

# **MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT**

Wednesday 17 November 1999  
(*Afternoon*)

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## Scottish Parliament

*Wednesday 17 November 1999*

*(Afternoon)*

[THE DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 14:30*]

### Time for Reflection

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson):** Our time for reflection leader today is the Most Reverend Richard Holloway, Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

**The Most Reverend Richard Holloway (Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church):** There is an ancient legend that there were four wise men, but only three of them made it to Bethlehem for the birth of Christ. The fourth wise man went aside to help a poor widow, and by the time he had finished the others had gone. He tried to catch up, but kept stopping to help people in need, so by the time he got to Bethlehem the holy family had left. He went on looking for Christ, but was constantly diverted to assist those in need, through all the famines and wars and oppressions of history. At last, worn out with serving others and searching for Christ, he was told that all along he had been encountering him and serving him in those who suffered.

The idea of Christ incognito, the Christ hidden among the poor, has its basis in Matthew's gospel, chapter 25:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

The idea of Christ incognito has taken different forms in Christian spirituality. Sometimes Christ is served in the poor, but sometimes Christ himself is thought of as travelling through the travails of history. That is certainly how Augustine of Hippo saw it:

"Christ is still journeying whither he has gone before. For Christ went before us in the head, and Christ follows in the body. Christ is still here toiling; here Christ suffered at Saul's hands. Christ is still here in want; here Christ still journeys; Christ here is sick; Christ is here in bonds."

However we express it, it is a vision of longing for a mended creation, a world that has been healed of its pain and injustice. Here is a modern version of the same ideal:

"Those who carry grand pianos  
to the tenth floor wardrobes and coffins  
the old man with a bundle of wood hobbling beyond the horizon  
the woman with a hump of nettles  
the lunatic pushing her baby carriage  
full of empty vodka bottles  
they all will be raised up  
like a seagull feather like a dry leaf  
like eggshell scraps of street newspapers

Blessed are those who carry  
for they will be raised."

Others might put it in different language, but we all share the same longing. Let us pray.

Grant us, O God, a vision of our land, fair as she might be: a land of justice, where none shall prey on others; a land of plenty, where poverty shall cease to fester; a land of equality, where success shall be founded on service, and honour be given to worth alone; a land of peace, where order shall not rest on force, but on the love of all for their land, the great mother of the common life and welfare. Amen.

## Child Care Strategy

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S1M-285 in the name of Mr Sam Galbraith, on the Scottish Executive's child care strategy for Scotland, and an amendment to that motion.

14:35

**The Minister for Children and Education (Mr Sam Galbraith):** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I hope that we will not find too much difference among the parties in this debate; that is reflected in the amendment lodged by the Scottish National party. I would have liked to accept the amendment—I would have done so for the second part—but the part that refers to securing long-term funding does not recognise the considerable work that has been done to put in the extra resources and secure them for the long term. I will, therefore, have to ask members to reject it.

As a minister at the Scottish Office, I was pleased to be able to introduce—for the first time ever in this country—a national child care strategy. I am also pleased that the partnership Government has been able to take that forward. I can report today on considerable progress and on our ambitious plans for the future. Our overall aim and vision is affordable, accessible, high-quality child care for those who wish it.

Child care is about giving children a good start in life—helping them to develop in a safe and caring environment. It is also about family life and the pressures on family life in today's somewhat complex and difficult world. It is about helping families who are at risk of social exclusion and young parents who feel isolated. Finally, it is about helping parents—where they wish to do so—back to work.

When we talk about child care, we talk about issues that are very close to—and indeed part of—the fabric of our whole society. That is why we take the child care strategy seriously. If we provide the right services for children and parents, we stand to make considerable gains: in health and educational attainment; in young people's attachment to their communities and their sense of social responsibility; and in their adult contribution to the economy.

For example, there is considerable evidence that good experiences in child care and pre-school education at an early age are associated with lower rates of criminality in later life. The gains are very large—if we get it right.

Our child care strategy is committed to supporting children's all-round development from

age 0 to age 14. It is about helping parents to balance family and work—by providing them with that child care—and ensuring a range of services for children and their families, especially those who need extra support. It is also about breaking the cycle of social exclusion that blights so many of our children's young lives, and working in partnership with other sectors to deliver our goals.

There are no quick fixes and no simple solutions. As many of us know, family life is not simple; parents have different—and many—needs. The more support that children and families need, the more complex the links between the services. We therefore need to have co-ordinated services to meet those needs. We also need better links between health services and care for very young children; between pre-school education and child care; and between school and after-school care. On top of that, we need to provide the right planning and funding framework to encourage joined-up thinking and joined-up service delivery.

All that, of course, takes money and we are more than providing that. We have put in place considerable extra resources. I was surprised to read Nicola Sturgeon in *The Herald* this morning—perhaps she did not say this, but it is in the paper. On funding, she said that the Government has

“a long way to go”

and that we are “complacent” and at a “standstill”. She also said that

“the funding allocation for providing places for all three and four-year-olds was on a three-year basis”.

It is on a three-year grant basis, but it will be added to the grant-aided expenditure after that, if it is permanent. She mentioned the new opportunities fund, which—as she appreciates—is only for start-up. Sustainability lies within the rest of the money that is provided.

Let me tell everyone the extent of the funding that we are now providing. The comprehensive spending review allocated an additional £49 million of Scottish Executive funds to driving forward the strategy over the period 1999-2002. A further £42 million has been allocated for families with very young children—the 0 to three-year-olds. We call that initiative sure start Scotland.

A further £25 million of lottery resources will also be distributed over the next three years by the new opportunities fund. That represents 11.5 per cent of the total that is ring-fenced for Scotland, with distribution being based on levels of deprivation rather than simply on population density.

Let us not forget the important resources that are made available for child care from the new child care tax credit within the working families tax credit. Precise figures for that will depend on take-

up, but we estimate that, every single year, it will provide an additional £20 million. That is an important step in our strategy.

Our financial package, combining Executive money, new opportunities funding and the working families tax credit, shows how the Scottish Executive is working productively with UK Government departments to align resources for child care in Scotland.

Under our programme for 0 to three-year-olds—sure start Scotland—our vision is that all children should have the best start in life. At the moment, the early life experiences of many children place them at an immediate disadvantage and can make it difficult for some three and four-year-olds to benefit from nursery experience. Even by that time, it can be too late. That is why we have implemented a programme specifically for our 0 to three-year-olds.

Sure start Scotland will improve support for families with very young children, by providing integrated facilities to which everyone can have easy access. Child care is just one element of that support. Not only do we want to provide stimulating play opportunities for children, but we want parents to be able to share in those play and developmental opportunities and to develop their own skills and confidence.

As I visit the projects that will benefit from sure start Scotland, a message that I hear clearly from mums and dads is that they also want to develop their skills and talents; that is an important function that child care facilities can provide. Parents and children should be able to get good medical advice and assistance on such issues as diet and child development. All the professionals in the system should be linked to that provision.

Sure start Scotland aims to target resources at the more disadvantaged communities, and to provide services that parents consider to be of help. It is an important part of our social inclusion strategy and the Scottish Executive has therefore allocated an additional £14 million to that budget for next year. That represents an increase of more than 50 per cent for that programme.

I turn to the rest of our child care strategy, for which we were able to make £5.75 million available this year. Next year, we will be able to increase our allocation to local authorities to £13.75 million—an increase of almost 140 per cent. That does not look very much like a standstill to me.

In building the funding package for child care, we recognise that different areas face different challenges and have differing costs. We have therefore skewed the distribution. For the first time, we have adjusted our funding formula for pre-school education and child care to weight it in

favour of rural areas. We are also providing a rural development fund that will be run by Children in Scotland to spread good practice in the delivery of child care throughout rural areas. We intend to commission further research on that. Additional grants will also be made available to help Gaelic-medium playgroups reach the standard at which they can access mainstream education funding.

Most important of all, we will skew our funding towards disadvantaged areas, because we realise that those areas have an acute need for services and problems with project viability. I have therefore given the greatest weighting in our child care funding to deprivation.

Figures for each local authority area are now available at the back of the chamber, but I will give some examples. Under the child care strategy, funding for Glasgow will increase from just under £1 million to just under £3 million, Edinburgh from under £500,000 to £1 million, Highland from just over £200,000 to just over £600,000 and Scottish Borders from just over £100,000 to nearly £270,000. That represents a significant increase in child care funding and puts in place a sustainable, long-term package that can be delivered year after year.

Child care is not something that central Government can deliver. Yes, we can give a broad strategic steer, but provision needs to respond to local needs and local circumstances. That is why we asked local authorities to convene local child care partnerships, which have representation from private and voluntary sector providers of child care, employers, local enterprise companies, further education colleges, the health service and parents. In every local authority area, a child care partnership is now up and running. They have taken account of views that have been gathered through audits of supply and demand for child care and mean that the funds we put in place are properly targeted at local needs.

The child care plans that have been drawn up by the partnerships cover both child care and education, to ensure that we forge the right links. In future, we will want to consider whether we can integrate planning for children's services even further; we also intend to review the planning structures.

The partnerships examine and integrate services, so I was again interested by Nicola Sturgeon's statement in *The Herald* this morning. The article said that Nicola

"will call for piloting for children's centres across the country to provide pre-school nursery and out-of-school care under one roof".

In fact, 93 such centres are already in place across Scotland—I do not know how much more piloting we need.

We are trying to adopt a partnership approach to our responsibilities. We need to practise what we preach at the centre if those outside are also to work in partnership. I therefore announce today that we will merge the Scottish Childcare Board and the early years education forum, which, at present, give us separate advice on child care and pre-school education. We will therefore have an integrated source of advice on both subjects to ensure that we make the correct links between them. The new committee will be chaired by a minister, as befits the service's importance.

Our most important partnership is with parents. We need to help parents to help themselves and their children. For them, information services on child care are crucial. Parents need to know what types of child care are available, what they cost, where there are vacancies, how they are regulated and a host of other issues. That is why, as part of our investment in child care, we have put significant investment into information systems. We have invested heavily in order to give local authorities the computer hardware and software that they need in order to set up effective child care information services. Every local authority in the country, therefore, is well on the way to having a comprehensive local child care information service.

Those local services will link into a national information line and website, which will be ready by December and launched formally in January. They will give not only information on local provision, but more general advice on the different kinds of care parents might consider, from childminders to nurseries to after-school clubs. One telephone number and one website will give access to material and basic information, both nationally and locally. That is one of the most far-reaching of all the measures taken under the child care strategy. Better information will help parents make better choices for their children and is likely to increase parental interest in quality, an important part of which relates to regulatory standards, staff training and qualifications.

I issued a consultation paper on the regulation of day care and pre-school education earlier this year. We have had many helpful responses and I thank everyone who responded. The issues are complex and I intend to come back to the Parliament with our conclusions.

We have already made it clear that we intend that the new Scottish commission for the regulation of care should assume responsibility for regulating child care. However, quality goes further than systems—important as they are. What matters for children is the knowledge and skills of the individuals who look after them. That is partly about ensuring that those who are involved in child care have the right temperament and aptitude for

the profession. Training and qualifications are also vital. That is an area where we still have a lot to do.

My first priority is to clarify the qualification structure. I will be launching an information booklet on that at the turn of the year. The booklet will be aimed at prospective students, adult returners, those already embarked on a child care career and employers. We will follow that with an action plan, setting out a suite of projects to improve access and career progression.

As a first step towards improving career progression, the National Training Organisation for Early Years, working with the Scottish Qualifications Authority, is developing a new Scottish vocational qualification level 4 award in early education and child care. The creation of that advanced qualification will help to show that child care is a profession in which entrants can progress over time to positions of higher status and responsibility.

I hope that I have given the Parliament a sense of what is being done to implement our child care strategy. Much has already been achieved and I pay tribute to the hard work and creative thinking of many local authorities and their partners. However, I stress that this will be a long haul and it will take time to achieve our full vision. It will need partnership and co-operation between all those with an interest in child care.

I had certain expectations when I started down this road, two and a half years ago, but we have made progress beyond those expectations. We can now deliver affordable and accessible high-quality child care for many children. That is good for our children and, as a result, is good for Scotland. I commend the motion to the Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament supports the Scottish Executive's commitment to its Childcare Strategy for Scotland and welcomes the substantially increased allocation of funding to local authorities in 2000-01 to develop the Childcare Strategy in their areas.

14:53

**Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP):** I welcome this afternoon's debate on the Scottish Executive's child care strategy for Scotland. The child care strategy is one of many policies that has been formulated, consulted on and—to some extent—put into practice without being debated in a national democratic forum in Scotland. Now we have a Parliament of our own, and with it, a chance to subject policies, such as the child care strategy, to proper democratic scrutiny. That is something that all members should welcome.

I begin by giving credit where it is due. The Scottish Executive—particularly Sam Galbraith, as

his responsibility for this matter predates the Scottish Parliament—deserves a measure of praise for the priority that has been given to child care and the development of a national strategy. Credit is due for the progress that has been made towards the provision of nursery places for every three and four-year-old in Scotland—a policy for which, even Sam Galbraith would acknowledge, the SNP has long campaigned.

**Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife)**  
(Con): Will the member give way?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Not just now; let me get into my stride.

Early education and child care should not be a political battleground. We have a shared interest in securing for every child in Scotland accessible and high-quality care and education that serves the interests and needs both of children and of parents. That presents a challenge for us all. For those of us in opposition, the challenge is to be constructive—that is the spirit with which the SNP approaches today's debate. For the Executive, the challenge is to be inclusive, to listen to and consider new ideas, not to dismiss them simply because they come from the Opposition. I urge the ministers, Sam Galbraith and Peter Peacock, to do that today.

Although we have come a long way, there is still a great deal to be done. If I have a criticism of the Executive's motion, it is that it smacks of complacency. Now is not the time to stand still or to rest on our laurels. It is time to push ahead with developing the strategy and addressing the weaknesses that exist. That is what the SNP's amendment seeks to do. It does not deny what has been achieved, as Sam Galbraith implied. It says, "Yes, we have come a long way, but let us ensure that we keep moving forward." That is why I am sorry that the Executive has decided not to support the amendment. It should have been possible to move forward on the basis of consensus.

The SNP believes that further work is needed, such as on making child care even more affordable. Some of my colleagues will touch on issues relating to the working families tax credit. They will also explore in more detail issues such as the funding and management of child care, further integration and the quality of service provided. I will touch on a few of those issues and put forward positive proposals, which I hope, in the spirit of consensus, will be given due consideration by the Executive.

Sam Galbraith spent most of his time talking about funding. The motion mentions

"the substantially increased allocation of funding to local authorities in 2000-01".

Contrary to his opening comments, I do not deny that more money has been made available over that period. However, an important question lies behind that fact: what happens after that period? Until the end of 2000-01, grants to local authorities are ring-fenced to allow for the expansion of the provision of pre-school education but, afterwards, funding for child care will be included in grant-aided expenditure. The creation of pre-school places for three and four-year-olds is one thing; sustaining those places in the long term out of already stretched education budgets, which are subject to many other pressures, is another thing altogether.

The issue cannot be dodged, because the forthcoming education bill—as far as we know—is likely to make pre-school provision for three and four-year-olds a statutory obligation on local authorities. I have heard from a number of people in local authorities—practitioners in the field. They say that, although there have been positive noises—like those that we have heard from ministers today—about funding in the long term, no concrete commitments have been made. I hope that that will change today and that the deputy minister, who I assume will be summing up, will address that.

We should not be talking only about sustaining what we achieve over the next few years; we must also be looking to further expand free nursery provision and make it full time, rather than part time. I hope that all members agree that that should be the end objective. That will be impossible unless serious consideration is given now to securing long-term, sustainable funding.

The same funding problem exists in the provision of out-of-school places. As Sam Galbraith said, most of the money for new out-of-school places—£25 million—is coming from the new opportunities fund. Incidentally, that is the only substantial part of Scotland's education budget that is not devolved to the Scottish Parliament, giving rise to the ridiculous situation in which the Scottish Executive can set the strategy but cannot ensure the funding to implement it.

That is another debate, however. What is important to note in this debate is that money from the new opportunities fund is available only for new or expanded projects, which leaves existing services without adequate financial support. I know from my area, and other members will have similar experiences—[*Interruption.*] Sam Galbraith may laugh, but he should talk to people on the ground who are experiencing problems. Well-used out-of-school projects are finding it difficult to survive because they cannot access lottery funds. Is that a sensible way in which to proceed?

Of greater concern is the fact that lottery funding is available only for one year. As Sam Galbraith



said, the lottery provides start-up funding but, after the first year, on-going funding must be found from elsewhere. The question that that poses for Sam Galbraith is, "From where?" Either new projects must become self-financing—presumably through increased charges to parents—or, as is much more likely, the on-going burden will fall on local authorities.

I understand that lottery funding is, by its nature, short term. That begs the question: should we rely so heavily on the lottery to pay for essential child care services? I hope that the deputy minister will address the question of long-term funding in his summation. Many people welcome—as I do—the direction of the Executive's policy, but we worry about its short-termism and the sustainability of the new pre-school and out-of-school places that are being created under the child care strategy.

Another criticism that can be levelled at the child care strategy is that it consists of piecemeal support for a plethora of initiatives. Plans abound in local authorities, such as the national child care strategy, children's services plans and sure start Scotland, to name but a few. The Executive must ensure greater co-ordination. The emphasis, in some cases, is on the quantity of places, rather than on where the places are and how overall provision hangs together. Integration and co-ordination are lacking.

A parent with one child at school and another at nursery must perform daily juggling acts, dropping off and picking up children. I visited a nursery in Leith this morning and heard of a parent who takes advantage of a part-time place at a nursery school in the morning, and who would pay for a place in the afternoon, but has difficulty finding care over lunchtime. Those problems are all too common. The ministers can pretend that they have not heard of those problems, but they exist. If this child care strategy is to be taken forward and developed in the way that it should be, we must acknowledge that it is not perfect. Things must be done to improve the service.

A fully integrated service must be provided. The SNP accepts—as Sam Galbraith acknowledged—that that cannot happen overnight, but we must ensure that we continue to work towards it. When I said that I thought that the Executive was being a bit standstill, that is what I meant. The motion does not say enough about how we should take forward the strategy.

**Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab):** I welcome the tone of Nicola Sturgeon's speech and I thank her for visiting my constituency this morning. Does she realise that, as part of the national child care strategy, City of Edinburgh Council has guaranteed a wrap-around nursery place for all children by 2001? I am sure that that is only one example of that happening.

Does she recognise that start-up funding is one thing, but that the child care tax credit should sustain after-school places?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** The child care tax credit is certainly a step in the right direction and some of my colleagues will mention it, but there are loopholes and weaknesses in it. I hear what Malcolm Chisholm says about child care provision in Edinburgh. That does not fully answer the problem of sustainability. The fact remains that provision around the country is patchy and what is happening in some areas is not happening everywhere. That reinforces the point that I am making: although much has been done, much has still to be done. It serves no purpose, and certainly not the interests of our children, to deny that fact.

Integration is one of the areas in which most work has still to be done. We believe that the way forward is through the provision of children's centres. Sam Galbraith says that there are 93 children's centres around the country. That is great, but he takes the attitude that, because there are 93 centres, everything is fine—that sums up everything that is wrong with the Executive's approach. It is fine that there are 93 centres, but we need more. We should be headed towards children's centres and towards that concept of integrated, wrap-around care.

The beauty of children's centres is that pre-school, school and out-of-school education and care can be provided under one roof. Providers can be the local authority or the voluntary or private sectors, but the important thing is that the service follows the child and not the other way round.

Local authorities can provide accommodation in under-used schools. The benefits of children's centres are multifold. Costs would be reduced. Moreover, schools could maximise operational capacity—there is much to be done on that, as it could offer an alternative to school closures, especially in rural areas. The real beauty of going down that road is that children would enjoy genuine wrap-around care. That is where the strategy should be heading.

Children's centres would require further capital investment, which is the nub of the matter—it is the missing ingredient in the child care strategy. Children's centres would be a real step in the direction of a genuinely integrated child care service.

One of the principal motivations behind the child care strategy is to encourage parents back into the workplace, but the interests of children are of equal, if not greater, importance. Children must be at the centre of the child care strategy. This Parliament is bound—because the minister did not refer to this, it is worth mentioning—by the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Perhaps we need a revised child care strategy from the Executive to recognise that fact. The group Children in Scotland would welcome that recognition.

Children's experience of early education and child care—and the quality of that care—will determine the overall success or failure of the strategy. The Executive intends to establish an independent regulatory body by 2001. We support that policy and look forward to receiving further feedback from the recent consultation exercise on the regulation of early education and child care. We strongly believe that consistent standards of regulation should be set across the range of child care providers—standards should not, as often happens now, vary depending on whether a child care provider is the local authority or the voluntary or private sectors. We also believe that the cost of regulation should rest with the regulator and should not be passed on to parents, as often happens now.

One of the crucial determining factors in securing quality of provision is the skill, commitment and qualifications of the staff who are employed to work with children. I was glad that the minister spent time on that point. The SNP believes that, where a child care provider is offering education and delivering a curriculum, there must be appropriate input from qualified teachers. We must also recognise that the distinction between education and child care is, as the minister acknowledged, becoming increasingly blurred. That is to be welcomed, as we should recognise the importance of play in children's development and should resist too narrow a definition of education.

As providers of care will inevitably also be providing some education, we should ensure that all child care staff are properly trained and educated. Again, in the spirit of consensus, I welcome what the minister said about that. We, too, believe that a new system of qualifications for child care workers is long overdue. We would do well to consider the Scandinavian model, in which child care workers are trained in psychology, educational studies, health and social studies, as well as in interactive disciplines such as music and drama. That enables child care workers to provide a high-quality service and to work across the increasingly hazy divide between education and child care. A new system of professional qualifications might also raise the status of the child care profession.

The SNP has tried—sadly, harder than the Executive has—to approach this debate constructively, and that is how we will proceed this afternoon. We recognise the progress that has been made, but urge ministers not to indulge in

too much self-congratulation, as there is still a job to be done. That is demonstrated by the example of some other European countries, where universal, publicly funded child care and education is taken for granted. I hope that we can proceed on the basis of consensus. If that happens, the Executive will certainly have the SNP's support.

I move amendment S1M-285.1, to insert at end:

“and considers that efforts must now be directed at securing long-term sustainable funding for child care, ensuring further integration of provision and achieving the highest standards of care and education for all children in Scotland.”

15:10

**Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife (Con)):** I am pleased to welcome what the minister said. I see that that brings a smile to his face. I hope that he will still be smiling at the end of my short contribution.

It is appropriate that we discuss this subject as we celebrate the anniversary of the signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by the Conservative Government in 1991. In 1992, we followed that by signing up to the European Union recommendation on child care.

I am always pleased to hear new announcements on spending from the Government, as it gives us a chance to work out whether the money is new, reheated or recycled. I am willing at this stage to take the minister's word that this is indeed new money and not the previously announced £91 million being carved up and recycled. New money is needed for some important aspects of child care.

In a sense, this strategy has been in its embryonic stage since May 1998. Much has been said about the strategy since then. I noticed that Nicola Sturgeon was handing out credit, but she omitted to mention the fact that credit for much of what we now have should go to the previous Conservative Government. I was disappointed, given that she was trying to be so nice to everyone.

Let me remind the chamber that it was the introduction of nursery vouchers by the Conservative Government that ensured a real political debate on this issue. Some parties are, of course, against nursery vouchers, but it was their introduction that ensured that other parties, not least the party that is now in power, had to find a response. There was nursery provision, but it was patchy. Nursery provision was good under Lothian Regional Council, for example, but provision was not of the same standard everywhere. Nursery vouchers ensured that parents could exercise choice—between provision by the local authority and, where such provision did not exist, by the

voluntary and private sectors.

**Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP):** Will the member give way?

**Mr Monteith:** I thought that no one was going to ask. I have been waiting for an intervention—I even wrote “intervention” on my notes—so I am glad that Fiona Hyslop has obliged me.

**Fiona Hyslop:** The subject of free education is topical at the moment, given the issue of tuition fees. Does the Conservative education spokesperson believe in free education for three and four-year-olds?

**Mr Monteith:** No. The Conservatives do not believe in universal provision of free education for three and four-year-olds. However, we recognise that there must be some state provision. Our manifesto included a policy that recognised that the current system provided only for part-time care and that the expansion of provision to three and four-year-olds would still provide only part-time care. We therefore advocated the use of vouchers to provide a minimum—to ensure provision for every child—that could be topped up. Parents could decide to split the voucher to provide part-time care for three or four years or to use it for full-time education for their four-year-old. That shows that we want to work with the grain of parental need, which is particularly important when discussing the child care strategy.

Labour claims that its child care policies improve choice and access for parents. Although we may get there in the end, that is not necessarily the case yet. When we introduced nursery vouchers, 80 per cent of children went into local authority provision. Since the vouchers were abolished, that figure has risen to 86.2 per cent. It is evident from many of our constituencies that private and voluntary provision is being crowded out. There are a number of reasons for that, and it is important that we take due regard of them when applying the strategy.

When, for example, local authorities decided to provide nursery care, often adjacent to existing playgroups, many parents decided to take their children out of playgroups and put them into the nurseries, because they saw the nurseries as a route into the schools that they wanted their children to attend. It was not the teaching, the play or the care that mattered to them, but the fact that the nurseries offered them a way of getting their child into a particular school. The Executive should take note of that.

It is also important that we pay regard to the education white paper cum bill, which proposes to make nursery provision a statutory duty. I have some concerns about that, because the funding is not ring-fenced. Some local authorities, by top-slicing for an administration charge, are already

making it difficult for parents to choose private or voluntary care. In East Dunbartonshire, for example, the local authority imposes an administration charge on voluntary or private nurseries of some £268. In Falkirk, the charge is £295. In Highland, it is £245 for the voluntary sector and £105 for the private sector. In North Lanarkshire, it is £240. Western Isles Council charges £35. Local authorities impose those charges, but private nurseries often pass them on to parents—for whom they represent, in effect, an extra charge.

