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Thursday 1 June 2017

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Scottish Prison Service (Pay)	1
Terrorism Threat Level	3
Local Authorities (Impact of Coalition Administrations)	5
Loneliness and Social Isolation	6
Fife Council (Meetings).....	7
Prison Officers (Retirement Age).....	7
Accident and Emergency Waiting Times.....	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Engagements.....	10
Engagements.....	13
Cabinet (Meetings)	18
Newly Qualified Teachers.....	21
People with Dementia.....	23
People with Arthritis (Assistance to Work)	25
VETERANS (DEPRIVATION)	28
<i>Motion debated—[Maurice Corry].</i>	
Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con)	28
Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	31
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	32
Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)	34
Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)	35
Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con).....	37
The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work (Keith Brown)	38
CHILD POVERTY (SCOTLAND) BILL: STAGE 1	42
<i>Motion moved—[Angela Constance].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance).....	42
Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP).....	45
Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con)	49
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)	52
Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP).....	55
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	58
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)	60
Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green).....	61
Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD).....	64
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP).....	67
Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con).....	69
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP).....	72
Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab)	75
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)	77
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)	80
Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	82
Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	85
Adam Tomkins.....	87
Angela Constance	90
DECISION TIME	94

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 1 June 2017

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

General Question Time

Scottish Prison Service (Pay)

1. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government for what reason the recent pay award to Scottish Prison Service operational staff has not been extended to non-operational staff in the same institutions. (S5O-01059)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Prison Service is on a transformational journey not only to bring change to the lives of those in custody and their families, but to deliver a modernised prison service.

Every organisation depends on all its staff to contribute to its success. Non-operational staff play a vital role in the delivery of key SPS services, while front-line operational staff provide the essential and immediate services that are required to maintain health, safety and security, and play a key role in developing relationships with those who are in our custody, enabling them to transform their lives and therefore enabling us to achieve our vision of helping to build a safer Scotland.

The payments are being made in recognition of a specific set of circumstances that are unique to the front-line prison officer role. The reform that is under way within the SPS will require greater flexibility from prison officers, and a willingness to acquire new specialist skills and to undertake new training and qualifications.

Mark Ruskell: The issue has been described to me by SPS staff as involving a fundamental misunderstanding of the various roles in our Prison Service, which has left many staff feeling undervalued and undermined. The definition of “non-operational” does not apply only to office and administration staff, who themselves play a vital role in the Prison Service, but extends to staff who deal with prisoners in front-line roles—for example, highly trained forensic psychologists who day in and day out deal with some of the most dangerous prisoners in the country.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that the pay award sets an unjust precedent by unfairly dividing staff? What will he personally do to ensure that all the valuable SPS staff are included in operational and pay reviews in the future?

Michael Matheson: I understand the concerns and the issues that Mark Ruskell has raised. However, he will accept that prison officers are disproportionately affected by the move that the SPS is making towards a new operating model. It is for that reason that the SPS sought to make the exceptional payment to its staff, recognising the unique circumstances that prison officer staff will be affected by because of the changes.

Although, as I mentioned, non-operational staff play a vital role, which is fully recognised, the SPS modernisation programme will have a significant impact on operational staff—primarily prison officer staff. It is for that reason that the SPS sought to make the additional payment.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary give any more detail about the changing role of prison officers in Scottish prisons?

Michael Matheson: The Scottish Prison Service published a prison officer professionalisation programme last month. It sets out the programme of work that will take place over the course of the next two years. It will result in significant change in how prison officers operate, with a new operating model, and it will see prison officers being recognised as justice professionals. The document was published for prison officer staff and other SPS staff last month and it sets out the progress of change that the service intends to make over the course of the next two years.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will know that I have written to him about this issue. It is not the first time that a bonus payment has been made—in 2015, a similar payment was made. At the time, it was said that it would be a one-off offer. Is the bonus payment likely to be repeated? Is it possible for Parliament to have some scrutiny of such arrangements?

Michael Matheson: My understanding from the SPS is that it has no plans to make any such payment to prison officers beyond the spring of 2018, which relates to this particular payment.

On the issue of scrutiny, of course it is entirely a matter for parliamentary committees to consider these issues, but we have kept Parliament informed about the range of work that has been carried out within the SPS and the way that the service is taking forward its transformational programme.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The previous one-off payment was awarded in exchange for prison officers agreeing not to strike for two years. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether any similar deals were agreed this time round?

Michael Matheson: I think that Dean Lockhart has misunderstood the way in which the exceptional payment has been taken forward by the Scottish Prison Service. It is linked specifically to the way in which the SPS is taking forward its transformational programme and the disproportionate impact that it will have on the operational duties of prison officers.

Terrorism Threat Level

2. Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the terrorism threat level. (S5O-01060)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): As the First Minister indicated during her statement to Parliament on 24 May 2017, she received briefings from the national security adviser on the reason behind the decision of the joint terrorism analysis centre—JTAC—to raise the international terrorism threat level to critical. Similarly, the First Minister and I participated in meetings of COBR chaired by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary at which the threat level was discussed.

On Saturday morning, JTAC reduced the threat level to severe, which means that an attack is highly likely. The threat level was reduced in the light of the assessment that, although there was still an on-going and dynamic investigation, there was no intelligence to continue to support an assessment that an attack was imminent.

Although the threat level has been downgraded to severe, that still means that an attack is highly likely, and we need to continue to be vigilant, but there is no intelligence that links the recent attack to any threat to Scotland.

Tavish Scott: Following the Manchester atrocity, a review into MI5's functions in relation to tracking terrorists was announced. Can I be assured that the Scottish Government and Police Scotland are involved in that review?

Given the importance of the European Union-wide Schengen information system, which is used by police forces across the United Kingdom, in tackling and tracking criminal and terrorist suspects across international borders, has the UK Government clarified in any way what will happen to our ability to tackle terrorist incidents if we are no longer part of that system, following Brexit?

Michael Matheson: I am conscious that a review of the way in which the security service has handled some of those issues is being taken forward. We continue to have good links with Police Scotland and the security services with regard to the way in which they operate in

Scotland, and we will continue to feed into that process and support any review work.

In addition, once the review has been completed, we will—importantly—look at what further measures need to be taken in Scotland and at any learning that comes from the particular event to which Tavish Scott referred. I assure members that the Scottish Government, Police Scotland and other agencies will be fully debriefed on how we responded to the change in the threat level to critical.

Tavish Scott raises a very important issue in relation to the Schengen agreement. I add to what he said the benefits that we get from working with agencies such as Europol in tackling serious and organised crime and terrorism. Given that those types of incidents do not recognise any national borders, it is important that we collaborate across Europe and the wider international sector.

As a Government, we have made it clear to the UK Government that we value our current engagement and that we wish to preserve those links and the benefits that come from them. At this stage, it is unclear what the UK Government's position on the matter will be when it comes to the Brexit negotiations, which is a matter of regret.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome both the questions and the cabinet secretary's answers on that very important issue. As the cabinet secretary knows, people of all faiths and none mourn the victims of terrorism and face the challenge of overcoming terrorism.

Given that, in the past year, recorded incidents of Islamophobic hate crime have doubled in Scotland, will the cabinet secretary consider publishing the trends for those crimes, as has been done for other parts of the UK, as a way of helping to bring communities together to challenge religious hate and tackle terrorism head on?

Michael Matheson: Anas Sarwar raises a very important issue. Security measures are only one part of the solution in tackling those issues. We also have a responsibility to ensure that we do everything possible to tackle any form of violent extremism and those who wish to peddle hate crimes in our communities.

We have well-established links with communities across the country that Police Scotland and other agencies use to tackle hate crime, including Islamophobia. I can give Anas Sarwar an assurance that we will look at whether we can put in place any further measures in order to make sure that we continue to tackle that. Alongside that, we will provide information in the public domain to give people an understanding of the extent and scale of it.

In my engagement with Police Scotland and other agencies over the past couple of days it has been encouraging to hear that there has been no particular increase in the reporting of hate crime in Scotland. However, I have sought assurances from Police Scotland and other agencies that they will continue to monitor that in the days and weeks ahead, and ensure that if there are any indications of an increase in hate crime appropriate measures are taken to address it quickly.

Local Authorities (Impact of Coalition Administrations)

3. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on how the coalitions that have been recently formed across local authorities will impact on the provision of local services. (S5O-01061)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): Local government elections use a form of proportional representation, which gives more choice and power to voters and offers a choice of representatives in each ward. Proportional representation makes coalitions more likely, as the numbers of representatives more closely reflect the distribution of votes cast.

Kenneth Gibson: Aberdeen Labour group was suspended for going into coalition with the same Tory group that it was in administration with for five years until a month ago. Meanwhile, no action has been taken against the North Ayrshire Labour group, which clung to power only with the support of four Tory councillors, or, indeed, against Labour's candidate in Edinburgh South, Ian Murray, who called on Tories to back him to save his own skin but urged Labour voters in the rest of Scotland to back the Tories. What is the cabinet secretary's opinion of the muddled inconsistency of Labour's leadership on this issue?

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The cabinet secretary should reply in her own brief.

Angela Constance: If you vote Labour, you might just get the Tories. We have seen the complete humiliation of the Scottish Labour leadership by some of their councillors and council groups. Whether those Labour-Tory pacts are formal or informal working arrangements, we have seen a growing list of them, including in my area, West Lothian. What those formal or informal pacts show is a lack of respect for voters, a lack of leadership from the Scottish Labour Party and a lack of understanding of the risk of further Tory cuts and privatisation. [*Interruption.*] They are cheering at that—at the risk of further Tory cuts and privatisation. It is all because the Labour Party wishes to cling to power and to sup with the Tories. Labour councillors have betrayed voters the length and breadth of the country—in

Aberdeen, North Lanarkshire, North Ayrshire, Midlothian and West Lothian—all to do sly deals with the Tories.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

4. Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I remind members that I am the parliamentary liaison officer to the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the action it is taking to tackle loneliness and social isolation. (S5O-01062)

The Minister for Social Security (Jeane Freeman): Social isolation and loneliness are an emerging issue of considerable concern, which impacts on wellbeing and health in communities across age ranges, gender and geography. We have started work on our commitment to develop a national strategy, and in April we held a discussion with a wide range of stakeholders. In the summer, we will launch a consultation with stakeholders on our draft strategy and with communities on what we should do next.

I recently had the privilege of meeting Brendan Cox to discuss the Jo Cox commission on loneliness. I agreed that we will work closely with the commission and others as we take forward our approach, and I will be taking part in the great get together in June.

Mairi Evans: Can the minister assure me that the issue of loneliness and isolation for older people who are being cared for after they have been discharged from hospital will be considered by the Care Inspectorate and Healthcare Improvement Scotland as part of their joint inspections of care services?

Jeane Freeman: Yes, I can. The issue of loneliness and isolation for all older people is core to the principles of health and social care partnerships. All care services are required to deliver care that is consistent with the national care standards. The new standards make it clear that people should be supported to make and keep friendships and to participate in interests and activities.

The social and emotional needs of people are core to our health and care services. Throughout 2017, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and the Care Inspectorate will focus their joint scrutiny activity on partnerships, strategic planning, leadership and outcomes for people using those services, including paying attention to those matters.

Fife Council (Meetings)

5. Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met Fife Council and what issues were discussed. (S5O-01063)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): Ministers and officials regularly meet representatives of all Scottish local authorities, including Fife Council, to discuss a wide range of issues as part of our commitment to working in partnership with local government to improve outcomes for the people of Scotland.

Jenny Gilruth: Can the cabinet secretary advise why, when Fife Council submitted an updated transport appraisal of the Levenmouth area in early 2017, specifically with regard to the viability of the Levenmouth rail link, Transport Scotland has yet to provide an update? That is despite my being assured in the chamber on 12 January that

“Transport Scotland official will provide further comments once they have had the opportunity to consider”

the report

“in more detail.”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2017; c 7.]

Angela Constance: I cannot give the member further detail on that, because that question would be more appropriately addressed to Transport Scotland or, indeed, the Minister for Transport and the Islands. From my constituency’s perspective, I recollect how the reopening of the Bathgate to Airdrie line had a positive impact on our local economy and many other aspects of social life in West Lothian. I therefore understand the importance of the issue that the member raises, but I urge her to direct her comments and inquiries to Transport Scotland or the minister.

Prison Officers (Retirement Age)

6. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the retirement age for prison officers, and what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding this. (S5O-01064)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): Prison Officers in Scotland are members of the UK-wide civil service pension scheme, the terms of which are reserved. The Scottish Government has always been clear that it disagrees with the UK Government’s position that prison officers should work to state pension age while carrying out front-line operational duties.

In December 2016, the UK Government presented a proposal to reduce the retirement age from 68 to 65 for some prison officer grades in England and Wales. That proposal was not

extended to Scottish prison officers. Scottish Government officials have since spoken with the UK Government. There has been no update on the pension position since the UK Government offer to reduce the retirement age in England and Wales was withdrawn in early 2017, following rejection by the Prison Officers Association.

Richard Leonard: Less than two weeks ago, I met members of the Prison Officers Association at HM Prison Shotts and witnessed at first hand the stress and high pressure that they work under. Will the cabinet secretary agree to keep pressing the UK Government before and after next Thursday to bring prison officers into line with the emergency services, with a retirement age of 60?

I join with others who are today calling on the cabinet secretary to make the same one-off payments that he has made this month to members of grades that are covered by the POA to other workers—predominantly women—who are employed in the prison service.

Michael Matheson: The member raises an important point in relation to the way in which the existing pension arrangements apply for prison officers across the whole of the UK, including those in the Scottish Prison Service. I fully recognise the valuable and important role that our prison officers play in the prison system. I have just returned from a visit this morning to Polmont young offenders institution, where I met a number of officers.

The Scottish Government has been consistent in its opposition to the changes that were made by the UK Government. We believe that operational prison officers should be treated in the same way that we treat police officers, firefighters and ambulance staff. I have made direct representation to the UK Government on this matter, and my predecessor did so as well. We will continue to make representations on this issue to try to make the UK Government see sense.

We recognise and value the important role that our prison officers play and will continue to take forward measures to support them in the difficult and important task that they carry out.

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

7. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce accident and emergency waiting times. (S5O-01065)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government national unscheduled care improvement programme aims to deliver safe, person-centred and effective care to every patient, every time, without unnecessary delays anywhere in the system. Since the launch of the six essential

actions two years ago, we have delivered significant improvements. Scotland is leading the way in the United Kingdom in terms of performance against the four-hour accident and emergency target, and the numbers of patients who spend longer than eight and 12 hours in emergency departments have reduced by more than 81 per cent and 97 per cent respectively.

Jeremy Balfour: Many of my constituents would say that that is simply not good enough. In 2016, the Scottish Government's weekly A and E target was met only seven times. More than 7,000 people waited for more than eight hours to be seen. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that is unacceptable, and will she take responsibility and do something about it?

Shona Robison: Scotland continues to have the best performance figures in the United Kingdom, and core performance has been ahead of that in England for the 25 consecutive months to March 2017. In March, Scotland's core performance was more than 7 percentage points higher than that of England and more than 16 points higher than that of Wales.

I say to Jeremy Balfour that he should perhaps look a little closer to home. Jeremy Hunt is a regular visitor to Scotland; he was up here just a few weeks ago to see how our emergency departments have been improving, through the work that we have been doing, and to take it back to England—perhaps to improve the emergency department performance down there.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Engagements

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S5F-01331)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Ruth Davidson: Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills said that cuts to teacher training places five years ago probably went too far. Opposition parties could have told his predecessor that at the time—and, in fact, we did. Will the First Minister admit that, when it comes to the basic task of putting enough teachers into our classrooms, her Government got it wrong?

The First Minister: No. As those who were in Parliament at the time—back in 2010 and 2011—will recall, at that time we had a significant issue with teacher unemployment. It was thought that we had a surplus of teachers coming out of the system, many of whom were struggling to get jobs, which is why we took the action that we did. Of course, in every one of the six years since then, we have seen an increase in the numbers of students going into teacher education—in fact, this year, we are seeing an increase in teacher training numbers of 371. We also have a teacher recruitment campaign that targets science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects and builds on the work that was done last year that helped to drive a 19 per cent increase in the intake of student teachers. In the past years, we have seen an increase in the number of teachers working in our schools, and the Government is investing more than £80 million to maintain teacher numbers in schools and to maintain the pupil teacher ratio.

As I have previously recognised in the chamber, we have work to do, but we are taking the actions to make sure that we have the right number of teachers in our schools and are getting on with the important job of improving standards and closing the attainment gap.

Ruth Davidson: Once again, we have a First Minister asking for applause for promising to fix a mess that her Government made. It is quite simple: the Scottish National Party Government did not listen to warnings from the chamber or from student leaders, who called for an end to “boom and bust” methods towards teacher training. First, it brought on too many trainees, with the consequence that they ended up in dole queues and not in the classrooms; then it cut the

numbers too drastically, with the consequence that we no longer have enough teachers—we have 4,000 fewer than when this Government came to office. Does that sound to the First Minister like the record of a competent Government?

The First Minister: I will tell the chamber who we did not listen to back in 2010: we did not listen to the Tories, because here is what they had to say about the issue of “demand and supply”, as Liz Smith described it at the time:

“given all the difficulties and the current economic situation, it might be necessary to re-examine teachers’ conditions.”—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 27 October 2010; c 4056.]

That is what the Tories wanted us to do: they wanted us to slash teachers’ pay and conditions.

As I have said, this is an important issue. Those who were in Parliament at the time will remember previous First Minister’s question times at which we talked about the very important issue of teacher unemployment—we inherited a figure for teacher training that was considered at that time to be leading to an oversupply of teachers. That is why we took corrective action at the time to deal with that issue.

In every single one of the six years since then, we have made sure that we have had appropriate numbers of teachers coming into teacher training—as I have said, this year we are supporting an additional 371 people going into teacher training.

As we saw in the most recent figures published in December, we had more teachers in our schools last year than was the case in the previous year; and we are investing more than £80 million into local authorities to ensure that we maintain the number of teachers.

Teachers are there to ensure that they are raising standards and closing the attainment gap. One of the most important, or—to use the words of a teacher who I spoke to on Saturday in East Dunbartonshire—“life-changing” things that we are doing is putting more money into the hands of teachers directly. More money is going into the hands of headteachers, so that they can take the steps to raise standards and to close the attainment gap.

Again, I will be absolutely frank with the chamber and the people of Scotland: we have challenges to confront and we are confronting them—we are pressing on with the programme of reform in education, to make sure that we address each and every one of them.

Ruth Davidson: Yesterday, John Swinney said that the Government had got it wrong. Today, the First Minister stands up and says that it is everyone else’s fault. The line on education from

this First Minister seems to be that we should forget about 10 years of failure, forget about the mess that the Government has made and forget about the children who have been failed by it, and that she is the person to sort it out. If she is going to do that, she first has to admit the consequences of getting it wrong. She needs to admit that her Government’s workforce planning has been disastrous and what that means. It means that we do not have enough teachers for STEM subjects, we do not have enough teachers for additional support needs and that schools are being forced to limit which subjects pupils are able to take because they do not have enough teachers to do the job. If the First Minister is going to fix the matter, will she first admit what needs to be fixed?

The First Minister: Ruth Davidson rightly talks about the importance of workforce planning. The decision that she is criticising, taken in one year—in 2010—was based on the unanimous advice of the teacher workforce planning group. That group includes councils, teaching unions and the universities.

Ruth Davidson wants me to take responsibility. In every single year since 2010, as a Government, we have ensured that an increasing number of young people go into teacher training. We acted to deal with an issue that was there at the time and was subject to much discussion in this chamber. We recognised that we had to increase teacher training places in the years after 2010; therefore, as I say, for every one of the past six years, we have increased the numbers going into teacher training.

We are taking a range of other actions, too, from the national improvement framework and the attainment challenge; from the attainment fund and the pupil equity fund, which are getting resources into the hands of teachers; to the increased number of teachers who are in our schools compared with in the previous year. I take responsibility for everything that this Government does, but I am also absolutely determined to get on with the job of improving standards in our schools.

The last point that I will make to Ruth Davidson is this: while I take absolute responsibility for everything that this Government does, over the next seven days, we need to make sure that we do not end up with another Westminster Government that is taking action and making cuts that are likely to push an additional 1 million children across the United Kingdom into poverty. It will not help anyone to raise standards in our schools if we have a Westminster Government pushing those children into conditions of poverty.

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister’s response seems to be: “I take responsibility, but it’s everyone else’s fault.” Earlier this week, we set out

our interim report into the curriculum for excellence. One of the numerous recommendations was to ensure the proper teaching of core skills, given that we have seen standards of literacy, numeracy and science drop under this Government.

