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Thursday 11 January 2018

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 11 January 2018

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

General Question Time

Taxation

1. **Bill Bowman (North East Scotland) (Con):**

To ask the Scottish Government what consultation it undertook with Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs regarding any potential negative impact of diverging tax bands and rates from the rest of the United Kingdom. (S5O-01634)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution (Derek Mackay): The Scottish Government and HMRC have worked closely—and continue to do so—to implement the income tax powers that were devolved in the Scotland Acts of 2012 and 2016. The Scottish income tax implementation projects will ensure that HMRC's systems will be adapted to accommodate income tax policy as agreed by the Scottish Parliament. HMRC has been clear that it will be able to implement the Scottish Government's proposed income tax policy proposals for 2018-19.

Bill Bowman: As the Scottish National Party's deputy House of Commons leader, Kirsty Blackman, pointed out, Scots do not give two hoots about independence. However, they do care about the SNP's new tax bands, which could see Scottish pensioners paying hundreds of pounds extra just to access their pension savings. Is the cabinet secretary happy that his budget will reduce the quality of their hard-earned retirement?

Derek Mackay: I want to talk briefly about the constitution. First, the Tories were against devolution, then they were for devolution. They were against tax-raising powers, and now they are for tax-raising powers—as long as we do not use those them. That is the current position of the Conservative Party.

The budget that I have proposed will ensure that Scotland will become the lowest-taxed part of the UK for the majority of taxpayers. It will result in a tax reduction for the majority of taxpayers, while raising resources for our valued public services and giving the best deal anywhere in the UK.

On the specifics, it is the case that, in setting out the use of our tax powers, the budget will deliver a fairer country. However, there are some areas, including pension arrangements, that we do not have control over. Reliefs and interpretation remain at Westminster. In designing a system that

is based on a progressive approach, even people who take a lump sum from their pension will be treated in a fair and progressive fashion. Pensioners with a lower amount will also enjoy the benefits of a progressive taxation system.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that being able to set our own tax bands and rates allows the SNP Government the flexibility to help to protect Scottish public services from damaging Tory cuts to Scotland's budget, and that the point of devolution—which Bill Bowman has clearly missed—is that we do what best suits Scotland's needs rather than sticking with a one-size-fits-all solution, which some Tories would dearly love to impose at the behest of their bosses in London, regardless of the adverse impact on Scotland?

Derek Mackay: Kenny Gibson is exactly right. [Interruption.] The Scottish Government is able, because of the powers that we have under devolution, to take a £211 million real-terms cut to our resource budget for 2018-19 and invest in our public services by delivering on the key tests that I set out for income tax and policy. Those include using the system to deliver a more progressive taxation system, to protect lower-income earners, to protect and invest in the economy, and to invest in our public services, thereby turning a real-terms reduction at the hands of a right-wing Brexit-mad UK Government into real-terms growth for Scottish public services.

Scottish Fiscal Commission Forecasts

2. **Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the latest Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts for economic growth. (S5O-01635)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution (Derek Mackay): The Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts for economic growth underline the fundamental strengths in our economy. Economic growth is forecast to continue and employment will rise further, with earnings growth forecast to match that in the United Kingdom. However, the forecasts also highlight the negative impact that Brexit will have and the challenges that Scotland faces from a declining working-age population.

The draft budget sets out a package of measures to support the economy, unlock innovation and drive productivity.

Dean Lockhart: I remind the cabinet secretary that the Scottish Fiscal Commission is forecasting that the economy will grow by less than 1 per cent for each of the next four years, which is a fraction of the growth that is expected for the rest of the

UK. The Fraser of Allander institute has said that such low trends in economic growth for Scotland “have not been witnessed in 60 years.”

Predictably, the cabinet secretary blames Brexit, but he knows that under the Scottish National Party the economy has underperformed for the past decade—since well before Brexit. Given the SNP’s abysmal track record and the dire economic outlook, does the cabinet secretary agree with leading organisations across Scotland that it is now time for a change in economic policy, that the SNP’s four I—investing, innovation, inclusive growth and international—economic policy is not working and that Scotland needs a new direction in economic policy?

Derek Mackay: I think that the enthusiasm from the Tories is about to dissipate.

Dean Lockhart went straight from the SFC forecast to the FAI forecast. The Fraser of Allander institute’s forecast for economic growth is far higher than the SFC forecasts. So, for that matter, is the EY forecast for Scotland’s economy. Both are higher than the SFC’s forecasts, which have been seen as being arguably quite conservative and cautious.

I gently point out that the Scottish Government’s interventions on the economy and business are strong. However, surely the UK Government has to take some responsibility for the economy—indeed, it argues that it has overall responsibility for it. I argue that it is the UK economic model that is failing the people of Scotland.

I will cite just a few interventions that I propose to make in the budget. There is extra support for business rates, in the most generous package of business rates relief ever. There are more interventions around innovation, and in skills and manufacturing. There is resourcing of the building Scotland fund, capitalising of the Scottish national investment bank and doubling of support for city deals. All that is great for Scottish investment, Scottish productivity and Scottish innovation, but it is all put under threat by the reckless approach of the UK Government when it comes to Brexit and the impact that it will have on Scotland’s economy, according to the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): I remind members of my role as parliamentary liaison officer to the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that a key reason that the Scottish Fiscal Commission gives for Scotland’s low economic-growth forecast is our projected population profile as a consequence of the impact of Brexit on Scotland’s economy. Its view is that Scotland’s economy is already growing at capacity and needs more working-age

people in order to expand. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the views of the Scottish Fiscal Commission are further evidence of the damage that the Tory hard Brexit will do to Scotland’s economy?

Derek Mackay: I agree—[*Interruption.*] I hear the Conservatives chortle that no one else agrees, but wiser Tory ministers, even, are coming to the conclusion that a hard Brexit and a no-deal Brexit might well be profoundly damaging to the UK economy and would, in turn, be damaging to Scotland’s economy. It is right to say that the more powers we have, the more we can engage and make the right decisions for Scotland. It is true to say that the Scottish Fiscal Commission identified the working-age population as a major challenge. We can tackle that properly only if we have the powers to do so and the flexibility to rise to that challenge.

I point out gently that many people have reported on the economic impact of Brexit on Scotland, and have identified a negative impact of up to £11 billion a year from 2030, with at least 80,000 fewer jobs over the next decade. New analysis from the *Financial Times* also shows that the vote to leave the European Union is already having an impact on the UK economy of about—surprisingly—£350 million a week. Was not that the figure that the Tories were going to invest in the national health service if Brexit occurred? It is the cost, right now, of its mishandling of Brexit. We could do so much more if we were not wedded to the UK mismanagement of our economy and the Brexit negotiations.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): As the cabinet secretary has just articulated, one of the biggest economic issues facing the country is the impact of the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, which my party still passionately opposes. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, as the Scottish Government’s existing economic strategy from 2015 is developed and updated, it will be essential that it takes account of and, where possible, addresses the new and emerging challenges that arise from Brexit, and that it is a living document that we must keep revisiting?

Derek Mackay: Of course our economic strategy should develop and evolve in the light of events, which is why we have so many positive economic interventions in our budget. That will ensure that, no matter the challenges that are thrown at us, we can invest in the people of Scotland and their skills to grow our economy, tackle productivity and, crucially, have the right tools to ensure that we also have the working-age population to support our economy. Of course that strategy will have to adapt in the light of circumstances.

Draft Budget 2018-19 (Equalities Spending)

3. Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government for what reason in its draft budget spending on equalities is being increased by 12 per cent. (S5O-01636)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): The increase in the equalities budget for 2018-19 demonstrates the value that ministers place on creating a fairer Scotland by tackling prejudice and discrimination and supporting a more equal and inclusive society where human rights are central.

The Scottish Government is firmly committed to progressing equality, as demonstrated through our funding for over 220 separate projects, and supporting the ambitions, aims and actions in our race equality action plan, the fairer Scotland for disabled people delivery plan and the equally safe strategy.

Increased resource for 2018-19 will also support programme for government commitments, legislation and other strategic work, including on British Sign Language, social isolation and loneliness and human rights.

Adam Tomkins: At the same time as the equalities budget is going up—the cabinet secretary alluded to this in an answer a few minutes ago—the fairer Scotland budget is being increased fourfold: from £7 million to just shy of £28 million. What steps is the cabinet secretary taking to ensure that taxpayers will get value for money and, in particular, that that spending will be effective?

Angela Constance: I would have thought that, given that we are at the start of a new year, Mr Tomkins and the Tories would perhaps have had cause for reflection. Given continuing Westminster austerity and the threats posed by Brexit, I would have thought that they would welcome the Scottish Government's increased commitment to advancing equality and tackling inequality in all its forms. I would have hoped that Mr Tomkins would welcome the increase in the equalities budget and the substantial increase in the fairer Scotland budget. I can assure him that we will indeed ensure that maximum value for money is obtained from our full range of commitments around, for example, the implementation of British Sign Language and the family reunion crisis grant funding that will help to mitigate some of the disastrous decisions in the United Kingdom Government's immigration and asylum process. We also want to support civic society and to produce a bill of rights on human rights. In addition, we will launch in the near future a draft consultation on our social isolation and loneliness strategy and will want to fund actions that will flow

from that, as well as fund the implementation of the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Bill and our on-going commitment to our equally safe delivery plan.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary agree that, to address the gender gap for women and girls in minority ethnic communities, it would be helpful to disaggregate the information so that the data is a bit clearer as to what the priorities should be to tackle gender inequality in areas such as prejudice-based bullying or underemployment gaps?

Angela Constance: Yes, I agree that it is important to have good, accurate and full information. Last year, the Government published our equality evidence strategy, which is about looking in particular at our priorities around race equality and the issues of intersectionality and understanding the issues in greater depth, particularly those around women and girls. The advisory group on women and girls will be particularly interested in that area. If there are specific gaps in information on which Ms McNeill wishes to correspond or meet with me, I would be happy to do that. We have a good record in gathering evidence and pursuing the links between evidence, policy and budgetary spend, but of course we want to continue to evolve our process so that it has maximum impact.

Probationer Teacher Numbers 2018-19

4. Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many probationer teachers there will be in the academic year 2018-19. (S5O-01637)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The application process for probationer teachers for the academic year 2018-19 is ongoing. The total number of applications will be known in March.

Gail Ross: Teacher recruitment poses a challenge to many remote and rural areas, including my constituency of Caithness, Sutherland and Ross. Can the cabinet secretary tell me what the Scottish Government is doing to ensure that trainee teachers are allocated to those areas during their probation period and what guidance and training are given to the schools to ensure that they are equipped to train them?

John Swinney: The Government continues to provide £37 million to support the teacher induction scheme, which includes funding for mentoring and support for all probationer teachers on the scheme. That includes funding for preference waiver payments. Students who take up that option are prioritised for allocation to remote and rural authorities, such as those in Ms

Ross's constituency, during their probationary year and benefit from an additional payment of up to £8,000.

Through our education reforms, we will take steps to ensure that initial teacher education prepares students to enter the profession with consistently well-developed skills to teach key areas such as literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, and to provide the support to schools to ensure that the training and induction experience is of value to individual candidates.

In the data that was published just before Christmas, the number of post-probationer teachers in employment reached 88 per cent, which is the highest level on record, as a consequence of the Government's actions.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned at the Education and Skills Committee meeting on 20 December 2017 that, although there was an improvement in probationary applications, there was a lower than expected retention rate of qualified teachers. Official statistics show that around 4,000 teachers who had been registered at the beginning of 2017 were not registered at the end of the year. Can the cabinet secretary tell us what percentage of those were teachers leaving the profession and what percentage were retirements?

John Swinney: I cannot give Mr Mundell that figure just now, but I am happy to confirm it to him in writing. It is welcome that we have seen an increase of 543 in teacher numbers in our classrooms in this academic year. That is a tremendous boost to the delivery of education in our classrooms, and the Government is committed to working with our initial teacher education providers to make sure that we continue that good progress in the years to come.

National Trauma Network

5. Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government by what date the national trauma network will be fully operational. (S5O-01638)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government is working with NHS Scotland to deliver a major trauma network in Scotland. That work remains on schedule, with the national implementation plan being agreed by the Scottish trauma network steering group last month. It sets out plans for the phased delivery of the Scottish trauma network over five years to 2022.

Lewis Macdonald: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. She will recall that, a year ago, Dr Catherine Calderwood, the chief medical officer, concluded that new trauma services in Aberdeen and Dundee would be operational in 2017

"Subject to funding and workforce and in line with nationally agreed priorities".

Given the timescale that the cabinet secretary has indicated today, can she tell us whether the new target timescale in place of that 2017 target is a result of issues with funding, with workforce or with nationally agreed priorities?

Shona Robison: The implementation plan remains the same. Lewis Macdonald will be aware that an extra £5 million was given in 2017-18 to enable improvements to accelerate. Funding was provided to deliver a 24/7 trauma desk and life-saving equipment in all Scottish Ambulance Service vehicles, and work was undertaken in Tayside and Fife to pilot the trauma triage tool, which will ensure that severely injured patients get to the right hospital as quickly as possible.

Funding of £10.2 million of revenue in 2018-19 will allow the implementation of major trauma centres in Dundee and Aberdeen that meet the agreed minimum requirements, which will be operational during 2018. I am sure that Lewis Macdonald will be pleased that the Dundee and Aberdeen centres are proceeding as was outlined previously.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Health and Social Care

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con):

In recent weeks, we have again been reminded how stretched hospitals are right across the United Kingdom, as they seek to cope with demand. Once again, we thank doctors and nurses for all that they do.

Will the First Minister confirm whether the number of hospital beds has gone up or down over the last five years?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I suspect that Ruth Davidson is fully aware that, in line with the position in all parts of the UK, as the pattern of hospital attendances and the nature of treatment that people require has changed, so has the number of acute beds. Not just across the UK, but across the western world, we will see the number of acute beds decline as more care is carried out on a day-care basis and as more care is delivered in the community. Our responsibility is to ensure that we have the right number of beds. The health secretary and her officials monitor that on an on-going basis.

In relation to the pressures on our health service over the winter period so far and particularly during the festive period, I put on record my thanks to those who work extremely hard at the front line of our health service. We have seen an unprecedented increase in demand in recent weeks. The health secretary set out some of the figures in her statement earlier this week. They include a 40 per cent increase in calls to the ambulance service, a doubling of calls to NHS 24 and a 10 per cent increase in accident and emergency attendances over the festive fortnight with a 20 per cent increase in the week before Christmas. In addition to the increased volumes of attendance at A and E, we are seeing more people present with more severe illness.

Much of that increased demand has been down to an increase in flu rates over the winter. It was reported last week that in the seven days up to hogmanay, flu rates were more than double those in the same period last year. I can advise Parliament that the figures for the first week in January are about to be published by Health Protection Scotland and show a further doubling of flu rates in Scotland: last week the rate was 46 per 100,000 and that has increased to 107 per 100,000, which is four times the level of flu in the same week in 2017.

Despite all that, thanks to winter planning and the efforts of our national health service staff, our

NHS is coping admirably. Even at the height of those pressures, we continue to see almost eight out of 10 people attending A and E being dealt with within four hours. We have not required to sanction a blanket cancellation of planned operations, as has happened elsewhere in the UK. We all owe an enormous debt of gratitude to those in the NHS.

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister seemed unable to give the figures that I asked for, so I will give them: five years ago, there were more than 23,000 hospital beds in Scotland and there are now nearly 2,000 fewer. We know the Government's rationale for that: it says that more care should be delivered outside of hospitals, closer to people's homes and in social care. That is a laudable aim, but if it is to work, there need to be places in the community available for patients.

Can the First Minister answer this question: has the number of social care places for elderly patients in Scotland increased or been cut in the last five years?

The First Minister: First, we now have around 700 more intermediate care beds in our NHS as part of the process of shifting the balance of care and—to go back to the point about acute beds—during the winter, including this winter, we have seen hundreds of additional winter surge beds, as part of the planning for increased capacity.

When it comes to social care, as Ruth Davidson is, again, very well aware, while I do not stand here and say that all is perfect—we all have work to do and we all face pressures, particularly during the winter—the Scottish Government is, in many respects, ahead of any other part of the UK. Over the past two financial years, we have transferred significant sums of money from the NHS into social care to support the shift in the balance of care; and earlier this week, we saw the health secretary in England being given responsibility for social care for the first time, as England is presumably now looking to integrate health and social care, which is something that the Scottish Government has already done.

Yes, there is pressure on services and our NHS is, in common with not just the health service in the rest of the UK but health services in many different parts of the world, undergoing a transition as it adapts to the needs of an ageing population, part of which is about transferring care from the acute service into the community. However, the Government has already done a lot of work on this and will continue to do so.

Ruth Davidson: I often ask the First Minister about health and social care in Scotland, and she often answers me by talking about the situation in England. I think that people in Scotland want to hear about what is happening in Scotland.

However, if the First Minister wants to bring England into the chamber, she should be aware that hospital beds in Scotland are being cut at nearly double the rate in England and, in England, the number of elderly social care beds has actually gone up in five years, while, under her tenure, the number in Scotland has gone down.

The number of hospital beds and the number of elderly social care places in Scotland are both falling, with the obvious consequence that hospitals get filled up; thousands of elderly patients cannot be discharged, because there is nowhere for them to go; and the cost of delayed discharge to the NHS in Scotland is over £100 million per year. If there are fewer hospital beds and fewer social care places for the elderly, is it any surprise that we have a problem?

The First Minister: The number of beds lost in our health service because of delayed discharge is down; indeed, the most recent published figures show that it is down 10 per cent over the past year. We do not yet have published figures for the festive period, but the information that we have—after all, we are obviously monitoring the situation carefully—is that delayed discharge has reduced further over that period. As a result, an increase in delayed discharge is not the reason for the pressures that we are seeing in our hospitals.

Ruth Davidson talks about comparisons with England. I know that the Opposition does not like us making such comparisons, even though it makes them when it suits it on plenty of issues. Let me be clear: for this Government, the benchmarks for success are the targets that we set ourselves, not what is happening elsewhere in the UK. However, when Opposition parties come to this chamber and try to make out that the pressures on our national health service are somehow uniquely to do with mismanagement by the Scottish National Party Government, it is perfectly legitimate to compare performance in Scotland with that in the parts of the UK where their parties are in power. I do not know whether Ruth Davidson bothered to look at the news this morning, but clinicians in England have said that they have “run out of beds” in the NHS.

Our responsibility is to make sure that our NHS is performing, and that is what we support our front-line clinicians and health boards in doing. The fact of the matter is that, in spite of all of the pressures—which are actually higher than they are in other parts of the UK; for example, flu levels are higher in Scotland, with more influenza A, which affects elderly people disproportionately—Scotland’s NHS remains the best-performing NHS anywhere in the United Kingdom. It is about time that the Opposition recognised the achievements of those working so hard on the front line of our national health service.

Ruth Davidson: Presiding Officer, Opposition leaders come to this chamber to ask the Scottish Government to take responsibility for the Scottish health service.

Here is what doctors and nurses have been saying to us over the past fortnight: people are waiting too long in A and E departments, because there are no beds for them on wards and because many of those hospital beds are taken up by patients who are waiting for their social care arrangements. This SNP Government has cut both hospital beds and elderly social care places, so when something like a flu crisis hits, the system breaks down. We need a moratorium before the next crisis, so will the First Minister promise to stop cutting hospital beds until patients have somewhere to go?

The First Minister: The hypocrisy of the Tories when it comes to these issues is breathtaking. They criticise things that are happening in Scotland, such as the changing pattern of care, which they presumably support in England, where their party is in power.

In a few weeks’ time, we will again debate the budget for next year. At that point, Ruth Davidson and her colleagues will stand up in this chamber and ask us to deliver tax policies that introduce tax cuts for people at the top end of the income spectrum—tax policies that, if we were to follow them, would take £500 million out of the money that we have available to invest in our national health service. Does Ruth Davidson know what £500 million amounts to in terms of nurses? It is equivalent to 12,000 nurses that the Tories would remove from our national health service.

We will continue to get on with the job of delivering healthcare for the people of Scotland and supporting our health service as it responds to the unprecedented demands that it is facing, and we will continue to thank and be grateful to those who are working hard across our country.

National Health Service (Delays)

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): This week, we heard apologies from the First Minister to the thousands of people who have experienced unacceptable delays in getting hospital treatment and who have waited hours in pain for ambulance crews to arrive. Apologies are welcome, but can the First Minister tell us and can she tell the people of Scotland what changes she will make to ensure that our national health service in Scotland will not be in the same position this time next year?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will continue to take the action that ensures that our national health service is the best-performing health service in the United Kingdom. I have

already outlined the unprecedented pressures that our national health service is facing. I have given the figures on flu for the first week in January. In that week, flu rates were four times what they were in the same week last year. When we are facing demands such as that, it is not possible to completely eliminate the pressure on services. No health service can do that completely. However, because of the plans that our health boards have put in place, supported by the £22 million of additional funding that has been provided by the Government, and enabled by the hard work of front-line NHS staff, the ambulance service's average response time to emergency calls, despite the 40 per cent increase in demand, is eight minutes, and almost eight out of 10 patients are still dealt with within four hours.

Let me address the point of the four-hour target. We often—I am guilty of this myself, sometimes—talk about that as being a target to see patients. However, the target is not just to see patients within four hours; it is to see, assess, treat and discharge or admit or transfer patients within four hours. Even at the height of the winter pressures, almost eight out of 10 patients are dealt with within that target period. Unlike the situation south of the border, in Scotland we have not sanctioned, or had to sanction, a blanket deferral of planned operations.

