

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE PARLIAMENT
MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 6 June 2001
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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SCOTTISH MINISTERS AND DEPUTY MINISTERS

FIRST MINISTER—Rt hon Henry McLeish MSP
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER—Rt hon Jim Wallace MSP

Justice

MINISTER FOR JUSTICE—Rt hon Jim Wallace MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR JUSTICE—Iain Gray MSP

Education and External Affairs

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS—Nicol Stephen MSP

Enterprise and Lifelong Learning

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING AND GAELIC—Mr Alasdair Morrison MSP

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MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Ross Finnie MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT—Rhona Brankin MSP

Finance and Local Government

MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—Angus MacKay MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—Peter Peacock MSP

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MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE—Susan Deacon MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE—Malcolm Chisholm MSP

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DEPUTY MINISTER FOR PARLIAMENT—Euan Robson MSP

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MINISTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE—Jackie Baillie MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE—Ms Margaret Curran MSP

Sport, the Arts and Culture

DEPUTY MINISTER FOR SPORT, THE ARTS AND CULTURE—Allan Wilson MSP

Transport and Planning

MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT AND PLANNING—Sarah Boyack MSP
DEPUTY MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT AND PLANNING—Lewis Macdonald MSP

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SOLICITOR GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Neil Davidson

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PRESIDING OFFICER—Rt hon Sir David Steel MSP
DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICERS—Patricia Ferguson MSP, Mr George Reid MSP

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY

PRESIDING OFFICER—Rt hon Sir David Steel MSP
MEMBERS—Robert Brown MSP, Des McNulty MSP, Mr Andrew Welsh MSP, John Young MSP

PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU

PRESIDING OFFICER—Rt hon Sir David Steel MSP
MEMBERS—Patricia Ferguson MSP, Mr George Reid MSP, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton MSP, Mr Tom McCabe MSP, Tricia Marwick MSP, Euan Robson MSP

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Transport and the Environment	Mr Andy Kerr	John Farquhar Munro

6 June 2001

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 6 June 2001

(Afternoon)

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): It is always a pleasure to welcome one of our neighbours to lead time for reflection. Professor William Storrar of New College is here to do that today.

Professor William Storrar (Director, Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Edinburgh): Over the years, I have made occasional appearances in the sheriff court—in a pastoral capacity. Once, I was asked by an elderly parishioner to accompany him to a hearing before the local sheriff. His son suffered from severe mental illness and, at that time, the only way in which the son could be admitted to hospital against his will was to seek a court order. The Scottish mental health act of the time required that. The stress of seeing his son being questioned in court by the sheriff caused the elderly man to collapse. The court was cleared and a doctor was called. I found myself standing in the corridor with the son's consultant psychiatrist. The psychiatrist was furious: "It's bad legislation that may have killed that old man", he snorted. The old man recovered and the son received the hospital care he needed, but I have never forgotten the consultant's words: "It's bad legislation that may have killed that old man." Bad laws destroy lives.

That was brought home to me again in a recent visit to South Africa. A former African National Congress prisoner showed me round Nelson Mandela's cell block on Robben Island. There, as I looked into the tiny cell where that other old man spent long years in captivity, I could see that the destructive power of the apartheid laws lingers on, long after Mandela's release. Wicked laws devastate nations.

However, good laws can protect lives and renew nations. Good laws ensure justice among competing claims, protection for the weak and accountability of the powerful. Thousands of years ago, in ancient Israel, the prophet Micah declared the eternal purpose of all legislation and the eternal calling of all law-makers. Micah, chapter 6, verse 8, says:

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does

the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

So many of us, for so many generations, have longed for the day when there would be a law-making Parliament again in Edinburgh. Now that it is here, I, your neighbour on the Mound, have only one request to ask of you, our Scottish law-makers, before you leave us. When the new Parliament building is complete, you will move from the Mound down the hill to Holyrood. When you first walk into the legislative chamber, where Scotland's laws will be framed, for good or ill, in the 21st century, take off your shoes, for you walk on holy ground.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

14:34

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): There are three Parliamentary Bureau motions. Motion S1M-1991, in the name of Tom McCabe, is a timetabling motion for stages 2 and 3 of the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, on Wednesday 6 June, the meeting of the Committee of the Whole Parliament to take Stage 2 of the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill should begin immediately the first meeting of the Parliament that day has closed and end no later than 3.30 pm, and that at the second meeting of the Parliament, consideration of Stage 3 of the Bill should end by 4.00 pm.—[*Euan Robson.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second motion is S1M-1990, in the name of Tom McCabe, on the designation of lead committees.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Committee is designated as Lead Committee in consideration of the Police and Fire Services (Finance) (Scotland) Bill and that the Bill should also be considered by the Finance Committee, the Justice 1 Committee and the Justice 2 Committee.—[*Euan Robson.*]

The Presiding Officer: Motion S1M-1989, in the name of Tom McCabe, is on the approval of statutory instruments.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) (No 2) Order 2001 be approved.—[*Euan Robson.*]

Business Motion

14:35

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The business motion is motion S1M-1993, in the name of Tom McCabe.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 13 June 2001

9.30 am Time for Reflection

followed by Oath Taking

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 3 Debate on the Housing (Scotland) Bill

2.30 pm Continuation of Stage 3 Debate on the Housing (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

7.00 pm Decision Time

Thursday 14 June 2001

9.30 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Business

followed by Procedures Committee Debate on its Reports on Written Parliamentary Questions and Changes to Standing Orders

followed by Business Motion

2.30 pm Question Time

3.10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3.30 pm Executive Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business – debate on the subject of S1M-1937 Cathy Jamieson: Adult Learners' Week

Wednesday 20 June 2001

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 3 Debate on the Mortgage Rights (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 21 June 2001

9.30 am Scottish National Party Business

followed by Business Motion

2.30 pm Question Time

3.10 pm First Minister's Question Time
3.30 pm Executive Business
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business—[*Euan Robson.*]

Motion agreed to.

