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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 29 January 2019

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. Our first item of business today is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leaders are Brogan Carberry and Zaina Bouazza, who are lessons from Auschwitz ambassadors for the Holocaust Educational Trust.

Brogan Carberry (Lessons from Auschwitz Ambassador, Holocaust Educational Trust): In October 2018, Zaina and I took part in the lessons from Auschwitz project with the Holocaust Educational Trust. We met a survivor, joined a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau and then shared what we had learned with our school.

The experience was a massive learning curve. We learned how extremely fragile human life is, and our understanding of the Holocaust was challenged. Although we know that the Holocaust was the systematic killing of 6 million Jews, we began to understand that the Holocaust is not just about statistics but about the individuals behind that number, who had families, goals and aspirations.

Standing at Auschwitz, where so many were murdered, was an extremely emotional experience. When I arrived and saw all of the hair, shoes and personal belongings that were taken from the Jews upon arrival, it really shocked me. One item in particular stood out—a set of house keys. Those keys symbolised the hope of the owner who, on the day they were forced from their home, would have locked their door in the belief that someday they would return. Unfortunately, they never did.

Zaina Bouazza (Lessons from Auschwitz Ambassador, Holocaust Educational Trust): Last year, our school was privileged to have Holocaust survivor Harry Bibring visit and share his experience of escaping Nazi persecution in Vienna. He came to Britain from his home in Vienna on the Kindertransport. We learned so much from him, despite our age difference. We all related to Harry telling us about the day he was no longer allowed to ice skate—a sport that he really loved—because he was Jewish. I cannot imagine the sadness he must have felt.

Harry Bibring remains positive, despite what he went through. He said to us, “The only race is the human race.” His words stayed with me. On the

anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I would like you all to consider Harry's words. The Holocaust must never be forgotten and the victims deserve to be remembered.

For young people around Scotland, I ask that, as we look towards our future, instead of fearing or belittling the differences we see around us, we should cherish them. We are lucky to live in a country that understands and supports the belief that, no matter our race, gender or belief, we are all equals. We must all stand up to antisemitism, racism and intolerance wherever we see it, because we know where it can lead.

Topical Question Time

14:02

Our Power

1. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the not-for-profit energy supply company Our Power going out of business. (S5T-01462)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): It is disappointing and sad that Our Power has had to cease trading. The Scottish Government has supported Our Power in its aim, since 2015, of tackling fuel poverty and supplying low-cost energy to households in Scotland. Our immediate response is focused on looking after the interests of the customers and staff of Our Power.

The independent regulator, Ofgem—the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets—is in the process of appointing a new supplier to take over Our Power's customers. Customers are protected and no one will be cut off as a result of the change in supplier. Ofgem's advice is for customers to take a current meter reading and wait to be transferred automatically to a new supplier. In due course, we will provide further support to Our Power customers as needed, for example through our home energy Scotland service.

This is a worrying time for Our Power's employees in Edinburgh and we have offered support through partnership action for continuing employment. PACE aims to minimise the time that individuals who are affected by redundancy are out of work, and we are making that help available immediately. We will also work with Our Power's partners to identify any further employment opportunities for those highly skilled and experienced staff.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Seventy people in Edinburgh fear for their jobs, and I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to supporting them through PACE. Our Power's plight is a shame for staff, customers and the prospect of healthier competition in the energy supply market. Backers included housing associations and the Government.

When were ministers first told about the company's cash-flow problems? Did they seek any reassurances or look to intervene at that point? What is the total financial backing provided to Our Power by the Scottish Government? What was the balance of loans and grants and what are ministers' expectations of recovering those?

Finally, can the cabinet secretary confirm where staff stand in relation to other creditors in the event of the company's demise?

Aileen Campbell: We were informed of Our Power's collection difficulties, and the formal request was put into us on 21 December. As a foundation lender to Our Power, our relationship with it has been long standing and we have continued to be supportive in that relationship.

Alex Cole-Hamilton is right to mention the other lenders. This enterprise was designed to try to tackle fuel poverty and to do something different in this market. It should not be forgotten that the company provided low-cost energy largely to the social housing sector over three and a half years.

I absolutely understand that what has happened is a real worry for the staff and that this will be a worrying time for them. The 70 staff are mostly in the Craigmillar area of Edinburgh. I reiterate our offer of support through the PACE scheme to ensure that there is a speedy and effective response to their imminent plight.

I am happy to engage with Alex Cole-Hamilton on any other details for by our exchange today. We will continue to work with Our Power where we can provide support.

A £9.5 million loan has been provided to Our Power over the years. We have had a facilitative and constructive relationship with it over the years, based on the fact that we are the foundation lender.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Not for profit, tackling fuel poverty, being socially responsible and a fair deal for customers—that is what Our Power stood for. The Scottish Government wants the same principles to underpin its own new energy company.

The chairman of Our Power, Alister Steele, said:

"It is now generally accepted that it is unclear what the level of financial backing is required for a new entrant to cope with market volatility and regulatory change."

In the past year, 11 small energy companies have ceased operating. What has the Scottish Government learned from that recent volatility in the market? Have its own plans for an energy company been altered at all? Has it shared learning with local authorities that are thinking about similar ventures? Has its outline business case been concluded? What guarantees are there that there will be a safe use of taxpayers' money?

Aileen Campbell: Alex Cole-Hamilton again raises legitimate and important points.

We give a commitment to take any learning that we can from the experience that we have gone through with Our Power. On the relationship between that experience and the creation of a

public energy company, we will, of course, continue to develop proposals that will deliver the ambition of a public energy company, and we are on track to deliver that ambition by the end of this session of Parliament. My colleague Paul Wheelhouse has lead responsibility for that work, and he will take due cognisance of the points that Alex Cole-Hamilton has made.

We cannot wait for the United Kingdom or the market to deliver lower fuel prices for Scottish consumers. Our public energy company will support Scottish Government ambitions for energy consumers. It is about consumer confidence and choice. More than half of consumers remain on standard variable tariffs, which are the most expensive. The public energy company forms part of a solution, complementing the Scottish Government's much wider work on energy consumers and fuel poverty. We will endeavour to ensure that any member with a concern as a result of what has happened is furnished with the facts and any developments on that.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I refer members to my renewable energy interests in the register of interests.

What existing similar loans are on the Government's books? What assessment of them has been done for the coming financial year?

Aileen Campbell: I think that the power industry is the only area in which we have committed to such an enterprise, but we can ensure that we get any information on that to Alexander Burnett.

From our perspective, the approach was a new attempt to find a way to give predominantly social tenants access to low-cost power. Our Power did so for three and a half years. I reiterate and underline how disappointing it is that, ultimately, the approach has not quite succeeded in this case. However, if there are any other such enterprises, we will ensure that Alexander Burnett is made aware of them.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): That concludes topical question time. We have finished rather abruptly, so we will have a short suspension to allow members and ministers to change seats.

14:09

Meeting suspended.

14:11

On resuming—

St John's Hospital (Paediatric Services)

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement by Jeane Freeman on paediatric services at St John's hospital. The cabinet secretary will, as usual, take questions following her statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): I am grateful for the opportunity to update members about the progress that has been made on the provision of paediatric services at St John's hospital in Livingston. I recognise the excellence and dedication of the staff who work there in caring for and serving patients and families in the surrounding communities and the support that the service has from local parents. I also emphasise my commitment to the hospital and its paediatric services.

When I came to Parliament last September to update members, I gave a commitment that I would return this January to provide a further update. I informed members that I had asked the director general for health and social care and the chief medical officer for Scotland to review progress by the end of January this year. I also asked the chief nursing officer for Scotland to liaise with NHS Lothian and provide advice and support on the training and development of advanced nurse practitioners. I record my gratitude to them for their support and their professional input.

I will not rehearse again the detail of why the interim service model has been implemented beyond one important point: the decision was taken by NHS Lothian in the best interests of children and their families in the circumstances at that time.

The interim model maintains the majority of children's services at St John's. The children's ward is open from 8 am to 8 pm, seven days a week, providing a short-stay paediatric assessment service. The paediatric ward remains open for day-surgery activity, planned day-case procedures and programmed investigations. The paediatric out-patient services, neonatal services and community child health services have all been unaffected. The assessment unit has seen about 3,560 children since July 2017, and there have been more than 2,555 planned investigation unit attendances. The emergency department continues to see more than 11,000 attendances a year, and out-patient clinics have seen more than 4,000 new and review patients.

The board has evolved the interim model since it was first implemented, and that has seen a drop in the number of children who have been transferred but not admitted to the Royal hospital for sick children in Edinburgh. When the interim model was introduced, in July 2017, the average figure was 12 children a month; since March 2018, the average has been four, reflecting more confident triaging of patients. Additionally, although the original plan was for children to be redirected to the Royal hospital for sick children at weekends, the board has maintained a daytime weekend rota on all but three weekends from July 2017 to the present.

A wide range of children's services continue to be available at St John's, and the vast majority of children who require services locally receive them there. However, I am acutely aware of how important the reinstatement of the full in-patient service is to the community. When I met a group of parents with Ms Constance on 29 November last year, I heard at first hand about their experiences at St John's and about the excellent care that their children received in the in-patient unit. I heard about the dedication of staff to the service and about their willingness to go above and beyond to provide care for the local population. I am grateful to all the parents who attended that meeting for their openness. I understand the anxiety and share the concern of members and the community to have the service fully reinstated.

The follow-up report from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health to NHS Lothian in 2017 reiterated that its preferred option remained a 24-hour model, which reflects the population projections for West Lothian. In turn, the board has confirmed its absolute commitment to reinstating the 24/7 model through discussions with Paul Gray, Dr Calderwood and Professor McQueen.

The board has continued to work to develop and deliver a safe and sustainable 24/7 service. That requires a staffing rota that ensures resilience to sick leave and any other short-notice reductions in staff availability. It requires the majority of shifts to be filled by permanent staff, so that rotas can be planned for six-month periods. It also requires a model that equates to having two tiers of trained staff to look after the children of West Lothian overnight—that means consultant paediatricians supported by a second full rota of other medical and nursing staff.

The NHS Lothian paediatric programme board met on 9 January, when two interim options to enhance paediatric service provision were considered. The options were to reopen the in-patient ward for four nights a week, from Monday to Friday, and to extend the opening time of the short-stay unit to 10 pm or midnight, seven nights

a week. The programme board assessed both options in the context of the full 24/7 service reopening in October this year, which means that the interim option will be required for no more than six to seven months.

What emerged from the assessments was a clear preference for reopening the 24-hour in-patient service from Monday to Thursday from 18 March. On the remaining three days—Friday to Sunday—the assessment unit will continue to be open from 8 am to 8 pm. That is achievable because of improved medical and nursing staff numbers. From a nursing position, the ward will be fully staffed overnight for four nights a week, from Monday to Thursday, with a paediatric nurse in the emergency department for the remaining three nights—Friday to Sunday—as under the current arrangement.

NHS Lothian has three advanced paediatric nurse practitioners in post. Two of them already contribute to the out-of-hours rota and one is expected to contribute to it from March, which is an improvement on the position in September, when only one advanced paediatric nurse practitioner supported the rota. Of the three additional APNPs who were recruited last year, two will be ready to contribute to the rota from October and another will be available in 2020. NHS Lothian expects the improved staffing position to support its commitment to reopening the in-patient unit fully in October.

The programme board felt that reopening the unit for four nights a week would significantly enhance the service that is delivered at St John's through a reduction in the number of transfers to the Royal hospital for sick children. Over the past 18 months, an average of 1.6 children a day have been transferred from St John's to the RHSC, and the board expects most such children to be admitted to the St John's unit over the four nights for which it is open. In addition, an average of four children a month are transferred to the RHSC but not admitted, and the board expects most such children to stay at St John's. The board will monitor the arrangements and keep activity under review.

The board also felt that the four-night interim arrangement would improve further recruitment efforts, as it demonstrates its commitment to reinstate the 24/7 in-patient service fully from October. The board will go back out to recruitment for the two consultant posts that were not filled after its recruitment efforts in the autumn of 2018. Advanced nurse practitioner posts will also continue to be advertised. Where possible, NHS Lothian remains committed to overrecruiting, both to build resilience and to mitigate the risks associated with the impact of sickness or any other absences or long-term leave.

I know that members and the local community are anxious to know when the full 24/7 service will be reinstated, and I understand that. I believe that the board's decision to reopen the paediatric ward for 24 hours on four nights a week, from Mondays to Thursdays, is welcome, and I hope that it provides assurance for members and families that full reinstatement of the in-patient service is on track to happen in October. The board's chief executive has sought to assure me that reinstatement of the 24/7 paediatric service has the full commitment of the board and will continue to receive the highest level of priority. As I said in September, that, too, is my commitment.

As we have done, we will continue to provide assistance and support to the board, to monitor progress and to work towards delivery of 24/7 paediatric in-patient services at St John's from October this year. That remains my commitment, and I hope that members will see the progress to date as further assurance of that.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. The downgrading of the service that we are discussing today is especially key for families in Livingston. On three separate occasions—in 2012, 2015 and 2017—we have seen services being removed. Local families across West Lothian will, rightly, be cynical about the latest promises from the Scottish National Party. The main staffing concerns that are outlined in the cabinet secretary's statement point towards the summer months, when, traditionally, it is very difficult to staff such services. Will the steps on recruitment that she has outlined be sustainable? From what she has said today, that will be clear only from the summer of 2020. How will she guarantee that the proposals are sustainable in the future?

Jeane Freeman: I make it clear that we are talking not about promises but about an absolute commitment. Since September, I have done exactly what I said I would do, which is improve the existing service on the road to full 24/7 opening. We are on track for that, and I have returned to the chamber to report on it. I am disappointed that that has not been welcomed by Conservative members.

Mr Briggs asks how I will guarantee that the recruitment process is sustainable and remains on track. I will do so with the professional judgment and guidance of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and of the NHS Lothian paediatric programme board, which itself is committed to ensuring that the service will be sustainable.

It would have been all too easy for me to have come here in September with quick fixes, but those would not have been sustainable. There

would have been no point in my making promises to the parents whom I met—or to any other parents in West Lothian—that I was not convinced I could keep. I have kept my promises so far, and I intend to keep them right through until October and beyond.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. Anything that increases provision at St John's—provided that it is safe—is absolutely welcome. However, it still falls short of the 24-hour, consultant-led paediatric care that the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health states is needed. We know that, since the closure of the out-of-hours service in 2017, more than 1,000 children have been transferred to Edinburgh, with all the extra stress and expense that that brings for families. Do the cabinet secretary and the health board have an estimate of how many more children will have to be transferred between now and October?

I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment that the reinstatement of the 24/7 service is her highest priority, but she must accept that families have been let down by assurances before. What contingency plans are in place should the 24/7 care, which is so badly needed, not be in place by October?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Ms Lennon for her comments and for her welcoming the progress that we have made.

I agree with Ms Lennon: we are not yet at the full 24/7 provision, which is not only what is required but what parents have told me very clearly is what they want—and rightly so.

It is difficult to estimate what difference the four-day 24-hour opening will make because, as I am sure that Monica Lennon will appreciate, the cases that come in are not all the same. The board's expectation is that there will be a significant reduction over those four days in the number of children who are transferred to the Royal hospital for sick children in Edinburgh—in fact, no children will be transferred there unless they are very sick and would have been transferred there even if the children's ward at St John's was fully open.

The board estimates that no children who are admitted in that period who require a short stay—which is what the full paediatric service offered prior to the reduction that we have seen—will need to be transferred. Children who require to stay in hospital for longer than 24 hours or who are very sick and whose stay in hospital would take them beyond the Thursday might have to be transferred to the sick kids hospital in Edinburgh. Such decisions will be clinical decisions that are made on a case-by-case basis. For children who require 24 hours' admission, that service will be open to

them at St John's for four nights a week from March.

Monica Lennon asked what the contingency plan is. With the support of the director general and chief executive of NHS Scotland, our chief medical officer and the chief nursing officer, I intend to keep progress on track as the next step is taken, when the unit moves to greater opening from 18 March, and as further steps are taken on recruitment and engagement with advanced paediatric nurse practitioners. In that way, I will ensure that, month by month, we make the progress that we need to make by October. If, at any point, it looks to me that that is not likely to happen—at this stage, we have the paediatric programme board's assurance that it can make the October date, as well as the royal college's support for the options appraisal and the work that it is doing—and I receive advice that suggests that that might not be possible, I assure Ms Lennon that I will act quickly to identify whether there were ways in which we can get the programme back on track. She has my assurance that I will keep the chamber advised of that.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I know that the cabinet secretary appreciates the extra travel, the stress and the expense that have been caused to families who have been required to travel to the sick children's hospital in Edinburgh. I am pleased that progress is being made, but I am sure that none of us—including the cabinet secretary—is satisfied yet.

Will the hard-learned lessons of St John's help to inform the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Bill, which is currently going through Parliament? Should overrecruitment become the norm so that we never again find ourselves in such a position?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Ms Johnstone for her comments. The experience at St John's, along with all the other experience elsewhere in our health service, has informed the propositions that we have included in the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Bill, which is being considered by the Health and Sport Committee, the amendments to the bill that we have lodged and our position on the other amendments. Our experience at St John's has been part of that mix.

Overrecruitment works when a board understands and can demonstrate that, if it has overrecruited in one area, it can make good use of those skills and expertise elsewhere and it has a sustainable model that takes account not just of planned events, such as holidays, but unplanned events, such as sickness and long-term leave.

Overrecruitment is not particularly new in the St John's case; it is used elsewhere in our health service. It remains a feature of our discussions with chief executives of health boards, directors of

nursing, medical directors and others so that, where appropriate, it is the approach that a board adopts.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I welcome today's statement and assure the cabinet secretary that the proposed reinstatement of 24/7 coverage by the paediatric service at St John's has the full support of Liberal Democrat members.

The cabinet secretary mentioned the fact that the number of cases that are referred to the sick kids hospital in Edinburgh has dropped off to between four and 12 per month. Does she share my anxiety that that might be symptomatic of an understanding that there is no service at St John's to sustain the provision of care to children in such circumstances, which means that people are going straight to the sick kids hospital and that, therefore, that figure is not a reflection of the demand for the service?