I have noticed that John Mason has an education question in a few moments' time. This is the same John Mason who, in a litany of tweets this week, has said that we have moved on from spelling and times tables, that if someone only has basic literacy, they should concentrate on what they are good at, that people do not need spelling to be a surgeon, that people do not need grammar to work in information technology, that an engineer does not need high levels of English and that there was too much emphasis on the—I quote him directly—"academic" in the past. Is that the view of the Scottish National Party Government? If it is, it explains why standards are so poor.

The First Minister: I had a look at the publication that the Tories published earlier this week and, actually, much of it is work that this Government is already doing in our schools. The Tories should maybe pay more attention.

Getting back to the serious point of standards of literacy, it is because the highest standards of literacy are so vital for every single young person across our country that we are taking the action that we are taking. It is why we now have new curriculum for excellence benchmarks in place. It is why we have established the attainment fund, directing resources to headteachers to allow them to take the action that they think is necessary to improve standards. It is why we have put in place arrangements to make sure that, in future, we will have comprehensive data, school by school and local authority by local authority, telling us how our schools are performing in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. It is why we have initiatives like the reading challenge, encouraging young people to read for pleasure.

Standards of literacy are vitally important as a foundation for everything else that our young people do. That is why we will get on with the job of building on the progress that we have made in our education system and on the hard work done by teachers and pupils across this country. It is also why, unlike the Conservatives in Westminster, we will increase the budgets going to our schools while they continue to cut theirs.

Engagements

2. **Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the week. (S5F-01327)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Kezia Dugdale: The Scottish National Party's treatment time guarantee gives patients a 12-week legal guarantee for treatment such as knee replacements and eye surgery. Will the First Minister tell us how many people waited longer than 12 weeks in the past year?

The First Minister: We have a situation in our national health service, like many health services have, of increasing demand. More patients are waiting longer than we would want them to wait, including those with the treatment time guarantee of 12 weeks. However, since the 12-week treatment target was introduced, more than 1.3 million in-patients and day-case patients have benefited from it and 94.6 per cent of all patients have been treated within 12 weeks.

We saw in the figures that were published this week that, as a result of the £10 million investment that the health secretary made last November, there has been a 20 per cent reduction in the number of out-patients who are waiting for treatment. On Tuesday, the health secretary announced £50 million of additional investment to make sure that we see continued improvements in in-patient waiting times, too.

Kezia Dugdale: There was no answer in any of that, so I will give the First Minister the answer: in the past year alone, more than 38,000 patients waited longer than 12 weeks. We have just heard her tell the chamber that people across Scotland have benefited from the legal guarantee, but Labour can reveal today that patients actually had a better chance of being treated within 12 weeks before the SNP introduced the legal guarantee. That should shame the First Minister, because behind those numbers are people and real lives: it is pensioners, children and parents waiting months for operations.

That is not the only problem that the NHS faces. This week alone, we have seen that accident and emergency targets and cancer diagnostic waiting times have been missed again. The British Medical Association told us that staff shortages are the reason for falling standards in our hospitals and Cancer Research UK said that patients are waiting too long. All of that is growing evidence of the SNP's 10-year mismanagement of the NHS. When will the First Minister focus on the day job and start fixing the mess that she has made of our NHS?

The First Minister: I acknowledge the challenges that our NHS faces, which are the same challenges that health services around the world face from increasing demand because of changing demographics. However, in so many

ways, and on so many indicators, the performance of the NHS in Scotland far outstrips that of the NHS in any other part of the United Kingdom.

In particular, on almost every indicator that we can look at, the performance of NHS Scotland outstrips the performance of the NHS in Labour-run Wales. In accident and emergency, A and E departments in Scotland have for 25 consecutive months been the best performing anywhere in the UK. However, there is no recognition from anybody in the Opposition of the hard work of our A and E staff who deliver that performance.

Under the SNP, the level of staffing in the national health service has increased by more than 12,000. The budget for the NHS has increased by £3 billion, and our plans to increase it further over this session go way beyond what any other party in the Parliament pledged to do at the election last year and way beyond what any other party is pledging to do at this year's election.

We have more doctors, nurses and other health professionals per head of population than any other part of the United Kingdom. I readily acknowledge the pressures that our NHS staff work under, and I thank them for what they do, but occasionally, just once in a while, the Opposition parties should also recognise the good work that is being done in our NHS and the fact that it is doing so much better than the NHS in other parts of the UK.

Kezia Dugdale: That answer was so revealing. When the First Minister is faced with her dismal 10-year record, all that she has in the tank is a kick at the Labour Party and an attempt to suggest that we are talking down the staff. We know that the First Minister does not like it when people speak the truth about her record on the NHS—we can just ask the nurse who had the courage to expose what life is like under the SNP.

Here is the reality: standards in our hospitals are down, NHS staff are overworked and underpaid, and tens of thousands of people are waiting longer for treatment. Is that not what happens when the SNP spends more time on running a campaign for a referendum than it does on running our NHS?

The First Minister: I suppose that we should have a competition in First Minister's questions for who the first person to get the word "referendum" in is. In most weeks, it is not me who mentions it.

If that is Labour's attack, how does Labour explain why, according to almost every indicator that we can point to, the NHS in Scotland under an SNP Government is doing significantly better than the NHS in Wales under a Labour Government? What is Labour's excuse?

Let me point to the action that we have taken on the NHS. The level of staffing is up by 12,000; the

number of qualified nurses and midwives is up by 7 per cent; the number of doctors is up by 30 per cent; and the number of consultants is up by 45 per cent. We are investing more money than any other party would have invested, and we are ensuring that we are delivering for patients across the country. Whether on education or on health, we will continue to focus on delivering for people across the country and we will leave Opposition members to their constitutional obsessions.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I am sure that the First Minister and all members will wish to send our most sincere sympathy to the family and friends of the young cyclist who tragically lost her life on Princes Street yesterday.

What action is the Scottish Government taking to aid the inquiry into that devastating accident? Will the First Minister and her Minister for Transport and the Islands meet the many groups and individuals who for many years have been calling for safe conditions for cyclists and pedestrians in Edinburgh and across Scotland, to ensure that no other family has to bear such an appalling loss?

The First Minister: I convey my heartfelt sympathies to the family and friends of the cyclist who so tragically lost her life in Edinburgh yesterday. It was a tragic incident that is sad almost beyond words. As the member will understand, I will not go into any detail about the incident, as there are and will continue to be investigations into it. The Scottish Government will assist with that in any way that we possibly can.

As the member is aware, we have taken a number of actions over the years, which include providing increased investment, to encourage more people to cycle and to make cycling as safe as possible for people.

To directly answer the question, the relevant minister would be willing to meet representatives of cycling groups not just in Edinburgh but across the country, to consider what further action we can take to ensure that cycling, which is an activity that we encourage, is as safe as it possibly can be for everybody who partakes in it.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): Kyle Gunn from Johnstone applied to study for a higher national diploma in practical journalism at Glasgow Clyde College, where he has been studying for a national qualification in media and communications. He has cerebral palsy, which means that he cannot write in shorthand. The Scottish Qualifications Authority has told him that that means that he cannot progress to an HND, as he would not be able to complete the shorthand component of the course. Essentially, that penalises him because of his disability. Does the

First Minister agree that that is unacceptable? Will she look into the matter?

The First Minister: I am very happy to look into it. I do not know Kyle Gunn but, from that short question, he sounds like a remarkable young man who should be supported as much as possible to achieve his dreams. I do not know the full circumstances, so it would be wrong for me to say more about the matter now, but I will have it looked into, and I will return to Maurice Golden in writing when I have the opportunity to do so.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of continuing concerns about the Vale of Leven hospital. There is the maternity review, an out-of-hours service review and a review of emergency admission points, such as the medical assessment unit.

Will the First Minister join me in welcoming hospitalwatch to the chamber? It is here to present an unusual petition—a bed sheet with thousands of signatures—following a 24-hour vigil at the hospital. I understand that no one from the Government is available to meet hospitalwatch today. Will the First Minister agree to a future meeting with it to discuss the importance of the Vale of Leven hospital to my local community?

The First Minister: I am very happy to welcome hospitalwatch to the chamber, and I congratulate it on its innovative way of lodging a petition, which we would be delighted to receive.

I know about the Vale of Leven hospital issue well from my past ministerial responsibilities. Shona Robison has recently sought assurances from Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board about the continued provision of comprehensive hospital, community and primary care services across the whole of the Clyde area, but particularly at the Vale of Leven hospital. That remains a priority. It is the responsibility of all health boards to ensure that services are provided safely, and Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board is no exception to that in respect of the Vale of Leven hospital.

However, we should also remember something that I am proud of. The Government ended a decade of damaging uncertainty by delivering the vision for the Vale. We saw a previous Labour Administration close the hospital's accident and emergency department back in 2002. In the years that followed, we saw a decline in in-patient and day-case activity at the hospital. The Government took office in 2007. In 2009, we published the "Vision for the Vale of Leven Hospital" document. I can give members an important statistic, which I hope that Jackie Baillie, as a campaigner for the Vale of Leven hospital, will welcome. Since we published that document, in-patient and day-case activity at the hospital has increased by almost a

third. We ended a decade of decline at the Vale of Leven hospital, and the Government is determined to ensure that the hospital continues to have a very positive future delivering for the patients whom it serves.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S5F-01333)

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

Willie Rennie: This week, I met hospital campaigners in Wick, who are facing the consequences of the downgrading of the Caithness general hospital maternity unit. Young mothers told me about the harrowing 100-mile journey to Inverness to give birth. That part of the country feels let down by the loss of such important lifeline services. The First Minister is under pressure on the issue. Will she finally intervene and reverse the decision?

The First Minister: The issue is very important, and I genuinely hope that we can avoid party politics on it. [*Interruption.*] I mean that. As Willie Rennie will be aware, decisions have been taken on the basis of advice that was given on the basis of patient safety. It is really important that no politician should or could run in the face of advice that is based on patient safety.

NHS Highland is currently undertaking a review of the clinical service model at Caithness general hospital. On midwife services, I absolutely understand the feelings of mothers or expectant mothers who are faced with long journeys, but we absolutely cannot have a service provided at any hospital if the advice is that it might not be safe. It was following the death of an infant at the maternity unit in September 2015 that the board took the decision to change the operating status of the maternity unit—it is a midwife-led service.

I understand people's feelings, and we will continue to work closely with the health board to make sure that it has the right services in place and, in the interim, to support women who might be affected by the different model that is there. At all times, and in all steps that we take, patient safety will be the paramount consideration.

Willie Rennie: I take exception to what the First Minister just said. I am raising the issue because it is important, and she should accept that I have a right to ask the question.

The First Minister talks about safety. What about the risk to the mothers in labour who are on the road, on the narrow A9, for two and a half hours? A population of almost 30,000 deserves better than a 100-mile trip to get to hospital.

People across the country are being let down. When Nicola Sturgeon announced a legally binding treatment time guarantee, she said that there would be

“a straightforward system of redress, on the rare occasions when things go wrong.”

It was rare that things went wrong at first—that is true; only five patients waited longer than 12 weeks. It is not rare any more; there are 13,005 patients waiting now.

Why can the First Minister come up with a triple lock for independence but not a triple lock for patients? The waiting time guarantee is not worth the paper that it is written on, and 13,000 people know it.

The First Minister: First, may I return to Caithness maternity services? Let the record be absolutely clear: I did not suggest that Willie Rennie did not have the right to raise the issue. I simply expressed the hope that we would be able to discuss the issue without party politics intervening, because the decision to change the status of Caithness maternity unit was made by NHS Highland on the ground of safety. It was informed by a review that the board commissioned after the tragic death of a child in September 2015. The chief medical officer supports the findings of that review. The decision was never referred to ministers, because it was made on the ground of safety, and the Scottish ministers have never intervened in this case.

I understand the concerns that mothers and families have, but I think that more mothers and families would undoubtedly be concerned if we were standing by and allowing a service to be delivered that was putting children’s lives at risk. We will continue to work with NHS Highland to make sure that we can deliver safe services for people and support them, whatever the model of care has to be at any given time. The health secretary will be happy to meet anyone in Caithness who has concerns, to discuss the issue further.

On the treatment time guarantee, as I have said, yes, more patients are coming forward for treatment as a result of the rising demand on health services across the world, but we are investing record sums of money to deal with that demand. There has been a reduction in the number of out-patients waiting, and just this week, the health secretary announced additional, targeted investment to make sure that we see the same improvements around in-patient and day-case treatment. We will get on with the work of making sure that that happens.

Lastly, if Willie Rennie had not raised it, I would not have chosen to go on from such important issues to the issue of the constitution. However,

Willie Rennie’s position in this election beggars belief. On one hand, he—

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Who is being party political?

The First Minister: Before I get criticised—*[Interruption.]* Well, Willie Rennie raised the issue. On one hand, he is going round—as he is entitled to do—criticising the Scottish National Party for wanting to give people in Scotland a choice over their future at the end of the Brexit process. On the other hand, he is going the length and breadth of the country arguing for a second referendum on European Union membership. At least Willie Rennie could be consistent for once—I know that that does not happen often, but in future he could perhaps try a bit of consistency in this chamber.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): What progress has been made in introducing Scottish social security benefits?

The First Minister: The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities, Angela Constance, made a statement earlier this week on the next steps that we will take to deliver Scotland’s new social security system, and outlined that the first benefits to be delivered through the new system will be the increase to the carer’s allowance, the new best start grant and funeral expense assistance. Over the next couple of years, those benefits will start to be delivered through the new system.

We are seven days away from an election in which the future of social security is a key issue. I am proud to be standing on a platform of ending cuts to support for disabled and low-income people. It is not surprising that the Tory Party wants to press ahead with billions of pounds more cuts that are driving people into poverty and widening the inequality gap. It is more surprising that Labour has pledged to reverse only a quarter of the further cuts to come to social security.

We will continue to get on and deliver the new system, but we will also continue to stand up across the UK for a social security system that has fairness and dignity at its heart.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Yesterday’s shocking report into the deaths of tagged golden eagles showed just how high is the wall of silence that surrounds some of our sporting estates in Scotland. What assurances can the First Minister give that there will be a licensing regime for driven grouse shoots? Given the decades of support that the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has given to the police to tackle animal welfare crimes, why cannot its role be extended to wildlife crimes?

The First Minister: I share the concerns about the report on the fate of satellite-tagged raptors,

which paints a disturbing picture of the illegal killing of our iconic golden eagles. It shows that, between 2004 and 2016, around one third of tagged golden eagles have disappeared in suspicious circumstances.

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham, has announced a comprehensive and robust set of measures that seek to build on the action taken over recent years. The proposals that were announced yesterday send out a very strong message that we are absolutely determined that Scotland's wildlife must be for everyone to enjoy, not for criminals to destroy for their own narrow, selfish ends. I hope that the measures announced by the cabinet secretary will be welcomed by Mark Ruskell, and I know that she will be happy to meet him to discuss this further.

Newly Qualified Teachers

4. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what recent discussions the Scottish Government has had with local authority directors of education concerning the quality of newly qualified teachers. (S5F-01340)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are determined to ensure that all newly qualified teachers enter the profession feeling confident in their skills and knowledge. The Scottish Government meets directors of education regularly to discuss a range of issues relating to education and further to the publication of the content analysis of initial teacher education last week, we will discuss next steps with universities, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and local authorities.

As we approach the end of the 2017 exam diet, I also take this opportunity to thank all teachers who have been involved in preparing our young people to sit their exams. It is important for our teachers to know that their commitment is valued and that their contribution is vital to our young people's success at school and in the future.

John Mason: Does the First Minister agree with the comments by Maureen McKenna, who is executive director of education in Glasgow and president of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, who said,

"I have been very impressed by the quality of newly qualified teachers coming to teach in Glasgow. Our headteachers also report very positively about the quality of newly qualified teachers"?

She also made the point that teacher training at college or university is just the first step in a career and that training on the job is hugely important.

The First Minister: Maureen McKenna's comments are important and legitimate. It is a testament to our teachers and, of course, to pupils

that we have record higher and advanced higher passes, more young people achieving national 5 qualifications and we have record numbers of young people going into work, education and training. Perhaps most significantly, we are starting to see the attainment gap—the kind of attainment gap that is seen in many countries—begin to close.

That does not mean that we have not got much more to do, including on teacher education. The report that I referred to in my first answer found inconsistencies between courses, and that is a cause for concern. None of that changes the fact that Scotland has excellent teachers who deserve our full support.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Does the First Minister believe that, within the context of teacher training, there should be greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy, or does she agree with Mr Mason that

"Learning times tables & spelling stronger in my day but we have moved on"?

The First Minister: The guidance that was issued last August puts primacy on literacy and numeracy. As I said earlier, high standards of literacy and numeracy are essential to provide the foundation for children's learning in other subjects.

The report on initial teacher education that I referred to, which was published last week, showed a variation in what student teachers say about their learning on literacy and we want to address that. Standards of literacy are vitally important. That is why we have new benchmarks in place, we are focusing on literacy through everything that the attainment challenge is doing, and we have initiatives such as the reading challenge, which tries to use the pleasure of reading to help to improve literacy among young people. We will continue to get on with all those things and, as we do so, I hope that we have the support of members across the chamber.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): A report from the University of Glasgow this week notes that Tory benefit sanctions have caused more harm to the poor than any policy since the workhouse. Many hundreds of thousands of people who have been sanctioned include single parents who are unable to attend interviews because of childcare, family illness or simply not having money for their bus fare. Last night, the Prime Minister failed to attend an important interview.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Ms McAlpine.

Joan McAlpine: She has no excuses. What does the First Minister—

The Presiding Officer: Ms McAlpine.

Joan McAlpine: —think her sanction should be?

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, the question must be a supplementary to the question in the *Business Bulletin*. We will move on.

People with Dementia

5. Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to provide support for people with dementia. (S5F-01336)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): This is dementia awareness week and I am pleased to say that this Government has maintained a priority focus on dementia since 2007. We have prioritised national support for staff education, training and development across all care settings, improved dementia care standards for everyone who has a diagnosis of dementia regardless of where they live, their age or the severity of their illness, and we have ensured the provision of high-quality, person-centred, post-diagnostic support.

We will publish our new dementia strategy in the coming weeks and it will set out in further detail the work that we and our partners will undertake to improve support, care and treatment for people who have dementia, their families and their carers in the years ahead.

Peter Chapman: I thank the First Minister for her answer but, as usual, to hear it, we would think that everything is fine. She is totally out of touch, as usual. Let me tell her what the real world looks like.

In the North East, the number of people diagnosed with dementia has increased by more than 44 per cent in the past decade. However, in 2014-15 in NHS Grampian, only 23 per cent of people diagnosed were referred for post-diagnostic support. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that people in remote and rural areas are able to access the support that they require?

The First Minister: Like other countries, Scotland has more work to do. We are seeing more and more people being diagnosed with dementia as the population lives longer.

One of the things that Scotland is recognised for internationally is our high rate of diagnosis of dementia. Any expert will say that early diagnosis is essential. That is true of any condition, but it is particularly true of dementia because of the nature of the support that is required. We are leading the world in getting people diagnosed early. We have more work to do on the provision of post-diagnostic support but, again, we are way ahead of most other countries when it comes to putting in place post-diagnostic services. Later this month,

we will publish our new dementia strategy, which will build on our commitments and set out what we aim to achieve in the years ahead.

Let me tell the member about something that we will not do in Scotland: impose a dementia tax on old people. I am proud that over-65s in Scotland have free personal and nursing care. For older people who are eligible for nursing and personal care, that means a contribution of nearly £13,000 a year, if they have to fund their own care, from the state. That does not take away the burden on personal resources, but it reduces it significantly.

We will also not be ensuring that somebody's house is part of their financial assessment if they are receiving care in their own home, which the Tories are planning to do in England.

On that, as on so many other areas, we have work to do, but I am proud that, when it comes to a progressive approach to dementia and to paying for social care, Scotland is so much further ahead than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Next week, we have to make sure that we do not allow the Tories to drag us backwards.

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I think that I know the answer, but does the First Minister agree that the dementia tax, which is essentially a plot to allow the financial services industry to asset strip dementia sufferers, is one of the most inhumane manifesto pledges ever devised?