Richard Leonard no doubt wants to say that all of what our NHS is facing now is entirely down to bad planning by the Scottish Government, but here is another view. It is a view that was expressed yesterday in the Welsh Assembly—

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Bingo! [*Laughter.*]

The First Minister: I mention Wales simply to ensure that we are consistent in how we approach these things.

Labour's health secretary in Wales said that the "unprecedented" spikes in demand in recent weeks

"are not pressures that you could reasonably plan for".— [*Official Record, National Assembly for Wales, 10 January 2018; para 128.*]

I disagree with that. We can plan for them and, because we have properly planned, although there are pressures on our health service we are the best-performing health service in the UK. Those who are delivering that service deserve our thanks.

Richard Leonard: Well, there we are. The British Medical Association has already said that it is fed up with the Government's spin, and patients in Scotland are fed up with it, too.

Let me give members a real example from right here in Scotland over the past couple of weeks. Tom Wilson of Newtongrange, who is 80 years

old, fell on new year's day and lay bleeding for three and a quarter hours waiting for an ambulance. His son called 999 seven times, only to be told that an ambulance was coming not from the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh, which was just 14 minutes away, but from Kelso. Mr Wilson then spent 13 hours on a trolley in a corridor in accident and emergency before he was admitted to a general ward. An 80-year-old man with underlying health conditions waited for more than 16 hours for treatment. He was discharged after four days, despite a nurse having told him that he should be kept in hospital, but the bed was needed.

What does the First Minister say to Mr Wilson?

The First Minister: What I say to Mr Wilson is very simple: I say sorry to him if that was his experience of the health service. I said earlier this week and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport said in the chamber that we apologise unreservedly to any patient who has waited longer than they should for hospital treatment or who does not get the standard of treatment that they have a right to expect not just in winter but at any time of the year, and I do that again unequivocally today. The health secretary and I will be more than happy to look into the specifics of Mr Wilson's case if Richard Leonard passes them to us.

I am not standing here saying—and we have not said at any stage—that some patients are not waiting longer during these winter times than we would want them to wait. That is down to the fact that we face unprecedented demand and increases in demand. I will not repeat the figures. The Welsh Labour health secretary made the point yesterday that there are "unprecedented" spikes in demand, and we cannot eliminate the impact of that on services. However, because of the winter plans and the resources that we have put in place, and principally because of the hard work of front-line NHS staff, we have a system that is coping admirably. I have given the accident and emergency statistics and the wider situation with planned operations. However, that does not take away from the fact that we apologise to anybody who does not get the standard of care that we would want them to get, and we regret that.

Richard Leonard: First Minister,

"I am sure you will say it's got nothing to do with you or the SNP and blame Westminster. I've seen on the news your answer is 'we are doing better than England.' Is this a joke?" [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Richard Leonard: Those are not my words; they are the words of Mr Wilson's son in a letter that was sent to the health secretary this week.

The First Minister has been found out by the people of Scotland. The doctors, nurses and ambulance crews and patients and their families

want to know what she is going to do to fix the mess that she has created in our NHS.

The First Minister: Nobody who listened to the answer that I gave to Richard Leonard's question about Mr Wilson's situation would have concluded that I did anything other than take responsibility for that on behalf of the Scottish Government.

It is interesting that anybody who listened to Jeremy Corbyn at Prime Minister's question time yesterday when he was asked about the Welsh health service would have heard his answer that it was all the fault of Westminster cuts to the Welsh budget. Westminster's cuts to the Scottish budget are never recognised by the Labour Party here, of course.

I take absolute responsibility for our health service, but that is why I can also point out that we have the best-performing health service in the UK. I know that the Opposition does not like the comparisons, but I make them not because my ambition is just to be a bit better than England or Wales. When Opposition politicians say, as Richard Leonard has just done, that the pressures on our health service are just down to Scottish National Party management, it is entirely legitimate to look at the parts of the UK in which Opposition parties are in power.

I am not saying that our health service is perfect—I would never have said that when I was health secretary, and I would not say that now—but we have a health service that is performing better than that in any part of the UK, and that is because of the record of investment, the record numbers of staff and the planning that our health boards are doing, particularly during this winter period. We will continue to support them to do that so that they can continue to deliver for patients.

Police Station Opening Hours

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): The First Minister may be aware that a recent freedom of information request has shown that public counters at some of Edinburgh's police stations are shut, or operate restricted hours, more than they are open at the advertised times. I understand that, for example, Leith police station is supposed to operate from 7 am until midnight, seven days a week, but that, last year, it was open as advertised only on 29 days between January and 22 September. I am sure that the First Minister would not want to be dismissive of Leithers' concerns, so will she explain whether that is an attempt to reduce the police estate by the back door in the face of public opposition? What reassurances can be given to those who want face-to-face policing but find the local station closed when they need it?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I would never dismiss the concerns of Leithers about police station opening hours or any other matter.

I have spent most of this week listening to Opposition politicians criticising the Scottish Government for supposedly interfering in the operational decisions of Police Scotland. Today, an Opposition member is standing up and, I presume, calling on me and the Scottish Government to interfere in operational decisions that the police are taking about the opening hours of police stations. There appears to be something of an inconsistency in that approach, but we will leave that to one side.

I do not have in front of me the information that has been cited to me about opening hours, but I will happily look into the matter and will personally respond—or ask the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to respond—in writing to Gordon Lindhurst's points.

Bus-fare Increases (Glasgow)

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): First Minister, it is hard enough after the festive season to return to work or to study, but for bus users in Glasgow that feeling has been accompanied by a very un festive hike in bus fares by First Glasgow. Does the First Minister agree with me that the rises, which include a 40 per cent rise in fares for the under-16s and a 10 per cent increase in fares for the unemployed, are simply unacceptable? What plans does she or her transport minister have to discuss with FirstBus the need to reverse the increases? Does she agree that there is a need for action to re-regulate the buses, as has been called for by unions, community transport groups and the Scottish Co-operative Party, among others, to ensure that people get a better service and not unaffordable fare increases?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): On regulation and legislation, the programme for government announced plans for legislation in this session of Parliament on better partnership working and the improvement of bus services.

On Johann Lamont's specific issue, I am an MSP for part of the city of Glasgow and I share the concerns that have been expressed by my constituents—and by many people across Scotland—about bus fare increases, including the FirstBus increase that was announced this week. We will continue to have discussions with the bus companies on those matters. We will do that as a Government, and I will make representations as a local MSP on behalf of my constituents. Of course, individual bus operators must reach their own decisions.

The Scottish Government provides funding to support bus services across Scotland and to keep

fares at affordable levels, and we will continue to take action to enable that.

Jobcentre Closures

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Tomorrow, Maryhill jobcentre will close its doors for the final time after being axed by the United Kingdom Government. That will have a damaging impact on many vulnerable families in communities that I represent, not least due to the longer journeys that they will face to other jobcentres and, as we have just heard, costly and rising bus fares.

The UK Government's approach is deeply flawed and counterproductive. Does the First Minister agree that jobcentres, which support people in getting back to work, should be at the heart of communities such as Maryhill, not ripped out of them? Will she pledge to do things differently should power over such matters be given to this Parliament?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I very much agree with Bob Doris. I do not support the plans to close jobcentres in Glasgow. Again, I say that as someone who represents part of the city of Glasgow and who knows the importance of having such services accessible to people. In fact, earlier this week, a cross-party letter went to the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, asking for the matter to be reconsidered.

As we try to help people back into work—particularly those who have been some distance from the labour market—it is important that such services are available without people having to travel inordinate distances to access them. As well as opposing measures such as the closure, we, in the Scottish Government, continue to do what we can to mitigate welfare cuts. However—I have said this before and will say it again—the sooner that comprehensive welfare powers are in the hands of this Parliament, the better, because that will mean that we are able to make decisions that are in the interest of the country and are properly joined up in the interest of the people whom we serve.

Pollution and Waste

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): It is welcome that the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government are both attempting to respond to the growing concern about plastic pollution, although the UK Government might be accused of kicking the issue into the long grass in talking about what it might achieve by 2042. The Scottish Government wants to highlight the problem of discarded cotton buds. To be fair, that is a much easier matter to address, as change is already happening and alternative products are already in the shops.

The issue is far more challenging and urgent than that, given the fact that China is understandably unwilling to keep taking ever more of the west's plastic waste and that people will not—and should not—simply accept the building of more incinerators around the country. Does the First Minister accept that, if we frame the issue merely as plastic litter, there is a risk that we imply that it is all about consumer behaviour instead of placing responsibility firmly where it belongs, with the highly profitable businesses and industries that are the real source of the problem?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I agree with that, although it has to be both. There is an obligation on companies and a real responsibility on them to get their own houses in order. In that respect, I agree with Patrick Harvie. We also have to encourage consumers to change their behaviour, and I would certainly back efforts to do that. Governments must consider the levers that they have and whether they can impose levies on single-use plastic products or take other actions to reduce the use of disposable plastic.

The Scottish Government has a good record through the action that it has already taken on the plastic bag levy, for example, and we have announced our intention to introduce a deposit-return scheme for drinks containers, which Patrick Harvie and the Greens have welcomed. We have also announced our intention to set up an expert group to look at other levies and actions that could be taken on other products, such as plastic straws. I pay tribute to Kate Forbes, who will ask a question later in First Minister's question time, for the campaign that she has launched on straws. As Patrick Harvie says, the Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform today announced our intention to ban plastic-stemmed cotton buds.

We are taking a range of actions, and that is the right approach. It is not about letting any particular interest off the hook; it is about companies, consumers and Governments. I absolutely agree with Patrick Harvie that the matter is urgent. It is more urgent than the 25-year timescale than the Prime Minister has set out implies.

Patrick Harvie: Plastic pollution is utterly connected to our society's economic addiction to oil and gas. Fossil fuels and industrial chemicals are two sides of the same coin. This week, we learned that one oil industry voice wants decommissioned rigs simply to be dumped in the sea, which would result in millions of tonnes of industrial waste, while cotton buds made the headlines. Another fossil fuel company wants to take the Government to court for protecting Scotland from fracking.

The UK Government and the Scottish Government like to claim credit for environmental

action, but they also want ever bigger tax breaks for the fossil fuel companies that are at the root of our environmental crisis. Is it not time to recognise that we can no longer invest our future in the fossil fuel industry and that we should, instead, join the hundreds of cities, institutions and countries that are truly leading? They include New York, which this week confirmed that it is taking the fight to the fossil fuel industry with legal action and a programme of divestment. Will the First Minister accept that it is time to embrace a positive, fossil fuel-free future for Scotland?

The First Minister: We support our oil and gas sector appropriately because it is important to our economy and lots of jobs depend on it. However, whether members agree or disagree with that, I genuinely do not think that it is fair to criticise the Scottish Government for a lack of action in our support for renewable energy.

If anything, we are a world leader when it comes to the transition away from fossil fuels to renewable energy. For example, in the programme for government we set out our ambition for electric and low-emission vehicles, on which we will take even greater action in the longer term. As Patrick Harvie has alluded, we have also taken the decision not to allow fracking in Scotland. Given this week's announcement of the judicial review, I will not say more about that other than that we are confident in the decision that we have taken and the process behind it.

We will continue to lead by example. The issue is important not just for this generation but for generations to come. We all have a responsibility to do the right thing, and this Government will continue to make sure that we do it.

National Health Service (Failures)

4. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I have listened carefully to what the First Minister has said, but the pressure that is faced by the national health service has been coming for years. It was largely predictable. The long waits at accident and emergency units are partly the result of failures elsewhere in the NHS. There have been failures in three fundamental areas: mental health, social care and primary care. Nicola Sturgeon is responsible for those failures, because she was health secretary at the time.

Why is it that staff and patients such as Mr Wilson have to suffer today because of Nicola Sturgeon's failure to do her job over the past 10 years?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): For a representative of the Liberal Democrats—the co-architects of austerity in this country—to ask that question is, frankly, unbelievable and demonstrates quite staggering hypocrisy.

Through the actions that we have taken in the face of that austerity, we have ensured record investment in our national health service. We have transferred more and more investment into social care, primary care—for which we have plans over the course of this parliamentary session—and mental health. This year, for the first time, the mental health budget in Scotland will top £1 billion. We have record numbers of staff in our NHS.

Despite what Willie Rennie said, the pressures on our health service during this winter period are unprecedented. Flu levels are four times higher than they were at this time last year. It is not possible to eliminate the impact on the service of that kind of increase in pressure, but because of the actions that we have taken in the face of the austerity that was imposed partly by Willie Rennie's party, we have—as I have said repeatedly this afternoon—the best-performing health service in the United Kingdom, and that is something that we should be proud of.

Willie Rennie: The First Minister really has a brass neck. If the plans that she has just set out are the obvious answer, why did she not deliver them when she was health secretary? She can hide behind those plans, but she cannot hide behind the NHS in England or even the NHS in Wales, and she cannot just blandly thank NHS staff over and over. We are 800 general practitioners short—that is her responsibility. There are 3,000 Scots waiting for mental health treatment—that is her responsibility. Today, 1,000 people are stuck in hospital because of a lack of home care—that is her responsibility.

We are all proud of our NHS staff in enduring the conditions that have been created by Nicola Sturgeon, but is she really proud of what she has done to our NHS?

The First Minister: Under this Government, the health service budget has gone up to record levels, the number of people who work in our health service has gone up to record levels and the number of delayed discharges has gone down over the past year. Despite the winter pressures—I readily acknowledge the pressure that they put on not just patients but staff—I repeat that the health service in Scotland is the best-performing health service anywhere in the United Kingdom. That is down partly to policy, but it is down principally to the hard work of staff right across our health service. I think that they deserve better—they deserve more gratitude from not just the Government but parties across the chamber.

The Presiding Officer: We will have a few more supplementaries, the first of which will be asked by Christine Grahame.

Bankruptcy

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Oh! Thank you, Presiding Officer. I had given up.

The First Minister will be aware of the recent BBC Scotland documentary that exposed deficiencies in the efficacy of bankruptcy proceedings. It focused on bankruptcy cheats such as Malcolm Scott, the bankrupt behind Loch Leven (2) Ltd, which has planning applications in for nine properties in Galashiels in my constituency.

Given that Malcolm Scott left debts of £42 million, cocking a snook at all of us and in particular his creditors and the trustee, will the First Minister review the bankruptcy process, including an increase in the inspection and monitoring of declaration of assets pre-bankruptcy and, post-bankruptcy, the operation of bankruptcy restriction orders?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Christine Grahame for raising this issue.

Like many people, I was concerned by some of the revelations in the recent BBC documentary. I can give an assurance that, in light of that, the Government will look at aspects of bankruptcy legislation and regulation to see whether there are changes that we require to make.

Christine Grahame has asked some very specific questions about particular aspects of the bankruptcy regime and I will make sure that the relevant minister responds to her in detail in due course, once we have had the opportunity to review those aspects.

St John's Hospital (Children's Ward)

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): This month, the children's ward at St John's hospital will have been closed to in-patients out of hours for more than 200 days. When will it reopen as a 24/7 service?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It will reopen as soon as possible. It is, of course, a matter of regret that the situation—which is to ensure safety for patients—has arisen. Patient safety is vitally important for all patients but all of us would accept that it is particularly important for children.

As soon as the recruitment challenges have been addressed—efforts are under way right now to recruit into that ward—the ward will reopen.

Neil Findlay previously used to say that our plan was to close the ward permanently. That was not the case. We are determined to make sure that the ward remains open to serve patients in West

Lothian, and I look forward to it being open properly as soon as possible.

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

Mairi Gougeon (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): The Finance and Constitution Committee of this Parliament unanimously agreed that the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill in its current state is incompatible with the devolution settlement.

The UK Government has failed to deliver on its promises to bring forward key amendments to the bill at report stage, which is deeply regrettable and a disgrace. It leaves Scotland's fate in the hands of the unelected and undemocratic House of Lords. Does the First Minister agree that now is the time for everyone in this chamber to unite in a simple message: hands off Scotland's Parliament?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The failure to bring forward amendments to the withdrawal bill at report stage in the House of Commons is not just a disgrace—although it absolutely is a disgrace—but in direct contradiction to the promise that the Secretary of State for Scotland made that the amendments would be tabled in the House of Commons and not in the undemocratic, unelected House of Lords. That promise has been completely broken.

There is no excuse. During the week, I heard Tory MPs say that the situation was unfortunate and due to the tight timescale. The Scottish Government and the Welsh Government jointly wrote amendments that could have been tabled or supported by the UK Government. We need to see amendments without further delay, but not just any amendments; we need to see amendments that properly address the issue.

Clause 11 of the bill is a power grab. That is the view of the cross-party committee of this Parliament and we will not recommend approval of the bill to this Parliament unless clause 11 and the other aspects that concern members across the chamber are properly addressed.

We hope that we can still find agreement and we will continue to work constructively in order to try to find agreement, but we have to prepare for that not being possible. That is why we have set out plans to bring forward, if necessary, our own continuity bill.

It is absolutely disgraceful that, having launched that power grab on this Parliament, the Tories have then broken all the promises that they have made so far about fixing it. Let us see that change sooner rather than later.

Single-use Disposable Plastic Products

5. Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government plans to reduce the use of single-use disposable plastics such as plastic straws. (S5F-01912)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are determined to tackle the blight of plastic that does so much damage to our environment generally and to our oceans and beaches in particular.

As I have already said in response to earlier questions, we have outlined our intention to introduce a deposit-return scheme, and today the Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform has set out proposals to ban plastic-stemmed cotton buds.

As we committed to doing in our programme for government, we will appoint an expert panel to provide advice on further charges and other actions that we might take to reduce Scotland's use of single-use items such as plastic straws. I again commend Kate Forbes for the campaign that she has launched.

Kate Forbes: The First Minister referred to the United Kingdom Government's environmental plan, which was published this morning and says that it will take 25 years to tackle avoidable plastic waste, including plastic straws. Does the First Minister agree that if Sunnyside primary school and Ullapool primary school pupils can eliminate plastic straws from an entire village in a matter of months with their "Nae Straw At Aw" campaign, the UK Government's target of 25 years lacks a bit of urgency, while plastic straws continue to pollute our seas?

The First Minister: I commend and congratulate the pupils of Sunnyside primary school, who have set an example for us all. As I said to Patrick Harvie, I take the view that we do not have the luxury of 25 years, and neither do our coastal communities such as Ullapool, which are already taking local action. "Blue Planet II" might have woken up the UK Government to the issue of plastics in our seas, but we have been alive to the issue for some time and have been leading the way in taking action. As I said, we set out in the programme for government plans to develop a deposit-return scheme. We have already introduced a comprehensive carrier bag charge and we have set out in our circular economy strategy how we can benefit economically from looking after the environment. As I have said a couple of times now, we have today announced plans on plastic-stemmed cotton buds. We will always look to work constructively with other Governments in the UK and beyond, but it is clearer than ever that decisions about our precious

natural environment are best made here in Scotland, because we are leading the way.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest with respect to my work at Zero Waste Scotland.

I welcome the plans from the UK Government and the Scottish Government around problem plastics. However, last year, the Scottish National Party revealed that it forecasts over the next five years a twelfold increase in incineration capacity in Scotland. I am sure that the First Minister will agree that it is better to recycle valuable products such as plastics than it is to burn them. Therefore, will the First Minister consider the introduction of a moratorium on new incineration facilities in Scotland?

The First Minister: I will ask Paul Wheelhouse, who is the relevant minister, to respond to Maurice Golden on incineration. I agree with the member that it is much better to recycle plastic. In fact, I will go further and say that it is much better to try to avoid use of plastics where possible, which is very much the focus of our actions.

However, where plastics are used, recycling should be a priority. That is very much at the heart of our circular economy strategy and some of the other measures that I have outlined. I hope that, on some of the key aspects of the issue, if not on every aspect, we will have a lot of consensus across the chamber on the actions that we need to take.

Small Businesses (Confidence)

6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of interests and remind them that I own a small business.

To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to improve small business confidence, in the light of reports suggesting that it is at a near-record low. (S5F-01901)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are maintaining the expanded small business bonus scheme, which removes the rates burden for 100,000 premises. As announced in the draft budget, we will continue to fund the most competitive business rates relief package anywhere in the United Kingdom. We are also delivering a record £2.4 billion investment in enterprise and skills, and will invest £600 million in expanding broadband to 100 per cent of premises across the country. Of course, we are also on course to deliver the new south of Scotland enterprise agency as part of our plan to drive forward economic growth while supporting communities and resources in the area.

Rachael Hamilton: Before I ask my supplementary question, I take this opportunity to welcome pupils from Kelso high school to the gallery.

The Scottish policy convener of the Federation of Small Businesses, Andy Willox, said that the federation's recent findings show

"a long-term optimism gap between a typical firm in Scotland and their counterparts elsewhere in the UK."

He went on to say that

"If Scotland is to confound predictions of sluggish economic growth for the foreseeable future, then closing this gap should be a top priority."

Will the First Minister listen to the concerns of small business and reverse the Government's tax plans in order to help small business confidence to grow?

The First Minister: I am sorry: I thought that we were not allowed to make comparisons between Scotland and England. Let me get this right, just for clarity. When Scotland is doing better than the rest of the UK, the Tories' position is that we are not allowed to say that, because comparisons are not legitimate, but when the Tories say that Scotland is not doing as well as the rest of the UK, it is absolutely fine to make comparisons. Are those really the rules by which the Tories want to play?

I will make two points on small businesses. First, as I said, we are investing significant sums of money in supporting our small businesses. We recognise the concerns that small businesses have about the economy generally—not just in Scotland but throughout the UK. That is why, according to the Federation of Small Businesses, the most important thing is support for continuation of the small business bonus scheme.