Meeting closed at 14:36.

Committee of the Whole Parliament

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:36*]

Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill: Stage 2

The Convener (Patricia Ferguson): No amendments to the bill have been lodged so far. Unless any manuscript amendments are lodged, the committee's only task is to agree to each section of the bill and to the long title. I do not anticipate that there will be any divisions, but if a division is required, the electronic voting system will be used. If members have no questions, we will consider section 1 of the bill.

Section 1 agreed to.

Section 2 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Meeting closed at 14:38.

Scottish Parliament

[THE DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 14:38*]

Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill: Stage 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S1M-1981, in the name of Angus MacKay, which seeks agreement that the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill be passed.

14:38

The Deputy Minister for Finance and Local Government (Peter Peacock): As with the stage 1 debate, I will not detain the Parliament for long on this matter. The bill is a short technical bill that contains only two sections. It amends the wording of the Local Government Act 1988 to remove the time limit on the period during which competition provisions in that act may be modified. The bill is necessary so that the current moratorium on compulsory competitive tendering can be continued beyond 31 December 2001.

I have already given assurances to the Local Government Committee and Parliament at stage 1 that we intend to publish legislative proposals on best value in the autumn. Our preparatory work is well under way and we have set provisional timetables for the publication of our proposals. In the meantime, we believe that it would not be prudent simply to repeal CCT without a suitable legislative backing for a best-value regime to replace it. We do not intend to return to CCT by default; we must act now to extend the time period within which we can continue the moratorium. We have chosen to do that simply by removing the date reference in the existing legislation.

In summary, the bill is a technical one that permits us to continue the moratorium on CCT. As such, it is a short-term but necessary solution to a technical problem. It will be necessary until—and only until—we can introduce a replacement best-value regime. We intend to publish the legislative proposals on that regime in the autumn.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill be passed.

14:40

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): I will try to keep within the time limits.

Members will recall that we had a full debate on

the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill on 17 May. I do not intend to go over the same ground, particularly as colleagues' thoughts may be focused somewhere else. At that time, the SNP made its position clear. We support the abolition of CCT. The bill has our full support in continuing the moratorium. We therefore back the Executive in this instance and call for the bill to receive the whole-hearted support of all MSPs. We look forward to legislation on best value being introduced this autumn.

14:40

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I too will be brief, but I do not think that I will take 34 seconds, which is what Kenneth Gibson took.

We opposed the bill at stage 1 as we endeavoured to create some impetus within the Executive to introduce legislation on best value at an early date. That has already been introduced in England and Wales. Councils are experiencing difficulties and unnecessary costs in running CCT and best value in tandem. We have made our point. The minister has given an undertaking that the Executive will bring forward detailed legislative proposals on best value this autumn. In view of that, we do not intend to oppose the bill, but we will look for the minister to deliver his promise.

14:41

Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD): A trend seems to have been set and I do not wish to break it.

On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I welcome the bill. It is a sensible technical measure to prevent local authorities having to go through an unnecessary exercise to prepare for competitive tendering, which will, I hope, be abolished later this year when best value comes in. I want to put in the *Official Report* that I did not support the Conservative amendment at stage 1, although I appeared to do so in the voting records. I fully support the Executive's intention to extend the moratorium and I support the bill.

14:42

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): I rise in some pain, but not from listening to what has been said. I have a common complaint among members at the moment—leafleter's knee. By tomorrow at about 10 pm, I hope that it will all be over bar the counting and I can get my knee back into shape.

The bill is a technical one, but the nub of it is best value. I suppose that it could be argued that the Parliament has regard to best value at the

moment because we are taking stages 2 and 3 together. That means that we are making proper use of officials' time, the official report's time and MSPs' time. The bill is necessary to extend the moratorium. Although I am being hassled from behind—by Hugh Henry in particular—to stop talking, I will finish what I have to say, which will take only a minute and a half.

At stage 1, Andy Kerr and Michael McMahon referred to concerns about the fact that local authority direct labour organisations and direct service organisations have to run CCT and the early days of best value in parallel. However, CCT and best value are incompatible and that would place a significant burden on the service providers. I am pleased that the minister has said that he will introduce a best-value bill in the autumn.

At stage 1, Pauline McNeill was concerned that the continuation of good salaries and conditions of service should be included in a best-value regime. I am sure that members of the Local Government Committee will take that on board when we consider the bill.

We are serious about the abolition of CCT and therefore we must be serious about getting best value right. It is critical to the delivery of services that we do much more. We trust local government to deliver best value, having regard to agreed priorities. All the key stakeholders that gave evidence to the Local Government Committee agreed that the way forward was to identify outcomes clearly, allowing service delivery performance indicators to be the criteria for awarding contracts, as Andy Kerr suggested.

Finally—Hugh Henry will be pleased to know that I am going to sit down in a moment—public services must be accountable, but they must also deliver. Best value is the way forward. I ask members to support the bill.

14:44

Peter Peacock: I am grateful for members' support and the many telling contributions that have been made to the debate. I am genuinely grateful for the support of Opposition parties and the fact that they did not oppose the bill, which is a necessary measure to continue the status quo of the moratorium on CCT. Keith Harding mentioned our promise. I undertake to deliver on our promise, as we always do on this side of the chamber.

