in time that institutions will need in order to make changes to admissions processes and to ensure that those are communicated to prospective students in time for them to apply. I therefore expect universities to make clear and demonstrable progress in that area over the next 12 months in order to ensure delivery of the access thresholds in time for the academic year 2019-20.

Progress has also been made on a programme of work to take forward the data recommendations. The commission made it clear that, although the Scottish index of multiple deprivation is the most robust measure that we have at this time, we must develop a more comprehensive methodology to identify the backgrounds of students. My officials are liaising with universities to identify the data that they currently use and that they will need going forward. The evidence base in that area is growing; new research was published in December, and further research from Durham University is due later this year. A group is now being established to determine the best measures to use, and it will deliver that work by 2018, in line with the commission's recommendation.

In the past year, we have created and enabled space within which all stakeholders in the widening access agenda could explore and establish their thinking on how best to implement "A Blueprint for Fairness". However, the commission made it clear that a whole-system approach would be needed to achieve our aim, which requires the whole education system to work together to deliver collectively on the blueprint's recommendations. I can therefore announce today the establishment of a delivery group to co-ordinate and monitor progress of implementation across all parts of the education system.

The group will include those who have a key responsibility for delivering aspects of change, and individuals and representatives, such as the National Union of Students Scotland, who have a wider stake in the outcome of our actions. It will, of course, involve Sir Peter Scott as our commissioner for fair access. In recognition of the importance that Government places on the group's role, I will chair it myself.

The Government's work to reduce inequalities in higher education did not start, and will not end, with the commission's recommendations. We have introduced statutory access agreements, and we have invested £128 million in widening access and providing articulation places over the past four years. This year, we also introduced 40 new places through our pre-medical year entry programme, which aims to assist students from socially deprived backgrounds to enter medicine.

Implementing "A Blueprint for Fairness" is undoubtedly challenging for everyone involved. However, it provides a significant opportunity to change our education system and, in the process, to change the lives of the young people who need equal chances and choices the most. The progress that I have set out today demonstrates that we are determined to address the challenge in order to deliver that opportunity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow approximately 20 minutes, or perhaps a little bit extra, for questions but I ask members please to ask questions instead of making long statements.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the minister for prior sight of her statement. I also welcome the work that has been undertaken by Sir Peter Scott, by the universities themselves, by Universities Scotland and by the Scottish funding council.

I have two important questions. First, will the Scottish Government address Audit Scotland's concerns about the overall financial sustainability of the higher education sector, and, in doing so, will the Government make available the necessary financial resources to expand the number of university places so that there is minimum displacement of better-off students, many of whom are finding it harder to get into university these days, despite having top-quality entry qualifications?

Secondly, according to the UCAS statistics that the minister mentioned, while the number of students who come from deprived backgrounds going to university is rising in Scotland, we still lag considerably behind other United Kingdom jurisdictions in percentage terms. Will she explain why she thinks that that is happening and say what plans she has to provide more bursary support?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Liz Smith will be well aware that the Scottish Government is investing more than £1 billion in the higher education sector. That demonstrates our commitment to the sector and our belief in the world-leading reputation of our higher education institutions.

Liz Smith talks about increasing the number of places as if there is a simple solution to widening access and all we have to do is increase the number of places. Of course, that debate is relevant and it should be had, but we must bear it in mind that other countries keep on increasing the number of places but still face the challenge of widening access. The commissioner brought that up when he told the Education and Skills Committee that increasing the number of places was not the answer to the widening access challenge.

Liz Smith has brought up displacement previously, but she does not recognise that what was demonstrated clearly in the commission's work was that there is an inherent, systemic unfairness about the way in which we distribute publicly funded places. We cannot simply assume that the best people will get to university if we continue to increase the number of places; the

issue is much more complex than that. The Government is continuing to invest in widening access places through the Scottish funding council, and that investment is paying dividends, but we need a much more detailed solution, which I expect to come through the framework for fair access that the commissioner is developing.

Finally, Liz Smith talked about comparisons with the UK. I urge some caution when people make such comparisons, not because the Scottish Government thinks that they are not helpful but because UCAS has also said that, as it means comparing two very different systems. For example, the English figures do not discuss the wide range of subjects that are provided in our college sector, and we simply cannot compare two different systems and not recognise the number of places in our college sector that lead to higher education. The commission recognised and made recommendations on that, and our officials are working with officials from across the UK on how to make genuine like-with-like comparisons with UK institutions. That is the only way that we can provide a better solution.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank the minister for early sight of her statement.

The Government's purpose that every child, no matter their background, should have an equal chance of going to university is one that we certainly share and I welcome this update on the progress that has been made.

However, I agree with the minister that the pace of progress is too slow. Indeed, the 2021 target for students from the 20 per cent most-deprived backgrounds to represent at least 16 per cent of full-time first-degree entrants to university is now a mere four years away. The minister used a figure for 18-year-olds, but the funding council figures for entrants aged under 21 show that it has taken 10 years to get from 8.7 per cent to 10.4 per cent. In fact, the figure fell back slightly in 2015-16. Does the minister really have confidence that the measures announced today will produce a leap from 10 to 16 per cent in only four years?

The minister was sceptical about simple solutions but one measure that researchers such as the Sutton Trust have recognised as being effective is the ring-fenced funding of additional widening access places. However, that funding was abolished in 2016 as a result of higher education funding cuts. Will the minister reinstate that ring-fenced funding in light of the urgency of the looming 2021 target?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Iain Gray is quite right to point out the challenge of reaching the interim targets. I have set out the work that the Scottish Government will do and the work that the Scottish funding council will do, but much of the

work will be completed by the institutions themselves.

As members in the chamber are quick to point out to me, the institutions are independent from Government and we need to work with the sector to ensure that they are up to meeting that challenge. That is why I spoke about ensuring full transparency in the outcome agreements and an openness around the scale of the challenge in certain institutions in reaching their targets. Also, looking at the picture institution by institution, although we can see that many are doing exceptionally well, both in widening access and in articulation, it is fair to say that others are not doing as well as they should be. We need to shine a light on and share good practice.

Iain Gray is right to point out the challenge around the pace of change. That is exactly why I announced the foundation of the delivery group. We can bring together the individuals who are responsible for delivering that change, both inside and outside Government, so that we work together towards implementation.

One of the most important aspects is the access thresholds, with universities not only having the working group's reports but then implementing that recommendation. That will have to be done quickly to allow prospectuses to be put in place to meet the timetable.

As a Government, we are continuing to invest in widening access places, and we have ensured that we will continue to do that. I pointed out in my statement that we are moving forward on medical places to ensure that we look at the work that is required in medical training to widen access. The Government continues to take seriously and invest in that area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have 10 back benchers who want to ask questions, so I ask for crisp questions and crisp answers, please.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I remind members that I am the parliamentary liaison officer to the education secretary.

When we think about widening access to—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, I want a question and I expect you to set an example. Start with a question, please.

Jenny Gilruth: Can the minister outline what role she sees for colleges as part of the widening access agenda?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Government and I recognise the important role that colleges play in widening access. They often open the door to further and higher education for the first time to those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Articulation, in particular, is a stepping stone for those who begin at college and move on to degree level. That is why I am keen to see further work on articulation and, indeed, articulation with full credit. I am pleased that Universities Scotland has developed a work stream around that.

The importance that we place on colleges is demonstrated by the fact that the commissioner for fair access will include a college representative on the framework for fair access development group, and someone from the college sector will be included in the delivery group that I have just announced.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I want to return to the point that was raised by my colleague Liz Smith. What advice will the minister give parents whose children will no longer be offered a university place because they are not in the percentage that has been mentioned? Should they go to England? Should they get a job? What advice—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A short question, please. Do not develop it.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: What I would say to any parent or young person is that they have a Scottish Government that is determined to ensure that all young people will have fair access to university places in Scotland and opportunities in that regard. We will approach the issue on the basis of free education, so that we do not burden students with the level of debt that we are seeing down in England.

I struggle to think why Jeremy Balfour would want to encourage us to look to what is happening in England, not only because of the level of debt down there but because the United Kingdom Government has taken away maintenance grants from new entrants into university. The Scottish Government will not be following that action, and I think that every parent in the country will be pleased about that.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I am delighted that the Government has delivered on its commitment to introduce a full bursary for care-experienced young people. Can the minister explain in more detail the inclusive approach that she alluded to, and say how the age limit of 26 was arrived at?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We considered carefully the options for eligibility for the bursary, taking into account a range of evidence and discussions that my officials and I had with stakeholders, including Who Cares? Scotland.

We have taken an inclusive approach on the issue. Anyone who has been looked after by a local authority is considered to be care-experienced for the purposes of the bursary, with

no timescale applied to that experience that might limit that eligibility. The age limit was arrived at to align with the current legislation to provide continuing care to young people leaving care in Scotland, up to the age of 26.

I was delighted this morning to meet some care-experienced students at the University of Strathclyde and to discuss with them the difference that the bursary will make to them and others in the sector and how it will encourage care-experienced young people to get into university. I was delighted to see that example of real progress being made.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Given that, in 2013, the Government cut the maximum bursary that is available by almost £1,000, can the minister confirm that the issue of student cost of living will be considered by the development and delivery groups and that they will examine the restoration and, indeed, the improvement of bursary levels and eligibility thresholds?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As the member is no doubt aware, a review of student support is ongoing at this time. That review, which is independent of Government, will consider a variety of aspects of delivery in higher education and further education, and the impacts on students.

I am aware that the commission recommended that the commissioner carry out his own research into student finance. He has chosen not to do so at this point, given that there is an on-going independent review. However, he has met the chair of the review, Jayne-Anne Gadhia, to discuss their work and ensure that there is no duplication and that there are no gaps. They are working closely together, and the commissioner will draw his own conclusions about whether he wants to make any further recommendations or carry out any research on the matter within his work programme.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): How will contextual admissions and access thresholds ensure that talent is evaluated fairly? Have universities that already offer grade adjustments experienced a drop-off in academic standards?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Clare Haughey is right to point out that many universities already use contextualised data, and many of them make significant adjustments to entry tariffs. None of them has seen a drop-off in standards within that. I discussed the matter with the admissions officers at the University of Strathclyde this morning, and they spoke about the fact that there has been no drop-off in standards because of contextualised admissions.

It is important that we recognise that there is growing evidence out there to suggest that grades

alone are a completely inadequate selection device for universities to use. Pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds do just as well as, if not better than, their more affluent peers even though their attainment on leaving school might be lower. There is no reason for contextualised admissions to result in any disadvantage in the higher education institutions, but there is real advantage to their developing the work further and ensuring that the good practice that takes place in some universities and courses spreads throughout the entire system.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Given that the minister and the commission have emphasised the need for a whole-system approach, will the minister clarify how the Government will ensure that barriers outwith the education portfolio, such as increasingly expensive public transport and exploitation in the private rental sector, will be addressed and not lost in a siloed approach that focuses on widening access within the education portfolio alone?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question has been asked, minister.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Ross Greer makes an important point. We need to give holistic consideration to the challenges that are affecting students, including the cost of public transport and of accommodation in halls and in the private rented sector. All such things have an impact on students as they go through their university careers.

I am keen to ensure that, when we look at widening access, we do not just look at widening access to freshers fairs but continue to look at widening access to people completing their degree programmes successfully. All those challenges will need to be borne in mind as we do so.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I thank the minister for the advance copy of her statement. On Sunday, Andrew Neil pressed the First Minister five times—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, no—I want a question, Mr Rumbles. You are not special.

Mike Rumbles: —on the impact that cutting grants has had for students from poorer backgrounds.

I can come to the front bench if you want me to ask my question from the front bench, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No—you are a back bencher. I want your question, please.

Mike Rumbles: I am not a back bencher; I am a front bencher.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I want your question, please.

Mike Rumbles: Well, you can have my question. I will ask it now.

Does the minister believe—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Look—sit down a minute. I am not getting into barneys. The front benchers who are to get longer are Ms Smith and Iain Gray. You are not down to speak for longer than anybody else and you will ask your question just like everybody else. Please ask it now.

Mike Rumbles: I will certainly take this up at the Parliamentary Bureau.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: How dare you speak to me like that? You ask your question now, please, and take that back.

Mike Rumbles: Does the minister believe that the decision to halve the value—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I said that you should apologise to the chair for that remark, Mr Rumbles. I am not happy.

Mike Rumbles: I am not happy either, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I know that you are not, but I am in the chair and you had a question—

Mike Rumbles: Indeed, and I am very respectful—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please sit down again and take a moment to yourself. I will take the next question while you are thinking about this.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): What steps are the Government and universities taking to ensure that young people not only get the chance to go to university but can sustain their place and complete their degree?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I mentioned in my answer to Ross Greer, the retention of students plays an important part in the discussions that we are having about widening access. A great amount of good practice takes place in our universities to support students, whatever background they come from. There is also much to learn from what happens in the further education sector and colleges in the front-line support that support staff give to students. All that needs to be taken on board in a systemic approach to ensure that retention is taken seriously by the universities, as I have every confidence it is.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): Will the minister confirm that the next stages of progress can be achieved via the outcome agreements that have been agreed between the Scottish funding council and the institutions and not by the introduction of further legislation?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my statement, we are placing a great deal of trust in the outcome agreements and drawing together the information in its totality. Each institution will have to report in a public fashion on how it succeeds with the challenges that it is set for the developments.

The outcome agreements are still relatively new, but they need to be taken seriously by the universities and the funding council, as I know that they are. The commission suggested that the Government and the funding council should look at other options if universities do not live up to the challenge that has been presented to them. However, given the continued assurances that I am receiving from Universities Scotland, I am confident that there is no reason for the universities not to succeed or to meet the pace of change that is required. I expect them to live up to the challenge.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): How does the minister intend to deliver the blueprint for fairness, which advocates a whole-system approach to achieving equal access and acknowledges that long-term change needs the involvement of the wider education system from the earliest age?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Stuart McMillan is right to point out that we need a whole-system approach. The commission took that seriously in its deliberations. The Government intends to follow through on that through the delivery group, to ensure that we better co-ordinate longer-term work.