Secondly, in most businesses that we speak to—small, medium or large—the top reason for the anxiety and concerns that they express is Brexit. It is why so many businesses are so concerned about the future. We have seen again this week the ineptitude at the heart of the Tory Government, as it takes this country closer and closer to the Brexit cliff edge. That is why every time a Tory stands up in this chamber to talk about those kinds of issues, they should be deeply embarrassed about what their party at Westminster is preparing to do to the interests of this country.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): What is the First Minister's view of recent comments by the Tory party and, in particular, of Murdo Fraser MSP's criticism of her Government's aid to small businesses? Does she agree that that is another example of Tory double standards?

The First Minister: I tend not to take anything that Murdo Fraser says particularly seriously.

Maybe it is just me, but I have come to realise that not much that Murdo Fraser says is particularly serious.

The double standards at the heart of the Tory party have been on blatant display to everybody. It calls for more money for the national health service while proposing tax policies that would rip £500 million out of Scotland's budget—and that is on top of the cuts that the Westminster Government is already making. It tells us that we cannot compare Scotland's performance with the rest of the UK when we are doing better, but it is quite happy to make such comparisons on other occasions.

Tory members in this chamber talk about the concerns of our business community while their party is imposing Brexit on Scotland, which will do untold damage to our businesses, and to our economy more generally. Every single one of the Tories, on all those issues and so many more, should be ashamed of himself or herself.

Carer Positive Employer Initiative

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-09621, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the carer positive employer initiative. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament supports the Carer Positive employer recognition scheme and its aim of making life better for carers; notes the vital job that carers do, which Carers Scotland estimates contributes the equivalent of around £10.8 billion per year to the economy and will likely increase as the population continues to age; welcomes the large number of employers of differing sizes from a wide range of sectors who have signed up to support carers in their workplace through the Carer Positive initiative; understands that Carer Positive is funded by the Scottish Government and was developed in partnership with public, private and voluntary sector organisations in Scotland; further understands that Carer Positive employers can progress through three accreditation levels of engaged, established and exemplary; notes that around 270,000 people in Scotland combine work with care and that, without support and understanding at work, carers can experience high levels of stress and exhaustion; recognises the importance of this scheme in supporting carers and employers; further recognises that this scheme can lead to benefits for employers, such as reduced absences, lower levels of staff turnover and savings on recruitment costs, and notes that employers across the Renfrewshire South constituency and Scotland are being encouraged to take steps to become Carer Positive employers and discover the benefits of supporting their workforce and those who rely on them.

12:50

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): As members of the Scottish Parliament, we regularly have the privilege of meeting an extraordinary range of individuals, groups and organisations. For me and, I imagine, for all of us, it is a humbling experience to meet certain groups and individuals among the many who make up the rich fabric of our society: those who serve in our fire, police and other emergency services; our forces and veterans community; those who work in the front line of our health and social care services; and our unpaid carers.

Carers make up 17 per cent of the adult population of Scotland, and it is estimated that 4 per cent of people aged under 16 are unpaid carers. The diversity of Scotland's population is equally reflected in the diversity of our carers community: the student who balances school with caring for her mum; the elderly husband who meticulously and selflessly organises his wife's self-directed support; and the single mother raising three children who each have additional support needs.

Those are but a handful of the experiences shared by the 788,000 people in Scotland who are caring for a relative, friend or neighbour. Each one of those carers makes a profound impact upon the lives of those whom they support. In doing so, carers make a massive contribution towards the delivery of care in Scotland. The value of the care provided by unpaid carers equates to £10.3 billion per year. To put that into context, it is equivalent to almost 80 per cent of our national health service budget, and it is being provided by barely 15 per cent of the population. To put it simply, society as we know it can only function because of the selfless dedication of unpaid carers. The care that they provide is irreplaceable.

As well as providing care, many carers make a significant contribution to Scotland's broader workforce across a range of professions. It is estimated that more than one third of carers combine care with work, with the 270,000 working carers comprising more than 10 per cent of the entire working population of Scotland.

With the total number of carers in Scotland expected to reach 1 million within the next 20 years, it is clear that our working carers are going to become an increasingly important part of Scotland's overall workforce. That is why it is vital that our workplace environments are supportive and understanding of the needs of carers, not just for the carers of today and tomorrow, but for Scotland's wider economy.

The carer positive initiative recognises and assists employers who seek to provide a supportive and understanding environment for employees who are carers. Such support can take many forms, such as telephone access, health and wellbeing support, leave arrangements and flexible working. Small differences can have a huge impact.

However, without the right type of support in the workplace, working carers are at risk of stress, burnout and leaving employment altogether. That can have a significant and detrimental impact on the carer and the people for whom they care. It can also have a negative impact on the employer, who loses a skilled member of staff. However, with the right support employers are able to retain carers, which can lead to reduced absence, lower levels of staff turnover and an overall reduction in recruitment costs. The good news is that all organisations, regardless of size or structure, can become carer positive.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Does Tom Arthur agree that, if employers do not provide flexible and carer-friendly workplaces, they are missing out on a huge pool of talent? It is not just about supporting people; it is about accessing the talent and skills of folk who have caring responsibilities.

Tom Arthur: I agree with my colleague, and I will illustrate some of that later in my remarks.

The question is, how does an employer or an organisation become carer positive? It is very simple. It is about fulfilling five basic criteria. The first is that there is a good understanding of the meaning of the term “carer” and that measures are in place that allow for the identification of carers, including support to self-identify for those who may not be aware that they are carers; the second is that there are recognised carer policies or procedures; the third is that there is workplace support; the fourth is that policies, procedures and support are effectively communicated to all staff; and the fifth is that carers are supported to engage with other carers.

Once an employer achieves carer positive status, they can then progress through three levels, moving from “engaged” to “established” and finally to “exemplary”. The ways in which the criteria are met and progression is achieved will, of course, vary between organisations, reflecting their different sizes and structures. That flexibility allows employers and carers to work together in the design and implementation of workplace policies and procedures that work for them.

The carer positive scheme is designed so that all organisations will be able to meet the criteria, and there are now more than 90 carer positive employers across the length and breadth of Scotland, covering close to 300,000 employees.

Carer positive employers can be found in a range of sectors, including financial services, energy, food and drink, charities and social enterprises, local authorities, health boards, colleges and universities, Scottish and United Kingdom Government agencies, and even MSPs, not to mention the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government. This means that there is now a solid evidence base highlighting the advantages of the carer positive scheme and a wide range of examples of best practice and how to achieve accreditation and progress through the different levels.

I place on record my thanks to members of the Greens, Labour and the Liberal Democrats as well as my own Scottish National Party colleagues who have supported the motion. I would also like to express my gratitude to Carers Scotland—in particular, to Simon Hodgson, Sue McLintock and Fiona Collie, who are in the gallery, for their support ahead of the debate. I am pleased to advise members that I will be hosting a drop-in session with Simon, Sue and Fiona between 2 pm and 4 pm this afternoon in committee room 3, and I encourage members to spare five minutes to take the opportunity to drop in and learn how they can promote the carer positive scheme to organisations in their own constituencies and

regions—and, importantly, learn how to become carer positive employers themselves.

Three in five of us will become carers at some point in our lives. Carer positive is an initiative that is relevant to all of us. It benefits both working carers and employers, supporting and enabling working carers to gain and retain employment, and contributing towards inclusive growth. It is a scheme that deserves the widest possible uptake and I look forward to seeing more organisations—and MSPs—become carer positive employers.

12:57

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Tom Arthur on bringing this debate to the chamber.

Carer positive is an initiative that I hope members from across the political spectrum will get behind. In recent years, it has been incredibly welcome to see, across all the parties, a greater focus on the needs and challenges that carers face.

The motion before us highlights the economic value of carers and the work that they do. This cannot be stated enough when we consider the provision that is made for carers directly through the state, as well as through initiatives such as this one.

To focus briefly on my region, the last census found that well over 40,000 people there are involved in administering unpaid care, with a significant proportion providing more than 50 hours of care a week. That is likely to be an underestimate of the true facts.

In some ways, our region is typical, but it is not difficult to imagine the extra strain that sometimes distant essential services can cause. It is equally easy to predict that care would be far more difficult for the public sector to deliver to people in community settings in areas such as the Highlands and Islands, so I pay tribute to the great many carers across the Highlands and Islands—and, indeed, across Scotland.

When we present figures, they can often mask the thousands upon thousands of individual situations that they represent—the range and diversity of people who are in employment and yet undertake often extensive caring responsibilities. Each is unique, but many of the stresses and strains are shared and unfortunately commonplace.

When employers support carers within their organisation, it provides a benefit not only to them and the carer, but to the person receiving care and to wider society, too. I echo Ruth Maguire’s point about being able to access the great pool of talent in the caring community. Caring for carers is in all

our interests and is rightly a key aspiration for parties across this chamber.

The law mandates a number of employment rights that carers can enjoy, including, significantly, the right to request flexible working, the right to time off in an emergency and the provisions in the Equality Act 2010 to guard against discrimination. However, there remains a range of steps that employers can take voluntarily to make their organisations even more accessible, inclusive and welcoming to people with caring responsibilities. That is where carer positive comes in.

Much of what is needed is about raising awareness. Often caring responsibilities can be hidden, with people's home and work lives kept separate. However, there always remain circumstances where the two clash. That is why it is positive for businesses to maintain policies and procedures that ensure that where that occurs, support is in place.

I note from some of the published material that most of the organisations awarded under the scheme are public sector or third sector bodies, which, I am pleased to say, include this Parliament, which received its recognised status back in February last year.

I ask the minister to outline today what the Scottish Government can do to encourage the uptake of the initiative among private sector companies with which it has regular dealings. It would also be interesting to know how many businesses are working with carer positive with a view to becoming awarded bodies.

I welcome the initiative and the work undertaken by Carers Scotland. I encourage the Scottish Government to look at where it can build on its connections and at what influence it has to embed carer positive attitudes among employers the length and breadth of Scotland.

13:01

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate Tom Arthur on securing the debate. I consider Tom to be a friend, so I always like to follow his work, but I also participate in the debate as a forthcoming new member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee, given that we are debating the role of carers in the economy and their ability to access fair work.

It is worth repeating some of the economic statistics. We know that carers contribute £10.8 billion to our economy and that one in seven workers in Scotland has some sort of caring responsibilities, but as we heard from Tom Arthur, currently only about 300,000 employees are covered by carer positive employers. There is a

tremendous amount more progress to make in that regard.

I confess that I had not heard about the scheme until I noticed the subject of Tom Arthur's debate today. Everything that I have learned about it, I have learned in the past few days. The similarities with the living wage accreditation scheme are striking, especially when we consider the benefits to the economy. Some of the arguments for the living wage were that it would reduce absenteeism and staff turnover and drive up productivity rates. Those are all arguments for the carer positive scheme.

To pick up the point that was made by Jamie Halcro Johnston, I say that it is worth remembering that one of the best advocates for the living wage was PricewaterhouseCoopers, which was one of the first major private sector employers to adopt the living wage because it believed that doing so made good business sense. There are many ways in which we can progress the case for expanding the carer positive scheme.

In order to become a carer positive organisation, an organisation needs to be able to do five key things. It needs to identify carers within the organisation, make sure that human resources policy reflects and mentions carers, provide various forms of workplace support, increase communication on, awareness of and training on carers, and have peer-support mechanisms in place. As we heard from Tom Arthur, under the carer positive scheme, there are three different scales on which employers can operate, which range from being engaged, through being established, to being exemplary.

I had a look to see which employers are currently carer positive approved in Edinburgh, in the area that I represent, and I was delighted to see that in the "engaged" category are the City of Edinburgh Council, the Parliament and the University of Edinburgh, and in the "established" category are NHS Lothian, Standard Life—which was a great champion of the living wage in the early days—and the Scottish Government. There are not as many organisations in the "exemplary" category as we would like, but they include the big energy company Centrica, which has its headquarters functions in Edinburgh.

Having only just learned about the scheme, I will endeavour, as a Lothian MSP, to do everything that I can to promote it, and I will contact large and small employers across the region to encourage them to participate in it. As an MSP, I am a living wage accredited employer: I will now take up Tom Arthur's challenge and make sure that my office is also a carer positive organisation. I will start taking those steps this week.

It is worth recognising that, although we know that carers make a tremendous contribution to the economy as employees, many carers who cannot work desperately want to work. I am mindful of a young man who came to my surgery back in October who is desperate to work but just cannot find an employer who is willing to deal with the reality of his living circumstances. We will, through the scheme, get this right when that young man is in the workplace, and I will continue to do my bit to ensure that that happens.

13:05

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): For two specific reasons, I thank my colleague Tom Arthur for lodging his motion for debate. First, carer positive is a great initiative that we should celebrate and promote; and, secondly, it affords me the chance at the conclusion of the debate to meet Sue McLintock and Simon Hodgson of Carers Scotland and to collect my carer positive certificate, as my office has joined Tom Arthur's in being accredited as carer positive. I am delighted to be the second MSP to be accredited, but I would have been even more delighted if Tom Arthur had not beaten me to being the first, mind you—not that I am competitive, you understand.

It is only right that Tom Arthur and I are backing words with actions and it is right and proper that the Scottish Parliament is doing that as well. Members might recall that in February last year I hosted an event here at Holyrood to showcase the carer positive initiative, at which the Parliament was presented with its carer positive “engaged” level accreditation. The Parliament has demonstrated that it has in place a number of policies that support staff who have caring responsibilities. In regular development conversations with staff, line managers are encouraged to ask about wellbeing and any support that a staff member needs. Support resources are available to staff, including trained counsellors who can provide expert emotional guidance. The human resources office also liaises with external organisations such as VOCAL—Voice of Carers Across Lothian—which supports carers in Edinburgh and Lothian.

I am pleased to learn that further steps are planned for this year and that a carers staff network that will be open to all building users is in the process of being set up in the Parliament. That will provide a space for carers to share their experiences and it will assist the organisation in developing its understanding of the needs of staff who have caring responsibilities. Once the network is set up, the Parliament will work towards the “exemplary” level of award in 2018. I hope that members will join me in acknowledging the efforts of Aneela McKenna and Phillipa Booth, who are

delivering that with other members of staff. More than that, though, I hope that members will commit, as Kezia Dugdale has, to joining the initiative. As MSPs, we ought to be leading by example.

To be honest, although I have always supported the carer positive initiative, I have previously voiced concerns about the challenges that face very small offices and businesses in becoming carer positive environments. Those concerns made me hesitate before taking the step that I took. I thought that there were circumstances in which, in being very much an outward-facing public-serving set-up, an MSP's office could find itself conflicted in being a carer positive environment. However, it readily became apparent that through common sense, co-operation and dialogue, we can almost always find a way.

Interestingly, of the now 90 carer positive employers in Scotland, 28 are defined as small employers—that is, they have fewer than 50 employees. Admittedly, a large number of the small employers work in the carers or voluntary sector, but the list also includes public sector organisations such as the Office of the Scottish Road Works Commissioner and private companies such as Mohn Aqua (UK) Ltd and Intrelate Ltd. Being a small organisation creates challenges to being carer positive, but Sue McLintock of Carers Scotland has not designed a one-size-fits-all scheme. Being accommodating does not mean that we are unable to provide a proper level of service to our customers or constituents. At the heart of the matter is the point that communication and flexibility cut both ways, and the same can be said of the benefits.

The results of a carer positive employer survey recently found that 92 per cent of participating organisations saw better staff retention, 88 per cent experienced lower absence rates, 61 per cent witnessed improved recruitment and 69 per cent observed higher productivity.

There is also a hard-cash illustration of the benefit to employers, the wider economy and the public purse. Centrica, which is one of the five employers to have received carer positive's highest accreditation of “exemplary” and one of the founding members of the employers for carers service, estimates that the direct cost to an employer of losing a working carer is between 100 and 150 per cent of the person's annual salary. Across the UK, that is a cost of about £1.3 billion a year to the economy; and when lost tax revenue and additional benefits payments are taken into account, that cost rises to £5.3 billion annually. In other words, there is a solid financial as well as moral case for pursuing carer positive policies.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The last of the open debate contributions is from Jeremy Balfour.

13:09

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I, too, thank Tom Arthur for bringing forward this important debate.

Unpaid carers are unsung heroes. As of June 2017, as we have already heard, there were an estimated 788,000 unpaid carers in Scotland. They make a massive contribution in reducing the burden on the NHS and our social care system by caring for friends, neighbours and relatives. If it was not for a carer, I would not be standing here, because I need help to get dressed every morning. That help is unpaid and done voluntarily.

In our role as members of the Scottish Parliament, we will all have met carers who tell us that knowing that they are helping someone else can be a positive and rewarding experience, but they also tell us that helping a husband, wife, partner or child can often be difficult and upsetting. It can lead to greater stress, worry, isolation, depression, anger, guilt and the blurring of boundaries—people say, “Am I a carer or a father?” or, “Am I a carer or a husband?” Caring can also put a strain and pressure on people’s finances. Often, people have to cut down on work, juggle work and caring and cut out things that they like doing, perhaps sport or other activities.

Supporting carers to manage the sometimes difficult job of balancing work with caring responsibilities can deliver real benefits to employers as well as help individuals and their families. The carer positive employer initiative aims to encourage employers to create a supportive working environment for carers in the workplace. I welcome the fact that a wide range of employers were consulted before the initiative. With the strong partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors, I hope that it will have lasting success across Scotland.

The employers who support the initiative recognise that supporting their employees, in addition to being good employment practice brings them benefits. Losing a carer from the workforce is damaging not only to the individual and their family but to the company or organisation. An example is the Scottish Court Service, which recognises the need to retain skilled and experienced staff by providing help through its carers policy. It acknowledges that it makes sense for everybody for employees to achieve a good work-life balance.

The Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, which will come into effect on 1 April, will again help people to be supported in what they do.

The carer positive initiative is a win, win, win. I confess that, like Kezia Dugdale, I did not know a lot about it until Tom Arthur lodged his motion. However, I hope to visit the session that he will

hold later this afternoon and, as an employer, I will look to bring the initiative to my workforce. I hope that other organisations and MSPs will do the same.

I welcome the award and hope that we will continue to develop similar initiatives that take cognisance of population changes and provide practical solutions that support and, most important, recognise the important contribution that carers make.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We do, in fact, have another contribution in the open debate. I call Fulton MacGregor.

13:13

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I apologise to you and the Parliament: I did not intend to speak in the debate, but I decided to press my request-to-speak button. Thank you for letting me in.

I declare that I am the parliamentary liaison officer to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport.

I thank Tom Arthur for bringing the debate to the chamber and pay tribute to Fiona Collie and the others in the gallery who, I know, have done fantastic work on the matter.

As I said, I did not intend to speak but, as I heard the debate progress, I was reminded of my own experience and decided that I would chip in. I thought about carers in the context of people not just being a carer once in their lives, but being in and out of that position. I thought of myself as a young 18-year-old and through my early 20s, helping as part of a family unit to care for my gran, who unfortunately passed away in 2000. I pay tribute to my gran, whose anniversary was last Tuesday. As a family unit caring for my gran, we all had our different roles to play. My brother and I, who were teenagers at the time, would go over to make her breakfast or lunch, while my mum and dad had fuller roles.

I have noticed in the case work that we deal with as MSPs—I do not know what other members think—that it is as common for people to come to the surgery or for a meeting in the office with a carer as it is for them to come alone. Inevitably, as you chat to folk, as well as dealing with the specific query, you hear them talk about their situation. I have been struck by the inconsistencies in how people are supported in their work. Some people say that they are very supported by their work and that their employer knows that they are a carer, for their aunt, sister or whoever, while others say that they are not supported at all—it was perhaps a real struggle for

them to get to the meeting and they only have 20 minutes. If the initiative can help with some of those inconsistencies it will have been great.

As Tom Arthur pointed out, it is about supporting the individual as well as the organisation. Like Kezia Dugdale, I would like to mention a particular case. Recently, I had a couple at my surgery who work in the same place and who care for their wee boy who has a lifelong condition. I was absolutely shocked to hear that they are struggling to get a shift pattern that works for them both. Not only are they having a lot of difficulties with that, but when they need time off, they are not getting paid leave. I will get the relevant information to the minister in case she can take the matter forward.

Will the minister and the Scottish Government commit to pursuing all sorts of organisations—including the Scottish Prison Service, which I did not see on the official list—to get them to sign up to the carer positive employer initiative? It is also about supporting them in how to treat their employees with significant caring responsibilities. It is a very good initiative.

I will leave it at that. I congratulate Tom Arthur and I thank you, Presiding Officer, again for allowing me to speak.

13:17

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Aileen Campbell): As other members have said, this is an important debate not only in recognising our unpaid carers, but in helping to raise awareness of the carer positive employer initiative for large and small employers across Scotland. I, too, thank Tom Arthur for securing the debate. I echo the words that he used to describe Scotland's carers and pay rightful tribute to the irreplaceable and selfless dedication of carers across Scotland. I welcome Carers Scotland to the Parliament and recognise the work that they do to promote carer positive, which is such an important initiative.

Although caring for a loved one can be a positive and fulfilling experience, many carers face stresses and challenges every day. Jeremy Balfour and Fulton MacGregor spoke from real experience about how that can impact on a family's life. Likewise, in my family, my mum relied heavily on the respite that she got from Crossroads Caring Scotland when she was caring for my granddad, when my sister and I were both very young.

Because of the value that the Scottish Government attaches to the unstinting commitment that carers have to the ones they love, we are absolutely committed to enabling carers to continue to care—that is, if they wish

to—in better health and to have a life alongside their caring role.