The First Minister: Yes. From a sedentary position, Ruth Davidson is trying to defend it, just as she defends the rape clause and other inhumane Tory policies. Not only is the dementia tax wrong in principle, but—completely beyond belief—the Prime Minister who put forward that policy now cannot answer even the most basic of questions about it. First, there was to be no cap on the cost of care, then there was to be a cap. However, nobody in the Tories can tell anybody where that level is to be set, just as they cannot tell anybody what the means test for the winter fuel allowance will be. Who will lose it? Who will retain it? Ruth Davidson said that we do not have to worry about that in Scotland, but they will not tell us how much money they will devolve to go with the power. Will they devolve the budget for the winter fuel allowance now, or will they do as they did with employment support and lop money off it before they do so?

The Tory manifesto that was published a couple of weeks ago was nothing short of an assault on pensioners' benefits. The triple lock for pensions is to go, the winter fuel allowance is to go and there is a dementia tax. It is very clear for pensioners across Scotland that, if they want to make sure that Theresa May does not have the power to take away their benefits and protections, they should

make sure that they have strong MPs standing up for them.

People with Arthritis (Assistance to Work)

6. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to help people with arthritis who are struggling to work. (S5F-01338)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): In December last year, we launched “A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People—Our Delivery Plan to 2021 for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, which includes £3 million of funding for the active and independent living improvement programme. That programme helps to ensure that those who develop health conditions such as arthritis while in employment can find the support that they need to stay in work. From April this year, we have been using devolved employability powers to provide Scottish employment services for disabled people and people with long-term health conditions to help them to find work and to stay in work.

We have also committed to exploring new ways of integrating health, disability and employment support in Scotland to ensure that people can find their way quickly to the tailored and person-centred support that they need.

Pauline McNeill: Does the First Minister agree that there is a need to recognise the scale and impact in Scotland of musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis? It is the biggest cause of disability and pain around the country and, according to Arthritis Research UK, it accounts for half of all work-related illness. In Scotland, 800,000 people live with osteoarthritis, which is the most common form of arthritis. Anyone who has it will confirm that it is a very painful condition.

There is some evidence to suggest that the use of cannabis can alleviate pain for some sufferers, and some people have called for use of cannabis under strict medical conditions. For example, countries including Germany and Canada and 21 states in the US already do that. Earlier this year, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency said that cannabinoids are safe and that companies can now apply for licences. I was genuinely pleased to note that the Scottish National Party conference overwhelmingly backed that last year.

Would the First Minister consider taking steps to license cannabis for medical purposes, or would she at least commit to looking at the basis for doing that?

The First Minister: I thank Pauline McNeill for raising the issue and, more generally, I agree with her that arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions make it very difficult for many people to sustain

employment. That is why all the work that I mentioned in my previous answer is so important—it helps people either to get or to stay in employment.

It is also one of the reasons why I think the assaults on benefits for disabled people and others are so wrong; often they penalise people who want to work but find it difficult to do so. Indeed, one of the other benefit changes that I hope will be reversed in the next couple of years is the cut to the employment support allowance for disabled people.

I have long been of the view that there is a case for medicinal use of cannabis. I am not in favour of decriminalisation or legalisation of cannabis in general, but I think that there is a case to be made for its careful use for certain conditions. There are two, albeit related, issues to highlight: first, use of cannabis itself, in respect of which I note that the licensing and classification of drugs is reserved to the United Kingdom Government, and the separate—though, as I have said, related—issue that I think Pauline McNeill is raising, which is drugs that are derived from cannabis. The approval of any drug for use in Scotland is a decision for the independent Scottish Medicines Consortium, and I am more than happy to ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to write to the member in more detail on whether any drugs that are currently under consideration fall into that category.

I am sympathetic to the suggestion. I do not hold all the levers here in terms of the classification of drugs, but as far as medicines are concerned, we have a recognised process in Scotland and it is, of course, open to any manufacturer of drugs to ask for approval through it.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister’s questions.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. When the First Minister was questioned by Kezia Dugdale and Willie Rennie on the legal guarantee for treatment waiting times, I believe that on three occasions the First Minister responded by saying that the number of patients being seen had gone up. In fact, her own Government statistics and the statistics from the Information Services Division show that the number of patients being seen has actually declined while the number of those waiting for treatment has gone up. In 2013, 335,000 patients were seen and 5,000 waited over 12 weeks. In 2016, fewer than 310,000 patients were seen, while more than 30,000 patients waited longer than the 12-week treatment guarantee. Will the First Minister take this opportunity to correct the record?

The Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Sarwar for raising his point of order. All members have a duty to be accurate and truthful when they talk in the chamber. The member can pursue such issues by lodging written questions or asking other questions in debates. That was not a point of order, otherwise.

Veterans (Deprivation)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-04061, in the name of Maurice Corry, on Combat Stress finds veterans in Scotland face higher levels of deprivation than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the research paper, *Multiple deprivation in help-seeking UK veterans*, published by Combat Stress, which found that ex-servicemen and women receiving help from the charity in Scotland, including those in West Scotland, face higher levels of deprivation than those living in the rest of the UK; understands that the report surveyed of over 3,000 veterans registered with Combat Stress from across the UK and found that veterans in Scotland face greatest risk of deprivation, in both levels of income and employment; notes that the report also found that half of veterans in Scotland who are registered with Combat Stress live in the most deprived three areas of Scotland, and thanks Combat Stress for collecting the information which it considers illustrates the work that still needs to be done to support the veterans community in Scotland.

12:48

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Just a minute, Mr Corry. I ask the public to leave quietly so that we can hear Mr Maurice Corry in what is a very important debate.

Maurice Corry: I thank those members who have supported my motion and allowed the debate to take place. I also welcome staff members from Combat Stress to the public gallery, and I thank them for all the work that they have done throughout the years to help our veterans and armed forces personnel.

Many of my colleagues will know that I am a veteran and that I therefore feel strongly about the subject of veterans' mental health. I have campaigned enthusiastically for many years, first as a councillor on Argyll and Bute Council and now as an MSP for West Scotland, to ensure that veterans' issues are not overlooked. I believe passionately that veterans should get the recognition that they deserve for serving our country. That is why I think that Combat Stress's finding that veterans in Scotland face the greatest risk of deprivation in levels of income and employment is a great concern that needs to be addressed.

I recently visited Combat Stress's Hollybush house centre in Ayrshire and was impressed by the service that it offers, which is absolutely vital to

our forces and veterans and is now fully recognised by the national health service.

Combat Stress was started in 1919 and has built up an excellent service for our veterans and serving armed forces personnel. The fact that we can now have an open debate about the impact of mental health issues among veterans is a huge step forward, as it was previously something that many service personnel were reluctant to accept. By talking about poor mental health and trying to help those who unfortunately suffer from it, we are helping to get rid of the stigma that still surrounds mental health issues, which is a huge achievement.

It is also worth mentioning the great strides forward that the Ministry of Defence is taking in helping to fight issues around mental health within the ranks of the armed forces.

Combat Stress's report "Multiple deprivation in help-seeking UK veterans", a copy of which I have with me, provides an overview of the experience of deprivation in a national sample of veterans with mental health difficulties and gives us a better idea of how best to target specialised military support to veterans with mental health difficulties. The report is based on a survey of more than 3,000 veterans who are registered with Combat Stress, the leading UK mental health charity for veterans, which discovered that veterans living in Scotland have higher levels of deprivation in income and employment than veterans living in the rest of the UK. The finding that half of those Scottish veterans who are registered with Combat Stress live in the three most deprived areas of Scotland is shocking, and the matter needs to be addressed.

The fact that those veterans are dealing with a range of complex mental health issues—whether post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or anxiety—means that it is already a struggle for them to readjust to the civilian world. If we add in the facts that they have to cope with higher levels of deprivation in income and employment and that they are living in the most deprived areas of Scotland, we begin to see why it is vital that we do something to help them.

Given that many veterans who do not suffer from mental health issues struggle to deal with the transition from military to civilian life, we cannot begin to imagine how hard it is for this particular group of ex-servicemen and women to do so. It is up to the Scottish Government to work with agencies and charities to minimise the mental health challenges that veterans face.

The report highlights the inequalities that veterans in Scotland face in relation to employment, and I am sure that everyone in the chamber welcomes the work of Eric Fraser, the

Scottish veterans commissioner, and the 19 recommendations that he has made.

I was glad to see that the new strategic working group on employment has convened and that it held its first meeting last month. I look forward to hearing the outcome of that and future meetings. It is a positive step in the right direction to ensure that veterans who settle in Scotland are not left disadvantaged by their military service and can play a full and productive role.

A further issue that is raised in Combat Stress's report is that it takes the average veteran 11 years to seek help after leaving the military. That brings me back to my previous point that, simply by discussing the issue of mental health among veterans, we are making headway on it. It could be that a veteran does not recognise or want to admit that they are suffering from mental health issues, and they might not seek help for many years. Alternatively, it could be that symptoms of poor mental health do not set in until other events trigger them at a later date. Either way, our debate and the work that Combat Stress carried out to produce its report send a clear message to veterans who think that they could be suffering from poor mental health that it is okay to admit that they need help and that such help is out there.

The report sets out that those who waited the longest to seek help were the ones living in the most deprived areas. That demonstrates that it is crucial for the Scottish Government to support mental health organisations and encourage veterans to use the resources that are available to them and get help early.

It is also important to note that a high proportion of those who experienced multiple deprivation were early service leavers. That group also has the highest unemployment rates. They need to be continually supported to get the best out of them as they transition into the civilian world.

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work (Keith Brown): Maurice Corry has mentioned the responsibilities of the Scottish Government a number of times. Does he recognise any impact on deprivation among veterans from the UK Government's welfare changes to housing benefit, disability benefits and, indeed, war pensions? Does he recognise any impact from those changes on veterans in Scotland?

Maurice Corry: I understand where the cabinet secretary is coming from but, as we go forward, many charities, organisations and local authorities are, in my experience, willing and able to deliver the help and support that those people need. In particular, Combat Stress is supplying that help admirably in relation to mental health issues.

I repeat my thanks to those who have helped to ensure that we have been able to hold this important debate in the chamber today. I also thank Combat Stress for its research, for bringing us its report, and—most important—for its support for the many veterans who deal with mental health conditions daily.

12:56

Maree Todd (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I thank Maurice Corry for securing this important debate. One of the first chats that we had after we were elected was about veterans' mental health, and we quickly realised that we had a common interest. The issue is not only vital but brings politicians together—even those with such diverse backgrounds and political views as me and Maurice Corry.

As many members know, I worked in mental health for 20 years and I now co-convene the cross-party group on mental health. One of the first meetings that we held was on veterans' mental health, and it was great to hear from Combat Stress at that meeting about its valuable work to support veterans.

Although I welcome the report for highlighting the important issue of multiple deprivation, I cannot fully support the motion. The report analysed a sample of only 332 veterans who were seeking help from Combat Stress in Scotland. That is 332 out of a total veteran population of more than 400,000, so any findings can be generalisable only to the group that is seeking support from Combat Stress and are not necessarily representative of the Scottish veteran community as a whole.

On page 81, the report states:

"Each country reported the relative measure of deprivation independently, thus the measure cannot be used as a relative measure between the four countries."

It adds that

"conclusions cannot be drawn about causality of associations".

Veterans in Scotland were overrepresented in the study, with English veterans underrepresented compared with the general population make-up of the UK as a whole. Therefore, we need to be cautious about drawing comparisons with other parts of the UK on the basis of the report's findings.

The Scottish group was different in other ways, too. The following factors might have had more of an impact on the levels of deprivation that they suffer than geography alone: they were more likely to have served in the army than in the other forces; they were more likely to be single males; they were more likely to be early service leavers,

as Maurice Corry mentioned; and they had taken longer to seek help.

I will pick up on the particular issue of early service leavers. The research that Dr Beverly Bergman presented at the cross-party group showed that the high risk of mental illness among the earliest leavers may reflect pre-service vulnerabilities that were not detected at the point of recruitment. Those vulnerabilities become apparent during early training and lead to early discharge.

Of course, poverty in childhood is a risk factor for later mental illness. Early last year, ForcesWatch and Quakers in Scotland petitioned Holyrood to stop the high number of recruitment drives by the armed forces in schools in deprived areas. Their argument is that many veterans would have gone into the forces young and were from the most deprived areas originally, which factors contribute to their lagging position when they leave the services.

We all agree that veterans deserve the best support and care that society can offer across Scotland and the UK as a whole. The Scottish Government has a strong track record on supporting veterans, and I am sure that, in summing up, the cabinet secretary will list its many initiatives.

The UK Government, on the other hand, has presided over a rise in insecure employment, welfare cuts and ideologically driven austerity, which have contributed to a rise in homelessness and food bank use across the UK. Children, families, pensioners and veterans have all been pushed into poverty and crisis because of UK Government policies—let us not forget that.

13:00

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the Presiding Officer and Maurice Corry for allowing me to speak in this very important debate. I am proud to declare that I, like Maurice Corry, have been a soldier, and that my son is currently a soldier.

I point out in the light of Maree Todd's final comment that, in the past 12 years or so, a lot of things have been happening differently for serving soldiers. We have had more soldiers on the front line than ever before. Since the second world war, the armed forces have served in more than 100 conflicts, but never for such prolonged periods or on so many tours as in recent years.

I am sure that we all recognise that stress disorders affect service personnel in different ways: some know that they have a problem, and some do not; some can cope, and some cannot;

some know where to turn, and some have no idea. Nothing is simple.

I found the Combat Stress report interesting and provocative, and I thank the charity for publishing it. It does not surprise me, as an ex-soldier, to read that the majority of service personnel who suffer from combat stress come from the Army. It is easy to see that the horrors of getting up close and personal will be traumatic, and that the vital but somewhat indirect support that the Royal Air Force and the Navy provide does not take its personnel as close to the front line. Let me be clear: I do not demean the vital roles that those forces play, but the way in which they serve is different.

Some of the information in the report is surprising, but it is also very helpful as it highlights some very important flags that we need to identify in relation to our veterans. It is immensely sad to read that it takes, on average, more than 11 years for people who suffer from combat stress to seek help. I am not sure that the report identifies why that is, but we need to find out, and to encourage veterans to come forward much earlier.

I find it interesting that those who seek help are just as likely to be married as they are to be single. However, it seems that soldiers who were single when they were exposed to combat are more likely to be affected by stress. To me, it is clear that sharing the pain of one's experiences makes it easier to bear. I would like to see more work being done to identify whether those who are married or in a relationship present earlier than those who are not.

I find it disappointing that some servicepeople still find it difficult to identify combat stress-related disorders, and that early leavers are more likely to suffer. That highlights the need for more education while people are serving, and for longer-term support when they leave, especially if they do so before their time is up. The support that the services give to serving soldiers over the long period for which they serve perhaps bears that out.

All those points give us a strong guide as to what we must do. Every five years, we should monitor those who have been identified from the flags as being most likely to suffer from combat stress and ensure that they are offered appropriate treatment. We also need to offer a national treatment plan to deal with the issues—which came across loud and clear in the report.

The report also highlights the fact that veterans who live in urban areas of Scotland and are unemployed appear to be at the greatest risk of deprivation, which in turn means that they are more likely to suffer from mental health difficulties. We must ensure that our most vulnerable veterans

do not fall between the cracks. I believe that an enhanced support package should be considered by the Scottish Government and local government under the armed forces covenant.

In conclusion, I commend the excellent Combat Stress report. We have much to do to support our veterans. We need to tackle the problems that are faced by veterans in urban areas in Scotland, which seem to make them more vulnerable to stress-related problems. We have been given some key pointers in the report, and we need to watch the people who are vulnerable. I call on the Scottish Government and the UK Government to deliver for those who have served us, often in the most difficult circumstances.

13:05

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I congratulate Maurice Corry on securing this debate on an issue that is of central importance to the work that we should be doing here and across the UK. For a very short time, I had the privilege of being a Government minister, and in that time the greatest privilege of all was to be the minister who had responsibility for veterans. I was struck then by the power of the voices of those who spoke up for people who had suffered in combat, and whose rights were generally ignored. They were a group and a force to be reckoned with. It is because of their courage in campaigning for the rights of veterans that people across the parties recognise that the issue is something that we can agree on.

It is the job of Government, wherever that Government lies, to understand the particular experience of veterans and our obligations to people who have defended our country or who have supported peacekeeping across the world. We may want to debate which Government is responsible for particular difficulties, but I know that, at heart, we all want to rise to the challenge that has been put before us by veterans, by Combat Stress and by others, and to recognise that we have a particular responsibility to understand their needs and to provide services in a way that best suits the veterans.

We also acknowledge the particularly important matter of mental health issues. In a world in which we are becoming more progressive, we need to understand the impact of mental health issues on people who have been in combat, and to recognise that although general provision may be suitable, there may also be a need for particular provision, that is supported by people who understand—more than I ever could—the consequences of veterans' experience. We need general understanding and specific provision.

In relation to housing, employment and other services, the question that should be asked by

those who deliver them is whether there is a particular impact on veterans or a particular need for which we should cater in developing the services—in particular, for those who do not want to seek help. I know that there has been progress in that regard. We all need to reflect on the evidence in the report and elsewhere, and to rise to its challenge.

There is an understandable desire to look at where the report does not properly reflect the differences across the UK but, to me, the loudest message that the report sends is that there are veterans in our country who are suffering. Irrespective of where the levers of power are, we need to use them to support and address that. Perhaps I say this because I am very far away from power, but the job of Government is to look at the evidence, listen to the voices and address the concerns, where it has the ability to do so.

I will finish with this point. Dr David Webster produced a report this week on benefit sanctions. People including nurses, social workers and social care workers will tell us what is happening in the real world in relation to provision of services and to the impact of disability sanctions. When we talk about the veterans who are suffering in a wide range of ways—as are others—we should not silo our policies on disability or our budget decisions for local government away from their impact on the people who will suffer as a consequence of them. We will be strengthened in our resolve to support veterans if we look to the evidence and if we develop and fund policies that will actually make a difference to them.

I congratulate Combat Stress and all the veterans who have voiced the needs and experience of people who have served this country. Our job now is to make sure that, wherever we have influence, we develop policy that meets the needs that they have identified.

13:09

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Maurice Corry on securing the debate. Maree Todd's valid points notwithstanding, I think that themes that have been highlighted in the report and the debate are extremely important, and we should continue to debate them in the times ahead.

I also want to acknowledge the fact that, since devolution, veterans issues have had a much higher profile in Scotland, and the fact that the current Scottish Government introduced the first minister for veterans, set up the veterans fund and appointed the country's first veterans commissioner. Those initiatives have brought a much greater focus to the serious and difficult

issues that face the veterans community in Scotland.

I speak as the MSP for Moray, which I believe must have if not the highest, then one of the highest concentrations of veterans living in any particular part of Scotland. I know many of them personally as friends and neighbours, and I know many of the issues that they have had to cope with in everyday life in the years since they left the services.

I am also aware of the valuable contribution that is made by Combat Stress and many other organisations that are out there doing their best to offer practical support, advice and so on. I congratulate Combat Stress on its report. It is true that there are areas that require much further research, and I hope that the minister will respond to that when he closes the debate. However, we have to be concerned by a survey of 3,000 veterans that shows that veterans living in Scotland are more likely to live in areas of multiple deprivation, with all the issues that that brings.

I want to highlight a couple of issues. As Maurice Corry and others have indicated, the report says that a fifth of veterans who access care at Combat Stress are early service leavers, and that early service leavers are most at risk of mental illness and three times more likely to commit suicide. That is quite an alarming conclusion that we must take seriously and delve into further. The report also highlights the need to ensure that support is available at appropriate times for early leavers. Page 11 of the report says that

“there is still a significant overall delay between leaving Armed Forces and seeking help.”

That makes it extremely important that services are available and that veterans who are leaving the forces know that the services are available.

I like the idea of the one-stop shops that are being created. I know that many organisations are doing good work across the country, but the veterans first point service that has been set up, with eight centres across Scotland offering one-stop shops, is an important way forward.

I will be parochial and talk about the issues in Moray for a second. There is a veterans first point centre in Inverness, and one in Aberdeen that serves Grampian. However, despite the fact that the organisation says that the main focus for veteran interface actually occurs in Elgin, which is in Moray, we do not have a veterans first point centre in Moray, which has—as I said—a particularly high concentration of veterans in its community. That is perhaps something that the service is considering at the moment and will continue to consider. It has a drop-in location at the Moray resource centre in Elgin, and the

Ministry of Defence has just seconded a nurse to work there with the national health service and other organisations.

It is important to ensure that support is available, but it is also important to ensure that veterans know where to access that support: there is no point in its being available if they do not know where to go. I hope that the good work that has been done can be built on.

