

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 3 May 2001

Session 1

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 3 May 2001

[THE DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Standing Orders

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item is a debate on motion S1M-1884, in the name of Murray Tosh, on behalf of the Procedures Committee, on changes to standing orders.

09:30

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): I am grateful to you, Presiding Officer, for selecting me to speak in the debate.

The Procedures Committee's first report of 2001 is substantial and contains a number of detailed changes to standing orders. Many of the changes are minor and technical, which reflects the kind of work that we have to do to consider the evolution of our procedures and standing orders and the experience of working them. However, there are some significant changes, which I will highlight. Broadly, the amendments are to chapter 9 and chapter 9A—the relatively new chapter in standing orders—which relate to public bill and private bill procedures respectively.

The preparatory work undertaken by the committee and many of the changes that we have recommended arose from requests made by the Presiding Officer and Margaret Smith, the convener of the Health and Community Care Committee, that we should examine the time scales for consideration of bills and for the lodging of amendments. All the recommended changes are set in what is essentially the existing process—the current sitting pattern and the current times available for legislation. The changes that we have made have therefore largely been to refine that process and to dot a lot of i's and cross a lot of t's.

One of the first issues that we considered was the notice period for lodging amendments and the intervals between stages of bills. The committee took the view that, in order to provide members with the final marshalled list of amendments sufficiently far in advance of stage 2 consideration and stage 3 debates, the periods of notice for lodging amendments should be adjusted. In the case of amendments at stage 3, the committee agreed to recommend that the notice period should be extended from two days to three. Although that results in a slight reduction in the

time available for members to lodge amendments, the committee considered that that was outweighed by the advantages for members of having the marshalled lists earlier than they currently do and of therefore being able to prepare more effectively for the debate.

We did not feel that it was necessary to recommend the same change to the notice period for amendments at stage 2 or at what we are proposing in the report to call the reconsideration stage. However, we thought that bringing forward the final daily deadline for those stages would be beneficial; the report therefore recommends that the deadline on the final day should be brought forward to 2 pm for those stages. The committee took the view that an earlier daily deadline at all stages would increase the ability of the clerks to discuss with the members within normal working hours those amendments—it can be a considerable proportion of them—that require some clarification and reworking before they become fully admissible. The committee therefore endorses the suggestion by the clerks that the daily deadline be amended from 5.30 pm to 4.30 pm. That standardises the time for lodging questions and motions with the chamber desk.

The committee has recommended changes to the minimum intervals between the stages of bills in order to take out the imprecision that arises from talking about two weeks. If the intervals are defined in terms of sitting days, we would know exactly how long there will be between each stage. We have recommended a number of other changes. We have suggested that the deadlines for withdrawing or supporting amendments should be brought into line with the deadlines for lodging them. One of several further minor changes worth drawing to the Parliament's attention is that, as things stand, when a new Parliament is elected, members will be banned from introducing a member's bill for six months, either if a similar bill has been defeated towards the end of the previous session or if it has simply lapsed at the end of that session. We felt that that was unreasonable and that, in a new session, members should be able to begin afresh so that a member's bill can be introduced quickly after the dissolution.

We recommend changes to the rules on financial resolutions. One substantial change is that the role of the Finance Committee to consider the provisions that give rise to the need for a financial resolution should be delegated to the lead committees, which ought to consider the financial provisions in the context of the subject of the bills. We spent some time in committee discussing whether ministers should be required to adhere to an earlier deadline than that for other MSPs for lodging amendments to bills. We discussed that with the Executive and decided to

make no recommendations to standing orders on the matter. We will review that in a further phase of work in some six months' time.

We have considered and endorsed the advice given by the Presiding Officer in the business bulletin of 9 February on stage 1 and stage 3 amendments. We considered that no changes to standing orders were required on that.

I hope that members will find that the detailed recommendations in the report are sensible and satisfactory and that they improve the working of our legislative process. I hope that members are looking forward to a fresh dose when we come to consider further changes to standing orders, as we will in a few months' time.

I move,

That the Parliament (a) approves the recommendations of the Procedures Committee's 1st Report, 2001, *Changes to Chapters 9 and 9A of the Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament* (SP Paper 316) and agrees to amend the Parliament's Standing Orders in accordance with Annexe A and Annexe B (Appendix B) to the Report and (b) agrees that these amendments to the Standing Orders come into force on 4 May 2001 and that the amendments set out in paragraphs 1 and 3 of Annexe B (Appendix B) to the Report shall apply only in relation to Bills introduced on or after that date.

09:36

The Deputy Minister for Parliament (Euan Robson): I am pleased to indicate on behalf of the Executive our support for the Procedures Committee report, which proposes a range of procedural changes to chapter 9 of the standing orders on public bill procedures and parallel changes to chapter 9A on private bill procedures. I can confirm therefore that there will be no Executive amendment to the motion.

As members will be aware, standing orders of the Scottish Parliament are an essential framework within which the Parliament can effectively operate and carry out its daily business. It is important therefore that the standing orders are kept under constant review so that the parliamentary processes can continue to flow smoothly. I express the Executive's thanks to the members of the Procedures Committee and its convener Murray Tosh for the positive way in which they have approached this work and for providing the Executive with the opportunity to comment on the proposals for change.

We also acknowledge the work of the financial resolutions working group, which comprised parliamentary and Executive officials. The group was set up to examine the procedures on financial resolutions and to consider whether any changes to standing orders were needed. Its recommendations have been incorporated into the Procedures Committee report.

The committee has suggested a number of changes which the Executive has endorsed. Members may be relieved, as I am, that I will not comment in detail on those changes. The changes, which are mainly minor, reflect practical experience gained in operating the present provisions and are designed to clarify, ease and simplify parliamentary business. We are indebted to officials for their detailed and painstaking work.

The revisions include changes to the time scales for lodging amendments to bills and intervals between stages and time scales for bill stages. They also include a wide range of minor changes that will clarify the interpretation of and rules and procedures in relation to a number of areas, including: member in charge of a bill; accompanying documents; terminology relating to committees; Subordinate Legislation Committee procedure for considering delegated provisions and the reporting process on budget bills; participation of junior ministers on non-Executive bills; selection of amendments; process for consolidation bills; and consequential for private bills.

The changes to time scales for lodging amendments to bills and intervals between stages are designed to ease the management of parliamentary business. Some time scales are currently expressed in weeks, but it would be more practical to calculate the intervals in sitting days.

The Executive has a substantial programme of new legislation and committees and members have a number of important proposals for legislation. It is therefore vital that the Parliament's procedures assist the process of consideration by committees and members. Of course, we cannot rely solely on rules for the smooth flow of parliamentary business, so it is important that members and officials co-operate to ensure the best outcomes.

The changes to standing orders outlined and recommended by the Procedures Committee should assist in the more efficient and effective discharge of parliamentary business. This is an evolutionary process and, as Parliaments go, ours is still in its formative stages. It is therefore important that we are ready to adapt the framework according to the practical realities and our experiences. The proposed changes are based on experience gained in the past year. The Executive stands ready to assist any future work of the Procedures Committee and we look forward to a continued joint-working and productive relationship.

09:40

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): The motion is non-controversial. However, the decision

on a procedure for dealing with private legislation is important to the Parliament and has been considered at length by the Procedures Committee. Although no private legislation has yet been lodged in the Parliament, it is important that the structures and processes are in place to deal with such bills when they are submitted.

It is estimated that, once the guidance is in place, there will be one or two private bills a year. Although the volume may initially be larger—I believe that some parties are holding back from lodging private legislation until a decision on procedures is made—it is vital that private legislation is processed through the Parliament, so that the public interest can be taken into account.

This is a non-controversial issue and all that it remains for me to say is that the SNP supports the Procedures Committee report.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate, and Donald Gorrie has the entire slot to himself. You have up to five minutes, if you want, Mr Gorrie.

09:41

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I will not take up that amount of time, Presiding Officer.

At the Liberal Democrat group meeting this week, I was able to assure my colleagues that the Procedures Committee report was not a sinister establishment plot but had been agreed unanimously and represents a modest step in the right direction on the timing of bills. As Gil Paterson said, it also sets out the procedure for dealing with private legislation, which is not the same as members' legislation. I think that some people are confused about that, but private legislation is what would be needed if someone wanted to build a railway or something like that.

As the convener of the Procedures Committee said, there will be continuous scrutiny of our procedures. Lengthening the period of notice for amendments and the period between the different stages of a bill is a step in the right direction, even though the increase is only small. I think that we still have not got it right and will have to lengthen the times so that we can deal with things in a measured and thorough way.

This week, the committee had a good session with the Minister for Parliament, who rightly said that he did not want life here to be a sort of war between the Parliament and the Executive. I am sure that we all sign up to that. However, there are occasions on which what may be convenient for ministers and civil servants in promoting their legislation may not be convenient for the Parliament in dealing with it. We must address those issues fairly and find a balance, but the

report moves a little way in the right direction. It is a good example of people working by agreement within the Parliament and I therefore welcome it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kenneth Macintosh to wind up for the Procedures Committee.

09:43

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank members for their brief contributions to this morning's debate. The debate has been short, but we have agreed a large number of detailed changes to parliamentary procedure. Few, if any, of the changes have been controversial, as Gil Paterson said, and credit for that is due to the work done by members of the committee and by John Patterson and the committee clerks, whom I thank. I also thank Andrew Mylne and his team from the Parliament's directorate of clerking and reporting, which also put in a lot of work on the report. Finally, I thank the financial resolutions working group, which was responsible for many of the detailed changes.

Our convener, Murray Tosh, outlined most of the substantial points. I had written on my speaking notes, "Not much I wish to add." The update is that there is nothing I wish to add to what has been said by other members. However, this is not the last word on procedures. I emphasise that the committee recognises that future changes in operational procedures or the work load of the Parliament, or simply the accumulation of more experience of our legislative process, may well result in the requirement to revisit those procedures. The committee is happy to play its part in that process.

There has been a willingness on all sides, from all parties and from the Executive, to ensure that the new Parliament works effectively and to allow procedures to evolve and improve. No one likes change for its own sake, but institutions have a habit of quickly fossilising. I am glad to report that there are no fossils here and I commend the report to the chamber.

Genetically Modified Organisms

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is a debate on motion S1M-1875, in the name of Andy Kerr, on behalf of the Transport and the Environment Committee, on that committee's report on genetically modified organisms.

09:45

Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to bring the Transport and the Environment Committee's report to the attention of Parliament. A strength of the committee is that we come to issues without carrying baggage and preconceptions about the matters that we choose to investigate. We listen to the witnesses, read the evidence that is submitted to us and make a judgment based on what we have heard and read. The report that we are discussing today contains substantive elements of that evidence.

There is perhaps less interest in the report than there might have been. When a committee agrees that something is okay and that it is satisfied with the adequacy of the control mechanisms that are available under the current system, that does not grab the headlines. Nonetheless, I think that our report covers a number of important points.

The petition that initiated our report asked the Scottish Parliament to exercise its powers not to permit the release of genetically modified crops into the environment by way of trials or commercial planting and to establish in Scotland a body or mechanism to address concerns about the impact on the environment and on human health of such releases, by way of an inquiry, independent commission or advisory body. No one would argue that the issues at stake are not complex or substantial. We certainly acknowledge the concerns that have been expressed in the public debate about genetically modified organisms and the possible risk associated with them. However, in debating the use of GMOs, as in debating many issues, a careful balance needs to be struck.

We focused our approach on those bodies and individuals that we felt were most appropriate to give us up-to-date information. They included: Friends of the Earth Scotland, the organisation that wrote the petition and brought the debate to the fore; RSPB Scotland; Dr Ulrich Loening, a retired director of the Centre for Human Ecology; the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, which analyses the risk of GMOs; and the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission, which goes beyond the question of risk from individual plantings and

crops and considers more strategic advice on ethical and social implications. The committee is grateful to the bodies that participated in our inquiry.

Many of our discussions centred on legality and European regulations. The legal advice that we received from the parliamentary solicitor was clear. It suggested that neither the Parliament nor Scottish ministers has the power to impose a blanket ban on the release of GM crops, as was proposed in the petition from Friends of the Earth Scotland. I understand that that view is shared by the Scottish Executive rural affairs department. It stems from the provisions of European directive 90/220/EEC, which requires that member states should not unnecessarily restrict the release of GM crops if the release is safe for human health and for the environment. That explains to those who argue against GM plantings why there is a clear case for not imposing a ban. Through our discussions with the organisations involved in the debate, we came to the view that a blanket ban would not work. The current arrangements could be tested in the courts, but the majority view of the committee was that any court case would be difficult to defend and probably unsuccessful.

The committee—with the exception of Robin Harper, Bruce Crawford and Fiona McLeod—therefore recommended that, in the context of the current European legal framework, it was not able to support the petitioners' request that the Parliament should use its powers to ban the release of GM crops into the environment.

We also considered the various possible risks of GMOs. We erred on the side of the precautionary principle, which suggests that we should consider that there may be such risks. Laboratory testing is done at the start of any process if there is a desire to release a specific product. No one, including Friends of the Earth Scotland, has raised any objections to laboratory testing. However, laboratory testing can go only so far, so there is a need, as has been identified, for farm-scale trials and further releases into the environment.

Again, with the exception of Robin Harper, Bruce Crawford and Fiona McLeod, the committee agreed that it supports the precautionary approach to GM releases. Consequently, the majority of members considered that, in the context of the European legal framework, there is a role for farm-scale trials in a rightly cautious but not unnecessarily restrictive approach to GM development. Again, we view the issue as one on which we must take evidence and consider the existing control mechanisms. We came to the view that farm-scale trials, within the context of the current controls, are appropriate.

ACRE is the organisation that considers the science. It deals with the precautionary

mechanisms and investigations prior to planting—there are years of investigations before any planting in the environment. Its evidence to the committee was strong and we did not receive any further evidence that led us to doubt our confidence in its scientific advice. We recognise that there is no consensus in Scottish society on GMOs, but we examined the control mechanisms that ACRE has adopted—that is its role—and we were satisfied with them.

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): The fact that GM contaminated seed was issued in error suggests that the control mechanisms are lax. Perhaps ACRE has been able to deal with only the specific issue of trials and not more general matters. How would Mr Kerr reassure the public and farmers—especially organic farmers—who might want stricter quality controls over the seeds that are being planted?

Mr Kerr: I am not sure whether Brian Adam is referring to the Advanta incident. If so, the committee report refers to that and I will cover it later.

ACRE's job is to consider an individual bid for a seed to be placed into the environment, to carry out the laboratory testing that is required and to assess the risk to the environment from a proposed field-scale trial. From the evidence that the committee received, and from ACRE's answers to the questions that it was asked, we have confidence in its approach. The mechanisms are in place; proper application is important in every case. Clear lessons are to be learned from the Advanta incident.

We recognised that there are specific Scottish interests in the advisory framework on GMOs. Some aspects of the rural economy, such as crofting, are largely peculiar to Scotland. The branding of Scottish products is also important. Brian Adam mentioned organic farming, which is another important issue.

Two members of ACRE are from Scotland, albeit that they are on the committee because of their scientific ability, not because they are Scottish. All AEBC appointments are made in consultation with the devolved Administrations—ministers from devolved Administrations appointed two members. Representatives from the AEBC told the committee that they recognised that there are issues unique to Scotland, which they take into account when considering these matters. Indeed, the AEBC is required to do so in its terms of reference.

The committee, with the exception of Robin Harper, Bruce Crawford and Fiona McLeod, did not agree with Friends of the Earth Scotland that the AEBC would not be able or willing to represent Scottish interests. We were satisfied that a

separate Scottish body was unnecessary and expressed confidence in the work of the AEBC.

We feel that there is much greater scope for transparency, publicity and involvement of local communities to ensure that the public are properly advised about farm-scale trials of GM crops. We have requested that the Executive and the other bodies involved produce a plan to inform local communities of trials and discuss and agree minimum information that is required of companies if trials are to take place. The committee is keen that that should not involve any additional expenditure by public bodies—the companies should meet the cost. The recommendation of the committee was to support the general principle that the costs of seeking approval for GM releases should be met by the applicant. The committee encourages the Scottish Executive to work within that principle when possible.

Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Mr Kerr: Yes. Thank you for the promotion.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: I am sure that it is well deserved.

Will the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food continue to be the main source of information to the Scottish Parliament on GM plantings and harvests? Members will recall that in May last year MAFF failed for almost four weeks to inform Scottish ministers of GM seed plantings that spring. The minister subsequently failed to tell us until I found out a week later that there had been a GM harvest from the same sites in 1999. Will we still use MAFF, which farmers do not trust?

Mr Kerr: Dorothy-Grace Elder has made some wild generalisations. I do not think that her portrayal of what happened reflects the role of MAFF at that time.

The committee agreed unanimously that the Advanta incident was not handled properly. Major players in the game heard about the Advanta release on Radio Scotland—that was not good enough. We are critical of the fact that no control mechanisms or management systems were in place to deal with and give information on the incident. As someone with a background in quality management procedures and control mechanisms, I found it astonishing that no procedure was in place to deal with the incident. However, the Scottish Executive has recognised the problem and has produced draft guidelines for dealing with such an incident, should one happen again. An important point to have emerged from the report is that, with the Advanta incident, which was unacceptable in many ways and did not reflect well on the organisations involved in GMO development, we have identified the problem, which should mean that it will not happen again. I

assure Dorothy-Grace Elder that we have identified the problems and asked the Executive to resolve them—the Executive has now drafted guidelines on the issue.

In closing—I am sure that the Presiding Officer will be happy about that—I say that, although there are great public concerns about GMOs, great benefits can be sought from them if we make progress. The reason for farm-scale trials is to see whether we can make progress. The settled will of the committee is for the precautionary approach. We have said that research on GMOs must continue to ensure that public confidence is maintained. I commend the report to the chamber.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the 1st Report, 2001 of the Transport and the Environment Committee, *Report on petition PE51 from Friends of the Earth Scotland on genetically modified organisms* (SP Paper 253).

09:57

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): I want to take the five minutes that I have in this debate to explain why the SNP dissented from only three of the 79 recommendations in the report. As Andy Kerr outlined, the committee was as one on a vast majority of the issues.

Given the brevity of the time that is available, I will deal with recommendations 25 and 35, which the SNP dissented from. They are about this Parliament's power to deal with GM crop field trials under the EC directive 90/220/EEC, which Andy Kerr mentioned. My colleague Bruce Crawford will deal with recommendation 63, which is about a separate Scottish advisory body.

As Andy Kerr said, GM crop trials are of huge interest to the public. That is primarily because genetic modification is a new science, which has not only the potential to produce enormous benefits for agriculture in this country, but the potential to endanger human and environmental health. That is why the public is interested in GM crops and has concerns about them. The committee's report is timely and its recommendations should be accepted by the Government. The Parliament should be aware of people's concerns and should accept the recommendations of the committee to show the Scottish people that we understand their concerns.

Recommendations 25 and 35 rest upon the interpretation of the EC directive. The Scottish Executive has said that it cannot restrict GM crop field trials, because the directive requires that Governments should

"not unnecessarily restrict the release of GM crops if the release was safe for human health and the environment."

The key point is whether at this time GM crop releases are

"safe for human health and the environment."

Andy Kerr alluded to the fact that there is not a consensus view on the safety of GM crops within the committee, society in general or the scientific community. A quick scan of the enormous amount of literature on the safety of GM crops will back up that view. For example, the Royal Society of Canada's expert panel examined this issue—Canada is the third largest GM crop-planting nation on the planet—and concluded that there was no full evidence that GM crops did not cause harm. Dr Ulrich Loening told the committee that there has been insufficient research on the long-term effects of GM crops. Furthermore, a British Medical Association report entitled "The Impact of Genetic Modification on Agriculture, Food and Health", which was published in 1999, contained 19 recommendations, including a moratorium on GM commercial planting and the statement that there should be no releases of GM material into the environment.

It is therefore important to point out that, instead of ensuring the safety of GM releases, the Scottish Executive is looking for a supposed lack of evidence of harm. Any approach should be the other way around; safety should come first.

I will turn from the consideration of the scientific arguments to a further investigation of the EC directive. Article 4 of the directive states that Governments must

"ensure that all appropriate measures are taken to avoid adverse effects on human health and the environment which might arise from the deliberate release ... of GMOs"

which can be interpreted to mean that safety must come first.

The SNP believes that article 4 enables the Parliament to prevent GM crop field trials. Indeed, we are not alone in holding that view: Friends of the Earth Scotland gave such evidence to the committee.

Mr Kerr: In response to that very point, Sarah Boyack said that any such prevention

"would be illegal unless based upon sound scientific evidence of harm."—[*Official Report, Transport and the Environment Committee*, 27 September 2000; c 998.]

Where is that evidence?

Fiona McLeod: Mr Kerr knows as well as I do that the committee was aware of the lack of consensus on the issue, and that there is still no such consensus within the scientific community. That is the issue that we must examine.

I want to return to article 4 of the EC directive, which the SNP and Friends of the Earth Scotland believe would allow the Parliament to prevent GM

crop field trials. Just last month, the Friends of the Earth Cymru received legal opinion on the matter to the effect that the article permits individual Governments to prevent such trials. In June 2000, the Welsh Assembly voted for a moratorium on those trials—and Wales is still a GM-free country. There are other European Union—

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): Will the member give way?

Fiona McLeod: I am terribly short of time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is enough time.

Fiona McLeod: Okay.

Ross Finnie: Fiona McLeod is absolutely right—like this Parliament, the Welsh Assembly has had an agonising debate about the subject. However, does she concede that, in the past 10 days, even the minister in charge has had to accept the legal advice, which he will tender to the Assembly, that it is not in a position to impose a blanket ban under EC directive 90/220/EEC?

Fiona McLeod: As I understand it, the legal advice that the Friends of the Earth Cymru has received says the exact opposite. As a result, the matter is still up for debate in Wales. Other EU countries bound by the same EC directive have actually done something under article 4. Austria, Luxembourg, Greece and France have implemented controls over GM crop trials.

The committee itself accepted that the directive is open to interpretation. That question is not yet closed, and perhaps it is up to the European Committee to pursue further this specific issue in the report. That would be an example of a devolved Parliament and its committees working for Scotland.

Apart from three recommendations, the SNP signs up to this report. I hope that members will not think that I am finishing on a sour note if I say that, given the three recommendations on which the committee failed to agree, we need an independent Scottish voice in Europe to argue for Scotland's return to a GM-free, quality-food nation.

10:05

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): The Friends of the Earth Scotland petition, on which the Transport and the Environment Committee has based its report, asked us to do two things: to stop the release of GMOs and to establish separate Scottish monitoring bodies. As those requests form the report's core issues, it is a bit of a cop-out to agree with everything apart from the two points that stimulated the whole debate in the first place. Furthermore, it is extraordinary that,

in her opening statement, the SNP member told us that the party's views on separate Scottish monitoring organisations would be established by a later speaker instead of doing so in that speech.

I assume that the SNP will hold with the reservation that it made at committee, which was based on the fact that the two members had not taken part in the process and could not realistically have been expected to sign up to the full recommendations. At the time, the committee showed flexibility and agreed at that stage to respect those views. However, many months have passed, and one would have thought that, in the intervening period, some of the evidence would at least have influenced the SNP line in this debate. The evidence gathered by the committee goes to the heart of what we are all about. If we are asked to examine an issue and then gather evidence, we are beholden to reflect upon that evidence in order to come to some conclusions. We would be an anti-Parliament—or a non-Parliament—if we simply gathered evidence and then disregarded it.

Fiona McLeod: Does Mr Tosh accept that, on two of the report's recommendations that the SNP was not happy to sign up to, the committee report makes it clear that there is no consensus view on scientific safety and that there are differing interpretations of the EC directive?

Mr Tosh: Although I accept that there is no consensus, we must proceed on the basis of the best legal advice that we have received. Already this morning, we have had an indication—not least from Ross Finnie's intervention—that the Scottish Executive believes that the Parliament does not have the power to stop the release of GMOs. Furthermore, it is extremely unclear whether the Executive has such a power. Whatever my reservations about the Executive, I would much rather it operated on legal advice that suggests that it does not have such a power than on the advice obtained by Friends of the Earth in Wales.

Although our investigation established that the Parliament does not have the powers, the exercise was useful in making us go through the whole issue and helped the committee to clarify whether we should or should not have GM trials. It is clear from the evidence that there should be trials. I accept that there is no consensus about the criteria for the regulations and that there is legitimate concern about when any commercial exploitation of the new technologies should take place. However, if we do not allow laboratory tests and field trials at some stage, we will never be able to test or establish the commercial and humanitarian opportunities that might arise from producing much more substantial and beneficial crops, which is of course what GMOs are designed to achieve.

It is therefore important that—in some way, in

some form and at some stage—trials take place and that we operate on a proper precautionary basis. Although I accept that there is disagreement about that matter, it is wrong in principle to say that GM technology should not be used. There must be properly controlled and sensible experimentation.

As for the question whether we should establish a Scottish ACRE and AEBC, it was very clear from the evidence that such bodies were quite unnecessary. I suppose that, in an independent Scotland that lacked those regulatory organisations, they would have to be set up and, as a result, it is not intellectually inconsistent for the SNP to hold such a view. However, continuing to maintain that in our current devolved context there is a need—and a justification—for wasting resources to monitor, control and regulate this activity is simply nonsensical and shows the infantile face of Scottish nationalism that says that we must have a Scottish equivalent of absolutely everything.

We highlighted flaws in the procedures and specifically requested—indeed demanded—that what happened with Advanta would not happen again. I believe that the Scottish Executive subscribes fully to that approach and was justifiably concerned about the relationship between MAFF and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency at that point. However, the operation of ACRE and the other regulatory bodies is not a problem: they are perfectly adequate to safeguard Scotland's interests as well as the wider UK interests.

The petition was wrong, and the committee's report is correct. It is a matter of great regret that, having had ample time to consider the evidence, committee members cannot accept the integrity of the process and the good sense of the recommendations, and that, in the context of a devolved Scotland, it is appropriate to accept the existing monitoring arrangements. I support the committee report and I regret the position that is being taken by the SNP on this matter.

10:11

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): The preamble to the Liberal Democrat constitution commits us to safeguarding the balance of nature and the environment and to harnessing technological change for human advantage. In approaching the difficult questions that are raised by technology that enables genetic modification, we should recognise that those objectives, although competing, are equally valid.

Other well-established and relevant Liberal Democrat principles include ensuring openness and accountability in Government decision making

and upholding the right of the individual to make informed choices.

A further consideration is the need for our agriculture industry to be able to compete internationally without unnecessary burdens that would compromise its competitiveness. As paragraph 6 of the report states, the

"issues concerning the development and release of GMOs are substantial and complex."

However, risks are inherent in any process of creating or introducing novel products, and some non-genetic developments—such as the introduction of non-native species and the move to growing winter wheat—have had serious adverse effects on biodiversity of the kind that critics of genetic modification fear.

There are significant commercial, health and environmental benefits to be achieved through the responsible application of techniques of genetic modification. There is also a great deal of public concern about the potential risks that are associated with genetic modification. It is, therefore, essential to have a robust public policy framework in place before commercialisation begins, to ensure that when or if commercialisation goes ahead, the technology is used responsibly.

Much of the policy framework for GMOs is dictated by Europe, where the precautionary principle is the basis of environmental policy, manifested in the step-by-step approach of the European directive on the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms. Under the directive, the containment of GMOs is reduced and the scale of release increased gradually, step by step, only if evaluation of the earlier steps indicates that the next step can be taken without harming human health or the environment.

The Transport and the Environment Committee considered where and from whom the Government and the Scottish Executive obtained advice on GMO matters. The plethora of acronyms in paragraph 16 of the report indicates that there is no shortage of advisory bodies. We are told that there are no fewer than 14 specialist scientific committees in the UK Government's advisory framework for GM technology. The two main bodies are ACRE and the relatively new AEBC, the remit of which is also to consider the wider implications of the use of GM technology. As Andy Kerr said, that remit was commended by committee members, who felt that it is important for the wider issues to be considered. The committee agreed that Scottish access to those bodies is satisfactory.

There has been much public concern over the lack of consultation on the GM farm-scale trials in Scotland. Clarification is needed of the difference

between consultation and the giving of information. Consultation implies that responses can materially influence, change or stop whatever is being consulted on. In the context of the current set of farm-scale trials, we are talking about providing information, not consulting. As both the Rural Development Committee and the Transport and the Environment Committee concluded, under EC regulations, the Scottish Executive cannot prohibit the trials. However, it is extremely important to make as much information as possible about the trials available to the public, detailing how they are to be conducted, what precautions are being taken and what safeguards are in place.

The first farm-scale trial in Scotland last year was conducted in Daviot, which is in my constituency and only a few miles from my home. As a good example of consultation, I cite the meeting that was organised for the people of Daviot through the auspices of the local community council. At that meeting, a representative from Aventis, the company that was supplying the seed and organising the trial, a representative from the Scottish Crop Research Institute, which is undertaking the scientific monitoring of the trial, and two representatives from SERAD each gave presentations about the aspects of the trial for which they were responsible and were open to questions afterwards. There was a good turnout of local people and a fairly long and probing question session. Those who were present found the meeting informative, useful and reassuring. Therefore, I endorse the committee's recommendation that standards should be set for companies that undertake such trials, concerning the information that they give to the public and the way in which it is provided.

I also endorse the report's recommendation on producing and publicising guidelines for dealing with the sort of accidental release of GMOs that occurred last year in the Advanta seed contamination incident. I wonder whether one loose end, in connection with that incident, has been tied up through the committee's evidence taking. At our meeting on 27 September, we were told that SERAD was awaiting a report from the Canadian authorities on the circumstances that led to the seed contamination. I wonder whether that report has been received and what it says.

In conclusion, I welcome the report, which is thorough and workmanlike. It contains many sound conclusions and recommendations, and I hope that the public will find it reassuring.

10:17

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I found Murray Tosh's speech interesting, although it lacked the intellectual rigour that we normally

expect from him. He suggested that everyone would have to arrive at the same conclusion on the basis of the evidence that was received. It was rather unfair of him to suggest that, because SNP members arrived at a different conclusion from that which was reached by him and other committee members, they were in some way wrong. Evidence should influence our decisions, but not everyone will arrive at the same conclusion on every occasion.