Between 2007 and 2017, we invested around £136 million in many programmes supporting adult carers and young carers, with our partners in local authorities, health boards, the third sector and the national carer organisations. The views and experiences of carers have also been crucial in helping to inform our programmes and initiatives. Most recently they have helped to shape the new legislation that extends and enhances the rights of carers to support.

I want to take a moment to talk about the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, given that, as members have mentioned, there are important links to the intentions of the carer positive scheme. With the 2016 act, which takes effect in April, we have sought to ensure that all our carers can be better supported and are able to realise their own personal outcomes. The new adult carer support plans and young carer statements will identify each carer's personal outcomes to ensure that their eligible needs are supported, and that might include, for example, their wish to remain in work or to undertake studies or training. Local authorities must also establish and maintain an information and advice service for carers that must cover a number of areas, including income maximisation for carers and information about carers' rights. It is therefore clear to me that the outcomes being achieved through carer positive can complement the 2016 act's provisions, and I encourage integration authorities to consider schemes such as carer positive when undertaking their duties under the new legislation.

There are an estimated 788,000 carers in Scotland, and 56 per cent of carers aged 16 or over are also in employment or self-employment, which, in the authority where my constituency lies, equates to around 18,300 carers being in work. I have heard from some carers who are struggling to look after their own health and wellbeing and, as a consequence, their loved ones' wellbeing. The financial impact of reducing the hours that they work or of giving work up altogether can be life changing. Nationally, around 35,600 carers have reduced the number of hours that they work and around 22,600 have left work altogether. Their situations, given some of the unfairness of the UK Government's social security system, can quickly become more challenging. We believe that it is unfair that the support that carers receive through the carers allowance is the lowest of all working-age benefits, and that is why in the summer we will increase carers allowance to the same level as jobseekers allowance.

Of course, supporting carers to balance work and caring responsibilities will help to improve family finances, but the carer positive scheme has

other positive impacts. As caring responsibilities increase in intensity, carers are at risk of becoming isolated, and it can be difficult to maintain or foster social networks and pursue hobbies or interests. Being at work and amongst colleagues can be invaluable to a carer's health and wellbeing, and the carer positive scheme is reducing social isolation and creating carer-friendly communities across the country. It is clear that since its launch in June 2014 the scheme is making organisations think about and reflect more on what can be done to better support employees who are also carers.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): In my capacity as convener of the cross-party group on armed forces and veterans community, I think that we are debating a very apt subject. Will the minister consider the carer support that armed forces veterans organisations provide to veterans in Scotland? Given that we are talking about 200 cases per month in some of the larger veterans centres in Scotland, it would be good if the minister could consider those organisations, too, under the carer positive initiative.

Aileen Campbell: There will always be ways in which we will want to enhance the offer through the carer positive scheme, and if the member writes to me with some of the details of the issue that he has raised, I will be happy to look at them, share them with Carers Scotland, my officials and others and explore whether there are improvements that we can make.

I am encouraged that, so far, 90 employers covering about 300,000 employees have been recognised as carer positive, but as Tom Arthur and Kezia Dugdale have rightly pointed out, there is much more that we need to do. The list of carer positive employers includes the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government, the third sector and public and private sector organisations. As members might be aware, I recently wrote to all Scottish public bodies to encourage them to participate in the scheme. I think that I also wrote to MSPs in November, so I should apologise to those members who might not have received that letter and for whom this is coming out of left field. I am certainly happy to ensure that we pass on knowledge and information to members who might wish to sign up to the scheme. In response to Jamie Halcro Johnston, I point out that my officials are working across Government to engage and establish better links with chambers of commerce to ensure that we up the number of private companies that embrace carer positive.

I congratulate Tom Arthur as the trendsetter on this issue, alongside Graeme Dey, as well as my ministerial colleagues Jeane Freeman and Maree Todd, who have also been recognised as carer positive employers. I hope that, like me, members

across the Parliament visit the carer positive website and apply to participate in this important scheme.

The carer positive initiative benefits not only carers. As Graeme Dey said, the organisations that have taken steps to become carer positive recognise the business case for supporting staff to remain in post and for retaining their skill and experience. That can reduce staff turnover and associated recruitment and training costs.

Inclusive growth is a key element of this Government's economic strategy, and we will support and encourage employers to maximise the benefits that come with treating workers fairly. As Kezia Dugdale did, it is right to set the carer positive initiative within the context of fair work practices.

We are committed to driving up employment standards. That is why we launched the Scottish business pledge and appointed an independent fair work convention, which published its framework in 2016. Despite employment law being a reserved matter, the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 enabled this Government to publish, in October 2015, statutory guidance on addressing fair work practices through procurement. That makes it clear that a positive approach to fair work practices can help to improve the quality of services, goods and works. Public bodies must now consider, before undertaking a procurement exercise, whether it is relevant and proportionate to include a question on fair work practices, including things such as the living wage, that can be evaluated as part of the competition. The carer positive initiative is contributing to that positive approach.

I will conclude by, like others, thanking Carers Scotland for its hard work in the development of the carer positive initiative. I hope that employers across all sectors in Scotland take steps to become carer positive. We will continue to work closely with Carers Scotland to explore how best to increase take-up of the scheme and how to support existing carer positive employers. I am grateful to all MSPs for their commitment to do what they can to promote this initiative.

Finally, I thank Tom Arthur for lodging the motion for debate and for his clear passion for making a difference on this important issue.

13:26

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Developing the Young Workforce

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-09821, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on developing the young workforce: review of progress at the midpoint of the seven-year programme.

14:30

The Minister for Employability and Training (Jamie Hepburn): This year marks Scotland's year of young people and is an opportunity for us all to focus on the contribution that young people across the country make to our communities and to our society.

On 12 December 2017, in this chamber, the Minister for Childcare and Early Years set out this Government's ambition for 2018 as being

"to ensure that our young people feel and believe that they are valued, wanted and vital to our country's future".—
[*Official Report*, 12 December 2017; c 13.]

One of the most significant ways in which we can work to that end is by supporting Scotland's young people to achieve the best possible outcomes for the lives ahead of them.

In our programme for government, we made clear our prioritisation of education and our ongoing commitment to equip our young people with the skills and qualifications that they need to succeed in a rapidly changing labour market. It is in the context of the year of young people and our commitments in our programme for government that I welcome the opportunity to update the chamber on the progress of our youth employment strategy, "Developing the Young Workforce", as laid out in our third annual report, which was published earlier this week.

The evidence and recommendations of the commission for developing Scotland's young workforce's final report, "Education Working for All!", gave us a shared vision of how we can tackle youth unemployment and, in so doing, address inequality and improve social mobility. The report was widely welcomed by members across the chamber. The Government responded quickly and unequivocally to accept the 39 recommendations that were made by the commission, and we made it plain that we shared its vision of a world-class vocational education system.

We are now at the halfway point of the programme's seven-year period, which is marked by a milestone achievement that I am confident we will collectively welcome. We set a stretching target and ambition that, by 2021, we would have

reduced youth unemployment in Scotland by 40 per cent from the 2014 level, and we have met that target four years early. I am also pleased to note that Scotland's youth unemployment rate has fallen from 25.5 per cent in October 2011 to 9.7 per cent in October 2017. Not only do we have a lower youth unemployment rate than the United Kingdom as a whole but we are now consistently among the best performers in the entire European Union.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the minister have figures on the variable employment rate within Scotland? There are probably quite grave variations, and I would be interested to know what he is going to do to tackle that.

Jamie Hepburn: I recognise that there are variations, some of them significant, within different communities, and one of the things that I am going to do to tackle that is continue to promote the developing the young workforce agenda, which has seen much progress.

I recognise that we need to maintain that progress and continue the downward trajectory of youth unemployment. In particular, there is more for us to do for those who are not in employment, education or training, many of whom face a variety of barriers to such destinations and many of whom will be in the very communities that Johann Lamont refers to. That is why it remains critical that we continue our long-term plans to strengthen education and skills partnerships among schools, colleges, training providers and employers.

As I visit schools, colleges and employers that are engaged in developing the young workforce activity, I am constantly met with energy and enthusiasm by those who are involved. The collective endeavour that we see from those partners and from local authorities, which share a leadership role with the Scottish Government in embedding the strategy, is making a difference.

We now have 21 developing the young workforce regional groups covering every part of Scotland. I have been impressed with the range and diversity of initiatives that are being led by each group in its own region, responding to its own circumstances, all of which are working to the same end of ensuring that our young people—wherever they live in Scotland—have the skills, learning and training opportunities that they need to equip them for the world of work and for their lives ahead of them. We need employers to be at the heart of our approach to developing the young workforce, which is why each group is chaired by a representative of industry in the region. Their role, input and commitment are critical.

Thanks to that partnership effort, we are seeing positive changes. The volume and number of secondary 5 and 6 students who are enrolled in

college courses at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 and above increased by almost 40 per cent in one year, from 2,169 in 2014-15 to 3,014 in 2015-16. Those higher-level courses are the key to getting more young people re-engaged in education and moving to the higher level of skills that Scotland's society and economy need.

We are offering a wider range of options for young people in school, including through the expansion of the foundation apprenticeship, which provides accredited work-based learning, alongside other course choices in the senior phase. I advise Parliament that foundation apprenticeship opportunities are now offered in all local authority areas, and we will continue to expand those opportunities. In 2017, there were more than 1,200 foundation apprenticeship starts, which was up from 346 in 2016. In the coming year, we will support more than 2,500 foundation apprenticeship starts in Scotland's schools.

To promote those new opportunities and to strengthen employer engagement in schools, careers advice is being offered earlier in schools, and we have established and continue to develop the career education standard, a work placement standard and guidance on school-employer partnerships.

Scotland's colleges are also making a vital contribution to the developing the young workforce agenda. The successful completion rate of higher education provision in colleges overall has increased from 73.1 per cent to 73.9 per cent. At the same time, 83.9 per cent of college leavers aged 16 to 24 are progressing to a positive destination of higher study, training, work or a modern apprenticeship. Colleges are also strengthening their links with employers, with 85 per cent of colleges now having established employer or industry advisory boards to review and enhance curriculum quality, planning and outcomes.

The expansion in foundation apprenticeships that I referred to a few moments ago has been matched by an expansion in modern apprenticeships. In 2016-17, we exceeded our target of 26,000 modern apprenticeship starts, with 26,262 people beginning an apprenticeship, which was an increase of 444 from the figure of 25,818 in 2015-16. An apprenticeship offers a fantastic opportunity to learn new skills while earning and gives employers the chance to grow their own talent while building a highly skilled workforce.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): Will the minister outline what is being done about the gender issues within apprenticeships?

Jamie Hepburn: I will come on to that point. We recognise that it has been a historical issue and is an on-going one, but we are determined to tackle it head-on. Over the past decade, the number of women undertaking modern apprenticeships generally has increased, although there are still some particular frameworks on which we need to do rather better. I will refer later to some of the work that we are doing on that. We have tasked Skills Development Scotland, through its equality action plan, to make efforts in that regard and we are seeing improvements, although I recognise that we need further improvements.

We remain focused on delivering our commitment to increase the number of new apprenticeship starts to 30,000 per year by 2020. Today, I can announce that we will fund up to 28,000 apprenticeship starts next year as the next step towards that target, which is up from our interim target of 27,000 this year.

I am pleased to say that the pathfinder phase of exploring graduate-level apprenticeships has proven its worth. For the first time, we will formally include and recognise the important contribution that graduate-level apprenticeships make to achieving our annual delivery targets. After successful testing of the graduate-level apprenticeship model over the past two years, confidence and demand from our higher and further education institutions and from employers are now at such a level that those high-level skills opportunities can be mainstreamed into the apprenticeship delivery targets, underlining the Scottish Government's commitment to graduate-level apprenticeships.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Can the minister tell us what the target is for modern apprenticeships at level 3 and above this year?

Jamie Hepburn: I will need to get back to Mr Gray with that specific figure in writing, as I do not have it in front of me right now. I could try to look through my substantial briefing but, rather than have that unedifying spectacle, I commit to writing to Mr Gray with that information in due course.

Our investment in graduate-level apprenticeships will result in the introduction of new graduate-level opportunities in business management, construction and cybersecurity, all of which are critical to employers throughout Scotland. At the same time, we are introducing a number of enhancements to ensure that modern apprenticeships continue to meet the needs of young people and employers and to support the development of key and priority sectors in our economy.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will those enhancements help people who have

disabilities to be part of the workforce, as has been suggested by Inclusion Scotland?

Jamie Hepburn: Yes. Just as Elaine Smith talked about the need to do more to ensure better gender representation in the modern apprenticeship framework, I acknowledge the need to do more to ensure greater participation by people with a recognised disability—learning disability being the example posited by Liz Smith—not just in modern apprenticeships but in the entire labour market. Our disability strategy sets out the demanding target of halving the disability employment gap. If we were to do better in the modern apprenticeship framework, it would make a substantial contribution to that. I am pleased that, as a result of the equality action plan, we are doing better, but I acknowledge that there is still long way to go.

We must do more to support our rural communities to better access modern apprenticeships. Last year, I announced the introduction of a supplementary payment for training providers in recognition of the additional costs involved in the provision of training for modern apprentices in rural communities. In 2017-18, that rural support policy has been available for trainees who reside in Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Highland, Moray, Orkney, Perth and Kinross, Shetland, the Western Isles, Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders as well as on the Isle of Arran, in North Ayrshire. I am pleased to confirm that, this year, we not only will continue to provide the rural supplement but will make it available to training providers based in all postcode areas that are defined as geographically rural, which will extend that support across all of Scotland's rural communities.

From April, we will support the extension of the early years workforce, as part of our commitment to nearly double early learning and childcare for three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds by substantially increasing the level of contributions to training costs across all age groups of apprentices. We will also increase our contribution to training costs for dental nursing apprenticeships and management apprenticeships.

Those enhancements all help to make our apprenticeship programme an attractive offer. I am clear that ensuring equality of access to opportunities is key to the long-term success of the developing the young workforce programme. That is why the 2018-19 modern apprenticeship contracting instructions for providers re-emphasise explicit equalities requirements to advance equality of opportunity.

We are making progress. In December, we published an updated equality impact assessment that showed the breadth of that progress. In 2016-

17, we saw the success of the stepping up programme, run by Enable Scotland, which has supported 1,571 young people with disabilities in 70 schools across 11 local authorities to access careers guidance and work placements. Of all those who were engaged, 98 per cent achieved a positive destination. We have also seen colleges working to tackle gender underrepresentation at subject level, and all college regions have set out their commitments in new gender action plans.

Furthermore, in July 2017, SDS published its first annual update on its modern apprenticeship equality action plan, which reflects progress across a range of indicators and, more importantly, includes details of further efforts to reduce gender stereotyping, increase the number of MA starts from minority ethnic communities, optimise the chances of a successful transition for care-experienced people into apprenticeships and increase the number of individuals starting apprenticeships who have a learning or physical disability.

We know that there is more to do if we are to address barriers to work and training for some young people, tackle inequality and ensure that all our young people have equal chances and choices to succeed in life. Going forward, we must build on the progress that has been made to date. That is a challenge for all our partners, including our employer groups.

Long-term change will come only from fully embedding the developing the young workforce approach in the school curriculum. To achieve that, we have placed that approach alongside getting it right for every child and curriculum for excellence as one of the three interrelated drivers of our ambition to create a world-class education system with the needs and interests of children and young people at its heart.

Young people are at the heart of our ambitions, and we look forward to their continued engagement during this year of young people, which we will use to further promote developing the young workforce to pupils, parents and practitioners. We will also continue to promote the benefits of the agenda to all of Scotland's employers, urging them to get involved in improving the life chances of Scotland's young people.

I look forward to continuing to showcase the personalities, talents and achievements of Scotland's young people, and I know that all members can be relied on to do that. I take great pride in supporting this agenda on behalf of the Scottish Government. I commend the motion in my name and hope that we will unite in backing it at decision time.

I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges the progress set out in the Developing the Young Workforce annual report 2016-17; notes the achievement of the programme's headline target, to reduce youth unemployment by 40% by 2021, four years ahead of schedule; recognises that there is more to do to address youth unemployment, particularly tackling gender imbalances in specific sectors and in improving employment opportunities for all young people, particularly those who are disabled, from minority ethnic backgrounds, or who are care-experienced, and believes that employers, schools, colleges and universities working in partnership through the Developing the Young Workforce regional groups can make a significant difference in improving the life chances of Scotland's young people.

14:45

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I begin my comments by referring to the contribution that young people made to the political debate at the time of the 2014 referendum—a contribution that, incidentally, changed my views about whether or not 16 to 17-year-olds should have the vote. I had not been in favour, largely on account of what many young people had told me when I visited schools, but after 2014, I was very much of the opinion that they formed a highly articulate group within the debate—good for them.

Irrespective of their views of the future of Scotland, I was particularly struck by the frequency of their references to education, skills and opportunities in the job market. They cared deeply about their education and employment, and what they expected from them, and so I think that that is a good starting point for the Scottish Conservatives in today's debate.

I warmly welcome what the Scottish Government says in its motion and the minister's comments; I will come back to talk about some of them in a minute.

I want to pick up on a constant theme from young people and employers. Irrespective of who they are, they want to have strength in literacy and numeracy first and foremost, because it is only by acquiring that strength that other doors of opportunity will unlock. That is a constant theme from many employers, some of which tell us that they still need to spend a considerable amount of money on topping up training in those skills when young people come into the workforce.

In the 2015 employer skills survey, 31 per cent of Scottish employers said that there was a lack of complex numerical skills among many applicants, and 16 per cent said that that applied to all their applicants, which is a worrying statistic. Eighteen per cent of employers said that among applicants there was a lack of ability to follow written instructions, and the figure was 17 per cent on information technology skills. I am pleased that the

Scottish Government is trying to address some of those figures through curriculum for excellence and better opportunities in the labour force.

I am also pleased with the Scottish Government's decision to introduce science, technology, engineering and mathematics bursaries, but we need to be clear that they will not have the greatest impact if we cannot solve some of the other skills issues in schools.

On that theme, I have been struck by what some employers and teachers have said to me recently about how it is time to think again about whether we should have a discrete qualification in arithmetic. I have spoken to Janet Brown of the Scottish Qualifications Authority about that, not because there is necessarily anything wrong with the mathematics course, but because a lot of employers are making the point that the basic skills of arithmetic are fundamental when it comes to the ordinary working of many of our young people. It is important because having a discrete qualification in arithmetic would mean not having the distraction of mathematics, which people can find difficult. I was taken with what Janet Brown said about the possibility of reconsidering the issue, particularly as the Scottish Government and the SQA are looking to reform national 4.

There is another issue around curriculum for excellence in ensuring that, within the desire to offer a broad general education, as much emphasis is laid on the need to acquire knowledge as is laid on the need to learn new skills. For very good reasons, curriculum for excellence has focused a great deal on skills, and there has not necessarily been the same focus on the knowledge base. The National Library of Scotland has now made available the archive of exam papers. It is interesting to note that changing focus, which is reflected in what many employers are telling us about our young people.

The Scottish Government has clearly devoted a great deal of time and, no doubt, taxpayers' money to its plans to develop Scotland's young workforce, and there are good ideas here—let us not be in any doubt of that. However, there is a need to reflect more on what Sir Ian Wood said in his seminal report about vocational training. There has been very strong cross-party agreement about it, but I wonder whether enough is being done to implement his recommendations. Vocational training is not only the right thing to do for our young people for educational reasons; it is the right thing to do for the economy.

Lots of really good things have happened in recent years, whether that is the modern apprenticeship scheme that the minister has spoken about, the opportunities for all programme, projects that have been set up by several chambers of commerce, or skills academies such

as those that are offered by Queen Margaret University in the hospitality and tourism sector. They have all played a major part in extending opportunities, but the vast majority of young people continue to be faced with a school system that does not necessarily have enough diversity. I am not talking about different kinds of schools; I am talking about the importance of having a diversity of choice within the vocational route as much as in the traditional academic one.

For too long, Scotland has not taken advantage of some of the thoughts that Ian Wood put before us about how the encouragement of and the incentives for young people could grow so much more if those vocational opportunities were extended and expanded. Ian Wood pointed to the influence of that greater choice in the curriculum in countries such as Germany and Denmark. It is not just about different subjects; it is about a different emphasis, particularly in the older years of senior school. It is very important to consider that.

Jamie Hepburn: Does Liz Smith accept that we are still in a rather early period of rolling out the new developing the young workforce agenda? It is about whole-system change. Surely she would recognise and welcome what I said a few moments ago, which is that two years ago, there were 326 foundation apprenticeships in Scotland's schools; last year, there were more than 1,200; next year, we have a target to have of more than 2,500; and the Deputy First Minister has previously set out in public that from 2019, there will be 4,000 such opportunities in Scotland's schools. Therefore we can already see the direction of travel that the member is talking about.

Liz Smith: I accept that, but I think that there is more to be done at school level. If I read Sir Ian Wood's report correctly—and if I understood correctly what some of his predecessors said—for vocational training to have that diversity, it needs to start below the actual job market. That is the point that we need to try to get hold of. If we read the evidence from European countries, we see that many of them are successful because of that diversity of choice.

I will spend a little bit of time on some examples to do with young people who have traditionally been disengaged from the school system. Newlands Junior College has been a hugely successful institution, supporting young people between the ages of 14 and 16 who have been very disengaged from mainstream education but have found their niche at the college. I listen carefully to what Jim McColl says, whether it is in his articles for *The Herald* or when I meet him, as I have done on a couple of occasions, and the Newlands example is part of that diversity. The calls for similar institutions across Scotland should not be left unheard, because that diversity is

important—it motivates young people. That is plain for all to see when they visit Newlands Junior College, which deserves a great deal of credit for what it has done in providing that diversity. The strong messages from Ian Wood and from institutions such as Newlands are important.