The cabinet secretary should reflect on his earlier intervention and further examine the ways in which the UK Government's welfare reforms and other policies exacerbate poverty in general in Scotland because, according to the report, they will have a disproportionate effect on veterans. We have to understand what that impact will be. I hope that the cabinet secretary will commission work on some of the themes that have emerged in the report, as well as on the impact of his policies and the UK Government's welfare reform policies.

13:13

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):

I thank my colleague Maurice Corry for bringing this important debate to Parliament. It is, indeed, worrying to think that many of our service personnel, who have served their country and put their lives on the line to keep us safe, find life difficult on coming out of the forces.

The report, published by the veterans mental health charity Combat Stress, presented some particularly distressing findings. One of the most concerning was the fact that it takes, on average, 11 years for people who are in need of support to ask for help. I wonder why it takes so long. Another notable statistic was that nearly one in five of the people who sought help were early service leavers. Those people obviously need closer observation and more support in the early years after coming out of the forces.

The report was based on a sample of more than 3,000 veterans, all of whom were active clients of Combat Stress. Combat Stress is the largest provider of community and residential evidence-based mental health interventions in the UK, after the NHS. It is also the leading specialist clinical service provider for veterans, with some of its services being commissioned by the NHS.

The majority of subjects in the sample for the report were male—which is hardly surprising—with an average age of 48. Of the sample, 48 per cent were in a relationship and 52 per cent were single. The majority of the folk in the survey had served in the army: 87 per cent in the army, only 7 per cent in the navy and 6 per cent in the air force. That split is not surprising, because army personnel are much more likely to be in the front line and in close contact with the horrors of war. What was a

surprise to me was the very low number—only 4 per cent—who were in receipt of pensions.

Perhaps the most significant finding was that veterans who live in Scotland appear to be at the greatest risk of deprivation, compared with those anywhere else in the UK. Combat Stress's chief executive, Sue Freeth, stated that the report's findings

"highlight the significant challenges that Scottish veterans face."

That is in contrast with the findings for veterans living in Northern Ireland, where, on average, there is less risk of deprivation. I wonder what they are doing differently in Northern Ireland.

Further, 63 per cent of those in Scotland who left their service early were in the three most deprived areas, but, of those who left after 15 years or more, only 32 per cent fell into the most deprived categories—a trend that is not echoed in the rest of the UK.

The report is distressing in many ways, but I hope that it leads to the beginning of a more caring and supportive regime for members of the armed forces as they leave and return to civilian life. Given that we now know that many of those vulnerable ex-servicemen and women spiral into homelessness, debt and mental stress in their first few years as civilians, we must put in place mechanisms of support and monitoring over a period of time, to help them to adjust to life away from the forces. That is surely the least that we can do for them, as they were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for us, to maintain our freedoms and our safety.

I therefore call on the Scottish Government to work with the UK Government to devise a strategy of support to address the obvious difficulties that arise upon veterans leaving the forces. A civilised society can do nothing less.

13:17

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work (Keith Brown):

I congratulate Maurice Corry on bringing the debate to the chamber. I acknowledge and commend both him and Edward Mountain for their lengthy service in the armed forces.

The Scottish Government has worked tirelessly in support of our armed forces and veterans community, as has been acknowledged across the chamber many times. We have a commitment to ensuring that the armed forces, veterans and their families receive the best possible levels of support. We set that out in the "Renewing Our Commitments" document in 2016, and much progress has been made—from support on housing to ensuring that, from 1 April this year,

veterans who receive social care in Scotland will receive the full value of their war pensions, thanks to £5 million of funding.

Here in Scotland, we are lucky to have so many excellent charities and organisations that provide a range of support to veterans and their families. As we have heard, Combat Stress plays a major role in supporting veterans who suffer from mental ill health. It offers a full range of specialist mental health assessment, treatment, education, advice and support to help recovery and to improve quality of life for veterans across Scotland. The Scottish Government has funded the charity to the tune of around £1.24 million per year, as well as £200,000 in the past year for community outreach work. The three years of funding up to 2018 will consist of £3.6 million in partnership with NHS Scotland for veterans resident in Scotland at Combat Stress's Hollybush house facility in Ayr, which has been mentioned. It is worth remembering that those who use the service make up a small percentage of those who have served in the UK armed forces.

We have also made available £1.1 million through the Scottish Veterans Fund since its creation in 2008, and that supports 144 projects.

As Richard Lochhead mentioned, we appointed the first Scottish veterans commissioner; we did that in 2014. We also established a network of armed forces and veterans champions in our local authorities and other public bodies.

In 2016, as I mentioned, we published "Renewing Our Commitments", which sets out our desire for Scotland to be the destination of choice for those leaving the armed forces, wherever they come from across the UK. We have made great strides in promoting that message. There is no question but that a small but important number of veterans struggle to make the transition to civilian life but, overall, our veterans and their families are, unquestionably, true assets to their communities, to their employers and to this country.

Combat Stress's report, which was based on responses from just over 3,000 Scottish veterans, explores the experiences only of veterans who were engaging with the organisation. As has been pointed out, a huge number of veterans make Scotland their home. Furthermore, the report is clear—it is important to bear this in mind—that each country reported a relative measure of deprivation independently, so no direct comparison could be made between the different countries. However, the simple point is that those who require assistance, particularly because of deprivation, must be treated on their own merits, regardless of how matters are dealt with elsewhere.

I certainly accept that more can be done. There is no question but that veterans are struggling to make ends meet, just like other members of society are struggling, as Johann Lamont mentioned. I met some of those veterans earlier this week when I visited the Coming Home Centre in Govan. Maurice Corry attended that event, too. The message I hear is that it is the UK Government's decisions that are driving people into hardship, poverty and deprivation. About £1 billion will be cut from welfare spend in Scotland by 2020-21, with a £0.2 billion cut due to changes coming into force this year alone.

We will continue to strive to protect the most vulnerable and those on low incomes by mitigating the worst impacts of the UK Government's cuts. For example, we have made sure that no one has had to pay the bedroom tax. We are taking action on reducing poverty. Our fairer Scotland action plan sets out 50 concrete actions that, over this session of Parliament, will help to tackle the inequality that is experienced by veterans and others. We have invested more than £350 million to mitigate UK Government welfare reform and to support low-income families. We have also established a £1 million a year fair food fund.

I recognise the important point that was made about the time that it takes veterans to come forward. I have made suggestions—I think that it was two years ago—to the MOD that it could help simply by making sure that a person's records go to a designated general practitioner when they leave the armed forces. That would prevent anyone from falling between the cracks after they leave.

Sometimes, as we all know, veterans do not take up the other assistance that is available, because they do not want to do that—that is their right—or they do not take health support, because they have not had to do that in a civilian setting for a number of years. If medical records are sent to a GP who is designated by the service leaver, the GP knows who they are dealing with, their background and their experiences in the armed forces. They will also make sure that there is, at the very least, a first check with that veteran. That seems to be a straightforward and sensible way to deal with the situation. It would not be the only way to deal with the situation, and other measures would have to be taken, too.

It is true—I have seen this over the years for which I have been the minister with responsibility for veterans—that the MOD and senior people in the armed forces started off with the view that if those who had been recruited from areas of deprivation were deprived when they arrived in the armed forces and that was the condition in which they left, that was their lookout. Over recent years, that view has changed and I have seen a much

more enlightened approach. If it is the case that the armed forces in Scotland and elsewhere have recruited disproportionately from areas of deprivation, there is an on-going responsibility—not just for the armed forces, but for the state—to look after those people, not least because of the service that they have given to the country.

There are things that we can do. I am more than happy to look at commissioning the work that Richard Lochhead suggested. It is entirely up to the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on mental health to decide what it wants to do. It might want to look at the impact of welfare changes on the deprivation that veterans suffer here in Scotland, although we will look further into that matter in any case.

I hope that my response has helped to reassure members of the Scottish Government's whole-hearted and on-going support for our armed forces veterans community. We should be supporting the veterans, as I think that Peter Chapman said, not least because they were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice in defence of the freedoms that we all enjoy. If we have any conscience, we should recognise that service and sacrifice, and ensure that we do everything that we can to help those veterans when they come out of the armed forces. Veterans organisations regularly make the point to me that the vast majority of people who come out of the armed forces manage to return to civilian life with virtually no issues, but that there are others who do not, and they deserve our full support. It is important to recognise that.

Again, I commend Maurice Corry for bringing this debate to the chamber.

13:25

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-05879, in the name of Angela Constance, on the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): I am delighted to open the debate on the principles of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill. The principles are indisputable. The bill will establish Scotland as the only part of the United Kingdom that has ambitious targets to reduce and ultimately eradicate child poverty.

The background to the bill is that, in July 2015, the United Kingdom Government announced its intention to repeal significant portions of the Child Poverty Act 2010. It proposed to replace the four income-based targets with measures on worklessness and educational attainment; to remove child poverty from the then social mobility and child poverty commission's remit; and to rename the legislation the Life Chances Act 2010.

The Scottish Government fundamentally disagreed with that approach and particularly with the removal of targets and the use of alternative measures that do not take income into account. That represents a shift towards characterising poverty as a lifestyle choice rather than addressing the social and economic drivers that cause people to fall into or remain in poverty. The Scottish Government therefore requested an opt-out from the UK Government's plans and committed to bringing forward our own approach. Since then, we have worked quickly to consult on and produce the bill that members are considering.

The income and poverty statistics for 2015-16, which were published in March this year, indicate rising levels of child poverty in Scotland, with 26 per cent of children living in relative poverty after housing costs. I know that members from across the chamber will agree that those numbers are unacceptable. At the UK level, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has projected that child poverty levels will increase further in the next few years, partly because of welfare changes that the UK Government has imposed. By the end of this decade and the start of the next decade, the number of children who are living in poverty will have increased by 1.2 million to more than 5 million.

With the bill, the Scottish Government is making a clear statement that child poverty is neither acceptable nor inevitable. That is why our targets, which are set on an after-housing-costs basis, will be even more stretching than those that were in the 2010 act. What is more, we acknowledge that income, or a lack of income, is central to poverty, which is a view that our stakeholders strongly agree with. If passed by Parliament, the bill will establish Scotland as the only part of the UK to have statutory income targets on child poverty.

Our consultation on the bill, which ran from August last year, was designed in collaboration with the ministerial advisory group on child poverty, the First Minister's independent adviser on poverty and inequality and other relevant stakeholders. I take the opportunity to thank all who contributed to the bill's development and all who took the time to respond. We received a total of 116 responses, which showed broad support for the proposals that the bill sets out.

Today, I hope to reassure members that the bill provides the robust framework and the strongest of foundations that are needed to drive our ambition to eradicate child poverty. The bill is made up of three key elements. It places a duty on the Scottish ministers to meet four ambitious income targets by 2030. Those targets provide a clear picture of the fairer Scotland that we all want.

The bill also places a duty on the Scottish ministers to produce regular delivery plans, the first of which is to be published by April 2018. Each delivery plan will set out the measures that the Scottish ministers will take to meet the income targets, and ministers will also be required to publish annual progress reports.

Further, the bill places a duty on local authorities and health boards to produce annual local child poverty reports, which will outline the measures that they have taken to reduce child poverty locally.

I thank the Social Security Committee for its detailed scrutiny of the proposals and for its comprehensive stage 1 report, and I will take full account of its suggestions as we take the bill into stage 2. I am sure that we will have the chance today to debate some of the recommendations in great detail, but I will highlight a few key points.

Having listened carefully to the evidence of stakeholders, I take the view that interim targets would be a helpful addition to the legislation. To be most useful, interim targets need to be set at levels that challenge the Government to take strong action. However, they also need to take account of the evidence about, for example, projected increasing levels of child poverty in the UK and consider what that means for Scotland.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): I very much welcome what the cabinet secretary said about wanting the bill to be amended at stage 2 to introduce interim targets. Does she agree that interim targets need to be set out in the bill, rather than in secondary legislation?

Angela Constance: I will come imminently to the specifics of what I propose to do at stage 2. I emphasise that the interim targets need to galvanise action, to be stretching and ambitious enough, and to focus minds. My concern about setting out the specific interim targets in the bill is that that would come prior to eminently sensible and crucial work being completed.

As I will outline, I will bring forward measures to ensure parliamentary scrutiny of interim targets but, given that we know that child poverty in Scotland and in the UK is projected to rise, we need to do work now on the implications of the child poverty level rising to 5 million children in the UK. What will the impact of that be in Scotland and what increases will we expect to see? An important piece of work has to be done and we must be led by evidence in that and in all such work.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): What the cabinet secretary said is, broadly, welcome. The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland has made the point that, if young couples who live in poverty have children, those children will be brought up in poverty. What is the link between poverty among adults and poverty among children? As welcome as the bill is, does the cabinet secretary accept that we need a coherent anti-poverty strategy for Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can allow you a little extra time, cabinet secretary.

Angela Constance: That is fine. I will answer Mr Rowley's point, but I will come back to the parliamentary scrutiny of interim targets, as I had not completed my point.

Mr Rowley's point is well made. Children are poor because their parents are poor, and any child poverty strategy must not sit in isolation from a wider anti-poverty strategy. As a Government, we introduced the fairer Scotland action plan, in which the number 1 action is to introduce an overarching socioeconomic duty across the public sector.

The bill forms one platform of the work, but other aspects include the Education (Scotland) Bill that we passed in 2016 and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. One thing that we can learn from the history of child poverty in Scotland and across the UK is that the progress that was made in the early years of the previous Labour Government stalled because there was no joined-up, all-government, all-country response to tackling child poverty.

To go back to Mr Tomkins's question, my proposal is for the bill to refer to the interim targets and for the levels of those targets to be specified in regulations that are made under the bill. I will ensure parliamentary scrutiny by seeking parliamentary approval for the interim target levels that are set out in those regulations.

In response to the consultation on the bill, we received general support for our proposals on delivery plans, but the evidence that was heard at stage 1 identified two further areas that merit consideration and on which I will lodge amendments at stage 2. First, I agree with the principle that delivery plans need to be aligned more closely with parliamentary terms. It is crucial to have a clear link between the priorities of a newly formed Administration and the duties that ministers will be subject to under the legislation.

As for the content of delivery plans, my initial view was that we should not restrict ourselves to a shortlist of issues that delivery plans should consider. However, I accept the arguments in favour of including more detail in the bill, so I will carefully consider the areas where that might be appropriate, and I note the committee's reference to the suggestions from the end child poverty coalition. The evidence tells us that there are touchstone issues in tackling and eradicating child poverty, which we can place in the bill.

I know that achieving the targets in the bill will be incredibly challenging—that is probably an understatement—but I hope that everyone in Parliament today, no matter which side of the chamber they are on, supports our aim of eradicating child poverty. I look forward to an open and constructive debate, and I welcome members' views on the proposals that the bill sets out.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill.

14:42

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): As convener of the Social Security Committee, I am pleased to speak in today's debate on behalf of the committee. I begin by thanking committee members very much for the constructive way in which we were able to reach a consensus view in our report on the bill's general principles. I am pleased that we were able to be open with each other during committee meetings and in other sessions, recognise our differences of opinion on some issues and yet still reach agreement, as set out in our recently published stage 1 report.

I also thank everyone who took the time to respond to the committee's call for evidence, either in writing or in person. In particular, we very much enjoyed hearing from our witnesses in

Glasgow at the formal evidence session and at the informal event that we held in the city chambers. Hearing from experts in the field and those directly involved was very helpful to our deliberations at stage 1.

I put on record our appreciation of the cabinet secretary coming to the committee with an open mind and being prepared to listen to the evidence that we had received and the views expressed by committee members. We very much welcome her willingness to reflect and to come back with amendments in key areas, and we look forward to discussing those amendments at stage 2. I also extend thanks to the committee clerks for all their hard work, and I thank everyone who took part in the evidence-taking sessions and beyond.

As all of us in this chamber will agree, there should be no place for child poverty in a modern Scotland. The effects of growing up in poverty can last a lifetime and can impact on health and educational prospects long after a child has grown up. We need to make a difference now to the lives of children in Scotland who are facing poverty. With that in mind, I acknowledge the fact that the Scottish Government introduced the bill as a direct response to the UK Government's repeal of significant sections of the UK-wide Child Poverty Act 2010, including those that provided for the previous income-based targets for child poverty.

Research published by the end child poverty coalition at the end of last year shows the number of children in low-income households by local authority area across the UK. The figures tell us that one in four children in Scotland live in low-income households and more than one in three children in Glasgow live in such households. That is totally unacceptable. The committee felt, therefore, that it was important to meet in Glasgow, to find out about the work that is being done there, and in other areas, to tackle child poverty and to hear what more needs to be done.

What we heard was powerful. I will touch on some of the specific points that were made a little later in my speech but, across the range of evidence that we received, there was strong support for this Parliament reinstating the income-based targets for child poverty. We were told that putting the targets back on a statutory footing would send a message about the importance that we in Scotland attach to addressing child poverty. The targets focus minds and resources and set a direction for where we as a society want to get to.

We all know that targets will not in themselves reduce child poverty, but they are an important part of the bigger picture, enabling us to measure progress in Scotland and to hold the Government here to account.

The targets mirror the targets that were set out previously in the Child Poverty Act 2010. They are already widely recognised and were arrived at following extensive consultation. The targets are all income based because, at the heart of all poverty is a lack of income. The amount of available income in a household is what counts when we assess whether a child is living in poverty.

For the purpose of the bill, income is arrived at after deducting housing costs. That is an important difference between the targets in the bill and what was in place previously in the UK. We welcome the approach that the Scottish Government has taken in that regard. Housing costs are invariably the largest regular outgoing for a household and they are an essential cost. That is why we support the approach taken in the bill.

In its evidence to the committee, the Institute for Fiscal Studies recognised the benefit of taking an after-housing-costs approach. It also sounded a note of caution and set out a caveat around the element of personal choice that can sometimes exist in relation to housing. We were given the example of two households with exactly the same money coming in. One might decide to prioritise the quality of the housing that they live in and the other might choose to prioritise the quality of the food that they purchase or how they live. In such an example, one household could be measured as being in poverty while the other could be measured as not being in poverty. The only difference would be that one family preferred to prioritise one thing over another. Despite that note of caution, it is clear that using an after-housing-costs basis for calculating income makes the targets in the bill more challenging. We acknowledge that and we welcome that approach.

When we discussed household incomes, we heard evidence from a number of witnesses about the inequalities that exist between certain groups in our society. For example, Engender and others told us that women are more likely than men to be living in poverty, as are lone mothers. Engender told us that tackling child poverty in Scotland is closely linked to tackling gender inequality. Inclusion Scotland told us that disabled children and the children of disabled parents are disproportionately likely to experience poverty, disabled women are much more likely than disabled men to be living in poverty and many more disabled women than disabled men are lone parents.

I will highlight evidence about householders who, through no fault of their own, face additional essential costs that greatly reduce their available household income—costs that relate to essentials that are not a matter of personal choice.

Inclusion Scotland and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation told us about the extra costs for a household in which one or more parents have a disability. They pointed out that the targets in the bill take account of additional income that is received from disability benefits but not the full impact of the additional costs that disabled people face. Inclusion Scotland said:

“This has the effect of boosting household income and lifting many households containing disabled people out of ‘poverty’ when the current measure of poverty is applied ... Whereas in fact those same households are consistently shown to be at twice the risk of material deprivation compared to households where there are no disabled children or adults”.

The committee was struck by that and, for that reason, we have asked the Government to consider whether other deductions should be made when calculating net household income, particularly when thinking about people with a disability.

I want to say some brief words about the date by which the targets are to be achieved—the end date is 1 April 2031. Tackling child poverty meaningfully will take time and the committee absolutely recognises that. However, a strong message that came through in our evidence—the cabinet secretary has mentioned this—was that interim targets would be helpful. We were pleased that the cabinet secretary said that she was open to revisiting the issue and that she would introduce proposals at stage 2. I thank her very much for listening to not just the evidence but the committee.

The other important part of the bill is the mechanism for the Government to report its progress to Parliament. We welcome the provisions for delivery plans and annual progress reports, which will enable robust and comprehensive parliamentary scrutiny.

We received a lot of evidence on the importance of the delivery plans and a number of suggestions about what the delivery plans should cover. Again, our report has made a number of recommendations, and we welcome the cabinet secretary’s willingness to look at them and come back at stage 2.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): Would the recommendation for a statutory commission cover the call for independent scrutiny?

Sandra White: That point was certainly covered in our report and we discussed it. There are differing opinions on whether the commission should be statutory and what exactly it should be. The committee will be looking at that issue once again at stage 2, but I thank the member for raising that important point.