I am worried that, because the white paper imposes a statutory duty on local authorities, they may decide to change the pricing structure further and to enter into partnership agreements that make it impossible for private sector nursery provision to co-exist with local authority provision. Because there will be no ring-fenced protection, the private nurseries may be forced out of the sector; there will be not so much a partnership as two classes of provision. That does not accord with what I have heard the minister and many members of the Scottish Executive say in the past—that they want partnership, rather than a divided, isolated society.

It is important that we give some consideration to the sort of care that is provided. Teaching is not always appropriate; child care should be more about play and interaction through which children can develop social skills. We should be encouraging flexibility of choice, rather than monolithic provision by local authorities.

It is also important that we are assured that, if the private and voluntary sectors use new opportunities fund money, they will not face funding problems two or three years down the line. Children in Scotland has said:

“Out-of-school care and study-support schemes are being promoted through ‘pump-priming’ funds from the National Lottery. The grants, however, are only for one-year after which projects are expected to sustain themselves—which is likely to be unrealistic.”

I recognise that the minister has made an announcement on this, but we need greater assurances before we can be relaxed—or complacent, to use Nicola Sturgeon’s word—about groups surviving beyond the initial period.

**Malcolm Chisholm:** Will the member give way?

**Mr Monteith:** I am practically out of time, but I will give way if the intervention is relevant to my previous point.

**Malcolm Chisholm:** Given that after-school clubs will be supported mainly by the child care tax credit element of the working families tax credit, how will the Conservatives’ policy of abolishing that help to sustain them?

**Mr Monteith:** As is quite clear, we intend to ensure that funding is made available for such clubs. We do not intend to introduce a system that brings in more means testing and divides society. We want, by providing state funding directly, a society that is united.

The Executive's commitments include a new national child care information line. When the minister winds up, I hope to hear more news on the way in which better information will be provided.

The Administration intends to provide a new regulatory body by 2001. However, at the same time, it says that it will train 5,000 new child care workers by 2002. When those new workers come on stream, will they be within the bounds of the new regulatory body, which will only just have been created?

In a briefing paper, Children in Scotland has said that

"barriers exist to the involvement of employers, Local Enterprise Companies, direct service providers in the voluntary and private sectors, and children."

Will any such barriers be removed?

Out-of-school care and study support schemes will have funding from the new opportunities fund. I mention that again because I want to hear from the minister whether that funding will continue. I also want to hear what the Executive intends to do for children at nursery school who have just reached the age when they should go to primary school but are considered by their parents to be too young to do so. The children may suffer educationally by going on to primary school. It would cost in the region of £2.5 million to ensure that they can stay on at nursery. Will the minister give a commitment—as my party did in its manifesto for the Scottish election—to make funding available to ensure that those children can stay on in local authority or private nurseries? Some local authorities already cover such costs, but they are not covered nationally.

If we had answers to those questions, and if we were assured that there would be flexibility, variety, choice and quality, together with the affordability that the minister talked about, we would all welcome the strategy—it would be one that all Scots could be proud of, and it would certainly have the support of the Conservative party.

15:22

**Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** It is my pleasure, and my party's pleasure, to support warmly Sam Galbraith's motion. The great thing about coming fourth in the opening speeches is that one tears up

one's original speech and responds to what others have said.

I remember moving back to my home town in 1986 with three small children, and being profoundly grateful that in one of the schools there were nursery places. It made a great difference to my wife and me. We were lucky at that time, because—as Mr Peacock will well recall—there were not many other nursery places in Highland. How different things are today.

I remember, too—especially when I was a councillor with Ross and Cromarty District Council—trying to help single parents get back into work, and how crucial child care was.

We all have the figures that were distributed at the back of the chamber; more telling, perhaps, are some figures that come directly from Highland. In 1995, there were 24 local authority centres catering for some 800 children. Today, there are 134 such centres, catering for 2,100 children. That is a remarkable achievement. There are also 86 partner centres. The figures for the under-fours show that 40 per cent of three-year-olds—930 children—are being catered for. By next year, we aim to reach 70 per cent of all the children in Highland.

Those are real and concrete achievements and I do not think that anybody could gainsay them. I welcome the tone of the speeches by Nicola Sturgeon and Brian Monteith. We should not muck about: Sam Galbraith and his team should be congratulated.

In a good speech, Nicola referred to

"piecemeal support for a plethora of initiatives."

That is not fair—I think that it was a soundbite. However, she made a point about rural schools that I welcome.

In the sure start Scotland programme, there is talk of taking services out to rural areas. That will prove to be an acid test of how we perform in future. I have always supported the holistic approach to provision for children that Nicola was perhaps advocating. Such an approach could include leisure and social work and might help to change the way in which things are done in rural areas.

I was interested in Nicola's reference to her visit to Leith. I have many reasons to bless being an MSP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, and today I have found another reason to do so. However, if she decides to visit us, we will be glad to welcome her.

I have to tell Brian Monteith that the whole issue of vouchers was a paperchase. Although I will give his party some credit for its policies, I was a councillor when vouchers were introduced and

was bamboozled when I tried to find my way through that system. The system today is much better.

My final point touches on a comment made by Sam Galbraith. There is a slight problem with recruiting people into the sector and retaining them.

**The Deputy Minister for Children and Education (Peter Peacock)** *indicated agreement.*

**Mr Stone:** I see the deputy minister nodding. There has been a worryingly high turnover of staff up to now, and we must fine-tune that issue. The minister has drawn the matter to our attention, and I wish him well.

I will now conclude my remarks. I am sorry that no member saw fit to intervene. The motion has my full support and I commend it to the Parliament.

15:26

**Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab):** I welcome today's announcements. Any child care strategy should be developed in the way that this strategy has been—with much input from many people.

Although the Parliament needs to give a lead, delivery will come through local agencies, particularly local authorities, and provision will be influenced by local factors, which is as it should be. My local authority, West Lothian Council, has set up an early-years and child care partnership. My colleagues will not mind if I list the members of that partnership: parents, voluntary organisations, businesses, private nurseries, career development organisations and education, community, strategic and health services. It is important to bring all interested parties together.

The partnership plans take account of all aspects of local need, such as involvement, cost-effectiveness and quality assurance. We should be providing not just a quantity of provision, but high-quality provision.

There is an obvious demand for wrap-around care. With local authorities such as West Lothian Council guaranteeing that by 2002 there will be a part-time place for every three-year-old who needs it, the question is how such pre-school education fits into child care provision. Many of us know that a child starting nursery can cause problems with the child care arrangements that parents already have. Although parents want their children to attend nursery to build relationships with other children, there are few people who can work for two and a half hours a day. Parents need to find both the necessary nursery facilities and the child care that will allow them to work. Only a true partnership approach can answer such needs and

provide such wrap-around care.

I welcome the long-term funding, which is essential. I agree with some of Nicola Sturgeon's points about initiatives that have provided money in the past, but only for first-year start-ups. Many of the people working in out-of-school provision are parents who offer their time voluntarily.

My own experience is that assistance with start-up costs is necessary, but many such service providers can take time to establish themselves and to gain the confidence of parents. It is perhaps in the second and third years that there have been problems in the past, but the longer-term funding arrangements that have been announced will alleviate those problems. So will the introduction of working families tax credit, which will provide people with the income necessary to pay for child care, and to ensure that provision is continuous.

The same issue arises with the provision of holiday care, particularly for children of school age. That is yet another area where the working families tax credit will be of assistance.

Local authorities are starting to examine how they ensure provision of child care for children with special needs. It might be useful to find out how that experience and knowledge could be shared among authorities. The Minister for Children and Education mentioned the telephone helpline in his speech. I wonder whether an element of that could specifically assist the parents of children with special needs and point them in the right direction.

Today's announcements will improve women's options; they will help ensure that children are well cared for; and they will support families into the future.

15:31

**Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** Immediately before I became an MSP, I worked for Angus Council, helping to implement the child care strategy. Like most practitioners, I welcomed the fact that at last we had a national strategy to implement, even if some of us suspected that the prime motivating factor was related to adult employment, and that the enhanced child care was simply the means to encourage more women in particular into the workplace.

Everyone involved in child care and education supports the moves to expand quality, accessible and affordable child care provision in Scotland, but the process of achieving that has not been simple. There are various pots of money in existence, allocated to different departments of local authorities, to agencies outwith, including health boards, and to the voluntary sector. It has been left to workers on the ground to integrate the planning and funding of new developments.

Local authority staff have been under particularly great pressure to implement the Government's proposals and to spend the allocated funding. They have been reacting, rather than having the time or flexibility to plan the services that are most appropriate for meeting the needs of children and families in the communities that they serve. That has been exacerbated by the fact that the initiatives have come at a time when it is increasingly difficult for local authorities to sustain their existing core provision, because of budget cutbacks in previous years.

As well as improved integration of service delivery, serious consideration should be given to the co-ordination of the now numerous plans required for children's services, which at present have different lead agencies, timetables and accountability requirements. Other initiatives, such as social inclusion partnerships, affect child care, and it should be the Executive's responsibility to integrate planning requirements to ensure that there is a complementary time scale and shared responsibility.

Parental expectations have been high following the announcement of increased nursery provision. Parents are generally not concerned about the fine detail of, for example, Government funding being available only for children in the pre-school year. Some of them choose deferred entry, which is a legitimate choice, and local authorities are funding that provision from their existing budgets.

Angus Council practises child-centred policies, under which interpretations of the guidelines have been inclusive and investment high. This year, the council is accommodating 171 pre-school children for whom there is no Government funding. At £1,175 per place, a great deal of money is involved.

Setting targets for places for three-year-olds for each year until 2002 is a good idea, but instead of funding provision for 60 per cent of eligible children, for whom funds are available, Angus Council is this year funding 82 per cent of the places. That is good practice, although it is a considerable financial burden.

Let us again look at the example of out-of-school care. Many of the clubs that were set up under the first Government initiative have been struggling to survive since that funding ended. The new opportunities fund could have offered a lifeline to those clubs, but against all the advice given during the consultation period, the Government has made the funding available for new or expanded provision for one year only. That does nothing to sustain existing clubs, particularly those in rural areas.

It is increasingly unrealistic to expect the voluntary sector and working parent-led groups to

take on the responsibility for establishing out-of-school care and to run the clubs with limited financial support. Consideration must be given to mainstreaming that provision, because that would obviate the need for that sector of child care to make regular and complicated bids for time-limited lottery cash. We will achieve high-quality, affordable and accessible child care only when planning is integrated and sustainability assured with a commitment from local and central Government.

15:36

**Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab):** There is nothing complacent about the Executive's motion, and I am sure that the Scottish National party amendment would have been accepted had it not implied that none of the funding is sustainable or long-term.

What strikes me is how far we have moved since the election of the Labour Government in 1997. I am interested in child care; in 1993, I asked a question about it of John Major, the Conservative Prime Minister, at Prime Minister's question time. I asked whether the Government would assist financially the lone parents who required child care. He did not answer the question—which was not uncommon—so I wrote to him. I looked at his reply recently, and astoundingly he said that research indicated that low-income lone parents did not spend money on child care. For him, that was the end of the matter. I do not think, however, that it needed research to indicate that.

We should remember that as recently as 1993—only six years ago—no financial support for child care was available for lone parents or for any other parents. Since 1997, there has been a massive advance in the importance of child care in political debate. The present Westminster Government is the first in United Kingdom history to state openly that child care is part of economic policy—it has thereby signified an end to the men-only economic policies of the past.

Child care is also a fundamental aspect of equal opportunities policy. Perhaps most important, it is a fundamental part of policy on children. That is most clearly demonstrated in the fact that the new initiatives ensure care for the under-threes; I am sure that we will hear more details about that in the near future. All child care—for the under-threes, nursery places, after-school places and wrap-around care—is in the interests of the children as well as of the parents, and much research backs that up.

The fundamental points of the strategy that have been emphasised are affordability, accessibility, quality and choice. There has been discussion

about affordability, and we must reiterate the importance of the child care tax credit. That is a new departure, although there were some belated starts towards it by the previous Government. It will ensure that a significant amount of money will go not only to people who formerly received family credit, but to others, as a result of the incomes scare. That is important for the sustainability of many new child care developments.

Accessibility has been a problem in the past—the child care places were simply not there. No one is complacent and there are still problems, particularly on extended places for children under five. There have been important developments in wrap-around care, and we all know about the guaranteed places for four-year olds. There will also be a big expansion in after-school child care. Accessibility is being addressed.

A paper on regulation has been taken on board, which is important for quality. Choice is also important—not only in regard to the choice of a child care place. An issue that is beginning to enter the debate is whether parents—women in particular—want to return to work after having a child. Last week's pre-budget report said that in future there will be provision for them for the first year. That will be done via an extension of the working families tax credit. Another principle is family-friendly employment. We need to develop a new combination of work and child care.