As I said in my statement, the group will include not only those who will deliver the recommendations that the commission specifically mentioned but individuals and representatives from the wider education system, who have a responsibility to support and challenge those of us who will be responsible for delivering the recommendations.

A great deal of work will be undertaken to ensure that the widening access work is taken seriously across the education sector. We will continue to feed in not only what we are doing in the delivery group but, for example, the work of the review of the learner journey, to ensure that we deliver on the whole-system approach.

Mike Rumbles: Does the minister believe that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rumbles, I must have an apology first.

Mike Rumbles: Presiding Officer, I apologise if there has been a misunderstanding between us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much. Just ask your question.

Mike Rumbles: Does the minister believe that the decision to halve the value of grants and bursaries in the past five years is consistent with the objectives of widening access?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have previously said to Mike Rumbles, the Scottish Government has an on-going review of student support, chaired by Jayne-Anne Gadhia, which will look seriously at student support issues. I remind the member that the level of student debt in Scotland is still the lowest of such levels in the UK. The changes that he referred to were made to ensure a minimum income guarantee from a combination of bursaries and loans. We have agreed to review the position, and I look forward to seeing the recommendations that the independent review chaired by Jayne-Anne Gadhia will make to me in due course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions to the minister. There will a short pause to allow members to take their places.

Destitution (Asylum and Immigration)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-05802, in the name of Christina McKelvie, on behalf of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, on “Hidden Lives - New Beginnings: Destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland”.

15:34

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Before I set out the committee’s main findings, I will say something that I hope will set the tone for this debate: destitution is first and foremost a humanitarian issue. People who are destitute are one of the most vulnerable groups in our society and they deserve our compassion and support. A human response—one that seeks to protect them—treats them with dignity, fairness and respect.

In truth, we found the subject matter of our inquiry difficult. Much of the evidence that we heard was harrowing. We visited Shakti Women’s Aid and heard from Hemat Gryffe Women’s Aid and were deeply affected by the harrowing stories from the women there. Our report concerns lives that have been shattered through torture, exploitation, abuse and fear—hidden lives, but they are no less valuable than our own. We seek a new preventative approach—one that focuses on new beginnings.

Our report, “Hidden Lives - New Beginnings: Destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland”, asks a lot of the Scottish Government; it also calls on the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments to work together. We want a better life for those who come to the UK seeking protection and sanctuary but who instead become destitute, fighting at the very least for existence and, at the very worst, for survival. Our report is wide ranging, as the particular aspect of destitution that our inquiry considered had not been looked at before by a Scottish Parliament committee.

We have made a large number of recommendations. Time will not permit me to cover them all, but I am sure that members of the committee will highlight other aspects of our work. I will focus my contribution on some specific findings: the harmful impact of destitution; destitution as a by-product of the asylum process and as a result of fleeing domestic abuse; no recourse to public funds and women escaping from domestic abuse; the importance of independent advocacy to address destitution; and the need for a national anti-destitution strategy.

First, I take the opportunity to thank the British Red Cross in Scotland, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland, the Scottish Refugee Council, Scottish Women’s Aid, Positive Action in Housing and Engender, which made an impassioned and well-evidenced plea for the committee to consider the issue.

As a committee, we succeeded in reaching a consensus on almost all our conclusions and recommendations, which is a great achievement, given that the subject matter covered reserved and devolved areas and diverse political views. However, on agreeing our report, a couple of members held different positions: one member dissented from the recommendation in paragraph 41 of our report that asylum seekers should be allowed to register an initial claim, or a fresh claim, in Scotland rather than have to travel to England, and wanted further background information; and two members dissented from paragraph 207, which concluded that the Immigration Act 2016 risks exposing more people to destitution, as it provides for cuts to be made to asylum seekers’ support and gives power to compel local authorities to participate in wider dispersal.

In conducting our inquiry, we were keen to hear from those who had experienced destitution, which is why we enlisted the assistance of the organisations that I mentioned. Notably, individual testimony represented a significant proportion of the 107 responses that we received. We express our gratitude, in particular, to those who shared their real-life stories, the organisations that worked hard to help us gather that valuable information and everyone who provided written and oral evidence. I pay special tribute and say a special thank you to Olivia Ndoti, who courageously gave oral evidence to us, sharing her personal experience of destitution and her fight to gain accommodation and financial support for her and her son.

News of our inquiry was far reaching, so much so that we received correspondence—heartbreaking correspondence—from an asylum seeker in Turkey whose family were facing destitution. The evidence gathered for the inquiry provided an unequivocal insight into the issues associated with destitution. A key theme to emerge was the significant detrimental impact that destitution has on the individual in terms of their mental health; their ability to access healthcare, including maternity services; and their ability to maintain prescribed treatments. Health practitioners also face difficulties in treating those suffering. The Glasgow psychological trauma service told us:

“When clients are destitute, or at risk of destitution, the impact on mental health is significant. Clinicians and service users described worsening mental health problems ... Destitution also increased clients vulnerability to further

trauma and re-victimisation and interfered with clients getting the health treatments they needed.”

It was also important for us to understand why destitution occurs. The risk of destitution is present at numerous points in the asylum and refugee system: at the pre-asylum application stage, during the asylum process; and post decision, irrespective of whether a decision is positive or negative. Other reasons were linked to issues of domestic slavery, domestic abuse and threat of retribution from wider family members—women who had entered the country on a spousal or student visa and, on fleeing from their partner, found their immigration status was insecure.

During our visit to the British Red Cross, we heard from parents who feared that their children would be taken away. Some recounted being told by social work staff that the only way that staff could help was to take their children into care—a terrifying thought for any family. On a personal level, as a former social care worker, I found those accounts deeply concerning.

We found inconsistency in the interpretation and application of child protection legislation, and we have asked for local authorities to review their training and guidance to ensure that there is no room for ambiguity. Destitute people are less able to access their rights and then to challenge any decisions.

We heard about gate-keeping practices by public authorities and, worryingly, about efforts to gain support being described as a “gruelling fight”. The Scottish Refugee Council advised that, of the 60 per cent of initial claims that are refused, 20 per cent go on to be successful. Being destitute makes it more difficult for people to re-engage with the asylum system to make a fresh claim, thus prolonging their destitution.

Kirsty Thomson from the Immigration Law Practitioners Association told us that the complexity of the legislation and processes and the ability to access specialist legal advice mean that there is a deficit in access to justice. Advocacy is crucial in helping people to access support to address their destitution, so we have asked the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and our third-sector partners to provide a fully-funded, independent advocacy service for those who are destitute. I know that that is a huge commitment, but if we help people at the earliest stages, we will not have to pick up the pieces in the later stages.

We feel strongly that women who are fleeing domestic abuse who have no recourse to public funds because of their immigration status should be given access to safe refuge accommodation and provided with the financial assistance that they need to survive. We should be ashamed that

abused women have to use pillowcases as nappies for their children because they have no access to funds. We have asked for the Scottish Government to negotiate with the UK Government on this issue in particular and, in the meantime, we have asked for a crisis fund to help those who are most at risk.

Core to addressing the issues that are set out in our report will be the development of a Scottish anti-destitution strategy to inform a national approach to mitigating destitution. I am not sure whether the cabinet secretary is in a position to offer a commitment on that today; I will understand if she is not, but we hope that she will agree that that would be a positive step forward.

The committee calls on the Scottish Government to embrace a preventative approach to destitution. We all know that prevention is better than cure and that, when we are there early enough and we help people at the earliest stages of their destitution, they do not take out from the service as much as they would need in the later stages.

A preventative approach will benefit Scotland. People will be spared the harmful effects of being trapped in a cycle of trauma—we must remember that we are talking about people who have come from trauma and are seeking sanctuary here. Opportunities to exploit people for domestic slavery or criminality will be reduced. We released our new strategy on human trafficking today and a preventative approach will help with that, because people will not be forced into dangerous situations. Public services will not have the same demand on them to pick up the pieces at later stages, and non-governmental organisations will be able to return their focus to core business. Ultimately, those who have had a positive experience of Scotland will integrate better, and so will their children.

It is my pleasure to move, on behalf of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee,

That the Parliament recognises that destitution has a detrimental impact on people, affecting their mental health, their ability to access health care, and also increases their risk of exploitation and abuse; thanks those who shared their personal experience of being destitute with the Equalities and Human Rights Committee; notes that destitution can also impact on families, communities and on the provision of support from non-governmental organisations and public authorities, and notes the findings and recommendations of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee’s 3rd Report 2017 (Session 5), *Hidden Lives New Beginnings: Destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland* (SP Paper 147).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Angela Constance to open for the Government. You have a generous seven minutes, cabinet secretary.

15:44

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I thank the convener of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee for her opening remarks. I am pleased that the committee was able to secure the debate.

The Scottish Government has welcomed the committee's inquiry, which has given a much-needed focus to the issues of destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland. The committee's report is aptly named. Too many people are leading lives hidden from view and suffering the consequences of immigration and asylum policies that are built on hostility, when they should be able to make a new beginning and a new life.

We should be in no doubt that the cause of the destitution, as examined by the committee, is the asylum and immigration system itself, which, as we all know, is reserved to the UK Government. I am therefore disappointed that the Minister of State for Immigration declined the committee's invitation to give oral evidence, although I note that he provided written evidence.

I firmly believe that it is better to prevent destitution in the first place, rather than apply a sticking plaster once the damage has been done.

The committee made a number of recommendations to the Scottish Government to try to mitigate the impact of destitution caused by the immigration and asylum systems. We will consider those recommendations carefully and fully and we will respond formally to the committee in July, to meet its timescales. In doing so, we will adopt a sympathetic, can-do approach, while being clear about the challenges where recommendations either cover areas that are reserved or are impacted by reserved issues. We will be equally open to the opportunities, where we have devolved powers, that could make a real difference to people facing destitution.

We will shortly engage on developing the next new Scots refugee integration strategy. The new Scots strategy takes a multi-agency partnership approach and I want to see which recommendations could be pursued through it, bearing in mind that that does not cover the immigration aspect of the committee's inquiries. There are some aspects of an anti-destitution strategy that could be pursued as part of the new Scots strategy.

Destitution is built into the asylum system. It is in the rates that are set for asylum support. How many of us could live on £36.95 a week? It is in the length of time that people have to wait to receive the support. It is in the ending of support to many of those who have been refused asylum. It

is also in the mismatch between the 28 days that people have to leave their asylum accommodation and support, and the length of time that it takes for benefits to be paid when people are eventually granted refugee status. That is at a time when people should be able to get on with their new lives in Scotland.

I have met families who are suffering the devastating impacts of destitution that is a consequence of the system. Those are families with young children who have faced the terrifying reality of being homeless and penniless, not knowing how they would get by from day to day—and all after seeking a place of safety and refuge to escape the trauma of their previous lives.

Destitution does not just impact on the individual; it impacts on our communities. We believe that asylum seekers and refugees should be welcomed and supported to integrate into our communities from day 1. That is the key principle of our new Scots refugee integration strategy. If people have to spend all their time fighting off destitution and are susceptible to exploitation, integration is impossible. That is devastating for them, first and foremost, but it is also a loss to our communities—a loss of culture, skills and friendship.

The Scottish Government and our partners among the third sector, charities and local government are literally paying the price of the UK Government's policies on asylum and immigration. We are all paying for services and support that would not be required if people were not being left destitute in the first place.

The success of the Syrian resettlement programme shows what can be achieved when programmes are sufficiently funded. Scotland has now welcomed around 1,700 Syrian refugees into 31 local authority areas. The committee has rightly said that that is the standard that we should be aiming for, regarding both the asylum system and resettlement.

The tailored support that forms part of the resettlement programme comes in stark contrast to the complete lack of support provided to people in the asylum system, including those who receive refugee status. That is the driving force that is creating a two-tier system and that risks division between communities.

The Scottish Government will absolutely do what it can to take a holistic approach to all refugees and asylum seekers, but we cannot tackle the root cause while asylum and resettlement remain reserved.

The Scottish Government is playing its part by supporting organisations working with asylum seekers through the promoting equality and cohesion fund, which includes the British Red

Cross, Positive Action in Housing and the Scottish Refugee Council, with more than £800,000 of investment. That includes £39,000 specifically for the British Red Cross's short-term asylum response project, which provides emergency humanitarian assistance.

I am particularly concerned about the needs of asylum seeking children. The interests of the child must always be paramount. Consequently, unaccompanied children in Scotland are looked-after children and have the right to be supported by an independent guardian.

I will continue to work for the reinstatement of the Dubs amendment for the most vulnerable unaccompanied children in Europe. The Dubs amendment has provided the only safe legal route for unaccompanied children, outwith the middle east and north Africa, to reach the UK. Without that process, thousands of children will be condemned to an uncertain future.

Destitution should never be an outcome of the asylum process. It is unacceptable that people fleeing war and terror should end up destitute or homeless in a country where they have sought refuge. While people are living in Scotland, no matter what their immigration status is, they should be treated as part of our community and be able to live fulfilling lives. Our asylum and immigration systems should support that simple objective, not hinder it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Annie Wells to open for the Conservatives. You have a generous six minutes.

15:51

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): First, I thank all those who gave evidence to the inquiry by the Equality and Human Rights Committee, of which I am a member. I look forward to this afternoon's debate. The Scottish Conservatives will support the motion in Christina McKelvie's name.