I would like to thank the Local Government Committee for its reasoned consideration of the bill and I would also like to thank the clerks and the other staff involved. This has not been the most taxing bill that we have considered. Nonetheless, all those people made a contribution to its steady progress.

I am grateful for the support of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Association for Public Service Excellence and the Scottish Construction Industry Group. They have all supported the measure that is before us today and we look forward to working closely with them as we develop our proposals for a replacement best-value regime. I want to pick up on Trish Godman's point: it is very important to get the replacement right, because doing so will lead to the proper use of public funds over a long period in the future.

I commend the bill to the chamber.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): That concludes the debate on the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill. We will take the decisions at decision time.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

New Deal

14:46

1. Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what the latest figures are for the percentage of those leaving the new deal who enter unsubsidised employment. (S1O-3552)

The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Ms Wendy Alexander): To the end of March 2001, 38 per cent of those young people recorded as leaving new deal in Scotland went into unsubsidised employment.

Fiona Hyslop: I am grateful for the March figures. Is the minister aware that, as of the end of February, only 11 per cent of all those who went through the new deal secured unsubsidised employment? That figure is well down on the original expectations for the new deal and it is certainly down on the expectations of young people. With that in mind, is the minister prepared to argue the case for this Parliament to have control over the new deal, so that resources can be redirected to suit the Scottish economy and to get a better deal for Scotland's young people?

Ms Alexander: I am certainly not prepared to argue that we should give up responsibility for the new deal after hearing from a party that is not even committed to the new deal. I remember that, four years ago, the SNP argued against our taxing the windfall profits of the privatised utilities to help people into employment, whether subsidised or unsubsidised. However, by doing that, we have reduced youth unemployment by more than three quarters in Scotland in the past four years.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Will the minister join me in congratulating all the young people in the Cumbernauld and Kilsyth constituency who have found employment through the new deal? Will she also congratulate those in the employment services on reducing youth unemployment by 80 per cent over the past four years?

Ms Alexander: Yes. The member has highlighted the hugely significant impact the new deal has made at local level. Four years ago, people simply believed that youth unemployment was a problem that was here to stay. In constituencies across Scotland, four out of five youngsters who were unemployed four years ago have now had the opportunity to go back to work, aided by the new deal and by the political courage that the Labour Party showed in taxing the windfall

profits of the privatised utilities to make it possible.

Policing

2. Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to ensure that there are high levels of visible policing within communities. (S1O-3548)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Iain Gray): We have funded record numbers of police officers in Scotland. Exactly how those officers are deployed is an operational matter for chief constables, but I know that those chief constables understand the benefits that can be obtained from visible policing. In addition, Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary will be undertaking a review of visible policing across Scotland.

Karen Whitefield: Although I welcome extra police officers across Scotland, it is important that the additional numbers translate into officers walking the beat. I share the concerns of my constituents—particularly in Shotts and Harthill—who want to see more police officers walking their streets. Does the minister agree that we must ensure that the police force listens and responds to the concerns and fears of local communities and neighbourhoods?

Iain Gray: Yes. It is certainly the case that our police forces should be policing in a way that meets the needs and aspirations of the communities that they serve. We set national performance targets for the police—Jim Wallace announced them relatively recently. Of course, it is easy to set national performance targets; the important thing is their delivery at a local level. I believe that police and communities have to engage locally to ensure that the people's priorities are met. The likeliest forums for that are the community safety partnerships, which allow crime prevention and community safety to be considered in their totality. That will allow issues such as closed-circuit television to be addressed. Of course, if specific concerns arise in Airdrie and Shotts, and Karen Whitefield wants to write to me, I would be happy to look into them.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister appreciate that visible policing is an alien concept to people in Grampian, given that the area gets the second-lowest level of police funding in the country, despite the fact that it has the highest rate of recorded crime in the country? Will the minister update the chamber and Grampian on what progress has been made on reviewing the funding formula for the police force in Grampian, so that we can have a better deal for Grampian and more visible policing?

Iain Gray: The key piece of progress was that cognisance was taken of Grampian's historical position when the current financial year's police

funds were agreed. However, we continue to work with police forces and the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland to examine how police funds should be distributed in future years.

On visible policing in Grampian, I return to the point that I made: it is important that local policing meets local needs. That will raise different issues in urban situations and rural situations and I look to a review by the chief inspectors to give us advice on how visible policing can be made a possibility throughout Scotland.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): Does the minister agree that public reassurance is obtained in many areas, particularly in urban communities, only where the policing presence is visible and police are clearly available to counteract crime? Does he accept that that should be a priority and that he should be directing police authorities accordingly?

Iain Gray: I agree up to a point. Our communities want results from their policing. If Bill Aitken examines the recently released safer Scotland drugs campaign, he will see that covert intelligence-gathering police work has produced visible results. The first eight weeks of covert enforcement resulted in the arrest of 3,490 people for drug offences, the charging of 847 people on drug supply charges and the seizure of drugs worth £3.7 million. There is a debate to be had about the most effective way in which to deploy our police officers. That is what people want and we are delivering it.

Violence Against Women

3. Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when its action plan on the prevention of violence against women will be published. (S1O-3542)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Iain Gray): We intend to publish in September an action plan for the Scottish Executive on preventing violence against women.

Elaine Smith: We all look forward to reading the action plan, which will cover all forms of violence against women. Although we all welcome the allocation of £18.4 million to address the problem of domestic violence, does the minister agree that it is important also to acknowledge links between all forms of violence against women, including rape and sexual assault, and to set aside appropriate funding to tackle them? What plans are there for a funding strategy to tackle those other forms of violence against women and are time scales attached to them?