It was good to hear recently that, in the letter that Shirley-Anne Somerville sent to colleges, she stated that she is looking for a rebalancing of college places so that there is a much better emphasis on part-time places. That is important. It matters for several reasons; principally because such places increase flexibility in the workforce, but also because they allow colleges to be much more responsive to the demands of their local economy. On a visit to Fife College, I was told just how important that ability is. Part-time places allow a greater speed of turnover, which is very helpful. I am pleased that the Scottish Government has made that clear.

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am grateful for the opportunity to restate our commitment to part-time places and to reiterate that nearly three quarters of all college places are on part-time courses. The Government continues to fund part-time and full-time courses, particularly those that will encourage young people and those already in the job market into further employment.

Liz Smith: I take that point, but, let us be honest, there had been a lot of criticism about there not being sufficient emphasis on that. Replacing that emphasis is a good thing, because it allows flexibility and allows local economies' specific demands to be met. It is an encouraging sign.

I think that my time is up, so I will finish by saying that this is a very important debate—nothing is more important than the future of our young people. However, I would like to see greater diversity of opportunity. There should be no let up in our attempts to engage our young people in the choices that they can make, to make Scotland a better place to live in and to ensure that there are better opportunities in education and employment. I am happy to support the motion.

I move amendment S5M-09821.3, to insert at end:

“, but recognises that these opportunities will only be realised if the aforementioned policies are accompanied by those designed to create a more diverse education system, which fully embraces vocational and technical training in the way set out by the commission that was led by Sir Ian Wood.”

14:55

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I rise to speak to my amendment and to support the Government motion.

The Wood report, on which the developing the young workforce plan was based, is one of the best reports of its kind that I can remember. It addressed an issue that is critical to not only the future life chances of our young people but our country's economic prospects, which is that we must ensure that we have the skills that we need for the jobs of the future and release the potential of our future generations—this nation's greatest latent asset.

The report was commendably clear and specific in what it required us to do, which was to provide more, and more diverse, paths for young learners to pursue by properly valuing vocational learning as well as academic learning and breaking down the barriers between school, college, university and the world of work. That is potentially a profound change. The danger was—and is—that we do that half-heartedly, which I think was how Liz Smith characterised it.

I remember saying at the time of the report that, if the result was just a few more pupils doing the odd college course while still at school, we would have failed. A consistent and concerted effort is needed to make the Wood recommendations happen. The fact that we have a seven-year plan and annual reports to track progress is very welcome indeed.

There has been progress, which is fairly noted in the motion, not least the fall in youth unemployment, to which I will return later. That progress is reported in numbers, but it reflects real opportunities for real young people. Only a few weeks ago, I met Connor Waldron, last year's foundation apprentice of the year. He did a manufacturing and engineering foundation apprenticeship as part of West Lothian College's pathfinder programme and went on to a job as an apprentice mechanic with West Lothian Council. He won a job when 700 people applied and 360 were interviewed for only two places. He was in no doubt that he would not have had that chance if it had not been for the foundation apprenticeship that he completed. Indeed, he said:

"It's unreal what you get out of the foundation apprenticeship."

He felt that it had seriously transformed his life.

However, there is a long way to go. At the same event at which I met Connor Waldron, Helen Young, the deputy head of West Lothian College's engineering department, who oversaw the programme from which Connor benefited, talked about the many positive aspects of the programme but also about the challenges that it faced. She

said that she was having trouble recruiting to the programme because she was having trouble getting schools to promote it. When there were students on the programme, schools undermined their motivation by insisting that they miss their foundation apprenticeship training in order to help at sports days or take part in school concert rehearsals. There were problems, too, in finding enough employers willing to provide work placements. I think that the message that Helen Young was trying to put across was that developing the young workforce programmes such as foundation apprenticeships are not yet embedded in the system. Too many teachers and employers still do not know about them or, if they do, they do not take them seriously enough—they see them as something extra, not something on a par with highers, even though a foundation apprenticeship sits at level 6 in the Scottish credit and qualifications framework.

That is evident in the numbers, too. The minister talked about there being 1,200 foundation apprenticeships, which is progress from the 460 or so the year before. I know that they are new, but it is still only an average of around three per school. The report refers to 3,000 level 5 vocational courses, but that is still only an average of around eight per school. It might be that those opportunities are being made available now in every local authority, but they are clearly not being made available in every school. We have a lot more to do to make them available, understood and valued in all schools as an option for all pupils.

Jamie Hepburn: I readily concede the point and I suppose that it goes back to the point that I made to Liz Smith, which was that we are virtually at the outset of a journey, so I hope that Mr Gray will recognise that we are progressing in the right direction. In terms of the fundamental agenda of promoting the benefits of the opportunities, will he join me in welcoming the fact that we now have 21 regional groups the length and breadth of the country that will help to promote the opportunities across Scotland?

Iain Gray: Of course I will. I think that I have just spent some time illustrating the strengths of the foundation apprenticeship and other parts of the vocational programme. My point is that those opportunities must be made available more widely to, for example, those young people for whom progress has not been on track, as the motion fairly acknowledges. It is those who face particular barriers of disability, ethnicity, care experience or traditional gender bias, which is still extreme in frameworks and sectors such as construction or engineering, where the proportion of young women fell from 6 to 5 per cent in the past year.

My point is that we will not change that without intensifying our efforts in, for example, one-to-one support for some young people or without efforts like those in Woodmill high school in Fife, which has a three-year gender action plan involving continuous professional development to change staff attitudes; engagement with parents to change their attitudes; and a complete redesign of course choice, structure and language to encourage young women to choose science subjects and other subjects that few women have traditionally studied.

Although we are now three years in on the programme, we are still virtually at the start and need to step up our efforts to transform young people's learning and skills choices and get beyond the pathfinders and good examples towards a lasting transformation of the senior phase of school-age education. However, we also have to be more rigorous about how we measure success. Achieving that youth unemployment target is welcome, but we have to face up to how many young people are in temporary, insecure, part-time or zero-hours jobs. Across the United Kingdom, 36 per cent of zero-hours contracts are filled by young people; if it is the same proportion in Scotland, that means that 25,500 young people are on those contracts here. We count that as a positive destination, but it is not. That is not developing the young workforce; it is exploiting them. It is not opportunity; it is alienation. We should stop counting that as positive and we should discourage it by ensuring that publicly procured goods and services are not rewarding that kind of insecure and unfair employment.

We are entitled to celebrate success in developing the young workforce, but we are obliged now to redouble our efforts and deliver that success for all: for the many, as some might say, not just the few.

I move amendment S5M-09821.1, to leave out “, and believes” and insert:

“; recognises that the rise of exploitative zero-hours contracts is damaging to the future stability of the workforce; notes that the current methodology used by the Scottish Government considers a school leaver who becomes employed on a zero-hours contract to be in a ‘positive destination’; believes that zero-hours contracts should be removed as a ‘positive destination’ for young people in official Scottish Government statistics, and that public procurement should not reward companies and organisations that engage in operating zero-hours contracts, but further believes”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I call Tavish Scott to speak to and move amendment S5M-0982.1.

15:03

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): The merits of Scotland's developing the young workforce programme are considerable—Liz Smith, Iain Gray and the minister have rightly set them out—both to tackle the scourge of youth unemployment and to revolutionise how we help young people prepare for work and life. Sir Ian Wood's report was and remains fundamentally right, but the world has moved on since 2014 and artificial intelligence, and what it means for the workforce of tomorrow, is one of the great unknowns for designing the policy approach to developing Scotland's young workforce and, indeed, the labour market more generally. However, a rereading of the Wood commission report is the basis of my amendment to the motion.

John Swinney might recall that, when he was the finance secretary, I made the argument about decentralising Skills Development Scotland; I make the same argument today to Jamie Hepburn, not to score a political point but because I think that there is a serious case for supporting young people with a more flexible, adaptable and closer system of support, which could also save some money. I am appreciative of the challenges that any Government faces, but there is a case for a system that could allow more to be spent on the very apprenticeships and flexible learning for vocational education that we all seek to support.

Decentralising Skills Development Scotland to the college regions would be consistent with the Wood commission's thinking and indeed recommendations. It said, for example, that

“The newly formed regional colleges”,

as they were at that time, in 2014,

“through more focused and ambitious outcome agreements, and working closely with industry, should ensure that a college education provides skills and qualifications relevant to the market requirements and in particular the new challenges of the modern technology orientated economy.”

I agree with that. It also made a specific recommendation that

“The new regional colleges should have a primary focus on employment outcomes and supporting local economic development.”

For me, the key word there is “primary”, and the recommendation is clear. I believe that the arguments in favour of that decentralisation are entirely consistent with the thinking and indeed the philosophy of the Wood commission.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I accept a lot of what Mr Scott says. I think that it is at the heart of how we have tried to implement the Wood commission report, with the

groups structured in such a way that they are aligned to the college regions, and with particular account taken of the diverse geography that Mr Scott represents in the islands and across the Highlands and Islands, where we have taken a particular course to make sure that the local dimension is very much reflected in the way in which the DYW agenda is taken forward in all communities.

Tavish Scott: I can very much agree with the Deputy First Minister's sentiments and with his suggestions about how the programme is working. What I am arguing for today is a further development and enhancement of the service, for two reasons. First, I have always believed that the strategic purpose of Skills Development Scotland could be subsumed into the enterprise agencies and the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council—which now, in fairness, come under the auspices of the board that Mr Brown set up last year. Whatever I may think of that, there is at least a clear structure in that case.

However, as important—or, for some, more important—is the fact that it is what happens at a local and regional level, which the Deputy First Minister has just mentioned, that needs to be enhanced. Improvements are necessary. Many see SDS as a top-down organisation that, given half a chance, imposes a one-size-fits-all regime on everything that it goes with. For example, only after pressure from MSPs of all parties who represent rural areas did it amend its previous proposals that would have made it very difficult for apprentices to undertake courses in specific colleges and locations in the central belt, which is still essential for many. I am grateful to Mr Hepburn for the work that he did on that.

At the Aberdeen developing Scotland's young workforce meeting just before Christmas, which was attended by colleges, the councils and the Scottish Government, the plea was that creative policies would achieve better outcomes with the money that is available if there was more flexibility. All the evidence, or certainly some of the evidence that I have been given, suggests that that does not come from SDS.

The foundation apprenticeship that Mr Hepburn talked about at some length today is a good policy. It is the right policy, but it is bedevilled—it is not just me who says this, but person after person who deals with it—by bureaucracy, form filling, systems and processes. Also, the problem is not just the SDS form filling, systems and processes but the fact that the SDS changes them so regularly. I cannot be the only constituency member to have had that representation consistently over a period of time. I am arguing for a simplification of that.

If the matter was devolved to a college region level where there would be much more input from the businessmen and women who are on the regional boards that Mr Hepburn has rightly set up, who would therefore have a close hand in those methods and how they were designed, I do not think that we would have the same concerns, which are certainly being expressed to me, about how the organisation operates. I just think that we could do an awful lot better with the money that Mr Hepburn spends.

Jamie Hepburn: I take on board the point that Mr Scott makes. If there are concerns about any level of bureaucracy, it is incumbent on us to hear them and respond. I suggest, however, that that does not necessarily suggest or lend itself to a radical overhaul of the structure of Skills Development Scotland. Perhaps it is about the manner in which it implements some of the policies. Let me readily commit now to happily meeting Mr Scott to take on board any concerns that he has.

Tavish Scott: I am grateful for that. It is very fair. I think that I will always seek to argue for a decentralisation model, but he is in government and he has every right to look at the matter. I certainly recognise and applaud a commitment to tackle systems that are not helpful in delivering the kind of services that we all want to see.

I want to make one other observation on SDS. The SDS online careers service—My World of Work—is not seen by schools to be as effective as one-to-one sessions for young people with local SDS staff. The local SDS staff across the country are the stars of the organisation. If the local staff were given more flexibility and removed from the clutches of centralised control, they would provide the adaptable learning and responsiveness to local needs that would so enhance the service. The service is not just for young people—although that is the context of today's debate—but is also for employers, schools and colleges.

Sir Ian Wood made very clear his desire to see close working relationships evolving and being sustained between those crucial building blocks for a young person's future. SDS's responsibilities should be devolved to Scotland's college regions across the country. I understand that some people may make the argument against that by saying that we need national programmes and nothing else, but we can have national programmes that are locally interpreted and flexibly designed with targets based on real local economic needs, rather than targets imposed from above.

Different parts of Scotland will do different things. Glasgow College with its size, economies of scale and the city region to cater for, will and should take different decisions from the University of the Highlands and Islands colleges. I am not

arguing for reform for reform's sake. Rather, I am arguing for an approach that can make such an important programme for Scotland's young people more adaptive to the ever changing circumstances that they face and puts the local and regional economic and vocational dimension at the heart of what we can offer young people as they make the choices that will shape their futures.

I move amendment S5M-09821.1, to insert at end:

", and further believes that a decentralised Skills Development Scotland, aligned to college regions, benefiting from closer partnerships with businesses, schools and other local agencies, would help achieve the objectives of the report of the commission that was led by Sir Ian Wood."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I understand why members turn around to respond to someone behind them, but I remind them that, if they do so, the microphone will not catch what they are saying. That applies to all members. I know that you are extending a courtesy by turning around, but it means that other members cannot hear what you say, so I ask you to desist from doing so. We will now move to the open debate.

15:11

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I am coming at the report from two standpoints. The first is as a former further education lecturer who has spent the majority of her working life focusing on getting young people from all backgrounds into skilled meaningful work. The second is as the only member of the Scottish Parliament who is on the Education and Skills Committee and the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee, and so has an overview of the skills agenda from both those policy areas.

I welcome the report and the achievements in youth employment rates. The report proves that equality is at the heart of the developing the young workforce policy. However, I had one reservation about the focus of the recommendations that were made to the Government by the national advisory group, and I have not really changed that view. We have a largely unmet need in training and encouraging young people into enterprise, and in relation to a changing work environment in which more and more people will consider the options of self-employment and setting up a company. I would like future development of the policy to focus on entrepreneurship and enterprise. That could yield some very positive results—in particular, in preparing young people for an ever-changing employment landscape and, crucially, in the context of today's debate, in promoting diversity in business leadership.

I take on board the minister's comments about business and management courses, but people

study a great variety of subjects and then set themselves up as self-employed. As it stands, our current demographic in entrepreneurship is not one that screams equality: the majority of business owners in Scotland are white, male and from middle-class backgrounds. If we do not encourage more young women to set up in business, we are missing a huge opportunity. I have often mentioned in Parliament the enterprise gap and how if we had as many women as men setting up businesses in Scotland we would add £7.6 billion to our economy.

Schools, colleges and universities could do more in terms of providing students with the basic skills and tools to set up in business. As many members will know, I lectured in television production; the creative industries is a sector in which the vast majority of people are self-employed and access work on a project or contract basis. That is simply the nature of the industry and has been for a very long time.

I will give members an example of where I am coming from. Bizarrely, many years ago, a unit in the higher national diploma that I taught was dropped. The unit, which was called "Freelance working skills", taught many of the skills that are needed to operate as a self-employed individual. Even though the subject matter could have been perceived as being dry—believe me, students used to moan about it, especially after they had had two exciting years of producing films and making live television—it was one of the course's most important units. It taught students how to find work, how to get a portfolio or show reel ready, how to navigate the tax system—members will see what I mean about it being dry—how to set up a company and, most crucial of all, how to market themselves to clients as well as to employers. I always taught the unit about two months before graduation, but when it was dropped from the curriculum, I found myself having to teach it ad hoc to make up for it.

I have discovered that Scottish Enterprise has no director who is directly responsible for engagement with educational institutions—either engagement in form of partnering businesses with educational establishments for innovation opportunities or, which is more relevant to this debate, of working with graduating students to ensure that they become the next generation of entrepreneurs and employers. A focus on maximising the potential of demographics that are not currently engaged in business creation could be a real winning formula.

As a former businesswoman and current convener of the cross-party group on women in enterprise, I do not think that anyone will be surprised to hear that I believe that business creation is a key route out of gender, skills and

employment segregation, restrictive traditional employment practices that do not meet the needs of people with family or caring responsibilities, the gender pay gap and gender stereotyping. All those things led to my setting up my own company in 2001. As most women in Scotland will be acutely aware, they have blighted the workplace and could be tackled at source with a focus on getting more women to set up in business and become employers and business leaders. The dearth of women in leadership positions in the private sector has meant that not enough private sector companies have flexible working practices or women on their boards, in leadership roles or in science, technology, mathematics and engineering roles.

The drive for equality of opportunity in the workplace through ensuring parity in the take-up of modern apprenticeships and access to college and university is hugely important. So, too, is creating the next generation of entrepreneurs and employers, who must be diverse if we are to tackle systemic inequality in the workplace. If we give young people the tools to be confident in that area, we will see generational change in the operation of the private sector, and that will unlock our economic potential and ensure equality of opportunity.

15:17

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I very much enjoyed listening to Gillian Martin's speech, in which she raised a number of valid points. Indeed, I have experienced the same thing in my constituency, where natural job opportunities in existing companies are not always available to young people, so some have to go out and create economic opportunities for themselves.

I was also interested in some of Tavish Scott's points about decentralisation and flexibility for different communities, given the great variation not just across Scotland, but across the constituency that I represent, in terms of what is on offer and the demands of the local economy.

I want to start by reflecting on a comment that Maree Todd made in a speech before the Christmas recess. It is no reflection on her at all, but I thought it interesting when she said that some members would be surprised to hear that young people had chosen enterprise and regeneration as key themes for the year ahead. In a way, that remark spoke volumes about the disconnect between the policy makers of today and those of tomorrow. Coming from a region that is facing some of the greatest and perhaps most pressing economic challenges that can be found the length and breadth of our nation, I was not surprised to hear that young people care about economic opportunities, are worried about the

longer-term sustainability of their own communities and really value opportunities to get high-skilled and good-quality jobs that are more than just a positive destination and actually gave them a positive outlook for the rest of their lives. In that context, I recognise that the developing the young workforce programme has made an invaluable contribution—and, I add, a long-overdue start—to stemming the tide of centralisation and decline.

I am greatly impressed by what the local team in Dumfries and Galloway has achieved in a relatively short time. As well as bringing together and maximising existing local training and employment opportunities, the team has done a sterling job in reaching out across what is a large and diverse rural area, in instigating new ideas and initiatives, and in working with schools, the college sector, businesses and young people themselves. It has done a lot to tackle the barriers that have emerged over a great many years as a result of the urban-rural divide.

As the minister recognised in his opening speech, there can be no denying that there are often real challenges in rural communities, and it is hard to make opportunities accessible to all, particularly when it comes to training. I warmly welcome the progress that has been made.

The issues that face many rural communities have been a long time in the making. It is also fair to say that they are not unique to Scotland. However, they must be recognised. In doing so, we must acknowledge that there are not always easy fixes. At the halfway point, the developing the young workforce programme is showing many welcome encouraging signs. However, in my part of the world, we are still more than halfway from the "Job done" point.

I have previously voiced concern in the chamber about broader issues that stand in the way of progress and are holding young people back—not only in rural communities across my constituency, but in communities across Scotland. We will not be able to move forward until those issues are addressed. I cannot help but feel that we are asking the DYW team to do its job with one hand tied behind its back. While we do that, we deny our young people the full opportunity to pursue their own aspirations and priorities. As I have said already, it cannot simply be about getting people into employment as an end in itself; it must be about ensuring that, at every stage of their lives, our young people have what they need to succeed. I am afraid that they are being let down at the moment by a Government that sometimes chooses to prioritise other things. Although today's debate is welcome, sometimes what we hear in the chamber does not match what young people feel the Government's priorities are.

Our education system no longer acts as the great leveller that it once was. Every moment that we ignore that fact, we sell our young people short and leave many of them behind. That is why I welcome the constructive approach that my colleague, Liz Smith, has set out with regard to ensuring that every parent and pupil across Scotland gets a first-class educational experience at their local school. The approach needs to recognise the concerns of our teachers and their considerable efforts to make the best of the Scottish Government's poor implementation of curriculum reform.

I am also worried that more than 150,000 college places have disappeared. Although I welcome moves to refocus efforts on some part-time courses, we seem all too often to have a Government that undervalues the economic contribution and tangible difference that college courses make to ensuring that we address the skills gap in areas such as Dumfries and Galloway.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you must draw your remarks to a conclusion.

Oliver Mundell: In higher education, we see continued complacency. We need to tackle that and ensure that everyone has a fair crack of the whip.

15:24

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Oliver Mundell was doing so well until the last couple of paragraphs, when he fell into the old trap of using slogans and clichés.

I will mention Newlands Junior College, as Liz Smith did in her speech. It is in my constituency and I have visited it a few times. I have spoken to Mr McColl and others, and the college is a very good example of how people from difficult circumstances who find school and education difficult on the whole can move on and make a difference to their lives. I thank Liz Smith for mentioning it.

I am delighted to take part in the debate, which could not be better timed, taking place, as it is, at the beginning of Scotland's year of celebrating young people. As I well know, we are not young people for ever, so it is vital that we are committed to ensuring that all our young people—regardless of their background—find themselves able to reach a positive destination. To that end, I was delighted to read that we are four years ahead of schedule on our target for reducing youth unemployment by 40 per cent.

The Government is right to congratulate the many partners in local authorities, employers and, of course, the education system. Many members

will have read in detail the response to the report from Action for Children Scotland and about the many barriers that it thinks prevent young people from obtaining secure employed positions, including their having no knowledge of how to put a CV together and lack of confidence for the interview process. I remember my first experience of interviews all too well.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Really?