Mr Tosh: I understand that a body of evidence that is received by a committee might permit different interpretations. My point was that we did not hear any coherent argument for setting up a Scottish ACRE and a Scottish AEBC. No good case for that was put forward; neither did the SNP members of the committee produce any evidence to support that proposal.

Brian Adam: Bruce Crawford will address that matter in his speech. However, the implication of Mr Tosh's earlier remarks was clearly that a unanimous opinion should have been arrived at on all areas of the GMO issue, not just on that specific point.

Like my colleagues, I believe that the GM farm-scale trials do not yet have a role to play—and I emphasise the word "yet". I would be much happier if the Scottish Parliament followed the lead that has been taken by the Welsh Assembly, in spite of what the Minister for Environment and Rural Development said in his intervention. I would prefer Scotland to be a GM-free zone. Many people in the north-east believe that our region is being used as a guinea pig. The Daviot and Tillycorthie areas account for 10 of the 18 GM trials that have been authorised in Scotland, and a large section of the public are extremely concerned about that.

When the first Daviot trial was announced, I went to well-attended meetings in Daviot and Inverurie. I attended the meeting to which Nora Radcliffe referred. Although I agree that it was well attended, that information was provided and that there was a significant question-and-answer session, I did not arrive at Nora Radcliffe's conclusion that people were reassured by it. It was also a ticket-only meeting. On the face of it, it was organised by the community councils, but we heard only one side—

Nora Radcliffe: The meeting was organised at the request of the chairman of the community council, which undertook to let local people know about the meeting. The council was concerned that the meeting should be, as Mr Adam said, an information-giving meeting. There were also concerns that the meeting might be taken over by people with another agenda.

Brian Adam: We heard only one side of the

argument, which was put forward by those who had an interest in the matter. The meeting was well attended and conducted, but we will have to agree to differ on the interpretation of the outcome.

The general point that Nora Radcliffe made about providing information and having meaningful consultation is important. The process that we are talking about, however, does not reflect well on the Executive as no meaningful consultation is taking place. People are simply being informed that they will have trials on their doorstep; they cannot influence whether the trials take place.

The meeting that I attended in Inverurie, which other members, including Alex Fergusson, also attended, was of a slightly different nature. The vast majority of participants expressed their concerns about the trial. Some have suggested that that meeting was hijacked by others, but I do not accept that. As far as I could see, most people who attended were local, had an interest and had significant concerns. Their views reflected accurately the views of the vast bulk of the residents of the area who were against the farm-scale trials and still are. On 18 March, *The Herald* carried quotations of a number of near neighbours of the New Craig farm that express their concerns. Speaking of the Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development, Professor Steve Bruce of Aberdeen University, who lives with his wife and three children just yards from New Craig farm, said:

"I do think she should have told us rather than leave us to learn from the media".

Mac Mackie, the managing director of the family-run dairy and farming business, Mackie's, close to the farm, said:

"I would have liked to have been told so we could check if there was anything we should be concerned about".

Roderick Nutten, from Loanhead of Pitninnan, which is also close to the farm, said:

"We were not even asked or consulted about this. I don't really know anything about genetically modified crops so I don't know if I should be concerned or not but I think someone should have explained to us what this all means."

People in the area felt that they had not been properly informed or consulted. All that has happened up to now is that information has been provided and the trials have gone ahead.

I am a scientist by training and I know that the scientific community is divided about the threat of cross-contamination of species. Recently, Michael Meacher, the UK Minister for the Environment, admitted that cross-contamination was a possibility. That is a significant change of heart on the part of the Government and that ought to be taken into account.

I am concerned about bees: there is evidence from Jena University in Germany that the guts of bees that have been feeding on GM crops have been altered. That alteration is bound to have an effect on the important role that bees play in pollination. I need not mention the significant amount of money that is involved in the honey industry.

10:23

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I want to emphasise my agreement with much of the report that was prepared by the Transport and the Environment Committee, on which I serve. However, I am informed by a deep sense of frustration at the feeling that the Executive is overly complacent about the safety of farm-scale trials. There is a feeling that the Executive believes that the arguments on GMOs are done and dusted. Farm-scale trials are commercially motivated and are more an exercise in public sedation than they are genuine scientific endeavours.

The three fundamental differences of opinion I have with the report echo those that the SNP has already mentioned. On the safety of GM trials, I disagree entirely with the conclusion that releasing the novel organisms into the environment to test them can be considered a precautionary approach. We heard evidence that there are serious concerns about the impact on the environment; for example, there has been little or no research into the effects on subsoil and soil bacteria.

The UK Government believes that the risks are minimal and are worth taking in order to speed the development of the technology. However, the committee heard evidence that there were serious concerns about testing the safety of GM crops in that way, particularly in regard to the possibility of horizontal gene flow. Murray Tosh said that we did not hear enough evidence about the dangers, but that is because the research has not yet been done. More research is needed.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Robin Harper: I do not have time.

The committee said that it could not decide whether the Scottish Parliament has any powers to ban GM crops and said that it is not the job of the committee to decide that. It is up to national Governments to interpret EU law and take action. I echo what has already been said on that matter by the SNP. The courts have to decide matters only in relation to disputes over sovereign action. As has been mentioned, several European countries have clearly concluded that they have powers to ban GM crops and have done so.

To say that we do not know what powers we have and cannot therefore do anything is to avoid the issue. If there is confusion about the law, we need an independent examination of exactly what powers the Scottish Parliament has to restrict GM crops. The committee concluded that the European Committee could be asked to pursue that question. I would like to echo what the SNP has said on that matter and call for that committee to do so.

The report disagrees with me on the need for a Scottish body to oversee GM crop developments. Murray Tosh said that the suggestion that there should be such a body was infantile and that the body would be a waste of time and money. Surely, however, having such a commission in Scotland would stimulate public debate on this important issue within Scotland, rather than having to—

Mr Kerr: Will the member give way?

Robin Harper: I will try to finish my speech within the time limit and see how much time I have left in which to take points from other members.

Most of my committee colleagues were of the opinion that a committee based in London with only one Scottish representative—I believe that the committee now has two Scottish representatives—should decide the future of GM crops in Scotland. However, agriculture is devolved to Scotland and GM crops, which are an important aspect of agriculture policy, should not be, as it were, devolved back to a UK body. We saw how Ross Finnie was kept in the dark about the Advanta GM contamination incident. I argue that the Scottish Parliament must be allowed to decide for itself about GM technology.

The petition from Friends of the Earth Scotland called on the Scottish Parliament to exercise its powers not to permit the release of GM crops into the environment by way of trials or commercial planting and to establish a mechanism in Scotland that will address the concerns about the impact of such releases on the environment and human health. I do not believe that the report has adequately addressed the petition. There is clearly a need for further investigation. I believe that we should suspend GM field trials at least until that investigation has been carried out.

I have half a minute in which to answer questions from other members.

Helen Eadie: Does Robin Harper accept that ACRE is not an English, Irish or Welsh body but a UK body to which we send Scottish representatives? Does he accept that the Scottish Executive negotiated a moratorium with the industry on the issue of the commercial release of genetically modified foods? Does he also accept that, during Britain's presidency of the EU, we pushed for labelling of all genetically modified food

products? Finally, does he accept that no GM foodstuffs have been licensed under Labour?

Robin Harper: I am happy to accept all those points. I will take an intervention from Andy Kerr.

Mr Kerr: Thank you. This is a unique method of dealing with interventions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: How this can be done within 30 seconds remains to be seen.

Mr Kerr: What is important is that the best representatives of the scientific community should serve on bodies such as ACRE, not whether they live north or south of the border.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: All right, Mr Harper. You have one minute, and that is it.

Robin Harper: I take Mr Kerr's point.

Mr Tosh: He has finished.

Robin Harper: Any more interventions?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If not, that leaves up to four minutes for Dorothy-Grace Elder.

10:30

Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP): I will not apologise to Andy Kerr for promoting him earlier—it might be just a matter of time.

I agree with Robin Harper that much more investigation is needed, and I believe that we do not have good cause, historically, to trust any UK body in relation to agricultural matters. Britain has a long and dishonourable history of adulterated food and interference with the food chain, which took place before we knew what we were doing.

On the subject of food, I come from a long history of handling with tongs absolutely anything that I hear from any Government. Heavy money is involved, fellow parliamentarians, in the whole GM-motivated industry, as are very heavy politics. We need think of only one case—that of Lord Sainsbury and his links with the Labour Government. Lord Sainsbury is one of the greatest defenders of the GM movement.

Genetic modification is unlike any other experiment, because it tinkers with the very basis of plant and crop life. That leads me to handle with lead-lined gloves all Government reassurances about GM, even from the best of people, who themselves might believe what they say.

We have no reason to trust UK bodies such as MAFF, which is heavily involved in GM. The people in MAFF contributed to the BSE disaster by refusing, over many months, to tell farmers precisely what was in feed, because of what they described as reasons of commercial confidentiality relating to the feed industry: and so, the BSE disaster became catastrophic.

MAFF is in many ways under suspicion over its handling of the current outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. I have no hesitation in itemising what happened in this Parliament with regard to MAFF in May last year, when we were meeting in Glasgow. At that time, Mr Finnie admitted that MAFF had delayed for almost one month passing on information that it had received from Advanta via Canada, to the effect that a rogue seeding had been carried out in Scotland in spring 2000. Mr Finnie ordered that the fields concerned should be ripped up immediately.

What Mr Finnie did not inform us at the time was that in 1999, the previous year, there had been not only a planting, but a harvest, and that the GM material had entered the human and animal food chains. It is still there. However, both MAFF and Advanta in Canada had been informed. Mr Finnie chose not to inform Parliament, until I dragged the information out of him with tongs a week later. He chose not to inform us then; what are we not being informed about now?

Members have spoken rather wimpishly today about the Parliament not having the relevant powers, as if we should merely accept that, just like children. If GM seeds are in our fields, that gives us a moral right to the powers, and seizure of those powers to protect our farmers, our population and our future generations, because we do not know how GM will work out in the long term. I urge the Parliament to put some steel in its spine: it should get those powers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to wind-up speeches. We are on schedule, so I will allow three minutes for each party representative, starting with Des McNulty for the Labour party.

10:34

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): The Transport and the Environment Committee has produced a very good report. The committee has a record of carrying out serious work, and has produced a series of good reports, of which its report on GMOs is a positive example.

We are indebted to Friends of the Earth Scotland for focusing attention on the issue, which is obviously of public concern. We should also be grateful to all those who gave evidence to the committee, which made a number of important recommendations that have not been entirely covered in speeches.

It is, perhaps, not relevant simply to focus on what happened in the past; much of the debate should have focused on what might happen in the future, if the recommendations that are being made by the Transport and the Environment Committee are taken up. It is regrettable that SNP members who listened to the evidence are not

here to participate in the debate, and that we have had to content ourselves with contributions from members who did not hear the evidence, and who do not appear to have read the committee's report.

The arguments on the matter should not focus on our positions on constitutional matters, but on our position on the scientific evidence.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will Des McNulty give way?

Des McNulty: I will not, Bruce—I am sorry.

Bruce Crawford rose—

Des McNulty: Can I continue? I have only three minutes.

Bruce Crawford rose—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is not giving way.

Des McNulty: It is important that we reassure ourselves that the current advisory bodies, ACRE and the AEBC, will effectively conduct the work that they are required to do. The AEBC was created after petition PE51 was lodged. In its evidence, Friends of the Earth Scotland made it clear that the creation of the AEBC and its proposed mode of operation were satisfactory in relation to some of the issues that it had raised. The Transport and the Environment Committee calls for the AEBC to operate within mechanisms that will deal effectively with the specific Scottish context. It is not that we need to produce a specifically Scottish science, but that we need to ensure that the recommendations deal with the specific Scottish context.

The committee made important points in recommendations 45 and 46: that the research that is required—I agree with Robin Harper on this—must focus not only on biotechnology and biodiversity, but on a range of issues on agricultural management and on the socioeconomic implications of proceeding with the science. We need to use proper scientific advice, and we must ensure that that is properly fed into decision making. Dorothy-Grace Elder mentioned BSE. I spent about half a day during the Easter recess reading through the BSE report, which contains evidence that, in the past, Westminster did not always take adequate account of scientific evidence. We are calling for scientific evidence to be properly built into decision making.

The precautionary approach that we are advocating should involve a default no, not a default yes, to applications to carry out trials. We ought to be satisfied that trials will be properly conducted and that they will properly build scientific knowledge. We are not in the process of simply allowing companies to rent land to carry out trials that will have no wider benefit. The report

includes important recommendations about public information, particularly in relation to the minimum information standard, which will give greater transparency and more information on decision making.

One particularly important issue is that the public should not at any point pay for the costs of taking the GM agenda forward. The costs of approvals of GM releases and trials should be met by the companies that are involved—that recommendation should be built into the mechanism.

The report gives a positive approach and maps the way forward. It should be considered positively, and I look forward to hearing the minister's responses to my points.

10:39

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I start by declaring my interest as a farmer. I also note the Executive's pragmatic approach to the matter.

I support Murray Tosh's view that we do not need a Scottish ACRE, and I look forward to Bruce Crawford outlining the SNP's policy position in his closing speech.

Brian Adam: Will John Scott give way?

John Scott: No, thank you.

I accept the need for a cautious step-by-step approach, as outlined in the Transport and the Environment Committee report, which I welcome.

We must be realistic, because we will have to deal with some harsh realities in the near future. The sooner we get rid of the froth on the subject and look at the bigger picture, the better. The population of the world is rising dramatically. The current world population of 6 billion is set to increase by 50 per cent in the next 50 years and, in the meantime, we must find a safe way in which to feed everybody in future. The Malthusian cliff looms large and unless we address the issues now and develop safe GM foods and organisms, this generation will have failed our children and our children's children.

Brian Adam: Will the member give way?

John Scott: No, thank you.

Each successive generation has had to cope with the population explosion of its time and GM foods offer our generation the scientific solution that we so desperately seek. We also have to bear in mind the advent of global warming—a subject that is close to Robin Harper's heart. As global warming gathers pace, two main things will happen. First, low-lying, fertile, food-producing, coastal land will be flooded by rising sea levels. Secondly, the equatorial desert strips that band

the world—the barren deserts of the world—will increase in size and width. That, too, will reduce the world's food-producing ability. Therefore, we are contemplating two driving issues, which are that our ability to produce food using existing science and technology in a reducing land mass is about to diminish, and that our population is set to rise. We must move forward quickly and safely.

The debate is no longer about whether we go down the road of scientific advance and whether we have field trials; the question is how we do so safely. That is why we must show leadership, shoulder our responsibilities and start getting our act together. We must stop driving scientists and bioscientists out of the country by accepting the sterile and sometimes selfish arguments of those who stand against progress as, on today's showing, Robin Harper would have us do.

We must have an intelligent and nimble Executive. MAFF's track record on this matter—and others to which Dorothy-Grace Elder alluded—calls into question MAFF's very existence. I agree with Charles Kennedy's call for the disbanding of MAFF because of its appalling record over the years. We cannot afford any more blunders like the Advanta crisis that was foisted on us last year, to which Brian Adam referred.

GMO is a reserved matter and so it should remain, but we must accept our responsibilities to the Scottish people and to the wider world. Scottish Conservatives are committed to the cautious development of GM organisms. The time for talking is over. We must recognise the potential benefits of the technology, but we must proceed with caution. We must recognise genuine public concerns and we must proceed on the basis of science alone. We should introduce clear and unambiguous labelling.

We must get on with it. With 700 million people starving in the world at the moment, we have no time to lose.

10:42

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I thank John Scott for concentrating so much on the committee's report—that was very useful. Andy Kerr, however, reflected well the Transport and the Environment Committee's findings. He did a good job, as did the committee in taking evidence. It carried out a very robust process on the Friends of the Earth petition.

For a Tory, Murray Tosh shows a remarkable ability to roll over to what the Executive says. The committee report is full of evidence of contradictions and problems, particularly concerning the EU directive. The report states:

"The Committee accepts that the EC Directive is open to differing interpretations."

Fiona McLeod properly gave our interpretation of the directive. No malice was intended and, had Murray Tosh had a little patience, he will hear me note that Fiona McLeod and I entered the process of examining the petition at a late date and could not have full individual ownership of everything that happened.

Mr Tosh *indicated disagreement.*

Bruce Crawford: Murray Tosh may not have meant that, but that was the intent that I understood in what he said.

Mr Tosh: If Bruce Crawford reads the *Official Report*, he will see that I acknowledged that he and Fiona McLeod came late to the debate. It was accepted that they could hardly be expected to sign up to evidence that they had not heard. My criticism today is that, having reviewed that evidence, Bruce Crawford has shown little sign of accepting any of it.

Bruce Crawford: I will come to that. I have already mentioned what paragraph 24 of the report says about the European directive.

Murray Tosh also said that the SNP should have made its position clear in its opening speech. We did not, because I intend to deal with it in summing up—we are given only so much time in the chamber.

It is obvious that we cannot take individual ownership of the whole process. There is much to applaud in the report, but it would be wrong to pretend that we accept the direction that has been taken by the committee in all its recommendations. We have had time to reflect on the report, and our position is strengthened by that period of reflection.

Fiona McLeod dealt with one area and I will deal with another. We support the view of Friends of the Earth that a separate Scottish GM advisory body is required. The Minister for Environment and Rural Development might deal with science that is similar to that which his UK Government counterpart deals with, but there can be no question that there are distinct economic and social circumstances in Scotland. More important, there is a distinct natural and agricultural background. Andy Kerr referred in particular to the crofting communities of Scotland. In the light of those differences, it is important to ensure that any advisory body acts properly and appropriately in advising ministers. That could be more efficiently achieved if a separate Scottish GM advisory body were established. There are separate bodies all over the place that advise ministers, so the nonsense from Murray Tosh about setting up another body is a red herring. There should be a body that is closer to ministers and that has a greater understanding of Scottish circumstances, rather than a body that is distant from ministers

and which does not focus fully on Scottish requirements. Executive ministers have many advisory bodies.

Murray Tosh should look at the evidence. In column 1019 of the *Official Report* of the Transport and the Environment Committee meeting on 27 September 2000, it can be seen that Kenny MacAskill tried three times to get information from the minister on what would happen if a Scottish representative in the current process was unable to persuade his or her colleagues not to proceed. On three separate occasions, Kenny MacAskill did not receive an answer from the minister. We want to protect and enshrine the Scottish position by having a separate advisory body. The evidence is all there.

10:47

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): I state at the outset that the Scottish Executive's overall policy is that we are neither for nor against GM. Our priority is to protect human health and to safeguard the environment. We are pro-safety, pro-environment and pro-consumer choice.

I welcome the basic thrust of the Transport and the Environment Committee's report. I welcome the recognition by a majority of the committee that, under current legislation, Parliament does not have the power to impose a blanket ban on the release of GM crops. That does not mean that we consider that such releases should be subject to anything less than the most stringent controls, which is what the present system provides for. I share Murray Tosh's view that, if the committee received advice to the effect that that is a correct interpretation of directive 90/220/EEC—it is the Scottish Executive's interpretation—proceeding on an ultra vires basis is not the correct way in which to protect our interests.

I also welcome the view of the majority of the committee that there is a role for farm-scale trials. It is wrong to suggest that simply because Luxembourg, Germany and France have decided not to hold trials, they have the power to ban the commercialisation of GM crops. The interposition of additional trials is an extra precautionary principle that has been introduced in this country, along with a three-year moratorium on the commercialisation of trials. Given that the other countries in the EU do not have powers to unreasonably prevent commercialisation, that will take place without those countries having the additional knowledge of the effects on biodiversity that is gained from trials.

I also welcome the committee's majority recommendation that it is not necessary to establish a separate Scottish GM advisory body.

Like Murray Tosh, I understand the SNP's intellectual argument, but I do not think that it holds true for a devolved institution. I believe that ACRE and the AEBC serve us well

I will speak about the committee's recommendations for changes to our current system. The essential issue is the involvement of local communities. Many members made that point well. The committee recommended that companies that undertake trials should be required to set out how they propose to inform local communities. The committee also recommended that the Scottish Executive, ACRE and other stakeholders should discuss and agree the minimum information standards that are required.

As I said, I am concerned about that matter—about which Brian Adam said that we had done nothing. I say to him that the essential problem is that the framework under directive 90/220/EEC, or under part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, is silent on that matter. However, I recognise that communities can feel justified in believing that they have not been given enough notice of trials—

Brian Adam: Will the minister give way?

Ross Finnie: I will finish this point.

Better public information and consultation are being considered, as Brian Adam knows from the evidence that was given by the AEBC. Those aspects will also be covered in the AEBC's forthcoming report on farm-scale trials and I assure him that the Executive will wish to act on the AEBC's recommendations.

Brian Adam: If the directive is silent on informing local communities, does not that give the minister discretion to act and to accept the precautionary principle that the driver ought to be to say no, unless a product is proved to be okay? Why has he chosen not to use that interpretation?

Ross Finnie: I did not say that the directive was silent on how the Executive should reach decisions. I said that it was silent on how proper consultation on the process should be conducted, which suggests that we should fall back on a system of holding public information meetings only. People want to go further than that.

Under article 9 of the recently promulgated directive 2001/18/EC, member states must consult the public when appropriate and will be required to lay down arrangements, including a reasonable time period, for that consultation, in order to give the public or groups the opportunity to express opinions.

Fiona McLeod: Will the minister give way?

Ross Finnie: Let me finish this point.

We are giving urgent consideration to how that

requirement should be given effect in Scotland. I say to John Scott that GM regulation is not a reserved matter, and we will be able to implement that directive through Scottish regulations. As I said, although GM regulation is not reserved, according to schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998, it is controlled by an EU directive, and as Brian Adam knows, under section 57(2) of that act, we must implement all EU directives.

Fiona McLeod: The minister said that he would give urgent consideration to directive 2001/18/EC. Is he able to say when he hopes to introduce guidelines on public consultation? As my colleague Brian Adam made clear, there was great consternation locally when folk heard—in the press the following day—about the 17 March decision on New Craig farm.

Ross Finnie: I am not able to give a specific date. If Fiona McLeod has read directive 2001/18/EC, she will recognise it as a rather familiar, but not short, European directive that contains about 38 articles. It will be necessary for the Executive to consider how best to implement the directive. That might be done through the provisions of part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, although it might be neater to deal with it through the provisions of the European Communities Act 1972. It is crucial that the directive is implemented through Scottish regulations, and many issues will have to be considered when the regulations are drafted. I regret that I am unable to give Fiona McLeod a specific date. However, I am anxious that public consultation should be incorporated in the Scottish regulations.

Fiona McLeod: Can the minister assure members by setting a target, rather than giving a date, to introduce the guidelines before next year's planting?

Ross Finnie: I am reluctant to give a precise date, given the requirement to introduce secondary legislation—which, I suspect, will require considerable scrutiny by the Parliament. I am able to say only that I am deeply concerned about consultation, and that I am anxious that directive 2001/18/EC is translated into Scottish regulations as soon as is humanly possible, although a number of issues must be dealt with in that process.

I note the committee's view that the move towards greater transparency in the GM release process should not involve additional expenditure by public bodies. The committee also took the view that, in general, the applicant should meet the costs of seeking approval. We accept that recommendation and we are putting in place a revised scheme of fees and charges to cover the administrative costs of running the regulatory process. We published a revised fees and charges

scheme that came into effect on 18 April.

We also accept the Transport and the Environment Committee's recommendation that new guidelines should be introduced on how to handle any future accidental releases. For that purpose, we published draft guidance that reflects the general approach to emergency procedures for other circumstances in which such procedures may be necessary.

That allows me to move neatly on to the point that was raised by Nora Radcliffe on the Advanta seed contamination incident. I regret to say that the Canadian authorities have found their investigation to be an extraordinarily difficult task. Although they have complied with our requests for information about the investigation, we are in their hands. I understand that the investigation is nearly complete—the most recent estimate of when we might receive a report of the investigation is towards the end of May.

I will deal quickly with one or two other points that were made during the debate. It is all very well for Dorothy-Grace Elder to campaign against MAFF, but I concern myself only with the integrity of the people who serve on ACRE, and the integrity and professionalism of those who serve on the Food Standards Agency and the AEBC, because it is from those bodies that I seek advice when I discharge my responsibilities. Despite Dorothy-Grace Elder's prejudices and feelings about MAFF—which may be understandable—I say to her that not one piece of evidence has been adduced to me that suggests that I should do anything other than accept the integrity and professionalism of those bodies. That is important, because the Executive seeks advice from them.

I have touched on the issue of meaningful consultation, and I also mentioned commercialisation, which was raised by Murray Tosh.

I am sorry if Robin Harper feels that the Executive is being over-complacent in relation to GMOs. I do not believe that that is the case, because we are very much concerned about the issue. Our approach is not driven by other considerations and our concerns are genuine. I had hoped that he would share our concern that, before we get pressed into having to give approvals to commercial crops, we should have trials that seek to test the effect on biodiversity and on the different farming practices that will be necessary for the crops. I also thought that he would recognise that approach as a sign that the Government is concerned about knowing the whole story before granting approvals for commercial crops. If we wait for the after-effects, it will be too late.

I thank the Transport and the Environment

Committee for its well-considered and balanced report. As I said, we are pursuing a number of the issues that the report identified. We are in touch not only with MAFF, but with our colleagues in other UK Administrations—the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly—and we are always actively considering the development of policy in this area.

In the meantime, I am grateful for the views that have been expressed during the debate and I commend the approach that has been taken by the Transport and the Environment Committee.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): I call John Farquhar Munro to wind up the debate on behalf of the Transport and the Environment Committee.

10:58

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): As the Presiding Officer intimated, my task is to wind up on behalf of the Transport and the Environment Committee, of which I am deputy convener.

As members heard Andy Kerr say, the committee accepts that issues around the development and release of GMOs are substantial and complex. The committee also recognises the concerns that have been expressed by large sections of the public about the possible risks that are associated with the release of GMOs, and it has suggested that a careful balance must be struck between the ongoing development of GM technology and minimising potential associated risks. We have heard some of those concerns expressed this morning. Robin Harper suggested that the precautionary approach was not acceptable or sufficient. I believe that that term also causes confusion.

The committee understands the public concerns over GM crops and believes that there is still a need for a wide-ranging and rational debate on future GM crops trials. The overall need for the technology, where GM fits in with agriculture and whether there are sufficient benefits to justify the risks of further developing and exploiting that technology should be considered. I suggest that many of the current problems have arisen because that debate did not take place earlier with local communities. The opportunity must be taken to promote a wide-ranging debate on GMOs and associated crop trials. The number of people who came to give evidence to the committee is proof of that.

The Transport and the Environment Committee is concerned that, despite many reassurances, there is still public concern about the risks that are associated with GM releases. As part of the approval process for farm-scale trials, the

committee recommended that companies that undertake such trials should be required to set out how they propose to inform local communities of the trials. The committee also recommended that the Scottish Executive and other stakeholders should discuss and agree the minimum information standards that are required from those companies.

It might not surprise members that the committee suggested strongly that greater transparency is required in the process of ministerial decision making and in how ministers arrive at conclusions.

I want to suggest respectfully to the Executive that any GM crop trials should, in future, be subject to the democratic planning process in the local authority areas in which such trials are proposed. That is reasonable.

Bruce Crawford: Will John Farquhar Munro say where in the committee report that particular element is referred to? I thought that he was summing up on behalf of the committee.

John Farquhar Munro: The suggestion that the democratic process should be applied is my own. I said that I respectfully suggest that. Bruce Crawford obviously did not hear me.

In conclusion, I thank the committee for the diligence in its meetings. I also thank those who gave evidence and the clerks, who worked diligently to ensure that the committee's democratic process was appropriate and successful. I sincerely thank the convener and members of the committee for concluding the report. As I intimated, the issues are varied and complex and we must continue to exercise the utmost caution.

Rural Scotland (Employment Patterns)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S1M-1892, in the name of Alex Johnstone, on behalf of the Rural Development Committee, on that committee's "Report on the Impact of Changing Employment Patterns in Rural Scotland".

11:03

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): It is my pleasure to be able to present the report on behalf of the Rural Development Committee. The report has taken some considerable time in the committee's busy schedule but the subject is important.

The committee first met less than two years ago. Our priority at that first meeting was to identify issues to which the committee should devote its time over the ensuing four years. Obviously, there were priorities concerning farming, fishing, forestry and other traditionally rural matters that had been dealt with by committees at Westminster. However, it was obvious to the committee that the new rural affairs concept—which this Parliament sought to launch—was a priority that had to be addressed.

At this stage I must pay tribute to one or two people who were important to the report. I would like to single out two former members of the committee who were integral to pushing the rural affairs agenda and getting the inquiry up and running—Cathy Peattie and Irene McGugan. They pushed the priority of rural affairs at an early stage and made us realise that there was more to it than the farming and fishing priorities of the past.

I also take the opportunity to thank for their input many of the professionals and advisers on whom the committee relied for the success of the inquiry and subsequent report. From the Scottish Parliament information centre, I highlight the efforts of Simon Wakefield, who was particularly active in controlling the direction of the report. I also convey our thanks to Sue Sadler, who organised many of the public meetings. I particularly thank Professor Mark Shucksmith, who was the adviser to the research project. He helped to steer us through some of the more difficult areas and was integral to the drafting of the report.

I will go over what the committee did to consult the public of Scotland on how we should report on the subjects that we chose. After considerable discussion and consultation with our adviser—once he was in place—we decided to investigate

the impact of changing employment patterns in rural Scotland. That crystallised and defined more clearly the views that were originally expressed on the first day on which the committee met.

To that end, the inquiry was launched on 30 March 2000. The overall aim of the inquiry was to undertake a wide-ranging investigation into the major changes taking place in rural Scotland, the impact of those changes on rural communities—particularly on poverty and housing—and the effectiveness of current policy responses. The inquiry also aimed to contribute to understanding how joined-up government can be made to work for Scotland's rural communities.