Secondly, if the re-establishment of 24/7 provision hinges on the appointment of two or three trained APNPs, will it be impacted by staff sickness and absence, given that margins are so tight? In that event, are there banks or locums that could be drawn upon to relieve the pressure?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Mr Cole-Hamilton for his question. I have no evidence that the drop-off in transfers from St John's to Edinburgh is a result of anyone going straight to Edinburgh. Actually, it is the result, as I said, of more confident triaging of patients at St John's as people understand better what they are there to do with the particular services that they can offer in the restricted hours for which it has been operating. They will now be translated into the longer operational period for the children's ward at St John's.

The member's point about tight margins is the reason why we had to do the work to get to this point and be able to open 24 hours over the four nights, but no longer at this time. We did that precisely to ensure that we have a sustainable model that is not only built on taking account of rotas, planned leave and planned holidays but, as far as possible, based on the overall evidence about how the staff numbers work out and the inevitably unexpected periods of sickness, including periods when sick leave is lengthy.

What the board has done, with our support and that of the paediatric programme board, is in line with how the royal college wants us to progress towards a 24/7 model, which it supports, as Ms Lennon rightly said. All that is in line with that progression as it ensures that we have a sustainable model so that, when we open for the four nights in the week, we do not have to close again because somebody goes off sick. That is

partly how the model has been built and it sits behind the proposition that the board has been delivering on to, as we have described it, overrecruit.

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): As the constituency MSP, I can say that this is a positive stride forward. It is not the final destination, but it is good progress nonetheless, and it will be welcomed by West Lothian parents of school-age children, including those in the chamber and the public gallery.

However, parents will want to know in detail—particularly those whom Ms Freeman has met, who have led a positive campaign—how the cabinet secretary and her team will continue to ensure that NHS Lothian does not rest, does not backslide and does not take its foot off the gas until our much-loved, first-class children's ward returns to a 24/7 service, given that that is the preferred option of not just the wider West Lothian community but, crucially, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Ms Constance for her support and her comments. I welcome any parents from West Lothian who may be in the gallery and who I may have already met.

The questions that Ms Constance raises are pertinent, because they are in everyone's minds, and understandably so. As I have said, we will continue to act, as we have done, to provide assistance and support to the board, to monitor progress closely and to work towards delivery of 24/7 paediatric in-patient services at St John's from October this year.

We will continue to have the involvement that we have had since September last year with the board, the chair of the paediatric programme board, the director general for health and social care, the chief medical officer and the chief nursing officer. That has proved to be very helpful and it will continue right through. I have asked the DG, Dr Calderwood and Professor McQueen to maintain that involvement, keep me regularly briefed on progress and alert me if, at any point, it looks as if we may be going off track, so that I can personally be assured that we are putting in place all the steps that we now know need to be put in place in order to return to the full in-patient service at St John's from October this year.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary tell the Parliament what effect partial closure has had on the Scottish Ambulance Service? Has an assessment been made of ambulance response times and the cost to the service?

Jeane Freeman: The Ambulance Service has been consulted on the proposed improvement and is supportive of it. As I think that we said in

September, NHS Lothian has made additional payments to the Ambulance Service to cover additional costs that the service has had to meet during the period—and where that continues through to October, those costs will continue to be met by NHS Lothian.

The Ambulance Service and other referring services will be notified well in advance of 18 March, so that they can ensure that their staff are briefed and know where they should take patients. Parents and staff at St John's will also be briefed well in advance of that date.

From the overall data that I have seen, I have not identified a dip in ambulance response times that might be attributable to the situation at St John's, but I would be happy to look further into the data and advise Mr Lindhurst of my conclusions in due course, if that would be helpful to him.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I welcome the commitment that full reinstatement of the 24/7 paediatric service from October is receiving the highest priority. Will the cabinet secretary say how she will scrutinise and support the work of the paediatric programme board?

Jeane Freeman: I understand members' concern to make sure that, although progress has been made, no one takes their foot off the pedal. I am also very conscious that parents in West Lothian will scrutinise what happens, to ensure that we deliver on the final part of the commitment that I have made.

As I said, I have asked Professor McQueen, Dr Calderwood and the DG for health and social care and chief executive of NHS Scotland to continue their active involvement—and it has been active; it has not been at arm's length or distant—with the paediatric programme board and with NHS Lothian's chief executive. We have made sure that there is, at a senior level in NHS Lothian, proactive interest in how matters progress.

Progress will be reported regularly to me. I have made a commitment that if it appears to be going off track at any point I will take steps to intervene, as far as I am able to do, to bring it back on track, and I will ensure that members of this Parliament are kept up to date on our progress.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): The announcement is welcome news in West Lothian and for any family with a child who has required hospital attention.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that there will be a degree of scepticism about the announcement, given that the ward has opened and closed three times since 2012. In that context, will she give an assurance that there will be a 24-

hour paediatric service at St John's hospital for as long as she is health secretary?

Jeane Freeman: I was thrown off by the final part of Ms Dugdale's question, when she said, "for as long as she is health secretary".

I am grateful for Ms Dugdale's support. Yes, she has my assurance of that. I made that commitment in September; I fully support a 24/7 in-patient paediatric service at St John's. I understand that that is needed now, as the royal college's work reaffirms, and given the welcome expansion in the number of families in West Lothian, as families move into the area—as I hope that people will continue to do—to benefit from its significant advantages and good standard of living.

I said in September that I would work with all the individuals whom I have mentioned and bring in the professionalism and experience of the chief medical officer, the chief nursing officer and the director general. I said that we would work with the paediatric programme board and that we would work to the royal college's commitments. We have done so, to reach a next step towards the opening of the full 24/7 service in October. That is and remains my commitment, and for as long as I am health secretary I will continue to want and to work towards sustaining a full 24/7 paediatric in-patient service at St John's.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): In her response to Miles Briggs, the cabinet secretary was definitive about the sustainability of the service. Can I clarify whether the board has provided her with assurances that the current staffing model that is to be implemented at St John's paediatric ward will create a sustainable solution that will ensure patient safety and avoid future disruptions to children's services?

Jeane Freeman: Ms Harper probably knows better than just about anyone in the chamber the importance to our health service of a sustainable rota that takes account of all the issues that I have set out in my answers. I am sure that she agrees with me about the significant value of advanced paediatric nurse practitioners—and of advanced nurse practitioners as a whole—across our health service. We recruited additional advanced nurse practitioners in September so that we could begin to bring them on to the rota. Members will know that it takes a period of time to do that. With the engagement of those practitioners and with the consultant and medical profession engagement that we already have, we have reached the stage at which the rota is sustainable for the four-night 24-hour opening of the in-patient ward at St John's.

The next steps are to continue to look to recruit two more consultants, to continue with the additional recruitment of advanced paediatric

nurse practitioners and to bring those practitioners who are going through the training on to the rota when it is clinically safe to do so. All that work will take us to a point at which we can say that the in-patient service will be open 24/7 from October.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): How will the cabinet secretary ensure that adequate resources will be made available to St John's to ensure that this crucial service overcomes the pressure on the staff that caused the initial restrictions in the first place?

Jeane Freeman: My understanding is that it was not a resource issue—in terms of pound notes—that led to the situation that we are working so hard to resolve by ensuring that there is sustainability. There was a staffing issue, which obviously connects to resources, but NHS Lothian has the resources—and will have them in 2019-20, depending on what the Parliament does with our draft budget—to deliver on the commitments. I do not come to the chamber to make commitments that I do not believe I have the resources to deliver. As I said, depending on what happens with our draft budget, I have the resources to deliver, NHS Lothian will have the resources to deliver and, consequently, St John's will have the resources to deliver.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that the end of the free movement of people following Brexit will harm future recruitment drives for clinical staff across Scotland's health boards?

Jeane Freeman: I share that concern. Let me give Mr Torrance and the chamber the benefit of a couple of quotes from people who work and represent people in our health service. The British Medical Association's council chair said:

"The only thing that is certain, is how disastrous leaving the EU will be for the NHS, its workforce, its patients and the health of the country".

Donna Kinnair, from the Royal College of Nursing, said:

"our ... healthcare system is fast losing its most important asset—its staff."

We know that European Union nationals are already leaving our health service. From memory, I think that, of those who were asked, 78 per cent of EU national doctors in the United Kingdom said that they found the UK Government's assurances deeply unconvincing, and just over 35 per cent of them planned to leave. We need to try to address those serious problems in taking forward our health service and—more importantly—in taking forward our country.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary has said that there are plans to recruit to two new consultant posts, which remained unfilled

after a recruitment round last year. What additional steps is the board taking to fill those posts? Does the cabinet secretary have confidence that those posts will be filled before the service opens in October? What impact will not filling the posts have on the service?

Jeane Freeman: The board is advertising those posts for recruitment again. The board believes—this point was also made to me by the parents whom I met—that the more that we can do to improve the provision of paediatric in-patient services in St John's, the more attractive those posts become to people who might consider applying for them. We are hopeful that the next step that I have announced will assist the recruitment exercise, along with the absolute commitments that we have restated. The move to four-night 24-hour opening makes good on those commitments and will encourage individuals to think seriously about coming to work in what is an excellent hospital that provides very high-quality care.

The board will put out the advertisement and seek to recruit to those posts. In anticipation of that, and given that there was a difficulty in the autumn recruitment that meant that the two posts were not filled, the board, along with the paediatric programme board and with the support of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, looked to realign its model, which has resulted in some of the advanced paediatric nurse practitioner recruitment that I spoke about in my statement.

The two consultant posts are important to the consultant rota. However, the additional steps that I set out in my statement, including those relating to the advanced nurse practitioner roles—in addition to those that I announced in September—will help to take us towards that sustainable 24/7 model.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has outlined some of the challenges currently being faced in recruiting staff. Can she outline how NHS Lothian figures today compare with staffing figures in 2007?

Jeane Freeman: In NHS Lothian, since 2007, consultant numbers have risen by 54 per cent. Emergency medicine consultants have risen by 252.7 per cent, qualified nurses and midwives are up by 9.6 per cent and allied health professionals are up by 18.8 per cent. Overall, the staff numbers in NHS Lothian have gone up in total by 14.8 per cent. We continue to seek to recruit in order to deliver the quality service that families in West Lothian and elsewhere across Scotland deserve.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-15609, in the name of Christina McKelvie, on “A Connected Scotland”, the Scottish Government's strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness.

14:48

The Minister for Older People and Equalities (Christina McKelvie): I am delighted to be opening today's debate. As we know, social isolation and loneliness are important. As our society changes, there has been increasing recognition of social isolation and loneliness as major public health issues, as they can have a significant impact on physical and mental wellbeing. That increased understanding is welcome.

I pay tribute to the Equal Opportunities Committee of the previous parliamentary session in taking forward its groundbreaking inquiry into age and social isolation. That was pivotal in getting the issue on to the public and policy agenda and led directly to the Government's commitment, in our manifesto for the most recent Scottish Parliament elections, to publish our strategy to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

Just before Christmas, I was delighted to launch “A Connected Scotland: tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger communities”. I visited Bridgend Farmhouse, which is a fantastic example of a community-based project supporting people to connect socially. The farmhouse was one of the first assets to be transferred under community empowerment legislation. I urge everyone to get along for a visit because they will really enjoy it. I was delighted to see that the farmhouse was shortlisted for the 2019 MacEwen award, which recognises architecture for the common good. That fits with our increasing understanding of the importance of placemaking in helping to foster the connection that we seek.

In developing the strategy, it was essential that we spoke to those who have lived experience, as well as the organisations that are doing the vital work day in, day out to support individuals and foster more social connections. That is why we held consultation events the length and breadth of Scotland to hear what matters to people and communities. We were helped tremendously by the energy of local organisations that brought together their communities to send in a response. We received well over 400 responses to the consultation, which is a sign of the importance that people place on the issue, and an indication of an appetite for real and meaningful change.

To frame the discussion, we set out our vision for a Scotland where individuals and communities are more connected, and everyone has the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships, regardless of age, status, circumstances or identity. We defined social isolation as

“when an individual has an objective lack of social relationships ... at individual group, community and societal levels”

and loneliness as

“a subjective feeling experienced when there is a difference between the social relationships we would like to have and those we have”.

Tackling social isolation and loneliness is not just the responsibility of one Government or even of one portfolio in the Government. It is the collective responsibility of us all to play our part in building stronger social connections and more resilient communities.

The reality is that social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone, at any age or stage in life, and in any walk of life. In my role as the Minister for Older People and Equalities, it is my responsibility to embed equalities and human rights across the work of the Scottish Government.

Social isolation and loneliness are undoubtedly issues for older people, as we know, and that can be because of a number of factors, including the barriers that older people experience and the attitudes that they face. That needs to change, which is why we will introduce an older people's framework in spring, to promote positive attitudes to ageing, tackle discrimination against older people, and break down the barriers that prevent older people from living their best lives.

However, let me be absolutely clear that social isolation and loneliness should not be seen purely in the context of ageing. They impact on all parts of society. A third of children who call ChildLine do so because they feel lonely. For new mothers, the time after the birth of a child can be incredibly isolating, and our veterans can face challenges in building their social networks on return from service.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I met a group of eight organisations in my constituency yesterday. They have all lost funding as a result of a flawed integration joint board bidding process, largely because they had all put in for creche provision, which the IJB said was not provided for in the funding round. Does the minister agree that that is a myopic view, considering what she has just said about new mothers and seeking to break down isolation? Will she meet me to see whether the Scottish Government can help those organisations?

Christina McKelvie: I would be delighted to meet Alex Cole-Hamilton to discuss those issues. He makes a few fair points on some of the issues and challenges that we face in the current budget negotiations. He will know that such decisions are for the IJBs, but I am happy to have that conversation with him. I also know that my colleagues in health have been working closely with that local IJB on some of those issues.

We know that social isolation and loneliness are whole-population issues and, if we are to tackle them, we need to recognise the commonality of experience as well as the distinct way that such experience manifests itself in different groups of people.

In taking forward the strategy, we have set four clear priorities. We want to empower communities to build shared ownership of the agenda. Social isolation and loneliness cannot be solved by the Scottish Government alone, and we are committed to working collaboratively with a range of partners as we move forward with our strategy.

We know that the people and communities of Scotland know what is best for them so, through our approach to community empowerment and public service reform, we want to enable communities to make a difference on their own terms. Last year, we launched the local governance review in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and through that review, we will work with communities to understand what changes to the current system would allow them greater control over the decisions that have the biggest impacts on their lives. Through the community choices fund, we will continue to work in partnership to help local authorities to reach their goal of having at least 1 per cent of their budgets subject to participatory budgeting, giving communities a better say in how their budgets are spent.

How people relate to each other is critical to building social connections. That is why it is important to help our young people to build an early understanding of positive and healthy relationships, to promote the value of kindness and to encourage greater intergenerational dialogue. To support young people as they progress through their education, we have placed health and wellbeing at the core of curriculum for excellence. All members of staff in schools are expected to be proactive in promoting positive relationships and behaviour in the classroom, playground and wider school community.

We will implement the recommendations of the personal and social education review that was published last week, to ensure that our young people are developing the knowledge, skills and resilience to fulfil their potential. That will help to

equip our young people to build and maintain those connections.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The minister made a point about schools supporting young people who are socially isolated. According to Versus Arthritis, 42 per cent of young adults with arthritis feel isolated and 73 per cent say that they feel lonely on a regular basis. It is important that we support those young people who are feeling isolated because of a condition. How would the minister suggest that we support those people who cannot get to school, so that they feel included?

Christina McKelvie: I could take up the rest of my speaking time in answering that question, because there are many ways to tackle that issue.

This morning, I was at Dunbar grammar school, which has a cross-generational project that works with young people and older people in the town. There is some really innovative work happening there and in other places. I have been blown away by some of the work that I have seen.

There are particular issues where young people face challenges, especially young people who have disabilities or long-term conditions. We are looking at that. The implementation group has a varied group of stakeholders, so that we can identify those issues much more clearly and take forward some of the necessary action. I hope that the implementation group will inform the work that we need to do to change that situation for those young people. It is a great point, and we are taking it on board.

Another issue that we face is the stigma that exists around social isolation and loneliness. We will help to raise awareness of those issues and encourage people both to seek support and to reach out to other people. That is why we are committed to working with partners and stakeholders, as I explained to Rachael Hamilton.

We know that it is not straightforward. We have much to learn from successful anti-stigma campaigns, such as the see me campaign. The fact that we are talking about social isolation and loneliness in the Scottish Parliament is an important step in raising awareness and focusing the attention of society on the issue. I know that that is of particular interest to the Conservative members.

Every member will know that there is a huge range of activities going on across Scotland. I wrote to all members to say that they should look at what is happening in their constituencies, because they will be blown away. So much good work is going on, and I urge members to go and see it.

I emphasise the importance of volunteering across Scotland. Volunteering is key to us achieving our ambition of creating a fairer, more connected and more prosperous country, with equality of opportunity for all—a country where everyone has a chance to participate. We know that there is a real two-way benefit to volunteering: as well as helping to foster a sense of purpose in supporting a cause, it helps to improve social connectedness. Volunteers meet new people, expand their networks and feel a connectedness to wider society through their work.

The publication of the national volunteering outcomes framework is coming up this year. We want to drive that involvement further. The lived environment is a key factor in how we interact with each other. From innovative housing solutions and intergenerational approaches, to the accessibility of transport networks and improving access to digital connectivity, we want to create the conditions that enable individuals and their communities to thrive. We want to work across different sectors to achieve that. We recognise the unique position of third sector organisations that support and develop the delivery of locally relevant solutions in a way that suits the needs of individuals. That is why the briefings that we have received in our inboxes today are so varied. We need to hear all those voices in this debate, and we are grateful to them for that.