The evidence that we heard in committee highlighted areas where improvements can be made to ensure that vulnerable people are not at risk of destitution. We need a system that is more accessible and flexible, whatever stage of the process an asylum seeker is at. The Scottish Refugee Council told us that people must travel to Croydon to make an initial asylum claim, and if they are refused they must travel to Liverpool to make a fresh claim. They therefore raised concerns over accessibility, which must be looked at closely and quickly.

When people cannot access the asylum system they can be left in a vulnerable position and with no recourse to public funds. A cause for even greater concern is that, as the report says:

"people with insecure immigration status find themselves destitute for a combination of reasons but mainly linked to human trafficking or abusive relationships."

Human trafficking is a serious problem in the region that I represent. Two weeks ago, BBC Scotland broadcast a shocking documentary on that despicable trade. It provided clear evidence that young girls are being trafficked from Slovakia to Glasgow, where they are forced into sham marriages with local men. That scandal is going on right under our noses, right now. It is essential that we keep the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 under review to ensure that our police officers have the powers that they need to tackle the problem and to save those young girls from that horrific violation and exploitation. I will continue to hold the Scottish Government to account on the matter.

The committee recently visited Shakti Women's Aid in Edinburgh, where we heard from a number of women who found it challenging to access the support that they needed. Again, they had often come from abusive relationships or had been victims of human trafficking; others had sought refuge to avoid their young daughters being forced to travel abroad to undergo the inhumane female genital mutilation procedure. Hearing about the experiences of those women was truly emotional for all of us who were on the visit.

We heard concerns—I have mentioned these already—about whether it is realistic to expect that people who are struggling will travel hundreds of miles to make an asylum claim. Although the Home Office needs to maintain an efficient service that can cope with the number of claims that it receives each year, it must work to ensure that services are accessible. I recognise the Scottish Refugee Council's call for the Home Office to make use of the SRC's network of regional and local offices, including the one in Glasgow, to aim for a more accessible system. Therefore, this morning, I wrote to the Home Office minister, Robert Goodwill, to ask that the feasibility of allowing refugees to lodge their claims—and any fresh claims—in Scotland be considered.

The evidence that we heard in committee was effective in not only identifying problems, but suggesting how we can begin to make the system work better. In particular, the SRC, although it supported the report's overall recommendations, asked us to consider three recommendations.

It is clear from the evidence that we heard that we need a Scottish anti-destitution strategy and I am pleased that the cabinet secretary said that that will be looked into. Such a strategy could bring to preventing destitution in the first place the focus that it deserves. That would, of course, require leadership from and co-operation between the Scottish and UK ministers.

A Scottish anti-destitution strategy should be developed in partnership with a national practitioners network that would involve people with experience of providing services to at-risk groups and who can share best practice to deliver a better quality of service. That network should continue to work in partnership with the Scottish Government once the strategy has been developed, in order to ensure that it works effectively.

I strongly echo the SRC's calls for the Scottish Government, COSLA and third sector partners to consider funding an independent advocacy service for destitute asylum seekers and people with insecure immigration status. That would allow them to begin the process of integration into UK society as quickly as possible and allow signposting to key services to begin at an earlier stage.

In conclusion, the Conservatives are determined to build an asylum and immigration system that ensures fairness and offers support to vulnerable people and which has the confidence of people who are already in the UK. The UK has a proud history of helping those who are most in need. We are committed to the UK remaining a sanctuary for refugees and asylum seekers, and we will be better able to make that ambition a reality by understanding the concerns that the report raises and acting on many of its recommendations.

I urge the Scottish Government and the UK Government to consider the report's findings carefully and address the concerns that the motion identifies. I will support the motion at decision time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Mary Fee to open for Labour. You have a generous six minutes. I keep saying the word "generous", but nobody is using the time.

15:56

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. You are very kind. I will take more than six minutes.

I thank everyone who assisted the Equalities and Human Rights Committee in producing "Hidden Lives—New Beginnings: Destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland". On behalf of all members of the committee, I thank all the witnesses who gave evidence, all the individuals who contributed written submissions, and all the individuals and organisations that assisted the committee's research on destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status. I also thank the committee clerks, who provided expertise and assistance to all members throughout the process.

It is only right and just to commend the strength and courage of the people whom the committee met who were seeking asylum and refuge and living in destitution. Their personal accounts of fleeing persecution, warfare and suffering in their home nations for the refuge of Britain and of their individual struggles for survival while continuing to live a life of extreme destitution in the land that they once hoped could offer them safety and comfort were harrowing and inspiring in equal measure.

From the outset, it should be made clear that the Equalities and Human Rights Committee fully recognises and accepts that immigration is a reserved issue. However, the UK Government's immigration policy has a profound impact on Scotland, and the majority of committee members believe that, fundamentally, the Immigration Act 2016 risks exposing more people to destitution, which could further traumatise them or make them vulnerable to exploitation.

The committee's report outlines a plethora of recommendations and points for consideration by the UK Government, the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities. The current UK immigration and asylum system fails to treat our fellow human beings with dignity and respect and fails to appreciate and understand the extensive variety of complex circumstances that help to explain why individuals seek refuge and asylum in the UK.

I will specifically focus on the experience of women who are seeking refuge and asylum in Scotland—they are most at risk of destitution. Destitution is linked to marginalisation and oppression. The truth is that women who seek refuge or asylum in the UK are often survivors of domestic abuse, genital mutilation or rape. Their insecure immigration status leads to further exploitation and is linked to their experience of abuse, violence and having their liberty and autonomy severely restricted. In its written evidence to the committee, Scottish Women's Aid articulated:

"Women with insecure immigration status experience specific patterns of abuse".

Destitution is built into the system because there are only a few locations in England where asylum claims can be dealt with. The only place where people are able to register their claim for asylum is in Croydon. The only place where people who have been refused asylum can make a fresh claim is in Liverpool. That results in the indefensible situation in which individuals who have fled from conflict, human rights abuses and humanitarian crises and have travelled a treacherous journey of many thousands of miles across continents to arrive in Scotland are then expected to make an

eight-hour bus journey to Croydon to register their claim for asylum.

The immigration system lacks compassion. It fails to treat our fellow human beings as fellow human beings. Instead of offering support and an inviting welcome to vulnerable and marginalised people who have travelled to our country to seek safety, the system appears to add to their suffering and increase the likelihood of destitution. The committee supports the Scottish Refugee Council's recommendation that the Home Office use the SRC's local and regional offices to make the system more accessible to newly arrived women, men and children.

In Scotland, we need a more collective approach. The Scottish Government should work with local authorities and third sector partners to identify the number of individuals in destitution and those with insecure immigration status. Meaningful data will help to inform policy and enable a more coordinated approach to tackling destitution. "Establishing Migrants' Access to Benefits and Local Authority Services in Scotland: A Guide for Local Authorities" should be updated as a matter of urgency. It is vital that that guidance is a living document that makes a meaningful difference to individuals in need.

The Conservatives' defence of the UK's immigration system is unsustainable. It is inefficient, illogical and lacks any sense of compassion or understanding. There is hope of a better future. There is hope that our immigration system can change and treat people with compassion and understanding. However, change will not come with the election of another callous Conservative Government that is hell-bent on achieving arbitrary immigration targets by dehumanising our fellow human beings. It is time for Conservative MSPs, for once, to do the right thing and call on their colleagues at Westminster to radically review the Immigration Act 2016.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We now move to the open debate. Contributions should be around six minutes, please. We have a wee bit of time in hand, if members want to intervene and respond.

16:03

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Anyone who reads the report will conclude that the UK Government and the Scottish Government can do more to address destitution. The report is a hugely complex piece of work and I thank everyone who contributed to evidence-taking sessions or welcomed the committee on visits, and I thank the clerks for all their hard work.

Under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, a person is defined as destitute if they do not

"have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not ... essential living needs are met); or"

if they have

"adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but cannot meet ... other essential living needs."

The report that has been prepared by the Equalities and Human Rights Committee examines the impact of destitution on asylum seekers and people with insecure immigration status. People who have fled their countries and lodged an application for protection, people who have had their claims for asylum granted, and people with insecure immigration status who are waiting on a response from the Home Office are the real subjects of the report.

We can and must improve the situation that those people find themselves in. I sincerely hope that, in this debate and the work that follows, we all focus on the humanity of the situation and do not get bogged down in statistics. Although I joined the committee only after the Easter recess, it is not difficult to see, from reading the report and *Official Reports* of meetings, and from hearing feedback from other committee members, that the evidence sessions were emotionally draining.

As we went over the report, one of the huge injustices that struck me was the part about destitution and insecure immigration status. All the previous speeches have touched on that. Paragraph 37 of the report says that the reasons given

"seemed more linked to issues of domestic abuse, domestic slavery and threat of retribution from wider family members, for example:

- A woman who was forced into a marriage of domestic slavery, but having escaped, had no documentation to prove who she is.
- People living in fear for their life and the lives of their children, including fear of honour killing, Female Genital Mutilation, incarceration and death.
- Women who have stayed with abusive partners so as not to become destitute, or had left abusive partners and were now destitute."

It was clear to us that the asylum and immigration system is peppered with points at which the risk of destitution becomes more likely. The sheer complexity and inaccessibility of the process makes it unnecessarily difficult, in practical terms, for someone who is new to the UK and is destitute to initiate the process. Destitution is further built into the system by there being only certain geographical locations in England where parts of the process can be accessed. People who arrive in Northern Ireland do not have to travel to Croydon to make an initial claim, and it is

unacceptable that destitute vulnerable people are forced to continue, in the UK, what will already have been a very difficult journey.

We are in no doubt that destitution should not happen as a result of failings in the system, as we heard about in respect of refugees moving from asylum accommodation. I contend, sadly, that people are being made destitute because of the complicated and onerous system that confronts them when they arrive on our shores. Vulnerable, poor, frightened and disadvantaged people must be protected and offered sanctuary, and not regarded as statistics.

So what can we do? The recommendation that has been made by the majority of the committee in paragraph 41 asks the Scottish Government to intensify its negotiations with the Home Office to ensure that people who arrive in Scotland and wish to make a claim for asylum are able to do so here in Scotland, and do not have to travel to Croydon. We have also recommended that we stop forcing people who wish to make a fresh claim to make the journey to Liverpool to complete that claim. We need to establish why those journeys are being forced on vulnerable people and whether there is a way to change that.

The message from the report is as damning as it is clear that destitution is built into the UK asylum process. Positive Action in Housing's director, Robina Qureshi, has said that the report

"is a stark reminder that the UK asylum process, instead of sheltering vulnerable refugees while they try to build new lives, is fast-tracking men, women and children into a deeper humanitarian crisis of absolute destitution."

Scottish Refugee Council policy officer Graham O'Neill has said that

"Today's report is an important wake-up call to a severe human rights problem—often called 'destitution'."

He went on to say that

"The simple truth is that UK governments have sanctioned destitution as a policy lever and it has failed completely"

and that the report

"is a blueprint for Scotland to develop a humane, preventative and more effective model against destitution."

The report calls for several things, including the creation of a Scottish anti-destitution strategy. The Government and other agencies, including those in the third sector, need to work together across all sectors with the aim of mitigating the negative effects that destitution has on asylum seekers.

More needs to be done to identify how widespread destitution is among asylum seekers and insecure immigrants. Asylum seekers should be allowed to work, paid or unpaid, in order that they can give themselves the means not to become exploited or destitute and to help their

physical health, mental health and self-esteem. A destitution fund should be created by the Scottish Government to help women who are suffering domestic abuse and cannot find other help. The Government should consider extending free bus travel to asylum seekers so that they can travel to hospital and other appointments. There should also be a national co-ordinated practitioners network, which would comprise several agencies, including the Scottish Government, health boards, local authorities, NGOs, the third sector and the legal sector. Finally, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities guidance for local authorities should be updated to let people know what help is available to them.

No one who flees war and persecution in their own country should come to the UK or Scotland and face destitution. We are asking the UK Government and the Scottish Government to make changes to ensure that those people—who are already weak, scared and vulnerable—are helped when they need it most, and are not forced into more unimaginable situations because help is not available. There are many good examples out there of organisations and individuals that are doing excellent work in the field, but the report shines a light on a problem that is quite often hidden in plain sight.

16:11

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I, too, welcome the opportunity to debate the report. As a committee member, I thank those who have given us oral and written evidence over the past few months. Without their openness in their evidence, we would not have before us the report that we have today. I also thank the clerks for pulling the report together and for keeping us moving in the right direction.

The report shows us that there are many issues around the area. It is simplistic to think that if we do one or two things, everything will improve. We need closer working between the Scottish Government and the UK Government, between the Scottish Government and local authorities, and between local authorities and the third sector. It became clear to me—and, I think, to other committee members—that although there are good practices out there, and lots of good ways that we should do things are written down, often they do not reach the grass roots. Too often, policies are written but then left on the shelf. Too often, people's first contact with a social worker or someone else is not a good and positive experience.

The first thing that I want is local authorities sharing information more professionally, through COSLA and through other ways, so that everyone

understands what the law is and how it should be applied to individual cases.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): What is Jeremy Balfour's response to COSLA's comment to the committee that

"destitution was an inevitable consequence of the ... immigration system"—[*Official Report, Equalities and Human Rights Committee*, 23 March 2017; c 2.]

that has been created by the UK Government?

Jeremy Balfour: I do not accept that statement. COSLA has failed in its work by not properly distributing information to the 32 local authorities. As I was about to say, distributing information will become more and more important if the system is to be rolled out across Scotland. At the moment it is, predominantly, in place in Glasgow and Lanarkshire, and, to some extent, Edinburgh, but if it is going to go to other parts of the country, there needs to be much greater access to information. We heard evidence from local authorities that different practices are being followed in neighbouring local authorities, which is not acceptable.