Iain Gray: I agree with Elaine Smith that domestic abuse is a problem, but not the only problem, when it comes to violence against women. We are pursuing policies on other aspects of the issue—for example, we are committed to

legislating on those who give evidence in court in cases of rape and other sexual offences.

A key part of our approach is the national group to address domestic abuse in Scotland, which will be chaired by Margaret Curran, the Deputy Minister for Social Justice. The first group meeting is next week. The group has an interesting remit, which is to oversee strategic developments in relation to violence against women. Domestic abuse is a central part of the remit, so the group will examine closely our legislative and funding strategies. That process will begin imminently; indeed, it will begin next week.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): Does the minister accept that in certain quarters of Scotland there is a regrettable, almost laddish, culture that pays scant respect to the well-being of women? Does he believe that that ought to be raised at schools, where people should be trained or taught to believe in mutual respect for one another, in the hope of developing better-rounded citizens who take a responsible attitude?

Iain Gray: I agree that worrying evidence exists. Not long ago, a survey discovered worrying cultural attitudes, particularly among young men. We must address that issue soon. That is why we aim to support the work on that issue that the Zero Tolerance Trust is conducting.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Will the deputy minister consider additional funding for women's refuges in rural areas? For example, the only refuge in the Borders is in Jedburgh and to have several smaller units would undoubtedly be better. As funding is patchy and accessed from social work and housing budgets, will the minister consider conjoining the funding sources and ring-fencing those moneys?

Iain Gray: We have a significant funding package for expanding the number of refuge places. Those funds will begin to play through and make a significant difference. Christine Grahame asked about ring-fencing funds that are disbursed through local government. Like many other issues, that question concerns the funding relationship between the Executive and local authorities. We will make it clear to local authorities that we expect the number of refuge places to be increased. The funding was calculated on the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities formula, so we are clear about the number of new places into which we expect it to translate.

Science Strategy

4. Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it plans to build on Scotland's science base. (S1O-3549)

The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Ms Wendy Alexander): The United

Kingdom science budget has increased by £1.4 billion in the past three years. In the next two years, that funding will be boosted by a further £1 billion. Scottish scientists can expect to benefit from more than Scotland's population share of that funding. Later this summer, we will publish the first comprehensive science strategy for Scotland. We are investing significant sums in building the capacity of the Scottish science base.

Bristow Muldoon: I welcome the minister's answer. How does she intend to encourage greater commercial application of much of the groundbreaking science and engineering research that takes place in Scotland's universities?

Ms Alexander: That question is appositely timed, because Bristow Muldoon and I spent part of today visiting NEC Semiconductors (UK) Ltd in his constituency. We considered how we could link some of our major electronics employers more effectively to our higher education institutions. For that reason, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council has embarked on a review of the distribution of research funding for infrastructure projects, to make more direct links to commercial opportunities for the Scottish economy.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): In light of the still-low percentage of revenue that the private sector spends on research and development, will the minister outline the initiatives that she intends to take to increase research and development spend in the private sector and to bring that spend closer to the UK and European averages?

Ms Alexander: I hope that the member will give the Executive some help on that in his capacity as convener of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. As he knows, I have been keen that that committee should examine how we use the public resources that are available for research to stimulate greater investment in research and development by the private sector in Scotland. I greatly look forward to receiving the committee's report in due course.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): What plans does the minister have to tackle one of the bottlenecks in improving our science performance—the fact that many universities need bigger and better laboratory operations—so that the early research into pure science activities can be developed commercially? Will she produce funds, in partnership or otherwise, to help universities to provide those important facilities?

Ms Alexander: I agree whole-heartedly with Donald Gorrie. As he knows, the budget of higher education institutions in Scotland is being boosted by 14 per cent. On research infrastructure, I announced the Scottish research investment fund in February; that involved £90 million being dedicated to the provision of infrastructure

facilities, which are important for those who perform basic research.

Out-of-school Learning

5. Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to expand out-of-school learning. (S1O-3553)

The Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs (Mr Jack McConnell): The new opportunities fund is supporting some 68 projects in 1,362 schools. More than 275,000 pupils in about 1,700 schools participate in study support activities funded through the excellence fund. Future arrangements for the expansion of such activities beyond 2002 are under consideration.

Hugh Henry: I am sure that the Executive will note the success of many of those projects, as they have raised attainment and helped pupils across Scotland. I draw the minister's attention to Renfrewshire Council's looked-after children project and to pilot homework clubs that were held in three libraries. Funding for those new opportunities fund projects finished at the end of March. Will the minister reflect the success of projects run by Renfrewshire Council in future plans for the new opportunities fund? Given the success of those projects, we do not want them to come to a premature end.

Mr McConnell: Although it would be inappropriate for me to get involved in an individual application to the new opportunities fund, I agree that it is important that projects that are established using new opportunities fund money have the chance to sustain their development. We need to look at that issue as we review our use of the excellence fund and the overall provision of out-of-school facilities.

A tremendous amount of good work is going on in Renfrewshire: the excellence fund is being used for study support in, I believe, 69 schools and good work is being done in the four NOF projects. It is important that those projects and clubs are sustained beyond 2002.

Cultural and Heritage Sites

6. Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to safeguard the future of cultural and heritage sites in the north-east of Scotland. (S1O-3532)

The Deputy Minister for Sport, the Arts and Culture (Allan Wilson): It is not clear to which sites Irene McGugan refers. If she is concerned about sites in the care of Historic Scotland, I should be happy to pursue any issue if she provides me with details.

We have provided £250,000 to carry out a

national audit of all Scotland's museums. The audit is under way. It will establish the relative importance of museum collections, buildings and services and will inform spending from a fund of £3 million over three years that is aimed at restructuring and stabilising the museum sector.