In recognition of the fact that Government alone cannot deliver the ambitions of this strategy, and of the importance of a cross-sector approach in tackling these issues, I was pleased to announce earlier today the membership of the national implementation group for a connected Scotland. Formed of a range of statutory, third and public-sector organisations, as part of its work, the group will develop and implement a shared delivery plan for the connected Scotland strategy, along with a shared performance framework, to help us understand the difference that we make. To support that, we are committing £1 million of investment over the next two years to help build our collective capacity to implement the strategy and to pilot innovative approaches to tackle social isolation and loneliness. We have committed to reviewing how to maximise the impact of existing funding in our communities.

In that context, I will touch briefly on the Labour amendment, in the spirit of consensus by which I hope this debate will be marked. Although local authorities are responsible for setting their budgets, the total funding that is available, including the flexibility to increase council tax by 3 per cent, will increase by more than £485 million in 2019-20. We want to work collaboratively with local government and others in tackling the issues, which is why I am pleased that COSLA is a key partner on the new national implementation group.

Tackling the issues is about more than money or projects. The reality is that we all have a responsibility to ensure that our communities are more connected. There is no quick fix to this, which is why our strategy looks forward all the way to 2026.

I welcome the opportunity to debate this most important issue with those who have joined me in the chamber. I hope that they will join the Government in playing their part in helping to tackle social isolation and loneliness and build a more connected Scotland. As our first national strategy for tackling social isolation, “A Connected Scotland” represents the first step towards our vision of a more connected Scotland and demonstrates our commitment to creating a society that treats all our people with kindness, dignity and compassion.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that social isolation and loneliness are issues that can affect people at any age, stage or walk of life; welcomes the recent publication of the Scottish Government’s national strategy, *A Connected Scotland*, which has been backed by £1 million to support innovative projects and approaches to bring people together; thanks those individuals and organisations that have contributed their ideas to the strategy, and recognises that Scotland’s people and communities know what is best for them in tackling these issues and that, across the public, private and third sectors, everyone has a part to play to tackle social isolation and loneliness and build a more connected Scotland.

15:01

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on social isolation and loneliness. Although the issue affects so many of us and comes up time and again, particularly around Christmas, we are yet to really tackle it. As I have said before in the chamber, we all have our part to play in solving the issue. I hope that the national strategy will give us the direction that is required to achieve complete cultural change. Although I have put forward my ideas on how best to achieve that and have urged the Scottish Government to push ahead with its plans, I will use my time in the debate to push for consensus on an issue on which we must all unite.

By now, we are all aware of how widespread the issue is. It is estimated that, in Scotland, 79 per cent of adults and 40 per cent of children and young people experience loneliness. Beyond the statistics, it is not difficult to think of people in our lives who may feel lonely or isolated: the neighbour who we see once in a blue moon when they take out the bins or the lifelong family friend who we should have phoned, although we have not quite got round to doing it yet.

We live increasingly transient and busy lives. We are encouraged to live our best lives, embrace

all opportunities and achieve beyond what is possible. We travel further for work, we put more onus on ourselves to tell the world what we are doing and paint the perfect picture and we rely increasingly on technology for our social interactions. Perhaps it is not surprising that some groups in society feel more isolated than ever. Perhaps we have not realised what impact those changes have on us with regard to mental health, being present and having meaningful social interactions.

Increasingly, we are more aware that older people are not the only section of society that is affected by loneliness. There are times in our lives when loneliness can be amplified: following the death of a loved one; during a lengthy divorce; becoming a new parent, possibly alone; being a carer; or maybe during a period of ill health when it is not possible to get out and about as we would like.

Young people, too, are affected by social isolation and loneliness. As I stated in the action plan that I published just before Christmas, that must also become a strong focus. A BBC study of more than 55,000 people found that loneliness is felt most intensely by young people, with two in five people aged between 16 and 24 reporting feeling lonely often or very often. The role of social media in our lives is changing how we interact with people day to day. WhatsApp has replaced phoning a friend and young professionals in the workplace may well send an email to the office along the corridor rather than going to speak in person. I am keen for more work to be done on the impact of technology and social media on young people. Interestingly, the same study found that those who reported feeling lonely had more online-only Facebook friends than those who did not.

As part of my action plan, I called for exploration of how, as part of the curriculum, pupils can be taught about loneliness and the value of social relationships, so I was pleased to hear the minister say that that will happen. I also called for pupils to be encouraged to get involved, where possible, with national schemes such as the John Muir award and the Duke of Edinburgh’s award or with the scouts or girl guides.

Older people are of course massively affected by loneliness. Across the United Kingdom, 3.6 million older people live alone and over 2 million of them are aged 75 plus—my mum being one of them. Three out of four general practitioners say that they see between one and five people a day who have come in mainly because they are lonely. That is why I have also called for better use of the social prescribing platforms that already exist. I recently carried out a social prescribing survey with GPs in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dumfries and Galloway, and it was clear that the platform

available to them is not up to date, is not easily accessible and is not user friendly. This needs to change.

Of course, it is not all down to GPs. We need a national conversation on what simple acts of kindness we can carry out in our everyday lives and we need to encourage those who are lonely to ask for and accept acts of kindness when they are offered without feeling guilt or shame. That is why I have called for a Scotland-specific national loneliness day, stressing the need to have something personal to Scotland that captures people's imaginations. Will the minister commit to supporting such a day and press ahead with plans to introduce it?

When we have such debates, I am always conscious of the fact that the conversation is framed in a way that does not necessarily celebrate what older people have to offer. Older people are absolutely an asset and, having spent just one day at a Contact the Elderly tea party, I can honestly say that I had a great time and I look forward to attending many more.

In the debate on the issue last year, I spoke a lot about intergenerational projects that had inspired me—the nursery placed in an old people's home is just one example. I therefore ask the Scottish Government what work is being done to promote more such projects.

I reiterate my support for the national strategy. Every single day, charities across our communities are making a real difference. Unfortunately, I do not have time to mention them all, but I was pleased to see many charities come together last year to form the action group on isolation and loneliness. That is an extremely positive step towards improving the lives of many people.

Loneliness is like a ticking time bomb and it needs to be the responsibility of everyone, from the Government down to local communities, to make a real difference. I hope to see real cultural change in the future.

I move amendment S5M-15609.1, to insert after “bring people together;”:

“calls for increased awareness of youth loneliness, greater social prescribing and a national awareness campaign;”

15:07

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The development of a strategy for loneliness and isolation has been supported across the chamber by all parties in a number of debates over a number of years. The strategy builds on the important work that was carried out by the Jo Cox commission on loneliness, which found that 9 million people across the UK are lonely. In moving

Labour's amendment today, I want to give our on-going support to the strategy. I make it clear that having a strategy is important, but it is also important that all levels of government, communities and civic Scotland are part of that strategy, with a commitment to making it work.

However, it is also clear that the current political choice of austerity in the UK is leading to more isolation and to more people experiencing loneliness. It is time for social isolation and loneliness to be recognised as major public health issues that can have enduring and serious effects on a person's physical and mental health. That is why we support the Government's motion.

Our amendment is designed to highlight that, for the strategy to work, there is a need for investment and a need to end austerity. The strategy comes at a time when austerity is having a real negative impact on tens of thousands of people in Scotland, on local services, on support for enabling local communities and on many third sector organisations that are working in the heart of communities up and down Scotland.

Although the strategy effectively lays out the need to build cohesive communities, improve people's mental and physical health and reduce poverty and acknowledges the important role that the third sector plays, it fails to acknowledge the threat that budget cuts to social security, public services and the third sector pose in tackling loneliness. For example, Inclusion Scotland's briefing for the debate states:

“Cuts to welfare benefits have also reduced tens of thousands of Scots disabled people's ability to participate in wider society”.

Inclusion Scotland points out that the stigma that arises from political rhetoric and media coverage of welfare reform has caused an increase in the harassment of disabled people and in their fear of harassment. Therefore, if we are serious about tackling loneliness and isolation, it is crucial that we acknowledge the impact of Government policies on achieving that ambition. Labour believes that local councils, which are key to building cohesive communities, are bearing the brunt of the Government's budget cuts.

The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights noted in his report that

“many of the public places and institutions that previously brought communities together, such as libraries, community and recreation centers, and public parks, have been steadily dismantled or undermined”.

The briefing for the debate from Royal Blind and Scottish War Blind states that respondents to their survey argued for more services at a local level that support people with sight loss and bring them together, to be provided by local authorities

and the third sector. Although the £1 million fund to support innovative projects and approaches to bring people together is welcome, it is a drop in the ocean compared to the £319 million funding cut that local government is facing if the Government's budget is passed in its current form.

There is no doubt that cuts to councils will impact on the strategy. We only have to look at some of the cuts to see that that is a fact. Last year, Inverclyde Council withdrew free swimming for over-60s. The City of Edinburgh Council's recent budget proposals include a £350,000 budget cut to Edinburgh Leisure, followed by three years of £1 million cuts to its budget. Moray Council is proposing to shut two swimming pools and libraries. Further examples of changes that are being considered by local councils to save money and that could erode people's feelings of community and opportunities to interact are the withdrawal of subsidies to pensioners Christmas dinners; the withdrawal of subsidies to local halls; charging for attendance at adult day centres; increasing charges for meals on wheels; increasing prices and reducing opening hours for leisure services and activities; stopping support for bus services; reducing support for local events; and closing community facilities.

Some of the options that I have seen councils considering are horrendous. Indeed, the former Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities has lodged a motion in Parliament describing the proposed cut to the West Lothian shopmobility service as "short-sighted" and saying that it risks increasing social isolation.

There is not much point in MSPs lining up to attack front-line cuts when they are the very same people who voted for those horrendous cuts to council funding. That is the main point. There is a consensus in the chamber that we need to address the issues, but the bottom line is that failed austerity is impacting on every community and on local organisations that are at the heart of communities. If we are to address loneliness and isolation, we have to make resources available and stop austerity.

I move amendment S5M-15609.2, to insert at end:

"; further recognises the key role of local communities, local services and the third sector in preventing social isolation; notes that the UN rapporteur's preliminary report on extreme poverty and human rights in the UK stated that 'many of the public places and institutions that previously brought communities together, such as libraries, community and recreation centres, and public parks, have been steadily dismantled or undermined', and agrees that the impact of ongoing austerity on local services, the third sector and local communities must be addressed as part of the strategy to tackle social isolation and loneliness."

15:14

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): It is certainly a sad paradox that, although we live in a society that gives us ever more means to contact one another through technology, many more people are feeling lonely. We should regard loneliness as a barometer of how successful our society is. Societies that are open, equal, welcoming and cohesive are, by definition, less likely to have a large number of people who feel left out and alone. I know that we are all extremely concerned that figures from NHS Health Scotland suggest that 11 per cent of adults in Scotland often feel lonely and that almost 40 per cent of adults sometimes do.

As the minister stressed, and as the strategy rightly recognises, loneliness is a major public health problem. As we have heard, the medical evidence suggests that loneliness can have a significant negative impact on our health. It can carry a risk of early death equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and it also increases the risks of high blood pressure and heart disease.

Many of the action points in the plan are welcome. For example, there is to be greater emphasis on social prescribing and the expansion of the community links worker programme to more GP surgeries. As Annie Wells highlighted, all too often, GPs are the only contact that a chronically lonely person might have. Three out of four GPs in the UK say that between one and five people a day have sought an appointment because they are lonely. Quite rightly, the Royal College of General Practitioners in Scotland describes loneliness as a "health epidemic".

I encourage the minister to consider some of the Royal College's proposals, including further expansion of the community links worker programme and longer GP appointments so that GPs can better assist patients who are experiencing loneliness. The Royal College has also made some constructive suggestions about producing a quality-assured national database of projects that offer the right support and ensuring that voluntary groups have reliable, longer-term funding. The latter issue has been raised by various colleagues across the chamber.

Many of those local groups do incredible work. One example is Health All Round, a community health project that is based in the Gorgie, Dalry, Stenhouse and Saughton areas of the region that I represent. Among a range of groups, activities and events, Health All Round organises good morning Gorgie, a social group for older adults that meets every Tuesday morning at St Martin's Community Resource Centre, in Dalry. Members of the group enjoy cooking, writing and arts and crafts. For some members, the group provides a key opportunity to meet up for friendship and

socialising—an opportunity that they might not have otherwise. The minister mentioned the fabulous Bridgend Farmhouse and spoke, too, of the importance of placemaking. The Hollies Day Centre, just off Musselburgh's busy high street, offers food, chat and even an affordable haircut.

Some of those projects are well served by bus routes, but others are not. I was glad to see in the strategy a focus on transport and infrastructure, because we can have these fabulous projects but it is really important that people can access them. Access to good transport can reduce loneliness and social isolation. A King's College London study has found that access to free bus passes is associated with a 12 per cent decline in depressive symptoms, with the researchers suggesting that the benefits come from

"reduced loneliness, increased participation in volunteering activities and increased contact with children and friends".

As we know, in too many parts of the country, bus services are expensive, unreliable and not frequent enough. For those who are unable to drive or who choose not to drive, public transport—and local buses services in particular—is a key service. We have to make sure that our buses are better, and I commend the work that my colleague John Finnie MSP is leading in that regard. I also draw the attention of members and the Government to the recent statement on poverty in the UK by Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty. Mr Alston said:

"Transport ... should be considered an essential service, equivalent to water and electricity, and the government should regulate the sector to the extent necessary to ensure that people ... are adequately served. Abandoning people to the private market in relation to a service that affects every dimension of their basic well-being is incompatible with human rights requirements."

We must also ensure that public places have the facilities that are needed to give everyone the confidence to get out and about. In particular, a lack of access to public toilets can cause people who might need urgent toilet access to avoid leaving home, leading to isolation and loneliness. I have lodged an amendment to the Planning (Scotland) Bill to ensure that local development plans must include a statement of the planning authority's policies regarding provision of public toilets. I was recently contacted by a constituent who is happy for me to share her thoughts on the subject. She works in the health sector, and she spoke of our growing elderly population and the growing list of health issues that affect people. She has stressed the fact that some people simply will not leave home if they do not feel that there is somewhere they can access when they need to.

I am running out of time. I ask the minister to respond to the points that I and others have made and look forward to working with colleagues

across the chamber to ensure that absolutely no one in Scotland feels lonely.

15:20

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I thank the Government for securing time for this debate and for its work in the vital area that we are discussing. It has the full support of Liberal Democrat members in the delivery of the loneliness and isolation strategy. We have had such debates before and we will have them again, but it is good that we are working towards some level of progress.

The 19th century French novelist Balzac said that solitude is fine but we always need somebody close at hand to tell that it is fine. Some 65,000 Scots spent Christmas alone and, all told, 200,000 elderly Scots go for half a week or more without a single visit or phone call from somebody whom they know or care about.

For all our progress and advance as a society and our greater understanding of social inclusion, we are contracting as a society through our online culture. People do not go to the shops as they used to; rather, they buy things online. Over Christmas, we saw the demise of many high street names and stores in which people may have found their only human interaction in getting their messages on any given day of the week. We have also seen the closure of local amenities, some of which have been alluded to in the debate so far, particularly around social hubs in our communities—one-stop places that people would go to, such as post offices and banks. People may have their weekly calendar built around their trip to the post office to draw their pension or to the bank to do their daily business.

Until I visited a local William Hill bookmaker to discuss prostate cancer, I did not consider that the same is happening with bookmakers. With the rise of online gambling, there has been a decline in on-street bookmakers. Older men in particular—I do not mean to be pejorative or prescriptive—would traditionally go to those bookmakers and spend the afternoon in them. However, those bookmakers are being removed from our communities and, with them, the opportunity for social interaction is being removed.

I understand Alison Johnstone's remarks about inhibiting factors for people who do not have confidence in the towns and landscapes around them. Toilets are really important, particularly for people with disabilities. There is a paucity of disabled toilets in our high streets and our venues, which is often a cause of people who have other causes to be isolated in the first place deciding not to leave their house.

There is a lack of confidence in our physical on-street landscape and the infrastructure, pavements and footpaths of our towns and cities. I have mentioned many times my desire to see the Scottish Government bring forward a national falls strategy. The Parliament has voted for that twice through amendments in my name. I would be very grateful if, in its closing remarks, the Scottish Government updated members on where we are on addressing falls. I do not mean falls in clinical care; we have a falls framework for that. We need to give people confidence that accident blackspots are well gritted and have ready handrails and that there is consideration of on-street furniture, for example. That may lend itself to addressing the problems that we have.

I associate myself with Alison Johnstone's remarks on the removal of vital public transport links. I have spent much of my time as an MSP receiving calls and correspondence from Barnton care home. That is a great place to visit, and its residents have robust opinions. To a person, they were devastated by the removal of the lifeline number 64 bus service, which connected them to East Craigs and the Gyle shopping centre. They now have to take two buses, into town and back out, to collect their messages and to visit friends on that side of the city. Such simple things make loneliness and isolation become happenstance and then the norm.

As I mentioned in my intervention on the minister, we talk a good game in the chamber and make policy that is directed at reducing loneliness and isolation, but we make bad decisions at the local and national levels. The eight organisations that I met in Muirhouse yesterday serve thousands of people in the most vulnerable part of my constituency and in Ben Macpherson's constituency, in the north-west of Edinburgh. However, the integration joint board ran a funding bid that saw those eight organisations lose £650,000 in this year, which is an existential threat to each and every one of them.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Does the member agree that there has been a lack of transparency in relation to why those organisations have lost money? Does he also agree that the IJB should meet each charity that has lost money to explain what went wrong with its application?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I was coming to that issue—I could not agree more.

Several things became apparent during my conversation with the eight organisations that stand to lose a sum of money that threatens their existence. First, there has been no feedback on the process despite there having been a vague offer that there would be. Secondly, the IJB had in place a general rule that it would not fund the

provision of a crèche. As I intimated to the minister, that is an incredibly myopic position. Thirdly, anecdotally, it is suggested that there is a view that, because north-west Edinburgh has always been invested in, it is time for somewhere else to get a piece of the pie.

Given that that part of my constituency regularly features in the top fifth of the most deprived areas in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, this is no time to withdraw resources. Organisations such as the North West Carers centre, the Drylaw neighbourhood centre and the Almond Mains initiative are part of a vital central hub that allows people to come together.