Local authorities and health boards will also report annually on the measures that they have taken to address child poverty in their local areas. Again, the committee very much welcomes that. That point was raised with us on numerous occasions and has been raised by members. We all know of initiatives undertaken locally that could be tried in other areas, and an important role of the local reports will be to share information on what works.

Earlier, I said that I would come back to some of the evidence that we heard in Glasgow. Therefore, I would like to draw attention to the good work of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and the impact that has been made on child poverty through its healthier, wealthier children initiative. I know that other members are aware of that work.

I will just mention another couple of initiatives, Presiding Officer—I know that I have gone slightly over my time. We heard similar stories from Dundee City Council and Fife Council, together with NHS Tayside and NHS Fife, all of which are building a growing understanding of what works. There is a great willingness across the whole of Scotland to increase our focus on tackling child poverty and to roll out tried and tested initiatives.

The Social Security Committee welcomes the bill. It should act as a foundation for ensuring a focus at national and local level on tackling child poverty in Scotland. We need a consistent and sustained effort, alongside a culture change in society. For those reasons, the committee supports the general principles of the bill.

14:53

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): I have been looking forward to the debate for a while. On these benches, we will be supporting the general principles of the bill today, but we look forward to trying to make the bill stronger over the course of stages 2 and 3.

I have been thinking about and working on the bill for a little while and, like Sandra White, I would like to thank the committee clerks and all the witnesses who helped us with our stage 1 report on the bill, which is, in my view, the best piece of work that the Social Security Committee has produced so far in this Parliament.

I would also like to thank John Dickie and Peter Kelly for their time and insights and the Child Poverty Action Group, end child poverty, Barnardo's and the Poverty Alliance for discussions and advice about the bill.

The Scottish Conservatives share the view that has already been expressed by Angela Constance and Sandra White that measuring child poverty is important. However, we strongly believe that

taking steps to tackle, reduce and, eventually, eradicate child poverty is much more important. The bill as introduced includes various provisions to measure child poverty in Scotland, but on its own—as I think Sandra White said—it will not do anything at all to lift any child in Scotland out of poverty. As such, it is a missed opportunity.

The Parliament has the chance to improve and strengthen the bill as it progresses through its legislative stages so that, by the time it reaches the statute book, it can help us, as parliamentarians, not merely to understand the scope and incidence of child poverty but to hold to account effectively and robustly the Government of the day on what it is doing about child poverty.

I will set out three ways in which the Conservatives will seek to improve the bill. First, as we have heard, the bill focuses very narrowly on income. The cabinet secretary says that poverty is all about not having enough income, but we on the Conservative side of the chamber do not believe that that analysis gets to the root of the problem. We believe that, unless we get to the root of the problem, no anti-poverty strategy, whether it is a child poverty strategy or—as Alex Rowley described—a more general anti-poverty strategy, will succeed.

In our view, it is not enough to say that the solution to poverty is increased income; we need to dig deeper to investigate and understand, and—without fear or favour—to address and confront the drivers that lead families to have insufficient income in the first place.

Although I am sure that we all have more to learn about the subject, we know quite a lot about what those drivers are. They include addiction, family breakdown, unemployment and educational underattainment. That list is not exhaustive, but those are all relevant considerations. All those issues are drivers of poverty in general and child poverty in particular.

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Adam Tomkins: I will finish my point, and then I will happily give way.

Our core contention in relation to the bill is that no anti-poverty strategy will be successful unless those underlying causes of poverty are addressed robustly and systematically.

Alex Neil: I hear what Adam Tomkins says: he thinks that addiction is a driver of poverty. However, is it not the case—indeed, much more likely—that poverty is the driver of the addiction? In most cases, poverty is the root cause of those problems, not the other way round.

Adam Tomkins: No, I am afraid that I do not accept that. There are behaviours that drive

people into poverty, so I absolutely do not accept what Alex Neil just said.

What does the bill say about matters such as addiction, family breakdown and educational underattainment? The answer is nothing, which I find puzzling. We have all heard the First Minister solemnly proclaim that closing the attainment gap is her Government's number 1 priority. We all know that educational underattainment is one of the key drivers of child poverty. In the bill, Scottish ministers have a legislative opportunity to turn the First Minister's stated political aspiration into hard legal reality, yet it is an opportunity not taken: an opportunity missed.

At stage 2, therefore, the Conservatives will lodge an amendment that seeks to place ministers under a legal duty to take steps to close the attainment gap and report annually to Parliament on the progress that they are making.

Angela Constance: I am somewhat puzzled and bemused that Adam Tomkins wants to make the legislation "stronger" and more effective, while his Government in London has ripped the heart out of similar legislation that covers the length and breadth of the UK.

As I have pointed out to Adam Tomkins, we already have legislation that places responsibilities on ministers and local authorities to address the attainment gap. As he well knows, the issues that he mentions are properly to be dealt with in the first delivery plan in a way that is based on evidence and on economic needs at the time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can allow you extra time for those interventions, Mr Tomkins.

Adam Tomkins: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

On the first point, the whole point of devolution is to allow parties to have priorities in different parts of the United Kingdom without ripping the UK up. On the second point, section 1 of the Education (Scotland) Act 2016 places on ministers a duty merely to "have ... regard to" the importance of closing the attainment gap, not necessarily to do anything about it.

It is plain from the Government's own documentation that the duty does not go far enough. In the Government's child poverty measurement framework, the percentage of primary 7 pupils from the most deprived areas who are performing well in numeracy and in writing is going down. It is plain that more needs to be done, and more can—and should—be done in the bill to force ministers' hands.

As we have already heard, the Social Security Committee agreed that whether the bill's targets are met will depend on the delivery plans that are to be published in 2018, 2021 and 2026. Those delivery plans are absolutely critical. There was

some discussion in the committee about the frequency and timing of the delivery plans, but for my part I am more concerned about their content. On that matter, again, the bill is next to silent.

The committee agreed that the bill should set out in detail the matters that must be addressed in those delivery plans. As a minimum, delivery plans must include information about the full use of Scottish social security powers—that is, not only those over benefits that are devolved in full but also the top-up power and the power to create new benefits.

The plans must also include information about employment for parents and carers. That addresses another of the key drivers of child poverty—children who grow up in workless households. The UK's Life Chances Act 2010 requires the secretary of state to report on the number of children in England living in workless and long-term workless households. In our view, delivery plans under this bill similarly should set out the measures taken by and proposed to be taken by the Scottish ministers to reduce the number of children in Scotland growing up in families in which no parent, guardian or carer is in employment or paid self-employment.

The final matter that I want to address is independence of oversight and scrutiny—the key word is "independence". The UK's Social Mobility Commission is a statutory body, whose powers and functions are set out in law made by Parliament. Scottish ministers, by contrast, propose to establish an ad hoc—that is Latin—non-statutory poverty and inequality commission, in respect of which, as I understand it, Parliament will have no oversight of its terms of reference, powers, remit, functions or personnel. That is not, in any language, a recipe for independent scrutiny, and the cabinet secretary knows it.

To conclude, right across the chamber there is the political will to take the problem of child poverty seriously. I have set out how we in the Scottish Conservatives will seek to amend the bill to strengthen it, so that it may realise its ambitions. I look forward to working with members from across the chamber to make that happen.

15:01

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Labour fully supports the principles of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill, and I echo the words of Sandra White and Adam Tomkins in giving thanks to the many organisations that gave evidence and assisted us in our work.

We think that the bill as it stands lacks the ambition that is needed, but we can work together across the Parliament to ensure that it has the level of ambition that such an important issue

requires. We are fully behind a targets framework to measure child poverty and a framework that will set out policy and action that is designed to reduce child poverty by 2030. It is policy and action that matter—targets only measure what we do.

The committee worked well together to produce a very productive report. I hope that our consensus will strengthen the bill at stage 2 and stage 3. I welcome the cabinet secretary's acceptance that the introduction of interim targets would be an important contribution. However, we are clear that that should be on the face of the bill and that there should be a statutory right for those targets to be tested at some time before 2030. I look forward to seeing the detail on that.

The committee rightly adopted from the end child poverty coalition the idea that there should be at least five specified areas in the delivery plan, such as the full use of social security powers and income maximisation. I agree that it should not be restricted to that, but there should be some prescription in the bill so that we can ensure that any Government would be expected to address policy in those areas.

I agree with Adam Tomkins that independent scrutiny of the Government's work is essential. The committee did its job on that by making a bold recommendation for the establishment of a commission on a statutory footing to ensure that successive Scottish ministers will be held to account for their actions. In the past I have not been a great fan of commissions—I have had my arm twisted on more than one occasion. However, in this case I believe that a commission will make a significant difference to the scrutiny of whichever Government is in power.

The last Labour Government created a tax credits system that transformed lives and reduced levels of child poverty. According to IFS research,

“both absolute and relative measures of income poverty fell markedly among children and pensioners”,

and that was

“driven by very significant additional spending on benefits and tax credits.”

I quoted that because I think that it demonstrates the kind of policy ambition that we should support in this session of Parliament. Fundamentally, it is the redistribution of income that will make the big difference. That is why Labour supports CPAG's proposal to increase levels of child benefit by £5 a week—£20 a month. We believe that the impact of that would be large and transformational.

I agree that there are other factors that entrench poverty in children's lives but, fundamentally, it is a lack of income that makes children live in poverty. CPAG shared with me some comments by those

who might benefit from such a policy. One parent said:

“It would pay for the breakfast club to help me get to work ahead of time”.

Another parent said:

“It would cover my daughter's bus ticket to school or pay for an activity once a week like swimming”.

Those are the kind of things that change a child's quality of life. A child can carry some of those experiences with them into adulthood, so they matter.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

Does Pauline McNeill accept that the child benefit top-up of £5 a week would also apply to folk on incomes of £50,000 to £60,000? Does she agree that, although universalism is a good thing, we have to get over the stigma of applying for benefits and that we cannot use that as an excuse?

Pauline McNeill: Sometimes, universalism is necessary in order to help the poorest people. That is why we support CPAG's policy.

Children who live in poverty are less likely to go to university and they are more likely to have poor health continuing into adulthood. The cold reality is that living in poverty is likely to affect someone's ambition, especially if there are not clear ways out of the cycle of poor housing and low pay.

Child poverty is on the increase, and projections by the IFS, which the cabinet secretary mentioned, are bleak. They forecast an increase of more than 50 per cent in the proportion of children living in poverty in the UK by 2021, which is not that far away. That would reverse most of the fall in child poverty that has been observed in the UK since the late 1990s.

The excellent report that Oxfam provided for this debate sets out the fundamental point that wealth inequality has risen in recent years and that wealth is now even more unevenly distributed than income, with the richest 1 per cent owning more wealth than the bottom 50 per cent put together.

Over the past few months, I have listened to the Tories saying that the best way to get out of poverty is to get into work. I agree with that, to some extent, but the figures belie the position and are worth examining, because 70 per cent of children who are in poverty are in working families. It is not enough simply to say that work will solve the problem. In fact, the Government's independent adviser, Naomi Eisenstadt, who has done wonderful work and produced the “Shifting the curve” report, says that being in work is not enough, and that people need good pay and enough hours in their work. That is why Labour supports other key measures such as a £10-an-hour living wage. We have identified that poor people are missing out on £2 billion-worth of

benefits, which is why we must consider initiatives such as automating benefits, and why we must think about whether it might be appropriate to legislate for income maximisation in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill and the forthcoming social security bill.

It is important that we recognise the work that local authorities currently do and the work that they will do on delivery under the legislative framework that we are discussing. It is important that we consider placing a duty on local authorities and health boards to plan in line with the existing planning process so that there is streamlining throughout the legislation.

I fully support the principles of the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I want speeches of around six minutes, but we have quite a bit of time in hand, so I can allow extra time for interventions.

15:09

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I, too, welcome the bill. It is high time that the Parliament sent out a loud and clear message from across the chamber that we are determined to do something effective and with reasonable speed to tackle the level of child poverty in our country.

I also welcome the excellent report from the Social Security Committee, under Sandra White's convenership, although, on its recommendation 10, I say in passing that, given the Scottish Government's intention to set up a poverty and inequality commission, we should not have a separate child poverty commission. Alex Rowley is absolutely right: tackling child poverty has to be part of a wider, broader and more comprehensive programme for tackling poverty across the board. However, I have a lot of sympathy with the suggestion that the poverty and inequality commission should be placed on a statutory basis.

We all know the scale of child poverty; very often, we cite it in the chamber. However, we should also remind ourselves of its costs to society, which are as high as we could imagine. A solve UK poverty report that was published in August 2016—not that long ago—stated that

“the public service costs of poverty amounted to around £69 billion, with identifiable knock-on effects of child poverty costing a further £6 billion, and knock-on effects of adult poverty costing at least £2.7 billion”,

that

“this gives a total cost of poverty in the UK of around £78 billion”

and that

“a large proportion of what we spend publicly (about £1 in every £5 spent on public services)

is spent to deal with the consequences of poverty in our society.

To those who say that we cannot afford to deal with child poverty, or poverty more generally, I say that they should look at the facts and the evidence. We cannot afford not to deal with child poverty, and poverty in general, in our society.

I fully appreciate the motives of Adam Tomkins. I am sure that he is motivated—as we all are—by the need to abolish child poverty. However, I fundamentally disagree with his analysis, because the evidence does not back it up. I draw his attention, and that of the Parliament, to an excellent report produced by one of the first-class quangos that we have in Scotland: Health Scotland. It does a massive amount of first-class research into poverty and, in particular, how to reduce health inequalities. About 18 months to two years ago, Health Scotland produced its excellent report, which addressed the fundamental issue that we must all address: what do we need to do to reduce and abolish child poverty and poverty more generally? It addressed the question of the most effective way of reducing health inequalities in Scotland.

When I heard about the Health Scotland report, I expected it to give a litany of actions to be taken by the national health service, but its evidence pointed to the conclusion that the single most effective measure that could be taken to reduce health inequalities would be to make the living wage mandatory for everybody in this country. Were we to have the living wage—not the Tory version, but the real living wage—that would very quickly start to reduce health inequalities. I make a similar point on reducing the educational attainment gap. We will not achieve our objectives on that if we do not, as a prerequisite, tackle child poverty. If a child goes to school hungry, and with an empty belly, no amount of tuition will overcome the negative impact of that on that child's education.

As a grandfather—I am a young grandfather, Presiding Officer—along with my wife I take our grandchildren to different activities almost every Sunday. They are lucky, because their parents—like their grandparents—can afford to do that. However, I wonder about other children. The cost for four of us to go to soft play on a Sunday morning is about £15. If we go to the pictures to see “The Baby Boss”, it is then over £30; if we are having lunch, it is £50—if we go to McDonald's. That is just one Sunday morning outing. If my grandchildren did not get those experiences, their ability to be confident, to explore the world, to read their books and to be able to mingle with other children and adults would be, quite frankly, severely restricted. How can any parent who is living on the minimum wage, who has a zero-

hours contract or who is on benefit afford to do that? There is no way on earth that those parents or poor grandparents can afford to do that for their children or grandchildren. Therefore, even if the children are going to an incredibly good school, they will still end up not doing as well as their peers, because they do not have that support at home.

I fundamentally disagree with Mr Tomkins. I see tackling child poverty and poverty more generally as being initially, and as a priority, about putting cash in the pockets of the poor. If people do not have the cash, many of the other support services will not work to their full potential. It is important not just to set targets—that is dead easy to do—but to put in place a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that has tackling child poverty at its core, while tackling poverty more generally.

Let us look at the level and the definition of poverty. People who are living in poverty are defined as having 60 per cent or less than the median average household income. When I was doing the job that Ms Constance is doing, I asked my officials how much it would cost a year if we were to give every family in Scotland that falls within the poverty category enough money to get up to the 60 per cent level. I expected the figure to be about £6 billion or £8 billion. It was not. The gross cost would be £2 billion a year.

That £2 billion would pay for itself, because if we were to take away the cost of the poverty, the net figure would be a lot less than £2 billion a year. We are going to set targets, we are going to have an independent commission to monitor them and we are going to look at how we publish them and all the rest of it, but the key message that must go out from this chamber is that we are, once and for all, really going to tackle poverty, starting with child poverty, in our society.

Elaine Smith: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Through you, may I ask that colleagues speak into their microphones? Unfortunately, I missed part of an otherwise excellent speech by Mr Neil.

Alex Neil: Should I do it again, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, thank you.

I thank Elaine Smith for raising that point. I was just about to mention that, even with Mr Neil's bellowing style—if he will excuse my saying so—people can miss what is being said if members do not speak into their microphones. For the benefit of everyone here and the official report, it is important that members are fairly close to their microphone when they are speaking.

15:18

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will try hard to stay close to my microphone, Presiding Officer.

I suspect that no Government anywhere would argue that there is an easy path when it comes to finding wholly effective policies to address poverty, but for exactly the reasons that Alex Neil set out—I obviously do not agree with his entire assessment, but he put the issue in an important context—such policies are clearly crucial when it comes to supporting our most disadvantaged communities. For generations, policy makers have struggled to unscramble many of the complexities that surround poverty, including what many people argue are inadequate definitions that are so often tied to arbitrary income levels.

Relative poverty is particularly hard to define and, of course, there are the on-going tensions—Alex Neil talked about them in his speech—between economic policy statistics and social policy, which has a much more subjective foundation. For that point alone, Alex Neil's speech was worth listening to, because we all recognise the symptoms of social exclusion when they occur, the effects that they have, and how they are linked to problems including unemployment, poor housing, crime, educational difficulties and low incomes.

However, as my colleague Adam Tomkins rightly identified in his speech, the most important focus for all of us—I do not think that there is terribly much disagreement politically on this—must be on the causes of poverty, rather than on the symptoms. We do not have any major concerns about the general direction of the bill, but we believe that it does not go nearly far enough in addressing causes.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I appreciate what Liz Smith is saying, but the problem that some of us on the SNP side of the chamber have with what Mr Tomkins said is that he conflated symptoms and causes. We believe that the area that he mentioned in particular, the attainment gap, is a symptom of poverty and not a cause.

Liz Smith: I will come to the attainment gap in a minute, because it is a very important part of policy.

If we are going to deal properly with poverty, we have to look at its root causes. If we do not do that, we will not be able to take on board the point that Alex Neil made at the end of his speech, which is that we actually have to do something. That is not to forget about the symptoms.

Alex Rowley: The previous Labour UK Government introduced tax credits and, as a

result, more than 1 million children in the UK were lifted out of poverty, including 200,000 in Scotland. The evidence is clear that when the Government intervenes and ensures that more income goes to families, child poverty goes down. What is Liz Smith's view of the fact that today 40,000 more children in Scotland than last year are in poverty? Does she accept that that is something to do with the UK Government?

Liz Smith: I agree only to an extent, because the key issue is not specific income levels but the root causes that underpin income levels. We will not get rid of poverty just by lifting income levels; we have to deal with some of the underlying causes. I do not pretend—I do not think that anybody in the chamber pretends—that this is an easy topic: it is not. As Clare Adamson reminded us, so many factors are interlinked with poverty. However, the deficiency in the bill is that it does not deal with enough of the genuine underpinning of some of the causes, which is where we have to concentrate our energies.

I want to talk about education policies that I think are important in addressing child poverty, and I will start with the early years. To come back to what some SNP MSPs are asking for, the evidence is important. A critical aspect of educational evidence is evidence on what is determined in children's early years. That is not just about when children are at nursery school; it is also about what happens before nursery school. There is a lot of evidence that the attainment gap, which we all want to address, starts early. That is why we believe fundamentally that we have to focus delivery of early years services not just on the three and four-year-olds—although what the Scottish Government has done in that respect is extremely welcome—but on disadvantaged one-year-olds and two-year-olds, among whom there are specific issues.

I also believe fundamentally that literacy and numeracy, which we have talked about a great deal in the chamber over the past few months, are crucial for improving young people's education opportunities and aspirations, and for acquiring the skills that they will need in later life.

We agree that the pupil equity fund is the right way forward and is an opportunity for schools, but decisions on it must come from the schools themselves. I hope that there will not be too many edicts from local authorities or national Government about how the money should be spent, because headteachers are the people who are in a position to make the right decisions about what will help their pupils best.

There is nothing in the basic principles of the bill with which we disagree, but we can do a lot more to ensure that it adopts the robust stance that we

all want. That is why we will lodge a variety of amendments at stages 2 and 3.