Irene McGugan: I am happy to provide the minister with further information. Does he agree that most people would find it extraordinary that, notwithstanding the audit, museums in Scotland are under greater threat than ever before? Indeed, many would argue that the audit is a seriously flawed and inadequate document. We are now two years into the first Scottish Parliament for 300 years and yet museums such as Duff House, described by the director general of the National Galleries of Scotland as a jewel in the crown of the north-east tourist industry, are under threat. Duff House is about to take receipt of a Botticelli valued in excess of £10 million—

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We do not need a supplementary dissertation; we need a question.

Irene McGugan: That museum is facing cuts, as are Peterhead Maritime Heritage Centre, the Lighthouse Museum at Fraserburgh, Macduff Marine Aquarium and Dundee Heritage Trust. The trust looks after RRS Discovery and the Verdant Works, the last working jute mill, which is about to close. When does the minister intend to visit all those beleaguered sites? What is he going to do to support them adequately—

The Presiding Officer: I ask Mr Wilson please to give his answer.

Allan Wilson: I am not sure which section of the question I should reply to. Is Irene McGugan still going on? Her question is typical of the sort of exchange that we expect from the Scottish nationalists. As the SNP is well aware, no member would expect me to comment on the specifics of the national audit until it is complete. It would be imbecilic to suggest otherwise. The questionnaires have been sent out and should be returned by 19 June. I expect the publication of the full results in the spring of next year.

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): Given that the Executive is encouraging cities such as Dundee to broaden the base of their local economies by developing strategies for sectors such as tourism, and given that the Verdant Works and RRS Discovery attractions are key to developing tourism in Dundee, does the minister accept that it would be entirely counterproductive not to secure the future of those key attractions by supporting with adequate subsidies the heritage trust that is responsible for them?

Allan Wilson: I agree with that sensible contribution from my colleague, John McAllion. In

fact, Verdant Works and the industrial museum sector in general will be made a priority in the national audit. Verdant Works is primarily the responsibility of Dundee Heritage Trust. However, I am arranging to meet representatives of the trust to discuss their difficulties. I have already consulted and discussed the situation with my good colleague, Kate MacLean.

Energy Efficiency

7. Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made by local authorities in improving home energy efficiency and what impact this has had on levels of carbon dioxide emissions. (S10-3545)

The Deputy Minister for Social Justice (Ms Margaret Curran): Local authorities tell us that, during the first two years of the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995, energy efficiency was improved by 2.86 per cent and carbon dioxide emissions fell by 0.7 million tonnes. The benefits from HECA between 1997 and 1999 are set out in a report from the Executive, which was laid before Parliament on 22 May.

Trish Godman: I thank the minister for her reply, but does she agree that, as well as the environmental benefits of energy efficiency, the savings in fuel costs to households are important? Will she assure me that she will encourage local authorities to place the reduction of fuel poverty at the heart of their energy efficiency policies?

Ms Curran: I am happy to give the member that assurance. I am sure that Trish Godman and other members will be aware of the deep discussions that we had at stage 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill—a bill that might take up slightly more time in the parliamentary timetable next week than we took this afternoon. As part of those discussions, we put considerable emphasis on fuel poverty and made clear our strong commitment to a range of measures on fuel poverty, which would of course include local authorities. We will make that a key part of local authority housing strategies. If members will excuse the pun, I will say that those measures were warmly welcomed by key organisations in the field and mark considerable progress on those matters.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Does the minister agree that an increase in fuel efficiency does not necessarily translate into fuel savings? The standard of insulation in our houses is so appalling that even when houses are insulated, people are likely simply to spend the same amount on fuel, in order to keep their houses nice and warm. How did local authorities arrive at the figure for carbon dioxide emissions that the minister mentioned?

Ms Curran: Robin Harper was at the Social

Justice Committee, where we had many discussions. I welcome his contribution—and that of his party—to the entire debate and to understanding throughout Scotland. It has been clear from those discussions that, to tackle fuel poverty, home insulation and the other problems that are involved in this matter, a range of initiatives and measures have to be undertaken. We have never implied that just one measure was needed.

We recognise that this is about income—we will work in partnership with Westminster on that—as well as housing strategy and local authorities. Our determination on this matter was perhaps best signalled by our commitment to the central heating programme, which has been strongly welcomed throughout Scotland. That indicates our determination to put substantial resources into the problem and to recognise its complexity. We will take every measure that we can to tackle home insulation issues and fuel poverty throughout Scotland.

Breast Cancer

8. Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what the recommended waiting time is for a specialist breast examination at breast cancer units and whether this target is being met. (S10-3535)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): The independent Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network clinical guideline recommends that more than 80 per cent of urgent referrals should be seen within five working days and the remainder within 10 working days. With the current exception of Lothian, those recommendations are being met across Scotland.

Ms MacDonald: It is customary to thank ministers for their reply, but I will just sympathise with that shabby response and ask the minister to apologise to our joint constituent, Sharon Gray of Broomhouse, who has learned today that she will wait 12 weeks before being seen at the Western general hospital.

I would like to hear the minister's comment on the leaflets that are supplied to cancer patients. In September 1998, the promise was:

"We will give you an appointment within two weeks of receiving your doctor's letter."

The latest one says that

"there is sometimes a delay of a few weeks between seeing your General Practitioner and your appointment at the Breast Clinic."

Will the minister explain why, when the Chancellor announced in March £85 million of extra spending for health in Scotland, that should be the case? We were also told that we could

expect the cancer plan in March. Why have we not seen it yet and what has the Executive done with the Chancellor's money?