I welcome the strategy. I particularly welcome the appointment of my friend and constituent Brian Sloan, who is the chief executive of Age Scotland, to the implementation group. He will be a breath of fresh air, given his innovative thinking on the issue.

I started with a quote and I will finish with one. Mother Teresa famously said:

"The most terrible poverty is loneliness".

We need to hold that in our thoughts as we progress this agenda.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): I have a little time in hand, but please do not go over the top.

15:26

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Social isolation and loneliness can, of course, affect anyone at any time in their lives, and it is all our responsibility to build a country in which everyone feels welcome and valued in our communities.

Scotland is leading the way—it is one of the first countries in the world to publish a national strategy on social isolation and loneliness. The strategy, which is backed by £1 million of investment over the next two years, is a step forward in tackling the issue.

In preparing for the debate, I was struck by Age UK's call for policy makers and researchers to be clear about the difference between loneliness and social isolation. Its website says:

"Loneliness is not the same as social isolation. People can be isolated (alone) yet not feel lonely. People can be surrounded by other people, yet still feel lonely.

The distinction between these two concepts is often overlooked ... which makes it difficult to understand what can help people reduce their feeling of loneliness."

As the minister said, loneliness is a subjective feeling about the gap between a person's desired level of social contact and their actual level of social contact; it refers to the perceived quality of a

person's relationships. Loneliness is never desired, and lessening those feelings can take a long time.

Social isolation is an objective measure of the number of contacts that people have; it is about the quantity, not the quality, of relationships. People may choose to have a small number of contacts, and if people feel socially isolated, that can be overcome relatively quickly by increasing the number of people they are in contact with.

Loneliness and social isolation are different but related concepts; social isolation can lead to loneliness and loneliness can lead to social isolation. They are different but can be experienced at the same time.

Folk may feel different levels of social isolation and loneliness over their lifetime, moving in and out of such states as their personal circumstances change. Loneliness and social isolation also share factors that increase the likelihood of people experiencing them, such as deteriorating health and sensory and mobility impairments. In its briefing, Inclusion Scotland points out that social isolation and loneliness affect a disproportionate number of disabled people at all stages of life, from childhood to old age.

Quality matters, because bringing people together to increase the number of their social contacts is not an end in itself; good-quality, rewarding relationships are needed to combat loneliness.

The quality of relationships that people have in their life matters; it is really important. A number of groups in my Cunninghame South constituency provide that quality interaction. I probably have time to mention one of them in particular.

The men's shed movement, which began in Australia in 2005, encourages groups of men to get together around activities that could take place in a garden shed—from engineering to creative writing and everything in between—in a way that benefits their health and wellbeing. The concept has taken off over the past 13 years or so and, today, Scotland has 67 open sheds and 47 in development.

I am pleased to say that we have a men's shed in Irvine, which is based at the Scottish maritime museum. Jamie, who is leading the development of the Irvine harbourside men's shed, told me about the inspiration for beginning it. He said that the museum has a dedicated volunteer base and that many of the volunteers are men—mainly ex-engineers—who often cite loneliness and social isolation as a reason for volunteering. The new men's shed project provides the chance to offer all men, whatever their background, the opportunity to come together, learn new skills, become more

social and get active, and, in so doing, improve their mental wellbeing.

A phrase that is commonly heard in sheds is that men do not talk face to face; they talk shoulder to shoulder, while working or enjoying a hobby with their friends. Jamie told me that that had been observed and admired in the museum's volunteer base and that the hope was that such camaraderie would continue in the men's shed.

The Irvine group already has 20 to 30 men who meet every couple of weeks on a Thursday. The number of folk who participate is testament to the quality of the experience for the men. Friendships have been built and the men socialise outwith the group.

There are demonstrable wider benefits to the men's shed movement. As well as supporting individuals, sheds and the projects that they undertake can provide benefits to communities—from planters being made and Wendy houses being built for nurseries through to commercial bicycle refurbishment schemes. I look forward to seeing Irvine harbourside benefit similarly.

I am proud that Scotland is leading the way with the strategy. I look forward to hearing from everyone about the quality groups that are meeting around Scotland.

15:32

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I, too, thank the Government for bringing forward the debate. I agree with the minister that not just older people but people across the generations—including the young and the middle aged—can feel isolated. One group that is particularly affected by isolation is those who have a disability. Whether people experience a disability as a child, a middle-aged individual or an older person, because a disability often affects someone's ability to get out and do things that most of us take for granted, isolation can become an issue.

Perhaps isolation happens less today than in previous generations, when it could arise because of societal attitudes—because of what people said and how they reacted to people with a disability who went out and about. However, people with a disability who go to activities at leisure centres or to other places often have to think through how they will get there, what will happen when they get there and whether the facilities will be appropriate.

Employment is one of the greatest issues in relation to isolation and disability. As we all know, there is still a major lack of opportunity for those with a disability to enter the employment market, and that is particularly true for those who have learning difficulties.

I do not blame the Government for this, but all the statistics tell us that things are still not improving in Scotland or across the United Kingdom. Therefore, if we are to tackle the issues of isolation and employment for disabled people, we will need to do some radical thinking.

Yesterday afternoon, I had the privilege of attending Garvald Edinburgh's workshop on Gorgie Road. The charity works across the city and the Lothians with people with learning difficulties and other disabilities. Its workshop is a remarkable place, a visit to which I highly recommend to the minister. Not only would she have an excellent lunch there, which is important, but she would see how bread and chairs are made and how woodwork is done. The workshop offers real employment, giving people real opportunities to learn new skills. What is perhaps just as important is that it gives them an opportunity to build friendships and relationships and to integrate with the people they work with and those who support them. The project has been going for more than 20 years now.

As I talked to the individuals there, they told me that, sometimes, people stayed there for only one or two years, because after that the council would take away their funding, saying that the workshop should be a stepping stone into what it called proper employment. I am tempted to ask the council officers how long they have been at the council and whether they ought to be moved on after two years. Such an attitude totally misunderstands what Garvald is trying to do: to teach skills to people who—let us be honest—would otherwise find it very difficult to get into mainstream employment and to give them opportunities not to be isolated but to socialise.

If we are to think radically about how people take up employment or work opportunities to break isolation, we have to get rid of the mindset that sees organisations such as Garvald and others across Scotland as simply stepping stones towards pushing trolleys in Tesco or other jobs. It angers me that some people in our council offices across Scotland still have the mindset that that is the way forward.

We want the debate to be consensual, but I would like to finish by picking up on Alex Cole-Hamilton's earlier point. Organisations not just in his constituency but across the whole of Lothian have been affected. The IJB here in Edinburgh has slashed funding for many community activities. The Community Ability Network works with older and disabled people in Craigmillar, to deal with social isolation and to help them with benefits and getting proper access to services. At the end of March this year—in just six or seven weeks' time—the organisation will close because of what the IJB has done. Another organisation

that I know, in Restalrig, works with older people and provides lunches for those who are isolated. It will close in December—only another 11 months away—because its reserves are low. Such decisions by the IJB are affecting not just organisations themselves but some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

I would welcome the minister's looking at such issues. I appreciate that in some instances her hands might be tied, but I, too, would welcome a meeting with her, perhaps along with Alex Cole-Hamilton, to see what the Scottish Government can do to help such organisations. We all want to see isolation across the generations stop, but if the IJB is cutting funding to such organisations, that will never happen.

15:39

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): As others have said, Scotland is one of the first countries in the world to publish a national strategy on social isolation and loneliness. We should all welcome that—I am certainly proud to be in a country that focuses on the area.

Social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone, at any point in their life. The strategy is a step forward in tackling the issue. One in 10 people in Scotland reports feeling lonely often. That figure is probably considerably underreported, as many people are afraid to admit that they feel that way.

Social isolation can have a significant impact on physical and mental health, and I welcome the minister's announcement that, through the connected Scotland strategy, the Government will invest £1 million in dealing with loneliness as a public health issue. The key message from the minister's speech is that we must all remember that tackling loneliness is the responsibility of all agencies, organisations, communities and individuals and that it is not simply about money. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I want to focus my remarks on some of the good work that is being done in my constituency to address the issue.

Social isolation and loneliness affect a disproportionate number of disabled people at all stages of their lives, and research demonstrates that disabled children and young people often have limited opportunities to access leisure activities. That is often because bullying spoils their access to inclusive activities or their use of leisure and recreation facilities. The shining stars additional support needs theatre school was established in Coatbridge in my constituency in 2016 with the aim of overcoming such disadvantage and providing young people with additional support needs ranging from mild to severe with the opportunity to come together to

develop confidence and life skills while participating in a number of activities, including drama, musical theatre, dance and arts therapy. The group has gained a local reputation as a trusted and respected organisation, and it recently secured a permanent home in the constituency, which will allow for developments such as a sensory room and bespoke facilities to improve the learning experiences of its members. I am looking forward to visiting the new premises. I do not want to be outdone by Jeremy Balfour—if the minister has time, I am sure that she would be welcomed by Kate Slaven and the shining stars team.

There are many other local organisations that tackle isolation and loneliness for our young people. I could not possibly mention them all, but I would like to mention Skate, which was formed in 2013 by parents and volunteers, who aim to develop skating for people who are disabled or mobility impaired by offering a range of opportunities, including a programme that allows all to train and participate in competitions and events on an equal basis.

It is important that all public bodies, including leisure trusts, make their services accessible to all. As members might be aware, just prior to Christmas, I started a petition to save the time capsule water park complex in Coatbridge, after concerns were expressed that its opening hours would be reduced to the extent that it would open only at the weekend, making it suitable just for children in mainstream education. The proposal caused outrage. I have had reassurances from North Lanarkshire Leisure that it will not do that and that the pool will be open, after refurbishment, for an enhanced number of hours. However, I ask the trust to go one stage further and to go back to the previous hours, when it was open during the day as well, as that would make the facility more accessible.

Another issue that it is important to consider in the context of loneliness is addiction, which, as I have said previously, is a big issue in my constituency and one that we must tackle head on. I know that the minister knows about Reach Advocacy in my constituency, which is a good organisation in that field. I am aware that, recently, it applied unsuccessfully to the national development fund. I was pleased to hear that it was successful with the Scottish Recovery Consortium, but I understand that that means that it will work more on a national basis than on a local basis. From the information that I have, I believe that the organisation was unsuccessful in its initial bid because it did not have a business plan and because the North Lanarkshire alcohol and drug partnership was not fully established. If we are serious about all agencies working together to tackle loneliness and everybody

playing their part, we might need to look at the bureaucratic deficiencies that exist.

The Age Scotland research that shows that 100,000 older people in Scotland say that they feel lonely all or most of the time serves as a big wake-up call to everybody. I am overwhelmed by the good work that I see every day in my constituency in addressing loneliness and social isolation among older people. Muirhead and district seniors forum is a great example of a group that does such work, and it was a deserving recipient of an Age Scotland inspiration award for its work in supporting and encouraging the over-55 age group to engage in social activity. The nifty fifties, like all the other organisations that I have had the pleasure of visiting, is absolutely fantastic.

I make a special mention of one of our councillors, who do not often get the press that they deserve. Councillor Caroline Stephen worked in partnership with the safety zone community centre in Bargeddie and various older people's groups in the area to set up a special Christmas lunch. The event was said to be a fantastic success, with new friendships being established. Another one is planned for next year, which will be even bigger and better. I will conclude on that nice point.

I welcome the minister's motion.

15:45

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Last year, we supported the launch of the Government's draft strategy on social isolation and loneliness. It was desperately needed and a first step to start tackling the issue. As I said then, it is reassuring that social isolation, which is increasingly a social and public health epidemic, is one area in which all parties agree that action is needed. The revised strategy that has been put together following consultation, in response to which people said that cuts to public services mean that communities cannot tackle loneliness alone, is another step forward. I had hoped, however, that it might lead to a more constructive and cross-cutting focus on how we use resources to tackle isolation and loneliness.

Although the Minister for Older People and Equalities accepts in the foreword to the strategy that the Government has

"an important role in tackling these issues",

the mantra that

"the biggest impact can only be delivered if we enable communities themselves to play their part"

has been trotted out again. The simple fact is that a £1 million fund to implement the strategy will do little to recoup the much-loved services and activities that communities are losing right now.

Alex Rowley mentioned some of those. Free over-60s swimming has been withdrawn in Inverclyde and £350,000 is being cut from Edinburgh Leisure. Libraries and swimming pools could be closed in Moray, while North Lanarkshire Council in my region has cut £230 million over the past 10 years because of Government cuts to its grants, which has devastated services.

I would be interested to hear how the Government believes that the latest budget, which slashes £319 million from services, will enable communities to “play their part”, because the answer is that it will not. More cuts will only dismantle and undermine the services that keep communities together.

Jo Cox’s groundbreaking commission on loneliness sought to tackle the issue before many other politicians had even considered it. On behalf of the Labour family, we are grateful that, although she is no longer with us, her work is still making the world a better place, and that is recognised in the strategy.

Across the UK, loneliness harms 9 million people and its consequences cost the economy £32 billion every year. In Scotland, loneliness affects almost half of adults often or occasionally, 80 per cent of carers feel lonely, and three in 10 calls to the Silver Line Scotland and the national lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender helpline are about loneliness. Those trends should fill us with dread and they should drive us to tackle the root causes.

Our amendment recognises the UN rapporteur’s comments about the dismantling of vital services being at the root of increasing poverty because that poverty intersects with the issue that we are debating today—loneliness. People do not want just a strategy; they want the resources and services to tackle the poverty that plagues communities. They want to grow their own bonds and curb loneliness. That is why, on Thursday, we will vote against the budget, which will serve up more austerity-driven cuts to local authorities.

As I said, 80 per cent of carers feel lonely. We have powers over social security and we should use them to help people overcome that loneliness. As I said in the debate last year, disability in a family can cause loneliness through financial, emotional and practical pressures. Stigma and the lack of suitable services prevent families from being integrated, while low incomes restrict their freedom to get out and about.

I referenced loneliness in our recent members’ business debate on end-of-life care, and I discuss it regularly with carers and support organisations. Since last summer, I have been asking them how we can change carers allowance, and one of the decisive responses has been that access to

concessionary travel for carers would help to boost their personal incomes, allow them to get out and about and cut through some of the isolation and loneliness that they face.

When it comes to disability entitlements, too, there are ways in which we can tackle loneliness. In the summer, I hosted a round-table discussion with more than 30 third sector stakeholders, academics and disabled people. The simple message that came out of the session was that the mobility component must be extended to people in receipt of attendance allowance. That is the fair thing to do and I hope that the Minister for Older People and Equalities will take up the issue with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People.

As one person at that meeting said, gone are the days when older people—disabled or not—want to retire and be stuck at home; they want to get out, and the social security system should support them to do that. If we are truly building a social security system that is based on dignity and respect, I hope that we can assure disabled people that the system will help them to get out into their communities and improve their health, whatever their age.

The new system can be a catalyst for reversing the isolation that is caused by personal financial troubles. I hope that the cabinet secretary will give further consideration to how the new system tracks, measures and overcomes social isolation.

15:51

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): This is a fantastic debate. I am sorry that some parties—particularly the Labour Party—have chosen to politicise the debate, because I think that we should be celebrating our strategy.

I feel great about being able to say “Thank you” to a minister for older people. For years and years, I and other members of this Parliament have been pushing for there to be such a minister. I welcome the Minister for Older People and Equalities and thank her for securing this debate.

As many members have said, loneliness and isolation are not just a problem for older people. The minister mentioned the Equal Opportunities Committee in the previous session; I was deputy convener of that committee, and our inquiry into age and social isolation threw up various issues. We learned that loneliness can affect even quite successful younger people. We held a phone-in, and we heard from a young man who had had a break-up in his personal life. He was working, but all he did was go to his work and then go home again. He felt that there was such a stigma around talking about such issues that he never mentioned to the other young men in his workplace that he

was lonely and isolated, and that that was affecting his health.

I therefore welcome the amendment in Annie Wells's name, which refers to loneliness among younger people. Loneliness and isolation affect everyone, from every walk of life.

That is why I am pleased to speak in this debate and pleased about the strategy, as I said. I am not saying that I want to pat myself on the back, but I think that we should be proud of this Parliament. Scotland is one of the first countries in the world to publish a national strategy on social isolation and loneliness, and that is something to be proud of.

As I said, loneliness and isolation can affect people from every age group and every economic group. I am convener of the cross-party group on older people, age and ageing—it is about people aged 55 and over, which is not that old.

I want to focus on some of the groups in my constituency that give their time to help older people. I think that the longest-running group, and the leading charity for elderly people in Glasgow, is Glasgow's Golden Generation, which was established in 1948 as Glasgow Old People's Welfare Association. I thank Sheena Glass, I thank all the people who were associated with the charity way back in 1948, and I thank the people who are coming forward to be associated with it now. Glasgow's Golden Generation has been very successful at getting grants and lottery money, and it is celebrating 70 years—70 years!—of serving older adults in Glasgow.

The charity does not just provide befriending support in older people's houses; it also gives advice. There is the befriending service, and people phone or pop in to give advice about welfare benefits and signpost people to certain places—I think that Annie Wells mentioned the deep-end general practices, which can help with loneliness. Glasgow's Golden Generation can point people to services that they can use, which is great, because people need to know what is available.

We have heard from every member about the different groups in their constituencies, and I have spoken about some of the groups in mine. We have all these groups, but there is no register of them locally or nationally; that point was raised during a previous meeting of the cross-party group on older people, age and ageing. There is so much help out there for people who volunteer, as well as for those who are helped by volunteers, but nobody knows what other people are doing. The minister might want to look at that issue. As I said, Glasgow's Golden Generation is very proud of its work.