The objectives of the inquiry were to identify the key drivers of change in employment patterns, to identify who gains and who loses as a result of those changing employment patterns, to assess the impact of the changes and to review the current policy to support employment in rural Scotland. We also wished to identify best practice and areas for improvement in policy, as well as to report on the inquiry and make recommendations for action to address likely further changes.

The consultation process on which we embarked relied on a number of methods. A series of seven local consultation meetings was organised. Those meetings took place throughout Scotland to enable members of the committee to hear views from local people regarding their experiences of changing employment patterns, the impact of those changes and the policy actions that they felt would be effective. Five of the meetings were open to the public and two were by invitation only. The research team worked in partnership with local organisations to set up the public meetings, invite local people to participate and promote each meeting widely in the locality.

At this point, I should say that we subsequently received representations that the publicity was not as effective in some cases as it may have been. One of the lessons that we learned during the inquiry was that, just as we know what is going on, we believe that people on the ground ought to know what is going on. It is disappointing that many who felt that they had something to contribute were unable to do so simply because they were not aware that the meetings were taking place. I advise committees to examine more closely the publicity attached to public meetings that the Parliament or its committees hold in future.

The public meetings took place in Newtown St Boswells, Stornoway, Newton Stewart, Laurencekirk and Dingwall. There was also a meeting that was designed to cover Argyll and Bute, which was eventually carried out by means of a video link. That meeting afforded us the first opportunity to exploit that technology and we

advise others to use it to contact other areas of Scotland.

Local authorities and local enterprise companies were involved in each public meeting. They were invited to make presentations to MSPs and members of the public. Those presentations covered the employment changes experienced in the area and set the scene for the discussion that followed.

Through the meetings, 246 people were able to make their views known to the researchers. At the same time, a consultation document was mailed to more than 400 individuals and organisations with an interest in rural Scotland. That document was also placed on the Scottish Parliament website and more than 350 accesses to it were made. Press releases were sent to national and local media to alert the general public to the consultation. Responses were invited, to be in by 18 May last year. That succeeded in eliciting 100 written responses from a wide range of organisations and individuals.

What information did we glean from the consultation process? The key findings of the report are that rural employment is in decline in most sectors and that transport—especially the cost of transport in rural Scotland—is by far the biggest concern of those who expressed opinions at the public meetings and through the consultation.

We also found that poverty in rural areas is distinct, in that it is highly dispersed and often disguised within a more wealthy community. It is also most common among older people. The key causes of poverty are lower wages, low uptake of benefits, the higher cost of child care and the lack of affordable housing.

Although rural Scotland's economy is different from that of urban Scotland, it is very diverse. Demand for the service sector is growing in rural Scotland as traditional manufacturing and agriculture decline. The Rural Development Committee is concerned that the combination of poverty and declining traditional industries is threatening the sustainability of rural life in certain areas.

I want to touch on the Executive's reaction to the report. There was some disappointment among members of the committee, who felt that the reaction was rather hostile. I want to take as constructive an attitude as possible. When it established the inquiry and subsequently drafted the report, the committee's aim was to benefit the future work of the committee and the Parliament, and, we hoped, stimulate reaction from the Executive—which we certainly did. If the report was interpreted as an attack on Executive policy, I can only offer my apologies to the minister,

because that was never the intention. By making constructive progress and by addressing the issues that we have identified as priorities for the Parliament, the committee can proceed hand-in-hand with the Executive—whoever may form it in future—to work on longer-term policy, up to and beyond the horizon of the current political climate.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): Ha!

Alex Johnstone: That was not meant as a joke, David.

I hope that the committee and the Executive will have the opportunity to do a constructive job, working together in Parliament in the interests of rural Scotland.

I am delighted to move the motion in my name,

That the Parliament notes the 1st Report, 2001 of the Rural Development Committee, *The Impact of Changing Employment Patterns in Rural Scotland* (SP Paper 254); recognises the problems faced by Scotland's rural communities as highlighted by the research findings in the report; further recognises that work is already under way to address some of these concerns, and urges the Scottish Executive to continue to address the Committee's concerns.

11:14

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): The SNP welcomes the opportunity to debate the Rural Development Committee's report. We add our congratulations to everyone involved—my colleagues in the committee, the clerks, the adviser Mark Shucksmith, everyone at the Scottish Parliament information centre who helped, everyone who sent submissions to the committee and, especially, everyone who turned out at the seven public meetings that we held around the country. Those meetings were very successful.

A couple of factors stood out in our inquiry. One was the high turnout at the public meetings. People were extremely enthusiastic about coming along to speak to parliamentarians about the rural economy. That was invaluable. I attended successful and worthwhile meetings in Dingwall and Stornoway.

Another factor was the unanimity of the committee on many of the recommendations and findings. There was huge agreement on the report, which includes many unique recommendations. I hope that the minister will respond positively.

Against that positive backdrop, the SNP was absolutely astonished by the Government's 13-page response, which sought to parry the committee's recommendations by simply listing what the ministers think they have achieved. They seemed to be in a huff because we did not spend several pages of our report paying tribute to the wonderful work of the ministers to date. We

wanted to engage in a constructive debate with the Executive. The committee's purpose was to go out, speak to people around the country and find out the real picture. We then came back and reported to Parliament and to ministers in the hope that the committee could influence the decision-making process in Scotland's new Government.

In its response to our report, the Government talks about the positive picture from rural Scotland. That was the first defensive remark. In recent weeks, discussions in Parliament have been dominated by the foot-and-mouth crisis, the fishing crisis, the decline in the textile industry and the tourism crisis.

I want to turn to the scores of written submissions that the committee received and to consider four or so of them that were at the top of the pile. The Rowett Research Institute said that because of the severe downturn in traditional agriculture, rural employment has moved from very low paid, but reasonably secure employment in agriculture, to a situation of wholesale redundancies and very short-term rural employment that is part-time, seasonal and poorly paid—for example, in tourism. It goes on to say that many rural residents have two or three part-time jobs just to maintain basic family budgets. The ministers talk about everything being rosy in rural Scotland because there are areas of low unemployment. I ask them to bear in mind the nature of the employment that there is.

Peebles Hotel Hydro told the committee that it was having to hire staff from overseas because of a feeling here that wages in the industry are poor and a difficulty to do with split shifts. It said that there was a lack of accommodation in villages around Scotland for incoming workers and a lack of skills among the work force in rural Scotland for certain positions—for chefs in particular.

The Scottish Wildlife Trust pointed out that it is extremely concerned about the current economic plight of our primary industries. Perth and Kinross Council, on the subject of social services, said that rural areas had fared worse than urban areas because of the difficulties in recruiting care workers in rural communities. Shelter Scotland spoke of the appalling housing problems in our rural communities. The picture is not as rosy as ministers would have us believe.

An extremely worrying remark by the Executive was that it was not surprising that

"Rural Scotland has not benefited from the key growth areas in the economy."

That somehow suggests that rural Scotland is not suitable for the key growth areas in the economy. Our report highlighted the fact that we must address that. We believe that rural Scotland could be appropriate for the growth economy. The

minister is telling us that, although traditional industries are declining, the new industries belong to the urban communities. Where does that leave rural Scotland in the 21st century?

It is a pity that Wendy Alexander is not here. The minister who will respond to the debate has very few powers over many of the issues referred to in the report. It would have helped if ministers from across the Executive had come here today to speak about the report.

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): I hope that Richard Lochhead is not suggesting that, within an Executive, it is not possible to have ministers who can act in a cross-cutting way for the benefit of rural Scotland. Ministers in the Cabinet have a collective responsibility and are perfectly capable of articulating interests on all matters that affect rural Scotland.

Richard Lochhead: The minister mentions cross-cutting. The cross-cutting Cabinet is very enigmatic. No one knows when it meets or what it does. In the chamber, we have never heard about how it is working to help rural Scotland.

In last week's debate on skills in Scotland, Wendy Alexander did not mention rural Scotland once in her opening speech. Back in February, we had a debate on "A Smart Successful Scotland". Again, the minister did not address any of the concerns of rural Scotland, as if it was not supposed to be part of smart, successful Scotland. We must start talking about information and communications technology inclusion, and not just social inclusion. We must ensure that rural Scotland benefits from new technologies and is as digitally switched on as urban Scotland. Broadband and telecommunications are two issues raised in the report that the Government must address in relation to rural Scotland. If it does not address those issues, our rural communities will be uncompetitive in the 21st century economy.

I will turn briefly to the soft measures promoted in the report. We must build up confidence in rural communities. It is not enough to supply premises and grants to help get companies off the ground—we must tackle social exclusion and build confidence.

I also want to raise the issue of the social remit for Scottish Enterprise, which was rejected by the Government. Why can the Executive not accept that recommendation? The report made it clear that Scottish Enterprise does not take on board rural concerns as much as Highlands and Islands Enterprise does.

The Executive must not alienate our rural communities. It has already alienated the fishing community. Only this week it has become clear

that the Executive has refused to hold an independent inquiry into the salmon farming industry. I urge ministers to take a leaf out of the committee's book: hold public meetings around the country and speak directly to our communities. If ministers take that approach, they might be able to take off their rose-tinted glasses, see what is really happening in rural Scotland and do something about it.

11:21

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): As a member of the Rural Affairs Committee—as it was when we began the inquiry—I would like to join members in thanking everyone who helped us to draw up the report.

As everyone realises, since the report was published the situation in rural Scotland has changed beyond recognition, most dramatically in the south-west. On its publication, the report painted a fairly gloomy picture; that gloom has turned into an outright crisis from which it will take many years to recover.

The last eight or nine weeks have highlighted the precarious and interdependent nature of our rural communities. Let us make no mistake—many of those rural communities are under genuine threat. The report highlights the facts. Employment in many rural sectors is in decline. The traditional rural industries of farming, fishing and forestry face particular challenges. Transport costs are almost unbearable given the low-wage economy in rural Scotland and—most worrying of all—rural poverty is on the increase. For those reasons and many others, many of our communities are under threat. We must ask ourselves if and why that matters.

Those communities are as diverse as the countryside in which they exist. One of the things that struck me most about the two fact-finding visits that the committee undertook—one was to Newtown St Boswells and the other to Newton Stewart—was that one could not have come across a more stark example of differing social, physical and mental attitudes to what are, in essence, the same problems.

Those communities matter—not just because they look pretty and attract tourists, but because they are a vital part of Scotland's social make up. Such communities foster and preserve some of our most precious and, in some cases, almost forgotten traditions, such as language and the arts. If those communities are allowed to decline further, our country is in danger of losing something that cannot be replaced. That is why the Executive must work to help private and smaller projects, such as the Museum of Lead Mining at Wanlockhead, as well as the better-known and bigger national institutions. We owe it

to the future to ensure that we preserve the past.

However, that approach must go hand in hand with modernising the rural economy. If not, the whole of rural Scotland will simply become one huge museum. We must determine the best way to revitalise the rural economy and create jobs. We will not do that by throwing more money at the problem through the enterprise network—I am sure that the minister will be pleased to hear me say that. We must reconsider the way in which the local enterprise companies and Scottish Enterprise operate to benefit rural Scotland. We must reconsider how the Scottish Tourist Board—or visitScotland or whatever it will be called next week—operates to benefit rural Scotland. Most important, we must take a long hard look at whether the current planning regulations best serve rural Scotland.

We must improve the road infrastructure. One of the most quoted phrases in the Parliament is that, in rural Scotland, the motor car is not a luxury, but a necessity. That is absolutely correct and must be recognised by the Executive with a genuine effort to examine and address the problem of fuel prices. That subject was hailed as the No 1 hurdle in the path to rural prosperity at every public meeting we held and by almost everyone who gave evidence.

We must improve access to information technology. I am sure that every member who represents a rural area will have tales to tell of businesses that have not become established because of the lack of access to up-to-date technology. I would be amazed if my colleague, David Mundell, did not address that point when he sums up the debate.

The Scottish Conservatives welcome the report as a genuine effort to establish a starting point from which to begin the regeneration of our rural economy—a phrase that has become all the more poignant in recent weeks. Sadly, it is typical of the Executive to see the report as negative and unhelpful. I would expect nothing less of an Executive that has fully lived up to the expectations of much of rural Scotland—it is an urban-based Administration with little understanding of how rural Scotland works. Perhaps if the Executive were to take the report more seriously, it might begin to correct that image.

The Scottish Conservatives support the motion.

11:25

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I beg the indulgence of both the committee convener and the Parliament, as I shall focus much of my speech on a specific constituency issue—the 161 jobs that have been lost in Campbeltown. Much of the content of the report is relevant to that

situation and I hope that members will allow me to highlight the key issues faced by the people of Campbeltown.

Before the announcement about job losses was made, Campbeltown had an unemployment rate of 7.5 per cent—well above the average for the Highlands and Islands Enterprise area. The major employers—farming, fishing and forestry—are all under pressure. The Rural Development Committee report identified that as a key issue in rural areas and it is also a key issue in Campbeltown.

Last week's announcement of the closure of the Jaeger factory, which resulted in the loss of 161 jobs, was a body blow to an already depressed area. To give members an understanding of how great a blow it was, I will tell them that it means that nearly 7.5 per cent of Campbeltown's working population have lost their jobs in one fell swoop. It is a human tragedy. Not only are 161 people losing their jobs, but many of those jobs are held in families—the mother, father and some of the children might all be employed in the factory. It is not just the breadwinner's job that has been lost, but the whole family's income.

The factory provided jobs for young people, which are extremely difficult to find throughout the Highlands and Islands. One of the great problems that much of rural Scotland faces—it is not true only of the Highlands and Islands—is that young people leave and older people come back to retire. The great danger is that rural Scotland will end up with a gigantic retired community. That is a worry for many of us. The loss of the Jaeger jobs is a loss of opportunity for young people.

It is through no fault of the work force that it has been made redundant. The workers have done everything that management has asked of them: flexible working; retraining; team working; reduced managers and just-in-time responses to orders. The public agencies have played their part—£296,000 has been pumped in over the last few years to try to keep the factory going. More money was available—the total amount available to the company was £550,000—although it has not been drawn down. However, that was not enough and the matter has ended in tragedy. Why? Because in Morocco, which is where production has been shifted, wage costs are 25 per cent of those in Campbeltown.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I agree with what Mr Lyon has said about the closure of the Jaeger factory in Campbeltown. Would he agree that it is now all the more important to make progress on the possibility of establishing a wind turbine manufacturing plant in Machrihanish?

George Lyon: I am coming to that.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): Will the member allow an intervention on the same point?

George Lyon: Very briefly, because I am about to address the issue.

Mrs Ewing: I agree with what Mr Lyon has said about the body blow to our rural communities. It may not grab front-page headlines in our national press, but we are well aware of the realities. From what I heard this morning, I understand that a package is being worked out with Highlands and Islands Enterprise and that the minister with responsibility for the Highlands is in Campbeltown today. Does George Lyon have any information that he can share with us on that issue?

George Lyon: I will come to that.

I argue that the impact on Campbeltown is greater than that of the Motorola closure on Bathgate. Why? Because in Bathgate, with help from agencies with retraining and reskilling, there are prospects of alternative employment. In Campbeltown, retraining and reskilling will have a limited impact, because there are no other potential employers in the area. Indeed, the nearest big town where there may be jobs is 50 miles away. That is why the key to solving the problem and giving hope to the work force of Jaeger is to find another inward investor. Without new inward investment, the population will decline once again. Families will be forced to move away, there will be fewer children in schools, less money in the local economy and more shops will shut. There will be a downward spiral in an already depressed area.

A lot of work has been done. A new customer contact centre has been built at a cost of £1 million. There must be a redoubling of effort to find an operator. Money has been offered to Landcatch to develop 14 new jobs in the old shipyard, with a fish hatchery. As Margaret Ewing and Jamie McGrigor mentioned, there is the potential development of a wind farm construction plant at Machrihanish. That development was announced in the media today, which I regret, because the deal has not been concluded. The media should not raise people's expectations before contracts are signed. The contract is close to being signed, but further work must be done.

The people of Campbeltown are looking for the Scottish Executive to apply to the Jaeger closure the same priority and effort that is being applied to the closure of the Motorola factory in Bathgate. I ask the Executive to redouble its efforts to turn the promises of prospective jobs into reality, to give people hope.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open part of the debate.

11:32

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): As Alex Johnstone said, the inquiry was important and provided an opportunity to find out what is happening in rural areas. The process of the inquiry, as he outlined, was also important. It provided the opportunity to meet local people and hear what they had to say. As Richard Lochhead indicated, meetings were well attended. People from different airts and pairts and with different interests came along and were happy to tell us what they thought should happen. The use of video links was equally important. Many of the issues that are highlighted in the report came from the communities with which we had such links and from the papers and questionnaires that we gathered. The report did not result from the committee closing doors and deciding what it wanted to include in the report; it came from what local people felt was important.

I will address one particular area. Committee members will not be surprised to hear that it is bottom-up approaches and community development. We cannot seriously examine issues relating to poverty, unemployment and education in rural areas if we do not start by examining what there is on the ground. Top-down solutions do not work, nor do economic strategies that take little notice of what is happening on the ground.

It was clear in the areas that we visited and heard from that the most successful projects were those that involved partnerships among local people, local authorities and local enterprise companies, because they could identify what was needed in the areas in which they worked. It is vital that partnerships are real. There is much in the report about the value of local participation that works. Such participation should be developed. Communities should have an increased share of economic development budgets, which should be devoted to communities and people and take on board softer measures. Social capital is important. Social economic objectives have to be adhered to.

We heard from councils for voluntary service, which work in partnership with a host of organisations at local level to deliver in areas such as housing. We heard about the new deal and its flexibility in working with the voluntary sector, community development, economic development, care of the elderly, social care, community transport, education, training and much more. So much can be delivered by working in partnership if all partners are on board, for example the excellent service provided by post buses, which provide important links in communities.

It is clear from the evidence that we gathered that when a partnership approach is developed, it works. I agree that HIE played an important role in taking on board the social aspect, which is vital

when addressing social care and community development, but HIE recognises that it cannot address such issues on its own; it can deliver only through working with local people, organisations, businesses and communities. HIE is involved not because it has a social ideal, but because it recognises the value and skills of local folk.

We need to get back to building on and supporting local communities, which are the real stakeholders in Scotland. If we want to change how things work, we must get away from top-down delivery and listen to local people. I would like the Minister for Environment and Rural Development to read the report, because there is a lot in it and it is a good starting point. It is important to listen to and value what local people have to say and to find ways in which they can participate in changing their communities.

11:36

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): I will address one or two issues, the first of which is transport and the cost of petrol. I do not want to give the usual, although totally justified, rant about petrol costs, but—as other members have alluded to—the one concern that audiences raised spontaneously at meetings we attended in various places was the price of petrol in their communities. It came as no surprise to members of the Rural Development Committee when, later in the year, the petrol protests got so much support from the general public.

My constituency of Galloway and Upper Nithsdale has one of the highest car-ownership levels in Scotland, yet one of the lowest per capita incomes. People are relatively worse off. Families have to have one or two cars to get to work, because family members must work, as wages are low and jobs are never at the same time or in the same place.

Often, bus services are inadequate. Recently, a factory closed in Dalbeattie. We had a public meeting and one young lad who had been laid off and was having difficulty getting work complained that although he had managed to get a job in Dumfries—the nearest town, which is 10 miles away—it started at half-past 7 in the morning and the first bus in the morning did not get him to Dumfries until 10 minutes to 8.

It is right that the Rural Development Committee should talk about the need for innovative solutions and about assisting public transport needs—Dumfries and Galloway Council already subsidises public transport substantially—due to the volumes and distances involved, but public transport will never be the answer in all cases. Therefore, we must address the relatively high cost of car ownership in our rural areas. If people cannot get

to work, they have a choice: they can move. Increasingly, that is what is happening in rural areas. We have a declining younger population and an increasing elderly population, with many knock-on effects for social service expenditure and council revenues.

The second issue is telecommunications. We want new industries in our rural areas. We want e-industries. There are many people who would love to work in rural areas because of the high quality of life. With modern telecommunications, the playing field for remote areas and areas close to urban centres could be levelled, but that is not happening. If anything, the disparities are growing, because nearly all investment in broadband technology is in our central belt and the main population centres. Market forces are working against rural areas.

If the Government makes a commitment to broadband, it has two choices. First, as the Rural Development Committee suggests, it could place a public service obligation on telecoms companies to provide broadband services to rural areas. After all, the companies were prepared to shell out, perhaps ill-advisedly, huge sums of money on third-generation mobile phone licences, so perhaps they should, as a quid pro quo, put some money into broadband technology. The other option is to provide subsidies. If rural areas are not to fall behind, modern telecommunications technology—the 21st century equivalent of roads and railways, which we could do with too, by the way—must be put into our rural areas.

I have time left to touch only on the flow of funding into rural areas. In Dumfries and Galloway—I presume that the situation is the same in other areas—most funding comes from the common agricultural policy. That will be examined in the aftermath of foot-and-mouth, but there are big problems with renegotiating anything through the European Union. Farmers say that they are in a worse crisis now than they were 10 or 15 years ago, despite the vast amounts of agricultural subsidy that have been provided. Has any other policy put so much money into areas over such a long time and achieved so little? We must study the system and consider how we can use the money for rural areas more imaginatively, to allow everyone to benefit from it, including those who work in forms of agriculture that do not benefit from the CAP because of its curious structures.

11:41

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I welcome the debate. The Rural Development Committee's report gave us valuable food for thought.

My first point arises from a communication I

received from Midlothian Council. We must be careful when we speak of rural Scotland and our definition of rurality. Penicuik is in my constituency, and Midlothian Council told me—I think that it was in a communication about the Arbuthnott formula, but I am not sure—that it felt aggrieved when Midlothian was not included in the list of rural areas. Much farmland and many recreational areas and small communities are within Midlothian Council's boundary. Some people might quarrel with our broad definition of rural Scotland.

Everyone recognises the Borders as a rural area. It contains towns and settlements that were based on traditional industry, which put factories and mills at the heart of the community. The transitional nature of the economy of those areas and agriculture have allowed the Borders to access European funding.

However we define rurality, we must ensure that our understanding of its problems is based on better statistics and criteria and that funding formulae produce fair results for rural areas. It is no use basing a measure of prosperity on cars when even the least prosperous people need cars to access employment and facilities, as Alasdair Morgan said. As he also said, raw unemployment figures can disguise the fact that people leave an area because it has no jobs or only part-time and poorly paid jobs. We need better statistics and better interpretation of them.

I will give an example that shows why fair funding formulae are important. Last week, we debated education and training. I draw ministers' attention to the position of Borders College. Last week, it was announced that further education colleges are to receive average increases in funding of more than 12 per cent. Borders College is to receive 0.7 per cent. Even that figure is based on targets for growth that the college believes it can scarcely achieve with the limited pool of people in its area. I say to ministers that we cannot allow colleges in rural areas to lose out if we want to sustain the objectives of which we spoke last week and speak today.

The public sector is important to the rural economy. The biggest employers in rural Scotland are health, education and council services. The jobs are important not only for their volume but for the varying levels of skill and professionalism that they give employees opportunities to use. The jobs also provide an infrastructure for communities and help to keep communities viable. For those reasons, we must do everything possible to protect local hospitals, rural schools and rural post offices. They are important for communities, job opportunities and a sustainable future in rural Scotland. Cathy Peattie talked about the importance of the voluntary sector. It gets into all

corners of rural Scotland, as well as urban areas, and we must help it.

As I am speaking about the importance of public sector jobs, I take the opportunity to renew a plea to the Executive to make progress with its promised dispersal of public service jobs. We face the restructuring of agriculture and textiles, the volatility of the electronics industry and problems in tourism—at least partly from the consequences of the foot-and-mouth outbreak—so it would be a wonderful boost to the economy of the Scottish Borders if Government jobs, in the shape of a public agency, were relocated in the central Borders. I ask the Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development to encourage her colleagues to give that urgent consideration.

11:45

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It should not take a tragedy for us to take an issue seriously. It should not take an accident for us to realise that something is unsafe. The inquiry into rural communities was being conducted before the foot-and-mouth crisis began, but in the wake of that crisis, it seems much more important to address the issues that the committee's report highlights and to allow our rural communities to play a full part in Scotland's economic and social structures.

I represent the Highlands and Islands; I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate because, contrary to the Executive's opinion, people in the Highlands and Islands are suffering greatly and were suffering before the foot-and-mouth crisis began. We all knew that, but now we have more evidence of it.

In recent weeks, the plight of people in rural communities has been highlighted repeatedly. We have all seen the news, heard from those who have been affected and read the papers. Members who represent rural constituencies have seen at first hand the devastation that the foot-and-mouth outbreak has caused throughout already precarious regions. Everyone's awareness of rural communities has been raised. We can just switch off the television, but rural communities must somehow pick up the pieces and keep going on increasingly lower incomes.

Now that the somewhat alarming reports are calming down a bit, it is easy to forget that people in rural areas are still suffering under the burdens that they had before—only now those burdens are much heavier. Mr Finnie's insinuation that the Rural Development Committee was overreacting was deeply patronising and betrayed his inability to grasp the situation in our rural areas. Some hope we have of improving the situation, when we have a Minister for Environment and Rural

Development who dismisses fact and concern as conjecture and overreaction. It is interesting that the much heralded values of social justice and social inclusion are applied only to housing or drug abuse.

Perhaps we have missed the point. Perhaps the Executive has, secretly and without anyone realising, helped our rural communities to overcome their difficulties. It is not like the Executive to keep anything quiet, but perhaps we have overlooked the great work that it has done and we are being unfair. Nonetheless, farm incomes this year are at their lowest for 60 years. In the past three years, farm incomes have halved and halved again. After the present crisis, agricultural businesses may not survive. Employment in most rural sectors is in decline, as are agriculture, forestry and fishing. Manufacturing employment has also declined—the latest example is Jaeger's closure in Campbeltown, which George Lyon talked about. Instead of taking action to improve matters, the Executive has started consultation on a bill on land reform, which will solve none of the problems that rural areas face and will introduce new problems that will cause conflict and even more hardship.

Transport costs are not only the biggest barrier to economic prosperity, but the factor that rural people worry about most. Access to training and education involves difficulties. The range of employment opportunities is limited and there are mismatches between jobs and skills. A lack of affordable housing hinders labour mobility. Why trap single parents and families on low incomes in rural housing that is miles away from the centres where they might find jobs? The high cost of transport is making it increasingly difficult for those who live in rural communities to remain there and for those who want to visit to get there. Tourism is vital in such communities. If people cannot get there, they cannot spend money. If there is no economic base, the communities will collapse.

The bedrock of rural communities is traditional rural industry—agriculture, fishing and forestry. Yet the Executive has failed to provide a level playing field on which those sectors can thrive. If we do nothing else, we must destroy the barriers that hinder rural prosperity. If EU directives are making matters worse, surely we have the right to expect our Government to stand up and say so.

The Executive may have listened to the concerns of our rural communities, but it has singularly failed to act on the advice that it has received. In every instance, it has resolutely refused to alter its own previously decided course of action. The report proves that there is much to be done and much that can be done to help rural communities. The key must be to help rural communities to help themselves. We must not put

more hurdles in their path. The Scottish Executive believes that the way to get over those hurdles is by financial support. That is fine, but let us destroy the hurdles and let the rural communities thrive.

11:50

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): During the inquiry, the Rural Development Committee travelled to all areas of Scotland. Irene McGugan, Cathy Peattie and I held a meeting in my constituency at Laurencekirk in the Mearns. As Richard Lochhead pointed out, our meetings were extremely well attended and enabled us to listen to people's concerns. During our investigations, the committee also listened to expert opinion. We took the views of the ordinary people out there in rural Scotland and of the experts.

The purpose of the inquiry was to make a contribution to understanding how joined-up government can be made to work for Scotland's rural communities. I think that the report is good, although members may say that I am bound to say so, being a member of the Rural Development Committee. I also think that the ministers in the Scottish Executive rural affairs department are doing an excellent job for rural Scotland. However, I was extremely disappointed by the Executive's reaction to the committee's report, which seems to be based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the report. Alex Johnstone, in his role as committee convener, apologised to ministers if it seemed that the committee's report was critical of the Executive's actions. That was not its purpose.

I am not happy with two issues that arise from the Executive's response to the constructive and positive suggestions that were made in the report—suggestions that were made unanimously by committee members. The first is the economic remit of Scottish Enterprise. If I were fortunate enough to live across the Cairngorms in Fergus Ewing's Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber constituency, I would be able to tap into Highlands and Islands Enterprise funding for community projects, which has a social remit. I cannot do so for my constituents who live on the other side of the Cairngorms. In evidence given to the committee by experts from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scottish Enterprise, it was made clear that the social remit should be expanded in rural Scotland. That was also clear from discussions with people in our constituencies.

I am astounded at the reaction of the Executive, which says in its response that

"the existing powers of SEn are sufficiently broad to address the challenges in rural areas".

I ask ministers to find the civil servant who wrote

that for them, as that civil servant needs to be spoken to. I am also critical of the minister who signed off that particular statement. The ministers have rejected the suggested approach, but from all the evidence that was presented to the Rural Development Committee, their decision is wrong. I would have liked to see Wendy Alexander in the chamber today to address that issue.

The second issue is the need for assistance to encourage exit from and new entry to the farming industry. As part of the rural development plan, we need an innovative early retirement scheme for tenant farmers. For the Executive to say in its response that it has not ruled such a scheme out is hardly a ringing endorsement of the proposal. I hope that the minister will look at the decision again, particularly as we all know what a difficult time farmers, and especially tenant farmers, in rural Scotland are facing.

There are many other things that I would like to raise, but time is running out. Overall, I think that the ministers are doing an excellent job. I hope that my criticism of the two issues I have highlighted has a higher resonance because of that.

11:55

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

The point needs to be stressed that the committee's report was drawn up as an academic assessment of the needs of rural communities and of the barriers that they face. The report's aim was to provide information for decision makers at every level—the Executive, local councils, enterprise companies, businesses and the committee. At no point was the report meant to be seen as a criticism of the Executive's work, as the motion makes clear. The Executive's response shows that the issues that concern the Rural Development Committee also cause the Executive concern and the Executive is working to address them.