The other area that I want to pick up on is independent advocacy for the people who go through the system. Those who arrive in this country have a raft of different stories and experiences, but almost all of them have had a negative experience of their Government or of someone who is in a position of authority over them. I think that there is a slight danger that people will not use advocacy that is provided by people here who are seen to be part of the system. Independent advocacy should be independent, and we should consider the possibility of such advocacy being directly funded by the Scottish Government. Whether it is provided by citizens advice bureaux, advice hubs or other third-party organisations, there needs to be a distinction between the provider of advocacy and the state so that people feel that they are getting absolutely independent advice.

Sometimes, the advice will be offered by lawyers. There is an issue with that, in that the legal people who deal with immigration law in Scotland are based predominantly in the central belt. How do individuals who need advice in the north of Scotland or other remote parts of the country get it? Paragraph 63 of the committee's report raises the issue of legal aid, which the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and other ministers need to be quick to consider in order to ensure that people are not losing out.

I agree with Gail Ross—we need to look at the issue from the points of view of the individual people who are affected rather than at statistics. We need to do so in a way that takes us away from cheap political point scoring and looks at

what the Scottish Government, the UK Government and local authorities can do together to help these very vulnerable individuals.

I hope that the committee's report will shed light on current practices. We have challenged the UK Government and the Scottish Government by asking that progress be made in a fairly short time. We have done so because the issue is so urgent that we need answers quickly. I hope that, in a year's time, the committee will have seen genuine progress and that people's lives will have been made easier.

16:17

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The work of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee on destitution, asylum and immigration status has been fantastic, and I am extremely grateful to it for its report, and for having the opportunity to debate it in Parliament.

Asylum and the issues around it are, of course, significantly reserved to the Westminster Parliament, but the report recommends a range of initiatives that could be undertaken in Scotland and which would be of tangible benefit to the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our country.

In December last year, we held a debate in which we welcomed the 1,000th Syrian refugee to Scotland. Since that debate, the Westminster Government has ended the Dubs scheme, as the cabinet secretary mentioned. The Dubs scheme was designed to take in unaccompanied child refugees—many such children are destitute in the rest of Europe—who are at huge risk. Named after Lord Alf Dubs, who was a child refugee from the Holocaust and someone whom I am very proud to know, the scheme was meant to take in 3,000 children, but it took in barely a tenth of that number, thereby abandoning thousands of the children on this planet who are most in need.

The Westminster Government claimed that councils across the country did not have capacity, but it was immediately contradicted by councils in Scotland and the rest of the UK, which offered places. Quite frankly, the Westminster Government was lying. I know—as, I am sure, all members know—what efforts councils across Scotland and the rest of the country have gone to in securing accommodation for unaccompanied children who seek asylum, as well as for families who have come to the UK through the Syrian resettlement scheme.

The Green MSPs sent a letter to the Home Secretary and the Minister of State for Immigration requesting that the scheme be reinstated. That is the second time that we have formally written to the UK Government to express concerns about

support for refugees and asylum seekers, but it has not had the courtesy to respond to either of our letters. If Annie Wells manages to receive a response from the UK ministers, she should let us know what the trick is.

In Government, the Conservatives have consistently contributed to the instability around the world that forces millions of people to claim asylum. They even brought arms manufacturers into this Parliament: the very company whose weapons turn innocent people into refugees by destroying their homes, schools and hospitals. However, when a very few people dare to come to the UK to claim asylum, the Westminster Government does everything that it can to turn them away, offering them as little support as possible and making the task of getting residency difficult and gruelling. The committee's report highlights the distances that refugees need to travel to Croydon or Liverpool to make initial claims and to reapply if they are rejected. As I mentioned to Jeremy Balfour, Andrew Morrison from COSLA told the committee that

"destitution was an inevitable consequence of the United Kingdom immigration system"

as it sought to create a

"hostile environment ... for those"

who do not

"have a legal right to be in the UK".—[*Official Report, Equalities and Human Rights Committee, 23 March 2017; c 2.*]

I have seen the reality of the refugee crisis; I know exactly how much those people need some basic compassion when they arrive in Europe. Last month, I was on Lampedusa, which is the small Italian island that has been at the centre of the refugee crisis since the European Union's deal with Turkey closed the routes through the Balkans. We know that, in 2016, at least 6,000 people drowned trying to reach Lampedusa, although the real number will be far higher than that. Just before we arrived on Lampedusa, another boat sank. As Patrick Harvie mentioned at First Minister's questions, 34 people—almost all of them babies and toddlers—drowned last Wednesday. The horrors that survivors experience are beyond what any of us can comprehend.

We met Vivien, a 17-year-old from central Africa. She was pregnant by rape and had been kidnapped twice and forced into prostitution, and her best friend had drowned in the Mediterranean. We saw the grave of Walala, an 18-year-old from Eritrea who had suffered terrible burns when gas canisters had exploded in the Libyan warehouse that she was held in. Rather than take her to hospital, the people smugglers put her on a boat to die in agony at sea. We also saw the unmarked

graves for those whose names, ages and stories we will never know.

They are desperate people who are asking for nothing more than safety and security, but even if refugees make it to the UK, their struggle does not end. The current Westminster Government and previous Governments have constructed an asylum and refugee system that is heartless and immoral and that does not offer the safety, security or dignity to which asylum seekers are entitled. We have a system that lines the pockets of multinational providers such as Serco and G4S and their subcontractors, and which puts profit and cost savings before basic rights and dignity.

In January, the UK Home Affairs Select Committee published a report on COMPASS—commercial and operating managers procuring asylum support—contracts and the provision of asylum accommodation in the UK. What it found is simply sickening. It included infestations of rats, mice, and bedbugs; rotten sofas and dirty carpets; women in the late stages of pregnancy being forced to share rooms; and accommodation that was without locks and completely unfit for habitation.

We have heard of atrocious living conditions in Glasgow in substandard housing that is provided by, for example, Orchard and Shipman. The company has been the subject of numerous allegations that it is putting vulnerable people in slum-like conditions. Health professionals and charities say that the health of refugees, and children in particular, has suffered as a result. What kind of society can tolerate such treatment of people who have come here to seek refuge? It is essential that responsibility for asylum support services here be entirely devolved to Scotland, as this Parliament voted on and agreed a number of months ago. If the UK Government will not operate on the basis of dignity and respect, we will.

As I mentioned, there is plenty that the Scottish Government could take a lead on right now. For example, the provision of free bus passes for people who are in destitution is an excellent recommendation from the committee. That could be extended to all refugees and asylum seekers, although I acknowledge the identification issues that might arise in a wider roll-out.

As recommended, an advocacy service for people in destitution whose immigration status is insecure is an excellent idea, but it should not be limited to people who are destitute. Many people whose residency here is insecure would benefit immensely from such a service, and it would likely head off large numbers of cases of destitution.

The committee's report is excellent, and Parliament should be very proud of it. The UK Government, on the other hand, should be

ashamed of its findings—not that they are anything new, or anything that people here, in other Parliaments and devolved assemblies in these islands, and in charities and NGOs have not said before. Even the United Nations has had much to say about how the UK Government treats refugees and asylum seekers.

The Scottish Government should take on the committee's recommendations and show that, when powers lie with this Parliament, we can create a dignified and just society for all those who need it.

16:24

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to debate the report from the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, "Hidden Lives—New Beginnings: Destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland".

I thank the committee's clerking team for their help and effort during the evidence sessions, and for bringing the report to its final conclusion. I also thank all the organisations and individuals who submitted evidence, or came before the committee to give evidence. However, I stress my disappointment at the lack of engagement by the UK Government, which refused to contribute any evidence, either in person or by video conference.

Since January, the committee has worked hard to understand the challenges that are faced by asylum seekers and refugees, and what the Scottish Government, the UK Government, local authorities and the third sector can do to effectively tackle the risk of destitution for each and every person fleeing persecution and seeking a safer and fairer life here in Scotland.

Scotland has a proud history of inclusivity and our approach to helping asylum seekers and refugees to integrate into mainstream society has been praised by the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee of the National Assembly of Wales. That is in stark contrast to the approach being taken by the UK Government. Evidence received by the committee showed that destitution is built into its harmful process, which creates a two-tier system of protection, forces far too many people into hardship, and has a detrimental impact on their integration into our communities. Individuals who have fled from dreadful circumstances find themselves trapped in destitution and homelessness, often for years, as a direct result of the asylum process.

The system places on claimants unfair stresses and constraints that impact on the whole of our society. We need a more inclusive and fairer approach to the assessment process. Andrew Morrison from COSLA summed up that view when he stated that destitution is

"an inevitable consequence of the United Kingdom immigration system" —[*Official Report, Equalities and Human Rights Committee*, 23 March 2017; c 2.]

as it seeks to create a "hostile environment" for those who do not have a legal right to be in the UK.

Graham O'Neill of the Scottish Refugee Council described the UK Government's policy as "inhumane and senseless" and advised there was a significant risk of exploitation, including sexual, to newly arrived asylum applicants who are seeking to fund their travel to Croydon. That includes individuals who have been refused asylum and are required to travel to Liverpool to submit a fresh claim. The Scottish Refugee Council has called for the Home Office to make use of its extensive network of local and regional offices to make the system more accessible for newly arrived destitute women, men and children to register their claim.

The committee recognises that the UK Government and Parliament have the power to legislate on asylum and immigration. It has asked the Scottish Government to continue its negotiations with the Home Office to allow people who arrive in Scotland to be allowed to register their claim in Scotland, and to allow fresh claims for asylum to be submitted in Scotland. National and local government and the third sector are paying the price for the failure of the UK Government's policies and an ineffective asylum process and immigration system, and this cannot go on.

In particular, Glasgow City Council and its third sector organisations cannot sustain the level of services that they are providing without additional funding help. Local authorities are cautious about becoming involved because of the lack of funding, but the success of the Syrian resettlement programme highlights what can be achieved when programmes are sufficiently funded and more local authorities become involved.

Many third sector organisations have played a tremendous part in helping to meet the needs of destitute asylum seekers and those with insecure immigration status but, without the necessary backing, they will simply be unable to continue providing such vital assistance.

I welcome the report's recommendations, which ask the Scottish Government, COSLA and third sector partners to consider providing a fully funded independent advocacy service for destitute asylum seekers and people with insecure immigration status, and the creation of a national co-ordinated practitioners network. I firmly believe that early advocacy would result in long-term savings for health and social services while providing people with the best opportunity to start the integration process. A national co-ordinated practitioners

network comprised of representatives from a number of sectors would enable all parties to share best practice and highlight concerns about legislation and practice.

We need to better understand and address the issues that are faced by those who seek asylum in Scotland. We must strive to combat the misperception, often attached to asylum seekers, that they do not need to be destitute in this country because they can simply choose to return to their country of origin. That is unfair and unjust. Given the choice, most people would choose to continue living in their home country, but because of devastating situations and events outwith their control, they find themselves with no choice but to seek asylum and a safer life for their family in a different country. Many claimants have fled from terrible violence and hardships.

We need to ensure the provision and successful delivery of the help and support that those who are seeking asylum need in order to continue learning, thriving and developing both mentally and socially. However, research shows that many barriers continue to impact on a daily basis, ranging from difficulty with travel costs to the emotional strain that day-to-day uncertainty brings. Isolation and a feeling of disconnection to wider society can also hamper opportunities and, in turn, create further barriers.

Too many asylum seekers are left with no legitimate means of securing a livelihood. Denied access to financial support or the right to work, they are often forced to adopt strategies to cope with having no income and no home while dealing with extreme levels of despair at the long periods they spend in the uncertainty of the asylum process. A high proportion of claimants report mental health issues, but the issue is substantially underreported in asylum seeker and refugee populations.

A determined response is required to ensure that the appropriate support is given at every stage of the asylum process to all asylum seekers living in Scotland who have been forced into destitution because of delays in the administration of a complex and inefficient asylum system. We must all work together to find solutions to the causes of the destitution that is experienced by asylum claimants and make efficiency a matter of priority.

The 2016 act and subsequent changes to support have the potential to exacerbate the issue of destitution for many who come here for a safer environment and risk exposing even more people to further trauma. I urge the Scottish Government to consider the report's key findings and recommendations and to undertake a Scotland-wide consultation. I look forward to a Scottish

Government report being submitted to the committee in one year's time.

16:30

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I welcome today's debate following the publication of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's report into destitution, asylum and insecure immigration.

My colleagues from the Equalities and Human Rights Committee have told me of some of the moving evidence they heard on this issue and we have heard more this afternoon. The issues that are raised in the report are serious and many of the solutions are sensible. I support the call for the creation of a Scottish anti-destitution strategy. If we want to create policies that mitigate destitution, it is vital that we have more information on the scale and nature of the issue.

I would also welcome the creation of an independent advocacy service for destitute asylum seekers. Skilled advocacy can help to mitigate the issue of destitution and exploitation as asylum seekers are directed to the right financial support and accommodation.

Finally, the creation of a national co-ordinated practitioners network would enable best practice to be shared among health boards, local authorities, Government officials and third sector organisations.

However, I have some concerns about aspects of this latest report from the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. Although its domestic focus brings to the fore some significant issues, we must also consider the international picture, as the international response informs the domestic response. To put into context the actions of the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local authorities, we have to look at domestic policy and international policy in equal measure.

The report mentions little about the humanitarian efforts of the UK Government in its response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The UK is the second largest donor and has committed more than £2.46 billion to helping Syrian refugees in the region surrounding the war-torn country. If we break down that figure, we find that the UK has provided about 20 million food rations, 4.5 million relief packages, 2.5 million medical consultations and 400,000 shelters. British aid offers the greatest amount of help to the greatest number of Syrians who have fled to neighbouring countries.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Finlay Carson: As Rob Williams, chief executive of War Child UK, estimated:

“Caring for the basic needs of a refugee in Europe costs at least ten times as much as in countries neighbouring Syria.”