I am not complacent, any more than the Executive is, and I have some concerns. No one is pretending that all the problems have been solved in the past two and a half years. Students cannot get the working families tax credit, and the access funds for further and higher education do not meet the full costs of child care. A constituent of mine, a lone parent in further education, has a big bill for child care that she cannot meet.

I am also concerned that the wages and conditions of child care workers should be addressed. A study is being carried out by the Accounts Commission, to compare the conditions of local authority child care workers with those in the private sector.

There are issues to be addressed that relate to working families tax credit and child care tax credit, although both schemes are praiseworthy. A withdrawal of housing benefit accompanies working families tax credit, although not child care tax credit. We have to keep an eye on charges, as they might rise as a result of working families tax credit. That will leave students and others who do not get working families tax credit in some difficulty.

Edinburgh Sitters has found that, although it provides a valuable service, it cannot attract the working families tax credit. I have written to the

minister about that, and I am sure that I will receive a satisfactory reply soon.

15:41

**Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP):** I thank Malcolm Chisholm for his contribution, even though he said about a quarter of the things that I wanted to say in my speech.

The Scottish National party welcomes the debate. Good, affordable child care has always been a flagship policy of ours. However, no motion or strategy is perfect, even if it comes from this Executive. I firmly believe that our amendment strengthens the motion, and I ask the minister to accept it. It also addresses some of the concerns that have been mentioned during the debate.

There should be a seamless approach to child care from the time before the child starts school. In many instances, that is not the case. I will speak about top-slicing, as Brian Monteith did, but I will come at it from a different angle. We know that the Government allocates £1,175 to schools for every school place, but each local authority has a different type of top-slicing. Glasgow City Council top-slices £250 from that figure, leaving £925 per place. City of Edinburgh Council top-slices only £134, leaving £1,041. North Lanarkshire top-slices £242, leaving £933. South Lanarkshire, however, top-slices the same amount as Glasgow does. My point is that that causes confusion for providers that deal with different authorities. I would like the minister to address that and perhaps put a strategy in place to allow all local authorities to work together.

Training is a related issue. Top-sliced money goes to training and, while some local authorities with staff who are on placements from other local authorities are flexible and will pay for training in the local authority where the nursery is based, others insist that the teachers are sent to the local authority that they came from. That means that the member of staff is not at work for two or three days and the nursery must pay the travel costs.

A further problem is payment. Many providers have come to me to discuss local authorities that make late payments. I hate to say this, but Glasgow is probably one of the worst. At the moment, there are people in the Glasgow area who have not been paid since August.

Glasgow City Council received some of the funding from the Scottish Office, but it has not paid it out. That has meant that the nurseries are in debt. People are telling me that they are practically closing down, as they have had to arrange overdrafts with their banks. I would like the Executive to consider that and determine whether something can be done to help those nurseries. It is important to them and to child development that

people use those nurseries.

As I said, I hoped that the Executive would take our amendment on board. We need to secure long-term funding. The motion does not address that properly; our amendment enhances the motion. We also need integration of provision, as I have highlighted.

15:45

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. Like others, I commend the Executive for pursuing the strategy of good-quality, affordable and accessible child care. I have a particular interest in the issue, not only as a member of the Parliament, but as a mother and a long-time advocate of the need for universal child care provision.

I warmly welcome the substantial increase in funding that has been allocated to councils to help to develop local child care strategies. That funding will ensure that the provision of play groups, out-of-school places and trained child mentors in every neighbourhood will become a reality for parents. Together with initiatives that have been undertaken by Westminster, the Scottish Executive has implemented measures to reassure parents that they will be able to work and pay for child care, and to ease parental worry about the quality of the child care that is provided.

Child care is a multi-faceted, multi-agency issue, but today I want to highlight one aspect. The introduction to the Government's green paper, "Meeting the Childcare Challenge", states:

"Childcare should be fun for children."

Sam Galbraith earlier mentioned that child care should provide stimulating play opportunities. That concept has been developed successfully by a group of parents in my constituency, through the safe play agenda.

Kirkshaws is an area that is afflicted by high unemployment and deprivation. It is, thankfully, also blessed with dedicated and determined parents. Struck by the apparent connections between young people involving themselves, at an early age, in drink, drugs and vandalism and the lack of local facilities for play and leisure pursuits, those parents formed Parents Action for Safe Play in Kirkshaws. In their own words, they

"battled, negotiated and built partnerships"

to transform a local site into a multi-purpose play area that caters for young people from toddlers to teenagers. Those parents continue to pursue the provision of out-of-school leisure activities for all children, and their achievements are hailed as a model for others.

Safe play, as an integral part of the child care agenda, also requires a multi-departmental approach and, in education, an ethos that supports playtime as a learning mode for all, and which encourages play activities outwith school time and school structures. In acknowledging the health benefits of children at play, we can attempt to combat issues such as the growing incidence of symptoms of heart disease in our teenagers. In housing, we should provide regulations to complement existing guidelines on the provision of play areas, in planning consents for new developments. Added to that, I would call on private developers to accept the responsibility, as parents and members of our communities, of making such provision regardless of profit margins. In training and enterprise, we can do much to promote recognised and valued qualifications and employment opportunities, as well as new qualifications. That would benefit not only our children at play, but our adults at work.

The importance of play for our children, in expanding their social skills, fine-tuning their creativity, providing intellectual stimulation and improving their emotional and physical well-being, is a crucial ingredient in their human growth and development. After all, the happy and confident children of today will be Scotland's well-balanced, self-assured adults of tomorrow. It is our duty to our children to create an environment that will allow them to play at their leisure. We also have a duty to provide easy and affordable access to play areas, to make our roads safer in built-up areas, and—most important—to create the conditions in which children and their parents are free from the social, economic and educational pressures that restrict their ability to play.

Our children need and deserve the opportunity, the time and the space to play. I commend the Government on its commitment to the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I call on the Executive to commit itself to recognising and promoting the right of the child to engage in safe play and recreational activities, as an important aspect of the child care agenda.

I look forward to the additional initiatives that will be pursued in partnership with local authorities, and I welcome the commitment of the Executive to our children's future and the future of Scotland.

15:50

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** As a parent who depended very much on the good will of my own family, my in-laws and friends, I welcome the child care strategy. There is no doubt that a more co-ordinated and consistent provision will ensure that each child has the opportunity to start school with a similar level of pre-school



experience and education—to start with the same advantage.

As Nicola Sturgeon said, the two years of pre-school should not be an extension of school. While I welcome the use of teachers in child care, there is a quite different approach to teaching reading and writing in the classroom and to the learning through play that means that children develop emotionally, socially, physically and in intellectual terms, as outlined in the curriculum framework for pre-school children. Anyone going from teaching into child care needs some form of retraining to address the differences between pre-school education and the more formal approach of school teaching.

As a lecturer in further education, I found it heartbreaking to discover people in their 20s and 30s, and even older sometimes, who at that stage found they were dyslexic. I talked to the National Autistic Society and to people experienced in working with children with learning disabilities who believe that the assessing, observing and training required in the child care strategy could be utilised for early detection of learning needs, such as dyslexia, autism and Asperger's syndrome. According to the National Autistic Society, only a small number of pre-school children get the early intervention that would identify and address those problems.

It is generally accepted that the earlier a true diagnosis is made the better for the child, the family and those around them, because effective strategies can be employed only if the true nature of a condition is known. I ask the Minister for Children and Education to ensure that the new strategy includes identification of learning difficulties so that appropriate support can be given. I have also been talking to providers of pre-school playgroups who feel that now that we have a more co-ordinated approach, with better health service links and so on, it is an ideal time to address the issue.

When we talk about all three and four-year-olds receiving child care, does that mean two years of pre-school education? That question was put to me—the Minister for Children and Education is shaking his head. I am told it can mean one year and four months. I return to Brian Monteith's point, that it is only after their child has begun pre-school education that many parents realise that the child is not mature enough to go to school at the expected time. Is there flexibility to allow the parent to retain the child in pre-school education for a further year?

15:54

**Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to debate the child care

strategy for Scotland. For too long children have been seen as little more than passive recipients of services, whether in child welfare or education. My childhood, and that of most members in the chamber, was characterised by corporate things being done to me, rather than things being done with me.

Times are changing, albeit slowly. In the 20 or so years since I left school, our education establishments have become more welcoming places for students, and particularly for parents. Gone are the days when parents were welcomed in school only for the obligatory parents day or evening, or when they were summoned because of a child's difficulty.

It is now 10 years since we ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although we are a long way from reaching its lofty goals, we have made some progress in recognising children as distinct individuals, and not as appendages or the property of their parents, as they were viewed in the past.

I congratulate the Executive on the way in which it has placed children's services in a clear departmental remit with a Minister for Children and Education. The core of the Executive's child care strategy is improving all-round development of our children through quality day care and early education.

From first-hand experience, I know how important pre-school education is. I was fortunate to be brought up in an area of Scotland that valued education. Fife County Council and its successor authorities have always invested in the area's education services. I was fortunate to get a nursery place way back in 1966. Over 30 years later, almost every four-year-old, and soon all three-year-olds, will have that same opportunity. I am conscious of the good start to education that pre-school education gave me. It allowed me, an ordinary kid from a working-class background, to be the first in my extended family to go to university. I hope that other people will have that opportunity.

Other members have spoken, or will speak, on other initiatives which, taken together, provide the bedrock of the Executive's child care strategy, such as early intervention, including playgroups and sure start, the working families tax credit and the provision of affordable child care. However, I want to address an area of child care that often is relegated to the position of a cinderella service: that of looked-after children, and in particular, support to vulnerable families.

If we are serious about ensuring that all our children have the same opportunities from the extra resources that are being ploughed into education, it is vital that they are all in a position to

benefit from them. To that end, it is important that we ensure that support to vulnerable families is high up on the agendas of the Executive and local authorities.

When developing services for children, and in particular when developing children's services plans, local authorities must ensure that comprehensive services are developed that meet the needs of children and their families. A social services inspectorate report from down south that was published in March this year identified that the key to getting family support services right was offering services that are flexible, sensitive and constitute an effective response.

The report also stated:

"Family centres offered an increasingly wide range of innovative services. They made good use of scarce resources, and parents particularly valued outreach work, parenting skills training and support groups."

From my experience of more than 15 years working in statutory child care social work, the same is true for Scotland. Families with pre-school children require all the help that they need, to ensure that children have every opportunity to maximise their potential.

The Executive's child care strategy is welcome. It is making real differences for a lot of our children. However, we must make extra efforts to ensure that support for vulnerable families, children in need and, of course, looked-after children, is better co-ordinated and improved.

I know of the minister's interest in, and commitment to, looked-after children. I look forward to a debate on that topic in the near future, so that we can improve the services to our most disadvantaged youngsters.

15:59

**Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** I will talk briefly about the qualifications of child care workers, and also about a more integrated approach that includes social inclusion partnerships as part of the rolling out of the programme.

With regard to qualifications, I have some concerns that the ambitious target that the Executive has set itself of having 5,000 people trained within a short period of time is achievable, but I hope that we will actively encourage people to get those qualifications.

I will relate some experiences that I had with the Middlefield community project in Aberdeen when I was a councillor, as it might give a flavour of what is possible, in terms of qualifications and how they can impact on the children, parents and residents in what is part of one of the new social inclusion partnerships.

Seven years ago, there was no provision in the area at all and the community project set up a series of nurseries. Now there are four nurseries offering 46 places, which are largely part-time. They have nine members of staff, who all started out living in the community and without qualifications. Most of them have qualified, or are well on the way to qualifying, in child care. Indeed, one has moved on further, having gone to college to enhance her career prospects.

None of that would have happened without the opportunity afforded through the Scottish vocational qualification route. Such a stepping stone is often important in allowing someone from a deprived area to get a start. The fact that that was available within the community was crucial. The standard of care provided is excellent. Because of the quality of nursery provision in the area, people from outwith the community are actively knocking on the door to have their children admitted to the nurseries.

Naturally, there are constraints, which—as such things often do—relate to finance. We cannot, and we do not, expect people to be compelled to put their children into after-school clubs, nurseries or any other form of provision. That is one of the choices that parents have, and will continue to have. There are advantages to children staying at home, but not in terms of the development of social skills and the early identification of potential problems that, regrettably, are in certain respects more prevalent in some deprived areas. Perhaps today's welcome announcement that the funds will be concentrated in deprived areas will help.

I plead with the minister to give active consideration to involving the social inclusion partnerships in the discussions about how and where we do that. It will offer opportunities to expand and provide services in communities and to take a holistic approach. This should not be done in isolation; it should be done in an inclusive way.

However, from my discussions with the people providing these services, it is clear that a couple of potential problems need to be addressed. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and its implications have an impact on who can be employed. Those things have to be dealt with sensitively. There are issues relating to that that the minister might care to look at.