Creating employment in rural areas and thereby defeating poverty is difficult. There is no one solution; rural Scotland is diverse. An example of the difficulty can be found in my constituency. The community in the Kintyre peninsula, which George Lyon also spoke about, suffered an economic downturn when the Royal Air Force base was closed. The people also lost their links with Northern Ireland and now face the closure of the Jaeger factory. Some years ago, a working group was set up to address the downturn in the local economy. The Kintyre initiative working group brings together agencies involved in development as well as organisations from the voluntary sector. I and my colleague, Maureen Macmillan, have made it a priority to attend the working group's meetings.

The closure of the Jaeger factory will lead to huge job losses in an area where there are few alternatives. The working group has never given up. This morning, it met Alasdair Morrison to seek his assistance to find solutions. I am really pleased that Alasdair Morrison responded so quickly to the request that he meet the group, which came from me, Maureen Macmillan and Peter Peacock. I am glad that the meeting has now taken place.

We all know that there are options in the pipeline, which need to be progressed quickly. This morning, we heard on the news that a major investment is to go ahead. I understand that some fine details are to be tied up, but I hope that that can be done in the next few days and that 150 new jobs will be created in the area. A huge amount of work has gone into attracting such investment to the area, which underlines the fact that solutions are hard to find.

If anywhere should be a magnet for inward investment, Campbeltown should. Although its geographical location gives it the same disadvantage as the islands, its air and sea links are good. Its work force is stable and multiskilled. There is a strong sense of community and people work together for the greater good. Financial support from the Government is not an issue. The local enterprise company has said that its current projects have the support that they require and that it foresees no problem in obtaining more support, should suitable projects be identified.

We need to show companies the benefits of locating in rural areas. We also need diverse industries in rural areas so that a downturn in one industry does not affect large sections of the community. As Cathy Peattie said, the Rural Development Committee's report recognises the advantages of bottom-up initiatives, which allow communities to look for local solutions. That is what happens in Kintyre. We need to support such participation in rural areas and ensure that communities themselves can find solutions.

Many of the solutions that are proposed by the people and agencies in Kintyre are not small projects. They are not afraid to think big and to use the assets around them to provide jobs and investment in the area. We need to convince all rural communities to follow that example and to support them when they do.

11:58

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): Comments have been made about the Executive's response to the Rural Development Committee's report and recommendations. At Westminster—as members who have served there know well—Governments produce responses to select committee reports all the time. They agree with X and disagree with Y

and no one is terribly surprised; such is the nature of the debate. Rather than pick up on the Executive's response, I will concentrate on what needs to be done for the future and which areas need to be challenged and taken forward—issues that many members brought out well.

The Rural Development Committee is to be congratulated on its findings, which, in many areas, challenge the Executive. One of the key recommendations concerns the production and collation of statistical information about poverty and deprivation levels across Scotland.

Ian Jenkins made a good point about how we define rural Scotland—it is too easy to say that such-and-such an area is in rural Scotland. There is a quantum leap between, for example, Alasdair Morgan's part of Scotland and my constituency of Shetland or the areas around Edinburgh that call themselves rural. It would be helpful at times to consider the different spheres that rural Scotland covers.

Richard Lochhead made a fair point about the fragility of the economies in many of our rural areas and the decline in traditional industries. An important point is that many of our traditional industries are hidebound by regulation. As a crofter put it to me at my surgery on Saturday, his croft is defined as an area of land surrounded by law. Many of us would agree that much could be done in both agriculture and fishing to reduce the regulatory burdens. That is why I welcome the red tape review that the rural affairs department has introduced. I hope that it will make significant changes, but more could be done, for example in the fishing industry.

Many members, including Alasdair Morgan, who made his point eloquently, were right about transport. I will not rehearse the arguments about petrol prices, but I hope that when the Executive considers the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's recent report on rural petrol prices, it will produce a solid analysis of the recommendations and that we will have the opportunity to debate the matter in the chamber.

I notice that the Secretary of State for Scotland is pushing for an increase in direct flights to Europe from Scotland. That is a laudable aim, but I hope that politicians in the Scotland Office will also concentrate on the need for internal flights, for example between Inverness and Heathrow, and on the cost of flights in Scotland. As I—or rather taxpayers—well know, the cost of flying members from Inverness or Shetland to Edinburgh is extremely high. Members of the Rural Development Committee who have been to outlying areas such as Stornoway know that too. I hope that the Executive works hard on those issues with the carriers concerned.

Many members made the point well about telecommunications. The recommendations of the report are helpful in emphasising that issue. A similar argument to the one about the electronics industry that we have witnessed in the past few weeks applies to call centres. It is said by many in the call centre industry that, as telecommunications move forward and different forms of technology—web-enabled activities—develop, the call centre as we understand it will have to evolve or it will not continue. Those who see call centres as having a great future must consider how that activity can develop, given the way in which the world is changing—it is certainly not standing still.

Many correct points were made on the importance of skills and the skills shortage, not only in urban but in rural and remote Scotland. Ian Jenkins made a good point about further education colleges and the limited number of people who are available to fulfil their needs.

I conclude with a point about joined-up government. I was asked in a former life to consider joined-up government between enterprise and rural development. It would not be offensive in any way for the Executive seriously to consider that. We need joined-up government between Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise for the simple reason that the social agenda that many members, and the committee report, have highlighted is important. Joined-up government can deliver that agenda.

12:04

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con):

Many issues have been raised this morning—I intend to consider only a few of them.

I start by saying that the tone of the Executive's response was unhelpful. The Rural Development Committee's inquiry and its report are important and a good starting point.

As Richard Lochhead, Mike Rumbles and Tavish Scott have mentioned, there is considerable confusion about the roles of the Minister for Environment and Rural Development. The position has been renamed, but we have never understood the meaning of that renaming. It is difficult for members to know on a practical basis what is happening.

There is a similar problem with the enterprise and lifelong learning department. I asked a question last week about funding. I expected Wendy Alexander, the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, to answer and up bobbed Mr Finnie. He responded admirably to the question, but I am not clear about what is now happening in the south-west of Scotland and in the Borders to help those areas recover from the foot-and-mouth

outbreak. I want to know who is running the show and where individual responsibilities begin and end. Yesterday, South of Scotland members had a helpful meeting with the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, but the conclusion of that meeting was that she would have to speak to Mr Finnie. We hope to have a meeting with Mr Finnie this afternoon, and I hope that the response to that meeting will not be that he will have to speak to Ms Alexander.

We must have greater clarity about rural development, because many of the issues are cross-cutting issues. I am hopeful that the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's work on a significant report on the new economy will have a fundamental impact on rural development. As Tavish Scott said, there is a need to bring a joined-up approach to the rural economy. I certainly feel strongly that, when it comes to telecommunications developments and the changes that need to take place to enable our rural areas to benefit from information technology, we need clear leadership to drive those changes through. We therefore need to identify who will do that.

IT offers many opportunities in our rural areas. Many are often talked about, but few have been realised. I was struck by evidence given to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee about people's ability to work from rural locations. For example, we got no satisfactory answer as to why the Bank of Scotland is not drawing on the pool of skills that exist in places such as Stranraer, Duns and Lerwick to work for head office operations here in Edinburgh, while at the same time it is recruiting part-time and agency staff. We have not fundamentally addressed why that great opportunity to use the skills of our people around rural Scotland has not been seized. The other thing that we do not do effectively is measure the social impact of information technology on our rural communities.

As many members have said, there is a need to retain a balanced and vibrant society in rural areas. I very much welcome retired people who come to rural Scotland from elsewhere or who move into rural Scotland, but we must have a balance of people. It is worrying that the South of Scotland has the lowest proportion of people aged between 15 and 24 of any part of the UK. That is a worrying prospect for the future and for the vibrancy of rural Scotland. We must continue to make rural Scotland not only diverse but vibrant. To do that, we need clear leadership from the Executive and a clear identification of where it is going.

12:08

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP):

It was at its second meeting, on 29 June 1999, with 38 possible topics identified, that the Rural Affairs Committee agreed that the first priority for investigation was employment, housing and poverty. In the face of the undoubted crises facing every sector of the traditional industries of farming, fishing and forestry, that was a significant and imaginative decision. It was also an acknowledgement that a strategic, cross-cutting and forward-looking approach was needed to address the changes impacting on rural Scotland.

The main conclusion of this detailed and well-researched piece of work is that the combination of poverty and the decline of the traditional industries is threatening the sustainability of rural life. Let us not underestimate the gravity of that statement. The 21 recommendations for action are aimed at eliminating poverty and encouraging regeneration in all Scotland's communities. I am therefore disappointed that the Executive has displayed little enthusiasm for some of the recommendations, and I commend them again to the Executive for urgent consideration and implementation. The report is an accurate reflection of the situation as we found it in rural Scotland.

The intention was not to pass comment on the Executive's performance, good, bad or indifferent. Our remit included consideration of

"the effectiveness of current policy responses."

I accept that the findings might be uncomfortable for ministers. The fact is that transport was the single issue about which concern was most frequently expressed; it was the only common factor at every consultation meeting. Members have heard many examples of its impact.

A straw poll was taken at the Dingwall meeting, which established that every person who attended the meeting had come by car, because there was no suitable public transport. Despite the measures that the Executive has taken to address the issue—I accept that it has taken some—and despite the many times that fuel prices and the high cost and general lack of public transport have been raised in the chamber, ministers have still not properly and adequately taken on board the impact of those matters on the lives of rural residents.

Rural poverty is widespread in Scotland, for reasons that have been highlighted in the debate. It is still the case—I have been saying this since the establishment of the Parliament—that we urgently need to develop systems for the identification and measurement of rural deprivation. That would be vital information for ensuring fair and equitable allocations of funding

and effective targeting of scarce resources. The Executive gave a commitment to a much-needed index of rural deprivation following the publication of "Rural Scotland: A New Approach", but that was a year ago, in May 2000, and we have heard nothing on it from the rural poverty and inclusion working group.

Rural areas are under-represented in all the key growth areas in the economy. Even the performance of the sectors mentioned positively by the Executive, such as the food sector and tourism, has been disappointing. Since 1991, food processing employment has fallen by 9 per cent in rural Scotland. Employment in hotels and restaurants has fallen by 10 per cent, yet tourism was reported as one of Scotland's growth industries by the Scottish Tourist Board, as it was then, in evidence to the committee.

It is a welcome and long-overdue development that local enterprise companies have now made a commitment to rural employment. It is important that that new commitment by Scottish Enterprise is supported by a strong team at its headquarters, because the committee noted that Scottish Enterprise chose to send no one from its HQ to give evidence to the committee, in contrast to Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Neither was it able to supply data for the rural areas that are within its remit.

The focus of the report and the debate is on rural Scotland's economic future, but I am pleased about and very supportive of the recommendation on an increased focus on soft economic measures, which was outlined by Cathy Peattie. Social accounting is important. Such initiatives foster a sense of community and ownership of enterprises and developments and will ultimately contribute to the sustainability of rural life.

Those findings and the report form a vital baseline for the committee's future work. We hope that they will have a wider benefit in taking forward, at the highest level, the crucial debate on rural Scotland's economic future.

12:13

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): I am grateful that we have this opportunity to discuss the committee's "Report on the Impact of Changing Employment Patterns in Rural Scotland".

I was interested to hear about the consultation meeting that the committee held in Dingwall. Had it taken place a few years ago, I might have participated in it, as I lived in the Dingwall area for several years.

The Executive is dedicated to supporting and

enhancing rural life, rural communities and the rural economy. The subject of the report is therefore especially relevant to the work that is being done to deliver that commitment. While I welcome the report, we had some initial concerns about its focus and coverage. As has been mentioned, we were disappointed by the lack of recognition given to the work that the Executive and others are taking forward. I accept Alex Johnstone's statement that that was not the intention. I am pleased, however, that today's debate has been used to discuss several difficult issues that we face.

I will mention at the outset what has been happening in Campbeltown. The debate is timely, because of the announcement from Jaeger about the loss of jobs there. We recognise that the number of jobs being lost will have a huge impact on such a small community. As we have heard, Alasdair Morrison met the Kintyre initiative working group to discuss the impact of the Jaeger closure and how the Executive could help with the broader issues facing the Kintyre economy. Our top priority is to create new employment opportunities, and the Executive and Argyll and the Islands Enterprise are already in discussion with a number of companies about various promising possibilities. The Kintyre peninsula is eligible for investment support at the maximum permitted rate and we will continue to promote the area vigorously as an attractive location for new investment.

We must be very cautious about the possibility of an inward investment project by Vestas Wind Systems, which has been reported in the press. Matters still have to be resolved. If the investment happens, it will be excellent news for the Kintyre economy and rural Scotland, particularly at a time when the local economy is being very hard hit. It should also prove excellent news for the Scottish renewables sector, as it will bring a major manufacturer to the country, and indeed endorses the Executive's policy to promote renewable energy. However, I must urge caution at this stage, because no final decisions have been taken.

I emphatically deny the suggestion that the Executive's response paints a totally rosy picture of rural Scotland. Actually, the media coverage at the time of the report's publication at the end of January and, in some cases, the report itself paint an unnecessarily bleak picture of our rural areas. Given what is happening in Dumfriesshire, the Borders and Argyll and the impact of foot-and-mouth on the whole of Scotland, I would certainly be the last to say that we do not face major challenges. However, we cannot afford to talk down the expectations and aspirations of rural communities. Jamie McGrigor was particularly guilty of doing so.

Alex Fergusson: Will the minister give way?

Rhona Brankin: I will give way to the member later; I want to get into my speech.

As the Executive response stressed, even against that background, rural Scotland is a dynamic area; it is not a single entity and there is considerable variation within the area. In the past, it has consistently enjoyed unemployment rates below the Scottish average, population growth, and underlying employment strength. Although that does not apply to all parts of rural Scotland, it applies to some, and we must be careful about generalising.

Although foot-and-mouth has presented real difficulties, I am confident in the ability of rural businesses and communities to respond, and the Executive is absolutely committed to supporting the recovery process.

Alex Fergusson: Although I accept what the minister says about talking the situation up or down, does she accept that—as Irene McGugan pointed out—the report's truth lies in its reflection of the situation that we found on the ground and at the public meetings we attended?

Rhona Brankin: I accept that the committee conducted a detailed consultation to produce its report. However, I re-emphasise that it is very difficult to make generalisations based on a number of meetings.

Richard Lochhead: Will the minister give way?

Rhona Brankin: No—I want to finish my point. We must recognise that there is considerable variation throughout rural Scotland.

I must carry on now; I am aware that I have been asked to finish as quickly as possible.

I take this opportunity today to highlight three broad areas where the Executive is undertaking important work that will play—and indeed is already playing—a vital role in supporting employment and the financial and social economies of rural Scotland: first, the enhancement of our statistical information base; secondly, the development and implementation of a series of initiatives and frameworks through which to tackle rural issues; and thirdly, the devotion and targeting of new resources to key areas. Those are not new priorities and reflect the commitment accorded by the Executive to rural areas since its creation.

I am pleased to say that the Executive response was able to report some common ground between the Executive and the committee. For example, we have been seeking to address the issue of data availability for some time. As "Rural Scotland: A New Approach" stressed, once we have acknowledged rural problems, we need to

understand their nature before we can tackle them. Statistical information plays a vital role in the development of rural initiatives. In particular, the Executive has recognised the need for local data. I am sure that the committee will welcome the fact that we have work in hand to produce the data in the form required to allow us to monitor progress in rural performance. We have already announced funding of £7 million over the next three financial years to support the needed development of local data. That work is being carried out with the community and the voluntary sector, and I look forward to seeing the results.

Richard Lochhead: Will the minister give way?

Rhona Brankin: Yes.

Richard Lochhead: I am stunned, as the minister does not usually give way to me. I thank her for doing so. She says that no local data are available. How, then, did the Executive reach its decision that the rural picture is fairly positive overall? Exactly what criteria is she using to reach that conclusion? When she talks about low rates of unemployment, is not she, rather than the committee, guilty of generalising, given the fact that what employment there is in those areas is low-paid, seasonal and part-time work?

Rhona Brankin: Let me correct Mr Lochhead. I did not say that the overall picture is rosy. What I said is that there are considerable variations and that we must be cautious about making generalisations.

Richard Lochhead: The Executive response uses the word "overall".

Rhona Brankin: No; I am sorry. I have to carry on.

We must be careful not to make generalisations, and we must ensure that there is better data collection to inform the decisions that we make and to enable us to monitor the progress that we are making. The committee will welcome that step, as it identified data collection as one of the key areas for action.

Our new approach has also been highlighted by last December's "Services in Rural Scotland" report. We commissioned the Scottish national rural partnership to produce that report to investigate innovative approaches to service delivery in rural areas and determine how those might be replicated in other areas. Additionally, the Executive is carrying out work on specific issues in a rural context. I expect the report of the rural poverty and inclusion working group to provide some useful recommendations on the way in which we might better address the needs of those who suffer poverty and social exclusion in our rural communities.

Mr Rumbles: We do not understand why the

Executive is not willing to extend a social remit to Scottish Enterprise, such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise has, so that it can address issues of social exclusion.

Rhona Brankin: This is the policy. I shall deal with that specific issue later.

Irene McGugan criticised the Executive for not releasing the report from the rural poverty and inclusion working group. She will understand that, recently, we have had to deal with some very difficult situations. The rural poverty and inclusion working group itself recommended that its work be suspended because of the work that was going on—in which departmental officials were involved—to deal with the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak.

The Executive has signalled that it is committed to ensuring that those who live in rural Scotland enjoy a high quality of life. We are already beginning to deliver on that commitment, as can be seen from the significant new resources that are being made available for rural schools, the health service in rural areas, rural transport and rural housing. Through the new deal for schools, we are supporting the provision of new and refurbished schools, and through the excellence fund, we are providing help for specialist schools. Further, our proposals for investment in broadband connections for schools will give rural and remote areas access to the best educational resources and support.

We are investing substantial resources in improving health services in rural Scotland. For the first time, the formula through which the NHS in Scotland is funded fully reflects the excess costs of delivering services in the less populated parts of the country. We are also providing support for a variety of new initiatives. For example, we have made £8 million available to establish a remote and rural areas resource initiative, to develop innovative ways of providing rural services. We are investing heavily in primary care services, and we recently announced that £18.5 million would be provided over three years, to allow trusts to employ GPs directly, thereby helping to ensure that a GP is present wherever one is needed. We have also provided capital totalling more than £12 million to build a new hospital for the Uists and Barra and to upgrade the existing general hospital in Orkney.

As the committee's report highlighted, transport is one of the key issues in rural Scotland. The early creation of the rural transport fund has brought new investment of over £14 million. Furthermore, the spending review for 2000 allocated an extra £60 million to enhance transport in the Highlands and Islands.

Rural housing will benefit from extra investment

by Scottish Homes in rural areas. It is anticipated that that will result in the construction of about 1,650 new and improved homes for families in rural areas, mostly for social rent. In addition, £4 million will be devoted to rural local authorities through the rough sleepers initiative.

Alasdair Morgan: Will the minister give way?

Rhona Brankin: I am on my last minute.

We also share the committee's wish that those least able to participate in rural life be given the necessary help, and that investment include support for individuals and communities.

The benefits of the approaches to rural issues that I have outlined are now clear from the way in which we have reacted to the foot-and-mouth disease crisis, particularly our recognition that this is not solely a problem for the agriculture sector, but a problem for other people in rural areas and for sectors that rely on agriculture.

The architecture that we have put in place since devolution to address rural issues is currently facing the heat of battle. The ministerial committee for rural development has created a sub-group to draw together the Executive's response to foot-and-mouth disease and to put in place measures to help alleviate the worst effects of foot-and-mouth disease on individuals and businesses. Those measures fall within the remit of departments across the Executive and are the result of in-depth liaison and discussion with the UK Government and the private sector.

That approach is working well and builds upon our experience of treating rural development in a joined-up way. We are working closely with the enterprise networks—among others—in identifying imaginative and effective ways of providing short-term relief and long-term recovery. That builds on the way in which we have worked with Scottish Enterprise to make it aware of rural needs and priorities.

I do not want to sound blasé as this is not an easy time. However, our reaction to the current crisis for rural areas is built upon the work that we have been doing over the past two years and on the lessons that we have learnt over that period about the needs and aspirations of rural society and rural businesses.

I am pleased that we have had this opportunity to discuss the enhancement of rural life, rural communities and the rural economy and the work that the Executive and others are doing to promote rural economic development. The Executive is dedicated to helping the rural economy face the current challenges and maximise its potential. That will benefit not only rural areas but the rest of Scotland.

12:27

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I am conscious that I am closing the debate as the deputy convener of the Rural Development Committee and that I joined the committee on 23 November 2000, when the vast majority of the work had already been completed. I am aware that I did not participate in all the meetings that were held around the country. With those caveats, I believe that the conclusions of the report merit serious consideration. Today's debate has contained a number of useful speeches, through which has run the common theme that the Executive must give more serious consideration than it has done so far to the serious body of work that has been produced on the subject.

Tavish Scott mentioned the need for the internal flight from London Heathrow to Inverness to be the subject of a public service obligation. That is a cause in which I am very interested. However, I do not know what the Executive's response to that suggestion might be. I wish that we could find that out.

The need for a social remit for the Scottish Enterprise network is demonstrable. The arguments against it in the Scottish Executive response that we have read do not stand up to examination. I hope that the issue will be revisited, as members of many parties have indicated that it should be.

The threats to the sustainability of rural life have been referred to by many members, including Irene McGugan, Alex Fergusson and Alex Johnstone, the convener of the Rural Development Committee. I agree with the vast majority of what has been said in that regard. I am not suggesting that the minister and the deputy minister have no regard for that matter—of course they do—but I am not persuaded that the report has been taken seriously enough.

I would not go as far as Mike Rumbles, who generally goes pretty far—

Alex Fergusson: Not far enough.

Fergus Ewing: I was not speaking in terms of spatial distance.

Today, we heard from Mike Rumbles that he was astounded. I have heard Mike say that he is appalled, and that he is astonished—today he was astounded. I am looking forward to the day when he is merely mildly surprised. Although I agree with the spirit, if not the wording, of his expression of astonishment that the response to the committee report was less than positive, I found his adroit but swiftly executed U-turn, which showed him to have a tighter turning circle than a Hackney cab, less than impressive, and I say that

from the point of view of criticising his contribution in a rational way. David Mundell's comment, that the tone of the response was unhelpful, was nearer the mark.

I will make two points of my own, which arise, I stress, from the committee's work. The starting point is that the Executive's response has misrepresented the fundamental conclusion that the committee reached. The committee did not conclude, as the Executive response purports it to do, that

"most rural employment is in decline".

The conclusion of the committee's work was:

"Employment in most rural sectors is in decline".

If the minister and deputy minister look at key finding 1 under the summary of key findings, they will see that it states that there have been some areas, such as the service sector, in which there has been growth, not a decline. However, the report goes on to spell out in great detail, in paragraphs 17, 19 and 20, that there has been a

"decline in employment in agriculture."

That was before the dreadful foot-and-mouth outbreak, which has obviously made the situation much worse. Employment in forestry has declined by 40 per cent, to 7,000, and, over the past 30 years, employment in agriculture has declined from around 68,000 or 70,000 to 32,000. I hope that no one is denying that the traditional sectors are in decline. What is unhelpful about the Executive's response is that it highlights the committee's having stated that all or

"most rural employment is in decline".

In fact, we did not say that. I do not think it helpful in a serious debate such as this if such a blatantly false representation is made in response to one of the longest, most serious reports that we have considered so far in the Parliament.

An even more serious matter, which relates to an issue highlighted by Alasdair Morgan and Tavish Scott, is the price of fuel. As members will know, that is a topic in which I take an occasional interest. I notice that the word fuel—perhaps because it contains four letters—is not one that the deputy minister chose to mention in her closing speech, but the committee did make recommendations on the matter. They were made by the committee on a collegiate basis, and therefore merit serious consideration. Recommendation R16 states

"that mechanisms be investigated for bulk-buying petrol in rural areas and passing on the discounts to petrol retailers and to customers".

What was the Executive response to that proposal?

"It has been suggested that the proposed Highlands and Islands Integrated Transport Authority might operate a bulk-purchasing scheme. The recently published report by Deloitte and Touche on their study into the setting up of a HIITA found little support for this."

I say to the minister that the reason why the HIITA "found little support for this"

was that it was not asked to consider it. The remit of the HIITA is to

"Encourage the establishment of regional transport partnerships".

If members read further in Deloitte & Touche's report, for which, incidentally, it was paid more than £100,000—which, if I may use the John Farquhar Munro device of offering a personal view when speaking on behalf of the committee, is money down the drain—they will find that the specific aims of the study, although no doubt worthy, did not include anything to do with considering the bulk purchase of fuel.

Why, then, when a suggestion was made on a cross-party basis by the committee, that the matter should be investigated, did the Executive respond in what I can only describe as a disingenuous way? There is a word that one hears from time to time, called spin. That is slightly misleading. There is an old-fashioned word that is more accurate: obfuscation. That is what we have seen in the Executive's response.

As I approach the conclusion of the speech that I am making on behalf of the committee, I hope that I speak genuinely on behalf of the majority of the committee in urging the Executive to revisit its response to the 21 recommendations. There is an appetite for more work on many of the recommendations. I believe that that is the mood of Parliament and that it has not been met with the response that we would expect from the Executive when a committee produces a serious and worthy report—I see the Liberals almost imperceptibly nodding as I close. I hope that on this occasion the Executive will agree with me and accept the invitation to look again very seriously at those matters.

Business Motion

12:35

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The final item of business this morning is consideration of business motion S1M-1893, which is set out in the business bulletin in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

The Deputy Minister for Parliament (Euan Robson): Before I move the motion, I inform members that Conservative business at 9.30 am on Thursday 10 May will be debates on tourism and Holyrood. I express my appreciation to the Conservatives for indicating those subjects in advance.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees

(a) the following programme of business—

Wednesday 9 May 2001

2.30 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Executive Debate on Impact of European Union on Scotland
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-1829 Mr Kenny MacAskill: 70 th Anniversary of Scottish Youth Hostels

Thursday 10 May 2001

9.30 am	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motion
2.30 pm	Question Time
3.10 pm	First Minister's Question Time
3.30 pm	Executive Debate on Urban Regeneration
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-1742 Dr Elaine Murray: Foot-and-Mouth Disease in Dumfries and Galloway

Wednesday 16 May 2001

2.30 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Executive Business
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Thursday 17 May 2001

9.30 am Education, Culture and Sport Committee Debate on its Report on Special Educational Needs

followed by Business Motion

2.30 pm Question Time

3.10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3.30 pm Stage 1 Debate on Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

and, (b) that Stage 1 of the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill be completed by 17 May 2001 and Stage 1 of the International Criminal Court (Scotland) Bill be completed by 14 June 2001.

The Presiding Officer: The word "Holyrood" covers many things. What exactly is the minister telling us?

Euan Robson: I am only advising members of what I have been told. I imagine that the debate will be on the Holyrood project, but I do not yet know the distinctive title of the debate.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S1M-1893, in the name of Tom McCabe, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

12:37

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Crofting Counties Roads Scheme

1. Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to bring forward legislation to reinstate the crofting counties roads scheme. (S1O-3330)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): Although the scheme produced benefits in the nearly 60 years of its operation, we take the view that local councils are the appropriate bodies to determine local road spending priorities.

Mr Stone: I thank the minister for his answer, which was not completely unexpected. I pay tribute to the minister's researchers, who had some difficulty in checking out the scheme, which went back to 1932. Does the minister agree that the scheme was extremely useful? Does he also agree that some roads in the remoter parts of the Highlands are below standard and that it would be useful if the Rural Development Committee examined the scheme to see whether it could be re-established?

Ross Finnie: Just as it is not for me to tell local authorities how to determine their spending allocations, it is certainly not for me to tell committees of the Parliament what they should examine. All I will say is that, as Jamie Stone pointed out, the scheme went way back to 1932 and was designed for a different purpose. I can only repeat that, although the committee may choose to examine the scheme, local authorities are the appropriate bodies to determine the spending priorities.

Glasgow Housing Association

2. Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when Glasgow Housing Association will publish its business plan on the proposed Glasgow housing stock transfer. (S1O-3325)

The Deputy Minister for Social Justice (Ms Margaret Curran): That is a matter for discussion between Glasgow Housing Association and Glasgow City Council, in line with the Executive's "Housing Transfer to Community Ownership—Guidance for Local Authorities".

Mr Gibson: Can the minister confirm or otherwise that, in the business plan following stock transfer, the cost of modernising transferred stock will be 17.5 per cent more than under the council, through the imposition of VAT, which is effectively zero rated on council housing? Can she also confirm that that will mean that, of the £1.8 billion that is currently touted as the cost of modernisation, £268 million will go into the bloated coffers of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and thus be lost to Glasgow? If so, how will she ensure that that money is returned to the city?

Ms Curran: First, it is clear from what has happened in Scotland over the years that money that is given to the chancellor is not lost to Scotland. On the specific question about Glasgow Housing Association's business plan, Mr Gibson is guessing at things that he does not know about—the VAT implications will depend on the specific details of the transfer proposals and, as he knows, we have yet to see those proposals.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): Does the minister agree that, on the specific question, this matter has dragged on for far too long? It is more than high time that the question of the Glasgow housing stock transfer was resolved in, I hope, a satisfactory manner.

Ms Curran: I firmly reassure the Parliament that I have encouraged all the parties in the process to keep their eye on the prize, which is increased housing investment in Glasgow and improved stock for the tenants of Glasgow. We are deeply committed to tenant involvement. That takes time. We are putting in place measures to make sure that tenants are involved. That is now happening. We are on target and we will make sure that matters proceed accurately.

Rail Links (Alloa)

3. Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether sufficient funding is in place to reinstate passenger and freight rail links to Alloa. (S1O-3355)

The Deputy Minister for Transport and Planning (Lewis Macdonald): The completion of funding packages for those links is the responsibility of the promoters of the links, which are Clackmannanshire Council in the case of the passenger link and Railtrack in the case of the freight link. I understand that Clackmannanshire Council is meeting Railtrack again this week to discuss the cost of the project. We expect to be kept fully in touch with the result of those talks.