15:25

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): The number of children who are growing up in poverty in Scotland is rising, not falling. Relative child poverty has gone up from 22 per cent of Scotland's children to 26 per cent in just 12 months. Absolute child poverty has gone up from 21 per cent of children in Scotland to 24 per cent in 12 months. More than 250,000 children in Scotland are now living in poverty, and almost 70 per cent of those children are in households that are in work, which is—as I keep pointing out to the Government—a sign not of a resilient labour market, but of a labour market that is mired in poverty pay, underemployment and insecure work. To Conservative members I say this: those are not lifestyle choices; they are economic impositions that people are facing.

We rationally expect equal treatment before the law, so why should we accept such a huge irrational inequality? Why should we accept a society with a shameful contrast of, on the one hand, unbridled private adult wealth, and on the other, public childhood destitution and squalor? That condition is visited upon those children: it is visited not upon those who have created those severe and capricious inequalities but upon those who are, through a chance of birth, simply born into it. We know the result: horizons are limited and life expectancy is cut, with cycles of poverty that pass from one generation to the next. That is what Parliament needs to tackle, and the bill provides us with a start.

There is an emerging consensus, which I hope the cabinet secretary can join, that the time when Parliament can merely set targets has passed. The time has passed when Parliament can simply count the growth in child poverty. The time has come to end child poverty.

The cabinet secretary recently told the Social Security Committee about a new socioeconomic duty that she is contemplating, but our other duty here in Parliament is our moral duty to act. That is why that committee, which contains members of the cabinet secretary's party, is demanding statutory interim targets in the bill—not in regulations, but on the face of the bill. That is why the committee is demanding tougher action to root out persistent poverty, as well as a tougher definition of it.

It cannot be right that, in a household in which there is an adult or child, or both, with a disability, material deprivation is so much worse. That is why we are also asking the Government to revise its calculation of net income in such households.

Neither can it be right that children from minority ethnic backgrounds are twice as likely to live in poverty than white kids are. We need robust delivery plans, with a clear and traceable link to the Scottish Government's budget, to tackle that and other inequalities.

As we have heard, the committee recommends the establishment of a statutory commission to provide independent scrutiny and oversight of progress, with powers to investigate and, where necessary, to call this or a future Scottish Government to account—not a ministerial advisory group, but an independent commission, established by statute through the bill and subject to parliamentary power of appointment. As the Child Poverty Action Group spells out, the commission should have

“members with expertise in measuring and understanding poverty, expertise in engaging with those people experiencing or at risk of poverty and an in-depth understanding of the causes and effects of child poverty.”

The bill mentions income after housing costs, and it is right that it focuses on statutory income targets. That is why Labour advances the case for increasing child benefit—an already universal benefit—by £5 a week. That would, at a stroke, lift 30,000 children in Scotland out of poverty.

However, the economic condition that people find themselves in is not just pecuniary deprivation; a deprivation of power comes with poverty, as well. That powerlessness leads to hopelessness and, all too often, to acquiescence.

We need not just economic growth; we need a fundamental change in the wider organisation of the economy. We need not just a redistribution of wealth, but a redistribution of power. Our demand—the Labour demand—is not simply to take the tears out of capitalism; it is to bring about a change that is much more radical than that. It is to bring about change that is based upon transformed relations of power, and upon foundations of equality and democracy in our economy, so that Government spending on housing, education, old-age pensions and social security is viewed not as a private burden, but as a social investment, and so that we create a truly civilised society that is productive, but shares its wealth with a sense of social justice, social cohesion and solidarity of human spirit, with all of that standing on a rock of faith—that old Labour rock of faith—in equality and the equal worth of all.

15:31

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): The main purpose of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill is to set in law a series of targets for the reduction of child poverty. The challenge of achieving those targets was underscored earlier this year, when

the latest child poverty statistics revealed that there had been a 4 per cent rise in relative child poverty in just one year. As we know, that is a rise of 40,000 children, to 260,000 children.

Relative child poverty can be an opaque term—Liz Smith touched on that—but Peter Townsend, who was Britain's leading expert on poverty, argued that it occurs when someone lives with resources that are

“so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.”

They are excluded from the little trips out that some may take for granted, which Alex Neil described so well.

There are 260,000 children whose families cannot afford to feed them the same breakfast as their classmates have every morning and, as a result, they struggle to concentrate at school. A quarter of a million children are not able to go on the school trips from which their peers get great educational benefit. For constituency members in the chamber, that is 3,500 children in each constituency; for regional members such as me, that is 32,500 children in each region. That is the scale of the challenge that we face.

I will remind members why the bill is needed. The statutory child poverty targets in the bill have existed before, but they were removed last year by the UK Government's Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 in favour of measures that relate to worklessness and educational attainment. Although I agree that worklessness is linked to poverty—as, indeed, is educational attainment—the focus on worklessness implies that work is always a route out of poverty, and, as we have heard, that is simply not the case.

In December, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation released figures that showed that one in every eight workers in the UK—that is 3.8 million people—is now living in poverty. A total of 2.6 million children across the UK are in poverty despite their being in a working family, and in Scotland—we have heard this, but the figures bear repetition—70 per cent of children in poverty live in households with at least one working adult. That is a 15 per cent increase between 2010-11 and 2015-16.

Child poverty is multifaceted, but the lack of an adequate income—whether that income is from work or benefits or from a mixture of both—remains its defining characteristic, and that must remain central to any poverty measurement and any strategy to decrease child poverty. That is why the Greens warmly welcome the reinstating of the targets and why we will support the principles of the bill at decision time.

I will lodge an amendment to the bill to ensure that the delivery plans cover five key recommendations of the end child poverty coalition. The first relates to the full use of the social security system. We know that using social security benefits to boost the incomes of our poorest families can pull hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty. We know that because it has been done before—Richard Leonard and Alex Rowley touched on that. However, that has been undone in recent years by so-called welfare reform.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies suggests that the projected increase in child poverty can be entirely explained by the direct impact of reforms to tax and benefits. The IFS also argues that investment in child benefit and child tax credits between the mid 1990s and 2010 was the key factor behind historically and internationally unprecedented reductions in child poverty and associated improvements in child wellbeing.

Now we are going backwards. It is projected that, by 2020, child benefit will have lost 28 per cent of the value that it had in 2010. We can start to address that by adding an extra £5 to the benefit. The Child Poverty Action Group and the Scottish Greens have called for such a top-up, and Pauline McNeill called for that approach today.

We know that, when child benefit is paid, it goes to more of its intended recipients than is the case for almost any other benefit apart from the state pension, with 95 per cent of those who are eligible for child benefit making a successful claim. I very much welcome the significant improvements to early years grants that were announced on Tuesday, but the sure start maternity grant reaches only around 50 per cent of eligible families. I have no doubt that the Scottish Government will work hard to increase that proportion, but we know that an increase in child benefit will get to those who need it and will make a huge difference to child poverty.

I accept that the near universality of child benefit means that some of the additional spending would go to relatively well-off families, whose children are not in poverty, but there are a range of problems with having a more means-tested approach.

CPAG commissioned research that shows that a £5 top-up would cut child poverty by 14 per cent, lifting 30,000 children out of poverty. That would quickly go a long way towards achieving the targets that the Scottish Government is setting. It is no wonder that the idea also has support from the Poverty Alliance, One Parent Families Scotland, the Church of Scotland and the new Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland as well as the outgoing one. Food banks report that child benefit is often the only source of

income for the families that present to them, for whom means-tested benefits and the system that delivers them have failed.

The Scottish Government describes social security as an investment and I agree wholeheartedly with that approach. At a cost of around £250 million annually, a £5 top-up would indeed be a significant investment. However, as we heard from other members, Loughborough University conservatively estimates that child poverty costs us £750 million a year. It is an investment that we cannot afford not to make.

The targets in the bill represent a major challenge, but it is a challenge to which we must rise. We should be ashamed that, in such a wealthy country, so many of our children live below the average accepted standard. The likelihood is that children who live in poverty will stay there and that their own children will experience poverty, too. We need to break that cycle.

The bill needs to be clearer about how the targets will be achieved and should provide for more policy tools to achieve the targets and break the cycle. Nonetheless, what we have before us today is potentially the beginning of the end of child poverty in Scotland, and I commend the Scottish Government for having that ambition.

15:38

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): When Alex Neil is on his feet and on such form, I always think that he needs a stage, not a microphone.

Let me say, first, that the Liberal Democrats very much support the bill, and, secondly, that my social liberalism is rather closer to the views of Alex Neil and Richard Leonard than it is to the economic views of members on the Conservative benches. I say that not in a politically aggressive way but because the arguments are stronger on that side of the equation.

There are two influences on me in the context of this vital area of public policy. One is Sir Harry Burns, the former chief medical officer. In evidence to a parliamentary committee of which I was a member—I forget which committee it was, but it was in the previous session or the session before—he laid out in stark, simple but incredibly elegant terms the crucial links, for young people as well as older people, between having no job—or, as Richard Leonard rightly put it, poverty wages—and a lack of educational attainment or educational failure, poor housing, health inequalities and stress and mental health issues. He set out the need to address the issue in the round and to address the underlying reality of what poverty means for far too many people.

As the cabinet secretary and many other members, including Alison Johnstone, have said, the bald statistics are scary and frightening—we can use whatever rhetoric we want to use, especially seven days before an election. It cannot be good enough that so many young Scots fall into the definition of poverty and face circumstances that none of us finds in any way acceptable, whichever side of the political equation we belong on.

The second influence is Naomi Eisenstadt, whom Pauline McNeill rightly mentioned. She is not an academic that I would take on on any basis whatsoever, and she gave a tub-thumping speech at the Scottish Council for Development and Industry forum a month or so ago. The cabinet secretary will forgive me for mentioning that she was not particularly kind about such things as the council tax freeze—that can be no surprise to anyone on the SNP benches. She said fundamental things about universalism and the challenge that it means, as opposed to the choices that we can make in politics and where we should direct our resources, efforts and approach.

We should listen to those people of Scottish and international importance when they analyse why poverty has to be addressed, how we should address it and the reasons and underlying feelings behind public policy at this time. I hope that the bill will be part of a series of measures that should be taken to address exactly those issues. It is right, philosophically and in practice, to produce legislation to eradicate poverty. It cannot be acceptable that more than a quarter of young Scots live in relative poverty. As members have said, the Institute for Fiscal Studies forecast that child poverty across the UK will rise by 50 per cent by 2020 has to be utterly unacceptable to any Government of any political persuasion. The response to that forecast cannot be to say that we will have more of the same.

Those are the challenges, and there seem to be three points to address on the specific measures that the Government proposes in the bill, although I am not sure that I have got them worked out yet. The first point is on targets. As Alex Neil said, we can all agree to targets—all Governments run those out, and they are the easiest thing going—but, if we do not meet targets, what happens then? A response to that question is what happened with CO₂ emissions: the Government missed its targets but, because of parliamentary pressures including from its own side, it has started to move in the right direction.

I was not sure about Adam Tomkins's analysis that more targets are needed in the bill, although I may have picked that up wrongly and would be happy to give way on that point. If educational attainment targets were to be included in the bill,

which is what I think he was hinting at, why stop there? We could include sports participation levels, fuel poverty targets—in my part of the world, fuel poverty comes down to a choice between heat and food for too many families—or targets for house build completion based on building insulation challenges and standards.

If we were to amend the bill to widen the targets, we would have to be conscious of where that would lead for the organisations on which we would lay those targets. Local government or an agency or body, not the Government, would ultimately have to achieve the targets. We would then haul ourselves into a world of constant ministerial direction irrespective of which party was in Government. If the Parliament agrees to a target and X local authority area—for example, Glasgow—does not achieve it, what will the minister do about it? In making such proposals for stages 2 and 3, members need to be careful and analyse what they are setting themselves up for.

My second point is on the proposal for an independent commission. The briefings that we received for the debate were thoughtful and highly articulate, and they seemed to share a common view that an independent commission is the right way forward. Like Pauline McNeill, however, I have my doubts about setting up yet another independent commission, and I hope that the Government will think carefully about it. Alex Neil made a sensible proposal—[*Interruption.*] Did you hear the baby cry when I mentioned Alex Neil, Presiding Officer? He brings tears to our eyes on so many occasions—sorry, Presiding Officer. A poverty and inequality commission is a worthy route forward on the issue.

My final point is on the independence of local government. The Scottish Government has every right to lay a duty on health boards; after all, they are at the beck and call of ministers—they do what they are told. The Government says, “Jump,” and the health boards say, “How high?” It should be remembered, however, that local government is different because it has its own mandate and responsibilities. It is also being told day in, day out that our Government's number 1 priority is educational attainment and closing the attainment gap. We need to be careful about now saying that the number 1 priority is child poverty. I would like the Government to reflect on the challenges of the approach that it wants to take. Education fits with child poverty, so what are the absolute criteria in that area?

Today is a long overdue call to arms. As Alex Neil rightly said, the challenge is now about getting things done. I make one final observation to the cabinet secretary. As the Deputy Presiding Officer and Mike Rumbles will remember, we went through some of this some years back with

medical inequalities and the Arbutnott formula. Proposals were made to move money from one health board area to another but politics got in the way. Good luck.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I have been a bit generous because we have a little time in hand.

15:46

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The introduction of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill, which contains ambitious statutory income targets and stringent reporting requirements at national and local level, is an important move and one that I, along with many others, welcome whole-heartedly.

Achieving the four main targets in the bill would, to quote the Child Poverty Action Group,

“make a huge difference to the health, wellbeing and future prospects of tens of thousands of children across Scotland”,

because only by increasing the incomes of families at risk of poverty can

“lasting progress be made towards improving child wellbeing”.

For that reason, it is correct that these targets are based on net household income. Although there are many dimensions to poverty, income, or lack of it, is unequivocally at the heart of them all. That is widely recognised by stakeholders, who have warmly welcomed the income-based focus of the bill. I share Peter Allan of Dundee City Council’s disdain of the claim that is often made by people in positions of privilege that poverty of aspiration is worse than poverty of income. It is not. Rather, as he said to the Social Security Committee,

“The poverty of having no money and sending your bairns to bed cold with nae food—that is poverty.

Whatever else the approach is about, it has to be about the money, but we know that the issue is not just about money.”—[*Official Report, Social Security Committee*, 20 April 2017; c 6.]

The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland has also stated its strong support for the four income-based targets, noting:

“These measures are internationally recognised as robust measures of child poverty and are the product of more than four decades of consultation and development by successive governments at UK and Scotland level.”

It is correct that the bill is target focused because, although we are well aware that targets and measuring on their own do not solve a problem, they create an unambiguous and overarching national aspiration of focusing diverse minds, approaches and organisations on one clear shared goal. When she gave evidence to the

Social Security Committee, Dr Margaret Hannah of NHS Fife said:

“For me, the target of addressing child poverty is an indicative target to mobilise us as a country towards something more ambitious on what is an intractable or difficult challenge.”—[*Official Report, Social Security Committee*, 20 April 2017; c 7.]

Similarly, Shelter Scotland recognises that the statutory income targets of the bill serve to focus the priorities and resources of policy makers at a national and local level.

The four main income targets provide a clear goal and a robust framework within which all manner of more detailed and nuanced approaches towards tackling child poverty can be discussed and included. They will be set out and scrutinised through the regular delivery plans, the first of which will be published by the Scottish Government before April 2018, with annual reports on progress also a requirement. Local authorities and health boards will also be required to produce annual local child poverty action reports outlining the action that they have taken to reduce child poverty.

The bill will galvanise action and focus minds across all Scottish Government portfolios and all local authorities and health boards. It will allow us to build on the wide range of work that is already being done to tackle poverty across Scotland, from the attainment fund to the council tax reduction scheme and the Scottish baby box, to name but a few. It will also give Parliament an opportunity to scrutinise and monitor the progress that is being made.

As a member of the Social Security Committee, I have heard extensive evidence in favour of interim targets and I agree that they would be helpful. I am pleased that the committee’s recent stage 1 report included the recommendation that interim targets should be on the face of the bill. However, any interim targets must be realistic and achievable and, crucially, they must drive momentum towards our goal of eradicating child poverty, not stall it.

It is worth reflecting on why we are even debating a Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill in the first place. We are here because the UK Tories took the disgraceful decision to repeal the UK-wide income-based targets for child poverty and to remove the child poverty remit from what was then the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. As is so often the case when we discuss social security, the contrast between the values and actions of this Scottish National Party Government and the Tory Government in Westminster could not be starker. As the Tories abandon their child poverty targets and push countless more children and families into poverty, the SNP Government is introducing its own ambitious targets and

signalling its unwavering commitment to eradicating child poverty.

I am not surprised that the Tories are anxious to bury the figures when it comes to their plans for lifting people out of poverty. In 2010, the Tory-Lib Dem coalition estimated that

“as many as 350,000 children and 500,000 working ... adults could be moved out of poverty”

by changes to welfare such as the introduction of universal credit. Far from reducing the numbers by hundreds of thousands, the scandalous reality is that the Tories’ programme of welfare reform, which now includes the callous two-child cap, is dramatically increasing child poverty, with a million more children expected to be living in poverty by 2020. I shudder to think of the further cost to society at the hands of an unfettered right-wing Tory Government.

Here at home, there will always be limitations to what the Scottish Government can achieve with one hand tied behind its back and shackled to a UK Tory Government whose hostile welfare policies are having a devastating impact on our communities. Too often, it can feel as though we are running just to stand still.

Much of our recent debate about social security in the chamber has been about mitigation and opposition, from the bedroom tax to the two-child cap and the rape clause. That is important, if regrettable. However, my ambitions for Scotland go far beyond mitigation and opposition. I do not underestimate the challenge that stands before us, which is a task that is made all the more difficult with a Tory Government in Westminster that is pursuing a cruel assault on low-income households, families, and pensioners. Child poverty, family incomes squeezed and pensions cut—that is the true cost of a Tory Government.

As we debate the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill today, it strikes me now more than ever that there is a clear choice to be made next week between Tory MPs, who will simply rubber-stamp more devastating cuts to social security, and SNP MPs, who will oppose austerity and call for a fairer society for all.

We all know which would be more helpful as we pursue the aim of this bill.

15:52

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): As a member of the Social Security Committee, I have had the opportunity to engage with the finer details of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill and to listen to the evidence that was presented to us by a number of organisations that do important work in this area. The organisations that gave evidence to us included Inclusion Scotland, the Law Society of

Scotland and the end child poverty coalition. They have had their say on the bill and it is encouraging to note their broad support for it. I thank them all for their input.

As my colleague Liz Smith said in her very careful and reasoned speech, tackling child poverty is not an easy task for any Government. Poverty in itself is a complicated issue and can arise for a number of different reasons. It can afflict any of us at any point in our lives. It is perhaps the complex nature of the issue that gives rise to varying views as to how it should be solved, and the bill that we have before us, contrasted with some of the suggestions that we have heard today, indicates how difficult it is to arrive at an agreed position on how to improve the situation.

What is clear is that, with 21 per cent of children living in a household that is in absolute poverty—16 percentage points from the 5 per cent target that is set for 2030 in this proposed legislation—progress must be made.

In order to really tackle the problem of child poverty, we cannot simply identify the numbers and then throw money at the problem without thinking about what lies at the heart of it. We must have credible and detailed plans for tackling it at its root, including a holistic approach in which the Government facilitates the tools that give people who need it a helping hand up so that they can help themselves.

Ash Denham (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP): A number of Conservative speakers this afternoon have referred to the need to discover the “root causes” of child poverty, as if the issue is in some way mysterious. Perhaps I can explain the matter by pointing out that in a recent report the Institute for Fiscal Studies said—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: This is an intervention, not a speech.

Ash Denham: I am coming to a question.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Keep it short, please.

Ash Denham: The IFS says that an additional 1.2 million children will be pushed into relative poverty by 2021 because of UK tax and benefit changes. The root cause here is a Tory Government. Will the member reflect on that?

Gordon Lindhurst: No, not at this stage. I thought that the member was asking a question, not giving a speech.

Returning to my own speech, I suggest that the attainment gap and worklessness are examples of the problems that need to be solved. We need to make sure that our young people, from all backgrounds, are equipped with the skills that will be vital to them throughout their life and which will

send them out, justly confident, into the world of work.

Sandra White: Will the member give way?

Gordon Lindhurst: Why not?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I do not think that that was terribly gallant.

Sandra White: I do not mind, Presiding Officer—I can be gallant in return.

The member mentioned the attainment gap. It seems to be the issue that the Tories are pushing, but does the member not agree with me and, indeed, experts that a child who is not getting the right food or heat will find even going to school a challenge? If people are not getting the right food, their brains will not develop in the same way. Surely the member must recognise that, in order to attain, people need to eat the right food and, at least, have heat in their houses.