In 2016, the House of Commons International Development Committee praised the UK Government’s response, as it discourages refugees from risking their lives on long perilous journeys into Europe, sometimes on unseaworthy boats and often at the mercy of human traffickers. We hear almost daily, if not weekly, about tragedies in the Mediterranean and we must recognise the UK Government’s attempt to find an alternative system that provides refugees with safer and more secure passage to Britain.

Angela Constance: Will the member take an intervention?

Finlay Carson: Created in 2014, the vulnerable persons resettlement programme works in conjunction with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The programme is aimed at those refugees who cannot be supported in the regions surrounding Syria, prioritising victims of sexual violence and torture, older people and disabled people. Under the programme, almost 5,500 Syrians were resettled in the UK between October 2015 and December 2016. Most important, refugee status is granted to individuals before they arrive in the UK.

Upon arrival, the refugees should have immediate rights to work, to access welfare, and to access public services such as health and education. As a result, the risk of destitution and insecure immigration is reduced. That is the major advantage of the vulnerable persons resettlement programme. The European Union is mirroring the UK’s actions by taking steps to establish a system that supports targeted refugee settlement.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Finlay Carson: The European Commission stated in April 2016:

“The overall objective is to move from a system which by design or poor implementation places a disproportionate responsibility on certain Member States and encourages uncontrolled and irregular migratory flows to a fairer system which provides orderly and safe pathways to the EU”.

Together, the UK and the EU are moving towards a more competent and co-ordinated international response. With international effort transitioning from an asylum-seeking programme towards a refugee-resettlement programme, it is hoped that the risk of destitution and insecure immigration will be lessened.

The asylum and refugee crisis that we face across Europe is one of the biggest challenges of our time. We cannot help but be moved by the personal tragedies that have been experienced by those fleeing conflict and persecution. To find a

way forward, all levels of government must cooperate with one another, and domestic policies should align with the international response.

In closing, I want to recognise the efforts of those individuals who have offered their homes to those fleeing war zones or persecution. I also want to recognise the work of dedicated refugee and asylum organisations in Scotland that have provided food, money, shelter and skilled advocacy support, such as Massive Outpouring of Love and Cafe DG2 in my constituency.

16:36

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I hoped that this would be a consensual debate. I think that most people’s speeches have been consensual, but I honestly cannot take the hypocrisy from the Tory side, as the Tories have caused pain, suffering and destitution with their cuts to help for asylum seekers. Perhaps if they had taken interventions from members, we could have asked questions and got some answers from them. I cannot praise them, given that they support a Government that goes about with a big white van telling refugees that they should go home. All that I can do is highlight their hypocrisy.

I want to thank the many people who have helped on this issue over the years, including you, Deputy Presiding Officer, if you do not mind me saying so. It was in the late 1990s that we saw the first tranche of refugees coming to Glasgow and Lanarkshire. You and I, and many others, were instrumental in closing down Dungavel, but that took a number of years. I also want to thank the many groups and organisations that demonstrated, fought and cajoled to ensure that the people who came to this country were treated with dignity and respect. That was particularly the case with the first tranche, when people arrived in Sighthill and other areas of Glasgow. They were quite frightened and did not know what was happening, and people were there to work with them. Integration came about and now we have the fantastic Glasgow girls, and others as well. That approach, which treats people with respect and dignity, can work. That is why I want to thank the committee for its report, which is fantastic. This debate has also been great, and the contributions—apart from those of the Tories—have been excellent.

I feel particularly strongly about the recommendation that people should not have to go down to Croydon or Liverpool. For years, I, along with many other individuals and groups, have been calling for that requirement to end, and I sincerely hope that that recommendation will be delivered. I understand that we cannot deliver it ourselves, as immigration and asylum are reserved to Westminster, unfortunately. However,

if the two Governments can work together, we can look forward to that recommendation being delivered. I thank Mary Fee for her speech, which talked about what happens to people when they come here. For people who are in that traumatic situation, arriving here and then being told that they have to go to Croydon or Liverpool must be frightening, because they do not know those areas. I want to make sure that that recommendation will be delivered.

A number of members, including Christina McKelvie and David Torrance, mentioned the impact that destitution can have on people with mental health problems, not necessarily when they arrive here but because of the trauma that they go through. I will give one example of that; I am sure that other members hear about such cases through their postbag or by phone. A college lecturer—I will not name them or the college; I will just call them “he”—contacted me and asked for my advice regarding one of the college’s students of English for speakers of other languages, who has been in the UK for almost six years. He says:

“He is an asylum seeker but during the entire time he has been here, he has not received any support from the home office. No accommodation or financial assistance, nor the right to work to support himself.”

I support what the committee’s report says about that. He admits:

“This is indeed rather unusual, but it seems that some asylum seekers qualify ... while others do not.”

It depends on whether their claim has been accepted via the Home Office. The person was involved in a trafficking case

“and was given 48 hours to leave his temporary accommodation provided for by a charity named Migrant Help. This has rendered him completely homeless and again without any financial support. Meanwhile, his lawyer is planning to make a fresh claim for his asylum but during this entire time his mental health is in rapid decline. He has barely eaten in the last three weeks, barely slept and in his own words he has ‘given up on life’. ... I don’t know if there is anything that you can do under these circumstances but I find it appalling that there is absolutely no safety net for vulnerable people under his circumstances. The Red Cross and Positive Action in Housing”—

which has been mentioned—

“were helpful in terms of support, but do not have the resources to provide accommodation for him whilst his asylum case is re-opened. I genuinely fear that he will take his own life as a result of being trapped in the system for so many years and unable to help himself in any way. Please can you bring it to the attention of others that it is inhumane and unfair to expect someone to live off nothing, and if there is any way”—

he—

“could be assisted, I would be very grateful.”

I recently received another email from the lecturer, after I had contacted a lawyer and various organisations. It says:

“Thank you for your help.”

He

“was admitted to Levensall hospital ... I am not sure how long he will have to stay there, but he is still very stressed and as far as I can see, without hope.”

That is the reality of being a destitute asylum seeker not just in Scotland but in the UK. I sincerely thank the committee for its report, and I am sure that we, in Scotland, can do something about the situation.

16:43

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I wholeheartedly welcome the excellent report from the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. The recommendations that it has made and the oral evidence that it took will make a significant contribution to the Parliament’s work in an area that many of us care deeply about. More than that, I do not think that the report could have come at a more crucial time. Its call for an anti-destitution strategy, which many of the recommendations refer to, could not be more timely.

As other members have said, the world that we live in now is one that we are perhaps not proud of but one that we helped to create. It is one in which 65 million people have been forced from their homes and 21 million people are refugees. Staggeringly, half those refugees are under the age of 18. There are also 10 million stateless people who are denied a nationality. We know that 53 per cent of the refugees come from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan, where we have had involvement, as well as Somalia.

Until recently, the Palestinian refugee population was the largest refugee population in the world. Tragically, many Palestinian refugees who fled to Syria in 1948 and 1967 have now been displaced two or three times because of the Syrian conflict.

As others have eloquently discussed, there are many reasons, such as domestic violence and persecution on the ground of sexuality, why people flee their countries and seek sanctuary in a foreign country with which they have no connection. Such people are so desperate that they brave it all, including risking their lives, to arrive in a foreign country with nothing. There must be a lot of darkness in the life of any person who is prepared to do that to get a better life.

As the report says, destitution is built into the UK asylum process. It is inevitable, because the immigration system is designed to be hostile to those who do not have a legal right to be here. There has been consensus among some speakers this afternoon that a human approach is not built into the system, which lacks humanity. Once a person is destitute, they are much harder to find.

The report refers to the evidence from Graham O'Neill of the Scottish Refugee Council, who said that

“there was significant risk of exploitation”

of any new person who arrives in a country. Annie Wells talked about young girls who have been human trafficked from other countries and who are extremely vulnerable. We have a moral obligation to those young women.

Graham O'Neill also said:

“they go into a twilight world and we do not know how they get to Croydon”.—[*Official Report, Equalities and Human Rights Committee*, 16 March 2017; c 17.]

Neither do we know how they fund travel. When we think about it, the question arises of how a person who has never been to the UK before and who has no friends or connections finds Croydon in the first place—I could not tell members where it is without looking on a map. How do they find the funds, travel there and make their application? The system is designed to put such a person off.

I am fully behind the committee's recommendation of registration in Scotland; that is a basic human requirement. Whether someone's legal claim for asylum meets the test is what really matters; where they turn up to make the claim should not matter. The law will decide whether, under our rules, someone is an asylum seeker and should be treated as a refugee.

The report explains really well the important issues of age-disputed children and children travelling alone. When a young person arrives here, they have an age assessment. As the report says, many children fear telling their stories. We have to get the conditions right to get that information out of a young person or child. Being designated a child asylum seeker affects the type and level of support that someone gets, so it matters that we have a system that can determine that.

I have talked before about a young eight-year-old boy called Najim whom I met in the Calais refugee camp two years ago. I was asked to help to find his family in London and he is now safely with them, not particularly because of my efforts but because the system actually worked. Children are being reunited with their families and I am so pleased about that. However, the issue of unaccompanied asylum-seeker children requires more attention.

There is no one who is more passionate or compassionate on that subject than Lord Dubs, as the cabinet secretary said. The scheme that he helped to create means that even more children are coming to Britain, although not enough, as far as I am concerned. I believe that Britain can take many more child refugees, and while I welcome

the 480 we have agreed to take, I would prefer that number to increase dramatically.

I will mention three of the committee's recommendations. The advocacy service is a superb idea that I whole-heartedly support. I have already talked about the right to make an application in Scotland. The right to do paid or unpaid work has long been an outstanding issue that needs to be addressed.

An advocacy service is important when we are trying to prevent destitution in an asylum system, because it would give every person access to guidance, distinct from legal representation, to help them through the system. That would play an essential role in preventing more people from becoming lost or hidden and from becoming destitute, because they would be signposted along the way in the process and shown how it works.

I have talked about the right to make an application in Scotland, and I have believed for some time that there should be the right to do paid or unpaid work. Anyone who has had an insight into the life of someone who is seeking asylum will know how despairing they feel about being unproductive and will understand how important the committee's recommendation on the right to do paid or unpaid work is.

I see that my seven minutes are up, so I will conclude, Presiding Officer. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention met members of the Scottish Parliament earlier this year and it convinced me that we have a poor record on how we detain people. In that regard, I, like Sandra White, have campaigned for Dungavel to be closed. I believe that every democratically elected member has the fundamental right to inspect conditions in any prison or place of detention. I have written to David Mundell about that, but I have not had a reply. I will give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that that is because of the general election. However, following that election, I expect, as an elected member of the Scottish Parliament, to be able to inspect the conditions in which people are being detained in our country.

16:51

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate for the Scottish Conservatives. I echo other members' comments about our shared commitment to doing whatever we can to support reasonable and workable actions that support some of the most vulnerable people in our society. As Annie Wells said, we will support the motion. We recognise that, in this area above all, it is essential for the Scottish Government and the UK Government to work together. I entirely support what Christina

McKelvie said in that regard and I thank her for the tone with which she opened the debate.

Such debates are often—rightly—peppered with passions. The debate is about a sensitive and highly important matter and it should be treated as such. I was struck by the individual stories of hardship and struggle in the committee's report, which we should take into account. Some of those stories are incredibly moving and, as Gail Ross said, it is right that we think of people rather than statistics. We also need to balance those stories with the evidence that is at hand, which I will do in my closing remarks.

Many elements of the report are worth while and should be taken forward. One issue that is dear to my heart is the proposal for a new advocacy service, which the report asks the Scottish Government to consider. Many members have mentioned that recommendation. One of the most formative experiences of my professional life was during my early years practising as an advocate, when I appeared at the asylum and immigration tribunal, as it was then called, in Bothwell Street in Glasgow, to represent asylum seekers. My first observation is that the rules and regulations that surround immigration law are formidable, hugely complicated and very difficult for anyone, even a lawyer, to navigate. My second observation from representing asylum seekers is about how difficult it is for applicants to argue their cases successfully and how much more that is the case if an asylum seeker meets the legal definition of "destitute". The proposal for an independent advocacy service is therefore to be welcomed.

I will focus the rest of my comments on healthcare, which is a significant area in considering how we support refugees and asylum seekers, and particularly those who find themselves destitute. The committee's report notes that some people who have come to the UK carry transmittable diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV and AIDS. Plainly, that poses a serious health issue for the individuals who carry such diseases. The report notes many of the barriers and issues that people with such conditions face to receiving treatment, which concern the distance to health centres, access to a general practitioner, contact between the patient and health workers and, crucially, patients' willingness to seek treatment.

Treating HIV and AIDS is particularly difficult because of the cultural perceptions and stigma that continue to exist around the conditions. Although that is true of general society to an extent, the stigma is exacerbated in migrant communities, and particularly in migrant sub-Saharan communities. Many who have the conditions are embarrassed about it and worried about others in their community finding out. As the HIV and hepatitis C charity Waverley Care noted,

those with such conditions who find themselves living with friends or accessing shelters have less privacy and are at greater risk of refusing to take medications as a result.

Like other members, I note the impact on mental health of destitution. The committee's report gives a variety of examples of serious things that contribute to diminished mental health, such as young female asylum seekers being trafficked and individuals suffering from domestic servitude. The report quotes the Glasgow psychological trauma service, which said that

"Mental health gets worse because of destitution"

and that that exacerbates pre-existing mental health issues.

It is also pertinent to raise in the debate the final substantial healthcare concern that the report documents, which is about maternity services for those who find themselves destitute. As the report notes, many pregnant women feel reluctant to talk about their pregnancy and some feel shame about it for various reasons. That poses a set of serious risks to women, including an increased incidence of maternal death because of an underlying condition and complexities during birth because of undisclosed conditions. The report also focuses on FGM, which the Parliament has—properly—discussed at length.