Susan Deacon: What Margo MacDonald got from me a minute ago was not a shabby reply, but an honest and factual one. That is what is merited for an issue as important and serious as this.

As someone who represents a Lothian constituency, I am deeply concerned by the performance in this particular service area within the national health service in Lothian. As I have indicated, Lothian's performance stands apart from performance throughout Scotland. I remind members that, whereas—sadly—women have recently had to wait a number of weeks in Lothian for that service, throughout Scotland the waiting time is between 48 hours and a maximum of about two weeks. That is as it should be. Lothian Health is acting on the issue and is targeting clinics in the area with additional investment of £100,000 to bring about change. It is improving the referral systems and making real, practical changes in investment to deliver real results and improvement. I shall be monitoring the situation as closely as anyone in the weeks to come.

It is a pity that Margo MacDonald, who has a real concern about such matters, did not just stick to the real, sensitive issue. Instead, as ever, she tried to turn it into a political football.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Does the minister recognise that, in relation to all the Executive's objectives on waiting lists and waiting times, the role of medical secretaries is absolutely vital? Will she give a commitment to deal with the complaints of medical secretaries, who require not only regrading but an improvement in their wages? They have been campaigning for far too long and they are undervalued. Will the minister give a commitment to meet the demands of the medical secretaries?

The Presiding Officer: You are going well wide of the specific question, Mr Sheridan.

Tommy Sheridan: With respect, Presiding Officer, my question concerns special initiatives in the health service. Medical secretaries deal with special initiatives.

The Presiding Officer: Your question must relate specifically to the one in the business bulletin.

Tommy Sheridan: My question relates specifically to special initiatives, and the problem is that it is the medical secretaries who are responsible for them.

The Presiding Officer: All right.

Susan Deacon: I am happy to recognise the contribution not only of medical secretaries, but of

the 136,000 people who work for the NHS in Scotland. A wee bit more time should be spent in this chamber on recognising the results of their efforts, and a wee bit less on kicking the service when things go wrong. The issue of medical secretaries is current. The Executive is facilitating negotiations between the trusts as employers and the trade union representatives. That is the sort of practical and meaningful action that will continue to be taken in this important area.

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD):

As a Lothian MSP, I share the concerns raised by Margo MacDonald, which were echoed to some extent by the minister. Members of the Health and Community Care Committee—along with the rest of Scotland—have been waiting for some time for the cancer plan. A number of concerns have been raised in the cancer field in the past few months, when we had expected to see the cancer plan. When can we expect to see it?

Susan Deacon: I am happy to give an absolute assurance that a great deal of work is being done on the cancer plan. We expect to publish it, and further details of work that will flow from it, in a few weeks.

Prawn Shells (Recycling)

9. Christine Grahame (South of Scotland)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what proposals it has for the recycling of commercially discarded prawn shells. (S1O-3536)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): Although the Scottish Executive encourages recycling generally, it has no specific proposals relating to prawn shells. [MEMBERS: "Shame."] However, in 1999—yes, members heard me correctly—we provided support in the form of a small firms merit award for research and technology of £45,000 to Carapacis Ltd in Ayrshire to help the development of a process that involves recycling prawn shells to produce commercially viable products.

Christine Grahame: As some of us are aware, crab shells are an essential ingredient in the production of bandaging that accelerates healing. Will the minister, or her colleague the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, consider an approach for funding from Heriot-Watt University at Galashiels for research into the feasibility of using discarded prawn shells from Eyemouth catches for that very purpose? Will the minister shell out and give that idea some muscle?

Rhona Brankin: I am afraid that I cannot give a specific commitment to shell out on behalf of Wendy Alexander. However, the university would be in a position to apply again for a small firms merit award for research and technology or could

look for help under the financial instrument for fisheries guidance grant scheme. I would be happy to discuss the matter with Christine Grahame.

Beta Interferon

10. Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive, further to the answer to question S1O-3462 by Susan Deacon on 24 May 2001, whether it will ensure that every patient who is assessed as potentially benefiting from beta interferon is prescribed it. (S1O-3554)

The Minister for Health and Community Care

(Susan Deacon): The Executive has initiated an extensive agenda of work to ensure that all patients have access to consistent, high-quality NHS services, no matter where in the country they live.

I have commissioned expert advice on the use of beta interferon, which is expected later this year. The NHS in Scotland will get the best possible clinical advice based on the widest evidence available. I expect health boards and trusts to follow that national advice when delivering care to their patients with multiple sclerosis.

Tricia Marwick: Two weeks ago, the minister said that cost was not a factor in determining whether patients with MS are prescribed beta interferon.

Will Susan Deacon explain why 52 people in greater Glasgow have been clinically assessed as requiring beta interferon, but have not been prescribed it because the funding has not been made available? Will she also explain why no new prescriptions for beta interferon have been issued in the Greater Glasgow Health Board area since November 1998? Will she explain why she has constantly claimed that cost limits are not being applied when she knows that that is not true?

Susan Deacon: If Tricia Marwick were to check the *Official Report* from a few weeks ago, I suspect that she would probably find that I said that this is not simply a question of cost; as with any drug or treatment, it is a matter of considering the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of any intervention. Every health care system in the world has to do that. We have to find systems, especially when modern medicine and technology are advancing by the day, of evaluating drugs and treatments to ensure that what we offer in the NHS in this country are the best interventions for all concerned.

As far as multiple sclerosis and beta interferon are concerned, as the member knows full well, measures have been put in place across the UK to assess beta interferon, through the National

Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Health Technology Board for Scotland. It is right and proper that that is done in an effective way. It is right and proper that the best possible evidence and clinical advice is available to the NHS in Scotland. We will continue to take that work forward in a balanced and measured way.