Mr Raffan: Will the minister reaffirm the Executive's commitment to the project? Will he confirm that the Babbie Group, which is one of the original two consultants, is examining closely Railtrack's revised figures? Can he give an

assurance that the Executive will work closely with Clackmannanshire Council to make up whatever the final shortfall proves to be?

Lewis Macdonald: The reports that we have received from Clackmannanshire Council and Railtrack show the gap between the funding estimates that the council initially submitted and those that Railtrack later submitted. That is why we are calling for both parties to meet urgently to discuss those costs, close the gap and show that a viable, value-for-money project remains for us to support.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Only a few months ago, the Minister for Transport and Planning walked the track and committed the Executive to giving the go-ahead to the line's reinstatement. I ask the deputy minister to give a similar commitment. Will he commit the Executive to reconnecting Clackmannanshire to the rest of Scotland through the reinstatement of the rail line?

Lewis Macdonald: I will not make commitments before the parties that proposed the project produce firm, agreed and costed proposals for the project. Members will be aware of our commitment from the public transport fund to support the project as it was initially designed and proposed to us. There is a serious difference between the figures that were approved at that time and attracted our support and the figures that Railtrack has produced. It is for those bodies to get together and sort out the difference. When they have done so, we will study closely the viability of the project. If the project remains viable, it will receive our support.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): Will the minister further clarify the answer that Sarah Boyack gave last month when I asked her whether the funding shortfall was caused by a miscalculation by Railtrack or by Clackmannanshire Council?

Lewis Macdonald: We are not in a position to clarify that. That is why we asked those bodies to talk to each other and examine—together—the basis of their figures. They are to produce a clear and agreed package with which we can proceed. We expect both parties to recognise the difficulties that their failure to agree on figures at the outset has caused. Sarah Boyack will meet the director of Railtrack in Scotland shortly. We expect Railtrack to give us assurances about the basis on which it will assess and respond to future bids from third parties such as Clackmannanshire Council.

Prescription Charges (Exemptions)

4. Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has any plans to review the exemption from prescription charge categories. (S1O-3335)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): We have no plans to do so.

Mr Davidson: That answer was not as bright as the minister's jacket. In recent weeks, many health support organisations have contacted me about reviews of the exemption scheme. The most recent contact was from Aberdeen mental health reference group, which seeks exemption from prescription charges for people with mental health problems. I remind the minister that the scheme was originally targeted at those with long-term conditions that required medication. To that end, will she agree to a review to appraise the needs of all those who suffer from long-term medical conditions?

Susan Deacon: We are aware of many different and often conflicting views on the policy that governs exemption categories. Relatively recently, the United Kingdom Government conducted a review of the categories and concluded that it would not make further changes. We, too, do not identify the issue as a priority at this time, but we are well aware of the many views that people with a range of conditions express on the issue.

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): I congratulate the minister on what looks like a lovely red jacket. I ask her to confirm that students who are aged 19 or over are means-tested to assess their eligibility for free prescriptions and that the means test assumes them to be receiving their full entitlement to student loans, whether or not they do. Given the levels of student poverty and debt, has not the time come to review the decision not to include students in the exempt categories for prescription charges?

Susan Deacon: I never realised that I could be responsible for provoking so many fashion statements in the Parliament. John McAllion accurately reflected the way in which students' incomes are treated for the purposes of exemption. However, I put that in a wider context. Prescription exemptions are granted on a range of medical and income grounds. About 90 per cent of all prescriptions are dispensed free of charge. As I acknowledged in answering David Davidson's question, a range of views will always exist about how exemptions should be granted and how forms of income should be treated, but successive Governments have decided to target resources as effectively as possible to those in the greatest need. We will continue to deal with the issue sensitively.

Maternity Hospitals (Nappies)

5. Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has any plans to promote the use of reusable nappies in maternity hospitals. (S1O-3353)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): The use of reusable nappies is a matter for individual national health service trusts to determine.

Nora Radcliffe: Does the minister agree that, given the huge savings that the use of real nappies brings—£600 per child in personal costs to families and £40 million in landfill costs to the public purse—encouraging the NHS to introduce new mums to the benefits of real nappies would be a useful piece of leadership by the Scottish Executive?

Susan Deacon: I am aware of the cost and environmental implications that Nora Radcliffe refers to. I am also very much aware of the fact that parents have a key role to play in exercising choice in this matter. Environmental concerns must be balanced with the decisions that individuals take regarding convenience. That said, I congratulate the Women's Environmental Network on recently organising real nappy week and on its efforts to raise awareness of the issue. Increased awareness promotes informed choice.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Are there health concerns for babies from the use of disposable nappies? I refer in particular to the product tributyl tin, known as TBT. I also ask the minister to respond to the claim, made by environmental groups, that it takes more than 200 years for a disposable nappy to decompose.

Susan Deacon: My understanding is that it takes more than 20 years for disposable nappies to decompose. The subject raises real environmental issues. That is why I consider it to be a legitimate area of debate and expect environmental questions to be raised on it. I am happy to respond in writing to the specific point that Mary Scanlon made.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Is the minister aware that there is practically no difference in efficacy and convenience between the two types of nappy? The reusable nappy is a modern contrivance. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Order. There is an awful lot of noise. Can we please hear the answer?

Susan Deacon: I find it difficult to know whether to answer that question as the Minister for Health and Community Care or as the mother of a toddler.

Having had some fairly recent experience of nappy changing in various forms, I repeat the point that I made earlier, which is that personal choice is very important.

Job Losses (Assistance)

6. Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will give the same assistance, proportional to the number of jobs lost, to work forces and communities in urban Scotland as has been made available to the fishing and farming industries. (S10-3354)

The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Ms Wendy Alexander): Assistance is currently provided to all those who lose their jobs across Scotland in accordance with the principles set out in our partnership action for continuing employment framework. We are very conscious of the devastating impact that job losses can have on local communities. We are seeking to ensure that, as we create sustainable economic growth, employment opportunities are available to people in all parts of Scotland.

Hugh Henry: Many of us recognise that problems in fishing and farming communities need to be addressed. However, does the minister agree that companies such as Compaq and Motorola should be held responsible for the problems that are caused by their actions? Will she further guarantee that urban Scotland, where the majority of Scotland's population, poverty and problems are to be found, will be given the same proportionate support that has been given to the fishing and farming communities?

Ms Alexander: Hugh Henry's point—that companies are in a position to contribute to outplacement costs—is certainly true. We are encouraging companies to do that and I know that Compaq has agreed to do so. I am not sure that depleted fish stocks or slaughtered sheep can contribute in the same way as multinational companies can to clearing up the destruction that they have wreaked. It is true that a number of instruments—such as regional selective assistance, some European funds, including the urban fund, and social inclusion partnerships—are predominantly available in urban areas. The judicious use of such moneys, which has led to successes in the cases of Mitsubishi and Continental, is what we are looking for in response to the Motorola and Compaq situations.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): At a time when many industries in rural and urban Scotland are suffering serious problems, does the minister agree that it is unfortunate, not to say crass, that a question should have been asked that tries to play off one area against another?

Ms Alexander: I did not understand the question to be one that tried to play off areas against each other. I was trying to reflect the importance of our responding to the specific needs of specific situations in urban Scotland. Where an exiting company can contribute to outplacement costs, we should encourage it to do so. Where we can claw back money, we should do so. Similarly, in areas where crises are a result of factors beyond the control of any one of us—for example, the depletion of fish stocks or disease in animals—a different response is required. The Executive is showing that flexibility.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): The minister will accept that, in her constituency and that of Mr Henry, millions of pounds of public money have been spent in recent years. Does she acknowledge that the communities of Dumfries and Galloway, which have received a mere £800,000, would give their eye teeth to get their hands on even a proportion of what has been made available to those urban communities?

Ms Alexander: In the spirit of my previous response, let me say that it is important that members from all parts of the chamber try to do what is best for each community in Scotland. Earlier today and over the past few days, the Executive has been considering the Dumfries and Galloway recovery plan and the need to respond to the specific needs of that community in the face of the foot-and-mouth crisis.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Will the minister assure us that the Executive will not be deflected from addressing the crises in our fishing and farming industries? As a rider to that, would she consider extending the social remit of Highlands and Islands Enterprise to Scottish Enterprise so that we can address some of the issues in our rural areas?

Ms Alexander: One of the strengths of the Parliament is that we have the opportunity to address all those issues—be they fishing, farming or Scotland's industrial future—with a degree of detail, intention and public accountability that was not possible before the Parliament came into existence. With respect to the response of Scottish Enterprise to the crisis in Dumfries and Galloway, I have recently discussed the issue with Scottish Enterprise. The crisis has provided an opportunity for its rural team throughout the network to kick into action; it is presenting proposals to its board on how to drive forward the rural agenda, especially in the light of the impact of the foot-and-mouth crisis.

Ritalin

7. Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive how it plans to address the increase in the number of children being prescribed Ritalin. (S1O-3318)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): Later this month, the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network—SIGN—will publish evidence-based guidance for health professionals on the diagnosis, assessment and management of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children. The guidance will be made available to all relevant health professionals.

Mr Ingram: Given the lack of convincing evidence that Ritalin has no long-term damaging effects, does the minister share my concern and that of professionals in the field at the dramatic, tenfold increase in the past five years in the use of the drug, which is prescribed to control the behaviour of children with hyperkinetic disorders?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am aware that this is a controversial area and that a number of people have expressed concerns—I spoke to the Scottish Association of Mental Health on the subject last week. However, I would prefer to wait to see what the SIGN guidance says. SIGN will be considering a lot of the research evidence and taking account of best practice. I am told that it will cover non-pharmacological treatments as well as the issue to which the question refers.

visitscotland

8. David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the interests of the South of Scotland are adequately represented on the board of visitscotland. (S1O-3322)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and Gaelic (Mr Alasdair Morrison): Appointments to the board of visitscotland are made on the basis of the expertise that an individual can bring to the work of the board and not because they are a representative of a particular area.

David Mundell: I note the minister's answer and welcome the fact that he has visited the area several times recently and listened directly to the concerns of local tourism businesses. However, on the basis of those visits, does he accept that there is a lack of confidence in Dumfries and Galloway that visitscotland can represent the area's interests and has its interests at heart? That was especially underlined by the allocation to the area of only £300,000 from the £5 million provided for dealing with foot-and-mouth. Will he ensure that he takes steps to restore confidence in visitscotland among tourist businesses in the

South of Scotland?

Mr Morrison: Obviously, visitscotland has a very important role to play as far as the South of Scotland is concerned. On my visit to the area at the beginning of the week, I found that, despite the enormity of the challenge facing tourism businesses and other rural businesses, people were positive and forward-looking. I will certainly convey the concerns that I heard in Dumfries and Galloway from Mr Mundell and Elaine Murray to the interim chief executive of visitscotland, to whom I will be sending a minute as a matter of practice.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Does the minister acknowledge that there are concerns in constituencies such as mine that tourism in those areas is disadvantaged compared with tourism in Glasgow? Does he agree that the rural areas of the South of Scotland should also be highlighted through the tourist agencies, just as urban areas are?

Mr Morrison: There is no doubt about that. I am well aware of the challenges facing the South of Scotland. I was greatly encouraged by a plan to promote the South of Scotland as one entity, instead of breaking it up into Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders area. There is real potential to do something special for the South of Scotland and to promote it as one entity.

Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP): Would the minister consider persuading visitscotland to change its fatuous name, which is just confusing people and making it more difficult to find Scotland? He is aware that there are demonstrators from Dumfries and Galloway outside the chamber today. They are demanding that, in view of the recent catastrophes, an entirely new tourist board be set up.

Mr Morrison: Unlike John Swinney, I and all my colleagues in the Scottish Executive are doing everything that we can to encourage people to visit Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I call John Farquhar Munro in the expectation that his question is about the South of Scotland.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): In order to support the excellent work that the Executive and visitscotland are undertaking to bring visitors to our countryside, will the minister encourage landlords who persist in displaying restricted-access signs to remove them with immediate effect from the areas of the countryside that are considered to be provisionally free of foot-and-mouth disease?

Mr Morrison: That issue is relevant to the South of Scotland and to part of the area that John Farquhar Munro represents. For many weeks now,

I have been telling private landowners that there is no room for selfishness. They must engage with the wider community and take cognisance of the issues that tourism businesses are facing. The message is: get those unnecessary signs down.

Higher and Further Education (Partnerships)

9. Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps are being taken to encourage higher and further education institutions to enter into partnerships with private enterprises in order to encourage business growth which benefits the wider community. (S1O-3347)

The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Ms Wendy Alexander): The Scottish Executive's approach to knowledge transfer, innovation and business development is set out in two reports: "A Smart, Successful Scotland: Ambitions for the Enterprise Networks" and the knowledge economy cross-cutting initiative report. Both documents highlight the successful role that can be played in productive partnerships between higher and further education and the business community.

Bristow Muldoon: Does the minister agree that an area such as West Lothian would make an ideal location for the commercial development of knowledge generated in Scotland's universities? Will she agree to discuss with Scottish Enterprise the promotion of West Lothian as such a location?

Ms Alexander: Very much so. As Bristow Muldoon will know because of his constituency interests, the Alba Centre, which is the first attempt to see Scotland as a centre for the next generation of electronics design, has a hub in Livingston. That is a unique collaboration between Scottish universities, the business community and Scottish Enterprise, and we hope that it is the first of such research-and-development-intensive projects to signal where the future of the Scottish economy lies.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): In some cases, one of the obstacles to progress in that direction is that universities and colleges need more accommodation in the way of laboratories and workshops to carry out the research that will very soon lead to economic benefits, but they cannot afford to provide those facilities out of their existing budgets. Will the minister consider using some of the economic development money to assist the universities and colleges to provide those facilities, which would soon have a spin-off?

Ms Alexander: I have to put on record the fact that, over the past four years, an additional £1.5 billion has been put into university research; Scotland has been the recipient of more than its population share of that money.

On the more general point, we are certainly

encouraging the enterprise network to look creatively at how it can support the work of universities. That is reflected in, for example, the proof of concept fund, which is administered by the enterprise network, and by the recent proposal to spend £10 million over the next three years on developing e-institutes. Those are collaborations between higher education institutions in Scotland and those overseas.

BSE

10. John Scott (Ayr) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive why it is safe to burn cattle over five years old yet not safe to bury such cattle due to the risk of contaminating either the ground or the atmosphere with BSE. (S1O-3324)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee recently considered a BSE risk assessment on the burning of cattle and the risk from burying cattle. SEAC's view was that burning cattle carcasses remains the preferable option, as burning can destroy as much as 90 per cent of any BSE infectivity whereas, with burial, none might be destroyed. The committee estimated that the likely BSE infectivity in cattle born before 1 August 1996 would be about 400 times higher than that in cattle born on or after that date. Based on that information, older cattle in Scotland are either rendered or burned.

John Scott: The minister will be aware that BSE is almost indestructible, so the process of burning potentially BSE-infected cattle that are more than five years old must carry a risk of distributing BSE prions into the atmosphere. That could allow the prions to fall on grassland or growing vegetables, which would contaminate the human and animal food chain. In light of that fact, which the minister has not denied, would not it have been safer to render rather than burn all cattle destroyed in the foot-and-mouth outbreak? Will he undertake to have cattle that are more than five years old rendered from now on?

Ross Finnie: The answer that I gave to John Scott was that we recognise the difficulty. We rightly and properly referred the issue to SEAC, whose advice I related in my first answer. There are no risk-free options in this matter. We have had similar difficulties in taking the advice of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and others about what we do with cattle that we are burying. In all those matters, we have the overlay of environmental considerations. There is no risk-free option, but at every stage we have taken advice from the relevant body. SEAC is charged with the responsibility for judging the risk of BSE and we have acted on its advice—it is on its advice that we have burned and incinerated animals over the relevant period.

Criminal Justice Forum

11. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made in relation to the work of the criminal justice forum. (S1O-3358)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): The reconstituted criminal justice forum has met on two occasions and will next meet in June, when it will consider a range of criminal justice issues.

Bill Butler: Does the minister agree that improving community safety and fostering a sense of security is the key to the regeneration of constituencies such as Glasgow Anniesland and that improving public confidence in safety must be a top priority of the forum?

Mr Wallace: I agree that improving community safety is an important part of the regeneration of many areas of Scotland. That point was made forcefully in many of the exchanges during yesterday's debate on crime. The Executive wants to encourage community initiatives and community safety partnerships, which not only involve the police and the other criminal justice agencies but must involve people living in the communities. We give the issue a high priority.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Can the minister confirm that the criminal justice forum was first established in 1996, under the previous Government? Is he aware that, in 1998, the then Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution at the Scottish Office, Mr McLeish, gave an undertaking to drive forward proposals to cut wasted police time? Is the Minister for Justice concerned at comments made at the recent Scottish Police Federation conference in Peebles, where accusations were made of considerable wasted police effort?

Mr Wallace: I confirm that Michael Forsyth set up the criminal justice forum. In a spirit of consensus, I say that it is at least one initiative from Michael Forsyth that was worth continuing. I recognise the points that Mr Gallie has highlighted and the comments that were made by the Scottish Police Federation—Mr McLeish made the same points when he was the minister. We will examine issues such as the amount of time that the police spend in court, so that we can reduce the time that they spend unnecessarily and that could be better spent on other duties. We have increased support staff to release police for front-line duty and we are investing £8.2 million in a high-tech centre for Lothian and Borders police, which will allow the equivalent of 89 full-time officers to be released to full-time duties. The Executive's combination of increased police numbers and investment in technology to facilitate the work of the police will ensure that our police officers on the front line and

in support are doing an effective job in protecting Scotland and making it a safer place.

Falkirk Council (Structure Plan)

12. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): To ask the Scottish Executive what representations it has received regarding Falkirk Council's structure plan. (S1O-3327)

The Deputy Minister for Transport and Planning (Lewis Macdonald): A total of 269 representations have been received.

Dennis Canavan: If it is appropriate for an MSP to make representations in the Parliament about the structure plan, why does the minister insist that it would be inappropriate for him to meet a delegation of MSPs to enable them to make oral representations about the structure plan? Furthermore, in view of the commitments made during the Falkirk West by-election in support of a new stadium for Falkirk Football Club, will the minister expedite approval of the structure plan to enable an early start to be made to the building of a new community stadium which will not only be a suitable home for Falkirk FC, but will be an asset for the whole community?

Lewis Macdonald: Mr Canavan has been around long enough to know that ministers—who have a statutory involvement in the structure plan process—cannot appear to show favour by meeting one party without undertaking to meet all the others. Although I recognise the plan's importance not only to the matters that he has raised but to many others, meeting all 269 of those who have expressed an interest would not allow me to expedite the decision in the way that he would like.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): What representations have been made by constituents in Falkirk East, and what are the main areas of concern?

Lewis Macdonald: Of the representations I mentioned, a great majority—237, or 88 per cent—related to one particular part of Cathy Peattie's constituency; the Bo'ness area. Some representations were for and others against the green belt proposals for that area; all will be considered as part of the process, along with the representations relating to the football club and any others that have been received.

It is obvious that the quicker we can reach a conclusion on this matter, the better it is for all concerned, but members would not expect us to miss out the whole process of considering representations on all these matters.

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Is the minister aware of Falkirk Council's concerns that the structure plan might have to wait the full

40 weeks before it is approved, which could undermine the proposed development of the new community stadium at Westfield in Falkirk? Will the minister assure us that he will try to expedite the process of considering the council's structure plan to enable us to get it through before the 40-week period is completed?

Lewis Macdonald: I assure the member that every effort will be made to expedite the process and we will certainly aim to equal or better the 40-week target that we set. We should recall that Sarah Boyack reduced the target from 52 weeks early last year, and we are trying to achieve that.

As I said in response to Cathy Peattie, we must recognise our duty to consider all the representations that we have received and not to act unfairly to any of those who have made them. I am sure that Mr Matheson and others will acknowledge that obligation upon us. We will make every effort to expedite the structure plan process within those constraints.

Domestic Violence (Prosecution)

13. Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what procedures are being implemented in order to ensure effective prosecution of cases of domestic violence. (S10-3321)

The Lord Advocate (Colin Boyd): Crimes of domestic abuse are viewed very seriously by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. In July 2000, detailed instructions were issued to procurators fiscal on the investigation and prosecution of offences of domestic abuse. Those instructions were informed by inter-agency discussions, particularly the work of the Scottish Partnership on Domestic Abuse, on which the Crown Office was represented. Prosecutors are instructed that, if there is a sufficiency of evidence in cases involving violence against the victim, prosecution not only is a consideration but ought to be the first option. There is a presumption in favour of prosecution in cases that involve injury. A rolling programme of awareness training to supplement those instructions commenced in September and was designed and delivered in conjunction with Scottish Women's Aid.

Trish Godman: I thank the Lord Advocate for his reply. Will he assure me that he will consider introducing a system whereby such procedures will be monitored and assessed by his office or others, and that the people who are in that monitoring and assessment system will work with, among others, women's groups that look after women who suffer from such abuse?

The Lord Advocate: We have regular contact with women's groups and others who are interested in matters of domestic abuse.

Monitoring of all types of offence, including crimes of domestic abuse, is regularly undertaken by senior managers. When the new computer system is in place, it may afford a better opportunity for monitoring such offences.

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (Meetings)

14. Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when it next plans to meet representatives of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and what issues will be discussed. (S10-3336)

The Deputy Minister for Finance and Local Government (Peter Peacock): We meet COSLA regularly to discuss matters of importance to the people in Scotland, whom we all serve.

Mr Harding: I thank the minister for that reply, although it did not tell me when he will next meet COSLA. When he meets COSLA, will the minister take the opportunity to discuss the fine example that has been set by Fife Council in refusing to distribute letters from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to school pupils in his constituency? Will he also consider whether guidelines on how to respond to such requests from MPs and MSPs—such as the one from Jack McConnell—should be issued to all councils?

Peter Peacock: I understand why the Conservatives have to ask a minister in the Scottish Executive to raise such matters with COSLA: the Conservatives control none of the councils in Scotland, so they are denied that opportunity. I have no plans to raise those matters with COSLA.

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): The minister will be aware that, over the past year, more than half of Scotland's councils have reduced the percentage of housing benefit applications that are processed within the target time of 14 days. At his meeting with COSLA, what steps will the minister suggest to ensure a reversal of that trend?

Peter Peacock: A series of processes are in place to try to improve performance across the range of local government services. We pick up such matters through best value reviews that the local authorities carry out. It is ultimately for those authorities to make decisions and improve their performance. However, if we can do anything to support that process, we are happy to do so.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): Does the minister agree that it is rather strange that the Tories have attempted to lecture the Executive on public services? Will he explain the potential effects of the £16 billion of cuts that is the policy of the Tories?

Peter Peacock: Bill Butler is right to draw attention to the Tories' proposals, which would take us back to the time when they had control of this country and when there was a progressive reduction in the level of local government expenditure to a level that threatened public services. We do not want to revisit those days. People can make up their own minds about how to prevent it.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that ministers are not responsible for Opposition party policies.

Football (European Championship)

15. Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive, further to the answer to question S1W-12583 by Allan Wilson on 4 April 2001, what progress is being made in relation to the feasibility study into the possible staging of the 2008 European nations football championship in Scotland. (S1O-3357)

The Deputy Minister for Sport, the Arts and Culture (Allan Wilson): I understand that the feasibility study on the European nations football championship has been delivered to the Scottish Football Association.

Cathy Jamieson: Does the minister agree that bringing such a prestigious event to Scotland would give a boost to Scottish football at all levels, as well as to the Scottish economy? Will he ensure that the Parliament is kept up to date with the findings of the feasibility study?

Allan Wilson: I will advise the Parliament on the findings of the study at the first available opportunity, following the meeting that the First Minister and I plan to have with the Scottish Football Association.

Bringing the European nations championship to Scotland would provide a multitude of positive spin-offs. It would give us the chance to showcase Scotland as a fantastic place to visit as well as to live and work in. It would give us confidence in ourselves as a nation and provide a boost to Scottish football. Providing the spectacle would give the fans the opportunity to participate—fans who are widely recognised as among the best in the world. That is why the Executive is committed to bringing such major sporting events to Scotland.

First Minister's Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what issues were discussed at the last meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S1F-1048)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): The Cabinet last met on 1 May and discussed issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Mr Swinney: Can the First Minister explain why, in the four years of this Labour Government, the number of home-grown businesses created in Scotland has plummeted by 30 per cent?

The First Minister: When Labour came to power on 1 May 1997, we recognised that the creation of small businesses in Scotland would be a major priority. Under the Conservatives, there had been a reduction in the creation of small businesses. We have remained committed to the creation of small businesses and, as the figure is still lower than we would like, we will continue to give it a high priority in the next few years. We have made a commitment to create 100,000 small businesses over the decade.

Mr Swinney: I am sorry, but the First Minister does not appear to have listened to the question. Why has the business birth rate plummeted by 30 per cent since Labour came to power? The Conservatives had a dreadful record on small business creation, but under the Labour Government the number has gone through the floor.

It is widely acknowledged that the creation of a vibrant small business sector is the pathway to a country's long-term economic security. Why is the Labour record of failure worse than the Tory record of failure?

The First Minister: As usual, John Swinney is selective in his use of economic statistics. I repeat: the creation of small businesses remains a priority for this Administration. After four years, we have the highest employment figures for 40 years, the lowest unemployment figures for 26 years, record cuts in youth unemployment, record cuts in long-term unemployment and growth in the first quarter of 2001 of over 2 per cent. We are witnessing a conspicuous economic success story, which has been brought about by Labour at Westminster and has been continued by Labour and the Liberal Democrats working in Scotland.

Mr Swinney: I am not sure that the First Minister should boast about the lowest levels of

unemployment in 26 years when, in his constituency, male unemployment is at 12 per cent this month.

Is not the fact that Scotland has had a 30 per cent decline in new business start-up under the Labour Government to do with the fact that we have the highest business tax in the UK, the highest fuel tax in Europe and interest rates that render our businesses uncompetitive? It is time the First Minister had some ambition for the Scottish economy and got for the Scottish Parliament the powers to deliver the right economic conditions for Scotland.

The First Minister: The weakness of Mr Swinney's argument is shown by how speedily he moves from one argument to talk about fuel tax and a myriad of other excuses for his party's position.

Let me make absolutely clear the problem that the SNP faces in terms of a poverty of ambition. Surfing the net earlier this week, I found on the YouGov website a declaration by John Swinney that Scotland does not have a clear sense of what the SNP believes in. That is a statement by the leader of the SNP. What are the people of Scotland to think? Against that, we can juxtapose Nicola Sturgeon's comment in the *Sunday Herald*:

"We are going to turn the tide on the 'still no policies' jibe, throw it back on the Labour Party and ram it firmly down their throats."

I ask John Swinney whether the case is that the SNP has a mass of policies or that there are still no policies.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): As nationalism would inevitably lead to far greater burdens on businesses in Scotland, and as businesses in Scotland must have been tallying up all the costs of all the promises that have been made by nationalist spokespeople in recent months and years, has the First Minister had any representations from the business sector suggesting that businesses would be helped if Scotland were independent?

The First Minister: I am sure that the business community views with horror the prospect of narrow nationalism on the part of the SNP, leading to separation. It is also important that today, as we approach the second anniversary of the establishment of this Parliament, we again put into sharp focus the fact that the SNP continues to talk Scotland down, while we—both in the Parliament and in the Executive—continue to work for Scotland. Whether on the McCrone report, on the Sutherland report or on the record number of police officers, we are succeeding. It is high time the SNP started to support Scotland rather than talk the nation down at every opportunity.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues he plans to raise. (S1F-1032)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): I speak to the Prime Minister regularly. We have no immediate plans to meet.

David McLetchie: When the First Minister meets him, the Prime Minister will no doubt share and voice the concern of everyone in Scotland that the Scottish Executive's record on health seems to be getting worse by the day. Given today's revelation that 14,000 operations were cancelled last year—an increase of almost 40 per cent—will the First Minister apologise to the patients concerned for the anxiety and distress caused to them?

The First Minister: I did not hear many apologies emanating from the Conservatives after 18 years of the previous Government's policies on the health service. Again we have an Opposition party that wants to be rather selective. Of course we want to ensure that cancellations of planned hospital admissions are reduced. Hospital services, the health boards and the Minister for Health and Community Care are working hard to achieve that.

As we are approaching two years of success in this Parliament, let us talk about the 100,000 more operations; let us talk about the 567 more bypass operations, the 861 more angioplasties and the 287 more hip replacements. Those are the success stories, not just for the Parliament, but for all individuals who have been admitted to hospital, who are getting better care and, in many instances, a speedier service.

David McLetchie: I think that the First Minister is once again being rather economical with the facts at his disposal. He has demonstrated again that his Administration fails to take responsibility for any of its own failings. It is a rather bitter irony that the more ministers we have, the less accountable they become.

The facts speak for themselves. On top of the rising number of cancelled operations to which I have alluded, there are 2,000 more people on the waiting list than four years ago. The number of patients who are waiting more than 18 weeks for national health service treatment has risen by 70 per cent. Morale among general practitioners is at an all-time low. Labour has been running the NHS in Scotland for four years now. Perhaps the First Minister could explain why it is in such a mess.

The First Minister: It has a lot of resonance when I hear such words as "mess" emanating from a Tory Opposition. And on the health service, too.

Can you believe it? Let us consider the fact that expenditure on the national health service in Scotland is growing from £5.9 billion to £6.7 billion. The best performance in the United Kingdom for median waiting times for in-patient and day cases is in NHS hospitals in Scotland: more than half of patients are treated immediately, without ever joining a waiting list. Of those who wait, almost half are treated within one month and more than 80 per cent are treated within three months.

Yes, let us have criticism, but let us not have selective criticism. There is a whole story to be told, and this Administration—Liberal Democrat and Labour—remains committed to improving the national health service over the next two years and beyond, after victory in 2003.

Licensing

3. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what consideration has been given by the Scottish Executive to 24-hour licensing of public houses and clubs. (S1F-1036)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): Current licensing boards already have the power to consider applications from licensed premises to remain open for 24 hours. We have recently announced a review of all aspects of liquor licensing law and practice in Scotland. The review will make particular reference to the implications for public health and public order.