Another organisation is Annexe Communities—I have been involved since the very beginning, in

1987—which is based in Partick. It has blossomed and gives support throughout the city, not just in Partick. Annexe Communities began life as Partick Community Association in April 1987, and its members were mainly residents and people who wanted to help out. In those days, we were swimming in the dark in trying to speak to various organisations, get grants and so on. However, we did not give in; we pushed forward. The association was set up to support people who were in poverty or poor health; at the start, it was not necessarily to support older people or people who suffered from loneliness and isolation. However, the annexe connects project, which is for older people who are over 60, was awarded money from the Big Lottery Fund. The carers do a fantastic job, and I have spoken about the organisation many times—it is probably fed up with me speaking about it.

In the seconds that I have left, I want to mention a new kid on the block, as we might say, which is the weekday wow factor. As I have mentioned to colleagues, it holds daytime discos and people can go sailing. It does fantastic work. I have been to events and, if the minister wanted to come along, I am sure that Pasma and the group would be very happy. In Partick, they hold a disco during the day in the Sanctuary nightclub. I have participated, and I can say that it is great.

I thank members for indulging me in allowing me to say what is happening in my constituency. I look forward to hearing what other members will say about their constituencies.

15:57

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I am delighted to be taking part in this afternoon's debate on tackling loneliness and social isolation. I welcome the publication of the Scottish Government's strategy, because the issue is extremely important. Unfortunately, loneliness is becoming all the more common across Scotland. Annie Wells talked about us all having to play our part and the need for a change in culture, and the strategy will go some way in addressing that.

Although loneliness is more often associated with the elderly population, it can affect people of all ages. A report by Age UK suggested that 40 per cent—a huge percentage—of 16 to 24-year-olds fell into the category of feeling isolated and lonely. The impact on the health and wellbeing of those who are affected can be significant and can lead to different risks, such as depression, anxiety and dementia. That has a negative impact on what they can achieve and do, so it is vital that we support such individuals.

There can be wider implications on the sustainability of our health service. Age Scotland estimates that loneliness and its associated health conditions cost the national health service £12,000 per person per year, which is a huge sum of money. A survey that the Royal College of General Practitioners published in May last year found that three out of four GPs saw between one and five patients per day who were suffering from loneliness or isolation.

It is clear that positive steps can be taken to deliver better outcomes for individuals who are affected, while reducing costs. This afternoon, we have heard about community events and community involvement. For example, the loss of community toilets can add to individuals' fears and anxiety about going out, as they will not be able to access such facilities.

Social prescription is one of the best ways of achieving those objectives, and I am glad that the Scottish Government has committed to investing in the community link workers programme. The community link work is high level and gives the opportunity for individuals and patients to meet and gain access, as I have seen across the region that I represent. In Perth and Kinross, Fife, Stirling and Clackmannanshire there are opportunities for links to take place and for individuals to go to clubs and events. The programme has been extremely successful. We have also heard about the budgetary implications that can have an impact on that and we need to be alive to those, too.

Link appointments are longer and give individuals the chance to have conversations and talk about their social, emotional and practical needs. There is great potential for third sector organisations to work collaboratively with other organisations. There are also opportunities for them to deal with the funding crises that we face.

Jeremy Balfour spoke eloquently about disabled individuals and the difficulties that they face. From my experience of dealing with adults with learning difficulties and the organisations that I was involved in before I became a parliamentarian, I know that it is vital that those people feel included and supported. Individuals and organisations can do that, but they must work collaboratively to achieve the goals.

To that end, it is vital that there are relationships in place and that organisations feel empowered. The Scottish Government has a very noble task in respect of community link workers. So far, only 56 community link workers have been deployed; we expect there to be many more—perhaps up to 250 by the end of the parliamentary session. It is important that we think about what we are doing in that respect.

The UK Government, too, has sought to tackle the issue of loneliness and in October 2018 launched its first loneliness strategy, in which social prescribing features heavily. It talks about enabling GPs to have longer and more active interactions with individuals and to talk about walking clubs, cookery classes and art clubs. Such activities give people the chance to develop their potential as they get older. The funding of those things is vital. As we have heard, community cafts, art spaces and gardens are working well in many parts of our communities. It is vital that we see such things.

In addition, the UK Government Minister for Sport and Civil Society has a remit in relation to cross-Government work on loneliness. The whole idea of cross-Government and cross-portfolio work is vital. This afternoon, the minister acknowledged that there needs to be understanding between different parts of the Government so that we all work together to achieve the goals that we want to achieve.

I want to talk about a real success, which is the coalition of nurseries and old-people's homes. We have seen some of that happening across the community. Those are intergenerational projects, which are working extremely well. We must also consider the innovation that is taking place in respect of loneliness.

The issue of social isolation and loneliness is a public health concern and we must work together, across the parties, to tackle it. Further investment in social participation is vital. We have to think about the consequences.

This afternoon, we have heard how integration joint boards are causing difficulties to some societies and organisations. We have heard all that today. As parliamentarians, we have a role in ensuring that we raise awareness of the issue in general. Individuals must play their part because every individual in our community deserves our support and no one should feel lonely and isolated.

16:03

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Most people, whether or not they care to admit it, have experienced loneliness at some stage in their lives. What is shocking, as other members have mentioned, is that the figures that have been produced by the "Our voice" citizens panel show that one in 10 Scots says that he or she "often" feels lonely. More troubling still is that 22 per cent of Scots say that they do not feel that they have a strong sense of belonging to their community. I suspect that those figures—or problems—are replicated elsewhere throughout

the western world, but that makes them no less disturbing to read.

Not long ago, I met Befriending Lewis, which is an organisation in my constituency that does outstanding work with people who feel isolated or in need of friendship. What struck me most was the wide variety of people who become isolated. I make it clear that the organisation did not describe to me actual individuals, but broad categories of people. Some of them were the people whom I had expected to hear about: older people whose families had moved away from the island; people without a car who relied either on a very infrequent bus service or on the kindness of neighbours to get them out of the house; people who were suffering from illness or bereavement; and people who had simply lived longer than most of their close friends. All those problems are, in many cases, exacerbated by the person living several miles from the nearest shops.

The other groups that were mentioned surprised me. Members have already spoken about this: it is clear that around the country many of those who are experiencing loneliness are young people. It is tempting and simplistic just to blame the digital world for social isolation. However, getting older people online often proves to be a transformative experience for them through its keeping them in touch with others. That said, there is a growing recognition now that, for all the manifold benefits of social media, they come with potential difficulties. That is becoming true and obvious even in tight-knit island communities in which it would for many people who know each other still be considered formal, and verging on coldly unfriendly, to knock on the front door before entering someone else's house.

As Annie Wells pointed out, we now have more anecdotal evidence from across the country that some very young people who have thousands of friends online can feel uncertain about where to begin in maintaining friendships offline. People who feel lonely in that way are bombarded with images of everyone else at their happiest. Facebook post after Facebook post shows people on holiday, getting married, showing off their new friends, taking pictures of what they are eating on their work night out, sharing their innermost and sometimes fairly ill-thought-through feelings, looking their best, and having fun.

Algorithms ensure that social media in effect tell us what we want to hear and shut out new or different types of people who might literally live next door to us. The indication is that people are now using their phones less to talk on, and many younger people are reporting that they are becoming wary about phoning, far less visiting, a friend. In fact, most of us are now unwittingly guilty of imagining that we have been keeping in touch

with a friend when we have not. If we have liked enough of a friend's Facebook posts in the course of a year, we think that we have kept in touch.

All that is before we consider the misguided and, in many cases, actively dangerous decision of many people to judge their lives against those of celebrities, which is something I find it very hard to recall ever doing, I have to admit. It is, nonetheless, a reality.

A much-quoted African saying is that it takes a village to raise a child. That is undoubtedly true, but we must consider some difficult questions around that. What if a young person has been brought up in the belief that their village, or their town, is a place where they should not be speaking to anyone they see? Those are huge questions to which our culture does not yet have answers.

The answer is not, however, to pretend that the digital world is going away, or even to blame it, *per se*, for loneliness. The immediate answer can only be to build up real communities wherever we find them in Scotland, and to find new ways of engaging everyone who finds that they feel outside those communities. That means investing in a strategy against loneliness, so I welcome the Scottish Government's £1 million commitment to backing up its strategy on tackling loneliness in "A Connected Scotland".

The answer is also about there being much broader investment in every aspect of our social, economic and cultural life. It means getting people outside and, sometimes, getting them offline. It means mobilising the existing wonderful communities that we have around Scotland and the goodwill that exists in organisations such as Befriending Lewis, in order to ensure that nobody in Scotland feels alone.

16:09

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in today's debate.

"Young or old, loneliness doesn't discriminate ... it is something many of us could easily help with."

The words of Jo Cox serve as a reminder to us all to care for one another, regardless of circumstances. The connected Scotland strategy is an important piece of work for which the Scottish Government should be commended. In 2016, Scottish Labour committed itself to a national loneliness strategy. I hope that the ambitions of the Government's strategy are realised.

However, we must acknowledge, as Scottish Labour does in our amendment, that the many public services that are required to tackle such problems need appropriate funding and resources.

Councils of all colours across Scotland are in the process of calculating budgets and bracing themselves for further cuts. Local authorities are the key drivers in building cohesive communities, but they cannot do so in the face of continued austerity. Since 2011, council budgets have been cut by £1.5 billion. If the 2019-20 budget passes as proposed, councils will face an additional £319 million of cuts. Therefore, the £1 million fund to accompany the strategy is the equivalent of giving people a cup of water to use when their house is on fire.

Alex Rowley reminded me of my time as a councillor. Every year, I was invited to the Christmas lunches that were held for the older people in my community. Normally, I was invited to four or five. They were a great opportunity for older people to get together and have a nice lunch. Father Christmas came along: we danced and we sang. They were lovely afternoons. The local authority stopped funding the majority of clubs in the area, so they had to stop the Christmas lunches, the Monday afternoon tea dances and the bus runs that the older people went on in the summer. The impact of those cuts was devastating in the communities in the area that I represented. Many people socialised only when they went to the Monday tea dance, on the bus run or to the Christmas lunch.

We know that the solutions to tackling the effects of isolation and loneliness come from all areas and all levels of Government, working in partnership with health services and the third sector. Those solutions cannot be delivered without the necessary funding and resources.

It is important that the strategy, as it has done, recognises the impact of isolation and loneliness on the mental health of people of all ages and backgrounds. Isolation and loneliness can lead to greater levels of depression and anxiety, and people who have poor mental health are at greater risk of isolation and loneliness. I therefore welcome the focus on mental health throughout the strategy: we are all on the right path in increasing the importance that we place on mental health.

Statistics show us that more children and young people are feeling socially isolated. It would be simplistic to blame that on the rise of accessible technology and social media. We must acknowledge that lack of opportunities to play and the significant pressure on young people these days play as big a role as social media and technology. It is paramount that we develop greater resilience in children and young people in order to lessen the impact of the social isolation that is caused by technology and social media. Previous generations did not experience the problem, so we must come at it from better

understanding and knowledge of the impact of social media on mental health.

I support the ambition of the Scottish Government to build links with wider mental health policy, and to support work to tackle the health inequalities that the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community faces. LGBT people are one of the groups that have been identified as being at greater risk of social isolation and loneliness. In the second half of 2016, a third of calls to the national LGBT helpline were from LGBT people who were experiencing loneliness and social isolation.

Recent Stonewall Scotland statistics show that LGBT people are at greater risk of poor mental health, and that they face discrimination from some healthcare staff. If we couple the statistics from Stonewall Scotland with the information in the strategy, that shows that we need to focus on improving the mental health of LGBT people in order to tackle their social isolation and loneliness—and vice versa.

Reducing the stigma of loneliness and social isolation, especially when mental health is involved, requires a substantial cultural change. We have come a long way in recent years in changing attitudes in respect of mental health, but we know that we still have a long way to go. The strategy is an important tool for reducing stigma. I support any initiative to achieve that.

I repeat my support for the strategy, but I also repeat my concerns that the good will in the words that it contains can be achieved only by fulfilling the ambition to fund our local authorities and third sector partners properly. Otherwise, the health and social inequalities that are linked to social isolation and loneliness will only grow.

16:15

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate on social isolation and loneliness, which, as the motion states,

“can affect anybody at any stage, age or walk of life”.

I, too, am pleased to see the publication of “A Connected Scotland”, which is backed by £1 million of Scottish Government investment. It will support innovative approaches to bringing people together and, in so doing, will work to reduce social isolation and loneliness across our communities.

I have enjoyed the contributions this afternoon and will focus my time on projects in my rural South Scotland region that work with people who are at risk of social isolation and loneliness, such as retired farmers, retired agricultural workers and elderly people in remote and rural areas. I have been impressed by the activity across the region

to address the issues and to ensure that appropriate support is in place so that people can be part of their community.

Farmers and agricultural workers across Scotland are a group that is at risk of isolation due to the large number of hours spent working outside, often alone. I have followed and supported the health and wellbeing in the farming community project, which seeks to address health and wellbeing issues that face the agricultural community in the Dumfries and Galloway area. It is a joint approach between NFU Scotland, Dumfries and Galloway health and social care partnership and Dumfries and Galloway Council, which aims to ensure that rural voices are heard to gain a better understanding of the concerns and issues that face the community and the barriers to becoming integrated and further connected to the wider region.

The project is currently taking forward action to reduce social isolation and loneliness and to reduce the stigma around some of the mental health conditions that social isolation and loneliness can lead to. An action plan is being developed to address the issues that were identified, from the lack of farming social groups to people not knowing who to turn to when they feel that they might be depressed or isolated or are feeling lonely. Poor connectivity—either to broadband or, indeed, through travel—is also a factor, as others across the chamber have mentioned.

Plans are now being put in place, including mental health training and awareness raising, to continue the Dumfries and Galloway retired farmers' social group, working with men and women to support their continued engagement with one another. I ask the Scottish Government, as well as local authorities, to monitor the retired farmers' group's work, because information is being requested by areas in England due to the group's success in promoting social integration.

Another initiative that ties into health and wellbeing in the farming community is the choir of farmers and their wives, with input as musical director from Dumfries and Galloway constituent Kate Picken. The choir was formed in 2013 and has more than 160 members. It has performed at Glasgow's Hydro and at agricultural and other events across Scotland. It includes not just farmers and their wives; many people across the region have joined and attend.

The choir's aim is to raise funds to donate to charities and to raise awareness of mental health and social isolation in rural areas. So far, its singing across Scotland has raised about £31,500 since 2014. Last Sunday, I attended its concert in Carlisle. I encourage anyone to download its track "Carry you home" on iTunes, as it is a great way to

raise funds and to provide support for charities. I am sure that members across the chamber will be happy to welcome the choir, which I have invited to the Parliament to sing in the near future. I am sure that we will all feel good once we hear it singing; it is fantastic.

Priority 3 in "A Connected Scotland" talks about the need to

"Create opportunities for people to connect".

Research suggests that one of the barriers to people socially connecting is

"a lack of awareness about the opportunities in communities to take part in activities that are enjoyable and that create opportunities to build meaningful relationships through the pursuit of shared interests."

Signposting people to the groups and support that are available was highlighted at a national health service transforming Wigtownshire event that I attended. Many people do not know what is out there to help them and signposting is a way of supporting people out there. I am interested in that because, across Dumfries and Galloway and south-west Scotland, a wide range of third-sector organisations work for social inclusion. I do not have time to talk about them all, but I would like to briefly mention a couple.

Incredible Edible groups in Stranraer and in Dumfries have volunteers who grow edible plants across public spaces in D and G, allowing people to come together, socialise and get active outdoors while learning about growing fruit and vegetables.

The men's sheds at Dalbeattie and Noble Hill allow men to come together and to connect, utilising the skills that they have in mending bicycles, picture framing, painting and wood-turning, as my colleague Ruth Maguire expertly described in more detail earlier. That reminds me that I have a bike that I need to drop off at the men's shed at Noble Hill.

Malory House nursery and day care in Dumfries take the weans to Cumberland day centre to allow for intergenerational integration. It is a joy to witness the elderly folk and the weans together.

In conclusion, I welcome the positive steps that the Scottish Government is taking to reduce social isolation and loneliness. I encourage the Government to continue to work with groups across my South Scotland region and to look at some of them with a view to, potentially, rolling out examples of good practice more widely across Scotland.

16:22

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): Social isolation is no small matter and is thankfully one of

which the Scottish Government is keenly aware. The issue not only causes individual suffering but strikes at the health of our communities. Now is the time to act.

I whole-heartedly agree with Alasdair Allan about younger people needing to speak on the phone more. I am constantly telling my son and daughters likewise. I welcome the strategy document, "A Connected Scotland", which outlines key priorities for combating the growing social isolation and loneliness in this country, and I commend the organisations that devote countless hours to researching and combating these issues and their causes.

It is more important than ever for the Parliament to prevent social isolation and to ensure the wellbeing of those who elected us, especially those most susceptible to loneliness, including armed forces veterans and their families and nearly everyone who has experienced a change in life at one point or another—in short, all of us.

As the research shows, the key to combating social isolation for all, from adolescents to pensioners, is prevention—from crisis intervention to crisis averted. An RAF battle of Britain Spitfire pilot in my area was befriended only two weeks before he died, having lost his wife one year earlier. Such situations are unacceptable and more co-ordination is needed to prevent them happening. Although we are unable to prevent all of life's tragedies, surely we can do more, as a Parliament, to empower communities and, as individuals, to stop such avoidable tragedies.

Sadly, communities are drifting apart and the number of people living alone is on the increase, with only a quarter of adults feeling involved in their local community. By investing in current and future socialisation projects, we can actively fight isolation.

I welcome the report's recommendation on community involvement and I encourage everyone to work with local councils to find best practice on that front. There is a fine example in my area, in Helensburgh and Lomond, where Grey Matters, which was set up many years ago, meets weekly with 70 senior citizens on a Saturday morning. They gather in the scout hall to discuss issues affecting them personally and collectively and, apart from the chat they have, to try to offer solutions. I would encourage the minister to visit Grey Matters in the scout hall in Helensburgh—that is the minister's third invitation today; she has many.