If the Scottish Government intends to take forward the report's recommendation that a Scottish anti-destitution strategy should be created, methods of tackling the stigma that can exist in some migrant communities in relation to mental health, the treatment of transmittable diseases and pregnancy should be further examined and included.

I will quickly touch on remarks that various members around the chamber made. I welcome the fact that Annie Wells has today written to the UK Government to ask it to consider whether it is possible for claims to be lodged in Scotland. Finlay Carson discussed the context and the dimensions of what is happening internationally and—rightly—he put on the record what the UK Government has done in its efforts there. Pauline McNeill spoke with great passion and sympathy about a migrant arriving here, the destitution that they face and the complexity of the system that meets them. I was struck by her contribution.

It is clear that, as we continue to live in an uncertain world with many unstable regions, the United Kingdom and Scotland will continue to be a beacon of hope for many people who are looking for a better life. We need to use the powers that this Parliament possesses to support people who choose to make Scotland their home, and I reiterate the importance of having a suitable and

specific strategy that deals with issues such as mental and public health in order to achieve that.

We cannot always solve or eliminate every cause and circumstance that leads to destitution, but we can employ measures that help to get people into a more stable environment, for their benefit and for the benefit of Scotland as a whole.

16:57

Angela Constance: In opening the debate, the convener of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee said that, first and foremost, we should approach the issue that is at hand—destitution in the immigration and asylum system—with humanity in our hearts and our minds. I agree with the sentiment that, first and foremost, we are dealing with a humanitarian issue and, in many cases, as Pauline McNeill outlined, a humanitarian crisis. Around the world, we are seeing the biggest displacement of people since world war two.

Mary Fee spoke aptly about how destitution is built into the immigration and asylum system, and I agree. The statistics that the British Red Cross provides show that, in 2013, 72 of the 539 people that it dealt with, or 13 per cent, were living in destitution. By 2016, the number of destitute individuals had increased to 870 out of the 1,600 individuals that it worked with, or 49 per cent. The figures show that the British Red Cross is dealing with an increasing number of people who are in need but also with an increasing proportion who face dire destitution.

Annie Wells said that she would hold the Scottish Government to account on the human trafficking strategy and other matters. That is fair enough and it is quite right, but I stress that that will be reciprocated with regard to members on her side of the chamber and the UK Government.

Jeremy Balfour made the really interesting comment that we cannot take a simplistic approach and that we should not focus on just one or two issues. I agree, as it is clear that the asylum system needs wholesale change.

We in the Scottish Government are not shy in seeking out the UK Government, but it has to reciprocate. We need to get out of the situation where the Scottish Government is always chasing up the UK Government to meet or chasing up replies to our correspondence. I hope that Ms Wells gets a speedy reply to her letter.

The Scottish Government will continue to do what it can to support people who face destitution, and we will continue to work for an approach that is based on fairness, dignity, partnership and prevention.

I heard the glib remark that, if the Scottish Government wants to mitigate, we can. We can

and do mitigate, with our support to the Scottish Refugee Council, Positive Action in Housing and others but, throughout our partnership working, we should be preventing destitution in the first place. There should be a holistic, end-to-end system of support to ensure that people who are seeking asylum do not end up penniless on our streets.

The Scottish Government, local government and the third sector are already being left to pick up the pieces of the current system. Of course we want to do what we can—as someone said earlier, there is a moral imperative. However, we pay our taxes to the UK Government and we have a right to expect fairness, dignity, respect and prevention to be part of the services that are currently reserved. We also have the right to demand and expect that preventing destitution at source is what we are all aiming for.

As Mary Fee outlined, the situation will only get worse when the asylum support provisions in the Immigration Act 2016 are implemented and when support—including support to families—is cut further still. We will also see increasing criminalisation.

I do not have time to go through all 28 recommendations from the committee's report, but I reiterate what I said in my opening speech—that we will look at all the recommendations sympathetically and with a can-do approach, while recognising the legal limitation of our powers. I note that six or seven of the recommendations are on areas that are reserved to the UK Government. The committee has asked the Scottish Government to negotiate and to work in partnership with the UK Government on matters such as extending the destitute domestic violence concession and the right to work.

Christina McKelvie: Allowing the right to work is one way to enable people not to have to face destitution at all. Is the cabinet secretary aware that, just today, the Irish Supreme Court ruled that it is unconstitutional to ban refugees from working in Ireland? Perhaps we should take some lessons from Ireland and use them in our negotiations with the United Kingdom Government.

Angela Constance: Hear, hear to the Irish Supreme Court. I am interested to know what the UK Supreme Court would make of such a challenge. The Scottish Government will look to our Irish friends and neighbours and consider that issue closely.

Fundamentally, I believe that all human beings and all citizens should have the right to work. Work is part of who we are; it is part of our identity. What comes across to me time and again when I meet refugees or asylum seekers is that they want not only to start a new life in Scotland but to

contribute to their communities and to their new country. We should not hinder them from doing so.

I know that my time is running short, and I do not want to eat into the time that the committee's deputy convener has in which to sum up, so I will end on the UK Government's U-turn on the Dubs amendment, which is tantamount to turning our back on children who are at real risk of peril.

If Finlay Carson had taken my intervention, I would have put to him the point that, according to Interpol, 10,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have gone missing in the past two years. Where are they? How can we stand by and think that it is all right for 10,000 children to go missing? Those children face the perils of abuse, exploitation and human trafficking. Finlay Carson spoke, as did other members, about showing some love in our policies, whether in response to the current international crisis or to domestic issues. What about those 10,000 missing children? Where are they?

I note that, in its recently published manifesto, the party that forms the UK Government says that it wants to offer

“asylum and refuge to people in parts of the world affected by conflict and oppression, rather than those who have made it to Britain”.

What does that say about the people who have come here via human trafficking routes? What about the children who have come via clandestine routes? How are they fed? How are they supported? What does that say about the human trafficking strategy across the UK? What does that say in the name of humanity?

I reiterate to the committee that the Scottish Government will do what it can to come to the issue with solutions. I hope that, in seeing the evidence that the committee has painstakingly gathered, the new UK Government will consider the damage that the current asylum and immigration policies are causing to people. Those people are only trying to find what we all want and need: a safe place to live, a safe place to raise our families and a way to make a contribution to our community and to our country.

17:06

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate in my role as deputy convener of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. This is the first time that I have had the privilege to undertake a summation of business led by my committee, and I am looking forward to the challenge of closing such an important and wide-ranging debate.

Given the reserved and devolved aspects of the topic of our inquiry, and the proximity of the general election, it is inevitable that the debate has generated some exchanges. However, in bringing it to a close, I thank all the parties for the conciliatory tone that I think that we can all agree has been adopted. I re-emphasise that the purpose of our inquiry was to understand why those fleeing conflict or persecution overseas can become destitute and what can be done to mitigate their plight.

I thank the convener, Christina McKelvie, the committee members, our clerks and the officials who serve us so well. We worked well together in examining the evidence before us, with each of us getting to grips with our country's complex asylum and immigration system in order to gain a clearer understanding of the issues. We talked to a number of people on the front line, as well as to those in need of support, so that we could consider what actions the Scottish Government might take to improve their situation. I was gratified to hear the cabinet secretary reflect on those in her closing speech.

I particularly want to underline what the convener said at the beginning of the debate: destitution of asylum seekers and those with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds represents a humanitarian issue that is being measured out in the lived experience of thousands of people in our society. Many of them are on the edge of crushing poverty and social isolation—we have heard heart-rending stories about that today. To put this into perspective, the UN's global poverty line for developing countries is \$1.25 a day, but destitute people have no access to money. That is a shocking fact in our country, which is one of the world's wealthiest nations.

It has been heartening to listen to the consensus in the chamber, which was remarked on by Donald Cameron a few moments ago, and a variety of well-made points have been raised. Above all, there is general agreement that action must be taken to ensure that vulnerable people are not forced into destitution to become more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. We are fortunate that non-governmental, third sector and charitable organisations, alongside public services, have provided vital support to fill the gap. However, that is not sustainable. A co-ordinated national approach is required, not least because of the potential of wider dispersal of asylum seekers to compound existing issues.

I thank Christina McKelvie for her opening remarks. She rightly referred to the disparities in things such as the application of child protection legislation. I will come on to that later, particularly in respect of unaccompanied children who seek

asylum and the shattering poverty that those with no recourse to public funds experience.

I also very much welcome Christina McKelvie's intervention in the cabinet secretary's speech, in which she brought news from the Supreme Court of Ireland. With impeccable timing, it has ruled today that asylum seekers should be able to work in the Republic of Ireland. I would like asylum seekers to be able to work in the United Kingdom, as well.

In her opening remarks, the cabinet secretary spoke eloquently about the successes of the Syrian resettlement programme and how our country integrates such refugees with compassion and friendship.

Mary Fee reminded us in harrowing terms of the plight of female asylum seekers, the great difficulties that they face, and the link between insecure immigration status and abuse. That theme was developed in an excellent speech by Gail Ross, who talked about a particular iniquity: in the current system, women have to stay with abusive partners in order to avoid that immigration trap.

I will make a number of observations on the committee's recommendations and considerations that will, I hope, inform members still further.

On the asylum process, we were given the clear message that

"destitution is built into the UK asylum process".

Newly arrived asylum applicants are vulnerable to exploitation, including sexual exploitation, so that they can fund travel to access the asylum process in Croydon. It was particularly gratifying to hear Annie Wells call on her Home Office to change practices so that asylum cases can be heard in Scotland. If that happened, that would answer the challenge that David Torrance outlined.

Gail Ross: Does Alex Cole-Hamilton agree that it is very disappointing that no member of the UK Government could come to the committee to give evidence?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: It is an indictment of the UK Government that no member of the UK department came. The UK Government still needs to answer searching questions, and we will persist in putting them to it.

It was nice to hear Sandra White recognising Annie Wells's call for the Home Office to change the process. We know that people who arrive in Northern Ireland do not have to travel to Croydon to make an initial claim. It is unacceptable that destitute and vulnerable people who arrive in Scotland are forced to continue within the UK what will have been already a very difficult journey.

Asylum seekers are most at risk of experiencing destitution when their asylum claim has been refused and they have no recourse to public funds. However, we were told that even those who have been granted

"refugee ... status are required to vacate their 'asylum accommodation' after 28 days".

Such people have found themselves homeless and without access to support because of delays in accessing benefits.

Another significant theme was the disparity between the dispersal system and the vulnerable persons resettlement programme. Some 31 out of 32 councils were taking part in the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement programme, and many witnesses held up that programme as the "gold standard" approach. Ross Greer made the point that that gives the lie to the UK Government's suggestion that there is a lack of capacity in UK local authorities to take vulnerable children, as per the Dubs amendment.

In contrast, local authorities were apprehensive about taking part in the wider dispersal of asylum seekers, as they do not currently have the experience, knowledge or resources to do so. Jeremy Balfour took up that point and referred to the lack of training, information and use of guidance in local authorities at the grass-roots level. He also expressed concern that legal advice for asylum seekers is still concentrated in the central belt. I very much hope that he will therefore come in behind Annie Wells in calling for their Home Office to change the rules and processes for hearing asylum cases outside Croydon so that they can perhaps be heard in Scotland.

We are concerned that a two-tier system that will seriously damage the prospect of integration for those who are left destitute is being created.

The committee also learned of the historical disparities in how various local authorities and social workers apply looked-after children status to young, unaccompanied asylum seekers who present to local authorities in Scotland. Pauline McNeill picked up on that theme in closing for Labour. We need to be absolutely clear in guidance and training that young people who appear on our shores should be immediately afforded the status of being in care and access to the aftercare that that status endows. That is particularly important in relation to victims of child trafficking who, as we know, face being re-trafficked if they are not given adequate support.

My time is short, so I will conclude. The debate has shone a light on a hidden crisis in our society. I trust that members and the Scottish Government will reflect on the committee's evidence and recommendations and see the debate as a turning point—a watershed moment. We look forward to

considering the Government's response to the committee's report. I emphasise that we are committed to monitoring progress throughout this parliamentary session so that we can confirm that there has been a positive shift from hidden lives to new beginnings.

I commend the report and the evidence that the committee gathered to the Parliament.

Decision Time

17:15

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S5M-05802, in the name of Christina McKelvie, on behalf of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that destitution has a detrimental impact on people, affecting their mental health, their ability to access health care, and also increases their risk of exploitation and abuse; thanks those who shared their personal experience of being destitute with the Equalities and Human Rights Committee; notes that destitution can also impact on families, communities and on the provision of support from non-governmental organisations and public authorities, and notes the findings and recommendations of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's 3rd Report 2017 (Session 5), *Hidden Lives New Beginnings: Destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland (SP Paper 147)*.

Vale of Leven Hospital (GP Out-of-hours Service)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-05016, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on Vale of Leven hospital general practitioner out-of-hours services. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament expresses its concerns about the future provision of GP out-of-hours services at the Vale of Leven Hospital; notes that a report produced by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde recommends the withdrawal of the service between Mondays and Fridays due to financial and staffing pressures; understands that the publication of the report follows months of temporary closures at the hospital during weekends as the NHS board is unable to recruit enough medical staff to cover the service; considers that it is unacceptable to force people in Dumbarton, Vale of Leven, Helensburgh and Lomond to travel to the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Paisley to access emergency primary care services; believes that the report identifies a reduction in services at the Vale of Leven Hospital as the preferred option, despite the NHS board's own figures revealing higher attendances at GP out-of-hours services among Dumbarton and Alexandria residents than residents in Paisley; considers that such services are a vital component of any local hospital, and notes calls on the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to intervene to ensure that the commitment in the Vision for the Vale agreement to maintaining these services is respected.