James Dornan: Believe it or not, that memory has not completely gone, yet.

That first interview experience can be a daunting prospect. In my case, it was embarrassing. As an adult, I still feel nervous at the thought of some of my early interviews, so I can only imagine what it is like for someone who has never been outside an educational establishment.

Action for Children stated that it has sought to work collaboratively with schools to engage young people in vocational opportunities. Many young people throughout Scotland leave school for an afternoon to attend work placements, which allows them to experience the change from an educational environment to an employment environment. Those opportunities also provide young people with the necessary work experience that prospective employers now look for on a CV. I will go into more detail about that later in my speech, because those opportunities are terrific. In many cases, education is the key to so much.

I turn briefly to my role as convener of the Education and Skills Committee. It is clear that that committee has a strong interest in vocational learning in our schools, colleges and universities and through apprenticeships. Although the committee has not undertaken specific work on vocational education, it is very much part of our day-to-day scrutiny of education policy. In September, for example, the committee heard evidence from the SQA, during which it explored how vocational qualifications are being taken within the senior phase. The SQA suggested that some vocational courses have displaced academic courses. I know that the Scottish Government is working on that area in its 15-24 learner journey review. The topic is also very much on the committee's radar, and it might explore it in more detail in the future.

One very important aspect of the Wood report and the developing the young workforce programme is equalities—in particular, gender segregation in modern apprenticeships and other vocational learning. I know that that issue was raised earlier. The Wood report recommended that Skills Development Scotland create an equalities action plan for modern apprenticeships. In

December 2015, SDS published an action plan to cover five years.

In our “Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies” report last year, the committee noted that there may be wider societal issues that lead to gender imbalances in the uptake of some modern apprenticeships. Nevertheless, the committee urged Skills Development Scotland to ensure that its programmes are accessible and attractive to all Scotland’s young people. The committee will continue to keep a watching brief on the progress and implementation of the SDS’s equalities action plan.

While making those very important points, it is prudent that we also highlight the success of vocational training programmes to date. I will take some time to provide to members details of their many benefits. As we know, foundation apprenticeships enable mostly S5 and S6 pupils to be released from school at times to work with local employers. Doing that alongside academic qualifications allows people to develop a brilliant vocational skill set alongside their academic achievements. However, foundation apprenticeships do more than that: they benefit pupils by giving them the opportunity to see how work is done, and they benefit employers by giving them the opportunity to see whether they want to keep the man or woman on if they already know their business and how it works and the people who work in it. They also give employers the opportunity to build great ties with local schools and colleges, which provide the employees of the future. Those apprenticeships are designed with employers and business owners, which can only have a positive effect on a business that chooses to participate.

The report is a detailed one that not only outlines the various challenges that we will face in developing the young workforce. It does more than that, although it accepts that there are still challenges to face, in that it highlights the importance of various organisations—from educational establishments to the Government, and from schools and colleges to third sector organisations—working together. Absolutely all those organisations are committed to our young people, so I take the opportunity to congratulate them. I fully support them in trying to achieve the goals that are set out in the report. I accept that there is much more to do, but any investment in young people is an investment in the future of Scotland.

Finally, I congratulate and thank our many young people who work so hard to become part of a growing and ambitious workforce. The real achievements belong to them.

15:29

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): I declare that I am a member of Unite the union.

At the end of last year, we debated the then forthcoming year of young people 2018; at the start of this year, we are again—quite rightly—debating a young people’s issue. Tackling youth unemployment is vital for our country’s prosperity; it will also make a major contribution to eradicating poverty and inequality in society. The long-term strategy is welcome and necessary but, to effect real change, it must be more radical, and what Labour is calling for in its amendment, which I support, would help to do that.

Work is important in tackling poverty, but we also know that many children who live in poverty are in families where parents work but remain poor because of low wages and precarious employment conditions. Poverty wages and insecure employment are particularly prevalent among our young workforce. The Unite campaign, better than zero, which is run for young people by young people to tackle insecure and low-paid work, is having some success in the hospitality industry. That message can be shared across other sectors.

The approach taken in the better than zero campaign challenges the presumption that young people can work any hours and be as flexible as the employer wishes them to be. Young people have many other commitments in their lives, including pursuing further study and caring responsibilities; they may also be young parents. They deserve respect in the workplace, good terms and conditions of employment, a safe working environment and a decent wage.

Two of the ambitions for schools in the developing the young workforce programme are

“Embedding meaningful employer involvement”

and having

“Stronger partnerships between employers and education.”

I want to look at those important aims and raise questions with the Government front bench about them.

First, will the minister tell us whether the employers that are involved are committed to fair work, including no zero-hours contracts and a living wage? It would also be helpful to know whether the aims of the fair work framework apply in the developing the young workforce programme.

One recommendation is that growth businesses and inward investment companies that are in receipt of public funding should be encouraged and supported to employ young people. I would welcome an update on that issue, including on

whether that includes a commitment to a living wage.

Another recommendation, which was mentioned by my colleague Iain Gray, is that procurement and supply chain policy should be used to encourage more employers to support the development of Scotland's young force. Again, I am interested to know whether that includes fair pay and conditions.

There should be encouragement to recognise the benefits of collective bargaining, which would pick up on one of the five principles of the fair work agenda and give employees an effective voice in the workplace.

Those are all areas in which the Scottish Government can have a big influence in making a practical difference to young people's prospects in the world of work, but revisiting what are considered "positive destinations" must be a priority. There must also be scope for supporting trade unions to speak to young people in schools regularly, building on initiatives such as the Scottish Trades Union Congress unions into schools programme, because any partnership with employers should include a meaningful partnership with trade unions in protecting and promoting workers' rights.

Although the numbers of young people undertaking modern apprenticeships continue to increase, which is to be welcomed, it would be helpful for the minister to provide additional information about why more than a fifth of those who start an apprenticeship do not finish it. I appreciate that the reasons for that will be complex, but it is unacceptable that modern apprenticeships do not deliver for those young people. The figure may conceal a high drop-out rate among young people who need additional support or who come from particular backgrounds. Perhaps no childcare is in place, which is an issue that Gillian Martin alluded to. It is surprising that, as far as I can see, there is no reference to incorporating support for young parents in the developing the young workforce programme. There are gender issues, too, which I raised with the minister earlier.

I welcome the objective of increasing the employment rate for young disabled people to the population average by 2021. The report shows that the employment rate in Scotland for young disabled people increased from 35.2 per cent in 2014 to 40.8 per cent in 2015. However, it is cause for concern that the rate decreased again to 35.6 per cent in 2016, and I would be interested to hear an explanation for that and the steps that are being taken to improve the situation. The coalition of disability organisations represented by Disability Agenda Scotland has recently produced a very helpful report called "End the Gap: Disability

Employment" with a number of strong recommendations for the future. I am sure that the minister will take that expertise on board.

Some welcome initiatives are already included in the developing the young workforce programme, including Scotland's employer recruitment incentive. The report confirms that 1,600 employers have been supported by that financial incentive to give disabled young people and young people with care experience employment opportunities. However, on the long-term impact, we need to know the numbers of young people who have been assisted through the scheme and how many remain in employment with those employers.

I could have raised other issues but do not have time. One of them is support for learning in schools, which is vital for young disabled people but is suffering due to continued reductions in Government funding for councils. I am also interested in the cost of placements. They can be unaffordable to access, particularly for children who live in poverty, so I would like to know whether there is any assistance with that.

For the future prosperity of our country, our young people must be employed in secure, fairly paid work. Therefore, the developing the young workforce programme is an important piece of work. The Government should be recognised for putting it in place but it is equally important for us all to scrutinise its progress and hold the Government to account for any failure, because our young people deserve no less.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ivan McKee. There is some time for interventions and members' time will be made up.

15:36

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate on the third annual report on the developing the young workforce programme. I remind the chamber of my role as parliamentary liaison officer for the economy portfolio.

The Scottish Government's focus on inclusive growth is a key element of our economic strategy. Giving everyone in our society the opportunity to participate in the workforce and contribute to our economy, and allowing them to realise their potential, is critical to driving that inclusive growth.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission has indicated that Scotland's economy is operating above its potential, which means that growth is constrained by a lack of appropriate workforce, so it is essential that maximum effort is made to ensure that the people who are furthest from the labour market are given opportunities to join the

workforce. The maximum focus needs to be on the parts of our country that suffer the most from a lack of opportunity to ensure that young people are supported into work and that they recognise that society as a whole values their contribution and has their future career prospects as a priority.

Unfortunately, my Glasgow Provan constituency, which has the highest unemployment rate in the country, is one such area. As such, it stands to benefit disproportionately from a successful youth employment strategy. Developing the young workforce is Scotland's youth employment strategy, which has the overall objective of reducing youth unemployment levels by 40 per cent.

Johann Lamont: I am interested to hear Ivan McKee's view on the Labour amendment. Does he consider that zero-hours contracts and precarious work should be counted as positive destinations for young people in his constituency and others?

Ivan McKee: The way that positive destinations are calculated at the moment makes sense. The minister might comment on that later. It is important that people are helped back into work.

The success of the developing the young workforce programme is clear. Scotland now has the third-lowest youth unemployment rate in the EU. The target that was set three years ago to reduce youth unemployment by 40 per cent has been met four years early and, at 9.7 per cent, youth unemployment in Scotland compares favourably with the UK average of 13 per cent. However, there is more work to be done, as the Government motion recognises.

That is particularly the case in relation to tackling gender imbalances in specific sectors and improving opportunities for all young people, particularly those who are disabled, from ethnic minority backgrounds or care experienced. I am glad to see a focus on changing perceptions of gender stereotypes. I have spoken on it in the chamber previously in debates on women in enterprise. I echo Gillian Martin's comments on tackling gender imbalances and providing training in entrepreneurship and enterprise to young people to prepare them for the ever-changing world of work. The emphasis on providing support for care-experienced young people to find their way in the world of work is also positive.

I commend the work of MCR Pathways and its young Glasgow talent programme, which trains volunteers to spend an hour a week mentoring a young person—often a care-experienced young person—and provide them with the confidence to progress in the world of work. The programme includes work taster sessions with participating

employers to give young people exposure to the world of work.

The MCR Pathways programme has had considerable success in providing positive destinations for care-experienced young people, who have been mentored to the extent that they exceed the average for the general population in achieving positive destinations. As part of the programme, I have been mentoring a young man in my constituency, and I would recommend that to other members.

I turn to the substance of the report. At an overarching level, progress has been commendable, and I am particularly pleased that key performance indicators are being used to track progress and to set specific objectives for key elements of the programme. That will ensure that there is a year-by-year focus on the actions that are required across all aspects of the programme to deliver substantial and targeted reductions in youth unemployment and to maintain progress.

The programme focuses on creating new, work-based learning options that will enable young people to learn in a range of settings in the senior phase of school. It embeds employer engagement in education, offers careers advice at an earlier point in school and introduces new standards for career education and work placements. It must be recognised that the programme is a partnership effort that includes work by the Scottish Government, local government, employers and many other partners.

Other on-going elements of the strategy include a review of the whole 15 to 24 learner journey to ensure that the system supports young people and our economy with the right balance of skills and qualifications, and the STEM strategy, with its objective of growing STEM literacy across society and encouraging and supporting everyone to develop their STEM capability throughout their lives—fewer words and more numbers is always a good thing. The strategy also provides for further expansion of foundation apprenticeships and modern apprenticeships, completion of the developing the young workforce employer network, an increase in the take-up by businesses of the investors in young people accolade and, of course, the establishment of the new enterprise and skills strategic board, which will be tasked with ensuring the effective use of the considerable resources that the Scottish Government deploys to develop the workforce and support business growth.

There is nothing more critical to the future long-term success of the Scottish economy and of Scottish society than ensuring that our young people—all our young people—have the training and the opportunities to participate in the workforce to the fullest of their potential. The focus

of the Scottish Government on ensuring that that is the case is to be commended, and although there is still much work to be done, progress to date has been impressive. I look forward to future reports on the progress of the strategy reporting on the delivery of as much progress as we have seen to date.

15:42

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): The future of our country and our economy will be the backdrop to the future of our children, and our children will be that future.

Scottish businesses rely on a skilled workforce to cope with the demands of a competitive, globalised world. For them, quality input is essential in delivering quality output—quality in, quality out. One of the Scottish Government's most important responsibilities is to enable a climate in which quality input can be delivered so that our people and our economy can flourish.

We have heard about the work of the Wood commission, which in 2013 was tasked with identifying how to establish a modern, responsive and valued system for vocational training. It had the goal of emulating the successes of other European labour markets, some of which will be more familiar to some of us than others. Let us take the German example. It is no coincidence that Germany has the lowest level of unemployment in the EU for economically active 15 to 24-year-olds. The approach that is taken in that country undoubtedly assists in the achievement of that success. It involves the teaching of a vocational education at Hauptschule level combined with opportunities to take part in dual training. There is a special system of apprenticeship that involves pupils training in a company while learning at school. The same approach can be seen in other countries, such as Switzerland. The commission concluded from that that the vocational offering by schools in this country could be enhanced.

I have seen how vocational work can be beneficial with the Scottish traditional building forum, which is exemplary in seeking to train up a traditional construction workforce for the future and spreading career awareness among young people. Such skills remain essential, and it is critical that young people join skilled trades if we are to maintain cities such as Edinburgh, where traditional buildings showcase its world heritage site. It was fantastic to meet pupils from schools across Scotland who are benefiting from the forum's work at an event that I hosted recently at Holyrood with the STBF. I will give an example from outwith my region: St Modan's high school in Stirling is piloting a course called "Roofing in the Classroom".

Pupils can benefit from a more diverse education system through such initiatives. We are often told that nowadays pupils have no idea of what some of the traditional vocations are. Seeing them in action can help pupils to identify with them and say that they are interested in them and want to do them. That is equally true of girls and boys.

In my view, that is something that the Government should fully endorse in collaboration with industry, for both sides have important roles to play. Our education system, first and foremost, needs to provide pupils with an education that gives the best grounding in basic skills. If employers want a skilled workforce, they too have an interest in being involved in and supporting training in the system.

The final report from the Wood commission says as much when it discusses other European countries in which industry and education work together. Businesses themselves can provide their own overarching support infrastructure to make the opportunities available while children are still in education. The report says that exemplary industry leaders and employers should inspire their peers to do the same—

Johann Lamont: Does the member think that exemplary employers should encourage precarious work and zero-hours contracts? Would he support Labour's call for those not to be included as positive destinations in any assessment of youth employment?

Gordon Lindhurst: The member raises a series of complex issues that I do not have time to address, but I certainly think that employers should be encouraged to provide quality employment to their employees.

If we are talking about getting young people into vocations rather than sending them down academic routes, we need to get them into companies to give them an idea of the sort of jobs that they could do. For example, girls might not be encouraged into STEM subjects simply by being told about them in the classroom, but they can identify with them if they see them in action. They may well then choose to go into those sorts of careers, which they would not choose otherwise. That is an important aspect of the debate.

It is fair to say that there are no simple answers, but in concluding I mention two suggestions from the Scottish Conservatives. One is that the apprenticeship levy should be ring fenced for in-work training, to ensure that greater numbers of business-led apprenticeships can be provided. The second is that the flexible skills fund could support qualifications other than apprenticeships, offering greater opportunities to our young people by supporting skills training from which they can benefit. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thought that you had collided with your microphone. There is room for someone with skills training in first aid.

15:48

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): In relation to today's topic, I draw members' attention to my being a professional member of the Association for Computing Machinery, a member of the Institution of Engineering and Technology and a fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, all of which have an interest in the education of young people.

In relation to my life experience, I am largely an autodidact, which is a bit inconvenient because it means that I have no one to blame but myself for any shortcomings in my knowledge and understanding of the world. I have, however, re-engaged with education in recent times. Since I stopped being a minister in 2012, I have managed to find time to do an online postgraduate certificate at the University of Strathclyde. The reason why I raise that is that it illustrates the new ways in which education can be done. It was an online course, so I could choose at what time of day I did the study. I could choose exactly when I was going to complete exercises. If I came in bleary-eyed in the morning, that might have been some of the reason why.

That leads me to a much broader issue that we have not mentioned, that of self-paced learning, which is enabled by the development of online computer training. Particularly for people who have other responsibilities, such as childcare or caring for parents, it is of value to be able to choose the pace at which they move through an education system. That applies particularly to people who find even the present quite flexible approaches still too restrictive. As technology improves and develops, there is great scope for us to look at further opportunities in that area.

In that regard, I encourage the Government and others to think about where people get access to the technology. The people who we want to bring into the system are often those who have least access. That means having computer terminals in libraries and other public spaces and perhaps in voluntary sector places. Equally, we need the people who are there to be able to provide at least the basics of support and give a bit of direction to those who find themselves in difficulties.

I will move on to a more general issue, under the heading "Achieving the impossible". One of the great things that our youngsters do is to achieve the impossible. Old lags like myself and others in the chamber might consider something beyond contemplation, but our youngsters do not know

that it is impossible and they achieve it. I may have used this example before but, when I was a minister, we had only £12 million to do a wee bit of electrification of the railway network, when all the officials said that it would cost £27 million and could not be done for a penny less. Eventually, they got fed up and gave it to an engineering graduate apprentice, who worked out how to do it for £12 million, because he did not know that the project was impossible. He did it on the very simple basis that a bit of the overhead wires could have no power in it as the wires went under a bridge, so the bridge did not have to be jacked up and the railway did not have to be taken down, and that got the project in at £12 million instead of £27 million. There is huge potential in our youngsters and other people in the system and it is at our peril that we talk them out of tackling the impossible and succeeding.

We have talked a little about maths. The most expert mathematicians I ever see are people who do not regard themselves as doing any maths at all. Liz Smith talked about arithmetic. I was in the cohort who sat the very first ordinary grade arithmetic exam in 1962. I must say that I found it rather simple, although I am sure that others found value in it. The people who use maths without knowing it are the guys—sorry, but it is mostly guys—who stand around in the bookies with a wee pencil behind their ear, working out five-horse accumulators with complex odds and instantly saying how much money they will win if it all comes good. I cannot do that, and I have a degree in mathematics. People will not be persuaded to use or to acquire those kinds of skills if we do not persuade them to do so.

Elaine Smith: Surely the huge potential of our young people that Stewart Stevenson mentioned will not be realised with insecure work and low pay.

Stewart Stevenson: The member is absolutely correct. For some people, who choose things such as zero-hours contracts so that they work when it suits them, they are fine. However, we can all condemn exploitative zero-hours contracts that are controlled by employers. I will just leave that little thought there.

I very much welcome the support that there has been for people in rural areas such as Aberdeenshire and Moray, but we have a wee bit more to think about. Those who have to attend classes sometimes still have quite an issue with how to get to college. The bus services in the north-east have been retuned, which is generally quite helpful.

Finally, I want to say three things. First, people need to learn a systematic approach as part of their life skills, and that means actively learning about time management. Secondly, they need to

learn how to develop and apply analytical skills. Finally—this is a hobby-horse of mine, because I lectured postgraduates on the subject for a couple of years—they need to learn project management skills. That applies to almost every area of life and work, but I have not heard it specifically referred to.

15:55

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I am happy to contribute to this important debate. For this of all issues—future opportunities for our young people and how we create a stronger, fairer and more resilient economy—it is critical that Government policy is informed and shaped by life experience.

We cannot take the debate in isolation. It is important to understand that choices elsewhere in the system will have an impact on such initiatives, and it is essential that there is a proper assessment of individual budget choices about local government cuts in education on the aims of the programme. It is certainly true that the effectiveness of the Wood vision will, in part, rely on how schools can support young people to take up the range of opportunities beyond the usual route of highers and university. However, if because of cuts to local government spending the very support staff who would work with the most vulnerable young people are stripped away from schools, the chances are that the initiatives that were identified in the Wood report will have less of an impact.

I want to talk about the reality of working life for too many people—in particular, for young people, but not exclusively—and to challenge the Scottish Government a little about what it can do within its powers to address that reality. I want to talk about precarious work, in which zero-hours contracts feature heavily, as that is the antithesis of the ambition of the Wood report and of the views expressed in Government speeches on that matter over some time.

We do not have to go far to get evidence. The direct experiences of a couple of young people I know who work for big companies in hospitality have given me more horror stories than I could have imagined, but it is important to understand that the experiences that they have described are not unusual and we should reflect on that.

In the experience of those young people, work is not about choice. There is no certainty about when they will work. They might be given a week's notice, but they are still expected to be available. They are given minimal training, especially on personal safety when providing room service, for example. They might go into work for a six-hour shift, after a 40-minute journey to get there, only to

be sent home after 30 minutes. They have contracts that confirm that breakages will come out of the wages of individual workers and that, if the cost of breakages is more than they have earned that week, there is a facility for those young people to pay it back in instalments. Tips that are paid by credit card never reach the staff, and tips are used to make up the cost when customers walk out without paying. Young people who work for six hours get paid for six hours but, if they work for just over six hours, they are paid for five and a half hours because they are entitled to a break—even though they do not get one—and they are not paid for the time. Five minutes' pay is taken off from the beginning and the end of their shifts to mark the time that it takes for them to walk from where they log or check in to where they go out.

Gillian Martin: I agree with Johann Lamont's dismay about such working practices. Will she join us in asking for employment law to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament?

Johann Lamont: I will go on to make a point about that in a moment.

When I asked one young friend how he knew that he had lost his job, he said, "I found out when I looked at the roster and my name was not on it." As the better than zero campaign and others tell us, that is not unusual. It is not just the experience of casual staff or young people; it is the routine experience of all too many people. Such jobs cannot be described by anybody in the chamber as positive destinations or aspirations for our young people.