My colleague Nicola Sturgeon was criticised for suggesting that a plethora of initiatives and ideas is being introduced. The six months arrangement for the new deal might also have an impact, in that it is difficult to undertake courses of study in only six months. Perhaps the more enlightened approach adopted by other public sector bodies—such as the Employment Service, which offers a year—would at least give people the chance to get

on the first rung and, potentially, find sources of future funding for the post. I suggest that the minister consider the new deal in relation to that arrangement, particularly as we are trying to find the appropriate number of people to do it.

16:03

**Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD):** I would like to congratulate the Executive on the progress that it has made on child care. The issue is widely supported across the parties and the Executive has grounds for being congratulated on what it has achieved. However, I was disappointed that Sam Galbraith did not accept the amendment. I could not see why the phrase that he apparently objected to—

“considers that efforts must now be directed at securing long-term sustainable funding for childcare”—

was necessarily critical of the Executive; it could be taken as adding to the motion.

Regardless of party, all Governments have a problem about sustainable funding of anything. There is flavour of the month funding: new issue funding, when new names are invented. New projects get the funding, but once they are up and running, they are forgotten about. Often, after two or three years, when everyone is doing a splendid job and has learned what to do, a project gets cut off in its prime. We would not like that to happen to this Parliament, nor does anybody in a voluntary group or project like it happening to them, but it does. It is an important issue. Nicola Sturgeon is right to draw attention to it and it is not necessarily a criticism of the Government to include it.

One or two speakers have already mentioned the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We should pay more attention to that. The programme so far could be described as pro-parent rather than pro-child. It helps children, of course, but it helps them from the parents' perspective. We need to consider the child's perspective and work up a system of advocates to look after the interests of children in policy making, in addition to our efforts to promote youth forums and other projects for slightly older children.

We do not necessarily need a commission or commissioner for children, although some of the issues surrounding that idea are well worth considering. The Government must examine the ways in which we can represent the interests of children as well as the interests of parents.

The subject of child care includes facilities for the older age group, such as after-school clubs. I recently met senior representatives of Strathclyde police, who feel that reducing truancy would do more than any other measure to improve our society, because many young people go wrong through truancy. Our child care strategy should

include the slightly older age group. If we could put together a sensible procedure—not just a heavy in a big hat coming to arrest kids—for working with children, families and schools to get the children back into school, we would achieve a great deal.

With some exceptions, we are quite good about children and are working on the issue of child care. However, our performance as far as youth work is concerned has been absolutely lamentable. Voluntary organisations that help young people have been cut, cut, cut and cut. We give teenagers less and less to do, but we blame them for going wrong. Our child care strategy must extend into the double figures age group as well as the younger age group. I give the Executive some good marks for effort but, rather like the Scottish football team, it could do better.

16:07

**Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab):** I warmly welcome the Minister for Children and Education's statement. The new allocation for child care represents something in the order of a 140 per cent increase in funding. That is not an insignificant sum of money, and I am proud that my colleagues saw fit to make that investment.

The statement is in stark contrast to what Brian Monteith said about the previous Government's commitment. When he mentioned vouchers, I remembered all the comments that I received as a councillor at the time when the scheme was launched. Most people said, “What good are the vouchers to me if I have no nursery to take my children to?” That is one of the issues that must be addressed.

We are talking about nursery education on the one hand and, as Nicola Sturgeon said, child care on the other. The difference between this Government and any previous or aspiring Governments is that our Government believes in making promises that it knows it can keep. It does not believe in making promises that it knows it may not be able to keep, although it may aspire to the same aims as other parties.

Everyone in this Parliament undoubtedly believes that investment in our children—the flowers of our future—should be at the very heart of everything that we do, enabling us to do something positive for young people in this country.

**Mr Monteith:** I point out to Helen Eadie that, in the first year after the voucher scheme was introduced, 63,467 children attended some form of pre-school education. Only 3,025 parents did not apply for those vouchers. That figure of 63,467 is larger than the number of children currently attending any form of pre-school education. It is therefore clear that, although there may have been

a lack of provision, the vouchers encouraged provision not just by local authorities but by private and voluntary groups. Is not that the case?

**Helen Eadie:** At the general election, I was a candidate in Roxburgh and Berwickshire, where I worked for 18 months to two years. I know that there was great hostility there to the Conservative party's vouchers. Then I returned to Fife, which has been one of the pioneering counties in Scotland. Fife Council has a great child care record. When everyone else was aspiring to undertake some of these initiatives, Fife Council was already putting them into practice. There was 98 per cent coverage for all four-year-olds.

I am delighted that the new Labour Government put child care issues at the heart of its agenda. I see that Donald Gorrie has left the chamber, but child care is not just about education or social issues; it is also an economic issue. Although Donald said that we must think about the children, we must achieve a balance and think about the parents too.

I remember that, when I had my two children, I was living in London with not a soul around me to give me support, as my family was up here in Scotland. I thought to myself, "What do I do about child care?" That was when my passion for child care started. At one time, I was the chair of the Child Care Now Scotland campaign. I believed passionately that the provision of child care would affect the social inclusion agenda and would begin to help families.

It was a Jesuit priest who said, "If you give me the child, I'll give you the man." He meant that investing in children produces people we can be proud of. However, for the last 18 years, the Tories put us in the second bottom place of the European league. That is no record to be proud of, I tell Brian Monteith. I am heartily proud of my colleagues both in this Parliament and at Westminster for the work that they have done on child care, about which Malcolm Chisholm spoke.

Nicola Sturgeon talked about sustainability. I was elected to this Parliament not just as a Labour party candidate but as a Labour and Co-operative candidate. As such, I bring baggage with me: the ideals of the Co-operative movement, which believes both in providing retail services and in local people providing local solutions to local problems. That is what the Co-operative movement is about and that is what this Government is about.

I see a slightly puzzled look on Nicola's face. I think she is wondering about the connection. The connection is that, in Markinch, in Fife—

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I am genuinely interested in what Helen Eadie has to say. The puzzled look on my face was not to do with the connection. Rather,

I was puzzled by what she found impossible to support in the SNP's amendment. As has been said, there is nothing in the amendment that criticises what has already been done, which I went to great lengths to welcome. What is wrong with accepting the idea that although we have come a long way, there is a long way yet to go? We should dedicate ourselves to ensuring that what we do now is sustainable in the long term.

**Helen Eadie:** That goes back to what I said at the beginning of my speech; it is the difference between making a promise that can be kept and making one that one would want to keep.

I wish to say a word about the Markinch scenario.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):** Briefly, please.

**Helen Eadie:** We have developed a number of community, or co-operative, enterprises across Fife, some of which have been partnership initiatives between the council and local groups. In Markinch, we have developed a co-operative nursery, which is now totally sustainable after receiving pump-priming money to help it get off the ground. That is only one initiative, but I could tell members about dozens more in Fife.

I am delighted with the efforts of Peter Peacock and Sam Galbraith. They are on the right wavelength. I know that the child care strategy will be welcomed by all parents, both inside and outside the chamber.

16:14

**Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP):** I suppose I had better declare an interest. I am the grandparent of children who are in child care, nursery and primary school, the parent of two school teachers and the husband of a former school teacher. I am also a former head teacher of a secondary school in what could be called an area of fairly bad deprivation.

Members will forgive me if I approach this topic in reverse chronological order. I will start at secondary and move backwards, although I know that that is an eccentric approach and is not really the way in which the system works. When I began in education, I was privileged enough to be faced with children who could read and write in secondary 1. As time went on, I was faced with children who could not read and write in secondary 1. In the bad old days, there was the myth of the fresh start. When children came from primary school, the slate was wiped clean, and we started from scratch, as if nothing had happened in the previous 11 years of their lives. I am pleased to say that things have moved on since then. We expect to get good reporting from

nursery to primary and from primary to secondary.

I hope never to see the kind of report I once saw for a primary 7 pupil, who had come to my school from one of the feeder primary schools—or associated primaries, as they are now called. It said:

“X cannot write, cannot read, misbehaves frequently and unfortunately has perfect attendance.”

That was highly accurate, but a total condemnation of the system. Too little had been done, and it was probably already far too late for the child to be educationally or socially redeemed.

More seriously, I have seen children whose lives were in constant turmoil and for whom the school was an island of calm and sanity. For the first time, child care will provide that calm for many children. I have met parents whose expectations of their child's capabilities and promise were well wide of the mark, and whose illusions had been allowed to last for too long. Such parents are so set it is impossible for them to face up to reality and to help their children. I have seen parents despair at the inability of the system to help them promptly with their child's educational or social needs.

We have a child care strategy, and the endgame is to improve the lives of children. The initial years are the formative ones. I would have mentioned Ignatius Loyola's comments on the first seven years, but Helen Eadie stole them. Great benefits can accrue to the child and great damage can be done to the child in those formative years. Frequently, the inadequacies of the child pass undiagnosed.

In my experience of the educational psychological services—I do not dispute their professional expertise—too few psychologists were available. They could not take on all the problems that were brought to them and it took too long to bring the child and the psychologist together. I have anecdotal evidence—I will not say from where—about a hyperactive child who had to wait a year before seeing a psychologist. The child was then put on methyl-phenidate, or Ritalin, which is not an ideal or universally acceptable antidote. The child was last seen as a docile attendee in class, not an active participant.

Last night, a child care provider told me, when I rang up to see what it was like on the front line, that she had very young child, who was not even of nursery age, for whom she was already seeking help. Experienced staff face that on a day-to-day basis. The shortage of skilled professional help exacerbates the individual's problems, disrupts the group and puts unnecessary strain on staff and parents.

The extension of child care, linking with nurseries and the formal education that follows,

must be seen as the chance to create an integrated system of providers, so that the standards of provision are high, the accommodation delivers a message of hope and well-trained staff are able to identify children who need specialised help. For that to happen, there need to be sufficient psychological support staff, special educational needs staff and parent educators and counsellors for those parents who are in difficult learning situations too. I hope that Peter Peacock will assure me that that will be systematically built into the provision.

Every pound spent on the start of young lives will save money later in the system. Although the Minister for Children and Education rejects our amendment, because of its long-term, sustainable funding implications, I hope that morally, if not politically, he will subscribe to its spirit.

**Mr Galbraith:** Most certainly.

16:19

**Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):** Sam Galbraith has already spoken about the substantial investment in child care. On 21 September, he announced an additional £91 million, which was broken down into £42 million and £49 million. Today, he highlighted an extra £14 million. I am sure that in winding up, Peter Peacock will assure Mr Monteith that that is extra money, as he disputed whether it was recycled money or new money. It is new money. Stirling, which Mr Monteith knows well, will receive an extra £191,000 for 2000-01.

I will talk about the importance of our child care strategy in two ways, as there is a dual agenda. The principal aim, which has been mentioned in many speeches today, is to promote greater social inclusion. That involves providing much-needed support for parents and widening the horizons of parents and, importantly, children. Many members have spoken about putting children at the centre.

The second aim is to allow parents to return to work knowing that their children are being cared for in a high-quality environment. The £49 million is being put into child care partnerships and regulatory and inspection mechanisms to ensure that it is a high-quality environment.

The Government has also acknowledged that, as we move towards nursery education for three to five-year-olds, there is a need to provide a partnership of provision that allows parents flexibility to choose the system most appropriate to their needs. I have received many letters about that issue. Many parents support the pre-school playgroup approach, which encourages parental involvement. That is important and I would like it to be extended wherever possible.

Mary Scanlon made a good point in asking what we should be providing at that crucial stage in children's education. A lot of research is examining the importance of dialogue as well as play. Another point that Mary Scanlon mentioned is that it is important that, as far as possible, the system is sufficiently flexible to allow parents the right of deferred entry and still enable them to access two years of pre-school education.

Another issue that has been raised in letters I have received is the point about going across local authority boundaries as it might be more convenient for some parents to access pre-school provision near to the workplace.

I will briefly raise another issue of crucial importance. I do not know how many people saw the "Despatches" programme last week about the number of children who are living on the streets. Last night's BBC 2 programme about a primary school in Wales showed that teachers are having severe difficulty meeting the needs of the disadvantaged pupils who attend their school.

One way to deal with these issues is the rough sleepers initiative, which Wendy Alexander spoke about last week. Another strategy is the move towards more community schools, which is an attempt to have more co-ordination and integration between teachers, social workers and health professionals.

In Stirling, the director of children's services has identified four main principles: put children at the centre; go for inclusion and recognise the rights, needs and wishes of children; go for quality; and go for partnership. It is early days in Stirling, looking at our new community school, but we have already started discussions between the various professionals and the signs are promising.

I will finish with a quotation from one of the teachers in the BBC 2 programme last night. She said:

"Each morning, coming into our school, we have hungry children, sad children, bruised children, children who simply want a cuddle."

Add to that the problems of drink and drugs on the streets: these immense problems need a holistic child care strategy such as the one the Government is pursuing.

16:25

**Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green):** I welcome the initiative, which I hope will address the concerns of people in the sector who have lobbied me. The concerns have mostly centred on the anomalies—particularly for private sector provision—in the way in which different authorities apply regulations.