Pauline McNeill: I am sure that the First Minister will note my interest in the matter as I represent the city centre of Glasgow, which has more than 460 licensed premises in a half-mile radius—the largest number outside London—and that he is aware of the impact that that has on front-line services such as the police and the NHS.

Does the First Minister share my view that the issue is not simply one of whether we should license premises for 24 hours and that we should also focus on marketing strategies that encourage heavy drinking, including happy hours and promotions such as “All you can drink for £10,” which are offered in Glasgow and can be linked directly to negative behaviour?

Further, will the First Minister assure me that the review will consider laying duties on licensed premises and on the licence holder to be responsible in their approach?

The First Minister: I agree entirely with Pauline McNeill's sentiments. That is why the remit of the committee is important. The remit is to review all aspects of liquor licensing law and practice in Scotland, with particular reference to the implications for public health and public order, which covers the national health service and the police service. The review will look at the correlation between excessive drinking and

behaviour, often after hours, and the violent crime that we still see in and around our towns and cities throughout Scotland. The committee will meet and have a wide remit, but this issue is not just about extending the hours for those who want to consume alcohol; it is about looking at every aspect of public health and public order. That is what the Parliament and the people of Scotland want.

Cancer Services (Funding)

4. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the First Minister why national lottery money is being used to fund cancer treatment and care services. (S1F-1033)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): We have already pledged record levels of expenditure on health. Core Government spending is £5.9 billion this year and will rise to £6.7 billion in 2003-04. New opportunities funding is additional to that, as the new opportunities funding published criteria make clear.

Nicola Sturgeon: Given Scotland's appalling health record, I think everybody agrees that extra investment in cancer services is always welcome, but does the First Minister agree that services such as cancer screening and diagnosis are core health services and should be funded from general taxation, which we all pay, rather than depend on individuals purchasing lottery tickets? Does he agree that the fact that lottery money is required for those services is proof that the Government is failing to fund such services properly?

The First Minister: I totally disagree with Nicola Sturgeon's last point. I have outlined the record levels of public investment in the national health service. I agree that any lottery funding should be complementary. It is important to recognise that health boards are using that money to complement health care in a vital area. I do not think that there is anyone in the chamber who has not had someone close to them—in their family or in their community—who has suffered from cancer.

It is right to say on this sensitive question that we have extended breast screening to women aged up to 70; we have provided £13 million to replace radiotherapy equipment; we have given £16 million for imaging services to ensure faster and better diagnosis; we have funded six more cancer consultant places in Scottish hospitals; and we have £38 million in the pipeline to rebuild the Beatson cancer centre in Glasgow. Firm investment and complementary finance from the lottery can go forward together, but the core investment will continue to come from the Executive.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): Will the First Minister congratulate Dumfries and Galloway Health Board on its successful application for £1.5 million of lottery funding towards a new oncology unit at Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary? Does he agree that the patients in Dumfries and Galloway who will benefit from that service will not be unhappy that the money they spend on lottery tickets will be put to that purpose?

The First Minister: I would not like this to become a political issue. Common sense should be applied. There is significant core funding from the Minister for Health and Community Care, and that will rise steadily. On the other hand, some excellent projects in every part of Scotland are being funded and delivered courtesy of the NOF. We should welcome that. We should always come back to the point that the health service is too valuable to be left to anything other than core funding from the taxpayer through the Executive in Edinburgh and the Government in Westminster. We are committed to that and I am sure that the Parliament is too.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): The cancer treatment to which the minister referred and initiatives on waiting times and lists are the declared priorities of the Executive. Is the First Minister aware that the delegation of managing those priorities is the responsibility of medical secretaries within the national health service and that medical secretaries' salaries are now a maximum of £12,800 and represent some of the lowest wages in the whole national service? Will he declare his support for the Unison campaign on behalf of the medical secretaries to have an immediate upgrading of the salaries of those essential health care workers, or will he preside over a continuation of poverty pay in the health service?

The First Minister: We recognise the issue to which Tommy Sheridan refers, which, I believe, has been the subject of continuing discussions within the NHS in Scotland and with health boards.

All I can say is that we want people who contribute to the health service to feel that they are both valued and getting decent pay for a decent day's work. I hope that those criteria will guide the discussions that are continuing to take place.

Factory Closure (Kintyre)

5. George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): To ask the First Minister in what ways the Scottish Executive has offered to assist Campbeltown and Kintyre following the closure of the Jaeger factory. (S1F-1029)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): Alasdair Morrison today met GMB union representatives and the Kintyre initiative working group to discuss

the impact of the Jaeger closure and how the Executive can help with the broader issues that face the Kintyre economy. The top priority is to create new employment opportunities. The Executive and Argyll and the Islands Enterprise are already in discussion with companies on a number of promising possibilities. The Kintyre peninsula is eligible for investment support at the maximum permitted rate and we shall continue to promote the area as vigorously as possible as an attractive location for new investment.

George Lyon: I thank the First Minister for that answer.

Will the First Minister confirm that the Executive is treating the workers' plight at Jaeger in Campbeltown as seriously as it is treating the crisis that faces the Motorola workers in Bathgate? The effects of the Jaeger closure on Campbeltown are just as severe as the effects of the Motorola closure on Bathgate.

Will the First Minister reassure the workers at Jaeger that ministers—both Liberal Democrat and Labour—are doing all in their power to secure new jobs for them? Will he confirm whether the Vestas project, in which ministers and I have been involved over the past 18 months, is close to a conclusion?

The First Minister: The response to George Lyon's first question is that Wendy Alexander confirmed earlier that no matter where redundancies take place and no matter what their scale, every part of Scotland will be given priority as far as the rapid response service is concerned. That commitment, which I make and which Wendy Alexander made earlier, will be honoured.

In response to George Lyon's second question, it is important that I stress that Liberal Democrat and Labour ministers will continue to work hard for the peninsula to ensure that we are able to attract new jobs.

In response to George Lyon's third question, there are exciting prospects ahead for the peninsula on a variety of fronts, including the project that he mentioned. The discussions have not been concluded and it would be premature for me, or for anyone else, to say more than that. The area has an unemployment rate of 7.3 per cent, which is not good enough—we want to make it better. Suffice to say that Wendy Alexander, her department and the Executive are making an enormous effort and that every effort will be made to provide new jobs.

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I express my disappointment with the vagueness of the First Minister's commitment. We need more than warm words and I ask him to give us a few more specifics.

The First Minister has said that he understands that the latest loss of 161 jobs is a hammer blow and that the Kintyre peninsula will be a priority, as it has been for Argyll and the Islands Enterprise for the past couple of years. This is a time for fresh thinking, and I will press him on two matters. First, will he redouble his efforts to ensure that the Campbeltown-Ballycastle ferry service is restored and marketed properly? Secondly, will he take up the challenge of completing the A83 to full trunk road status? That would reconnect Campbeltown to the rest of Scotland and provide a much-needed boost to the area's economy.

The First Minister: I am disappointed that Duncan Hamilton does not appreciate the fact that we are giving the Kintyre economy massive priority. Anyone who listened to what I said about the exciting prospects that lie ahead could read between the lines. [MEMBERS: "What are they?"] Members may shout from a sedentary position, but in the real world in which we live with our Liberal Democrat colleagues, we must move forward sensibly, rather than use these occasions to say things that we might not want to say at the time.

Everyone knows that the Vestas project is active and live, and I suggest that we wait until the discussions are complete—[*Interruption.*] I hear members shouting about Ballycastle. Again, discussions are proceeding about that development. If the restoration of the service proceeds, it is clear that marketing will be required.

The rapid response service is in place, the Vestas project is being discussed, the Ballycastle issue is being discussed and we are trying to attract investment to the area with investment support at the maximum permitted rate. That shows urgency and commitment.

Schools (Teaching Standards)

6. Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether new action is being taken to raise the standards of teaching in Scotland's schools. (S1F-1045)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): The historic pay and conditions deal that was negotiated earlier this year—and agreed with the overwhelming support of the teaching profession—has paved the way for standards to continue to rise. Most significantly, at its heart is our recognition of the critical role played by the teaching profession. The deal rewards high standards of skill and expects high standards of achievement. It offers for the first time a practical opportunity for every teacher to develop their professional skills continuously throughout their teaching careers through the universal obligation of continuing professional development.

Karen Gillon: Will the First Minister acknowledge that it is important that we modernise a system that has been in place since 1916 and that placed teachers in the same framework as people in the local government sector? Will the First Minister acknowledge that fairness is the key to a new system of discipline in the teaching profession? Will he indicate that there will be minimum standards against which pupils and parents will be able to judge whether teachers meet the criteria that are set for them?

The First Minister: I am pleased to confirm the points that have been made by the Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs on other occasions. We want a new national system that is transparent, fair and equitable but capable of meeting local needs—that is crucial. We want a system that supports teachers to do the best job they can and, of course, we want an improved role for the professional body for teachers. Disciplinary procedures, continuous professional development and review of initial teacher education are included in a positive package to ensure that the respect that teachers should have is gained. Over the next two or three years, I am sure that we will see the benefits in the classroom.

Child Health

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The next item of business is a debate on motion S1M-1896, in the name of Susan Deacon, on action on child health, and on two amendments to that motion. Members who would like to contribute to the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

15:32

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): Each of us has a personal memory of 1 July 1999, when this Parliament opened. One of the lasting memories for many of us is the procession of children from every constituency in Scotland. They came to Edinburgh to mark the creation of their new Parliament. As the second anniversary of the elections to the Parliament approaches, it is apt that we remind ourselves of that image and renew our pledge, which has been made often in Parliament, to build a better future for our children and to work to give each child the best possible start in life.

Our children are our future and there is no more important building block in the early years of their lives than good health. Young lives are built upon that foundation stone and it can be the determinant of health and well-being in later years. The Executive has made clear its commitment to making the health and well-being of children a priority in its work. I want to reflect on some of what has been done and to look to what more can be achieved in the first session of our Parliament.

“Our National Health: A plan for action, a plan for change”, the Scottish health plan, which was published in December, sets out our approach. As I have said before, the document is a health plan—deliberately not just a national health service plan—because it recognises that good health is about more than just the absence of disease and that improving health needs more than just actions on the part of Government or the NHS. To make a real difference requires new alliances, true partnerships, combined action and effort across agencies and within communities. Crucially, it also requires a partnership with people.

Let me be clear: we are not in the business of telling people how to live their lives or of preaching to parents about how to bring up their child. What we can do is create the climate, the support and the tools by which parents—and children themselves—can exercise informed choices about their own health. Our approach is one of empowerment, not paternalism.

One of the most powerful human instincts is the

desire of a parent to protect and nurture their child. However, that does not always come naturally or easily. Over the years, many of the traditional support mechanisms that once existed in families and communities have broken down. Lifestyles and habits have changed, and poverty and isolation have taken their toll. Our challenge is to develop policies, practices and interventions that reflect the realities of the modern world but, at the same time, build on the traditions and values that still hold good—family, community and collectivism.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): While the minister is talking about policies, practices and modern society, will she comment on sportscotland's views on physical exercise for youngsters, especially those at primary school? The practice of many primary schools in Scotland is to offer less than an hour a week of physical exercise.

Susan Deacon: We have discussed at some length in the chamber the importance of exercise for young people. I echo the view of other ministers who share an interest: physical education is an important area for us to continue to work in. However, in that area, as in others, we must recognise that change takes time and sustained effort. I believe that an important start has been made.

In our programme for government, we pledged to create four national health demonstration projects, including one on child health. That has been done. Last November, I launched the Starting Well project in Glasgow. That three-year, £3 million project will support nearly 2,000 families. Health professionals—notably health visitors—are working hand-in-hand with communities to provide sustained support to families with babies and young children. They are developing tailored family health plans, providing continuity of support, and working with lay health visitors—that is, other parents—to provide the right support, in the right place and at the right time, to parents in many communities in Glasgow. They offer practical support—from a much-needed break to let a new mum get an hour or two off, through to information and help on things such as cooking, nutrition and baby care. Glasgow's approach is radical and innovative, but, crucially, it is based on evidence and firmly rooted in the community itself.

In our programme for government, we pledged to create a network of healthy living centres. Those centres are now coming on stream across Scotland. They have been developed from the bottom up, allowing communities to identify and shape the support and facilities that they need. They bring together health professionals, other agencies and individuals from the communities to

make best use of their combined skills and energy.

In our programme for government, we also pledged to create a national health improvement fund. We have done that. The fund is supported by Scotland's entire share of the tobacco tax—more than £100 million over four years. Now entering its second year of operation, the fund is delivering real results on the ground across Scotland. One of its key priorities is children's health. In using the fund, we have been careful to try to strike a balance between national measures on, for example, childhood immunisation and health education, while allowing scope for local innovation and initiative that can respond to local need.

I am genuinely impressed by the range of work that is taking place across Scotland—breakfast clubs, free toothbrushes and toothpaste for thousands of babies and young children, fruit in nurseries and healthy eating projects in schools, to name but a few of the initiatives.

Many other programme for government pledges have also been fulfilled, beyond simply the health department. They are important measures that will have a real and positive impact on children's health. Examples include the expansion of community schools, of nursery provision and of child care support. All those things have a part to play.

What characterises all that work is partnership—between professionals and agencies, and between professionals and communities and individuals themselves. Believe me, this is more than just warm words—this is about a fundamentally different and better way of working, which empowers people and communities, many of whom have, for far too long, been either excluded or ignored. That partnership approach applies, and must apply, across the Executive, across the Government and across the UK. One of the most important ways in which we can improve the health of our children is to close the health gap between rich and poor. That is why the shared aim of Government—north and south of the border—to tackle child poverty is so important. Profound inequalities in the life circumstances of Scotland's children directly affect their health, their educational attainment and their life chances.

We must break the cycle of poverty for children in Scotland. We have joined the UK Government to set the target of ending child poverty within a generation. The Labour Government at Westminster has put in place a range of policies to help us achieve that aim. The working families tax credit will provide a minimum family income of £225 per week. The sure start maternity grant will ensure that more babies reap the benefits of health checks and support; the grant is set to rise from £300 to £500. There have been record

increases in child benefit. Those measures, together with measures that are already in place, such as income support child credit, are helping us to lift more than 1.2 million children—around 100,000 in Scotland—out of poverty by the end of the UK Parliament. That is only the first stage of our strategy; we aim to cut child poverty in half by 2010, on our way to abolishing it in a generation.

As I have stressed, to improve child health requires action on many fronts and children's health services are part of that picture. There is much that we can be proud of in our child health services in Scotland, but much more is still to be done to ensure that those services are delivered effectively and to a high standard in every part of the country. That is why, last year, I established a national child health support group, bringing together a range of expertise and experience from throughout the NHS and beyond. I wanted to ensure that we were learning from one other, sharing best practice and experience and improving services in every part of the country. I commend the work of the group, which has been examining provision across the country, and I will shortly set out its recommendations on a template for child health services for use across Scotland.

One of the key aims of that work, and of other areas of health policy, is to capture best practice and to translate positive innovations into mainstream practice. Innovation is key. Over the past three years, the child health innovation fund has acted as the catalyst for many such developments with a total of £10.3 million being used over the period. Today, I am pleased to have announced details of a total of £1.9 million of investment from the child health innovation fund, which will support 25 projects across Scotland. That will encourage innovation and ensure that people in local areas benefit from the measures. Crucially, that will provide us with experience from which we can learn and a platform on which we can build in the future.

We are now developing that approach on a much greater scale—across departments and sectors. In November 2000, the First Minister announced the changing children's services fund, through which £77.5 million will be invested from 2002 to 2004 in the development of effective integrated services. The fund brings together the resources and effort of ministers in education, health and social justice—that is as it should be. That will help to foster and develop effective joint working locally between the NHS, local authorities and the voluntary sector. Quite simply, we know that we can achieve more by working together than by working in silos. We know that we must work locally and nationally to organise services around the needs of those who use them. In short, we need genuine partnership and a genuine people-centred approach.

The examples that I have given today are just that—examples. I am sure that we will hear more during the debate. Much more has been done and there is much more still to be done. For example, “A Framework for maternity services in Scotland”, which was published in February, sets out our vision for maternity care, right through from antenatal support, to birth and postnatal care. We must ensure that that is translated into practice. Similarly, we recently set out a new strategy for public health nursing and we must ensure that we move to implementation. Our aim now is to translate that policy into practice and ensure that it delivers results.

Ours is an ambitious agenda. We would be the first to say that only a start has been made. However, I am confident that we have laid the right foundation stones in policies, services and investments in order to lay the right foundation stones for our children’s health and future. For their sake, we can and must continue to build on that.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that action on child health is essential for the future health of the nation and for addressing health inequalities and supports the clear priority given by the Scottish Executive to improving children’s health as set out in *Our National Health: A plan for action, a plan for change* and across the Executive’s wider agenda for social justice.

15:44

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I will start by saying that I do not know whether the Minister for Health and Community Care’s jacket is real or disposable, but it looks very nice.

I welcome this debate. It deals with an issue that is the key to unlocking Scotland’s potential to be a wealthy society where all children are afforded the best possible start in life and the best life chances.

Life expectancy in Scotland continues to lag way behind other parts of the UK and significantly behind other European nations. Within Scotland, there are startling inequalities. In Glasgow, life expectancy in 1997 was lower than the UK average for 1966. Statistics such as that are shocking. We know that one of the major factors determining mortality is deprivation. Certain causes of death later in life, such as stroke, are related entirely to socioeconomic deprivation in childhood. Inequalities in the health of Scotland’s children must be tackled seriously and urgently, and with an effect that has eluded Governments—both Tory and Labour—for more than a generation, because as well as making childhood a struggle for those children at the bottom of the health league, poor health in childhood, as the minister outlined, contributes directly to poor health throughout life. It simply is not acceptable in

a wealthy country such as Scotland that such huge inequalities continue to exist. We face a massive challenge in Scotland to turn that situation round.

The Scottish health plan acknowledges the importance of tackling inequalities in child health. I welcome that, but argue for much more. I argue, for example, that this Parliament should have full fiscal powers, to gain access to Scotland’s vast resources and recoup some of the nearly £8 billion surplus that we will send to Westminster this year and next. Those are the tools that we need to equip us to deliver real results.

I acknowledge and welcome many of the initiatives that are under way, many of which Susan Deacon referred to in her speech. For example, I welcome the commitment to prioritise and improve maternity services and the support for the commitment by Glasgow City Council—and by other local authorities—to provide free fruit to all its schoolchildren. Indeed, our amendment calls on the Executive to extend that commitment to all children in Scotland, not just some of them.

The initiative to provide children of under 12 months and infants in deprived areas with free toothbrushes and toothpaste is also to be welcomed but, once again, we call on the Executive to go further and to reintroduce free dental check-ups for all. More than half of all adults in Scotland are not registered with a dentist. If parents are not registered, there is less chance that children will go to the dentist. One in two adults say that they would be more likely to register with a dentist if there were no check-up charges. That simple initiative would make a big difference to improving an important aspect of our children’s health.

We also welcome the expansion of school breakfast clubs, beginning with schools in deprived areas. That initiative contributes not only to healthier eating, but to educational attainment. Initiatives that aim to improve young people’s health in general, and their sexual health in particular, are crucial, and are welcomed by the SNP.

Tommy Sheridan: Before Nicola Sturgeon leaves the subject of initiatives, will she say whether she welcomes Glasgow City Council’s initiative to provide free swimming for the under-16s? Does she temper that welcome with regret that the council has closed Govanhill baths in the process?

Nicola Sturgeon: I regret that Glasgow City Council closed Govan baths and Pollokshaws baths, and express my regret at the proposal to close Govanhill baths. I add my support to those who are campaigning valiantly to keep open that important facility in Glasgow.

The SNP supports the principles and thrust behind all the initiatives that Susan Deacon has outlined today. We acknowledge that certain statistics show an improvement. For example, infant mortality is on a downward trend, but real improvement over time will not be delivered until we tackle the major underlying problem, which is poverty. Children in deprived areas are more likely to die young. Children who are born to mothers from deprived areas are two thirds more likely to be of low birth weight, which is a disadvantage to health that persists throughout a child's life.

The Executive cannot get away from the fact that poverty remains the biggest influence on child health, nor can it get away from the fact that no child has been lifted out of poverty since it came into office. The proportion of children who live in low-income households has increased since 1997. Almost one third of Scotland's children still live in poverty and the number of households that are living in temporary accommodation has increased. We must see improvement in those areas, or the pilots and initiatives, which are to be applauded and are welcomed, will have only short-term benefit while we continue to bemoan some of the worst statistics in the European Union and beyond.

I will end with some concrete proposals that I hope the Executive will take on board. I suggest that dental check-ups be made free again, to remove a huge obstacle to attending dentists and accessing preventive dental care. Initiatives such as free fruit for schoolchildren should be expanded. Such initiatives encourage healthy eating. With support, they can lead to fundamental changes in eating habits later in life. We have started to support that with free fruit in the members' tea room. We should also afford that privilege to children throughout Scotland.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab) *rose—*

Nicola Sturgeon: I apologise; I am running out of time.

I urge the Executive to support my amendment and to take a step forward to improve the health and eating habits of our children. As a vision for the future, we should start to invest, so that future generations of Scots are not condemned to enduring the same life circumstances with which this and previous generations had to battle.

That is why SNP members propose a fund for future generations. We have set out clearly how we can invest Scotland's oil wealth to create a fund that will pay dividends for the health of our nation in the medium and long term. Norway has established such a fund, which pays more to its economy each year than the amount with which the fund was established. It is shameful that

Scotland—in particular our poorest communities—has nothing to show for all the wealth that we have extracted from the North sea and dispatched south to Westminster. More oil is left in the North sea than we have extracted. By investing money for the future of all of Scotland, we will help to improve health and life chances.

I applaud the Executive for its work, but I urge it to raise its vision even further, to think nationally and beyond the many pilots and initiatives that deal with symptoms but fail to deal effectively with the underlying causes of poor child health. I urge the Executive to plan for a future in which the health of our nation is a record of which to be proud, rather than a running source of shame.

I move amendment S1M-1896.1, to insert at end:

“and calls on the Executive, in addition to ongoing initiatives to improve child health, to provide a free daily portion of fruit to every primary school pupil in Scotland.”

15:52

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In the business bulletin, amendment S1M-1896.3, in my name, contains a printing error. It should say “priority status”, not “primary status”.

I was pleased to hear the minister talk about translating policy into practice, because a plethora of reviews and consultations have taken place. I am pleased that implementation will take place. The motion says that child health is a priority for the Scottish Executive, whose proposals are well outlined in the national health plan, which Conservatives support.

It is worrying to hear from people such as Professor Phil Hanlon of the Public Health Institute Scotland, who confirmed to the Health and Community Care Committee this week that many health initiatives result in the healthy becoming healthier, but have little impact on poorer families. He said that health initiatives often widen inequalities. The challenge for members is to ensure that health initiatives have an impact on everyone.

It is also worrying that the national health plan says:

“The early years of development, particularly from conception to age three, influence learning, behaviour and health throughout life ... The life circumstances of the expectant mother and young child influence the chances of developing cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity, cancer and mental health problems in later life.”

I am shocked that so much damage can be done at such an early age.

I will talk about two cases in my constituency; the most tragic cases that have affected families that I have heard of since I became a member of

the Parliament. My point is about joined-up thinking. The cases involve women who were married to soldiers—one in the Black Watch and one in the Royal Highland Fusiliers. When their marriages ended, the women were thrown out of their houses. They endured a humiliating procedure of eviction through the courts. Then, they faced living in homeless hostels and bed and breakfasts. One woman—who has three children and who is waiting for a home—has been offered bed-and-breakfast accommodation in a house that she must vacate between 10 am and 5 pm every day. I mention that case to emphasise the importance of cross-departmental working and of communication with the Ministry of Defence in London.

Probably the best place to start is with the maternity services review. I want to highlight fears about the downgrading of the consultant-led service at Caithness general hospital in Wick. I see Jamie Stone nodding in agreement. Although no firm proposal has been made, there is real concern in the community about the three-hour journey to Inverness on a road that is notoriously difficult in adverse weather conditions. As the Health and Community Care Minister will testify, even the air journey takes a similar time and is often not possible due to consistent fog problems at Wick airport.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Does Mrs Scanlon agree that, given the weather conditions that we experienced this winter, had that sort of journey been contemplated, the life of both a child and a mother would have been threatened?

Mary Scanlon: I thank Jamie Stone for raising that point. I have heard serious concerns during my visits to his constituency.

Health provision and services should be appropriate to the needs and rurality of an area. The unique circumstances in the north and north-west of Scotland render the area highly inaccessible. Some people have to travel more than 150 miles to Raigmore hospital in Inverness. Local general practitioners worry that they might be called to provide a service for which they feel they are not fully qualified. Not only are there serious clinical implications, there are serious safety implications, as Jamie Stone said, which worry pregnant mothers and their families.

The loss of the maternity service in Wick is surrounded by further worries that that might be the thin end of the wedge and that it will lead to losses of more children's services at the hospital. If we are to address children's health, the maternity services review should take account of the fact that the mother needs advice before, during and after the birth of the child.

Children who have autistic difficulties need to be diagnosed early but, at what is a crucial time in a child's development, they may have to wait up to one year for an appointment for diagnosis. That must be addressed if such children are to be given an equal chance. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee's report into special educational needs, which is undoubtedly a significant piece of work, clearly says that assessment needs to be done at the earliest possible stage. The need to match the record of needs with education and support is absolutely crucial.

Community schools, which have professional, multidisciplinary working, seem to address many of the problems that have been highlighted today. They bring professionals together and include children in decision making. Nonetheless, there are concerns and there is still much more to do.

I am seriously concerned about the increase in chlamydia, the incidence of which almost doubled in the three years between 1997 and 2000. It is a symptomless condition that can lead to infertility. It is also worrying that the number of children who are registered with a dental service fell by 41,365 between 1997 and 1999. I understand that work is being done by the health-promoting schools unit and by the physical activities taskforce.

We support the commitment that was given on children's health in the NHS plan, but we need to see the plan in action, not simply aspirations.

I move amendment S1M-1896.3, to leave out from "supports" to end and insert:

"calls upon the Scottish Executive to set out clear targets and timetabled objectives to ensure that child health is given priority status across its departments."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): I call Margaret Smith.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): There may have been an error in communication. We were hoping that I would be allowed to speak next.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Donald Gorrie.

15:59

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I am not sure whether I am allowed to volunteer myself, but I apologise for any confusion.

I am happy to welcome, on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, the debate on the motion. The issue is complex and it affects all parts of our society. I want to start by criticising the Labour Government in London, which I am allowed to do.

Mr Stone: Only when the Lib Dem whip is stuck in a lift.

Donald Gorrie: No, no. These things are complicated.

The Liberal Democrats at Westminster and here feel that, although there have been some improvements under the Labour Government, the benefits system is still far too complex, which means that many of the people who should benefit from it do not. We could learn the lesson here, that many of the systems for helping poorer people are devised by highly educated, upper-middle class people and are often incomprehensible to the people whom they are trying to help. We regret the refusal of the Labour Government to increase tax on the richest people. The gap between the richest and the poorest has widened. If we were really interested in levelling things out and helping the poorer people, there would be a higher rate of tax for richer people.

I will concentrate on the affairs of this Parliament. Child health is a matter in which, above all, we need joined-up government. We all talk about it, but find it difficult to develop. I welcome the fact that the Executive seems to have a long-term strategy, because it is not an area for a quick fix. I especially welcome the use of the health promotion fund, which has existed in Liberal Democrat manifestos for some time and is part of the coalition policy. That fund is doing good work—we welcome that.

One part of the picture that has not been fully examined is housing, which contributes greatly to the poor health of some young people. Much of our housing is still of poor quality. It is damp, which contributes to the breathing problems from which many young people suffer. Improvement in housing is a key part of this issue. Shelter Scotland recently pointed out the difficulty that homeless people have in getting access to public services, such as health services. The minister might consider whether there is a way to make it easier for homeless people to make use of the system.

A problem in which the minister shares my interest, and which we should take more seriously than we have so far, is abuse of alcohol. The problems of many children stem from alcohol abuse in their families, which often leads to the children abusing alcohol when they become older. Alcohol problems should be higher up our agenda.

We must develop support and help for young people within the community. There are good things happening. I recently visited Nethermain Primary School in Denny, which has an exceptionally good after-school club. The club is so good that many children who have perfectly good family homes to go to volunteer to go to the club instead. The club is developing into a youth club in the evenings. That is one example. We must use the community to give children a fairer

start in life. We could also do more than we have so far to develop play and sport for young people. Even at an early age, small children can tumble around and they can get great benefit and enjoyment from a gym. That can be useful for them—it can introduce them to football and other games. We can start sport at a young age—more effort should be put into primary schools to facilitate that.

There is a range of things that we can do. I welcome some of the things that the Executive is doing and I hope that together we can work out a combined package that will address the awful gulf between unhealthy children and healthy children and which will give everybody a fair start in life.

16:04

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab):

This is a welcome debate, for our children are our future. Time and money that are spent on them are an investment in that future. I would like to speak about two areas of importance: the integrated, joined-up approach to children's health that is taken within my communities, and the need for further action on children and smoking.

I begin by welcoming the principle of community schools. There are two such schools in my constituency, which have gathered momentum and are now playing a key role in the promotion of children's issues, particularly children's health issues. They are a prime example of integrated, joined-up working in the community, and I want to share with members an example of good practice.

Last Friday, I had the opportunity to participate in an excellent initiative at the Magnum leisure centre in Irvine. The morning was organised by the local health care co-operative in partnership with the project managers of the community schools. It was aimed at promoting healthy and safe lifestyles for young children in the cluster primaries. The title of the morning was "It's all about you", which I thought was appropriate. Primary 6 children undertook competitive challenges encompassing knowledge and physical activity during a fun morning that was designed to test knowledge of health and safety issues and to challenge fitness levels.

It occurred to me that it would have been a very interesting development if we had had a team of MSPs there. I think that we would have lost to the children. Not only were the children asked some very difficult questions, but the eliminator obstacle assault course would have put even army recruits through their paces, although if we had had Ben Wallace in our team we might have scored a few points. However, I doubt that we could have outperformed the children.