Tricia Marwick: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

May I quote the minister, who said in the *Official Report*—

The Presiding Officer: No, I am sorry. That is not a point of order.

Local Democracy

11. Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it is taking to develop local democracy. (S10-3547)

The Deputy Minister for Finance and Local Government (Peter Peacock): We are taking forward the development of local democracy in a number of ways. A proposed new power of community initiative to councils is just one example.

Mr Quinan: I thank the minister for that reply. Does the minister agree that it would be of great benefit to local democracy in the West Dunbartonshire Council area if the current Labour leader, Councillor Andrew White—who lost a vote of confidence last Wednesday—were to step down from the position, as he has been requested to do by four members of the Labour party who voted against him in the vote of no confidence? Does the minister agree that for a council leader not to accept the democratic vote of a council at a full council meeting is an assault on local democracy? Will he instruct Councillor White to resign from West Dunbartonshire Council?

The Presiding Officer: Order. Ministers have no power to instruct councillors to do anything of the kind. Does the minister want to answer that question?

Peter Peacock: The essence of local democracy is that it is local. It is not for this Parliament to intervene in matters that are determined locally. Councillors will stand or fall by their record with the local electorate.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Does the minister agree that, at any level of government, it is dangerous to democracy if one party has an overwhelming number of seats although it does not have an overwhelming number of votes? When will the minister move to introduce proportional representation to local government?

Peter Peacock: We are committed to making progress on electoral reform, and progress we shall make.

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Can the minister explain how holding local elections on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections will improve local democracy?

Peter Peacock: In 1999, when local council elections were held on the same day as the election for this Parliament, we saw that, for the first time in many generations, the turnout for local elections increased significantly. The great benefit of that is that elections for local councils have parity of turnout with elections for this Parliament. That means that the credibility of local councils, in the eyes of the Scottish public, ought to be equivalent to that of this Parliament. That is good for local democracy.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Will the minister indicate whether his plans to revitalise local democracy in Scotland include any plans to break up further the country's local authorities, or does he believe that any such plans would have a negative impact on Scottish people as far as the delivery of services were concerned?

Peter Peacock: I beg your pardon, Presiding Officer. I did not catch the question.

Karen Gillon: Does the minister think that it would be to the advantage of Scottish people to downsize local authorities and thus reduce their competitiveness?

Peter Peacock: There are a number of aspects to downsizing. Local authorities must be of a certain size to deliver services effectively, and there are a number of questions to be answered about the appropriate size of local authorities. However, we would not intend to make a move towards having smaller local authorities.

Scottish Budget

12. Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the total Scottish budget as a proportion of comparable UK spending will rise, fall or stay the same in the next three years. (S10-3543)

The Minister for Finance and Local Government (Angus MacKay): I am pleased to report that the Scottish budget remains stable as a proportion of the overall UK budget over the next three years.

Andrew Wilson: Perhaps for "stable", we should read "falling". According to every estimate—including the Treasury's—the Scottish budget will fall as a share of UK spending over the next three years. Is the minister satisfied with that situation? Is he also satisfied that he is the only

finance minister in the developed world who does not trust himself with the nation's finances? Is not it time that he acknowledged the wide consensus across Scotland and joined the growing support for the case for financial autonomy and full fiscal freedom for the Parliament, instead of backing the Tories on this issue?

Angus MacKay: There was rather more noise and heat than light in Mr Wilson's supplementary question. I note with great interest that, in a letter that appears in *The Scotsman* today, Professor Arthur Midwinter says of Andrew Wilson's position:

"His need to engage in a damage limitation exercise against an academic commentator reflects his own shaky grasp of his brief, which results in exaggerated pronouncements on Scotland's fiscal health."

I have said before—and will say again—that it comes strange for the SNP to lecture other parties in the chamber. The SNP's public service trusts do not work; its oil fund never fills up; and there is a structural deficit that it cannot explain. It is more interested in tearing Scotland out of Britain than in taking poverty out of Scotland.

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland)
(Con): I am sorry that Andrew Wilson sought to put you in an embarrassing situation just then, Presiding Officer.

Will the minister tell Scotland unequivocally whether Labour—should it be elected tomorrow—will continue to support the Barnett formula, despite the statements of prominent ministers such as the Deputy Prime Minister that have been made to appease northern English Labour MPs?

Angus MacKay: The people of Scotland are faced with some very clear choices in tomorrow's election. They can vote for the Scottish Socialist Party, which proposes some Trotskyite nirvana of an independent Scotland; they can vote for the Conservative party, with its £20 billion pounds' worth of expenditure cuts, £2 billion of which would fall on Scotland; or they could even consider voting for the SNP, with its structural deficit of somewhere between £5 billion and £2.5 billion. In fact, they can choose between the mad, the bad and the dangerous to know—or they can stick with Labour, and the Prime Minister's commitment to stick with Barnett.

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): Does the minister agree that the letter from Professor Arthur Midwinter of Strathclyde University to which he referred effectively debunks the myths that the SNP has continually peddled about the Barnett formula for a number of years? On David Davidson's point, does the minister also agree that the pressure from certain parts of the north of England for the formula to be revisited is clear evidence that the formula works to the benefit of the people of Scotland?

Angus MacKay: The formula does indeed work to the benefit of the people of Scotland. As a result of Gordon Brown's previous set of spending decisions in the comprehensive spending review, Scotland received an extra £1.2 billion, £2.3 billion and £3.4 billion in each of the succeeding three years' budgets.

Of course, what the SNP is trying to do is to promote the argument for independence by the back door. However, *The Scotsman* today reports that Sir Sean Connery, the SNP's most prominent campaigner in this election, has said:

"I would come back here to live if there were signs of a serious independence move".