Although quality day care and pre-school

education are attractive phrases, I am concerned that the meat in that sandwich should be child development. That is what this should be about. It is a little early to mention the word education in respect of children of this age. I would hate to see this development lead to schools starting to compete against each other in numeracy, literacy and the rest.

This century has a wonderful history of development in the kindergarten—the child's garden—movement. People such as Froebel have developed ideas of space, music, balance, movement and the senses of sight and smell. I want to reinforce what Mary Mulligan, Brian Monteith, Elaine Smith, Scott Barrie and Donald Gorrie said. We are talking about young children. As Elaine rightly said, outdoor education follows right through nursery to primary and on to secondary education.

In recent years we have seen a steady erosion of outdoor education provision in Scotland in every respect. From playing fields to play areas to outdoor education teachers, that provision has been eroded and it is about time that it was set in the opposite direction. I strongly support Elaine Smith's remarks. Our children need access to sand, mud, puddles of water and piles of leaves to kick about.

16:27

**Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** Although we now have the beginnings of a child care strategy, the aspirations are set far too low. Where is the vision of universal, full-time child care? Helen Eadie has unfortunately left the chamber, but I wonder whether she really was saying that aspirations are no longer relevant in the new Labour world. We must aspire to full-time child care provision—not to do so undermines the whole strategy.

Affordability is a key aspect of child care provision. As of 1998, every four-year-old has access to a free, part-time, pre-school education place, which amounts to about two and a half hours of care per day. That provision will be extended to three-year-olds by 2002. However, any pre-school education or child care over and above that must be funded by parents.

I acknowledge that there has been an increase in child benefit, which is worth £64 a month at the higher rate. The typical cost of child care can be £50 per week for the very, very lucky—it is more likely to be around £120 per week. Other assistance comes in the form of the working families tax credit. It provides for child care costs up to a maximum of £70 per week for one child, depending on income and as long as the parent works more than 16 hours a week and is not a

student.

There are many exceptions to the rule and the forms are as complicated as we might expect. Also, the working families tax credit is available only if registered child care is used, so it cannot be used to pay the army of grannies who are often the main child care providers in a family. That is short-sighted and overly restrictive.

I am concerned about the working families tax credit from an equal opportunities perspective, too. It is paid through the wage packet by the employer or directly by the Inland Revenue. Couples can decide to whom it is to be paid. In 326,000 of the 406,000 couples who receive the credit, the main earner is the man, so it is likely that the credit will be paid into his wage packet. I am sure that many members will be aware of the problems that that will cause in households in which child care costs may not be seen as the priority. Unfortunately, that is the reality.

Although the working families tax credit is a reserved matter, it has a major impact on the Scottish child care strategy. I therefore ask the minister to address a number of key questions that require answers.

The working families tax credit is not available to parents who work fewer than 16 hours per week, despite the fact that such parents still have child care needs. Does the Government plan to change that? Will the minister make representations about that?

Will there be national monitoring of those who have been refused the working families tax credit and of the reasons for refusal? As I have said, to be eligible for the tax credit, children must be in registered child care, which may not include child care that is provided within the child's home. Some local authorities register such care, but registration should be standard across Scotland to ensure equal access to good-quality care at home. What is being done to ensure that that happens?

Parents in higher and further education struggle to pay for child care, and access funds are limited and insufficient. How is that problem being addressed?

Employers have a huge role to play in providing child care. Only 10 per cent of employers provide practical help with child care costs. That is abysmal and the Scottish Parliament should examine the matter.

However, the Parliament should lead by example. I am concerned that child care in the Parliament has slipped off the agenda—we have to ask why. I am talking about child care for the children of parliamentary staff rather than of MSPs. If we do not lead by example, how can we expect employers to provide child care?

The demand for child care is enormous and can be met only if the issue of affordability is dealt with. Therefore, I encourage members to support the amendment.

16:32

**Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):** I welcome Mr Galbraith's comments, which tackled the agenda for social inclusion as well as education.

The two things that most affect children's prospects are poverty and a lack of education and socialisation. If we can get this strategy right, we can improve the prospects of children and of society as a whole. The working families tax credit attacks poverty. Announcements such as we have heard today attack the lack of education and child care.

I will be delighted to go back to the Borders and tell the newly formed local child care partnership that it will have £250,000 to spend instead of £100,000. If the chamber will forgive me, I would like to mention a friend who died this week. While he was a councillor, Alan Hooper fought hard to get the council to take the provision of nursery education seriously. He would have been delighted to hear that such resources are to be available to the Borders.

I do not want to spend too much time on this, as most of what I wanted to say has been said, and it would be silly to repeat it. I hope that Mr Galbraith and Mr Peacock will accept some points that have been made on all sides of the chamber. For example, the idea was raised of deferred entry if people do not feel that their children are ready to go to formal school. We should be able to give local authorities some flexibility in how they apply the two-year pre-school provision.

Sylvia Jackson talked about arrangements for people living near council borders who would find it easier cross those borders for pre-school care provision. I hope that that will be facilitated.

I am glad that rurality was mentioned as a factor in weighting funding. There are still problems in rural areas with transporting youngsters to playgroups and nurseries that are miles away from the children's cottage or village. I hope that those problems will be considered.

Regulation is a strange thing. Of course we want to be certain that only qualified people do the job, but we do not want to hamstring people who have a genuine desire to help if they are less formally organised. With that in mind, I hope that regulation can be married with common sense and a bit of flexibility.

I commend Donald Gorrie for his comments. We have talked about very young children most of the

time today, but we must also help the over-fives, who are also vulnerable, through out-of-school clubs and after-school homework clubs. I hope that some of the funds will be spent in those areas.

Finally, I agree with Helen Eadie's point. As I said at the beginning, if we get this strategy right, we will be doing everyone a service—children, ourselves, society and the generations that follow. If children today are treated properly, their children will benefit too.

16:36

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** It was appropriate that in his opening address Sam Galbraith stressed the importance of child care. It is noticeable that many people have spoken on the same themes. Quite frequently these days, there is an almost depressing consensus in the chamber. When one of the principal participants is Sam Galbraith, however, that is unique. Nevertheless, much of what he said was genuinely welcomed on all sides.

I am somewhat bemused by the fact that the press release issued by the Scottish Executive claims in its first paragraph that this money represents an increase of £8 million in this year's allocation. That may be correct, but if I am not mistaken, it was not that long ago that an announcement was made along the same lines. Therefore, while today's announcement is good news, it is most certainly not new news.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to debate this issue. The recurrent themes today were quality, flexibility, variety and choice of care. We were all pleased to hear Sam Galbraith refer to the fact that there will be increased quality control in nursery care. We have come a long way since the days when the King Herod school of nursery care was the norm. Children are important. They are the most vulnerable section of society and we must ensure that they are looked after in a caring and safe environment.

The quality test has undoubtedly been passed, but the minister fails to recognise that there must be flexibility, variety and choice in nursery provision. The aims of nursery education vary. No one any longer thinks that nurseries are a dumping ground for kids while people are at work, but different families have different requirements. Some will consider early play a vital aspect of their child's development; others may see nursery as an opportunity for their child to develop social skills at an early age; many will see learning as the priority in choosing provision. Through the removal of the voucher system that was introduced by the Conservatives, the Government has removed a substantial and important element of choice.

Let us be blunt. Labour's decision to abolish the nursery voucher scheme took choice away from parents and increased the opportunities for local authorities to have a monopoly of nursery care.

Brian Monteith highlighted the figures. It is quite clear that over the past two and a half years the percentage of nursery places in the public sector has increased, largely at the expense of the private sector. We submit that that is not a satisfactory state of affairs. Quite clearly, many local authorities—for reasons of blind politics—have sought to restrict the private sector's contribution to this important aspect of our children's care.

Helen Eadie criticised the lack of provision under the previous Government, but the introduction of the voucher system represented an opportunity to increase the amount of care that was provided. I remind her that local authorities had the opportunity to make that provision themselves. Most of them were Labour controlled and failed, lamentably, to do so.

Other aspects of the Government's policies have militated against private sector child care. To some extent the working families tax credit works against those who seek to provide child care in their own homes—which many, even since the demise of the nuclear family, regard as the most satisfactory method of child care. One need only look at the comments of Frank Field to realise that, even among Labour politicians, there is an awareness that not all is well there.

Some aspects of child care remain highly dependent on the good will of the Westminster Government. After-hours clubs have been very successful, but they are reliant on the funding that is provided by the new opportunities fund, which is controlled by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

**Mr Galbraith indicated disagreement.**

**Bill Aitken:** Yes, it is. If Sam Galbraith checks his facts, he will discover that that is not a devolved power and that he depends on the good will of the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the continuation of that funding. If the Westminster Government's policy changes, we will be left with a deficit.

Overall, we welcome what has been said today and recognise that progress has been made. For that reason, at the end of the day we will support the Executive on this issue. Nicola Sturgeon's amendment has merits, but it is nit-picking to some extent. There is very little here that she can get her teeth into, and we think that she is seeking merely to divide.

16:43

**Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP):** This



afternoon I rise wearing hats, rather than anoraks, as in last week's debate. As the shadow deputy minister for children, I welcome the fact that the Executive is giving child care its proper place. It is central to the life of every child and every carer. However, wearing my other hats—as a former committee member of my local mother and toddlers group, as a past convener of Westerton pre-school and playgroup and, above all, as a parent—I must question how much this strategy is driven by the interests and needs of our children, and how much by the demands of the labour market and the Government's economies.

**Mr Galbraith indicated disagreement.**

**Fiona McLeod:** Mr Galbraith is shaking his head, but in the introduction to the consultative document that was issued last year, "Meeting the Childcare Challenge: A Childcare Strategy for Scotland", Donald Dewar said:

"In our election manifesto we undertook to produce a childcare strategy for Scotland which would 'match the requirements of a modern labour market'".

In the same introduction, Tony Blair declares that he wants

"to encourage more family friendly employment".

For me, those are not words that inspire a vision of a child care strategy. Mr Galbraith's opening remarks gave no indication of a Government that was prepared to learn or to move on. He dismissed the SNP's amendment because it includes the dread word funding, but today that issue has been raised repeatedly by members of all parties and the minister has signally failed to deal with it.

The SNP has long been committed to nursery places for all three and four-year-olds whose parents want them. However, we have taken a holistic, child-centred approach with our plans for children's centres. A child care strategy must provide an integrated service that caters for all the child's needs.

We must give all children a suitable and stable environment that gives them, and their parents or carers, access to all the services that they need in one place, with no shuttling between breakfast club, pre-school care, childminder, play scheme and health visitor. Children need a centred approach to life; they do not need to be on a conveyor belt.

The minister mentioned sure start Scotland and how it will apply to children up to the age of three. It will bring services to the child. As part of the vision, it would be nice if that could be broadened out to include all our children.

Children's centres would be one-stop shops for child care and could be managed as such, ensuring that all aspects of a child's life were in

balance, and that the funding could be assured and long-term. One of the SNP's main criticisms of the child care strategy as it is constructed at present is the precariousness of the funding. That is a big problem. Using lottery funding to fund child care is not a sign of commitment. Using one-year lottery funding is putting many providers in jeopardy. There was almost universal condemnation of that funding mechanism in the submissions to the consultation process, and the chamber has heard nothing from the Executive today that will reassure local groups and businesses that they can plan for a secure future.

Relying on the working families tax credit for the sustainability of out-of-school care seems to me to be in the same vein as the discredited voucher scheme of the Conservative party. It means that the carers have to have the money to spend first, and it therefore excludes many people from out-of-school care—people such as students. It does not allow services to have clear and assured funding that allows them to plan for the future, as is essential.

Another point that is often raised by those actively involved in child care is the management of the service. A truly integrated statutory service would relieve the management burden on parent and volunteer committees. Meeting a national child care strategy through those people's free time is unacceptable.

In conclusion, I again welcome the Scottish Executive's commitment to a child care strategy for Scotland. But the strategy as presented to us today leaves much to be desired in meeting the needs of all children in a flexible and fully funded manner. The minister told us that it has taken two and a half years to get here. Today's debate tells us that there is still a lot of work to be done.

16:47

**The Deputy Minister for Children and Education (Peter Peacock):** We have had a good, wide-ranging debate, with many useful comments from members of all the political parties. I am encouraged by the broad support for the Executive's efforts from all parts of the chamber.

We will take away some of the points that have been made so that we can consider them further. This is an on-going debate. We are in the midst of a major expansion of provision in Scotland, from which we will all learn as time goes on. I will respond to other points in a moment.

Before I move on, I want to put things in context. Our policy is clearly designed to impact in several ways. It is designed to give children the best possible start in life; good child care services, delivered in time, will bring benefits for health,

support families that are under stress and help to support better parenting. It will help to give greater structure to children's learning and will support work and training opportunities—which would otherwise not exist—for adults. It will promote a more inclusive society.