Gordon Lindhurst: I meant no disrespect to the convener of the Social Security Committee in my response to her desire to make an intervention, and I would not wish it to be understood in that way. I agree with her, because as I have said the issues arise from the complex interplay of many factors. I therefore do not disagree with what she has said, and I thank her for her intervention.

It is unacceptable that the percentage of primary 7 pupils from the most deprived areas performing well in numeracy dropped by more than 7 points between 2014 and 2016. Such a drop does nothing to end the cycle of poverty in some of our most deprived communities, and I am confident that closing and eventually ending the attainment gap could play a big part in meeting the targets that have been set out, alongside other measures that have been referred to by other members and which clearly relate to the underlying causes of poverty.

The Government also needs to step back regularly and assess the broad picture of the effects of its measures on tackling child poverty. The risk of not doing so is that we reach 2030 and find child poverty unchanged—or worse. That would be a waste of 13 years.

Elaine Smith: Will the member give way?

Gordon Lindhurst: Not at this point. At this stage, I wish to make some progress.

Like others, I raised the issue of interim targets in the committee, and I am pleased that the committee report includes the recommendation that interim targets be put on the face of the bill and on a statutory footing. Of course, that is different from including the targets in a statutory instrument; it will aid our focus on them, give them greater immediacy and provide the certainty that statutory instruments do not. Statutory instruments

can be so easily hollowed out to defeat the purpose of primary legislation and render it ineffective.

I acknowledge the comments that the cabinet secretary has made on interim targets, and I agree that they must be considered carefully instead of simply being plucked from a particular point on a scale that works towards the end goal in 2030. Targets are important; they must be bold, but they must also, as has been said, be credible.

It is important that successive Governments between now and 2030 are accountable for the actions that they take to bring down child poverty. It is an issue that pervades political cycles and cannot simply be dropped beyond the next election, whatever party happens to be in power. I hope therefore that the Government takes on board the committee's views on the establishment of a statutory commission that has parliamentary oversight and is fully independent of Government, so that it can have the confidence of the Parliament to hold the Government to account.

The Scottish Conservatives are pleased to support the principles of the bill in the hope that the measures to tackle child poverty are strengthened. Parties in the chamber are agreed on the end goal and I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues on the process of how we get there. We must be tough on child poverty and the causes of child poverty.

16:00

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): As a member of the Social Security Committee, I thank all the witnesses who gave evidence to the committee, fellow committee members for their collaborative spirit and the committee clerks for all their work and assistance.

We live in a rich country—Scotland and Britain are rich countries. However, despite that, today hundreds of thousands of children on these islands will, totally unjustifiably and inexcusably, suffer the consequences of unnecessary man-made poverty. As David Hayman put it so powerfully recently,

“they will go to sleep at night in unheated rooms with [little or] nothing in their bellies; they will never get a birthday present; they will never get a Christmas present; no one will ever buy them an ice cream; no one will ever take them to see Star Wars.”

Their opportunities to give their best and make the most of their abilities will be needlessly curtailed and damaged. Every day will be a struggle to get by for them and their families.

In Britain right now, 4 million children live in poverty. The IFS has stated that, under UK Government welfare reform and austerity, that

figure will rise to 5 million—which, shockingly, is around the same as the population of Scotland.

It does not have to be this way. By progressing the bill through Parliament we can start another chapter in the process of trying to change the unacceptable reality that here in Scotland more than one in four children—approximately 260,000 children—are officially recognised as living in poverty. That figure has increased by around 40,000 since 2014-15, principally as a result of UK Government policy.

I very much welcome the bill as a means to focus the minds of policy makers by way of the income-based targets that it proposes and its introduction of a set of robust reporting mechanisms. If, by the will of the Parliament, the bill is passed, it will re-establish income targets on child poverty in Scotland after the UK Government regrettably repealed large parts of the Child Poverty Act 2010.

I support the enhanced targets set out in section 1 of the bill. They are suitably ambitious and realistic. Although the bill alone will not eradicate child poverty, it will meaningfully pave the way for more action to be taken to

“ensure the scandal of child poverty remains high on the public and political agenda.”

Those are the words of the campaign to end child poverty.

On the subject of keeping the issue on the public and political agenda, the committee heard strong and persuasive evidence from many witnesses that interim targets would aid focus and create greater immediacy. I welcome the cabinet secretary’s commitment, made in response to the committee’s report, to lodge an amendment at stage 2 to place the principle of interim targets on a statutory footing.

In order to meet interim and final income-based targets, I strongly support the Scottish Government’s determination for the bill to co-ordinate action to tackle poverty through the proposed delivery plans. Those will be pivotal in focusing Scottish Government and multi-agency action on achieving the targets and making the necessary difference to assist the children who are so unfairly affected.

The delivery plans will also be crucial in ensuring that we adapt to and deal with any further UK Government cuts or unhelpful decisions that the UK Government might make on reserved issues.

Given the importance of the delivery plans, the committee recommended that the Scottish Government consider the evidence that we received about issues, concepts and strategies to be included in them, so I welcome the cabinet

secretary’s commitment to lodge an amendment at stage 2 setting out appropriate areas to be taken account of in the delivery plans, including making specific reference to the measurement framework and taking budget considerations into account.

When I made my first speech in this chamber around a year ago, I spoke of our

“unifying hope of a better Scotland”—[*Official Report*, 26 May 2016; c 81.]

and, despite some apparent party-political differences, I believe that there is a unifying hope in the chamber that we get this right and that the legislation and resulting action make the difference that is undoubtedly required.

What is equally, if not more important is the continued need, for as long as Scotland remains part of the UK, for all of us to oppose destructive and unhelpful Westminster Government policies, which have most often been the cause of increases in child poverty in our time. Therefore, in good faith, I ask all fellow members of the Scottish Parliament, of all parties, to press whoever is in the next UK Government to reverse the austerity and welfare reform policies that are having a devastating effect on communities and increasing child poverty on these islands, and to press any UK Government to tackle low pay and insecure work because the root causes—as has been mentioned today—are low pay, insecure work, welfare cuts and fiscal austerity, powers on all of which primarily lie with the Westminster Parliament.

Austerity and child poverty are not only ethical issues; they make no economic sense. The Child Poverty Action Group has identified the costs of child poverty as coming to £29 billion a year. That includes the cost of policy interventions, long-term losses to the economy, lower educational attainment and poorer mental and physical health. It is therefore in all our interests to tackle child poverty in Scotland and beyond, for ethical and economic reasons.

Shelter Scotland has stated:

“The interconnected issues of poverty, homelessness, high housing costs and welfare changes must be addressed together if we are to meaningfully tackle them.”

I support the general principles of the bill because it is an important and helpful step in the wider process of positive socioeconomic change. If passed, the bill will send a message of intent and provide the foundations for ensuring a sustained focus at a Scottish Government level and at a local level.

Child poverty is not an inevitability of a market-based economy; it is a result of ideological neo-liberal economic policies that have been created by politicians on the right and encouraged by

those with power and an interest in preserving the status quo.

I believe that the bill can be part of a process of change and will help to create a renewed shift in social consciousness towards creating a fairer and more compassionate society.

The bill helps to refocus all our efforts and reminds us that we can tackle the man-made problem of child poverty in our communities and in our time with urgency and collective determination.

16:08

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): Last Sunday, at a Jeremy Corbyn event in Glasgow, Ian Lavery—Labour's candidate for Wansbeck—told us that on a school visit in his constituency, he saw a young boy in detention. When he inquired as to why, he found out that the boy's crime was taking a sandwich from a classmate's bag because he was so hungry.

It really is unbelievable that we have to debate child poverty in the 21st century. However, the statistics in the committee report show that we do. The report tells us—and we have heard it from other members today—that more than a quarter of children in Scotland in 2015-16 were living in relative poverty after housing costs, which is an increase from the previous year, and more than one in three children in Glasgow are currently living in poverty.

I commend the committee on its report, which is certainly a very worthy piece of work. However, it lacks the real-life stories that lie behind the statistics and the passion that drives the determination to end child poverty. Of course, that may be because the bill under scrutiny is one that simply sets out targets and provides a framework for reporting. As such, it does not specify the policy actions or level of resources that will be needed to reduce levels of child poverty.

On that issue, I note the cabinet secretary's remarks earlier in the debate, and the committee convener's speech in which she provided more depth on the report.

As it seems that we all agree that the general principles of the bill should be supported, it is important to consider exactly why we need targets and reporting, and why—as Labour believes—we need a statutory duty to reduce child poverty.

The *Holyrood* baby initiative is interesting. I am sure that we all know a Kirsty—a child who lives in poverty in a working family. The Kirsty I know is a smart wee eight-year-old. She is a talented singer and she has fantastic class reports, but the worry is whether that will be sustained as she goes through the school system, living in a family in

which her parents work hard but are struggling just to get by.

Kirsty spent the first five years of her life sharing a bedroom with her parents in a private flat with no outside space. In those five years, there was not one offer of council housing, so the family scrimped, saved and borrowed to buy a small two-bedroom flat. Kirsty's dad works shifts in a factory, and her mum can work only part-time in a shop because the family cannot afford childcare. Kirsty's mum has no choice but to work Sundays and, to make matters even worse, her employer has just taken away her Sunday allowance. It is a rare occurrence for Kirsty's mum and dad to have a day off together, so the right to family life is not obvious for this hard-working family, and holidays are a luxury that they simply cannot afford.

Originally, the family got tax credits, which were welcome, but then the department made a mistake—and guess what? It was the family that had to pay the money back, which is affecting their already strained resources.

Another current worry is that, when Kirsty goes back to school after summer, she will be in primary 4, so she will no longer get free school meals. She is lucky that her mum breastfed her for a couple of years, which gave her the best nutritional start, and that she has had a good hot meal for the first three years of school, but now that meal will be a sandwich.

Perhaps that particular wee Kirsty will get to university—she is certainly clever enough, and not having tuition fees in Scotland helps. However, without grant funding, it is just as likely that she will have to try to get a job instead. In fact, research that is reported in today's *Herald* tells us that teenagers from poorer families are less likely to apply for university as a result of concerns about debt.

Too many children in this country are living like Kirsty: children whose parents work hard just to make ends meet and to feed and clothe their family. Their immediate aspirations are to have secure housing, an annual holiday and the odd luxury such as a visit to the cinema or a meal out, as my colleague Alex Neil mentioned. Others do not even have a home, and they rely on food banks and charity shops to feed and clothe their family. Shelter Scotland says that it is

“appalled at the level of child poverty across Scotland and alarmed by the recent increase”,

and that

“more must be done by all partners to urgently address the causes, consequences and responses to poverty”.

To go back to the example of Kirsty, I will mention a few actions that would make a big difference. Providing all families with decent,

secure and affordable housing with outside space for children to play in is vital. Last year, there were nearly 6,000 Scottish children living in homeless households in temporary accommodation, which represented an increase of 17 per cent on the previous year.

To address that, a Labour Government would, if elected next week, implement the most radical house-building programme since the war, and Scotland would gain the consequential from that. Labour would extend free school meals to all primary school children—a policy for which I have long campaigned, as colleagues who have been in Parliament as long as I have will know. That used to be SNP policy, but the policy of free school meals in primary 1 to 3 was implemented as a result of the Tory-Liberal coalition introducing it and passing on the Barnett consequential. Unfortunately, the Tories now want to take that food out of the mouths of children.

Childcare is another vital issue in tackling child poverty and allowing families to earn. The Scottish Government pledged to double the provision of free childcare in Scotland, which is very welcome, but private nurseries say that the scheme will fail if the rate that is offered to nurseries does not cover costs. Labour will give families what they need, with flexible, all-age, year-round, wraparound affordable childcare.

As the rich grow richer and wonder where their next yacht is coming from, the poor grow poorer and wonder where their next meal is coming from. The gap is widening, with the wealthiest 1 per cent owning more wealth than the bottom 50 per cent, according to the “Wealth and Assets in Scotland 2006-2014” report that the Scottish Government published in February.

We have the powers in this Parliament to tackle child poverty and the bill provides the tools to measure it. Now we just need the political will to eradicate the appalling reality of child poverty from our rich country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I am allowing fairly wide-ranging speeches that are deviating a little bit from the fact that it is a stage 1 debate, but I understand why.

16:15

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): As a member of the Social Security Committee, I welcome this stage 1 debate. I am passionate about the bill. Like, I am sure, most members in the chamber, there is nothing that I want more than for the children of Scotland to flourish and thrive. I want our children to achieve their dreams and I am committed to knocking down any barriers that they may face as a result of their circumstances, family income or postcode.

I want to pass on a prosperous and fair country to my children and grandchildren—like Alex Neil, I am a grandparent, but I am obviously a wee bit younger than him—and I want to know that future generations will not be negatively affected by the harsh and frankly unforgivable UK Tory cuts. To achieve that, we must ensure that every child in Scotland is protected and given every opportunity to succeed, and we must break the often crippling cycles of poverty in which hard-working families all too frequently find themselves trapped.

I agree with Alex Neil that it is not enough just to measure poverty, and I believe that the bill is a step in the right direction. We need to see where the areas of poverty are and get the data, which many of the individuals who came to the committee said that we need to get.

In such debates, areas such as Paisley, and Ferguslie Park in particular, come to mind, as they are always regarded as areas of deprivation. Richard Leonard was correct to say that there have been issues with poverty in those areas for generations. I know that that is true because my family come from Ferguslie Park. My father got a trade and was able to work his way out of that, but many of his colleagues, friends and schoolmates are still there and have lived that life. I know them because they come and tell me that they kent ma faither. They tell me about their problems and about things that have happened in their lives.

If we are talking, as Elaine Smith did, about real-life stories, that is very real for me. We need to get the proposals right, because those are people who my father grew up with, and we are now dealing with people who I grew up with. That is where my family come from. I want to get away from talking about such places as areas of deprivation and to talk about how much they can give our communities, because Ferguslie Park is also a vibrant place to live.

Since the SNP Government came to power, we have seen a host of policies and approaches that have contributed to tackling child poverty. Unfortunately, our hands remain tied behind our backs in the face of further UK austerity and cuts, which are pushing more people into poverty every day. That is simply unacceptable. Like my colleagues, I am appalled that in today's society one in four children live in relative poverty and more than 1 million people live in relative poverty after they have paid their housing costs. Action must be taken and the bill is a crucial step forward, although it is not the only thing that will make the difference.

The Scottish Government is committed to taking great steps forward in tackling the issue and, after the bill is passed, Scotland will be the only part of the UK to have statutory targets on addressing child poverty. Not only does the bill set out four

headline targets with the goal of eradicating child poverty by 2030, which is extremely ambitious, but, most important, it holds every Government department responsible, and it places a duty on our ministers to publish delivery plans at regular intervals and to report on progress annually. Tackling poverty is everyone's responsibility and the bill recognises the importance of successful reporting mechanisms and clear co-operation across the country.

The delivery plans will contain a baseline against which progress can be measured and will call on local authorities, partner health boards, community planning partners and wider organisations such as employers and housing providers to work in partnership on shared priorities in order to deliver leadership and support for the goal of eliminating child poverty once and for all. The four targets that were proposed in the consultation, including the goal of halving the number of children who live in relative poverty, have received strong support from poverty experts across the UK, such as the Child Poverty Action Group and the Poverty Alliance, and they are regarded as more challenging than those that the UK Government repealed, because they take housing costs into account.

The child poverty measurement framework, which is already in place, addresses the wider range of drivers of poverty alongside the impact that poverty has on the lives of children and families. The three Ps—pockets, prospects and places—are part of an approach that focuses on maximising household resource and improving children's health and wellbeing through the provision of well-designed, sustainable and, ultimately, accessible places. The Government's new approach will build on and develop that already-supported network, with the emphasis continuing to be placed on regular reporting.

That reporting and information will provide us with valuable data about where we need to focus future Government policies and will inform our discussions and decision making. That is one of the fundamental parts of the bill—the fact that we will be able to provide ourselves with the crucial data that we need. Of course, what the Scottish Government does with that data is key to helping people. As Tavish Scott said, that is the point at which we will get things done on child poverty.

We are already dealing with the issue. The UK Government's welfare reforms have had a significant effect on people in my constituency, as Ferguslie Park is one of the areas that are most affected by Tory austerity. A child who is born in Bishopton will live 16.4 years longer than a child who is born in Ferguslie. It is essential that children in Scotland do not continue to be victims of the UK Conservative Party and are not

penalised because of their postcode, household or circumstances from the minute that they enter this world and open their eyes. The Scottish Government will continue to protect our most vulnerable citizens and those on low incomes by mitigating some of the worst impacts of the Tory cuts.

As I said earlier, the bill and its intentions mean a lot to me. I have explained my background, of which I am extremely proud, and I have said how the bill can make a difference. It can be one step on the journey towards ensuring that every child in Scotland gets the same start and opportunities in life, regardless of where they come from or where they are born.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Neil, I am not offended that you had your back to the chair throughout Mr Adam's speech, as I realise that you were merely being attentive to the speech. However, I remind members not to sit with their backs to the chair throughout the debate.

16:22

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I had prepared a speech for the debate but, over the afternoon, I have scribbled over it and pretty much rewritten the whole thing. That might make more sense in a moment, when members hear what I have to say.

Like some other members, I will start by sharing a story to set the scene and explain why the debate is so important. It is a tale of someone growing up in a tenement flat in a fairly typical council estate in Scotland. The family includes an unemployed, alcoholic father, who more often than not drinks the benefits payment the day that it arrives, and a mother who cobbles together as many part-time jobs as she can to ensure that food is on the table—she is sometimes paid cash in hand. Dinner that night might be a Pot Noodle, or it might be a handout from a local church. There are problems in the household with addiction, domestic violence and depression. Are those problems the by-products of the living conditions, or is it the other way around? I will be honest: I do not know. I wish that I knew the answer.

Many families on that estate—or scheme, as we call it—are unemployed. There are households where a whole generation has never worked, apart from in black-market or cash-in-hand jobs. People live in each other's houses and each other's pockets. Whoever gets paid that day provides a home to the rest of the close. It could be called a community, but it is also grimy, chaotic and sometimes dangerous.

The child in the house is often the only child who cannot afford school trips; whose uniform is never quite as new as anyone else's; who turns up

to school hungry; who has to walk to school rather than get the bus, because they have no money; who never goes on holiday when their classmates do; and whose teachers know that they are having a difficult time at home but are helpless when it comes to doing anything and can offer only sympathy. However, no matter how bad school is, it is at least not home.

I am sure that we can all imagine such a scene. It is normality to some people. If someone does not know any different or better, they accept what they have, because that is how it has always been.

That story is the story of my childhood. I do not share it with members as a sob story; this is not an “X Factor” audition. I was taken with George Adam’s speech and his sharing of his experiences of Paisley, which is just a few miles up the road from where I grew up in Greenock. I want the chamber to hear my story because I want to approach the subject with the gravest attitude and a heartfelt intention that we, as legislators, must get this right. The Gibshill estate in Greenock might have changed a lot since the 1980s, but it is still just as sad that we are having this debate today.

Pauline McNeill: I commend the member for his courage in bringing us his personal story. I found listening to it quite emotional, and I do not detract from it at all. However, the picture that has been painted of child poverty in today’s Britain is one in which the child who cannot afford the school trip is the child whose family are in work. Will the member acknowledge that that is the picture that we must work out the answers to?

Jamie Greene: I accept that, which is why, in sharing my experience, I said that my mother worked as much as she could. We had income—we did not rely entirely on state welfare benefits—so I accept that there are families who still struggle even though the parents are working. I do not detract from that whatever.

I mentioned my story because for me to stand up today and be partisan in any way would not be the right thing to do, given the subject matter. I have heard some contributions in which I have been quite disappointed, as I know the members who made them. The theme that the Tories are bad and the SNP is good—or that this party or policy is good and that one is bad—does the subject no justice whatever.

In the little time that I have left, I will talk briefly about the bill. There are lots of words in it—lots of definitions, calculations, measurements, reports and targets. They are all well and good, and they are the foundations of the bill. However, only one section talks about the delivery plan. It is not the job of legislation to define policy; that is a political

decision for the Government of the day. However, it is interesting to note that the Social Security Committee acknowledges that the setting of targets alone will not reduce poverty. I am new to the legislative process, so I do not pretend to know the answer to how a bill addresses the root causes of poverty. Surely, though, it must be about more than just how to measure income levels.