17:17

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the future of GP out-of-hours services in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. I will focus my attention on the cuts that are proposed at the Vale of Leven hospital, but I am sure that other members will speak about the out-of-hours services in their areas because—we should make no mistake—there is an NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde-wide plan to cut back access to GP out-of-hours services.

According to the recommendations in a paper that was sent to all health and social care partnerships in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area, the services at the Vale of Leven hospital, Greenock health centre and the Inverclyde royal hospital will be closed between Mondays and Fridays in the evenings and overnight. That will leave just five GP out-of-hours centres covering the whole of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde during the week, will put even more pressure on national health service staff and will cause concern for patients. The health board argues that the cuts are necessary due to staff shortages and financial pressure on NHS budgets. Those staff shortages have arisen in part due to

the reduction in medical training places that has been made by the current Government.

Since the beginning of the year, services at the Vale of Leven hospital have been withdrawn for hours at a time on at least eight occasions with no notice having been given. Patients who have been sitting in the waiting room have been handed letters telling them that no doctor is available to see them and that they need to go to Paisley. The irony is that the vast majority of temporary closures at the Vale of Leven's out-of-hours service have happened during the weekend, but the health board wants to axe the service during the week, when it appears to have less difficulty filling staff rotas.

What happens if the cuts go ahead but the health board still does not have enough staff to run the out-of-hours service on a Saturday or Sunday? If it is so concerned about staffing, why did the health board stop trainees doing shifts—a practice that has been allowed to continue in Glasgow but not at the Vale of Leven? Local GPs believe that it is only a matter of time before the service is removed completely.

There has been no consultation on the proposed changes, and the health board has issued empty reassurances via the local media while, behind the scenes, its officials send out papers to the health and social care partnership recommending cuts to the service. Just ask the local GPs in Dumbarton, Vale of Leven and Helensburgh who met me and hospital campaigners last Friday. They are furious about the lack of engagement. Not only have they not been invited to share their unique insight into the needs of local patients, they were not even informed of the proposals. One of the GPs in my area found out about the proposed cuts not from the health board, but on Facebook. Family doctors should be at the forefront of shaping local primary care services, but NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde treats them merely as an afterthought.

Local GPs, who are responsible for the care of about 75,000 patients across the entire catchment area of the Vale of Leven hospital, have issued a unanimous statement condemning the proposals, in which they say:

"Closure of the Vale service constitutes an unacceptable clinical risk which will be felt most by disadvantaged patients, thereby widening health inequality."

They claim that the proposals go against Government and NHS Scotland advice, and made the point very clearly that the GP out-of-hours service is a core service that should be local and accessible. It is not a specialised service. There is no clinical argument in favour of centralisation; indeed, the GPs have said that patient safety is at risk if the proposals go ahead. Emergency primary care is one of the most basic components of any

local healthcare provision and should be protected.

Let me tell Parliament about the practical implications for patients of the Vale of Leven if the service is centralised in Paisley. This is just one example. I was told about a woman with a heart condition who turned up recently at the Vale on one of the evenings when the out-of-hours service was closed due to staff shortages. When she was told that she would have to make the 34-mile round trip to Paisley to see a doctor, she decided to go home and wait until her local surgery reopened in the morning. Fortunately, in this case the patient's condition improved, but things could have been very different. That example highlights how vital it is to protect access to local out-of-hours care. If the service is withdrawn permanently, many people from Dumbarton, Vale of Leven and Helensburgh, especially people who do not have a car, will simply not be able to see a GP in an emergency. They might not see a GP at all, because they do not want to bother anybody. My local GPs firmly believe that patients' lives will be put at risk.

The health board's own analysis of the footfall at out-of-hours centres shows that the service at the Vale of Leven hospital is well used. Dumbarton and Alexandria have the highest share of out-of-hours attendances of any postcode area in the whole of the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area, but, predictably, the health board once again singles out the Vale of Leven hospital for cuts. On average, more than 120 patients in my constituency use the service on Mondays to Fridays; they would be forced to travel to Paisley. Patients in Helensburgh and the remote communities on the Rosneath peninsula and in Arrochar would face even longer journeys if the service were to be centralised. Local GPs estimate that it would lead to in excess of 500,000 miles of travel annually for Helensburgh patients alone.

In West Dunbartonshire, we have some of the most deprived communities in Scotland and the lowest rates of car ownership. The last bus from the Vale of Leven to the Royal Alexandra hospital leaves at 10 past 6, and the patient transport service does not have the capacity to offer transport within one or even two hours. The poorest patients would be hardest hit and would, in effect, lose access to emergency primary care. Whatever happened to the mantra about prevention and early treatment? If the proposals go ahead, patients will self-refer and end up in the wrong place—at the front door of an accident and emergency department, thereby further increasing waiting times.

The provision of GP out-of-hours services was a key commitment in the vision for the Vale agreement that was signed by Nicola Sturgeon

when she was Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing. I welcomed the Vale vision back in 2009 because it offered stability and promised to retain a range of services at my local hospital. However, in recent years the health board has started ripping up those promises. Maternity services are under review, wards have been closed, and haematology and a host of other clinics have been cut. There are 113 fewer nurses and midwives, and bed numbers have been slashed by a third. Now, even the most basic local service is under threat.

Every time I raise the Vale of Leven hospital in the chamber, the minister, the cabinet secretary or the First Minister tells me that they are committed to the vision for the Vale. However, if that is the case, why has not one Scottish National Party member of the Scottish Parliament signed my motion—not even Stuart McMillan, whose constituents in Greenock and Inverclyde will be directly affected?

The message is not understood by the health board. If the health secretary and her minister are serious about the vision for the Vale—I believe that they are—will they tell the health board to take the cuts off the table? I hope to hear about that from the minister when she sums up this evening.

The out-of-hours service is a basic service. It is not a specialist service and it will not benefit from centralisation. If we remove it, we will be “putting patients at risk”. Those are not my words, but the words of local GPs. On Thursday afternoon after First Minister's question time, I will have the pleasure of welcoming to Parliament a delegation of local activists from the hospitalwatch campaign. Their recent demonstration at the Vale of Leven hospital was a huge success, with more than 5,000 people attending. I hope that on Thursday they will get the opportunity to meet the cabinet secretary and ministers, and I encourage colleagues from all parties to join us at 1 pm in committee room 4.

The message that we want to convey is clear: stop the cuts and protect local services.

17:26

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Jackie Baillie raised many issues in her speech, and I can find common ground with her on many of them. The issue that is before us is the GP out-of-hours service.

When I was a regional MSP, occasionally on behalf of constituents I raised issues regarding service delivery, the future of the Vale of Leven hospital and services in the Dumbarton constituency. The “Vision for the Vale” document, which Jackie Baillie mentioned, was published in

2009-10, and inpatient and day-case activity has increased by a third since then.

We should remember that the current SNP Government ended a decade of damaging uncertainty by delivering the vision for the Vale. Under the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat Administration, in which Jackie Baillie served as a minister, the Vale's accident and emergency department was closed in 2002. In addition, the number of acute beds reduced in every year of the Labour-led Scottish Executive.

I highlight those points for a reason: health service delivery is changing. The report, "Pulling together: transforming urgent care for the people of Scotland", which was published in November 2015, highlights the need to think anew about what is best for urgent care for the people of Scotland and it highlights that that will require transformational change across many sectors. Doing that is not easy, and I have raised concerns about proposals that have been made regarding the Inverclyde royal hospital, both publicly and in correspondence with the cabinet secretary and the health board, and will continue to do so. However, I do not deploy the tactic of running to the press with a story before I have all the information—although I am not accusing Ms Baillie of doing that.

I am aware that the review clearly affects the Inverclyde area, which is why I wrote to the chief executive of the health board on 10 May. I asked questions regarding access to public transport because public transport is not always available, and the cost of a taxi from Inverclyde to Paisley will be prohibitive for many of my constituents. Jackie Baillie used the phrase,

"The poorest patients would be hardest hit",

and I absolutely agree with her on that.

I have also asked questions about unsociable hours and accompanied travel for people who need to use the service, and I have asked about patient safety and care and the long-term future of the service.

I know that the review is taking place. The health board's reply in last week's *Greenock Telegraph* to someone else who raised the issue was extremely informative. It said:

"This review, being led by health and social care partnerships, is considering how we can continue to provide an efficient, responsive GP service out of hours that is sustainable in the long term ... The recommendations from this review will be reported back to the six integrated joint boards and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde in due course.

A spokesman for Inverclyde Council said: 'The service is wholly reliant on having enough GPs available to cover out-of-hours, and this is proving difficult across the whole of the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area.

A number of proposals will be put to joint boards, including Inverclyde's, next month for consideration and a preferred option identified."

The out-of-hours service is important to Jackie Baillie's constituents and to mine, and the review that is under way is one of the recommendations from Professor Sir Lewis Ritchie's review.

As ever, the Scottish Government will expect meaningful engagement with the public to take place. There have been occasions on which that has happened, but there have been other occasions on which the engagement activities of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde have fallen short, as I am sure Ms Baillie would agree.

I will look at all the recommendations that are made, and I will encourage all my constituents in Greenock and Inverclyde to do likewise and to make loud and clear representations to the integration joint board and the health board, because the service in question is crucial to Jackie Baillie's constituents and to mine.

17:30

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I thank Jackie Baillie for securing this important debate. The future of the Vale of Leven hospital—which I will concentrate on, because it is in my area—is vital to the constituents we both represent in the Dumbarton constituency and to people across the wider West Scotland region. Therefore, it is right that we have the chance to debate our concerns about the future of the hospital here in Parliament today.

The Vale of Leven hospital is a central part of life in our area of Scotland. For many of us—myself included—it is where we remember our children being born and family members receiving life-saving treatment; for some, it is also the place where we have said our last goodbyes to loved ones. That is why every threat of a reduction in services at the Vale is followed by such a passionate outcry from the local community and furious debate. Only local people can truly understand how important the Vale is to our community.

The moving of the GP out-of-hours service from the Vale to Paisley is another example of a threat against the hospital, and it would be detrimental to our area. Asking people in places such as Dumbarton, Vale of Leven, Helensburgh, Lomond and the Rosneath peninsula, which Jackie Baillie mentioned, to travel for more than an hour to the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley to access emergency primary care services is unfair, and I certainly do not believe that it will improve patient care or people's ability to access that care.

As Jackie Baillie correctly points out in her motion, demand for out-of-hours GP services has

not fallen in the areas that I mentioned; it is actually higher in those areas than it is in others. We are not talking about an underused service that wastes manpower and resources that could be better used elsewhere; rather, it is a service that meets a vital need of residents north of the Clyde in my West Scotland region.

Alongside the suggested cuts, the removal of other services has been mooted in recent months and years. Cuts in pharmacy services would, I believe, have a detrimental effect on patient care, as would the suggested closure of the community maternity unit and the reduction in haematology services at the hospital. Local people have been left questioning whether the Scottish Government and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde truly have the dedication and commitment that are required to deliver on the promises that they made in the “Vision for the Vale” document.

The service that we are debating and the others that I have mentioned are vital parts of our local hospital. Those services are essential to a hospital’s ability to successfully serve its local community, as the Vale of Leven hospital has done for many decades.

With the proposed expansion of the Faslane naval base over the coming years, the population in the area will only increase. Service personnel and their families will move to the local area, and many will be reliant on the services that are provided by the Vale of Leven hospital. By getting rid of those services, we are discouraging people from living in our area; importantly, we are also discouraging those who want to settle there.

I welcome the calls that have been made for Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to intervene in the matter, and I, too, call on her to do so.

The out-of-hours service is not a centralised service; it is a basic service for our communities. The issue can only be understood by local people who rely on the service and see the benefit of its being provided in the Vale of Leven hospital. Moving the service to Paisley would mean that patients would have travel times of more than an hour and would incur personal costs in making those journeys. Young married couples come up to the area to serve in the Navy. The wives might not drive, and in the middle of the night one of them might face a panic situation with one of the children. If there was no cash on the table for a taxi, there would be a problem.

Demand for the out-of-hours service has not fallen; it is actually higher among Dumbarton and Alexandria residents. The Scottish Government should deliver on the promises that were made in the “Vision for the Vale” document. The service is needed because of the plans to increase the size

of Her Majesty’s Naval Base Clyde, from which there are about 10 referrals per day to the Vale of Leven hospital. It is vital that the Government steps forward, protects the out-of-hours service and keeps the promises that it made to local residents, patients and NHS staff in the “Vision for the Vale” document.

17:34

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I hope that the Presiding Officer will permit me to start by thanking all staff at Wishaw general hospital, who have responded very quickly to what is believed to be a bomb threat today. Staff have had to evacuate patients, but they have been getting the situation back under control and getting back to work. I put on record my thanks to all our wonderful NHS staff, and to those working at Wishaw general in particular.

I also thank Jackie Baillie for bringing to the chamber this important debate. It is no secret that she is a strong defender of the Vale of Leven hospital and a strong advocate for local services in her constituency. She has worked closely with local people, including those who run the hospitalwatch campaign. I look forward to accepting her invitation to meet campaigners from hospitalwatch on Thursday, and I put on record my thanks to them for their on-going commitment to protecting services and staff at the hospital.

It is important to place the debate in the context of the on-going concern about the Vale of Leven hospital’s maternity services unit, which is currently under review and has been recommended for closure by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. I hope that the Scottish Government takes the earliest opportunity to end the uncertainty by clarifying for service users that the maternity unit will be protected.

The pressure on the out-of-hours service is a result of two key factors. First, resource is not currently meeting demand in the NHS. Secondly—and perhaps of more concern—there is an on-going workforce crisis in the NHS. We should not forget that health boards are being asked to make £1 billion of cuts over the next four years, which will impact directly on services and patient care and on all NHS staff. The situation at the Vale of Leven is perhaps an early indication of what the results of those cuts will be.