It was encouraging to see how much information

about diet and exercise the children had absorbed. We know from the experience in Finland that that investment in early life pays huge dividends in the years to come. It is also important to note that research has shown that, by informing and encouraging the children, there are likely to be spin-off effects into the wider extended family, which is important. We have a very good news story to tell in relation to promoting children's health in community schools.

Regrettably, there is an area in which Scotland is very much lagging behind: controlling tobacco sales to young children. In the next hour, someone somewhere in Scotland will die from smoking. Tobacco is a drug. It is addictive and it kills, but today children the length and breadth of Scotland can purchase that drug and the people who sell it to them—retailers who put private profit before children's health—can do so with impunity. Although it is illegal to sell tobacco to children under 16, in 1996-97 there were no recorded prosecutions, convictions or fines for sales of tobacco to children in Scotland.

Ninety per cent of smokers will have started to smoke before the age of 18. Indeed, research has shown that a high proportion will have started before the age of 15, which is at least one year before the age at which children can legally buy cigarettes. I am pleased that the Lord Advocate has offered to conduct a review of the situation, but it is important that the joined-up approach that we have in communities is also taken up in Government. We must ensure that our views are made known to the Lord Advocate, because we now know the irrefutable facts about the links between smoking and cancer, and we cannot turn a blind eye to them.

16:09

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and will reiterate the concerns of parents, carers and professionals who must deal with autism. I shall continue to bring those concerns to the chamber until we have sufficient levels of services to develop the experience and knowledge to treat and eventually eradicate that severe condition, and to prevent any further incidence of what is now known as acquired autism.

It has been stated by many professionals that early diagnosis is essential to giving people who have autistic spectrum disorders appropriate treatment, assistance, education and care. Early diagnosis is fundamental to families in accessing and securing appropriate support and care. It also allows the Government—at all levels—to plan for future provision.

Although levels of diagnosis in Scotland have

improved, the procedures are not adequate. The Executive must draw up universal guidelines that can be utilised by all professionals—educational and medical—which could result in the highest standard of provision all over Scotland. Unfortunately, standards of treatment and diagnosis are too often dependent on the local area and the postcode lottery.

Many of the leading experts on autism have agreed that early intervention in the treatment and education of autistic children is crucial to development of their life chances. A study that was carried out last year by the National Autistic Society cited long delays in diagnosis. More than half of those who were sampled reported that they experienced severe delays, great difficulty in obtaining a diagnosis, a large number of consultations and medical staff who were unable to commit themselves to a clear diagnosis. That does not bode well for parents and carers who are already confused and concerned about their children's behaviour. They are looking for guidance, answers and solutions, which seem to be lacking in the current system.

According to the study that was carried out by the National Autistic Society

"frontline health professionals appear to have little knowledge or awareness of autistic spectrum disorders and 65% saw 3 or more professionals before they got a firm diagnosis and many experienced vague diagnosis in the actual severity of the condition and either limited or no support after diagnosis."

That is an intolerable situation, which requires urgent action. However, how in all honesty can we expect health professionals to know about autistic spectrum disorder when there is little specific training in autism?

Some parents currently have to wait for two and a half years for diagnosis of their child. That is an intolerable burden on them and the impact on the child can be devastating. Early diagnosis and intervention needs to be immediate. I will put a proposal to the minister, which would enable us to develop a strategic approach to the diagnosis of the condition, although an initial investment into research would be required to consider the underlying medical problems, with a view to treatment. Those problems include psychological, immunological, gastrointestinal, urinary tract, physiological and biochemical tests. Some work has been carried out on those problems, but the process is costly and it would require a serious financial injection from the Executive to sustain the long-term research that would allow us to build on the skills that are available in Scotland and let our country be at the forefront of the 21st century approach to autistic spectrum disorder.

That proposal would have far-reaching consequences for children who currently suffer

from autistic spectrum disorder and for future generations. If the minister and the chief medical officer in Scotland gave serious consideration to the matter, that would indirectly give parents and professionals much-needed reassurance that the Executive was working to combat the condition and not—as is the opinion of many—working to cover up and silence the growing number of people who are affected.

I reiterate my concerns about the current system. I invite the minister to meet with Dr Kenneth Aitken and Dr Gordon Bell—two highly valued experts on diagnosis—to allow us to develop a discussion about a new model for Scotland. I look forward to the minister's reply in his summing up.

16:14

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to debate this extremely important issue. It may be a cliché, but the future of our nation is in the hands of our children. If we are to continue to develop a thriving and vibrant economy, fit to compete in the world market, it is imperative that we have a healthy population.

Shelter's briefing, which Donald Gorrie mentioned, emphasises the fact that

"Cold, damp homes, fuel poverty and homelessness all have tremendous impacts on the health of Scotland's children."

It is estimated that 367,000 children live in inferior accommodation that is affected by condensation and dampness. One third of those with breathing problems live in such homes and I understand that the incidence of childhood asthma in Scotland is higher than the UK average and continues to rise. Fifty per cent of children who stay in bed-and-breakfast accommodation as a result of being homeless will experience a deterioration in their physical health.

If we are to tackle inequalities in health, we must address housing. We welcome the Executive's existing initiatives and those proposed in the Housing (Scotland) Bill. Scottish Conservatives believe that it is essential to press ahead quickly with the stock transfer to community ownership that is projected for Scottish social housing, as it will bring much-needed investment to improve homes and will also provide people with much more say in their housing conditions. Local power builds esteem and allows people to gain the skills to tackle their own problems. Such skills develop the individual responsibility that is the key to improving public and child health.

The current approach appears to centre on yet more state involvement in everyday life through the Executive's schemes for parents and social

inclusion projects and, nationally, through more means-tested benefits. The result is more—not less—dependency, which leads to reduced personal responsibility. The Barnardos briefing we received for today's debate contains some clear warnings about that approach. It states:

"The desire to 'do something' can mean that interventions with vulnerable groups are not properly thought out and might be ineffective or worse."

Furthermore, the briefing states:

"While many interventions intended to improve matters for the poorest sections of the community are targeted ... most poor children do not live in poor communities."

I have no doubt that some projects are welcome and well thought out. We support the general thrust of the action plan. We must ensure that healthy choices are available to all families, but many of the health improvements among the more affluent have happened because people have heeded basic advice about diet and exercise. Although our education system plays the primary role in spreading such advice, it is undermined by projects that take responsibility for people and keep them mired in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's complex and ever-increasing means-tested welfare system, which can only increase dependency.

Although child health is improving in all sectors, we have been told that the gaps between rich and poor are widening as the more affluent improve their health more quickly. The difference is personal responsibility. We must give people more power over their housing, their life choices and their economic future. Welfare in all its forms should assist those who need help and reward those who do the right thing to help their family's future; it should not encourage dependence on benefits and state-sponsored projects. Only by encouraging personal responsibility for lifestyles, our health and our children's health can we genuinely improve child health in Scotland.

I support Mary Scanlon's amendment.

16:18

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): When the minister kicked off the debate, she drew our attention to the importance of children's health for health in later life. A healthy childhood is an opportunity to bank knowledge and skills that will prove essential later. One's heart goes out to children who do not enjoy good health.

I will touch on two points, the first of which relates to schools. The head teachers I have spoken to in my area have highlighted the issue of diet; Nicola Sturgeon's amendment refers to fruit in schools. Although Nicola said that fruit should be available to all children, I note that her

amendment mentions only primary school pupils. I am sure that Mike Russell will clear that up in his summing-up.

The point that has been made most strongly is that, although it is good to have fruit in schools, a menu that consists of pizza, chips and fruit does not quite achieve the objective. Pupils need milk, roughage and other good things apart from fruit. We must change the whole ethos and atmosphere of school canteens. The head teachers in Highland have told me that there have been some moves in Glasgow to make it sexy—to use a word—for kids to go to the canteen. I see that Johann Lamont is shaking her head; perhaps that information is not correct, but it is the way that we should be going.

Mary Scanlon: Cheese.

Mr Stone: No, not today.

The other issue that headmasters and head teachers raise is smoking. It is evident that there has been absolutely no advance on that front; I reckon that there are as many—if not more—busts behind the bike sheds today as there were in my time.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Just like in the Parliament.

Mr Stone: Indeed, but I have given up smoking for 12 days and Mike Russell has not.

Doctors in Highland want two things. The first is pregnancy advice and the second is sexual health care. Doctors far north of here are concerned that the morning-after pill, which costs £20 a throw, is outwith the reach of children. That must be addressed. There are still too many unwanted, accidental pregnancies.

There is a sexual health clinic in Inverness and there are clinics in other parts of the Highlands, but the geography of the region becomes a problem. Pupils of 14 or 15 in Balintore or Alness, for example, face quite a trip to get to Inverness. How are they expected to get there without their teacher knowing or their mum finding out what is going on? If we are serious about tackling sexual health problems—venereal disease—we must think about the geography. Right now, the geography of the Highlands counts against the children who live there. I have the full weight of my local doctors behind me in making that point.

I would hardly be myself if I did not touch on the question mark over consultant-led maternity services in the far north, which Mary Scanlon so eloquently raised. The horrors of the weather and the lack of access to some areas make it almost unthinkable that such a service could be downgraded in any way.

When we consider the health and future of our

children in remote areas, we must acknowledge that there must be quality jobs in those areas. That is why I was banging on about not shutting Thurso veterinary investigation centre. We must keep skills centres marbled right throughout Scotland. If someone wants a consultant of calibre, why should they have to go to Inverness or Aberdeen? It would be so much better if good, high-paid jobs could be spread to the further-out areas.

Mary Scanlon: As the Highlands have benefited from an increase in Arbutnott funding to address rurality, deprivation and accessibility to health services, does Jamie Stone agree that more money should be put into GP practices in Helmsdale, Lybster and Dunbeath and into the maternity services in Wick, instead of being used to pay off the financial deficit of Raigmore hospital?

Mr Stone: I agree completely with Mary Scanlon. The minister's intention was evident: extra money has been given to Highland Health Board to attack the problems of service delivery in remote and rural areas. I cannot understand why the minister's good intention is not being followed through.

We should do our best to practise joined-up thinking, as the geography is a problem. In some parts of the country, such as my constituency, the situation is tricky. I ask members to remember that distance, remoteness and weather are huge factors that must be addressed if we are to offer equal access to services.

16:23

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): I shall focus on the rapidly growing problem of hyperkinetic disorders among children and the lack of a holistic approach to tackling the problem by health, education and family support services.

Like autism, hyperkinetic disorders form a spectrum. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—or ADHD—is the most commonly known and was first identified nearly 100 years ago. Its symptoms appear as exaggerations of normal child development behaviour and cannot easily be controlled. Children with ADHD are chronically inattentive, impulsive, volatile, poorly co-ordinated and restless. The impact of such behaviour can be devastating and can disrupt the educational environment and the family home.

I am greatly concerned about the alarming rise in the number of children who are diagnosed with ADHD and about the widespread use of the drug Ritalin to control the behaviour of such children. Many parents and professionals have severe doubts about the suitability of the treatment. The short-term benefit in behaviour control is being bought at the expense of the health and well-being

of the children in the longer term.

Members may have read a recent feature article in *The Herald* that highlighted the work of the late Professor Steven Baldwin. Professor Baldwin was deeply sceptical of the research that the pharmaceutical companies that produce Ritalin conducted, which proclaimed the drug safe and free from long-term, damaging side effects. His research, by contrast, led him to believe that the long-term effects of Ritalin use could include damage to the cardiovascular system, stunted growth, psychosis and violent or suicidal behaviour.

Studies into the causes of ADHD have indicated a genetic susceptibility that can be triggered by environmental factors. The most alarming evidence points to the use of anti-depressants and to alcohol abuse during pregnancy. Babies are born with an addiction and damage to the brain that results in ADHD. The latest survey shows that more than 90 per cent of benzodiazepine babies develop ADHD and that 70 per cent go on to suffer from other problems associated with chemical dependency. That raises questions about the appropriateness of treating a condition that arises from the use of prescribed chemical substances with another chemical substance whose long-term effects have not been sufficiently researched. In that context, the huge increase in the prescription of Ritalin—which, as I indicated, has undergone a tenfold rise in one health board area from 40 instances in 1995 to just under 400 in 2000—is deeply worrying.

I add my voice to the calls of the people whom I know have been making representations to ministers, such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, for an urgent review of the practice of prescribing Ritalin. The application of the drug does not provide a cure. It suppresses and slows down a child's mental processes and it is a substitute for forms of treatment that will improve children's social and communication skills to help them integrate with their peers and, in due course, into adult society.

Best practice for the treatment of hyperactive disorders must be established as soon as possible to ensure that GPs, health authorities and education and social work departments work together in a systematic and coherent way to assist affected children, parents and teachers to cope with and combat the problems. Sadly, that is not happening in Scotland.

I am aware that the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network will shortly issue guidelines for the treatment of hyperactive disorders; I hope that that will herald a more enlightened approach.

I would be grateful if the minister could give a commitment that Government funding of research

into the use of Ritalin is one of its priorities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): There are three speakers left. If speeches can be kept to just over three minutes, everyone will get in.

16:28

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): One of the first actions of the Labour Government was to recognise the importance of health inequality and to commission an independent inquiry into the subject. Interestingly, but perhaps not unexpectedly, a number of the areas that were identified in that inquiry were not medical. "Our National Health" states:

"Poverty, poor housing, homelessness and economic opportunity are the root causes of major inequalities in health in Scotland. We must fight the causes of illness as well as the illness itself."

Unacceptable inequalities between rich and poor remain. The NHS report recognises that. It points out:

"The Scottish Executive's commitment to tackling health inequalities is part of our wider commitment to tackling poverty and creating social justice across the whole range of our work".

We live in a wealthy country. It is therefore to our shame that one in three of our children live in poverty. Many studies have shown that health and wealth are closely linked. We must tackle the root causes of avoidable ill health and not simply concentrate on equipping the NHS to deal with the symptoms. As the Barnardos publication that was referred to points out, there is no vaccine against poverty. That report makes it clear that the best way to reduce inequalities in mental and physical health is to pay greater attention to parents, particularly present and future mothers, and to children. The Barnardos publication also states that approximately a quarter of all children are born to mothers under 25 years old, so the supposition that under-25s require lower benefit rates than over-25s needs to be re-examined urgently.

Unfortunately, it is still the case that mothers are an easy target for adverse comment and pointing the finger of blame. At times, it would seem that it is not that well-designed, well-run services and well-planned social and fiscal policies are needed to tackle child health issues and inequalities, but that the required change lies with mothers. In the vast majority of cases, that is nonsense. We all recognise the gist of the criticism aimed at mothers. The arguments run along the lines of children suffering if mothers go out to work—or indeed, if they do not—or of children's diet not being sensible. Such dangerous spin continues, despite the fact that evidence shows that most

mothers who live in poverty rear their children successfully and do their utmost to protect and promote their health, sometimes to the detriment of their own health and despite difficult conditions.

The thought, "It's like teaching your children to swim in a pool full of alligators" in relation to the conditions that many families face rings only too true. The Executive is addressing many of the areas in which action is required to tackle child health inequalities. Although I do not have time to go into much of that, the early years of development are particularly important. Breastfeeding, nutrition, dental health and accident prevention are major focuses for health improvement. Encouraging mothers to choose breastfeeding is vital for our children's future health. Sadly, Scotland—Lanarkshire in particular—has the lowest number of breast-fed babies in the UK. Breast feeding has not yet been debated in the Parliament; I take this opportunity to urge members to sign my motion on the subject.

The most effective time to intervene is in early life. The Barnardos report states:

"Inequalities in health can only be fundamentally tackled by policies that reduce poverty and income inequality. This means poor people getting more money".

I would have liked to mention mental health and young people, but perhaps the deputy minister will address that in winding up the debate.

To reduce child health inequalities effectively, the Executive must work in conjunction with Westminster and Europe to shift resources to the less well-off and to stop the trend of the rich getting richer at the expense of the poor getting poorer. If we fail to do that, we will ultimately fail to protect the most vulnerable members of our society—our children.

16:32

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome any initiative aimed at improving the health of our young people and the future health of our nation. It must be recognised, however—it is a proven fact—that wealth and good health go hand in hand. As has already been mentioned, children in deprived areas are more likely to die young, which is a terribly sad fact.

In Sweden, the infant mortality rate is 3.1 per cent; in Scotland, it is 5.3 per cent. If we are serious about improving the health of our young people, we must consider the infant mortality rate and do our best to improve it.

We cannot get away from the fact that poverty remains the biggest influence on child health, as has been mentioned in many speeches. No matter what the Executive has said previously, no children have been lifted out of poverty since the

Executive came to power.

In her opening speech, the minister mentioned best practice, yet some of our school canteens are run, dare I say it, like burger bars or other fast food outlets.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Would Sandra White agree that it has been very difficult to encourage young people to opt for school meals? In Glasgow, by making school meals attractive and by using burger bars side by side with salad bars, we have brought youngsters into the schools and away from the mobile shop selling greasy chips outside. When they use the school meals service, the youngsters have the opportunity to choose from a variety of healthy foods—alongside other food. Glasgow City Council ought not be condemned for that, but congratulated.

Ms White: I agree that Glasgow City Council should be congratulated for trying to encourage kids to eat healthily, but I disagree with the existence of such burger bar type facilities and of Coca-Cola machines, which basically form part of a profit-making industry. I do not see why schools should be used as places for such profit-making industries to operate, with kids forced to see those machines. I ask the Executive, apart from supplying fruit to schools, to encourage schools to supply decent, nutritional meals, and to get away from the burger bar type of canteen. Glasgow City Council should indeed be congratulated for starting an initiative. The Executive should ensure that schools in other areas get away from the Coca-Cola and burger bar image, which the companies concerned clearly promote.

Exercise was also mentioned. In case Johann Lamont wants to intervene again, I applaud the initiative taken by Glasgow City Council to allow free entry to swimming pools. However, I condemn the council for closing down many community facilities, as people in deprived areas did not need to pay bus fares to get to them.

I also condemn the recently announced proposal to demolish the Kelvin Hall, which is important locally and nationally. I hope that all members will join me in condemning the council's plans.

In winding up, I mention the breakfast clubs initiative, which appears to be going well. I say "appears" because there do not seem to be any figures on how many clubs there are, how many people use them, and where they are. I urge the minister to gather that information.

16:35

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): The early years of life, including the time spent in the womb, have a critical role in determining the

pattern of health and disease throughout an individual's life. Implementing policies at the beginning of life seems obvious, but I believe that it is the current Government that has begun to focus on that. I know that all Scotland's politicians—MSPs, MPs or councillors—have altruistic reasons for believing that we must do our best to ensure that all children in the world have a better life. The Executive and the Government have created the right backdrop by setting the right targets to drive children out of poverty, as other members have said. They have demonstrated their commitment in the UK and the world at large.

I probably have only 30 seconds or so to speak about Yorkhill children's hospital in my constituency. Yorkhill is the Scottish centre for maternal and child health and we should be proud of the work that it does. It is now able to correct problems and defects while the child is in the womb. On tours of Yorkhill—and other maternity hospitals—I have been disturbed by the high number of babies with very low birth weights, which is an indication of the poverty that remains in Glasgow and the rest of Scotland. I have been told at Yorkhill that 65 per cent of all its patients come from a very small number of postcodes.

Yorkhill also undertakes advocacy for children by promoting children's interests, health and well-being. It is important that we should be concerned with children's mental welfare as well as their physical well-being. The provision of children's health services at Yorkhill offers the right model for all children's hospitals in Scotland, and is preferable to co-location with adults, as children have special needs.

I am particularly pleased with the range of current initiatives. Sure start, on which £42 million is being spent, recognises that we must address the concerns of mothers, not just those of children. There is an initiative to provide free toothbrushes to all children under 12 months. The Stinx advert aimed at persuading young girls to give up smoking is superb. When I first saw the advert, which has quite a catchy song, I thought that Stinx was the new girl band and was surprised to see that the advert was made by the Health Education Board for Scotland, so all credit is due to it.

Glasgow City Council has spent £650,000 on providing free fruit to children. As the SNP amendment calls for the provision of free fruit, I hope that it will welcome what the council has done. That money means that 60,000 children in Glasgow benefit from free fruit. It is a particularly important initiative.

On the theme of Glasgow City Council, it is important to recognise that 60,000 people have taken advantage of free access to swimming pools. That cannot be underestimated, and credit

is due to Councillor Catriona Renton, who has taken on youth work.

It is important that we measure the success of the initiatives on fruit and getting children to take more exercise. We must find out whether they have been beneficial. We must think of some measures.

Finally, I make a plea for a debate in Parliament on the needs of older children, who are beyond the traditional play stages and who need facilities. We must look at the issue of facilities for teenagers.

16:39

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD):

We all want the best health for everybody. Today, we have focused on the health of our children. As many people have said—in the words of the song—children are our future.

Individual children have a range of different needs. We have touched more on public health issues and on some of children's physical needs. It would be useful for us to focus more on the mental health needs of our children and young people. Perhaps we could debate that serious issue on another occasion.

If we are serious about improving the health of our country in the long term, we must also be serious about tackling that issue at the earliest possible opportunity with our children. We heard many points of agreement today, the first of which was made loudly and clearly by the minister and was picked up by members throughout the debate: we need alliances, partnerships and networks in place and working well. Many of the Executive's initiatives are community based and those are most likely to bear fruit, if I may coin that phrase.

The debate is about people working together and about the Parliament dealing with children's health in the wider sense. As Donald Gorrie said, although we talk about joint working and joined-up government, they are more difficult to put into practice. However, it is essential for children's health that we try to do so.

We must ensure that we do everything that we can to tackle poverty. As Elaine Smith said, it is a complete and utter shame that 36 per cent of our children still live in poverty, despite the fact that this is a rich country. It is also a shame that many of our children do not have the same access to the streets, sports facilities and exercise that many of us had when we were growing up. They have lost that access because of traffic and a different way of living.

Aside from the health service and public health, many other issues come into child health. It is crucial that we consider addiction, and I

congratulate Irene Oldfather on her continuing work on under-age smoking and Donald Gorrie on his continuing work on alcohol. We must develop their work through networks.

Another key issue that came through time and again during the debate was the importance of children's early years. The two best presents that any parent can give their child is, first, to refrain from smoking if at all possible—even if that is only during the mother's pregnancy—and, secondly, to make at least an attempt at breastfeeding, which is important. I speak as someone who tried to breastfeed both my children, but who did not quite manage it for all sorts of reasons. If a mother manages to do that, she will give her child a much better start in life. As Mary Scanlon said, breastfeeding gives a child a greater opportunity to fend off many different diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases and chest infections of all kinds. Early years also have an impact on obesity as well as the widespread diseases that I mentioned.

Many of the initiatives that the Executive has introduced must be appreciated and applauded, and I think that all the parties represented in the chamber did so during the debate. I welcome many of those initiatives, such as sure start, the Starting Well project, work with maternity services and work that is funded by the health improvement fund. We must invest and have faith in our children and we must give them opportunities and choices. We must also have faith in ourselves.

The Executive's initiatives will not come to fruition over a matter of months. We must keep faith with them and ensure that we manage them properly. For example, at the end of pilot schemes, we must decide whether those schemes have been effective and how they can be developed throughout the country. We are not talking about a quick fix—we are involved for the long term, not for the short term.

16:44

Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con): There can be nothing more important to the future of society than for us to ensure that our children are not handicapped by poor health. If we are to maintain the NHS, an affordable state pension system and a fit and able work force, we must now make investments for tomorrow.

Although we lodged an amendment to the motion, we do not disagree with many of the health plan's proposals; in fact, we positively welcome the measures that are designed to ensure that mother and child have the best possible start. We also believe that the child health support group is a step in the right direction towards ensuring a co-ordinated template for

providing integrated child health care.

Unfortunately, some of the positive language in the plan blocks out some of the specifics. Often, we do not know when some of the proposed measures will be taken.

The Executive said that it would appoint a national diet action co-ordinator in the early part of this year. To date, no one has been appointed. Progress is being made on the appointment, but the lack of a detailed timetable makes that hard to swallow, especially when there are so many announcements.

The Executive also said that it would issue guidance on children who are too ill to attend school. That guidance has yet to be published and I urge the minister to ensure that it is published without delay.

The challenge for the minister is to tie such announcements to strict timetables. Clear indications should be given as to when, for example, the £70 million mentioned in the plan will arrive at the front line.

The Conservatives are not so naive as to blame glitches—the occurrence of health conditions—purely on the Government. I highlight some worrying trends: the increase in sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol misuse, drug misuse and a rise in teenage pregnancies.

The large drop in dental registrations is a worrying sign that we must try to plan better for the future. There is no excuse for bad dental health. I congratulate the minister on her scheme for free toothbrushes. However, free toothbrushes are no good if there are no dentists around to check the health of the teeth. In December, we debated dental services in Grampian. We are still waiting for a number of the dental vacancies in that area to be filled. I urge again that there be a considered effort to ensure that we find dentists to fill those vacancies and to ensure that our children's teeth are properly checked.

I am glad to see that the statistics for inoculation are holding up well. However, there is a creeping disease in our country: tuberculosis is yet again raising its ugly head. There has been an increase in outbreaks throughout the United Kingdom. I urge the minister not overlook that. The number of inoculations has gone down; that is not something about which to be complacent. Tuberculosis has stalked us for too long. We must always stamp on it where it occurs.

I agree with Elaine Smith that ill health in children is linked to poverty. It was nice to hear her espouse some socialism and give her backing to a redistribution of wealth from the new Labour ranks. I welcome that contribution, although I do not agree with socialism.

Members could perhaps reflect on the fact that in a recent report the Office for National Statistics said that the tax burden on the poorest fifth of households in the United Kingdom has increased under the Labour Government. That cannot be a good way to lift people out of poverty; it can only keep people in poverty.

Our children's lifestyles are set against a much more liberal society in the past. We must be careful that children's health is not damaged by the ready availability of drink, drugs and tobacco. As Irene Oldfather did on tobacco, I urge the minister always to clamp down and enforce controls on drink, drugs and tobacco so that children's health does not deteriorate when they become adults.

The Conservative party will always strive to keep the development of good child health as one of our priorities. We want the Government to announce its initiatives, not just with warm words, but with a transparent and definitive timetable.

I support Mary Scanlon's amendment.

16:48

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I, of course, support the amendment in Nicola Sturgeon's name.

Debates of this nature are sometimes called motherhood-and-apple-pie debates and seem to be fairly mundane. In this debate, we have had a slightly different approach. I hope that the minister has been listening. She has been writing a great deal, but I do not know whether she has been signing her correspondence or writing down what is being said. The debate has, at times, allowed the ministerial team to get a flavour of concerns and ideas from all parties. To that extent it is almost consultative. There have been important contributions on certain issues, to which I hope that the deputy minister will respond in his summing up—I know that Malcolm Chisholm is closing the debate—and which I hope that the ministerial team will take away and consider.

At the heart of the matter is the context in which we debate child health. Not only Nicola Sturgeon, but Elaine Smith and Donald Gorrie reminded us that the debate is about poverty. It is about the ability of people to afford good health. It is shameful that, in the first years of the 21st century, we should still be having a debate in which we have to use those terms. We must build and develop our society so that we do not have that problem in future and so that we have a rich society that sees health, and the promotion of health, as vital.

Margaret Smith reminded us that the debate is also about people. We are not talking only about

statistics or intervention strategies; we are talking about people of all ages. We are talking about people and about the care that they show to one another. As this afternoon's debate has developed, people have taken such issues and divided them into particular concerns. I was struck by Adam Ingram's contribution. He told us about his considerable worry. It is a worry that many of us have heard about in an educational context, so we know the difficulties that it creates. It is a worry that requires urgent attention from ministers.

I want to talk about three things. First, I want to talk about health as an integral part of our educational approach. We have warmly supported the Executive's community schools initiative, but we are concerned that there is still no long-term package of proposals to support and develop that initiative. The community schools initiative makes health a mainstream part of schooling—not just in what children learn, but in the care that the schools show for their communities. Promoting health through a community school is a very effective strategy. It is part of the joined-up government that must become the normal way of working. Without the community schools initiative, there would now be, after so few years, a major hole in health provision in many communities in Scotland.

There are still some doubts as to how the initiative works. Many of us remember the nit nurse, but there is still no good policy for helping parents to cope with infestations of head lice. I have questioned the minister recently on that issue and I know that she is concerned—although from her reaction she seems to have forgotten that important moment in her day when she had to sign off questions about infestations of head lice. That is still a problem in almost every school in Scotland. Parents and teachers are concerned. A local GP in the south of Scotland advised me recently that doctors do not believe that enough is being done in schools. I hope that that is an area in which a very simple health intervention can help. The community schools initiative involves much broader interventions, and I am sure that Mr Chisholm will tell us about head lice when he replies.

The second thing that I want to talk about is something that Margaret Smith touched on briefly—child mental health. At any one time, 20 per cent of children may be suffering from severe mental health problems or stress. In an investigation in recent months of the provision of mental health facilities for young people in the south of Scotland, I have been concerned to discover how poor and patchy that provision is. Child mental health problems often lead to severe problems in later life—including addiction, broken marriages, broken households, depression and suicide. Treatment of young people is very

important. However, one third of all children with mental health problems go untreated. We must look into the provision of child mental health services.

The third thing is the subject of our amendment. My colleague Irene McGugan has strongly promoted the berry project as one way of bringing some fruit into children's lives. We all need a revolution in our eating habits; I know that because I have eaten with people in the chamber. We can only bring that about by sustained action in early days and we can do that by bringing fruit to young people. I hope that the minister will take our amendment in the spirit in which it is meant. It does not demand that Susan Deacon go out and set up a fruit stall today, although Nicola Sturgeon is suggesting that that would be useful alternative employment.

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): I suppose Nicola would be the wee barra.

Michael Russell: I am not responding to that remark. It was a good one and I hope that the *Official Report* caught it, but it would be rude to my colleague here to respond.

Our amendment is designed to give the Executive the opportunity to set our proposal for free fruit as a target. I hope that that will come to fruition—if I may say that—in the near future. During the debate, we were asked to welcome the contribution that Glasgow City Council has made to providing fruit to young people. We do welcome it, and we want it to happen all over Scotland.