I wish to highlight prevention, which is especially key at life's transitional periods. Veterans, by nature of their profession, face a unique transition. Returning to non-military life is difficult and, without preparation, some families find themselves

caught in between lifestyles. A 2017 survey found that nearly one third of ex-service personnel felt lonely or isolated. Thankfully, there are 230 military charities that often have breakfast clubs or other meets-ups that connect veterans with one another and their community. That is especially important when veterans have post-traumatic stress disorder and other life-changing issues from their military operational service overseas.

Last week, I met one such charity, Bravehound, which is an organisation that helps to train dogs for veterans. One veteran spoke glowingly of how training her dog had significantly improved her life and renewed her sense of purpose—having a constant canine companion helped her to feel less lonely. Nevertheless, there is still a need for Bravehound dogs to be allowed into premises throughout Scotland; at the moment, they are prohibited. Organisations such as Bravehound allow veterans to stay connected with people in similar situations long after their military service is over.

This morning, in Edinburgh, I attended the Ministry of Defence disability pension review panel for another Bravehound veteran—I am glad to say it was successful—and saw how essential it was for the review board to understand the effects on him from his operational tours with the Royal Engineers' bomb disposal team in Gorazde in Bosnia with the United Nations forces in the 1990s. He struggles with life today. Nevertheless, he is grateful to his Bravehound dog, which has saved him from suicide on several occasions when he has been left feeling dejected and lonely.

Of course, veterans are not the only group to experience loneliness: new parents, university students, senior citizens and many others feel similar isolation. Without a support network of family or community, it can be easy to feel lonely during life's transitional periods.

The Scottish Government should focus its attention on such times. "A Connected Scotland" recommends volunteering as one of the many ways to ease loneliness, and I whole-heartedly agree. For youth especially, volunteering is an effective way to stem the tide of their own loneliness and to alleviate loneliness in others.

Scotland has a vast network of befriending groups and volunteering opportunities that we can tap into and expand. I call for a national volunteer accreditation scheme to encourage that expansion. I also fully agree with Sandra White that we should set up a national register of organisations that deliver support in Scotland—well done to her for mentioning it.

One way to encourage inclusion is to focus on the hub of the community, to show what our local centres can offer to people who are more

susceptible to loneliness. For example, Tesco in Maryhill is training staff members simply to personally greet customers at shops, and community centres can also go an awful long way. The places where we go each week, without a second thought—the local shop, the post office or our child's football matches—are all places where community members can connect with each other and enjoy social interaction. For the elderly who live alone, that—or when the district nurse comes up the glen once a week—can sometimes be the only interaction that they have in a day, which is one reason why it is a shame that it is becoming more common for bank branches, such as those in Helensburgh and Renfrewshire, and community centres, such as Westerton library near Bearsden, to close.

We must encourage local councils to keep libraries open. Just last week a constituent said to me:

"it is depressing and demoralising to hear of the progressive dismantling of this vital service ... the trend needs to stop and ... reverse."

She wrote of the bustle of families and neighbours, who are doing more than just checking out books. In the face of financial and community services moving online, there is no replacement for traditional human communication.

At the end of the debate, I hope that we can look forward in order to find the best solution to loneliness.

In conclusion, we need action to stem the tide of social isolation, which includes everyone: our veterans, our senior citizens, our university students, LGBT youth and more. The "A Connected Scotland" report is an encouraging step in the right direction, but it means very little without sustained efforts. I hope to see an increase in measures that create closer and more engaged communities, to see more volunteers in the community and for people to be aware of the resources that are available, before it is too late.

As is said—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): No, no, no.

Maurice Corry: Look out for others, not just yourselves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There you go, that was a long conclusion.

16:29

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I thank the minister for lodging the motion for debate and acknowledge that there have been many excellent speeches from across the chamber. It has been a very interesting debate,

which has captured two broad areas. First, what we can implement at a practical level to reduce and tackle loneliness and isolation? Secondly, a broader cultural response is needed—for example, intervening early to mitigate loneliness when it occurs—and we should reflect on the extent to which our society creates environments in which loneliness and social isolation can occur. Although those problems will not necessarily be solved in one year, with one strategy or in one session of Parliament, a desire to solve them should inform our longer-term thinking.

I want to highlight some of the outstanding work that goes on in my constituency. Renfrewshire is home to Roar—reaching older adults in Renfrewshire—which does fantastic work across the local authority. I was pleased to meet a representative from Roar late last year to hear about some of its pioneering work, particularly around reducing falls in older people. Much of that work has taken place through Otago classes. Otago is a form of light exercise that was developed at the medical school at the University of Otago in New Zealand. It is specifically designed to help prevent falls in older people, but it also has the beneficial effect of creating an opportunity for older people to come together and socialise.

Roar has health and wellbeing clubs across Renfrewshire, including in Elderslie in my constituency, at Linwood health centre and at the McKillop institute in Lochwinnoch. Lochwinnoch is home to some other fantastic pioneering efforts. There is a brilliant Lochwinnoch elderly forum, which is led by the indefatigable Anne Nicholl. It is always a highlight of the year to attend the forum's St Andrew's lunch. The forum provides a treasured resource for many older people across Lochwinnoch and helps to tackle loneliness and isolation. Its members do not just keep themselves to themselves. They work with the community council, and there are bimonthly tea dances as part of Lochwinnoch's position as a dementia-friendly village. I have had the pleasure of attending a tea dance, although I have been told that my slosh leaves much to be desired and that I have got a long way to go to match my constituency colleague Mhairi Black. However, I am working on it, and if the minister has an opportunity to come along, maybe we can try and do a dance together, as long as it is not the slosh.

I want to mention some of the other great community facilities in my constituency, such as the old library in Kilbarchan, which provides a fantastic hub. One that I was really looking forward to mentioning was the Barrhead men's shed and its fantastic chairman Alex Storie, which get a mention on page 36 of the strategy. I have engaged with the men's shed in Barrhead over the past 18 months to two years, and I have been very

pleased to be able to help it with specific matters relating to its premises. It was a great pleasure to meet Alex Storrie again. He did not remember me, but I remembered him from when I was five or six years old. He has taken his leadership attributes and applied them, as chairman of Barrhead men's shed, to creating a resource that is much valued by men and women across Barrhead.

Barrhead men's shed recently celebrated its fifth birthday, and I very much look forward to lodging a motion for a members' business debate to recognise that anniversary and the men's shed movement more broadly. I hope that when that motion appears in the *Business Bulletin* it secures cross-party support and we can all celebrate the fantastic work that men's sheds do in communities across Scotland, particularly in tackling loneliness and isolation.

Alex Storrie's words are well worth sharing. He said:

"Our members are proud and delighted to help the local community, schools and nurseries and retirement homes, but most importantly take time to share, help and listen to our members who are living in social isolation. As one of our widowed members said, 'loneliness is a disease'. Let's all help to eradicate this disease in our society."

I have spoken with members of the men's shed, and the impact that it has on them is clearly profound. Many say that they do not know what they would be doing if that resource was not there—some say that they would either go to the pub or sit at home watching television. Those personal testaments are incredibly powerful and underline the case for continuing to support the men's shed movement, and I am glad that the Scottish Government has committed to do that.

I co-convene the cross-party group on carers with Mark Griffin, who was right to highlight the fact that eight out of 10 carers report feeling lonely and socially isolated. The Government has taken positive action with the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, but we know that there is more that we can do.

One area that is incredibly important is the carer positive employer scheme, on which I secured a members' business debate last year. I again encourage members to take up that issue, which is about promoting positive employment practices that allow carers to continue in work. We know that the professional and personal relationships that can be formed in the workplace make being in employment a very powerful and effective way to tackle isolation and loneliness. As we move from 700,000 people to more than 1 million people who will have caring and work responsibilities in Scotland over the coming decades, it is imperative that all employers—large and small—do all that they can to ensure that their workplace

environments support carers so that they can stay in employment.

Many well-made points have been made about the two species of digital isolation: digital isolation from not being connected and not being able to access the internet; and digital saturation, whereby people's lives become entirely mediated through social media forums, whether Twitter or Facebook, and through which artificial relationships can form that can have a damaging and negative effect, as has been highlighted.

I thank the Government for bringing forward the debate, and I look forward to seeing the implementation of the strategy over the coming months and years.

16:35

Alex Rowley: I want to pick up on Sandra White's comment that she was sorry that the Labour Party criticised the strategy. No Labour member has criticised the strategy today; indeed, we have made it clear that, whether or not our amendment gets support, we will support the Government's motion, because we have consistently supported the strategy and we have consistently said that loneliness and isolation have a knock-on effect on health, including mental health, and wellbeing. For the avoidance of doubt, we absolutely support the strategy.

What we have said today and what our amendment tries to put forward is that it is really difficult to implement the strategy at the same time as failed austerity is impacting on communities and public services. Many of the organisations that have written in or sent briefings have said that.

I remember quoting the North Ayrshire-based charity Food Train last year. It described the strategy as

"just words on a page"—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2018; c 75.]

without funding for lifeline services. We see that no matter where we go.

The £1 million investment is obviously welcome, but that is against a £300-odd million cut in local authority budgets, the majority of which will lead to cuts in services such as many of those that have been mentioned. Members have talked about the cut to public toilets. They are among the first services to go in many councils, because it is an easy cut to make. Highland Council is the latest council to say that, like Scottish Borders Council and many others, it will cut toilets. Age Scotland and Age UK have produced reports telling us about the devastating impact on older people who go to shopping areas of the failure to have public toilets. Again, that is an issue isolation.

Fife Gingerbread says that it will have to pay off more than 20 workers and that it cannot continue to support 739 families. That is not because of a cut from the council but because, although it had secured project funding through the Scottish Government, the council and other organisations, that project funding is coming to an end. The £1 million spending in the strategy that we have talked about is to fund projects. The problem with funding projects is that, when the money comes to an end, if there is no core funding to support those projects, they will fall and all the good work that is going on will fall with them.

I say to Sandra White and others that there needs to be a bit of reality in respect of the strategy. We can have all the strategies in the world—the Parliament is good at adopting strategies—but, if people do not have the resources to support their implementation, they become meaningless.

Sandra White: Does Alex Rowley agree that the Smith commission recommended that the Scottish Parliament should have control of all welfare, but the Labour Party did not support that? Would that not have been helpful? He talks about austerity, but he must remember that his colleagues at Westminster supported that along with the Tories.

Alex Rowley: Sandra White can keep going back to who supported what and when, but I have always been very clear about my support for devolution. Those of us who support much stronger devolution for Scotland and for this place would say that if there is an overwhelming case that we need certain powers in this Parliament, we should have those powers. Whether they are powers over welfare, immigration or a number of other areas, if the case can be made to have them, they should be brought to this Parliament. I think that that view is widely supported across Scotland by people on all sides of the argument.

In its briefing, Inclusion Scotland said:

“Rationing of social care further increases social isolation amongst disabled people.”

When it comes to social care, we know what happens in councils: in order to make cuts, they change the eligibility criteria.

On Monday morning, the BBC Radio Scotland programme “Call Kaye” discussed how difficult it is for people to get social care support packages. Many who apply for such packages are being turned down—that is how much the eligibility criteria have changed. It is the same with lunch clubs for older people. The eligibility criteria have changed, so a person who does not have dementia or is not in the most dire need of support does not get to go to those clubs any more. That was not the case a decade ago.

We have to wake up to the reality that austerity impacts on front-line services in a way that will not help to achieve the Government’s strategy. We also need to accept that austerity is not an economic decision; if it were, it would be a terrible one. Austerity is a political decision, which was made by the Government in Westminster. It is a political decision to pass cuts from austerity—and additional cuts—on to local councils. That is where the impact is happening.

Home-Start Scotland produced an interesting briefing for the debate. It said:

“We also highlighted the threat of closure and contraction of local Home-Start family support services as local authorities wrestle with difficult budgeting decisions and the Big Lottery Fund’s grants budget for Scotland falls yet again.”

The Royal College of General Practitioners also produced a briefing that spoke about the need for more funding for local services.

Let there be no doubt that there is consensus in support of the Government strategy, but the people out there know that real-terms cuts are taking place in local community services across Scotland. They will reach the point of thinking that this place is full of hot air because we cannot deliver strategies such as the connected Scotland strategy. We can do that only by recognising that we need to halt austerity. Austerity is bad for communities, it is bad for Scotland and it needs to be halted.

16:42

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to close for the Scottish Conservatives in what has been quite a valuable debate on the problems of social isolation and loneliness. There have been many well-considered and insightful points raised. Generally, it seems that the whole chamber is united in its desire to see levels of social isolation and loneliness reduced in Scotland.

The strategy document, “A Connected Scotland”, which was released last month, has enjoyed cross-party support—and rightly so, because it is based on community-led proposals for dealing with social isolation and loneliness. I am pleased to see that several of the points raised in the document align with those expressed in the Scottish Conservatives’ “Loneliness Action Plan” that was released last month and to which Annie Wells referred.

“A Connected Scotland” paints a vivid picture of the problem of loneliness and its statistics, many of which have been presented to the chamber today. They highlight the fact that loneliness can affect people of all ages and social backgrounds. It is reassuring that the Scottish Government has

acknowledged that. Given the subjective nature of loneliness, it is important that local groups are encouraged and empowered to tailor support to the needs of their community.

The minister and a number of colleagues have emphasised the importance of volunteering in addressing the issues to do with loneliness. I will highlight an initiative that I have come across: volunteering for wellbeing. It began in 2017 as a joint enterprise between Volunteer Centre Borders and Borders NHS with the aim of tackling loneliness. The difference with the initiative is that it matches voluntary positions to those who have described themselves as lonely. Once they are in roles, the volunteers—the people who felt lonely—have regular meetings to assess how their voluntary work has eased their loneliness. That initiative is exactly the sort of thing that is needed to combat loneliness in communities. It tailors its support to each case and it seeks to help the volunteer and the locality.

Annie Wells said that 40 per cent of young people and 79 per cent of adults will experience loneliness. That means that pretty much all of us in the chamber and in the building are likely to experience loneliness at some point. It is important to be clear about the difference between being lonely and being alone. Loneliness feels draining, is distracting and upsetting and can have a significant impact on someone's health and wellbeing, whereas being alone is a desired solitude that can feel peaceful, creative and restorative—as I come from a large family, I can very much attest to that. Understanding the difference will be important as we move forward, because that will be the key to facilitating people's happiness.

Several members talked about the impact of social media, which I feel strongly about. We must not underestimate the importance of human contact in preventing loneliness. Annie Wells talked about social media; Alex Cole-Hamilton described how modern life has contracted social contact; and Alison Johnstone said that it is a sad paradox that, in a world in which we have even more means to communicate with each other, loneliness is increasing. We must think seriously about the things that have an impact on our social interaction.

Alexander Stewart talked about GPs' important role in dealing with loneliness. A vast number of people go to see their GP simply to have somebody to talk to. I welcome the recently announced national implementation group—the announcement is so recent that I got the minister's letter about it only this morning, so it is hot off the press. It is a great idea, but I am slightly concerned that GPs are not on the membership list. The minister might want to consider including

as a member the organisation that represents GPs, as they are the first port of call for many lonely people.

That takes me nicely on to social prescribing. The Royal College of General Practitioners made the point that it would really help GPs to have a list of places to which they could send people. The royal college did not use the term “social prescribing”, but such an approach, in several formats, has been mentioned today. We need to give social prescribing more attention.

Alison Johnstone: In my region, I recently visited Age Scotland in Edinburgh and witnessed its community connecting service in action. That is manned by fabulous volunteers who not only put older people in touch with a list of local organisations, but follow up to check that the older person had the confidence to continue and that the arrangement worked out. We might want to look at that kind of thing.

Michelle Ballantyne: Absolutely. I spent quite a lot of time working in the third sector, where we had a number of iterations of a list of all the things that were available in communities. That has never been taken on board nationally and has never been systematic. The Royal College of General Practitioners said that, if a GP could look at a system and say, “Ah—Mrs Jones, you could go to this club,” or give someone a chitty to go somewhere, that would make a big difference. Perhaps we should think about that.

Sandra White said that there is no register of the groups that everyone has spoken about, which is true—although, given the invites that the minister has received today, I believe that she will have a long list of organisations to visit.

We have heard about a number of important areas that we need to pick up on. My colleague Maurice Corry talked about how lonely and isolated ex-servicemen can feel, which is to do with a change of life. When people have massive changes in their lives, it is important for them to have a point of contact that they can deal with.

I see that I am rapidly running out of time, so I will be brief. My colleague Jeremy Balfour, and others, talked about how disabled people can feel incredibly isolated because, as a result of stigma, they fear going out and being involved in society and because they have a major lack of opportunity in the employment market. We all know that our employment has a big part to play in our connection with the world, so that is something else that we need to look at.

Presiding Officer, I know that you are going to wave at me, but—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude.

Michelle Ballantyne: I will wind up by saying that this is a very important issue, and there are lots of things that we can do to address it. I hope that parties can work together to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Christina McKelvie to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:50

Christina McKelvie: I have been very proud to lead today's debate on the Scottish Government's first national strategy on tackling social isolation and loneliness. The liveliness and passion of the debate are most welcome, and I hope that they continue throughout and beyond the lifetime of our strategy. The many invitations for me to visit fantastic examples of community projects included one to teach Tom Arthur to do the slosh. Who could turn that down?

At the outset of my closing remarks, I want to put on the table that I am happy to meet members to discuss issues raised in today's debate and any of the impacts that we might have on social isolation and loneliness.

It was a privilege to take up the mantle of my colleague Jeane Freeman on this agenda. I know that, following her work, the Government was pleased to lead the way, as the first Administration in the United Kingdom to have produced a strategy addressing such issues. Members have raised many examples of issues, and I want to get through as many of them as possible.

Michelle Ballantyne, Alison Johnstone, Sandra White, Emma Harper and others raised the issue of a national information resource or register. The Scottish Government has acknowledged that, and the challenges of sharing such information, and has already taken them on board. We are absolutely committed to working with third sector interfaces to look at the ways in which they do that and to explore best practice. Voluntary Action South Lanarkshire's locator tool is a perfect example of that.