When Sam Galbraith spoke earlier, he set out the range of efforts that we are making in child care and related services. Local child care partnerships are now established in every part of Scotland and make a major contribution to the planning and integration of services. Massive extra funding is becoming available—directly from the Executive—through the new opportunities fund and the working families tax credit. Today, Sam Galbraith announced almost £14 million of new money for local authorities for next year—that is an increase of almost 140 per cent on current funding.

We have guaranteed a pre-school place for every four-year-old; we are building up the provision for every three-year-old; and, under sure start Scotland, we have committed substantial sums of money to extend services that support families with very young children. We will shortly launch a national child care information line that will be linked to local child care services in every area of Scotland.

We have mapped out the options for an improved system of child care regulation and we are introducing initiatives to improve training qualifications. That issue has been raised by a number of members, and I will return to it in a moment.

In all that, we have tried to act in an open and consultative way and in partnership with many parts of the public, private and voluntary sectors. We include the Parliament in that partnership and today's debate will contribute to our thinking and to the development of policy.

In the same way that the full Scottish Grand Committee of the House of Commons debated last year's initial green paper on the topic, we want to continue to interact with the Parliament. It is evident that many MSPs have much to contribute and want to bring their experience to bear; many are trying to make child care arrangements while they are in the Parliament. Moreover, we have heard about the difficulties that the Parliament's staff face in finding secure child care facilities. Some MSPs have also worked in child care services and at least one MSP was the chairman of a local child care partnership.

I will pick up some of the points that have been raised in the debate. First, we had the comparatively rare event of Nicola Sturgeon giving credit where credit is due. In some respects, her comments were very generous; I welcome her

welcome for the working families tax credit and for our approach to child care training and qualifications. Although she said this afternoon that the issue should not become a political battleground, that does not square with an article in *The Herald* in which she tried to make a number of political points in advance of the debate. However, we share the view that she expressed this afternoon. A great deal unites the parties on the issue.

Nicola Sturgeon raised some important questions and I will pin down completely the issue of money. We are in this business for the long run; we are not building up expenditure in order to cut it later. That principle is part of the very fabric of the Administration's programme to tackle social exclusion, to build more confident communities and to increase young people's life chances from their earliest years to the end of their lives.

The existing child care funding is part of the grant-aided expenditure settlement, which provides the mainstream funding for local authorities. The working families tax credit will continue to provide resources to fund services over time and to make them more viable than before. The funding for the major expansion of pre-school provision will become part of mainstream funding within the GAE system. It was implied that, when the money became available, some local authorities would use it for another purpose, but there is no evidence to support that. Local authorities across Scotland are just as deeply committed as the Executive to expanding the range of services. In fact, funding in the local authority sector is never—or only exceptionally—ring-fenced for a particular purpose and local authorities continue to give education the highest priority.

**Mr Monteith rose—**

**Peter Peacock:** I hope that Brian will not mind, but I have to press on.

I have no reason to believe that the Executive or the local authorities will make any cuts in education.

Nicola Sturgeon also raised the issue of integrating services and having one form—instead of the current variety—of provision. She also mentioned some parents' difficulties in securing wrap-around care. We do not intend to impede parents in their search for suitable services. However, we should recognise that different parents have different requirements at different stages of their lives. The system that is being developed allows parents to have a choice and to secure the services that suit their particular family circumstances. Those services should not be put in a straitjacket with one model privileged over others.

Furthermore, if we moved to the system that Nicola suggested, there would be no indication of what would happen to the voluntary and private sectors, which play a major part in this area of provision by bringing in different kinds of expertise—

**Fiona McLeod** *rose*—

**Peter Peacock:** If Fiona does not mind, I will press on. Many members raised points in the debate and I want to respond to them.

We have to keep our approach flexible. We need a mixed economy of provision that will still develop services that individual parents want for their individual children.

Brian Monteith was very bold to raise the question of vouchers. His only claim for that policy was that it caused a debate in Scotland. Well, he is right—it certainly caused a debate, but it did not do much else. In particular, it did nothing to achieve universal provision and the guarantee of a place for young people. That is what we are doing and we are doing it in a systematic, proper way.

Brian also raised the important question of choice. We are committed to having a mixed economy of provision and want a choice of services in the marketplace. That is not to say that parents will not exercise their choice; there is a clear indication that parents who are given the opportunity to do so—even before the services have been provided—will choose the local authority provision over other provision. The Accounts Commission is examining how local authorities are commissioning places and that will be reviewed in due course, but I repeat that we want to see choice in the marketplace.

Brian and others—I think Mary Scanlon, Ian Jenkins and Irene McGugan—also mentioned deferred entry. When a decision is made to defer a child's entry into primary school, it ought to be made on the basis of the interests of the particular child; it should not become part of a fashion in education, which people universally opt for. If the decision is made, the flexibility exists in the current funding arrangements, as does the money, for that place to be funded out of local authority resources. Parents are free to make that choice and local authorities provide for it—they are welcome to continue. There is no requirement to change the rules or regulations that apply at present.

Jamie Stone raised a number of points. He drew particular attention to the importance of child care as one way to introduce people back into work. As Malcolm Chisholm quite properly indicated, it is not just about the economic instrument; it helps women back into work in a way that has never before been possible and it helps to secure their family life.

Mary Mulligan asked about special educational needs and parents' ability to access information about their child's special needs. I remind Mary that there is a helpline for such parents and that the developing information services also provide an opportunity to ask such questions on child care.

Mary Scanlon mentioned the need to identify special educational needs and Colin Campbell also referred to the fact that the earlier a diagnosis is made of dyslexia—or another condition that would affect a child's learning in the future—the better. We fully agree with that; it is part of the process of building services so that earlier interventions can take place and we can benefit children more positively over time.

Irene McGugan talked about the planning framework, which is complex at present. That was a good point and I agree with it. We will continue to examine that and we will review it with a view to simplifying the framework in time.

Malcolm Chisholm made a point about the difficulty that some students face in securing child care, because of funding arrangements. We recognise the importance of that. Only a couple of weeks ago, Jack McConnell announced some £14 million of access funds to assist with that. We are conducting a survey with our colleagues south of the border to review the position and we are monitoring uptake.

Sandra White raised the question of top-slicing. That is an important matter and I want to keep it under review. I am quite prepared to speak to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about existing practices to see whether we can improve on them. My understanding is that such funds should be used to support voluntary and private provision. We have to ensure that that is happening.

Another point was made about cross-border placements, where parents can secure placements in other parts of their area. Sandra raised a point about the region that she represents and I would be happy if she wrote to me about the particular difficulties. In general, it is not difficult for local authorities to secure provision in other places.

Members have made many other points, not least of which was Scott Barrie's admission that he was one of the first children in Scotland to receive nursery education. What better advertisement could there be? [MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] He also made the important point that child care provision must impact on those in our community who are most vulnerable, the children with the greatest needs. That is central to what we are trying to achieve. Scott mentioned the need to debate that further. In due course, we hope to have a debate in the chamber about looked-after children.

Brian Adam and many others talked about qualifications, which are very important for the sector. Our intention is that everyone who works in the sector will be either qualified or working towards a qualification. The new Scottish vocational qualifications will help with that. We are mapping out provision and we will supply information that will allow people to make choices within that provision. Improvement of training and qualifications is important, partly because it impacts on the issues that have been raised by other members about wage levels, security of employment and the respect accorded to employment in the sector. Those matters are inextricably linked. We want progress and are happy to listen to a wide range of views.

The Administration has not been afraid to put its efforts and resources into developing child care and early education. We have already come a long way, but—as has been mentioned today—there is much more to do. We will put more money and effort into achieving our aims. This year we are more than doubling the resources that will go to local authorities for development of the child care strategy. We will progress work on reforming the child care and early education regulations and we expect to have a debate on that in Parliament.

We have worked to produce an information booklet that sets out the existing qualifications in early education and child care. That is the first step towards tackling a complex problem. The journey towards realisation of our child care vision will be long—we are off to a good start, but we intend to see the journey to its end. I commend our strategy to the Parliament.

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** That concludes today's debate. There are no Parliamentary Bureau motions so we will move straight to decision time.

## Decision Time

17:01

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** The first question is, that amendment S1M-285.1, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, which seeks to amend motion S1M-285, in the name of Mr Sam Galbraith, on the Executive's child care strategy for Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

### FOR

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)  
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)  
Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)  
Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)  
Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)  
Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)  
Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)  
Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)  
Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)  
Munro, Mr John (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)  
Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)  
Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)  
Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)  
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)  
Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)  
Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

### AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)  
Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)  
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)  
Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)  
Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)  
Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)  
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)  
Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)  
Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)  
Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)  
Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)  
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)  
Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)  
Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)  
Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)  
Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)  
Galbraith, Mr Sam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)  
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)  
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)  
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)  
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)  
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)  
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)  
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)  
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)  
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)  
 Johnston, Mr Nick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)  
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)  
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)  
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)  
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)  
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)  
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)  
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)  
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)  
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)  
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)  
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)  
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)  
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)  
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)  
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)  
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)  
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)  
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)  
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)  
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)  
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)  
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)  
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)  
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)  
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)  
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)  
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)  
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)  
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

commitment to its Childcare Strategy for Scotland and welcomes the substantially increased allocation of funding to local authorities in 2000-01 to develop the Childcare Strategy in their areas.

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is as follows: For 31, Against 74, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that motion S1M-285, in the name of Mr Sam Galbraith, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament supports the Scottish Executive's

## Proof-of-age Cards (Ayrshire)

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** We move on to members' business and a debate on motion S1M-219, in the name of Phil Gallie. I make my usual appeal for members to leave quietly and quickly if they are not staying to hear the debate.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament commends the actions of South Ayrshire Council in setting up the Proof of Age Card Scheme, which addresses in a positive manner the problem of underage procurement of alcohol, cigarettes and other harmful substances.

17:03

**Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con):** Few in this chamber and, I hope, few across the country, will recognise me as anything other than a Scottish Conservative MSP. However, I am here today to praise South Ayrshire Council, which is, strangely enough, Labour controlled—although only just, as Labour has 17 members and the Conservatives have 13.

Why should I give South Ayrshire Council credit? I am frequently in dispute with it on policy issues and, on the day that it launched the proof-of-age card, it banned me from a council premise. I will, nevertheless, give credit where it is due. The proof-of-age card is a good scheme; it has been introduced in an innovative and creditable way and it addresses long-standing problems.

Age limits on the purchase of drink, tobacco, glue and a range of other products are set to protect the young. It is important that the laws are upheld, for the good of young people and for the good of the community. We all know the impact that youths can have on communities when they obtain copious quantities of alcohol—they can cause great concern, especially to the elderly.

It is illegal to sell alcohol to people under the age of 18 and it is illegal to buy it for youngsters. However, until 1997, the police could do nothing about youngsters having alcohol in their possession. Happily, the previous Tory Government gave the police the power to confiscate alcohol from youngsters.

The proof-of-age scheme eases the situation. It is important that retailers have some kind of guide when faced with young people demanding articles from the long list of items that may not be sold to them. The proof-of-age scheme is designed to leave no doubt in retailers' minds that they are operating within the law. It offers them some protection.

Irene Oldfather, who, I understand, is in mainland Europe today, has lodged a motion that

suggests that a hard line should be taken against retailers who sell tobacco and other products to youngsters. If we are to take such a stance, we have to ensure that the retailers can comply. We must recognise the situation that they face when a group of young people demands a product. The retailer might be intimidated into going along with the youngsters' claims that they are old enough. However, the retailers who join the proof-of-age scheme have an element of protection: they can ask to see the card.

Councils are mandated to deal harshly with retailers who flout the law. It is to the credit of South Ayrshire Council that it has created links among its consumer protection bodies, its education body, the police and the health board, which has supplied a great deal of funding for the scheme.

Validate UK is funded by a company called Photo-me International and a number of major companies that recognise the merits of the scheme. The scheme is aimed at those between the ages of 16 and 18. It gives them cards through the education system, but it also takes account of those who have left school before the age of 18 and makes the cards available from retailers, police stations and council offices. That allows for a wide range of inclusion.

South Ayrshire Council has to be commended for its actions. Only Western Isles Council has a similar scheme. I believe that, if Irene Oldfather's motion were to be pressed, North Ayrshire Council and other councils could pick up from South Ayrshire Council and the scheme could be implemented throughout Scotland. One of the reasons why I lodged this motion was, as well as to commend Labour-controlled South Ayrshire Council, to ask the minister to think about the validate UK scheme—the proof-of-age scheme—and consider its value to young people and to people who run small businesses. There is mutual advantage in it, as well as advantage for the communities. I ask the minister to commend South Ayrshire Council and the scheme.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson):** Several members want to speak in this debate. If members keep their speeches to roughly three minutes, we will be able to accommodate everyone.

17:11

**Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab):** I shall try to keep my contribution brief.

I congratulate Phil Gallie on his warm words for South Ayrshire Council. I welcome the fact that he recognises the good work that a Labour-controlled council in South Ayrshire has been doing over the

years. That good work will continue.

It is important to recognise that the proof-of-age card scheme came about as a result of several other policies that have been adopted by the council, particularly on community consultation. The idea of introducing a scheme to tackle the problem of under-age drinking arose in consultation through community meetings; it came from young people themselves, who were consulted as part of that process.