16:54

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): The debate has been important and wide-ranging. I welcome the fact that Nicola Sturgeon and Mary Scanlon welcomed the many on-going initiatives. Indeed, there are so many initiatives it will be very difficult for me to sum up the debate in seven minutes. I presume that I have seven minutes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have eight minutes, minister.

Malcolm Chisholm: Thank you for the extra minute, Presiding Officer.

Nicola Sturgeon was right to say that the underlying problem is poverty, but she was wrong to say that there have been no improvements in child poverty. Even between 1996-97 and 1998-99, there was a reduction in the percentage of children living in poverty in Scotland from 34 per cent to 30 per cent. That figure is unacceptable, but shows the progress that was made from the very start of the new Labour Government.

Addressing inequalities is at the very heart of

our health strategy. Mary Scanlon drew attention to what Professor Phil Hanlon said about how we need to be careful that our action in that respect does not have a perverse and contradictory effect. We set up the Public Health Institute Scotland under Professor Hanlon in order that health interventions could be evidence-based. That addresses the point that was made by Keith Harding. Professor Hanlon was closely involved in the selection of demonstration projects, such as Starting Well and Healthy Respect, which deal with some of the problems that have been raised today and which are targeted in particular on the reduction of health inequalities.

Nicola Sturgeon referred to free dental check-ups. Of course, dental treatment for all children is free. On top of that there are the initiatives that have been referred to during the debate, such as free toothbrushes and toothpaste and enhanced payments to dentists for treating young people in deprived areas. We also have a target that 60 per cent of five-year-olds should have no dental disease by 2010.

That is one of our many targets, which is why Mary Scanlon's amendment is unnecessary. We have many targets and time scales in place already. Ben Wallace raised that issue and I will give him an example: this autumn, 60 health visitors and 30 school nurses are to be trained as part of a new model of public health nursing. That is why we are not going to accept the Conservative amendment.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am sure that Malcolm Chisholm's misunderstanding of my point about dental checks was deliberate. However, I will repeat the point that the cost of dental checks is a disincentive to adults going to the dentist, which is why less than half of all adults in Scotland are registered with a dentist. If adults are not going to the dentist, there is less chance of children going to the dentist. Why should we not remove charging for dental checks for adults in an effort to ensure that more children are registered with a dentist?

Malcolm Chisholm: I have enough to cover without getting into a debate about adult health.

The SNP amendment refers to free fruit. Like Pauline McNeill, I praise Glasgow for its pilot work on that initiative. The health improvement fund reflected the priority that we accord to children and young people and to tackling inequality. That was made clear in the guidance. Health boards were told to address the issue of free fruit, as well as supporting breakfast clubs and salad bars in school settings. They are also improving the general well-being of children, improving their diet, and stepping up work to improve sexual health and general lifestyle.

The health interventions were all based on

Careful discussions about what is most effective. Those are priorities based on evidence. We have made our choices. As the SNP never makes choices, but simply adopts ours and adds on a few more, it is unnecessary for us to accept the SNP amendment. We are already involved in the kind of activity to which it refers.

Michael Russell: Will the minister give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: In a little while, if I have time. I have many points to which to reply. Mary Scanlon and Jamie Stone referred to maternity services in Caithness. I remind them that no decision and, indeed, no proposal has been made on maternity services in the area. The maternity services framework recognises the needs of more remote and rural areas. Any local plans must be tested against the framework, which is fundamentally woman-centred.

Mike Russell and Irene Oldfather referred to community schools. Health initiatives are under way in those schools. I remind members of the health-promoting schools; over time, we intend all schools to become health-promoting schools and a unit is to be set up to drive that forward.

Michael Russell *rose—*

Malcolm Chisholm: I am still dealing with Mike Russell's first point. Perhaps he will forgive me if I refer to his point about head lice, which is a matter to which we attach a great deal of importance. We are currently setting up a working group to produce national guidance and a leaflet in order to unify the approach to head lice across all NHS boards. Given the fact that I have replied to two of Mike Russell's points, I should move on to address points raised by other members. If I have time, I will take an intervention from Mike Russell later.

Mary Scanlon and Donald Gorrie referred to access to health services by homeless people. I announced recently the appointment of the health and homelessness co-ordinator, who will drive that work forward. More generally, the child health support group is doing a great deal of work, which will result in Susan Deacon announcing the child health template shortly. Part of the group's work is laying out the key components of integrated child health services, and assessing and meeting children's needs are a key part of the group's work.

Adam Ingram drew attention to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. I commented on that at question time. I am aware of the articles in *The Herald* and of Professor Steve Baldwin, and there will be further discussions when the Scottish intercollegiate guidance network guidelines are published.

Donald Gorrie asked about housing and health. That has been made a priority by the Executive.

We have the central heating initiative, and we know the priority that is attached to addressing fuel poverty in general.

Lloyd Quinan raised the important subject—and I do not complain about that—of autistic spectrum disorders. Research is being done by the Medical Research Council, and services are being developed as part of the learning disability review.

Pauline McNeill reminded us of the importance of sure start Scotland, as did Margaret Smith, and asked that its funding be continued. It will be funded with £19 million in each of the coming two years.

Elaine Smith and Mike Russell both referred to mental health, which is a priority in general and for children. One of the recent initiatives that we have taken is to ask the Scottish needs assessment programme to produce guidelines for best practice in mental health services.

Johann Lamont: Will the minister give way?

Mr Quinan: Will the minister give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: I have only one minute, so I must continue.

Elaine Smith also referred to breastfeeding. We have set up the national breastfeeding advisory group, and are keen on initiatives such as that in Elaine Smith's part of the world, Lanarkshire, called "You can't get fitter than a breastfed nipper."

Irene Oldfather referred to underage smoking.

Michael Russell: Will the minister give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am in my last minute.

We have targets for that, and the Lord Advocate is reviewing guidance on using test purchasing by children. Irene Oldfather also referred to local health care co-operatives. They are important to the objective of improving child health services. We will announce a strategy on that soon, with child health as a key focus.

I do not have time to deal with all the UK initiatives that Susan Deacon was right to remind us of. There were many measures in the budget to help children who are living in poverty, not least the sure start maternity grant, which will increase to £500 next year.

While we need those UK changes to address poverty, the Scottish Executive is proceeding with a large number of initiatives: the national maternity services framework; the health improvement fund; public health practitioners; health-promoting schools, to which I referred; the child health service template, which will be launched soon; and new performance management arrangements, which will require health boards to show how joined up their child health services are, and

whether they are meeting children's clinical and emotional needs.

Clearly, child health is a new priority for the Executive, and children's services right across the Executive—through the children's change fund, sure start Scotland and many other initiatives—are at the top of our agenda. An important start has been made on addressing problems of child poverty and child health inequalities. I hope that the whole chamber will acknowledge that today.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Now that he has escaped from the lift, I call Euan Robson to move motion S1M-1894, on membership of committees.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that

David Mundell be appointed to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee following the resignation of Nick Johnston; and

Nora Radcliffe be appointed to the Justice 1 Committee following the resignation of Jamie Stone; and

Jamie Stone be appointed to the Equal Opportunities Committee following the resignation of Margaret Smith.—
[*Euan Robson.*]

Decision Time

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): There are seven questions to be put to the chamber. I ask members to check that the light in front of their card is out. The first question is, that motion S1M-1884, in the name of Murray Tosh, on changes to standing orders, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 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)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

ABSTENTIONS

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 108, Against 3, Abstentions 3.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament (a) approves the recommendations of the Procedures Committee's 1st Report, 2001, *Changes to Chapters 9 and 9A of the Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament* (SP Paper 316) and agrees to amend the Parliament's Standing Orders in accordance with Annexe A and Annexe B (Appendix B) to the Report and (b) agrees that these amendments to the Standing Orders come into force on 4 May 2001 and that the amendments set out in paragraphs 1 and 3 of Annexe B (Appendix B) to the Report shall apply only in relation to Bills introduced on or after that date.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S1M-1875, in the name of Andy Kerr, on the Transport and the Environment Committee's report on genetically modified organisms, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the 1st Report, 2001 of the Transport and the Environment Committee, *Report on petition PE51 from Friends of the Earth Scotland on genetically modified organisms* (SP Paper 253).

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S1M-1892, in the name of Alex Johnstone, on the Rural Development Committee's report on the impact of changing employment patterns in rural Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the 1st Report, 2001 of the Rural Development Committee, *The Impact of Changing Employment Patterns in Rural Scotland* (SP Paper 254); recognises the problems faced by Scotland's rural communities as highlighted by the research findings in the report; further recognises that work is already underway to address some of these concerns, and urges the Scottish Executive to continue to address the Committee's concerns.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that amendment S1M-1896.1, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, which seeks to amend motion S1M-1896, in the name of Susan Deacon, on action on child health, 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)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
MacAskill, Mr Kenny (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)
Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (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)
Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
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)
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)
Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
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)
MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (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)
McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 31, Against 82, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fifth question is, that amendment S1M-1896.3, in the name of Mary Scanlon, which seeks to amend motion S1M-1896, in the name of Susan Deacon, on action on child health, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)

MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

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)
 Butler, Mr Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 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)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (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)
 McLeish, Henry (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 45, Against 67, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The sixth question is, that motion S1M-1896, in the name of Susan Deacon, on action on child health, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises that action on child health is essential for the future health of the nation and for addressing health inequalities and supports the clear priority given by the Scottish Executive to improving children's health as set out in *Our National Health: A plan for action, a plan for change* and across the Executive's wider agenda for social justice.

The Presiding Officer: The seventh question is, that motion S1M-1894, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, on membership of committees, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees

David Mundell be appointed to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee following the resignation of Nick Johnston; and

Nora Radcliffe be appointed to the Justice 1 Committee following the resignation of Jamie Stone; and

Jamie Stone be appointed to the Equal Opportunities Committee following the resignation of Margaret Smith.

Pensions (Ardersier Employees)

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The members' business debate is on motion S1M-1463, in the name of Margaret Ewing, on the McDermott UK pension plan and former Ardersier employees. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. It would help if members who wish to participate in the debate pressed their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that more than 1,500 former employees of the Ardersier fabrication yard were compulsory contributors to the McDermott UK pension plan which was first introduced in 1975; further notes that subscriptions continued to be collected until five years ago when McDermott joined with Brown and Root at Nigg to form the Barmac joint venture; expresses concern that the Louisiana-based McDermott International are now planning to take 65% of the £31 million left in the pension plan as part of the process of winding up the pension plan, expresses its support for the campaign to reverse this action by McDermott International, and calls on them to distribute the surplus fairly amongst those workers who paid into the fund.

17:09

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I thank every member from across the political spectrum in Scotland who signed the motion and I thank those who remain to participate in the debate. That reflects a unity of purpose that is essential to the issue.

The issue is important and directly affects people who are mainly in the north of Scotland, but a general principle about pension schemes is also at stake. I fought for a Scottish Parliament to deliver social justice. The motion is part of that.

The motion deals with McDermott's pension plan and the fact that 65 per cent of its £31 million surplus of funds is to be retained by the company. Moral and ethical aspects underpin the issue. The Parliament must take a clear stance. I say to the minister that even if at times there are no immediate solutions, our considered opinion must be registered and brought to bear on private companies and on public responsibility.

This morning, I heard on "Good Morning Scotland" that McDermott's head office in Louisiana had refused to pass comment on our deliberations this evening. At least the company is aware that we are talking about the issue. The message that we send to the company, to its customers and to its former employees is for it to give us an honest response to the united concerns that will be expressed this evening in the Scottish Parliament.

To help those in the chamber who may not be

fully aware of the background, I will attempt to give a brief explanation of a complex situation. The McDermott UK pension plan was compulsory when it was introduced in 1975. Subscriptions continued to be collected until five years ago, when McDermott joined with Brown and Root to create BARMAC. Throughout that period, as a result of its pension plan, McDermott received reductions in national insurance contributions. That is a not insubstantial financial concession that many other businesses would welcome.

Part of the problem lies in pension law. Section 76(3) of the Pensions Act 1995 does not apply to this situation; it gives more rights to pension plan members and allows them to elect trustees to help them look after their interests. The trustees that were appointed by McDermott were at senior management level as the majority of plan members were made redundant in 1993 or were excluded from the plan in 1995. With the formation of BARMAC in June 1995, the entire McDermott Ardersier work force was excluded from the pension plan and their pension benefits were deferred.

In October 2000, McDermott announced that the best estimate of the surplus was approximately £31 million, once Legal & General had secured the benefits. Under the plan's trust deed, the founder of McDermott International will decide how to use the funds. I find it extremely difficult to understand how decisions about the funds were moved from the trustees to the founder. I cannot trace the legislation that enabled that to happen.

Thirty-five per cent of the surplus is to be used for the benefit of plan members. The balance, which I appreciate must be net of tax, is to go to the company. I have tried to find a resolution, as has the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union—which may yet bring legal action. We seem always to hit a brick wall, despite the fact that local McDermott personnel have a long and proud reputation of being co-operative with their work force and their employees.

Over the past month, along with Councillor Jimmy Gray and the AEEU, I have been pursuing the matter with the Treasury. I want to refer briefly to responses that I have received from Melanie Johnson, a junior Treasury minister. She said that she could not

“comment about the affairs of particular pension schemes and companies”

but that

“it should not be possible for an employer to exert undue influence on a pension fund to the detriment of members' benefits and rights.”

Nevertheless, McDermott has retained 65 per cent of the money that was paid in by individuals. Current tax rules do not require that surpluses be

dealt with in any particular way. That is probably a huge flaw in our pension law, which should be addressed. I want the Parliament to look seriously at the issues and I want recommendations to be made to the Treasury and to the company involved.

I am conscious of the time, I know that other members want to speak and I want the debate to be constructive. I know that the minister has been involved in other issues today that are important to the Highlands and Islands, but is this not exactly the kind of situation where Highlands and Islands MSPs, irrespective of their political allegiance, should have been represented at the Highlands and Islands convention so that we could have discussed the issue? Elected members have a right and a responsibility to speak out on behalf of their constituents.

There is also the role of the Executive to consider. What liaison has there been with the Treasury about the pension plan? What liaison has there been between the Executive and McDermott International in Louisiana? Those who have been given the privilege of being ministers have a responsibility to ensure that our concerns are reflected.

We must ensure that what we say in the chamber today is relayed clearly to all who are involved and that the body of consensus that I know exists shows a will to rectify the injustice. I hope that the debate will point a way and that the minister and the Executive will follow that way.

17:16

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands (Lab)): I thank Margaret Ewing for initiating this debate on an issue that is important to many people in the inner Moray firth area and beyond.

McDermott's refusal to honour its commitments to its former work force rankles deeply in our area. I pay tribute to the AEEU, which has worked hard to progress the matter. Jimmy Gray has been on the phone to us constantly about it. If hard work guaranteed success, he would certainly have success. The hourly-paid work force in the oil fabrication industry was always aware that the industry did not offer a long-term, secure future. The knowledge that a substantial nest egg was building up for them in the McDermott pension fund at least gave the employees some security to look forward to.

As we know, when McDermott Fabricators combined with Brown and Root to become BARMAC, the workers who transferred to BARMAC found that they were no longer considered to be active members of the pension fund, but deferred members. That decision affected 80 per cent of the former McDermott

Fabricators work force of 1,800. Those deferred members now find that the money that they paid into the fund is being raided by a super-rich American company. As far back as 1988, the AEEU asked McDermott for elected trustees to represent the interests of the members of the pension scheme. McDermott refused.

In 1995, the hourly-paid workers employed by BARMAC were put out of the pension scheme. In 1997, McDermott nominated four senior managers as trustees. The current McDermott work force was notified, but not the former employees who were by then working for BARMAC. The trustees had a responsibility to those who paid into the fund. How did they behave? Whom did they consult? Whose interests did they have at heart: the former work force or the company? Did they transfer their powers to the company? We do not know. We need answers to those questions. McDermott stonewalls and refuses to carry out its responsibilities. It is outrageous that a billion-dollar company should make itself richer with the money paid by its hourly-paid work force in the past. Indeed, all companies in the oil industry have a duty in that area.

The local authority standing committee on oil fabrication has called for a fund to be set up, with contributions from the oil industry. That would help communities to diversify once the oil industry pulls out. The oil companies are reluctant to participate. However, in areas such as the inner Moray firth, where there has been such a swings and roundabouts situation with jobs, there should have been a fund to help people into other jobs and into training when the oil fabrication eventually ceased.

The local enterprise companies and the Executive have done well, however, and unemployment has fallen considerably since the dark days when the yards closed. Why, though, should it be left to the public purse to pick up the pieces? The oil fabrication companies have a responsibility. I urge the Executive to use its influence in that area and to progress the claims of McDermott's former work force.

17:20

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Today's debate on the future of McDermott pensions is both worth while and justified, although it is a matter of considerable regret that we need to have it at all. Indeed, it is very unfortunate that what is essentially a matter between employee and employer has had to come this far and that the situation has not been rectified earlier. It is bad enough for people to lose their jobs, but the extra distress that this episode is adding to the lives of individuals and their families is utterly disgraceful.

There are many people to congratulate on bringing the matter to the attention of the chamber. All of us will have received a letter from Councillor Jimmy Gray highlighting the problems and plight faced by all those involved in the scheme. Margaret Ewing also deserves great praise for lodging this evening's motion, and I congratulate her on securing the debate.

People who have invested in an occupational pension scheme have a right to expect fair treatment and a decent income. They should not feel that they are losing out to any other source. Insult is being added to injury. Indeed, the sole purpose of the pension plan was to provide retiral benefits for the plan members and their dependants. Surpluses should go to the employees who have lost their jobs. Those who contributed to the fund did not intend that McDermott shareholders should benefit. They are understandably frustrated and furious that that may ultimately be what happens.

This Parliament must send out a strong message to all concerned that we find the situation unacceptable. I am sure that the local community will do the same. It is simply not right that such a loyal and skilled work force, some of whom are nearing retirement, should be treated in such a contemptible fashion.

We should be doing everything in our power to reward those who save, instead of punishing them for their desire to be prudent. As the average proportion of savings has fallen from more than 10 per cent of earnings in 1997 to just 3 per cent this year, that desire should be given even more credence.

McDermott and the Ardersier yard have made a big contribution to the Highland economy and the wider community and it would be somewhat disappointing if the company left on such rotten terms. It seems absurd that those who have paid in the past should be treated in such a way, and I encourage McDermott to take the necessary steps to appease its pension fund holders.

17:22

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): It seems absurd that McDermott should continue to ignore requests from the work force for meaningful discussions with the trade unions that represent former workers at the Ardersier yard. Instead, McDermott has sent a standard reply to all the plan members who wrote complaining of the company's intention to retain 65 per cent—which equates to £22 million—of the declared £33.8 million surplus. That is nothing short of scandalous.

The cross-party support that has been evidenced here reflects the strength of feeling

about the issue and McDermott International cannot fail to act on the calls to reverse the planned action. As things stand at the moment, the pension plan members have had no input, no consultation and no say in the winding up of the McDermott pension plan and the dispersal of its funds, despite the fact that the majority of the contributions paid into the plan have come from plan members.

Senior management were appointed—self-appointed—as trustees to the plan in 1997. Since the majority of plan members were made redundant in 1993, or excluded from the plan in 1995, those trustees have never met, consulted or even spoken to the pension plan members whose interests are entrusted to them. Prior to the redundancies in 1993, the unions made repeated unsuccessful attempts to have member trustees elected, but McDermott refused—surprise. In 1995, legislation was introduced to give more rights to pension plan members and to allow them to have trustees elected to look after their interests. Unfortunately, as we have heard from Margaret Ewing, the introduction of that legislation coincided with the formation of the McDermott-Brown and Root joint venture company, BARMAC.

With the formation of BARMAC in June 1995, all the McDermott work force at Ardersier were excluded from the pension plan and had their pension benefits deferred. In 1997, when McDermott appointed its own senior managers as trustees of the plan—self-appointed and without consultation—it notified the few remaining active plan members of the appointments. No notification was given to the majority of the plan members, who by this time were, compulsorily, deferred beneficiaries.

It is imperative that the maximum political pressure is exerted on McDermott International to have meaningful talks with the unions and representatives of the McDermott UK pension plan. That should be done with some urgency, as the clock is ticking on the statutory wind-up process. Any money that is in the fund should be distributed fairly among all those who have contributed over the years. It is an insult to all former employees that little more than a third of the profits of this compulsory scheme will be returned to them. I suggest that the cash must be recognised as part of the employees' original investment. It is money to which they are entitled and which they deserve.

McDermott International should be in no doubt that the Scottish Parliament will not rest until justice is done.

17:26

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): This debate is about the many men and women who will lose the valuable pension rights that, as many members of all parties have said, they should have as of right. It is about many of my constituents who are in that category. It is about Mr William Humphreys of Inverness, Mr James Walker of Nairn, Mr David Shaw of Inverness and others who have written to me to express their views and feelings now they are in the situation that many members have described.

A sentiment that constituents commonly express is that McDermott was a good employer that made a large contribution to the economy of the area. That is appreciated. It is not ignored and it is not forgotten. Jimmy Gray made that point when we met him earlier today. The message that we are sending to the company today is that we want it to live up to the claim on its website that it is moral and ethical.

The issue that underlies the debate is the fact that the law allows the notional surplus of an occupational pension scheme to be used by the employer and, in effect, taken from the potential beneficiaries, both present and future.

I do not want to introduce a note of discord, but I have to say that the practice was first allowed in the late 1980s, by Mrs Thatcher. It has not been stopped since, so I do not think that anyone is suggesting that there has been illegality. The taking of a surplus from a pension fund has not been outlawed. It could have been, but it has not been. Let us be clear about that. The current Government has had four years to end it.

This is, of course, a complicated issue, but McDermott must acknowledge and act upon specific points. For example, in the calculation of the so-called surplus, it is assumed that no one retires early and that no one becomes disabled. Those assumptions are wrong. Their application in the calculation of the so-called surplus artificially inflates the size of the surplus. Those are just two specific points; I know that there are more. As Margaret Ewing mentioned, this may subsequently be the subject of legal action. One hopes that that will not be necessary.

Other companies are notorious for using their employees' pension fund money. One is Al Welders in Inverness, who—as members will recollect—did so in 1991. A long campaign against Verson, which owned the company at the time, resulted in the preservation of that important engineering business for the north of Scotland. Another was Mr Robert Maxwell, but for the sake of decorousness I will not say anything about him or mention the name of his associate.

If—as I believe—McDermott International wishes to preserve its good reputation in the north of Scotland; if it wishes to be seen as the moral and ethical company that it professes to be on its website; and if it does not want to be associated in any way with Robert Maxwell and all his works, it must do the decent thing, negotiate with Mr Gray and his colleagues in the union and give justice to the McDermott International work force.

17:31

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I congratulate Margaret Ewing on securing this debate. Her motion has attracted much cross-party support, which is an indication—if any were needed—of the strength of feeling on this issue.

I welcome representatives of the McDermott pension plan action group and the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union to the gallery. They have put much time and effort into ensuring that justice is done for themselves and other members of the pension plan.

Like other members, I have contacted McDermott International to find out the reasoning behind its decision to wind up the plan and to give part of the surplus to its shareholders. McDermott International has benefited from a reduction in national insurance and has not contributed to the pension plan since the mid-1980s; it has benefited from the plan in the past and sadly its wish to continue to benefit is very evident.

McDermott International's response has been wholly inadequate. In its first letter to me, the company stated that if there is a winding-up of the plan and a surplus is in existence, it has

"sole discretion to direct the destination of that 'surplus'."

McDermott International has exercised that discretion. It has made a choice. It has decided to benefit its shareholders instead of making a significant difference to the future of many workers and ex-workers who have loyally served the company in the past.

The company has also failed to engage properly with the campaign by workers. I was astonished by its constant refusal to meet with unions; however, a meeting finally took place on 3 April. Why has the company been so unwilling to engage properly with the very people who worked for it? It says that it has fulfilled all its obligations to plan members, but if it is so sure of its case, why has it been so reluctant to defend its actions?

I hope that members recall that we are not talking about a few hundred—or indeed a few thousand—pounds that McDermott International wishes to keep, but about 65 per cent of the £31 million left in the pension plan. That is an enormous sum of money in anyone's books. The

company claims that it has been more than generous, but when the disabled workers who contributed to the pension do not receive any disability pension, how can such a claim stand up?

The issue can be summed up in the two words fairness and justice. For many years, McDermott International has been able to count on the support and loyalty of a dedicated work force and the company has made an important contribution to Ardersier, where it was held in high esteem. By seeking to keep money that morally belongs to workers, it has damaged its reputation. That damage has been compounded by the way it has high-handedly brushed aside the views and concerns of its workers.

I hope that all parties can send a clear message to McDermott International that its decision must be reversed. It must fully take on board the concerns of its employees and ex-employees and ensure that those people receive the money they are morally entitled to.

17:34

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and Gaelic (Mr Alasdair Morrison): I join colleagues in thanking Margaret Ewing for securing this debate. I should begin by stressing that pensions policy is a reserved matter, but we have followed this particular pension issue closely.

Margaret Ewing is absolutely right to say that the chamber's considered opinion should be registered. I hope that that clear and unequivocal message leaves this chamber tonight. She asked what the Executive's role has been over the past while. The First Minister has been in touch with McDermott, which, as members have recognised, has an excellent reputation for employee relations, and with employee representatives. He has been concerned about whether, on this occasion, complying with the letter of the law is sufficient.

McDermott has committed to complying not only with the letter of the law, but with the spirit of the law. The First Minister's concern has been shared by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Helen Liddell, who has also been actively involved in the matter. I have no difficulty recognising Mrs Ewing's efforts on behalf of the workers, and it is right that we should also recognise the sterling work that David Stewart MP has carried out on behalf of his constituents.

The McDermott pension scheme was established specifically for McDermott's UK workers and the main concern that has been expressed is about the proposed allocation by the trustees of 65 per cent of the McDermott pension plan surplus to the company. That surplus is estimated to be around £31 million. McDermott

International has informed the Executive that the clear purpose of the pension plan is to provide a specified level of retirement benefits for employees. In this instance, the pension plan's assets exceed the cost of the benefits. Nevertheless, the company decided that it would be appropriate to apply 35 per cent of the surplus to increase employees' and ex-employees' benefits over and above their entitlement under the plan. I understand that the company envisages that plan members will receive benefits that exceed those that were originally promised to them.

It might be useful to explain that, under trust law, neither the employer nor the scheme members own the assets of the pension scheme; the trustees hold the assets. They are under a strict legal duty to use them in accordance with the deed setting up the trust and the scheme rules. In the trust deed for each occupational pension scheme will be rules stating how a surplus will be treated. They are subject to any overriding legislative requirement.

Mrs Ewing: The minister is talking about the trustees. Can he explain why the founder is making the decision about 65 per cent of the surplus?

Mr Morrison: As I explained, the trustees hold the assets. They are under a strict legal duty to use them in accordance with the deed that set up the trust and the scheme rules.

For schemes in which payment to the employer is permitted by the scheme rules, as is the case here, members have a right to challenge if they believe that the statutory criteria have not been met. A challenge to the trustees' decision can be made to the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority, which will investigate the case and decide whether to allow payment. The Occupational Pension Schemes Advisory Service provides independent advice to members on pension schemes. It has already indicated that McDermott appears to be acting within its rights and in accordance with trust law.

There are also Inland Revenue requirements regarding pension schemes, which include limits on the use of surpluses. Many tax relief schemes are associated with pension schemes and legislation is in place, under the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988, to ensure that pension funds do not receive undue tax relief by holding unnecessary surpluses. When a scheme holds funds in excess of 105 per cent of its liabilities, it must reduce the excess to retain full tax exemption. Employer/employee contribution holidays, improved benefits or taxable refunds to the employer can be used to achieve that, but the Inland Revenue must approve any plan for the removal of surplus.

In addition, legislation imposes a 40 per cent tax on a payment to an employer out of the funds that are held by an approved occupational pension scheme. That tax charge was put in place to recover the tax relief given on the contributions to the scheme and the tax-free build-up of funds. Before a payment can be made to an employer from a surplus, under the Pensions Act 1995 all current and future pensions in payment must be increased annually in line with the retail prices index up to a maximum of 5 per cent, including pensions accrued in the past; trustees must satisfy themselves that the use of the surplus is in the interests of the members; and members must have been notified of the proposal.

When a scheme commences winding up, the Inland Revenue requires confirmation that the benefits have been secured in accordance with the trust rules and within revenue limits, and that the trustees are compliant with the Pensions Act 1995.

Fergus Ewing: We listen with interest to the description of the legal complexities and appreciate that these are serious matters, but is not the basic problem that the law permits the employer to extract a notional surplus from a pension scheme? That is a law that could have been changed over the past four years but which, unfortunately, has not been.

Mr Morrison: Those matters are debated in another place, as Mr Ewing knows.

As I have already said, the First Minister had a meeting with representatives of the former Ardersier employees in November last year. He raised his concerns about the winding-up proposals with the Secretary of State for Social Security, Alistair Darling, who confirmed that he has no powers to intervene in individual cases. As has been said, that position was understood and accepted by the trade union representatives, Jimmy Gray and Alan Burgess, both of whom are in the gallery. OPRA is the regulator appointed by the Secretary of State for Social Security for the purpose of intervening in individual cases.

The First Minister also wrote to the chairman of McDermott International, requesting him to reconsider the company's decision not to enter discussion with the members of the pension plan. I am pleased to say that a meeting between the representatives of the members and McDermott took place in Edinburgh on 3 April. As a result of that meeting, the regulatory authority has decided to delay payment of the surplus, which was due on 4 April. OPRA is seeking further confirmation that the trustees are compliant with section 76 of the Pensions Act 1995.

McDermott International has, in the meantime, informed the First Minister that it believes that the

meeting on 3 April was beneficial to both parties. We hope that the outcome from the meeting presents a solution that goes towards meeting the needs of the pension plan members and is acceptable to the company.

I trust that the company will recognise what members from across the political spectrum have been saying in the chamber tonight. The parties in the Scottish Parliament are united in the attempt to secure legitimate benefits for the workers concerned.

Meeting closed at 17:42.

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