We were delighted to see the UK and Welsh Governments join efforts to build a more connected society, with their respective publications of a strategy and a discussion paper. We look forward to getting to work on the next stage of our strategy, including looking at the many great ideas that were mentioned in today's debate. We continue to look for the best practice and the best ideas across the piece.

Like Maurice Corry, I take this opportunity to thank the individuals, communities and organisations who contributed their time, effort and ideas to our consultation and engagement phases. As we heard from Mr Corry, organisations such as

Bravehound—a great example—can be absolute life savers for our veterans. I hope that the strategy and its ambitions will resonate with those who contributed and that, through our commitments, they will feel supported in their efforts to create connected, cohesive communities.

Ruth Maguire, Tom Arthur and Emma Harper gave us a real insight into the value and positive impact of men's sheds. I agree with them, and the Scottish Government is working with such organisations.

Another great example was raised by Alex Cole-Hamilton, who told us how Prostate Cancer UK is working with William Hill, with which I have worked very closely in my constituency. Just last week, I met its representatives to talk about the work that it is doing and how we can build social isolation and loneliness measures into that.

I particularly want to thank befriending networks. Alasdair Allan gave us a clear insight on those and talked about how valuable their work is in rural and island communities. I also thank organisations such as Voluntary Health Scotland, Age Scotland, Samaritans, the campaign to end loneliness and veterans' organisations that have worked to shape the strategy and whose day-to-day work directly helps to combat the issues that we have discussed today.

The Scottish Government is aware of issues of geography, which Emma Harper and Alasdair Allan brought up in relation to islands and rurality. Working with the farming community is a great idea, and I am also looking forward to hearing the choir when it comes to the Parliament.

As we have just heard very clearly, a broad range of organisations is interested in this area, and they show a real commitment to ending the impact of social isolation and loneliness. Some such organisations have been around for a long time—such as Glasgow's Golden Generation, which was rightly lauded by Sandra White—while others are very new and work in innovative ways. I believe that together, across Government and the public, third and private sectors, we can build a more connected Scotland in which we treat people with kindness and compassion and everyone is given the chance to flourish as valued members of our society.

Many members, including Fulton MacGregor, raised issues relating to people, especially young people, with disabilities. The shining stars additional support needs theatre school sounds absolutely amazing, and I look forward to receiving my invitation to visit it. As he always does in debates on the subject, Jeremy Balfour raised similar concerns on accessibility and how we might do things differently. I was very happy to

support the Learning Disability Alliance Scotland with its production of an easy-read version of the strategy, which is a great addition to what we currently do.

I draw the attention of Jeremy Balfour and other members to “A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People: Employment Action Plan”, which we published—I looked this up so that I would get all the details right—in December 2018. As well as consulting on a target for the employment of disabled people in the public sector, we held a congress on the disability employment gap that involved disabled people, employers and unions. In addition, fair start Scotland, which started in April 2018, provides employment support for disabled people. We are committed to publishing information on the disability pay gap, equal pay policy and occupational segregation for disabled people. I hope that that gives Jeremy Balfour an insight into some of the action that we taking to address the concerns that he always raises in the chamber.

I am glad that today’s announcement of the cross-sectoral national implementation group has been welcomed, and I look forward to chairing the group and establishing clear plans for developing and delivering on our ambitions. I am sure that Alexander Stewart, along with every member who is here, will be pleased to hear that I will also lead work to strengthen a cross-governmental approach to the issue. I will chair a steering group of ministerial colleagues whose portfolios include mental health; children and young people; local government, housing and planning; and business, fair work and skills. I am sure that that cross-Government approach will be welcomed.

Alison Johnstone: We have all acknowledged that loneliness is a public health issue. What role does the minister see the new public health body in Scotland having in combating loneliness?

Christina McKelvie: That is another aspect of the work that we are continuing to develop. I look forward to working with the new body to address loneliness.

In her speech, Alison Johnstone made some clear points about how we should tackle what is a public health issue, and Michelle Ballantyne mentioned the RCGP, which we are working with—indeed, I met the college at the end of last year. We have taken on board all of its recommendations and we will continue to progress them.

Alison Johnstone also raised the issue of transport, which I do not intend to go into detail on, as it is a huge issue. However, we know that accessible transport is vital to people’s ability to meet face to face and stay socially active, so we are carrying out a review of the national transport

strategy from the point of view of accessibility to make sure that we plan future policy appropriately and provide better options.

Many amazing suggestions have been made in the debate. I would like to remind everybody that the University of the Third Age, which is a movement of retired and semi-retired individuals that encourages lifelong learning and social connection, is hosting an exhibition in the Parliament from today until 31 January. I look forward to seeing members there.

We recognise that the connected Scotland strategy is the first of many steps on a joint journey. Alasdair Allan gave us an insight into the pitfalls of social media. As well as talking about digital connectedness, many members talked about how digital technology can disconnect people and encouraged us to build up our communities. We are committed to taking time to reflect on what is working well. We will report on progress every two years, and we hope to gain an ever-increasing understanding of the complex issues of social isolation and loneliness and what works in tackling them.

Mention has been made of community link workers. Pilots are under way in Glasgow and Dundee, and the Government has committed to providing 250 community link workers by the end of the parliamentary session.

I turn to the Labour amendment. I have sympathy for the position of Alex Rowley and the Labour Party. We have all seen the impact that cuts to the Scottish Government’s budget have had, but I am sorry to say that I cannot support Alex Rowley’s amendment, because I am not supportive of the way in which it sets out his argument. I agree with him on the damage that the UK Government’s continued programme of austerity has caused, which countless organisations and the UN rapporteur have pointed out.

As well as vociferously calling for an end to austerity, the Scottish Government has sought to protect the people of Scotland from its worst impacts. Our progressive tax policies have meant that the Scottish budget is around £570 million higher. Between 2010-11 and 2019-20, Scotland’s discretionary resource budget allocation will have reduced in real terms by nearly £2 billion, yet our decisions on tax and borrowing, which are always made with the people of Scotland at the forefront of our mind, have meant that we have been able to reduce the real-terms reduction in our total fiscal budget from 6 per cent to 3.8 per cent. In the process, we have generated an additional £712 million for investment in public services. We take hard decisions to protect people from austerity, to say nothing of the £125 million that we spend every year to mitigate the effect of welfare cuts

and protect people on low incomes. How many other things could we spend that £125 million on? I am sure that we have lots of ideas.

Mark Griffin raised some really interesting points on how we use social security to prevent and tackle social isolation. I heard those points and I am sure that the cabinet secretary heard them, too. We will discuss them further.

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this important issue and our ambitious strategy before the Parliament. Sandra White was absolutely right to say that all of us here should be proud of ourselves. I am very proud of the valuable contributions that have helped to inform the processes that I am taking forward and I look forward to working with colleagues across the Parliament in building a connected Scotland.

Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Our next item of business is consideration of motion S5M-15582, in the name of Kezia Dugdale, on the appointment of a new Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. I call Kezia Dugdale to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

17:00

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): On behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, I invite members to agree to the appointment of Caroline Anderson as the new Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland.

By way of background, I note that the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Act 2010 provides that the commissioner is to be appointed by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body with the agreement of the Parliament. The SPCB sat as a selection panel on 17 December 2018. I chaired the panel and the other members were Sandra White and Andy Wightman. On behalf of the panel, I thank Louise Rose, the independent assessor, who oversaw the recruitment process and has provided the SPCB with a validation certificate confirming that the process complied with good practice and that the nomination of Caroline Anderson is made on merit with a fair, open and transparent process.

The commissioner's role is an important one in the statutory framework to secure high ethical standards in public life. The commissioner is responsible for investigating complaints about the conduct of members of the Scottish Parliament, local authority councillors and members of public bodies and non-compliance with the lobbying regime. The commissioner reports their findings in relation to MSPs and lobbyists to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee and their findings about councillors and members of devolved public bodies to the Standards Commission for Scotland.

In addition to their complaints work, the commissioner regulates how people are appointed to the boards of public bodies in Scotland, and if it appears that the code of practice for ministerial appointments to public bodies in Scotland has not been complied with, that, too, is reported to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

Turning to our nominee, I note that Caroline Anderson is the unanimous choice of the panel

from a strong field of candidates who were invited to interview. Caroline is a chartered accountant and has over 20 years of specialist experience in regulation and compliance, gained mainly in the professional services environment. For seven years, Caroline acted as an independent consultant appraising applications for aid under the European Union special support programme for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. She has also held a number of ministerial appointments, including chair of the audit and risk committee of the Disclosure and Barring Service and tribunal member of the Competition Appeal Tribunal.

The SPCB believes that Caroline's unique set of skills, knowledge and experience will equip her well in the commissioner's role. The panel believes that Caroline will bring to the post professionalism, fairness, integrity and high ethical standards, and I am sure that the Parliament will want to wish her every success in her new role.

I believe that the Parliament will also wish to record its thanks to the outgoing commissioner, Bill Thomson, whose term in office will end on 31 March 2019, and to wish him a long and happy retirement.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the appointment of Caroline Anderson as the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland.

[*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Business Motion

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-15619, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a change to tomorrow's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Wednesday 30 January 2019—

delete

1.30 pm

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.30 pm

Ministerial Statement: Response to the latest EU Exit vote in Westminster

and insert

2.00 pm

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

delete

5.15 pm

Decision Time

and insert

5.00 pm

Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that amendment S5M-15609.1, in the name of Annie Wells, which seeks to amend motion S5M-15609, in the name of Christina McKelvie, on “A Connected Scotland”, the Scottish Government’s strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-15609.2, in the name of Alex Rowley, which seeks to amend motion S5M-15609, in the name of Christina McKelvie, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 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)
 Macdonald, Lewis (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)
 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, 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)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 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)

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)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (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)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 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, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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 23, Against 84, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-15609, in the name of Christina McKelvie, on “A Connected Scotland”, the Scottish Government’s strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that social isolation and loneliness are issues that can affect people at any age, stage or walk of life; welcomes the recent publication of the Scottish Government’s national strategy, A Connected Scotland, which has been backed by £1 million to support innovative projects and approaches to bring people together; calls for increased awareness of youth loneliness, greater social prescribing and a national awareness campaign; thanks those individuals and organisations that have contributed their ideas to the strategy, and recognises that Scotland’s people and communities know what is best for them in tackling these issues and that, across the public, private and third sectors, everyone has a part to play to tackle social isolation and loneliness and build a more connected Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-15582, in the name of Kezia Dugdale, on the appointment of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the appointment of Caroline Anderson as the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: On behalf of the Parliament, I congratulate Caroline Anderson. [Applause.]

Housing and Ageing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business today is a members’ business debate on motion S5M-15454, in the name of Graham Simpson, on “Housing through the lens of ageing”. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication in January 2019 of the report, *Housing through the lens of Ageing: Integration, Communication and Community, an analysis of the Age Scotland Housing Project*, which has been co-produced by Age Scotland and the University of Stirling; notes that this builds on previous research and has the aim of constructively progressing the thinking, debate and practice of the role of housing in the quality of life of older people by analysing housing research data gathered via a national housing roadshow and survey; commends the analysis undertaken by the university and, in particular, the input from its team of community researchers; notes that the topics covered in the research explored the views of older people on their current housing situation and changing needs, their experience of adaptations and energy efficiency measures, including how these have been funded; and if they had heard of or used their local care and repair scheme; acknowledges the recommendations on six key areas, strategic planning, information and advice, adaptations, housing with care or support, preventative support and new housing; believes that these findings can help to inform the development and implementation of the Scottish Government’s housing strategy for older people, Age, Home and Community, and notes the ambition to see collaborative efforts to take this important work forward so that older people in Central Scotland and across the country can live safe, healthy and independent lives at home for as long as possible.

17:08

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to be able to open this debate on “Housing through the lens of ageing: Integration, communication and community”, which is the title of a report that has been co-produced by Age Scotland and the University of Stirling.

I thank members from across the chamber who signed the motion in my name; in particular, my good friends Monica Lennon, Andy Wightman—who is otherwise engaged—and Kenny Gibson, whose seniority gives him a special interest in the subject. [Laughter.]

How can we, as a society, better prepare for and meet the housing needs of an ageing population? What role does the home play in the quality of life of older people? Those are the questions that the report tackled.

The number of people aged 75 and over is projected to increase by 27 per cent over the next 10 years, and by 79 per cent over the next 25 years. That gives us a clear set of challenges.

We all want to help older people to live independently and safely in their own homes for as long as possible; it is better for them and it is better for strained public services. However, that requires investment, be it through adaptations or care and repair services. Both those areas are struggling: we continue on that road at our peril. I will say more about each area later.

Three key themes, or areas, in which improvements are needed emerged from the Age Scotland research. They are integration, communication and community, which are all intrinsically linked. First, lack of integration between councils, health and social care providers, service users and everyone in between leads to confusion, poor management, ineffective strategies and systems and, ultimately, an inferior housing situation for older people.

A number of areas still require to be addressed and improved. The best way of finding out what older people need and want is, of course, to ask them. We need to recognise that everybody's needs are different, which becomes more apparent as people age and are more likely to become frail, vulnerable or disabled, or to develop long-term health conditions—for example, dementia.

Because their home is where people spend most of their time, an holistic person-centred approach that allows health and social care to work more seamlessly with the housing sector and with older people in their homes is crucial. That is why I was pleased to see another research report—"Housing and Ageing: Linking strategy to future delivery for Scotland, Wales and England 2030"—being presented at Scotland's Futures Forum last week. The conclusion of that work was to

"Place housing at the heart of service integration".

Housing provision and support for older people are beginning to become integrated with health and care support needs, but there is a confused picture. Issues remain in social housing provision, including lack of wardens in sheltered housing, lack of choice in smaller rural communities and lack of targets for the number of age-friendly properties in planned new developments. Early intervention and the development of preventative measures such as adaptations and energy efficiency measures remain key.

Secondly, on the community theme, it is imperative to consider not just the buildings themselves but the external environment that the homes are in—the surrounding community, support networks, nearby amenities, transport links and everything else that makes people feel part of a community when they are not at home. New builds and age-friendly designs, downsizing,

public transport, accessibility and the urban-rural divide are all issues that older people are concerned about.

I want to turn to the positive contribution that is made by care and repair services. Although care and repair services are largely looked on favourably because of the tasks that they are able to assist with, there is another less obvious benefit to having a handyperson attend a person's home, and that is the social connection. The availability of care and repair and handyperson services should be consistent across councils. There should be no postcode lottery, but there is: it is a game of chance.

Last year, we lost care and repair services in Inverclyde, West Lothian and North Ayrshire. The previous year, we lost services in South Ayrshire, and it looks as though the service in Angus is under threat. This week, Care and Repair Scotland told me:

"The formation of IJBs has not made our lives any easier. The Act transferred funding for owner occupiers' disabled adaptations to the IJBs. However, there is still a great deal of confusion about roles and responsibilities."

Thirdly, on the communication theme, many older people cited lack of knowledge about where to turn to or whom to ask as a reason why they had not sought advice on areas of their lives, and about homes that they needed help with.

I will turn briefly to three of the six recommendations that are contained in the report. First, the planning process should be reviewed to ensure an adequate supply of different types of housing across all tenures. The Planning (Scotland) Bill is going through Parliament, so we can do that. Secondly, people should have greater clarity about how to access the range of support and information services that is available.

Thirdly, adaptations were highlighted as one of the main things that support people to live at home for longer. However, in 2018-19, housing associations outlined the need for £16.9 million of funding to provide adaptations, when the amount that was available was approximately £10 million. It has not been increased in the past six years. That is something that the Local Government and Communities Committee has repeatedly highlighted. We need action.

Given the challenges that we face as a society, the research is timely. It supports the growing evidence base for what older people need and want, it captures examples of good practice and innovation, and it reminds us of what actually works. It must not gather dust. Perhaps today's debate will help to ensure that it does not.

17:15

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate Graham Simpson on securing today's debate, which is allowing us to discuss the report by Age Scotland and the University of Stirling—my alma mater—entitled “Housing through the lens of ageing: Integration, communication and community”.

It is more important than ever for Scotland to be a good place in which to grow old. According to National Records of Scotland, about 20 per cent of our population is aged 65 or over. In my constituency of Cunninghame North in North Ayrshire, the percentage is even higher.

The Scottish Government has already improved the quality of life of older people in Scotland through its most recent strategy on housing for older people, and through the Social Care (Self-Directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013, free bus travel for over-60s, and free personal and nursing care.

However, we must go further to support older people to live independently and safely in their own homes for as long as possible. That is why I welcome Age Scotland's excellent contribution to achieving the six key policies that are identified in the Scottish Government's strategy, “Age, Home and Community: A Strategy for Housing for Scotland's Older People.” Age Scotland's report provides insight on how to improve delivery of strategic planning, information and advice, adaptations, housing with care, preventative support and new housing. With more than 75 years' experience in supporting older people, Age Scotland is perfectly placed to advance constructively the debate around the role of housing in improving the quality of later life.

The report also features a case study on the development of lifetime homes in North Ayrshire, which is a priority for North Ayrshire Council. The scale of the new-build programme is ambitious for a local authority of its size, with plans under way to build 1,732 new high-quality affordable homes by 2023, backed by £102.218 million from the Scottish Government. Given North Ayrshire's rapidly ageing population, it is increasingly important that new homes are suited to the needs of older people; indeed, a quarter are suitable.

Half of that specialist accommodation will allow the council to provide homes for the people who are most vulnerable and in need of support. One example of the lifetime homes approach is St Beya Gardens in Millport, where 12 bungalows have been built around an attractive and accessible shared outdoor space. Of those, 11 have been constructed to amenity housing standards, while also retaining the flexibility to be adapted further for people with more significant

disabilities. The 12th home is fully wheelchair accessible. Phase two of the development will see another 10 amenity homes and five wheelchair-user homes being built next year. The project will be an exemplar for energy efficient and accessible older people's housing, and will set a benchmark to inform older people's housing in the future.

Only this afternoon, I attended the official opening in Beith of the refurbished Dickson Court, where 22 older households live independently in sheltered accommodation, following an investment of £2.2 million, including £1.2 million from the Scottish Government. Given his advancing years, Graham “Methuselah” Simpson has already put his name down on the waiting list.