In the previous parliamentary session, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee conducted an inquiry into fair work. I asked witnesses from the Department for Work and Pensions a simple question about whether a claimant would be sanctioned for refusing a job with a zero-hours contract and all the insecurity that goes with it; they could not answer the question. I understand that the Scottish Government is not responsible for employment law—we can have a debate about where those powers should properly lie—and that it does not have responsibility for that aspect of welfare, but it is reasonable to ask the Scottish Government the equivalent question: should a zero-hours contract be regarded as a positive destination and, if so, why?

That matters because, as Wood and the Scottish Government acknowledge, that work is placed in the broader economic and social ambitions of the Government. The Wood report matters because we care about youth employment. We should not sully that aspiration by deeming a category of work to be a positive destination when it self-evidently is not.

Will the minister look again at the definition of a positive destination? This routine exploitation will have a long-term impact on young people, their attitudes to work, their ability to get on in work and their ability to thrive in the economy. It is a cost to us all, not just to the young people who are experiencing this situation.

Will the Scottish Government commit to using its power to encourage better and more far-sighted approaches by businesses big and small? Is it reasonable to expect that recipients of the small business bonus should show that they do not use such exploitative practices? Will the Scottish Government ensure that Scottish Enterprise support and other support that is given to companies should be contingent on a commitment to basic rights for employees and on companies not having the attitude to their workforce that I have described? Will the minister update us on the effectiveness of the business pledge in creating a good quality attitude in business?

The minister must make the minimum commitment that his Government's approach to zero-hours contracts and what it has said explicitly about its hostility to exploitative work will be followed through in all areas and that, as a bare minimum, employment figures should reveal, not conceal, significant levels of exploitation captured as positive destinations.

I see the direction of travel of the Scottish Government in relation to the Wood report and young people. I care as deeply as anyone else about it. We cannot be in a place where it looks as if, on the one hand, we want to ensure that young people are given the best opportunity while, on the other hand, going along with practices that surely must be unacceptable.

16:01

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): As the first ever year of young people, 2018 provides an excellent opportunity to build on our existing achievements and to continue improving the life chances of Scotland's young people, whatever their background.

I welcome the fact that the headline target of the strategy to reduce youth unemployment by 40 per cent by 2021 has been met four years early. That is positive progress and it provides a solid base on which we can continue to build. Although the broad target has been met, there is still a bit of work to be done on addressing gender imbalance and on improving opportunities and outcomes among particular groups, such as those who are disabled, care experienced or from minority ethnic backgrounds. With continued strong partnership working between employers, schools, colleges and universities, supported by the regional DYW

group, I am confident that we will see those improvements over the coming years.

The year of young people also serves as an important reminder that, when we are talking about developing the workforce or meeting employer needs, we are fundamentally speaking about the lives and experiences of individual young people. Yes, the impact on the economy and on employers is an important dimension of today's debate, but more important is enriching young people's lives and aspirations by giving them a variety of ways to succeed and to fulfil their potential.

Apprenticeships have an important role to play here, giving people with skills that are not traditionally covered in school exams the opportunity to shine and excel, such as through craft apprenticeships. The national picture is encouraging, showing a year-on-year increase in the number of modern apprenticeships at level 3 and above. That indicates that we are well on course to achieving the target.

On a local level, I am pleased to say that DYW Ayrshire has been doing some great work over the past year, and I would like to share a few examples with members. One of the most inspiring stories was that of Martin & Son Builders, a small family business based in Kilwinning. The owner of the business, Martin, is profoundly deaf after losing his hearing five years ago, and one of the reasons why he was keen to be involved with DYW Ayrshire was to demonstrate to pupils that that has not stopped him from running a successful business.

Martin visited St Winning's primary school for five consecutive days to give each of the five classes an insight into the building trade. Pupils participated in a series of interactive tasks, including using laser levels, sizing, measuring angles and calculating thermal heat loss. The young people were also introduced to bricklaying and watched a live demonstration of a small wall being erected. As well as introducing pupils to this career area and allowing them the opportunity to engage in interesting, hands-on activities, Martin sent a powerful message to those pupils at a young age about overcoming challenges and achieving success.

Turning to some of the high schools in my constituency, Auchendarvie academy has had great success with its barista cart—the Higher Grounds coffee bar—which functions as a coffee bar training facility for pupils such as Lucy. As well as undertaking an S4 customer service programme, from which she gained hospitality-specific qualifications, Lucy was able to gain valuable experience from working on the school's coffee bar. To quote Lucy herself:

"I enjoyed the course so much that I have now decided to focus on hospitality as a career and I am now studying this at Ayrshire College."

Another pupil who undertook the barista programme, Kai, said:

"The Barista training has given me the confidence to work as part of a team and communicate effectively with customers of all types. I feel prepared to work in the hospitality industry now that I have my customer service, first aid at work and City & Guilds Barista qualifications. Working on the Higher Grounds Coffee Bar has been one of my favourite experiences at Auchenharvie Academy."

Another good example is the partnership that has developed between the Hallmark hotel in Irvine and DYW Ayrshire, with the hotel recently developing a hospitality training programme for S6 pupils at Greenwood academy. At the end of three training sessions, providing pupils meet the necessary criteria, Hallmark Hotels makes job offers to the pupils to work on a casual basis, allowing them the work hours that they want—the work hours that fit in with their school hours and their extracurricular activities.

That is a good example of how there is a place for casual hours contracts that are mutually beneficial for workers and employers, whether for workers such as young people who are still at school and fitting in a job around other commitments or for other employees who need casual work. That said, we have to remain vigilant that mutually beneficial flexibility does not turn into exploitation, and we must always ensure that the employment being offered to our young people is of a good quality and that they are treated with respect, particularly where public funding and partnerships are involved.

Unfortunately, the hospitality sector is somewhere where examples of poor treatment and exploitation can be found, more often than not of young workers. Unite the union's fair hospitality charter provides a good benchmark when it comes to acceptable standards in the sector and I reiterate my support for the aims of its campaign.

In all sectors, including hospitality, we must be careful to ensure a good balance between employer and employee interests. Young people who are ready and willing to work are a benefit to employers, but businesses must be prepared to invest in our young people to get them prepared for work and to develop them when they are in the role—not just to step in to employ them once they have been trained elsewhere.

Looking forward, one of the main targets is to address the substantial gender imbalances that exist on certain courses and in certain industries. That applies equally to getting more men into areas such as nursery teaching and to getting more women into science, technology, engineering and maths areas. Colleagues will not

be surprised that I will take this opportunity to highlight once again the exemplary work of Ayrshire college in this respect, with its #ThisAyrshireGirlCan and #ThisAyrshireManCares campaigns, which are powerfully challenging gender stereotypes and transforming people's outlooks.

I see that the Presiding Officer is nodding at me, so I will close there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): Thank you, Ms Maguire. You obviously had a lot more that you wanted to say. I call Michelle Ballantyne.

16:08

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): On a recent visit to East Coast FM, a radio station based in Haddington, I saw at first hand how schools, employers and voluntary organisations can work together to develop young people's skills and prepare them for a job in their chosen field.

East Coast FM has received national recognition, including a Princess Royal training award, and is a shining example of how to bridge the gap between school and work. Working with local secondary schools, East Coast FM trains young people on how to produce their own radio shows in preparation for a career in the field. The station encourages young people to expand their skills and knowledge while giving them the chance to work towards something tangible, which for several alumni has led to jobs in the media.

A similar success story is the textiles industry in the Scottish borders. Although it had sadly been in decline for several decades, it has seen something of a resurgence in recent years, which is due in part to an influx of young people into it. At the start of the decade, 12 local employers came together with other partners to create the Borders textile training group, which develops fresh talent in textiles and weaving, helping that traditional industry enjoy a fresh lease of life in the 21st century.

Other Borders initiatives, such as Heriot-Watt University's industry programmes, have shown similar results and have provided a pool of young people with specialist knowledge who are valued the world over and are ready for work. It is interesting that those initiatives were created before the Wood review, birthed from a desire to create a system that rewards hard work and reflects the marketplace, and they have all been resounding successes. That is the kind of integrated strategy that is required if we are going to build new industries and preserve the ones that we already have.

The creation of employer-led regional groups is a step in the right direction, but as the report admits, those groups are still evolving. Engaging with existing employer groups to maximise co-operation and build “sustainable industry-led infrastructure”, with an emphasis on developing skills in response to industry demand, is an essential step in bridging the gap between education and employment.

At present, only 32 per cent of employers recruit young people directly from education, and that figure has stagnated since 2014. Although many employers recognise the potential benefits of employing young people, the perception is often one of not having the time or resource to invest in training and, sadly in some cases, there is a view that young people are not ready for the workplace, which is sometimes born out of a poor experience.

We must provide our young people with education that is both academic and vocational, supports their choices about their future and prepares them for the reality of work. I believe that it was Thomas Edison who said:

“Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work”.

Presiding Officer—sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer; I am trying to promote you—it is important to remember that this strategy is not just about meeting targets; it is also about building a confident, enterprising workforce that values its place in our society. To ensure that, it is imperative that our education system provides a broad-based curriculum in which vocational training is embedded and that meaningful work experience is available to all young people. Good quality work experience can play a key role in helping a young person make decisions about their future career and it gives employers an opportunity to identify potential employees.

The Scottish Government’s recent review of the life chances of young people identified a number of issues that impact on a young person’s wellbeing during their transition to work. An increasing number of our young people cannot get on the first rung of the housing ladder and are likely to be in lower quality employment than their elders, while many others struggle with the transition from school to work. That strain and uncertainty can take its toll, and, as we saw in the life chances review, there is evidence of growing mental health issues, particularly among young women, which the transition to employment can only serve to exacerbate. In this year of young people, which counts mental health as one of its main themes, that fact should be acknowledged in our young workforce strategy. However, I note that the strategy does not contain a single reference to mental health, either in the initial document or in the subsequent annual reports. Although it was

not included in Sir Ian Wood’s initial recommendations, it is an area that should be addressed to meet the demands of today. I urge ministers to examine the issue and its potential impact on our economy.

Scotland’s young people are one of the country’s greatest assets, and it is in our national interest to ensure that they have access to the skills, training and support required for them to enter the world of work. The Scottish Government has taken some promising steps towards achieving that outcome, but it must be careful not to eschew quality for quantity in a race for statistical parity with other European nations—although, as my colleagues have highlighted, we could learn much from some of those countries. As Sir Ian Wood noted, this is not just about numbers; it is about Scotland’s long-term economic success and the wellbeing of its workforce. That should be our priority.

16:14

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I suspect that it will come as no great surprise to members to learn that I intend to focus my remarks on young workforce developments in my neck of the woods. However, in doing so, I will highlight not just examples of success but areas where I think that improvements could be made.

I begin on a positive note with two examples that are noted in the report. Following the development of foundation apprenticeships, Skills Development Scotland has piloted work-based learning qualifications at Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels 4 and 5, including a project at level 4 that involves pupils at Brechin high school, which is in my colleague Mairi Gougeon’s constituency, in a partnership with Dundee and Angus College and a number of local employers. Knowing the work that goes on at the college, I was not at all surprised to read of it being at the forefront of developing our young workforce. I very much look forward to welcoming the Minister for Employability and Training to the college in a few weeks’ time to see for himself some of the work that is going on there.

The report also notes the Angus works programme, which is driven by Angus Council. Rather than the usual one week’s work experience, that initiative sees school pupils having access to the work environment one day a week across a 22-week programme. There are roles right across the council and Anguslive, including in trading standards, waste awareness, day-care support, clerical systems, museums—the list goes on. Pupils have to apply for the positions, which carry with them proper job descriptions and provide a mentor, skills and thereafter, hopefully, an endorsement from the employer, which is all

incredibly useful. Those benefits have to be earned and the programme helps participants to develop a sense of personal responsibility as they have to sign a charter committing to catch up on school work that they might have missed, which is all commendable.

I turn now, however, to areas where barriers to progress still exist. It is, as the motion indicates and as we have heard in the debate, imperative to address gender issues in certain employment sectors. I am mindful of an experience that I had a little while back involving the first-class Angus Training Group Ltd, based in Arbroath, which produces the engineers of tomorrow and which the minister will also visit when he comes to my constituency. As we all know, attracting women into engineering is challenging, to say the least. Putting that in perspective, Angus Training Group has produced 629 apprentices since 2000, but just 26 of those were female. Half of those women have come through in the past five years, so we are seeing a degree of improvement, but it is relatively minor. Traditionally, the young women who have passed through Angus Training Group's doors have had a family connection with engineering. The fact that the current situation is slowly changing is thanks in part to an excellent joint initiative in Aberdeen involving, if memory serves right, the local education department and industry, through which engineering is actively promoted in schools as a career choice for females.

I met a couple of young women who had taken up apprenticeships via that route and who had experienced only encouragement to tread that path. We can compare and contrast that, however, with a third female apprentice in that year's intake, who was a young woman from Arbroath who had joined them in spite of the best—or perhaps the worst—efforts of her school. She told me that, having had family links to engineering, it was the career that she wanted to pursue. However, sharing that ambition with some of those charged with guiding her education had provoked only negativity. She told me:

“I was told engineering was not something girls did, that I should be looking to child care or beauty.”

When attitudes such as those remain, is it any wonder that we find enticing young women into that sector so difficult? That is not necessarily down to the Government or its delivery agencies; it is a societal problem.

I will now do a Tavish Scott, as it were—it is a scary thought—by looking at an aspect of developing the young workforce in which, in my experience, Skills Development Scotland could be doing better in practice. It is about actively and appropriately guiding young people towards careers where opportunities, increasing demand

and decent salaries exist. I am thinking specifically of fields such as occupational therapy and speech therapy. One consequence of the population living longer is that, sadly, we will need more people filling roles in those areas to assist people in recovering from things such as strokes. My understanding is that there is a genuine shortage in those areas right now, which made a conversation that I had with an SDS official—admittedly, a little time ago—all the more perplexing. Reasoning that such jobs were highly skilled and well paid and had a long-term future, I asked why SDS seemed not to point young people in their direction. To my surprise, I was told quite dismissively that it was not SDS's role to point anyone towards a career choice. On one level, I understand that entirely, but surely we ought to be highlighting such options and encouraging consideration of them, thereby meeting workforce demand and handing our young people paths into sustainable long-term employment.

I was pleased to read the developing the young workforce progress report's exploration of the efficiency and effectiveness of progression for 15 to 24-year-olds through the education system. It is a welcome step to consider the tertiary education system from the perspective of what our society and our economy need in terms of the balance of skills and qualifications. I note that the aim is to support young people to make and sustain positive choices and to ensure that our investment matches those ambitions as efficiently as possible—good. The report goes on to state that there is an expectation that the skills of young people will not only increase but better match the needs of employers to further the Scottish economy. That is the right direction of travel, of course, but SDS staff on the ground need to be, at the very least, highlighting occupations that they know require staffing or will likely require it in a few years' time, and which they believe the people they are working with might be suited to.

I am happy to be corrected if my experience is unusual or a little bit out of date, but I contend that the point that I have made is an important one. We need the practical delivery to match the intent that has been established by Government.

Excellent initiatives are helping to support young people to prepare for the world of work. The progress that has been made to date proves that. However, there is no room for complacency. The world is ever changing and we need to do what we can to equip our young people to deal with that.

16:20

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Developing Scotland's young workforce is important wherever people live, but in rural areas the Scottish Government's seven-year programme

can be transformative. Rural depopulation is a serious problem facing communities across Scotland, and one of the biggest contributing factors is the lack of employment opportunities.

As soon as I say the word “rural”, I feel that I should remind the Parliament that I am the parliamentary liaison officer to the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity.

Encouraging economic diversity is key to creating employment, and much of the work that I have done in Parliament has been focused on supporting and developing the rural economy. However, it is also vital that we make sure that young people are aware of the possibilities and options that lie on their doorstep. That need was highlighted to me recently when I helped an unemployed young gentleman who had been made homeless. No one had ever suggested to him that farm work may be a good work option to consider and that many farms are able to provide housing alongside employment.

Unfortunately, Stranraer has one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in Scotland, but the developing the young workforce programme, in collaboration with Stranraer academy, is helping to make a difference. Last year, I had the privilege of opening the Stranraer DYW office, and I was welcomed by Justin Thomas and many education experts. Agriculture is a big employer in South Scotland, so the DYW office has been working with Dumfries and Galloway Council and NFU Scotland vice-president Gary Mitchell to encourage young persons to think about farming as a career path. Gary now has a young man from Stranraer town working full time on his dairy farm, and Gary was even presented with the champion in developing the young workforce award at the Dumfries and Galloway business awards in 2016. He is the only dairy farmer I know with a classroom.

Other nominees that year were Jas P Wilson Forest Machines, which has created pioneering relationships with education establishments, especially Dalbeattie high school, and the Springboard Charity, which works hard to train and equip young people for the hospitality, leisure and tourism industries. The Scottish Government’s strategy recognises the need to create new vocational learning options and enable young people to learn in a range of settings in their senior phase of school. That is something else that is already happening at the new Dalbeattie learning campus, which is a high school, primary school and nursery on one site. It has an automotive shop for pupils to learn how to work on cars, engines and tyres, and the cars were donated by Jas P Wilson.

Last year, when the Minister for Employability and Training visited the company, Jas P Wilson

had 50 employees and one apprentice. One year later, it now has 60 employees and six apprentices, which is a great success story. Jas P Wilson is committed to developing the young folk in and around Dalbeattie, and it has a classroom on site, too.

The Royal Highland Education Trust and the NFU Scotland policy manager George Jamieson are also doing excellent work in engaging with young kids from local high schools. Recently, I attended the Royal Highland Education Trust’s food and farming day at Scotland’s Rural College at the Crichton campus, and I was very impressed by the quality of the work that RHET is doing in the region. Over 300 students attended the event over two days, including home economics students from four Dumfries secondary schools as well as the entire S1 year group from Annan academy, which is where I went to secondary school. I am looking forward to taking my wellies and volunteering at next year’s event.

Another area that I am particularly interested in is enabling young people into careers in healthcare. A career in healthcare does not just mean becoming a doctor or a nurse. There are so many other options, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, optometry, healthcare support, or working for the Scottish Ambulance Service.

The national health service provides a range of apprenticeships including a new modern foundation apprenticeship for young people in S5 and S6. When I was a clinical educator, I welcomed many young students who spent the day with me while doing their modern approach to learning. The foundation apprenticeships help students in S5 and S6 to gain valuable work experience and access to practical learning. Modern apprenticeships are available to those aged 16 or over, as are apprenticeships in healthcare support, which is a qualification that allows young people to build a career working in a range of environments including hospitals and health centres and in the community.

As the motion states, the headline target in the developing the young workforce strategy was to reduce youth unemployment, excluding those in full-time education, by 40 per cent between 2014 and 2021. I agree with Ruth Maguire and I, too, am delighted that the target was reached in May 2017, which is four years earlier than anticipated. That is a significant achievement, but it is important to continue the long-term programme plans to strengthen education and skills partnerships and embed system change.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will now move to closing speeches. A couple of members who took part in the debate are not in the chamber, which is disappointing.

16:26

Tavish Scott: I suggest that Graeme Dey should never copy my style of speech making as he has a glittering career in Parliament in front of him—although he is at the back of the chamber at the moment, for which I can hardly blame him. He raised a significant issue and proposed a positive idea for a principle of parliamentary procedure, which I commend to every member. Debates are here for the formation of ideas and the suggestion and testing of thoughts. If Graeme Dey enters into that process in Parliament every week, we will be the better for it.

The minister started the debate by reminding us—as if we needed reminding—that this is the year of young people. Perhaps it is important to keep stressing that. It is all too easy, as Iain Gray reminded us, to take the foot off the gas: Government programmes are introduced then have an inevitable period of reform, but still need impetus and drive after several years of implementation.

Stewart Stevenson: I mentioned project management in my speech. One of the rules of project management is that the first 95 per cent of the project takes half the time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a little time in hand, Mr Scott.

Tavish Scott: Okay. I am sorely tempted to go into a whole thing about the 5 per cent, but I will not. I take Mr Stevenson's point.

I want to suggest that the Government is right to take a positive approach to a seven-year programme that will take a lot of Government commitment and ministerial time. The programme that came out of Sir Ian Wood's commission deserves that kind of emphasis and constant ministerial attention in order to make the changes that are so necessary.

I want to highlight two changes that have come through in many of the speeches that have been made in this afternoon's debate. First, it is of absolute importance that we constantly stress vocational routes into work and life. Some of us have sat in Parliament for some time: right back in the early days we sat through committees and produced reports into something called parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes into work and life. We are still talking about it all these many years later. I share the concern of many members that we have yet to nail that absolutely and to make the definitive move towards saying to every young person in Scotland that it does not matter which way they choose to go or where they want to end up and that the vocational route into life is every bit as important as the academic one. I urge the Deputy First Minister and his ministerial colleagues to keep

making that argument from the exalted heights of their ministerial office.

A second issue that has emerged perhaps implicitly rather than explicitly, and which I will highlight, given that the Deputy First Minister will wind up the debate, is the role of the headteacher. Iain Gray said that without headteachers who believe absolutely in the programme, developing the young workforce does not fly in schools—and if it does not fly in schools, it will not fly in any context. Jamie Hepburn was quite right to make an observation about breaking down the barriers, as Ian Wood wanted Government to do, between colleges and schools and between businesses and the agencies that support them, but the issue is about having in every secondary school in Scotland a headteacher who will make the difference.