The NHS workforce has been mismanaged over the past 10 years, and our NHS staff have been left overworked, undervalued, underresourced and underpaid. The situation needs to be addressed urgently.

There is also an on-going GP crisis. The Royal College of General Practitioners tells us that the NHS is projected to be 830 GPs short by 2021,

which is a concern for out-of-hours services in particular.

I hope that the minister, in responding to the debate, will highlight the opportunities that will arise during the GP contract process to provide more support for general practice. First, there is an opportunity to provide more auxiliary support for GPs in the form of specialist and advanced nurses, physiotherapists, mental health nurses and so on. Secondly, there is an opportunity to look at what further support pharmacies can offer to take the pressure away from GP practices and out-of-hours services.

In addition, there is an opportunity to look at the role of out-of-hours services and their relationship with primary care, given that any closures to those services will only pile more pressure on GPs and on our already overstretched accident and emergency departments.

I thank all the GPs in the area around the Vale of Leven hospital who have drawn up a joint statement to highlight the unacceptable clinical risks that they believe will be posed to patients if the out-of-hours service proposal goes ahead. The minister must listen very carefully to the concerns of general practitioners in the region.

In closing, I highlight the direct impacts that will occur as the result of the loss of a lifeline service. There will be more pressure on GP practices and additional pressures on already overstretched GP practices and surrounding A and E departments. The continued centralisation of services will mean longer travel times for people in the Vale of Leven area, and it will impact in particular on those people from the most deprived communities. There are poor transport links to other hospitals in the area, which will have an impact on wider health inequalities. There will also be further pressure on staff in other areas. The fact that the withdrawal of services from the hospital may be the beginning of a downward slope will be of huge concern to people in the area.

It is important to recognise that it is not only the Vale of Leven that is impacted by such changes, because people in Greenock and Inverclyde are affected by pressures around Greenock health centre and Inverclyde royal hospital. I hope that the minister will take the opportunity to provide clarity to local people by saying that local services will be protected, which was a manifesto commitment, and that the Government will invest in our NHS and take the pressure off our hard-working NHS staff.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Sarwar. You localised it eventually. You were a bit general to start with, but you are an astute speaker and realised that you had to bring your

contribution round to the motion at hand. I compliment you for that.

17:39

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I apologise, because I have to leave early. I notified your office, Presiding Officer, and Jackie Baillie last week that arrangements for an event that I am hosting were changed because of the security issues.

I, too, thank Jackie Baillie for bringing the motion to the chamber; I know that she, quite rightly, cares deeply about the issue. Indeed, we should all—certainly every West Scotland representative—feel strongly about the issue. Access to healthcare in the local area is of vital importance to everyone. The importance of the local connection and accessibility should not be underestimated.

Primary care services should be available in the local community and from a GP who people know and trust. That is exactly what is under threat at the Vale of Leven. Year on year, services such as haematology and pharmacy have been chipped away, and now out-of-hours GP services are under threat of being cut.

Out-of-hours GP services have already been closed temporarily at weekends due to staffing shortages. As Jackie Baillie stated, a report by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde recommends the withdrawal of out-of-hours GP services on weekdays. Alternative out-of-hours services would involve people travelling all the way to Paisley, to the Royal Alexandra hospital, which can be more than an hour away by bus. I do not see how forcing people who have a health issue to travel all the way to Paisley will deliver better care. In particular, access to healthcare for people who have disabilities or parents with young children will suffer from restrictions on out-of-hours GP services. Local residents certainly do not think it will improve the service, and they are its users.

As Jackie Baillie said, those who have campaigned to save local services in the Vale of Leven will be here on Thursday. Hospitalwatch has been campaigning for 13 years. The campaigners will have with them a bed sheet that has been signed by thousands of their supporters, some of whom attended the vigil last week. It will be presented to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to demonstrate the strength of local support, particularly for those who live further north and will be most affected by having to travel further south to Paisley.

I hope that the cabinet secretary will consider the impact that such a cut would have on people in and around the Vale of Leven. After all, the Scottish Government's 2015 independent review

of out-of-hours primary care services states that they should be

“Person-centred ... Intelligence-led”

and

“fair and accessible to all”.

Restricting out-of-hours care in the Vale of Leven will not achieve that. It will exacerbate health inequalities that are already a serious problem across this country, particularly in west and central Scotland.

I respect the fact that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde made the proposal but, as Anas Sarwar said, it was made within a financial context. If the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will not step in and protect local services, how many more hospitals will face the same problems as the Vale of Leven? It is deeply worrying to see staff shortages driving the need to cut local health services.

The public sector pay cap is preventing hospitals from getting and keeping the professionals that they need to deliver healthcare. As my colleague Alison Johnstone said earlier this month, it is clear that the public sector pay freeze is negatively impacting staff retention. The NHS in Scotland faces severe workforce shortages and, with a retirement boom on the horizon, pressures on healthcare will only increase.

It is imperative that funding in this area increases by above the rate of inflation and keeps up with demand. Anything less is unacceptable. In that way, we can ensure that services such as out-of-hours GP services that should be accessible locally remain accessible locally. That is certainly what we will be fighting for at the Vale of Leven.

17:43

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest, in that I have a daughter who works in the NHS.

I thank Jackie Baillie for bringing the debate to the chamber. The debate has far-reaching implications for the Vale of Leven hospital and for how Parliament approaches healthcare needs across Scotland. I can completely empathise with the stance that Jackie Baillie, Maurice Corry and Stuart McMillan have taken. Protecting local services in their areas and supporting their constituents is entirely right.

The proposed changes at the Vale of Leven hospital and the on-going review have been raised often in the chamber; I have spoken previously in a debate on the subject. My position now is as it was then: it is unsustainable to have a blanket policy that states that no services can change or move. It is still my view and the view of the

Scottish Conservatives that a significant change in the services that are provided in a community should be brought to the cabinet secretary's office and such a decision should rest with her.

We have a rapidly changing health need that we are struggling to keep up with. With reference to the Vale of Leven, as with other similar situations, we need to consider community services in the round and not through a narrow prism. It is time that we considered the long-term future of hospitals and how they fit into the package of community care. Should they be places for acute services such as A and E and neonatal units, with once-in-a-lifetime treatments and operations such as hip replacements taking place in area hospitals where specialists are working?

However, primary care within the Vale of Leven is the subject of the motion, so I would ask what other provisions are available outside the hospital to complement or supplement the specific needs that have been highlighted. The truth is that there are others in the chamber who know better than me. However, investment in primary care is essential if we are to have a sustainable NHS service.

The Scottish Conservatives have called for increased funding to be invested directly with GPs to help alleviate the very issue that the motion highlights. The RCGP has said that 7.2 per cent of the healthcare budget is currently spent on general practice in Scotland, which is less than the percentage that is spent in the rest of the United Kingdom. Even then, I would suggest that not enough is being spent throughout the UK.

We have to make primary care an attractive proposition for doctors, not only as a good career option when they graduate from medical school but as a working lifetime option. GPs, more than any other healthcare professionals, can build up a trusting and knowledgeable relationship with communities over years of service to those communities.

Continuity of care is an essential element of the effectiveness of our front-line NHS staff and Jackie Baillie highlights in her motion that that is sadly lacking. Whether that is through poor workforce planning, as has often been discussed and debated in the chamber, lack of GP training and recruitment, or even the general running down of services in the Vale of Leven, I am not able to say.

Investment in primary care is supposed to alleviate pressure on hospitals, but in this case we have primary care being delivered from a secondary care site. However, it is clear that there is a breakdown in the GP services that the hospital can provide, which has to be to the detriment of patients requiring out-of-hours care.

I have not supported the motion, mainly due to a lack of knowledge of this particular case. However, I can certainly support the focus on the overarching issues—lack of proper investment in primary care, specifically in GPs, lack of cohesive workforce planning and lack of long-term planning for our NHS services.

17:47

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Aileen Campbell): I echo what Anas Sarwar said at the start of his speech about the staff response to the incident at Wishaw general. Wishaw is one of the hospitals that serve my constituency and it is where I had my two children. I commend the dedication of the staff who work there on our behalf.

Like others, I thank Jackie Baillie for lodging the motion. I will begin by setting the scene for national out-of-hours provision before returning to the points that she and others raised.

Daytime general practice and GP out-of-hours services across the country, such as those in Glasgow and at the Vale of Leven hospital, are facing challenges, including increasing demand. That is why, in February 2015, the Scottish Government commissioned Professor Sir Lewis Ritchie to review GP out-of-hours services. The review was commissioned precisely because we recognised the importance of primary care as the first point of contact in healthcare. That should also be the case for out-of-hours services.

Sir Lewis Ritchie's November 2015 report "Pulling together: transforming urgent care for the people of Scotland" makes 28 specific recommendations that focus on the delivery of a model of care that is GP led and involves a multidisciplinary team working together at urgent care resource hubs across Scotland. The report received full cross-party parliamentary support and achieved a broad consensus for its key recommendations from key professional groups such as the Scottish general practitioners committee, the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing, pharmacy services, GP out-of-hours services, NHS board chief executives and patient representatives.

Crucially, the report recognised that delivering the new model would take time and would require transformational change across the health and social care landscape. That journey has begun. In 2016, we asked integration joint boards to work with their delivery partners to set out how they would deliver the report's recommendations locally. We provided £10 million of funding in 2016-17 and we will provide a further £10 million in the current financial year to support that work.

As part of an on-going peer-review process, Sir Lewis Ritchie has recently led a national engagement programme under which each IJB area has brought together key stakeholders, including staff and the public, to discuss progress. We are starting to see progress in a number of areas but, as I mentioned, it will take time to embed such transformational change.

The review that is taking place in Glasgow is being carried out in line with the recommendations in Sir Lewis Ritchie's report. I make it clear that the review is being led by the Glasgow city health and social care partnership on behalf of the six greater Glasgow and Clyde integration authorities. The IJBs are in the initial stages of exploring options for the service as a whole across greater Glasgow and Clyde. I must be clear that they are only options at the moment—no decision has been made and no decision will be made until wider consultation is concluded.

We have been assured by the Glasgow city IJB that it will undertake extensive engagement with the community to shape a service that meets the needs of communities and is safe and sustainable in terms of human resources and finances. We expect nothing less than meaningful and robust engagement. The IJB will organise a number of half-day events in the first instance, the first of which is to take place by the end of June. That is why the point that Stuart McMillan raised is important. MSPs should actively seek to use the opportunities that are presented by the consultation process to ensure that the IJBs and health boards know exactly what the local challenges are.

Jackie Baillie raised legitimate points about car use and public transport, and Ross Greer raised legitimate issues about barriers that are faced by those with disabilities and the impact that important decisions can have on the most vulnerable groups in our society if they are not adequately engaged with. I know that Jackie Baillie will continue to engage in the consultation process.

Jackie Baillie: I am encouraged by the minister's comments on consultation. However, does she share my concern that local GPs who are responsible for delivering the service were not consulted and that one found out about the situation from Facebook?

Aileen Campbell: I expect the IJBs and the health board to give GPs an adequate opportunity to feed into the process with their specialist knowledge and their in-depth awareness of the communities that they serve. We are actively encouraging the consultation process to engage with GPs to ensure that they can feed into the options consultation.

The service needs to develop in order to provide a quality, safe service to patients. As is the case across the country, the number of GPs who are willing to work in the out-of-hours period is challenging, and we need to work through those challenges to ensure that we have the right complement of staff and professionals so that we can support the people who need support, when they need it. Patient safety cannot be compromised and the onset of illness and the need for services does not recognise the clock.

We are taking action to deal with the challenges of GP recruitment, which is not an issue that solely affects Scotland. Our manifesto made it clear that we are committed to increasing the number of GPs who work in Scotland. Last year, we increased the number of general practice training places by a third and, for the first time, we made a recruitment bonus of £20,000 available to attract trainees in traditionally harder-to-fill posts. However, such measures go only so far in helping to increase GP numbers in the out-of-hours service.

That is another reason why, in November 2015, we published the national out-of-hours report. As many members have noted, we face workforce development issues, which is why 11 of the 28 recommendations in the report related to workforce issues. The recommendations covered the specific future contribution of not only the GP workforce but, importantly, the nursing, pharmaceutical and paramedical staff and other allied health professionals, as well as the social services workforce. The out-of-hours review that is being undertaken across Glasgow is taking all those workforce recommendations into account. For example, pilots are taking place to deploy advanced nurse practitioners in home visits.

With all that in mind, and in order to stabilise the service, the IJBs are required to explore options to deliver a sustainable and safe model of care. As I said, patient safety cannot be compromised. However, the continued provision of out-of-hours primary care services across the Clyde area, including services at the Vale of Leven, is a key priority for the Government. We want a high-quality out-of-hours service that fully meets patient needs. That is why we are investing £20 million over two years in delivering the recommendations of the 2015 report on creating a multidisciplinary team approach, using the skills of a range of highly trained professionals in the NHS and ensuring that patients are seen by the person who is best able to address their needs.

Many other points have been raised, but the debate is of such importance that I do not want to descend into the political point scoring that often happens in such debates—by, for instance, trading blows about who said what in their

manifestos. I could say that we are much more willing to invest in the NHS than other parties or that it was our party that decided to end the uncertainty about the Vale of Leven hospital, whereas the previous Administration shut the hospital's accident and emergency department. However, the debate is of such importance that we should unite as a Parliament in support of our NHS staff and GPs.

We must support the consultation process to ensure that, at the end of it, we have a sustainable service that meets the needs of the people whom we all care about—those who are most vulnerable and furthest away from consultation exercises. We must ensure that they can adequately shape NHS service delivery in their areas.

Meeting closed at 17:55.

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