I do not have a problem with the concept of the bill, but the documentation says that the Scottish Government does not control all the levers that it needs to control in order to improve the lives of everyone in Scotland. Powers over education and health are devolved so, in the later stages of the bill, I would like to see what has been done to include matters such as closing the attainment gap. Good results at school make a difference; I guarantee members that I would not be standing here today if they did not. My family might not have had money when I was a child, but we did have books.

How will the bill address the problem of long-term worklessness in a home? How will it ensure that funding for third sector or local authority services that tackle alcoholism, drug abuse and domestic violence is protected or is in place? How will we look after grass-roots activity to address poverty? Will those points be just in the delivery plan? If they are, what recourse will be available to us, as a Parliament, if impacts are not adequate and are not independently measured? It is not just health and education services that will fix the problem, just as it is not only income that defines poverty.

I had much more to say but, in the spirit of the debate, I want to be clear that I have no interest in opposition for the sake of it as we go through the stages of the bill, and neither do I think that one party or another holds a magic wand that will eradicate child poverty. Good will and good ideas are coming from every side. I genuinely hope, and I believe, that the Parliament—even with our disagreements and our political posturing—can bring out the best of the ideas at stage 2, so that the end product is not just words on paper and so that, in 30 years’ time, an MSP does not have to stand up in the chamber and share his story, because there will be no need to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Greene. I call Clare Adamson, who is the last speaker in the open debate. We will move to closing speeches after that—members have been warned.

16:29

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am not a member of the Social Security Committee, but I thank its convener and members

for putting together the stage 1 report and all those who contributed to the consultation and to the committee's work and its evidence sessions. I am sure that those sessions were not easy at any point. I also commend some of the organisations that have provided briefings for the debate. I will pick out a few to quote.

Children 1st emphasises that one in five children experiences poverty and that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has stated that child poverty will increase by 50 per cent by 2020. Those are absolutely startling statistics. Children 1st also notes that local government, community planning partnerships and community-based third sector organisations play a vital role in tackling child poverty, and it welcomes the inclusion of local authorities and health boards in the legislative framework.

The briefing from the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland highlights the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the articles that are pertinent to the committee's work at this stage.

CPAG, which supports the aims of the bill, highlights that poverty costs the country £29 billion a year. It quantified the cost of policy interventions and long-term losses to the economy through lower educational attainment and poor mental and physical health. I think that it was Tavish Scott who talked about Harry Burns's work on health inequalities, which also highlighted those areas.

In North Lanarkshire, where I live and grew up, 25 per cent of the children live in poverty.

Inclusion Scotland highlights the disproportionate effect of poverty on families who are affected by disability—that includes families where there is a disabled child and families where there is a disabled parent. I look forward to getting an insight from the cabinet secretary about how she will tackle the particular issues around disabilities.

Sandra White talked about the consensus that the committee was able to reach. I am delighted that that was achieved, but I am a bit surprised that it happened, given some of the debate this afternoon. There is a gulf between those on the Tory benches and members of every other party about the symptoms and the causes of poverty. What many of my colleagues and I see as the symptoms of poverty the Tories seem to think are the causes of poverty. It is more complex than that, and I hope that, if nothing else, we can move forward in agreement that poverty is incredibly difficult to tackle.

A lot of emphasis has been placed on educational underattainment. How can Mr Tomkins ignore the actions of his colleagues on North Lanarkshire Council, who have supported

Labour in slashing the number of classroom assistants? It is possible that up 198 posts will go. How can that help with educational attainment?

We have heard about workless families, but 70 per cent of children in poverty are from families in working poverty. I cannot understand how the Tories can argue that the two-child tax credit limit, along with its horrible rape clause, will do anything other than exacerbate the problem. The Department for Work and Pensions has estimated that 3,600 households in Scotland will be detrimentally impacted by that benefit cap.

Scotland has opportunities. It is a modern, successful country, with a wealth of talent and natural resources. It is completely unacceptable that one in four of our children—our bairns—grows up in poverty.

I fully welcome the bill's ambitions and aims, and wish the committee well in the stage 2 proceedings. I am particularly grateful that the bill includes a child poverty measurement framework, which is a huge step towards helping us understand the drivers of poverty.

Alex Rowley: Clare Adamson highlighted one council where classroom assistants are being taken away. Does she agree that we need to look at having poverty impact assessments of every policy and budget decision taken by the Scottish Government and by every arm of government, including local government and the health boards? Should we have a poverty impact assessment for every financial decision?

Clare Adamson: That would certainly help to inform people's decision making. However, I have heard Mr Rowley argue many times about the council tax freeze and its effect on the ability of local government to provide services. I mentioned that local councils will be included in the legislative framework, which is fantastic. North Lanarkshire Council could have raised £3.8 million in additional funding had it chosen to increase the council tax to protect services, but on this occasion it failed to do that.

Presiding Officer, I think that I have run out of time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No—I have not waved my pen yet.

Clare Adamson: Okay.

I congratulate the Scottish Government on the work that it is already doing to tackle poverty, including the £750 million attainment programme, which will help close the attainment gap; the £29 million programme to tackle poverty across Scotland, which includes £12.5 million from the European social fund; the healthy and nutritious free school meals that are benefiting our primary 1 to primary 3 children; the introduction of the baby

box; and the educational maintenance allowance, which we have kept and which supports children and students from poorer backgrounds to maintain their position in the education system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches. Members have made my weekend—you are all in the chamber for the closing speeches, so I am a happy bunny now. I call Alex Rowley to close for Labour. Six minutes, please, Mr Rowley.

16:36

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer—I am happy if you are happy.

This has been a welcome debate. I commend the Social Security Committee for its work on the bill and the report that it has produced. It is important that we have such debates in the chamber, because we need them. We need debates about poverty across the country. The levels of poverty and inequality in Scotland are surely not acceptable to anyone in the chamber. How we tackle inequality and poverty is a big question with big challenges, and the debate about it is wider than the debate that we have had today. I believe that it is a debate that the whole country needs to have, and I hope that, as the bill progresses from stage 1 to stages 2 and 3, we will be able to widen the debate to include communities across Scotland.

The cabinet secretary talked about the UK Government's announcement in 2015 of its intention to repeal significant parts of the Child Poverty Act 2010, and Jamie Greene referred to taking the politics out of the debate—the SNP being good and the Tories being bad is how I think that he put it. We must acknowledge that the Government can and should address poverty and inequality, and how much is done in that regard is down to the Government. As I said to Liz Smith, the previous Labour Government cut child poverty numbers in the UK by more than 1 million. That did not happen by accident; it happened because the Labour Government introduced a policy that targeted poverty and lifted children out of poverty.

I find it shocking that we have 40,000 more children in poverty in Scotland today than we did this time last year. The projected figures are fairly bleak, and how we address the issue is down to the Government and all politicians. Richard Leonard spoke about the need to redistribute not just wealth in this country but power. On the offerings that come from political parties, I urge those who are interested in tackling the bigger questions to look at the Labour Party manifesto that we are fighting the current election on. The manifesto has big ideas on how to redistribute

power and wealth within the United Kingdom, which is fundamentally what needs to happen.

When the UK Government made its decision on the repeal of the child poverty targets, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted its “serious concern”. It recommended that the UK

“Set up clear accountability mechanisms for the eradication of child poverty, including by re-establishing concrete targets with a set timeframe and measurable indicators”.

That is why there is unity across the chamber on the bill.

A number of members, including Alex Neil, Richard Leonard and Pauline McNeill, said that we must move beyond simply having targets. Having targets is one thing; being able to address poverty is another. Action speaks louder than words; action will speak louder than targets.

There are 40,000 more children in poverty in Scotland since last year. In 2017, 260,000 children in Scotland are living in poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies forecasts a 50 per cent increase in child poverty across the United Kingdom by 2020.

Under the Tories, the average household income in Scotland has fallen by more than £600 in the past year, and 467,000 Scottish people are earning less than the living wage. We must move beyond targets. That is why Labour is saying that a £10 living wage should be introduced across the UK. If we are serious about tackling poverty, we need to take the measures to be able to do that.

In Scotland, 70 per cent of children living in poverty are in a family where at least one person is in work. What are we going to do about that? As Ben Macpherson pointed out, when we reach 2030, we should not just say that another target has not been met. Governments of all colours are good at setting targets, but then not meeting them.

We need some coherent proposals, not just from the Government but from all of us who are involved in this debate. Part of that will involve a coherent anti-poverty strategy. All the existing strategy documents have not been pulled together, and I repeat my request to the cabinet secretary that she consider having a coherent anti-poverty strategy for Scotland and what that should look like.

As Pauline McNeill noted, a number of organisations have proposed the idea of increasing child benefit by £5 a week. If we achieved that over this session of Parliament, we would lift 30,000 children out of poverty. That is a target—it would be a direct result of a policy that we can actually introduce.

Former Government ministers sometimes talk about what they should have done when they were ministers. In his speech, Alex Neil said that,

when he was a minister, he asked about the cost of addressing the position of those on lower incomes, which was said to be £2 billion. I hope that the Social Security Committee will ask Mr Neil to give evidence on the proposal, which I think would be worth considering.

Let us consider what we need to do. Oxfam has been absolutely clear that the proposed commission should be “fully independent” of the Scottish Government in terms of both practice and perception. The cabinet secretary needs to take that on board. There is unity in the chamber, and we need an independent commission to scrutinise and ensure not just that there are targets but that there will be actions that will address poverty in Scotland.

16:44

Adam Tomkins: This has been a good-quality debate from all sides of the chamber, and it has included two sparkling and memorable speeches—one from Alex Neil and one from my friend and colleague Jamie Greene. Alex Neil’s speech was brilliant: it was brilliantly wrong, but it was brilliant, nonetheless. I will go straight to the issues that Alex Neil and Jamie Greene spoke about, which are not just philosophically and intellectually interesting but very important for getting our anti-poverty strategies right.

What is the relationship between not having enough money and all the other issues that we have talked about, including educational underattainment, the attainment gap, addiction and family breakdown? What is the cause of what, and what is the effect of what? Which is the by-product, as Jamie Greene put it? Jamie Greene said that he does not know what is the cause and what is the effect. That puts the finger on the issue with which Conservative members are trying to grapple. It is not our view that we can think only about addiction, family breakdown, educational underattainment and the rest, however the Government’s view seems to be—at least as far as the bill is concerned—that we must think only about income. We are saying that thinking about either end of the question on its own will not work; we must join it up and think about it all together.

The truth of that is encapsulated in the Government’s child poverty strategy measurement framework, which includes a significant array of 37 indicators of child poverty that do not focus only on income. The indicators mention the living wage, employment, good health, mental health, eating enough fruit and vegetables, talking to mum, housing, crime and drug misuse. An effective child poverty strategy or an effective anti-poverty strategy, whether it is about children, families or anybody else, will not work if it focuses only on income. That is our point: it is not that we should

do away with the income targets or that we should pass the bill only after having taken the income targets out of it, but that, on their own, the income targets will never be successful in achieving and delivering on the Government’s aspiration to eradicate child poverty from Scotland by 2030.

Alex Neil: The Health Scotland report showed that in respect of tackling health inequalities, for example, a basic decent income is a prerequisite to solving the problem, but it is not the total solution. It is clear that policies on childcare, housing, health and education, for example, are also needed. However, if people who live in poverty do not get a decent basic income, the impact of all those other policies will be substantially diluted, and we will not achieve our objective.

Adam Tomkins: In that case, the disagreement between us is quite tiny. However, my point is that unless we add broader concerns to the bill, it will not work—it will not achieve what it sets out to achieve. We are not doing it at the moment.

The Government’s own statistics show that the percentage of primary 7 pupils from the most deprived areas who are performing well in numeracy is going down, not up. That percentage went down between 2014 and 2016, from 60 per cent to 54 per cent. We see a similar fall in the percentage of P7 pupils from deprived areas who are performing well in writing. That percentage went down from 61 per cent to 56 per cent. We therefore need to do more legislatively than we are currently doing to put obligations in the Scottish statute book to require ministers to take steps to address those problems, as well as to address the income issues that Alex Neil and others rightly talked about. It is not either/or; it is both.

Ruth Maguire: Will Adam Tomkins take an intervention?

Adam Tomkins: No, I will not, at the moment.

That is why we will, as I have said, seek to amend the bill—not to take anything out of it, but to add to it legal requirements on ministers to take steps to close the attainment gap and to reduce the number of children in Scotland who grow up in workless households, so that we can address not just poverty of income—the lack of income that poor families suffer from—but its underlying drivers and causes.

Tavish Scott, who is not in the chamber, asked whether we will add education targets. Why not add a host of other targets as well? We want to focus on education, because we are talking about a child poverty bill, and it is clear that there is a relationship between children and young people and education.

Members do not have to take my word—or the word of any Conservative member—for any of that. Let me quote two pieces of evidence that the Social Security Committee received. Peter Allan, from Dundee City Council, talked about “contributory factors” behind child poverty. He said that

“Attainment issues will be one of those factors.”

Attainment issues contribute to child poverty. He went on to say:

“Strong targets associated with those would be more meaningful than waiting for five or 10 years to see whether the income measures have changed.”—[*Official Report, Social Security Committee*, 20 April 2017; c 7.]

Bill Scott, from Inclusion Scotland, said:

“Disabled children are twice as likely as non-disabled children to leave school with no qualifications, regardless of the type of impairment that they have. There are disabled children with sensory impairments and physical impairments but no intellectual impairment whatsoever who are leaving school with no qualifications. That makes their chances nil in the current job market. Unless we change that, we will not change their future, and when they become parents they will be parents living in poverty, and their children will be living in poverty, so we have to change the cycle.”—[*Official Report, Social Security Committee*, 20 April 2017; c 25.]

That is the force of the argument that we Conservatives are trying to make, which is that a focus on income alone will fail to meet the laudable aspirations of the bill, the principles of which we support. If we are serious about tackling poverty in Scotland—and child poverty in particular, in the context of the bill—we need to think about educational underattainment, addictions, family breakdown and worklessness, as well as about income targets.

Sandra White: Adam Tomkins quoted Bill Scott on disabled children’s attainment. Does he think that taking disability living allowance away from people and putting them on personal independence payments has got something to do with poverty, as well as the attainment gap?

Adam Tomkins: The fact is that under the UK Parliament that has just been dissolved for the general election, more was to be spent—more than £50 billion—on disability benefits than had been spent in any Parliament in British history.

I say gently to the cabinet secretary that putting the detail of interim targets in secondary legislation will not address the concerns of the Social Security Committee. We can have that argument at stage 2. Nonetheless, I welcome the cabinet secretary’s willingness to move on interim targets.

A point that a few members made, which I did not have time to mention in my opening speech, is the importance of amending section 10 so that local authorities will be required not merely to look back on what they have done with regard to child

poverty, but to look forward to what they propose to do.

Sandra White said that setting targets sends a message. That is a point that we took from evidence to the Social Security Committee. I agree that setting targets sends a message and is an important step. However, I want to do so much more than that. It is important not just to measure child poverty, but to take concrete steps to tackle and reduce it. The amendments that we will seek to make to the bill will be designed to help the Government to realise its aspirations, not to get in the way of its doing so.

16:52

Angela Constance: This has been a good debate, across all the parties. I agree with Adam Tomkins on one thing, which is that the speeches from Alex Neil and Jamie Greene were outstanding.

Much of the debate was about the philosophy behind statutory income targets, the technical underpinning of the targets, processes for interim targets, delivery plans and parliamentary process. I will seek to answer as many of the points that were made as I can in eight minutes.

However, the point that I want to make is that addressing poverty is ultimately about people and about children. Jamie Greene made me reflect on a favourite quotation of mine. J K Rowling, a woman who has had personal experience of poverty and who knows a lot about children, said:

“Poverty entails fear and stress and sometimes depression; it means a thousand petty humiliations and hardships. Climbing out of poverty by your own efforts, that is indeed something on which to pride yourself but poverty itself is romanticised only by fools.”

That encapsulates something on which we probably all agree, which is that poverty crushes the spirits of individuals and families and can crush communities. The consequences of child poverty can last a lifetime. It stunts a young person’s physical and mental wellbeing and affects their life chances.

Alex Neil rightly said that we cannot afford not to address child poverty. I agree whole-heartedly. With the exception of those on the Tory benches, we are mostly agreed on the centrality of income—or the lack of income. That is not to say that it is the only aspect of poverty; there is also poverty of opportunity and poverty of aspiration.

Tavish Scott, in his own way, made the link between having a focus on internationally renowned legislative targets and having a measurement framework. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has described the Government’s measurement framework as a “quantum leap” forward. It covers all the issues that are both a

cause and a consequence of poverty, including disability, attainment, fuel poverty, rural poverty and drugs—that is not an exhaustive list. We are currently reviewing those measurements, because they can be better, but we would not necessarily want to put that framework or those measurements in statute. A lot will happen between now and 2030, and our measurement framework needs to be flexible to respond to the issues of the time and the evidence.

We will come back to the issue of interim targets and I will welcome that discourse with the committee. Interim targets will be statutory and will be anchored in the bill. My plea and my preference for regulations is for us to set the interim targets together and for them to be based on the very best evidence that is available.

The delivery plan is the overarching plan for action. It is not a measurement plan; the delivery plan is about what we will do and how we go beyond misery and poverty. It needs to be responsive to what has happened today, next week and next year, between now and 2030. Tavish Scott and others, including the convener of the committee, I think, made the point that no target is perfect, but our statutory targets are internationally renowned. They have been developed over decades and have overwhelming support from stakeholders, although that does not mean that they will not change at some point in the future.

The important point, which I think all members agree on and have encapsulated, is that this is about action. Members have questioned whether targets and legislation are enough, and they are right to raise the question. My point is that requiring me and the Government to measure and to report annually on progress invites a degree of scrutiny that ultimately leads to better action. We do not demur from our responsibilities. The Government is fighting child poverty with one arm tied behind its back but, irrespective of the constitutional settlement or the future of Scotland's constitution, as I do the day job, I want to make sure that my arm is as strong as possible.

Alex Rowley: Does the cabinet secretary agree that when the public bodies that will need to meet and deliver those targets set budgets, they should do impact assessments that describe the impact of their decisions on poverty?

Angela Constance: Yes, I agree. I keep trying to tell Mr Rowley that we already do that, and we could do it better once we implement the socioeconomic duty, which is a dormant part of legislation that the Conservative Government chose not to introduce. The equality budget statement already has measurements of inclusive growth, because that gets to the heart of the matter. I want to stress what we can do, as

opposed to pointing out the problems with the issues that we cannot address. Jamie Greene was right to say that health and education are devolved but, sad to say, many of the economic levers, as well as equality legislation and other matters, are not devolved. However, I want to focus on what we can do in this place.

Make no doubt about it, child poverty north and south of the border is at scandalous levels—it is too high in Scotland, as it is too high in England. In the 1990s, child poverty in Scotland and in the UK used to be at similar levels. On every measurement today, child poverty is lower here than it is in any of the other UK nations and in the UK as a whole. I contend that that is the difference that the Scottish Parliament has made through too many actions to mention. Of course, we can and will have to do much more, but there is no silver bullet.

I heard what Alex Neil said about the big ideas. There are touchstone issues, such as affordable housing. Our record on affordable housing is second to none. During our two terms of office, we delivered 65,000-plus affordable homes, thanks to the good offices and leadership of Alex Neil. We want to step that up to deliver 50,000 affordable homes during the current parliamentary session. I am therefore content to look at how the touchstone issues can be anchored in the bill.

I listened carefully to what the committee and our stakeholders said about a statutory commission. Of course, the Oxfam report is an exemplar. However, I come to the issue first and foremost as a parliamentarian rather than a minister. What members are describing sounds to me more like a parliamentary commission, and that is not the business of the Government. The Government's business is to deliver on our manifesto. We will come back to the issue in the committee, and our plans are for a poverty and inequality commission to anchor the wider anti-poverty approach. Such a commission will indeed be full of experts, big brains and independent folk such as Naomi Eisenstadt—no one can say that Naomi Eisenstadt is not independent. I am not currently persuaded about a statutory commission. I have to confess that that is partly because of the financial costs of such a commission when every penny is a prisoner.

Similarly, topping up child benefit is not a bad idea, but I am not convinced that it is the best one. We are talking about £256 million per annum, and I would want all that to go to poor kids whereas, under the proposals that I have seen from some stakeholders, and the Labour Party, only £3 out of every £10 would go to a child who would be considered to be in a poor household.

I know that I am running out of time. This has been a good debate across the chamber and we

will come back to the many issues that have been raised today. I thank all members for their contributions.

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The question is, that motion S5M-05879, in the name of Angela Constance, on stage 1 of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill.

Meeting closed at 17:02.

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

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