Another exemplary North Ayrshire project is the dementia demonstrator property at Montgomery Court in Kilbirnie, which I have visited. Of the 90,000 people in Scotland with dementia, 2,571 live in North Ayrshire. Age Scotland emphasises the importance of dementia-friendly housing. The dementia demonstrator features specialist design including contrasting objects, walls and floors, which makes them easier to see; floor coverings with large patterns in order to avoid unsettling shiny surfaces; clear signage that is positioned below eye level to indicate the purpose of the room; and extra lights to create brighter spaces. The outdoor space is designed to be attractive and peaceful, and paths are level and easy to navigate. Those small adjustments are easily applicable to traditional or existing homes, and make a difference to people who are living with dementia. In exploring North Ayrshire as a case study, Age Scotland suggests the principle of “weighting” new build towards older people and dementia-friendly design.

Reducing fuel poverty is another element that we must prioritise as we go forward. I am sure that we welcome the Fuel Poverty (Target, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Bill that I, Mr Simpson and other Local Government and Communities Committee members have worked on in order to make sure that it meets the needs of Scotland's most vulnerable groups and communities. The report on the bill will be published at midnight today.

I am confident that Age Scotland's excellent report will feed into the Scottish Government's strategy through the age, home and community monitoring advisory group, of which Age Scotland is a member. With that approach to understanding and analysing the needs of older people, we can achieve our aim of supporting all older people in Scotland to live safe, healthy and independent lives at home, for as long as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we go any further, I issue a warning to Mr Simpson and

Mr Gibson. I am older than both of you. Please be careful about what you say.

17:20

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I thank the older members of the Parliament for allowing a young gun into the debate. This is an important debate, which helpfully follows on from our earlier debate on social isolation and older people. Isolation and housing can often be linked.

As Graham Simpson pointed out, we live in an ageing population. In Edinburgh, 20 per cent of the population is now 65 or over.

In Government—whether it be national Government or local authorities—we often still work in silos rather than looking more broadly. In my experience as a councillor, housing was often left out of the debate on health and social care services. It was often left to a different department or team.

We need a policy on ageing that puts people in the right places with the right networks and the right environment. That is why I welcome the joint report by the University of Stirling and Age Scotland. If a house is not in the right place with the right transport links or accessibility, it is simply not a home. There is a difference between a house and a home. A house is bricks and mortar; a home is somewhere that we feel comfortable, safe and secure. We should all be striving to make sure that old people have such a home.

I welcome the moves by the Local Government and Communities Committee, which considered amendments to the Planning (Scotland) Bill that is going through Parliament, to see what we will do for older people in future. Although some of those amendments might need tidying up and clarification, they show where Parliament wants to go and set the scene for development in the years to come. Too often, housing for older people is simply an afterthought as something that can just be put in. I hope that, whatever amendments are made to the Planning (Scotland) Bill by the time that it gets through Parliament, local authorities will take that issue seriously.

As people get older, they need adaptations to their homes, and that is a challenge for local authorities. Hospital beds are often blocked because older people need such adaptations to be done before they can return to their homes and they often wait months for that to happen. The third sector can work with local authorities and Government in speeding up those services. Most members will be aware of Care and Repair Scotland, which offers advice and assistance with appropriate adaptations being made to a house. The adaptations can be fairly small, but a person might not be able to return to their house without

them. I hope that local and national Government will support Care and Repair Scotland and the many other organisations that work across Scotland to do such repairs.

The report is helpful, but Graham Simpson is right to say that if it simply sits on a shelf gathering dust for the next few years, it will have failed. The challenge for us, in and outwith Government, is to take forward the report's recommendations and make a real difference for older people.

17:24

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Graham Simpson for securing a substantial policy debate. In time, I hope that we will have a full parliamentary debate on the subject. I also thank Andy Wightman, who chaired a packed meeting of the cross-party group on housing, at which we discussed the issue of ageing.

We have heard from Graham Simpson and other members that the number of people aged 75 and over is set to increase by a staggering 85 per cent in the next 20 years. That is a big number. The fact that there are big numbers in this debate tells us that ageing has huge implications for the design of our housing and social policy.

We must ensure that people are able to live safely and independently in homes that are designed for an ageing population and for the needs of each individual, including the support service that they need to live there.

Renting into retirement is an aspect of ageing that scared me when I read about it. The number of people who rent into retirement is on the rise. By 2032, one in eight retirees will be renting. That is a significant extra cost that will have to be met by an increasing number of retired people who are not working and on a low income. The term "generation rent" is often applied to young people, but it is becoming increasingly applicable to pensioners. When people plan for their life after work, few of them take into account the need to pay rent into retirement.

We must encourage people to recognise and understand the financial implications of renting into retirement and we have to take action now. More than a quarter of renters under the age of 45 do not see themselves ever being able to buy a property. For those people who have to rent into their retirement, the estimate is that they will have to spend 42 per cent of their retirement income on their rent. The average renter would need to save £525 a month on top of their pension contributions to afford that, which will be a huge problem for many people.

Recent benefit changes and universal credit will make it even harder for some people, particularly

those retirees who have a younger partner. At the moment, a person aged over 65 who is living as part of a couple can claim pension credit regardless of their partner's age, but from 15 May, such couples will be able to begin to claim only if both partners are over 65. For such couples, that will have substantial costs, which are estimated to be about £7,000 a year.

We need a lot of change and the housing market needs to change to ensure that it better suits older renters. Homes for Scotland points out that new-build homes, including those for private sale, must meet a wide range of accessible requirements, such as the adaptations that Jeremy Balfour talked about, barrier-free access and stair lifts.

We are a long way from the planning system ensuring that that will happen in terms of the number of houses—

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): A lot of what Ms McNeill describes relates not so much to the planning system, but to the building standards system. She can be assured that we will look at all that, but does she recognise that a huge amount of effort on the part of parliamentary committees and the Government has been on dealing with post-Brexit scenarios? We could not be complacent around building standards on that front.

Pauline McNeill: I am happy to recognise that the Government is not at all complacent about building standards. In this debate, I want to get across that if we are serious about adaptations and people living independently, we will have to go a lot further and be more radical to ensure that that happens.

According to Homes for Scotland, almost three quarters of the stock that was built before 1982 does not have the features that we are talking about. We have heard a lot of talk about downsizing. I believe that the correct term is now “right sizing”; I learned that only today. That is to make it easier for older people to move into smaller homes. We need to plan for a wide range of high-quality options for older people.

Last year, I visited Fife to look at the quality of sheltered accommodation there. It genuinely surprised me. The quality of social housing in that sector shows that it is possible to build sheltered accommodation that is highly desirable, and that must be the standard across the country.

I was grateful to members of the Local Government and Communities Committee for supporting my amendments on local authorities having regard in their development plans to dementia-friendly homes and those who need access for disabilities. Sally Witcher from Inclusion

Scotland said that Scotland's next generation of homes will be without adequate floor space for many disabled people. Being unable to buy or rent sufficiently accessible homes can leave disabled people trapped.

There is a lot to be done in the Parliament and there is a lot that we can agree on. I hope that we can agree that we need to think about the next 20 years to deal with the ageing population and we need to be a little more radical.

17:30

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this timely debate on housing and ageing, and I congratulate Graham Simpson on securing it.

The recent research that was carried out by Age Scotland and the University of Stirling shows that fuel poverty and energy efficiency were key areas of anxiety and worry for older people. I therefore wish to focus my remarks on the positive effect that domestic energy efficiency measures can have on improving the health and wellbeing of the people who receive them, and on tackling a key driver of fuel poverty.

A key feature of the report is the attempt to capture good practice and innovation across Scotland in order to demonstrate what works. I was delighted to learn that the groundbreaking work that is taking place in Ayrshire and further afield, involving the Energy Agency in partnership with NHS Ayrshire and Arran, is to be showcased in the report when it is published, as Kenny Gibson mentioned.

The Energy Agency and NHS Ayrshire and Arran are conducting an evaluation project to investigate the potential benefits of solid wall insulation. It commenced in 2014 as a study before becoming an on-going monitoring and evaluation project that to date has involved more than 350 households across South Ayrshire, East Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway, and it has enabled an analysis of the impact of council-led area-based insulation projects. Its report shows that the energy efficiency measures that were carried out, which included improved housing conditions, increased indoor warmth and comfort and reduced fuel bills, can also have a positive impact on health. Health questionnaires that were issued before and after insulation works have indicated improvement in both physical and mental health among people who perceived their home to be much warmer following the insulation works. There have also been anecdotal reports of improvements to existing health conditions, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma, and reports of improved mood following insulation. The findings so far have been impressive, whether they be in relation to the

condition of the property, fuel costs or thermal comfort.

I turn now to property conditions. More than nine in 10, or 94 per cent, of respondents agreed that the overall condition of their homes had been improved by the insulation. Respondents reported average fuel bill savings of around £250 per year, which is equivalent to 23 per cent of their fuel costs. The fuel poverty rate fell and the number of properties with a below-average energy efficiency rating decreased from 49 per cent to 21 per cent. With regard to thermal comfort, 88 per cent of respondents agreed that their homes were able to retain heat more efficiently. More than seven in 10, or 78 per cent, of respondents reported that the overall temperature had increased following the insulation work.

The project is examining longer-term health trends in postcodes where wall insulation upgrades have taken place. Clinical data such as hospital admissions are now being investigated in order to compare areas that have received the measures with a control group of similar postcodes that have not yet participated in the scheme.

The report is a serious and robust piece of work and is exactly the type of evidence that we need to inform the development of policy in this area. This project has highlighted the benefits of including a public health perspective in the evaluation of domestic energy efficiency improvements by capturing the real-life experiences of the occupants. We should all welcome it, and I thank Age Scotland for highlighting it in its report.

17:34

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Graham Simpson on securing today's debate. We do indeed need to adjust our focus and to look again at housing policies and priorities in the context of an older population that is growing in size.

Much of our existing housing stock in both the public and private sectors has been built with young people and families in mind, but we know that future demand for older people's housing will only go up. Existing models such as sheltered and very sheltered housing remain valuable, as we have heard, but new models will also be required in the age of health and social care integration.

I want to focus my lens on one particular new model that has been developed in my home city—indeed, the minister's home city—of Aberdeen, and which has been showcased by Age Scotland and the University of Stirling in the report that we are debating.

When I took on the role of convener of the Health and Sport Committee a year ago, I soon discovered that the integration of national health service provision and local authority social care was moving at very different speeds in different parts of the country. I had ministerial responsibility for that process of integration between 2005 and 2007, but despite continuing commitment to it from successive Governments, there is clearly still some way to go.

I discovered last year that Aberdeen City health and social care partnership is held up as an exemplar for others to follow, and it is good to be able to highlight a specific aspect of the partnership's work in this debate.

Delayed discharge can happen for a variety of reasons, but the most common is that there is no suitable accommodation or care package available that would allow a person who is no longer in need of continuous healthcare to leave hospital. Aberdeen City Council has converted what was sheltered housing at Clashieknowe in Bridge of Don to provide interim housing and support for people who are either due to leave hospital or struggling to cope in the community. Clashieknowe has 19 interim housing units catering for adults over the age of 18. Although many residents are older people, this is one of the few services that supports people with complex social care needs who are under 65. Intermediate care and support are provided onsite by the council's social care provider, Bon Accord Care. Residents are enabled to learn or relearn skills necessary for daily living, from cooking and cleaning to independent mobility and medication.

Key to the success of Clashieknowe is the mutual trust among housing, social work and NHS staff, with effective partnerships among Aberdeen City Council, Bon Accord Care and the health and social care partnership. Another partner is the Disabled Persons Housing Service, a local charity based in Aberdeen; the delayed discharge housing liaison group, the housing needs assessment team and the adapting for change project group have also played important roles.

Aberdeen City Council has also launched interim housing for people with low-level support needs in Cove and in Mastrick in the city, recognising that future provision must span a broad spectrum of needs, abilities and disabilities. Intermediate care and support cost money, of course, but they cost a good deal less than delayed discharge. Initial findings from the Aberdeen project suggest that interim care costs around half the cost of a hospital stay.

Delayed discharge is a challenge not just for the NHS but for housing and social services and I commend the good example of Aberdeen. A person-centred approach, open lines of

communication and regular meetings of all concerned are key to success, as is a health and social care partnership with the vision to know what needs to be done and the clout to get on and do it.

17:38

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): I will not mention age today in relation to any members; I think that that would be the wrong thing to do. I certainly do not want to face your wrath, Deputy Presiding Officer, and I am very surprised to hear that you are older than Mr Simpson and Mr Gibson. I will leave it at that.

Jeremy Balfour: Hear, hear.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Mr Simpson for highlighting this important issue. However, there is a wee bit of confusion: Mr Gibson mentioned the fuel poverty report's being published at midnight tonight, but it was published at midnight last night.

The "Housing through the lens of ageing" report has not yet been published in full by the University of Stirling; I will be most interested to see everything that it encompasses. I am aware that it recognises many of the issues that are identified in our refreshed strategy, "Age, Home and Community: The Next Phase". The Scottish Government's vision is that older people enjoy full and positive lives in homes that meet their needs. The three principles that we think will help to achieve that vision are

"Right Advice, Right Home and Right Support."

Therefore, it is reassuring that the data that was gathered and analysed by Stirling university validates the importance of appropriate housing, advice and support for Scotland's older people.

As many members know, Age Scotland is one of our key partners. It was at Age Scotland's offices in August that I launched our refreshed older people's housing strategy. During my visit, I took the opportunity to visit Age Scotland's call centre to hear at first hand requests for help from older people and their families. Issues with housing, health and heating come up daily, so I am pleased to say that this Government has always prioritised tackling fuel poverty by offering assistance to vulnerable households that are struggling to heat their homes.

At this point, I make my usual appeal to members and suggest that if they know of constituents who have difficulties, they get in touch with the award-winning Home Energy Scotland advice line, which does an immense amount in helping to refer people to the right agencies—including the Energy Agency, which John Scott mentioned in his speech.

Last May, I was invited to speak at an event—led by Stirling university—along with Rebecca Evans, who was the Welsh Minister for Housing and Regeneration. The resulting report—"Housing and Ageing: Linking strategy to future delivery for Scotland, Wales and England 2030"—confirmed what we all know, which is that there is still work to be done to address housing and ageing, and not just in Scotland but elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and across Europe.

In Scotland, we have worked with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other partners in the health, housing and third sectors to review our original age, home and community strategy, "Age, Home and Community: A Strategy for Housing for Scotland's Older People: 2012-2021", in order to better reflect the changing needs of older people. As well as building on existing actions, the refreshed strategy seeks to address the issues of isolation that older people can face, and to improve access to suitable housing.

It has been interesting to hear members highlighting current good practice. Many of the topics that have been raised today have actions in the refreshed strategy—for example, the importance of local care and repair services. I agree with members who highlighted care and repair services; it is disappointing that some local authorities have clawed back on delivery of care and repair. Mr Simpson said that we should try to create uniformity across the country, but there is a balance to be struck—the Government is often accused of centralising. I hope that local authorities will see the benefits of care and repair services and will continue to fund them, because in the long run, funding such services will save them money and stop some of the human costs that result from withdrawal of the services.

Graham Simpson: Has there been any analysis of the savings that could be made through having services such as care and repair and a fully funded adaptation service?

Kevin Stewart: Off the top of my head, I do not have an answer to Mr Simpson's question. Analysis has been done, but I do not have specific answers. In my experience, and from talking to occupational therapists in Aberdeen as a constituency member just the other week, I can see quite clearly that spending on adaptations can, as well as improving quality of life, make savings for councils, integration joint boards, health services and so on. Installation of handrails and ramps and adaptation of bathrooms can prevent accidents and unscheduled hospital visits.

John Scott: Not much has been said in the debate about the link between fuel poverty and mental health. Does the minister agree that that is an area in which more research is needed, because it could potentially bring relief in relation

to the increasing level of mental health issues across Scotland?

Kevin Stewart: That has not really been touched on in the debate, although it is an issue that we look at closely. Tackling fuel poverty is a priority for the Government, so we will spend up to £1 billion before the end of this session of Parliament in order to get our approach right.

Beyond the energy efficiency spend and educating folk to use fuel and energy more wisely, we need the UK Government to use the powers at its disposal in relation to energy pricing and incomes so that we can get this right for absolutely everyone. If Mr Scott wants further conversations with me about how we can work together to get the UK Government to play its part, I will be more than happy to have them.

I return to care and repair services, which often offer the small repairs services that are highly valued by older people. The trust that is built up and the social connections that are made are also valuable resources. That is why we have included in the strategy an action on continued support for care and repair services for older home owners. It is important that local authorities fully consider the wider benefits of such services. We will continue to ask older people for their views and opinions to help to inform and monitor the next phase of the strategy.

Lewis Macdonald talked about sheltered and very sheltered housing in Aberdeen, and Mr Gibson gave very good examples of sheltered housing and dementia-friendly housing in North Ayrshire. Those are all good things, but when we talk to people we hear that that is not what everyone wants. I attended the funeral the other week of Mrs Margaret Corall—known as Marnie—who was 102 and was a well-loved woman in Aberdeen. She stayed at home, with some small adaptations, and was very active until near the very end. We must try to allow the Mrs Coralls and others of this world to make that choice, and to live in their family home for as long as possible. It is okay for folks who want sheltered or very sheltered housing—we can do all of that—but we must also make sure that we provide for folks who want to live independent lives in their own homes for as long as they can. That is why we need to continue to listen to people and, beyond that, to align all the services to make sure that that is possible.

In our social housing programme, 91 per cent of it is being delivered with housing for varying needs standards. It is important for the future that people are not in situations such as have been discussed. We must look at what we can do for them.

I could talk about the issue forever, to be honest. However, in conclusion, I say that realising

our vision for older people in housing and other respects will require continued effort on the part of the Government, the Parliament and other stakeholders. We must ensure that older people are at the very centre of that effort and have the opportunity to share their concerns and aspirations for the future.

Meeting closed at 17:49.

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