The significance of the scheme is that it is operated by the council. Other proof-of-age schemes exist, but they are run either by licensed trade associations or by individual companies. However, South Ayrshire Council has taken the view that it should be responsive and provide a service at no cost to young people.

As Phil Gallie said, young people may want to prove their age to retailers to show that they are old enough to buy alcohol, to gain entry to discos or other entertainment facilities or to buy tobacco products. In other circumstances, younger children say that they want a proof-of-age scheme—for example, to be able to hire a video that is designated as suitable for somebody who is aged 12 or to be able to go the pictures to see a film that is suitable for 15-year-olds. It is to the council's credit that it is saying, "We have made a start on this process, which we are going to continue to roll out in the future."

Phil talked about the wider vision of getting other authorities to pick up on the scheme. East Ayrshire Council—part of whose area falls within my constituency, as does part of South Ayrshire Council's—has taken an interest in the scheme. With other MSPs, I will seek to pursue that, as—I am sure—will other Ayrshire authorities.

It is not often that I have the opportunity to agree with Phil Gallie, but I thank him for securing this debate and for his warm words about South Ayrshire. I am sure that my comrades on the council will be delighted for him to have the headline in the *Ayrshire Post* for once.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Things have obviously changed in Ayr since my day.

17:13

**Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** I, too, congratulate Phil Gallie on lodging this motion. Cathy Jamieson's comments are cogent, to say the least. It is a pity that some of our friends who sit to my left are not here today—the nats are absent. I can use the word nats, as Winnie Ewing is not here.

The strength of what South Ayrshire Council is doing can be seen in relation to children going to dances, which Cathy Jamieson touched on. I have

experienced such problems in the past. Our young ones get into these places and come out bloated because they were able to buy drink under-age—we know the old story. Unfortunately, I had occasion to gate one of my daughters the other day—unlike Mr Gallie, I am of an age to have teenage daughters. She turned round and said, "You are a hypocrite, Dad. Didn't you do the same in your day?" For the purposes of the *Official Report*, let us draw a discreet veil over that.

That problem leaves the people who organise the dances in a difficult position. A proof-of-age scheme, implemented via the schools—exactly as Phil suggested—would be very effective. Some schools already use smart cards, for school dinners and so on, so the scheme could be tagged on to that.

Let us not be too heavy on the kids. I remember that, a long time ago, a constituent came to me outraged that kids had come out of a dance and were rioting outside his front door. I was pretty green so I wrote to the chief constable. A sergeant later asked me to come up to the station to see the charge book, which showed that, in fact, my elderly constituent had come out of his door roaring drunk and shouting at the kids—it was he who had been lifted. We should go easy on the kids, therefore, but Phil Gallie's suggestion and what the council is doing would help hugely.

17:15

**Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con):** I am aware that this will not find favour with my friend Mr Gallie, but I confess that as a rule I am not in favour of identity cards.

I am torn between the view that people with nothing to hide have nothing to fear and the opposite view—I wish Phil Gallie would stop looking at me—that identity cards are one step too far down the route to Big Brother is watching you. However, Phil has at least three and a half years in the life of this Parliament and I hope at least four years after that to persuade me otherwise. He will perhaps approve of the start I have made because I believe that proof-of-age cards have a significant role to play.

I particularly welcome the shift of legal responsibility from the licence holder to the purchaser of alcohol. I speak as a former licence holder. From 1982 to 1986, I was part owner of the finest restaurant that Girvan in South Ayrshire could boast. I say that without fear of contradiction because it was the only restaurant that Girvan could boast. It is still there. As, I hope, a law-abiding citizen, the hardest part of that job was ascertaining the age of customers buying drink. It was hard enough 15 years ago—the older I get, the harder it is to tell.

That the legal burden of selling alcohol to those too young to buy it falls on the licence holder is an understandable grudge of the licensed trade. The present legislation is unjust. It is akin to blaming the victim of a burglary rather than the burglar; blaming the fire rather than the arsonist; the corpse rather than the murderer. If that is over-dramatic, I am sure everyone agrees that there is far too large a grey area at the moment—far too high a level of injustice.

I support South Ayrshire Council and commend it for introducing proof-of-age cards because they remove the grey areas and place the burden of proof firmly on the young person buying alcohol. I have no doubt that, where they are introduced, such schemes allow licensees to breathe a collective sigh of relief and allow law-abiding citizens to uphold the law with certainty.

17:18

**Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab):** I am a former member of South Ayrshire Council, but I am not speaking in that capacity. We thought long and hard about proof-of-age schemes during my time on the council.

I make a plea from the heart. When I was 23, I was thrown out of a pub not because I was drunk and disorderly—for a change—but because the proprietor would not believe I was over 18. Despite my former husband and my colleagues telling him otherwise he would not believe me. Later on I took the precaution of marrying a 6 ft tall 14 stone ex-rugby player but unfortunately our three children all inherited my height deficiency.

I support a voluntary proof-of-age scheme that extends to younger children. Cathy Jamieson said that South Ayrshire Council is considering that. I approach it from the point of view of young children and teenagers being allowed to access services to which they are entitled. When my eldest son was 12, he had the embarrassing experience of being turned away at the cinema—all his pals of the same age who were 5 ft 6 in with broken voices got in and my poor lad at 4 ft 6 in with his wee, piping voice did not.

When he was eight, my other son was refused entry to the swimming pool. He had to phone me to come and say that he was old enough to swim with his mates. It was doubly embarrassing because I was the convener of the committee that ran the swimming pools at the time. I feel quite strongly about this matter. My children would love a proof-of-age scheme. It would be a great relief from embarrassment for all the wee, young-looking children and teenagers in Scotland.

17:20

**Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD):** Well

done, Phil: good motion.

Other people have told the stories that I was going to tell, so the case for a card that will help children, publicans and small shopkeepers is established. I would like to press the minister to say either that the Scottish Executive should promote a national scheme, or it should encourage each council to have its own scheme—while ensuring that the schemes are compatible. One way or another, the Executive should promote a scheme throughout Scotland, or say, "We support the idea, but the relevant parliamentary committee should promote it."

We must promote this scheme nationally and it must not cost money. A previous scheme, which was established by the charitable arm of the booze manufacturers, was free for children, but when it began to be charged for, the whole thing collapsed. The scheme must be free, it must be compatible across Scotland and it must enable people of different ages to have access to different things.

One relevant issue that we could look at is the fact that people are allowed to do things at different ages. Perhaps there should be an age at which one becomes an adult, and can drive cars, go drinking, smoke and so on. That is a separate issue, but it is worth examining.

We should support the South Ayrshire scheme strongly, but the Executive must endorse it and either promote it actively or get Parliament to do so.

17:22

**The Deputy Minister for Communities (Jackie Baillie):** I apologise in advance, because I am loaded with the cold. If I have to stop occasionally, I hope that members will understand.

The motion that we have discussed this evening is at the very heart of community safety and the vital social welfare of young Scots. I welcome this opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Executive. I join in the chorus of thanks to Mr Gallie for congratulating the excellent work of a Labour-controlled local authority. Cathy Jamieson is right when she says that it will continue to be Labour controlled.

The debate has been considered. It is clear from the many and varied speeches that Mr Gallie's motion has struck a chord with a great many members. We will take away some points and chew on them further: others I will respond to in the closing minutes.

I sense members' concern about not only the seeming ease with which children and young people can get hold of age-restricted goods such as alcohol, tobacco, solvents, fireworks, knives



and videos, but the potentially damaging effects that those products can have on the individuals concerned. Often, the impact is felt beyond the individual. Other family members and the wider community are affected, particularly where anti-social and criminal behaviour arises as a result of youngsters getting hold of such products.

Retailers who sell age-restricted products are, of course, still primarily responsible for ensuring that such goods do not get into the hands of those deemed too young in law to purchase them. The proof-of-age card not only enables retailers to ensure that they do not breach the law, but assists people who, although of age, appear too young to buy age-restricted products. Although this is the first scheme of its kind operated by local government in Scotland, there is excellent evidence from similar schemes run elsewhere in the UK that suggests that where these cards have been introduced, the number of complaints about illegal sales has decreased.

The Executive, therefore, is happy to commend South Ayrshire Council for taking the initiative and launching its proof-of-age-card scheme, which will enable all retailers in the council's area to ask for the same proof-of-age card. A standard policy of no proof, no sale, gives retailers confidence in complying with the law.

Ultimately, of course, the scheme's success will depend on the collaboration and commitment of the local business community, trading standards, the police and schools. From what I have learned about the scheme, it is clear that the council has worked hard to get everyone on board; I am certain that that bodes well for the scheme's success.

Locally driven, multi-agency work such as this will be most effective. As Cathy Jamieson said, young people were themselves involved in the implementation. Such schemes are attractive to young people, particularly those of age who, when asked, cannot prove their age, and those who do not look their age. I have to admit, I did not think that it was a problem for most of us sitting round this chamber, aside from Elaine Murray.

Schemes such as this set up a key barrier to illegal use by young people and exploitation by retailers. The illegal sale of all age-restricted products is to be abhorred. As the motion suggests, alcohol and tobacco are probably the two products that give rise to most concern. Under-age smoking and drinking is, of course, nothing new. Children smoke and drink for all sorts of reasons; some do so to show their independence, others do it because their friends do. Some children smoke and drink because adults have told them not to. In short, there is no single cause.

For some youngsters, early experimentation is nothing more than that, but unfortunately—for an increasing number—that first puff or drink leads to a lifetime of problems associated with alcohol and tobacco. We know, for example, that 82 per cent of adults start smoking in their teens and that a third of teenagers buy alcohol for themselves. There is increasing evidence to suggest that people are presenting with alcohol problems at an earlier age, sometimes in their early 20s. There is evidence to suggest that youngsters who smoke and drink are more likely to dabble in drugs. For some teenagers, heavy frequent drinking goes hand in hand with the use of illegal drugs.

Smoking is the most preventable cause of ill-health in Scotland. It results in 13,500—that is one in five—deaths every year, and 33,500 hospital admissions. The message on smoking, therefore, is quite unambiguous: "Don't do it."

Alcohol, on the other hand, in moderation and at the right time and place, can be included in a healthy lifestyle. However, excessive drinking carries a heavy toll in illness, accidents, anti-social behaviour and criminal acts of violence. Its costs—in personal, social and economic terms—are great and are too often hidden or unheeded. Research tells us that alcohol misuse is linked with crime, lower achievement, poor mental and physical health, family breakdown and poor employment prospects. Sadly, the age of 14—yes, 14—appears to be an alcohol milestone, with most teenagers having begun to drink by 15.

Not surprisingly, the Executive is, therefore, concerned about the upward trend in the levels and frequency of drinking and smoking among 12 to 15-year-olds. We are giving a high priority to tackling this problem. We have set targets to achieve a reduction in those levels and we are taking action to improve the situation.

Tougher enforcement of illegal under-age sales is another plank in our strategy. We are working closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Association of Chief Police Officers and trading standards representatives in Scotland to achieve that. We would encourage wider adoption of proof-of-age-card schemes, such as the one launched in South Ayrshire.

At UK level, agreement has been reached with the National Association of Cigarette Machine Operators on a code for their members that would provide clear guidance on the siting arrangements that are expected. On alcohol, there are several measures in place to address young people's drinking. For example, many councils have introduced public bylaws to curb drinking by young people in public places. Powers are now available to the police to confiscate alcohol from under-18s in public places. Those measures are having a positive effect in reducing the incidence of

intimidating behaviour on street corners.

Those sanctions are backed by the criminal law, but it is not our intention to make criminals of people—young or old—who drink in public places. We want to reduce or eliminate the nuisance element and petty crime associated with it. We want the streets to feel safer for the general public. The absence of threatening groups on street corners and in public parks goes a long way towards that goal. From a health policy point of view, if more young people are drinking less alcohol, the health risks associated with alcohol consumption will be substantially reduced.

The Government has recently moved to introduce legislation to ban the sale to children of butane gas cigarette lighter refills. That blocks a potentially dangerous loophole and reinforces existing laws forbidding the sale of volatile substances to children. To complement those enforcement initiatives, we have set up the Scottish Advisory Committee on Alcohol Misuse to drive forward implementation of a new alcohol misuse strategy.

Much else is being done to reduce levels of smoking and drinking by children and young people. Local enforcement policies on illegal sales of alcohol, tobacco and other age-restricted products are particularly effective when backed by a simple and acceptable way for young people to prove their age. That more than anything removes doubts and arguments and gives retailers confidence in complying with the law.

The Scottish Executive commends South Ayrshire Council for taking the initiative, and I for one would be pleased to see other councils follow its excellent example. I can assure Donald Gorrie that I will examine the ways in which the Executive can further promote such schemes. The more difficult it is for under-age users to access potentially dangerous products, the more the young people affected and Scottish society will ultimately benefit.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you. I now close this meeting of the Parliament.

*Meeting closed at 17:31.*

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