I ask the Deputy First Minister, when he reflects on this debate—if not today, then in the future—to consider, for the governance proposals that he has introduced, in which he asks headteachers to take on more responsibilities, the commitment that across parties and across Parliament we have made to the programme. It is fundamentally important to how we help and support our young people, but if we constantly put pressure on our headteachers—as might happen as a result of his proposals—something will have to give, so some consideration must be given to the workload that we ask our inspirational headteachers in every part of Scotland to take on.

I will make two final points. I fundamentally agree with Gillian Martin's point about teaching in schools the skills for setting up businesses and for entrepreneurship. I have heard her make that case before, but it is a strong one that bears repeating. As a constituency member, I have been part of many a young enterprise company, and have watched—and, indeed, supported—them as they have gone through many initiatives. However, there are not enough of them in Shetland, and I am sure that the same is the case across all the constituencies and areas that we represent. That is—dare I say it?—another request straight away for headteachers, but as Gillian Martin has said, more certainly needs to be done in that area.

Related to that is the argument that Graeme Dey and many others have made about the need for a constant drive to encourage girls and women into engineering and other areas where they are either not properly represented or where—as, I think, Mr Dey said—the statistics are actually going the wrong way. The Shetland learning partnership did a huge amount to drive a programme of engineering courses at the fisheries college in Scalloway, and to make it absolutely clear to young girls and women that there is no impediment to their taking those courses. Indeed,

quite the opposite is the case. Every encouragement was given to all people to take those courses, and the programme needs to be pushed and pushed again.

I echo the support that Oliver Mundell and Ruth Maguire showed for many initiatives in their areas. In that regard, I want to thank John Henderson, who is the managing director of Ocean Kinetics and chairs Shetland's developing the young workforce group, and Shona Thompson, who provides very able support for it through Shetland Islands Council. One of John Henderson's employees, Shane Odee, was one of the apprentices of the year. Jamie Hepburn might well have presented him with his award at last year's awards. That very able 18-year-old is now an engineer and is one of the young men in that business who will ensure that we continue to supply the right services to the oil and gas industry, the fishing industry and many other industries.

I will finish with these observations. Above all, we must make the case for vocational routes into life. We must ensure that headteachers are not overwhelmed by more initiatives and are, instead, utterly supported in everything that we ask of them, and we must make the case really strongly that traditionally boys-only careers such as engineering are absolutely relevant for girls and that we are positive and supportive in that respect. On the basis of this debate, we should consider those matters and take them forward.

16:34

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to close the debate for Scottish Labour and to voice my support not only for our amendment, but for the Government motion and the other amendments that have been lodged.

Ensuring that our economy works for young people should be a priority for our Government and our education system. Unfortunately, in today's world, the odds are ever increasing against young people, what with the high cost of living, rising student debt and precarious work opportunities.

That is why Scottish Labour's amendment seeks to remove employment on zero-hours contracts from official Government statistics on positive destinations for young people. By amending the motion today, we look to all members across the chamber to work with the Government to change the methodology for school leavers, so that zero-hours contracts are not viewed as a positive destination. The Government's developing the young workforce strategy must be about developing young people in and out of employment, and zero-hours contracts will not

support the ambition of that strategy. We call on members to back our position that the estimated 71,000 Scots who are on zero-hours contracts deserve better—especially the estimated 25,000 young exploited Scots—and that the methodology for school leavers should be corrected.

Today's debate has been constructive and consensual. There has been recognition across the chamber that although progress has been made, more needs to be done. Speeches by Elaine Smith, Johann Lamont, James Dornan and Ivan McKee touched on modern apprenticeships, zero-hours contracts, STEM subjects, gender segregation and the issues of young carers and young parents. I want to comment on some of those areas, particularly in relation to gender.

James Dornan mentioned the briefing from Action for Children. I, too, want to touch on some of the comments that it contains. Although the organisation welcomes the progress that has been made, it also focuses some remarks on the practical and personal barriers that young people face. The briefing highlights the lack of knowledge and understanding of CVs and the interview process, and suggests ways in which young people can be helped to manage stress, anxiety and demoralisation. Action for Children works with schools and is keen to expand on that work. It also works with minority ethnic women to help them to overcome the barriers that they face. I will talk in a bit more detail about black and minority ethnic young people later.

Elaine Smith made the very important point about the costs that young people face when they are on placement.

Gillian Martin made the point about encouraging young people into enterprise and business. That was not an area that I had considered before, and the point was very well made.

Oliver Mundell and Emma Harper highlighted the specific issues that young people in rural areas face, and the measures that should be taken to help them.

The overall figure on modern apprenticeships paints a positive picture. However, when the statistics are looked at in greater detail, we can see that a volume of work still has to be done to ensure that female, disabled and BME people find and maintain apprenticeships. With regard to apprenticeships and gender, it is clear that more can and should be done to end the segregation of roles in the workplace. Young people—male and female—should not be grouped in certain industries. We need a far more inclusive approach in order to end that segregation.

Skills Development Scotland aims to reduce the number of industries that are dominated by more than 75 per cent of one gender. However, the

majority of apprenticeship sectors are male dominated: only hairdressing and social services are dominated by females. The statistics for the second quarter of the current financial year show that only 1.5 per cent of construction apprenticeships were held by females. The actual number is 52 females out of 3,285 modern apprenticeship starts.

The same statistics, which were released by SDS, show that there is a gulf in respect of the opportunities for female, disabled and care-experienced apprentices to start apprenticeships at levels 4 and 5, and at level 8. Only 30 per cent of female modern apprentices started that modern apprenticeship qualification and, when the figure is broken down, we can see that only 4.4 per cent of all female modern apprenticeships are taking on the qualification, compared with 5.5 per cent of all male modern apprentices. Only 3.3 per cent of disabled modern apprentices started the highest level, compared with 6 per cent for those not self-classifying as disabled. The figure for BME apprentices is 3.7 per cent.

It is easy to stand here and say that young people are our future. They are, and we as politicians have a responsibility to ensure that we do what we can to support and help them as they move into the world of work. Undoubtedly, progress has been made. However, we need to work together to ensure that that progress is not halted and that a positive destination becomes just that.

16:40

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the voices from across the chamber and the genuine interest that they have expressed in the development of Scotland's young workforce.

It is undoubtedly the Parliament's duty not only to build the conditions for a successful economy but to consider how progress can be sustainable for future generations. In 2013, the developing the young workforce agenda got off to a positive start with the appointment of the independent commission under the chairmanship of Sir Ian Wood. As others have made very clear, the commission's report in 2014 was a thorough and commendable body of work that was well received.

Sir Ian Wood's 11 key performance indicators addressed a number of significant underperformance issues, some of which were longstanding. His findings drew attention to genuine problems that young people faced on their journey into jobs and careers. Some of the statistics in the commission's report were stark. It said that fewer than 30 per cent of Scottish

businesses had any contact of any kind with education, only 27 per cent of employers offered work experience opportunities, only 29 per cent of employers recruited directly from education, and only 13 per cent of employers had modern apprentices. Although there were positives, the report presented a backdrop of young people struggling to access their first opportunities and, just as significantly, struggling to be prepared for the workplace with the skills that they needed. It offered challenges that were agreed by parties across the chamber.

This week's progress report sets out a mixed bag of performance. There have been successes in some areas; in other areas, targets are in danger of being missed.

I welcome the progress on youth unemployment across Scotland and, indeed, on the positive labour market changes that we have seen over recent years. However, that presents challenges of its own. We must ensure that progress on employment is sustainable, and that young people are equipped to progress in their chosen careers and are not the first to suffer when economic challenges are experienced.

It is clear that, to provide for sustainable employment, more needs to be done to develop skills. Too often, we consider that to be chiefly an issue for young people, but there is a real opportunity to create a culture in which skills development continues throughout a person's life.

My experience is that young people are aware that they are entering a more rapidly changing labour market. Although prosperity has increased, some of the old assurances no longer exist. People are more likely to change career tracks several times in their lives, to be required to undertake new responsibilities, and to require support and advice on how they move forward.

The starting point of developing a skilled workforce is career education, which the Scottish Government has described as

"a fundamental building block for DYW".

In that area, the progress report's findings were mixed. The report found that provision was

"not yet being implemented across all schools and early years settings",

that what was available was inconsistent, that "Further progress is needed" to ensure quality work placements, and that primary schools are "yet to embrace" industry partnerships. Expanding meaningful partnerships with employers is set as an aspiration for next year.

For DYW to exist as more than a strategy, we must get the fundamentals right at an early stage. The choices that are open to young people are

perhaps greater than ever before, which is why support and direction are needed more than ever. We must also be clear that some options are far from fallback choices—I think that Tavish Scott mentioned that in his contribution. Having spoken with young people, I know that there are still a number of stereotypes around entering into areas such as modern apprenticeships or choosing not to go to university. Those attitudes, which can often be reinforced rather than challenged by schools, represent opportunities missed.

I am also concerned at the report's finding that there is

“uncertainty over the DYW Lead Coordinator posts in some local authorities”.

Leadership at all levels will be an essential component of driving change.

It is unfortunate that there is not more regional analysis of youth employment, education and skills. It is very apparent that, in comparison with other parts of Scotland, there are quite distinct issues in my region—the Highlands and Islands—that need to be addressed. In the Highlands and Islands, we see young people facing disproportionate problems from living in remote and rural areas. Accessing opportunities can be very difficult. I have spoken before about the lower level of choice that is available in some council areas in northern Scotland for young people who are entering foundation apprenticeships. The same is often true for those who are looking to access modern apprenticeships, training and employment—although I was pleased with the minister's comments earlier today. In those areas, schools must take on greater responsibility in relation to guidance and support, because we see from the report that much of the provision remains patchwork rather than universal.

There have been a number of thoughtful and constructive contributions from across the chamber today. We heard specific examples from Iain Gray and Gillian Martin, practical examples from Ruth Maguire and a passionate speech by Johann Lamont. I enjoyed the speech by Stewart Stevenson, who demonstrated how using skills enhanced those skills further—although I noted that, as he discussed time management, he went 30 seconds passed his allotted time.

My colleague Liz Smith recognised that too many employers continue to see skills shortfalls in the most fundamental areas. As we continue to roll out curriculum for excellence, we have an opportunity to build on existing provision to ensure that young people are best prepared to enter the workforce. We also have the opportunity to provide young people with real choice across subjects, which is an issue that I have touched on in relation to foundation apprenticeships in some

areas. Liz Smith also highlighted the importance of STEM education. We have welcomed the Scottish Government's STEM strategy, but the truth is that many of its steps were long overdue.

I have covered some of the challenges raised by Oliver Mundell that young people face in remote and rural areas accessing opportunities. Oliver Mundell also echoed Tavish Scott's comments about decentralisation. I agree with that point, as well as and the point about the rural-urban divide.

Michelle Ballantyne spoke about the importance of young people in her region being able to move from school to high-quality employment with training support. That was a key indicator in Sir Ian Wood's commission report and an important option for young people who want to travel down a vocational route. Provision of such employment remains patchwork across Scotland. Michelle Ballantyne also touched on the wider issues of mental health and the wellbeing of young people, which are issues of increasing significance on which cross-Government effort is required to meet young people's needs.

In Scotland's year of young people, there ought to be a focus on individuals being able to participate fully in their communities—and not just through employment and education. Their wellbeing must be considered in the round.

Earlier today, I spoke in Tom Arthur's excellent members' debate on the carer positive employer initiative. Schemes such as that are vital in catering for the needs of young carers and in ensuring their individual training and employment opportunities in years to come.

Some colleagues looked further afield to models that are used internationally. Gordon Lindhurst discussed the experiences of technical and vocational education in Germany, and Liz Smith expanded the scope to include Denmark and Switzerland. Gordon Lindhurst also highlighted some of the traditional skills that are becoming increasingly important in our tourism and heritage industries.

A common thread was employers' issues with the basic skills that young people have when they emerge from many years of education. In meetings with business, MSPs from all parties surely cannot have failed to notice that common complaint.

There have been a great many good ideas and no shortage of passion in this debate, but if we are to make progress sustainable and measurable against all the objectives set out by Sir Ian Wood's commission, the fundamentals must be in place at all Government levels. Although we offer the Scottish Government support with its objectives, I hope that over the next year there will be real actions in the areas that we have outlined.

16:47

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): This has been an informative and helpful debate in which members across the political spectrum in Parliament have recognised that there is a great deal to celebrate in the progress that has been made at the end of year 3 in this seven-year programme of commitment to the developing the young workforce agenda. As the Minister for Employability and Training said at the outset, there is a recognition—this is central to the Government's approach—that we must sustain the focus on the DYW agenda to ensure that, over the seven-year period, we realise the ambitions that were set out for us in the original Wood commission report.

Iain Gray said that the Wood report was one of the best reports that has been written for Government. I whole-heartedly agree with that assessment. The report is characterised by clarity, which has assisted with its implementation. It has enabled the Government to make rapid progress and to engage businesses around the country to ensure the establishment of 21 regional groups based in the localities, and based fundamentally on our college network, but with greater distinction applied to the circumstances of the communities of the Highlands and Islands.

All that activity has enabled us to engage the relevant parties to support our activities as a nation and to achieve the stretching headline target and ambition of reducing youth unemployment in Scotland by 40 per cent compared with 2014 levels, which the Wood commission report envisaged we would reach by 2021, four years early. The clarity and strength of the Wood report have assisted us in making that progress, which has been welcomed across the chamber.

As the minister said, it is important that we recognise that we are part way through the programme and it needs to gather momentum. It principally needs to gather momentum in the involvement of the business community in work with individual schools at local level.

A number of members, including Tavish Scott in his closing speech, made the point that it is important to ensure that schools are immersed in the DYW agenda. The minister and I saw at first hand one good example of that when the national DYW group met at Our Lady's high school in Cumbernauld. We saw a vivid illustration of it in the way in which the programme has been incorporated fully into the work of that school. Indeed, yesterday, I was in Wallace high school in Stirling and saw again at first hand the prominence and significance of the DYW agenda in the school.

Increasingly around the country, schools have absorbed the DYW agenda because it enables them to fulfil their central purpose, which is to equip young people with strong educational foundations for the remainder of their lives and for their working activity. The agenda enables them to assist young people in reaching strong destinations.

At the heart of the Government's agenda in education is the drawing together of three principal policy planks: getting it right for every child, the curriculum for excellence and developing Scotland's young workforce. The common theme in those three policy foundations is the importance of addressing the needs and circumstances of each and every child, whether our youngest citizens in getting it right for every child in their early years, schoolchildren through the curriculum for excellence or our older young people as they prepare for the workforce. However, there is now increasing activity on involving the DYW agenda in the delivery of the programme in the primary sector to ensure that we do not in any way delay the starting point at which young people become accustomed to and aware of the world of work.

Gillian Martin made a powerful contribution on the importance of tackling the skills gaps that are based on gender and, in particular, supporting the development of greater activity for women in self-employment and enterprise. There is a lot to encourage us about the progress that has been made in that respect, particularly through the work of Women's Enterprise Scotland, which is encouraging more and more women to think about business start-up and make such a contribution.

James Dornan made the point that vocational education qualifications are displacing academic qualifications to a greater extent. That is the objective of parity of esteem about which Tavish Scott talked in his second speech. On the two occasions that I have handled the Scottish Qualifications Authority results diet—in August 2016 and 2017—I tried to concentrate our communications not only on the more than 150,000 higher passes in each diet but on the increasing numbers of vocational qualifications that were emerging through the fulfilment of curriculum for excellence in our education system. Indeed, in the most recent diet, more than 50,000 vocational qualifications were achieved in our school system, which represents the emergence of more significant evidence of the effect of the DYW agenda in that system.

Ivan McKee, in making a powerful argument about the need to address the needs of all our young people, cited in particular the experience of MCR Pathways, which has been significantly piloted in Glasgow. That mentoring approach is valuable and successful. It engages people who

have time to contribute towards supporting the development of young people and their aspirations in a focused way. I pay tribute to the leadership that Iain MacRitchie has given to MCR Pathways and confirm to Parliament that the Government is actively engaging with the organisation on how we can extend and strengthen that approach more broadly across the country.

Emma Harper made a number of comments about the importance of addressing the issues of rural communities and tailoring our interventions to that end. The prevalence of the DYW agenda in schools gives us a very effective way of ensuring that that can be done in every part of our country.

In winding up the debate for the Conservatives, Jamie Halcro Johnston lamented some of the leadership at local authority level. The Government appreciates enormously the contribution that is made by our local authorities to the DYW agenda, and my counterpart in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Councillor Stephen McCabe, jointly chairs the developing Scotland's young workforce national group. We value the leadership that is exercised by Councillor McCabe and by all local authorities that support the programme across the country.

I want to address a couple of specific points. Mr Gray asked about the number of level 3 apprenticeships. In 2016-17, 66 per cent of apprenticeships were at level 3 or above, which represents a slight increase on the previous year. That gives a significant indication of the quality of the apprenticeships that are being taken.

Elaine Smith asked about gender segregation. In 2016-17, we know that, overall, 40 per cent of MA starts were female. I accept that that is not good enough, but the position is stronger than it was in previous years. We recognise that we have more work to do. Within that headline figure, there will be more significant imbalances in particular areas of recruitment, and we want to address those more whole-heartedly as we make progress with the programme.

Tavish Scott raised the issue of localism in the design of many of the activities in the programme. As I said when I intervened in his opening speech, we have been trying to ensure in our implementation of the Wood commission report that the local developing Scotland's young workforce groups are designed to reflect the high degree of localism that exists. In the Highlands and Islands, we have particular groups for Shetland, for Orkney and for the Western Isles, and we also have three different groups for the Highland mainland area, in an attempt to recognise the diversity of that area. Moreover, Skills Development Scotland has developed regional skills investment plans that recognise the diverse needs of particular localities, and the first

of those regional plans was developed for the Highlands and Islands. I think that it is a very good piece of work that assists us in that respect.

The Conservatives made a number of points about our educational foundations. I simply point out to Oliver Mundell and, to an extent, to Liz Smith that there are strong foundations in our education system. The data that was published before Christmas showed that, at secondary 3 level, 88 per cent of young people are reaching the requisite level in numeracy, 90 per cent are doing so in reading, 89 per cent are doing so in writing and 91 per cent are doing so in listening and talking. Those are the strong foundations of curriculum for excellence.

Liz Smith: Could the cabinet secretary comment on the reflection that too many employers still say that those basic skills are lacking when young people go into the workforce?

John Swinney: I listened to what was said about that survey evidence, but I am presenting the data on the level of performance that has been achieved by young people in our education system. I think that that factual information is helpful in rebalancing the debate. Equally helpful in that respect is the fact that, in 2015-16, 72 per cent of enrolments on courses in our colleges were for part-time courses, so the idea that nobody can get a place on a part-time course in our colleges is nonsense.

Oliver Mundell talked about complacency in the higher education sector. I do not understand the specifics of his point, but I remind him that the Conservatives are the first to criticise the Government when there is any sense that we are intervening in the governance arrangements of the higher education sector. We have just intervened to give the higher education sector a real-terms increase in its funding, so there is precious little evidence of complacency in that respect.

My final remarks are about the Labour amendment and the points that were made by Johann Lamont. The practices that she set out in her examples of the experience of young people on certain zero-hours contracts are ones that I totally deprecate. They have no place in the fair work agenda that is being taken forward by Keith Brown and which we apply across the board.

If we want to exercise the power to do something about the detail of those contracts, we must have control over employment law in this Parliament. Mr Gray was with me in the Smith commission and will know that the Labour Party would not recommend the devolution of employment law to this Parliament to enable us to exercise those responsibilities.

Iain Gray: Our amendment asks Mr Swinney to stop counting zero-hours contracts as positive destinations. We can do that.

John Swinney: For some people in the labour market—and I caveat this by saying once again that I deprecate the practice that Johann Lamont talked about—zero-hours contracts are what they want to enable them to pursue other aspects of their lives. Not only is what the Labour amendment asks us to do something that the Labour Party will not give us the power to do, it is something that runs against the practice that individuals want to take forward in our society. When the Labour Party wants to support the devolution of employment law to our country, we can tackle the issues that Johann Lamont is concerned about.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S5M-09857, on committee membership.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Alex Rowley be appointed to replace David Stewart as a member of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.—[*Joe FitzPatrick*]

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S5M-09821.3, in the name of Liz Smith, which seeks to amend motion S5M-09821, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on developing the young workforce, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-09821.2, in the name of Iain Gray, which seeks to amend motion S5M-09821, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on developing the young workforce, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 26, Against 88, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-09821.1, in the name of Tavish Scott, which seeks to amend motion S5M-09821, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on developing the young workforce, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-09821, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on developing the young workforce, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament acknowledges the progress set out in the Developing the Young Workforce annual report 2016-17; notes the achievement of the programme's headline target, to reduce youth unemployment by 40% by 2021, four years ahead of schedule; recognises that there is more to do to address youth unemployment, particularly tackling gender imbalances in specific sectors and in improving employment opportunities for all young people, particularly those who are disabled, from minority ethnic backgrounds, or who are care-experienced; believes that employers, schools, colleges and universities working in partnership through the Developing the Young Workforce regional groups can make a significant difference in improving the life chances of Scotland's young people; but recognises that these opportunities will only be realised if the aforementioned policies are accompanied by those designed to create a more diverse education system, which fully embraces vocational and technical training in the way set out by the commission that was led by Sir Ian Wood, and further believes that a decentralised Skills Development Scotland, aligned to college regions, benefiting from closer partnerships with businesses, schools and other local agencies, would help achieve the objectives of the report of the commission that was led by Sir Ian Wood.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-09857, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Alex Rowley be appointed to replace David Stewart as a member of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.

Meeting closed at 17:04.

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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