Scottish estate agents need not get too worried or too excited.

Schools (Technological Studies)

13. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland)
(Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what provision exists within the primary and secondary curricula for the teaching of technological studies. (S10-3540)

The Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs (Mr Jack McConnell): Technological studies is the name of a specific course that is available at standard grade and at higher and intermediate 2 levels. The five-to-14 environmental studies guidelines provide for the study of technology at primary school and in the first two years of secondary school.

Miss Goldie: The minister's reply slightly eases my troubled mind in one respect and troubles it further in another. Is the minister concerned to learn that in an educational authority the size of Glasgow City Council, where there are 27 secondary schools, it is alleged that technological studies is available as a subject choice in only three schools? Given the current skills gap in Scotland, is not that a deeply disquieting picture? Will the minister confirm that he is prepared to examine this issue with a degree of urgency?

Mr McConnell: I have been concerned to learn that the number of pupils who are studying for standard grade in technological studies has dropped significantly in recent years. That is why we have decided to focus from next year on a new, improved credit and general level course in technological studies and to drop the foundation level course in the subject. Pupils can then be directed towards other subjects in the technological mode that are more popular.

At the same time as there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of pupils taking technological studies, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of pupils taking subjects such as craft and design, which are technological

in nature even though they do not have the word “technological” in their title. Ensuring that pupils take subjects that interest them but which also give them technological skills is the best way forward for all ability ranges.

First Minister's Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Prime Minister (Meetings)

1. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP):

To ask the First Minister when he next plans to meet the Prime Minister and what issues he intends to raise. (S1F-01122)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): I last met the Prime Minister on 25 May. We have no immediate plans to meet. However, I believe that the Prime Minister is in Dumfries today—something to do with the election.

Mr Swinney: It has been reported today that there is a danger that some elderly and frail people will be evicted from nursing homes because of a rather unseemly squabble about the funding of those homes involving the Executive, councils and care homes. When the First Minister associated himself with the Labour manifesto at the previous general election four years ago, is that what he meant when he said that things could only get better?

The First Minister: We expected rather more from the so-called leader of the Opposition in the way of an eve-of-poll attack.

We have a firm commitment to the future of older people in Scotland. That is why over the next three years we will spend record amounts on our national health service. That is why, on receipt of the development group's report in August, we will embark on free personal care for our older people. We want to implement that from April 2002.

We hope that the current dispute between the local authorities and the nursing home owners will be resolved in the weeks ahead. It is in no one's interests for older people in nursing homes or their relatives to be unsettled by the discussion on fees that is taking place. We have facilitated discussions between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, nursing homes and local authorities. A settlement of the current dispute is in the interests of older people. It is certainly in the interests of long-term care.

Mr Swinney: If that was an eve-of-poll clarification, it has not taken us any further forward.

The First Minister may be aware of comments made by the board of social responsibility of the Church of Scotland, which has said:

“There is not a council in the country with sufficient money allocated to care for the elderly.”

That money comes from the Executive.

Apparently, that issue is to be resolved in the next few days. However, the spokesman for the board of social responsibility states:

"It is not surprising that this whole matter has come to a head,"

because it has been around for 10 years. He goes on to say:

"Residential homes have been consistently under-funded by successive governments"

and accuses ministers of

"burying their heads in the sand".

Is that not absolutely typical of new Labour? It bleats on about everyone else being at fault and fails to provide a solution to the problems.

The First Minister: We are not prepared to take lectures from John Swinney and the nationalists about the future of long-term care. I have read the comments to which he refers. I advise all concerned to get back to discussing the issues. COSLA and the nursing homes can resolve the problem.

The nationalists would commit a derisory amount of money to older people in the NHS. Furthermore, despite Mr Swinney's protestations to the contrary—he said that he would not spend unless the spend could be costed—the SNP has a national health service wish list that it will not own up to. Let us also be specific about this: the fiscal separation that the SNP talks about will destroy economic stability and inflict massive cuts on public services in Scotland. We have a nationalist party with empty promises and uncoded thinking. The older people of Scotland will be safe in our hands, not in the hands of the nationalists.

Mr Swinney: During the election campaign, the First Minister may have spoken to members of the public who are fed up with the fact that he does not give the Parliament any answers to the questions that we ask him. He talks about empty promises, but what about broken promises? The Labour manifesto from four years ago told us:

"Everyone is entitled to dignity in retirement."

Where is the dignity in the farce that is continuing over care for the elderly? Is it not time that the First Minister started standing for Scotland and delivering for the people of Scotland, instead of betraying them?

The First Minister: John Swinney moves effortlessly from being a gentleman to being Mr Angry again. We are not impressed by the rant that we get from the leader of the SNP.

Let us get down to the facts about billions of pounds of public expenditure. In 1997, the SNP earmarked a miserable £35 million extra for the NHS, whereas the Labour party budgeted for an

extra £1.25 billion over the same period. The Labour party in Scotland is happy to agree with the Labour party at Westminster on spending a massive sum on the welfare of our older people—and there is more to come. We have an absolute commitment to personal care for the elderly, whereas the SNP plays politics. We want COSLA and the home owners to get together to resolve the issue of nursing homes. John Swinney is falling into the oldest political trap and is playing politics with the future of older people. It is a disgrace.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues he plans to raise with her or him, or whoever it might be. (S1F-01123)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): I last met the Secretary of State for Scotland earlier today and we have no immediate plans to meet.

David McLetchie: I hope that when a meeting is arranged—the secretary of state will have plenty of time on her hands after tomorrow—the First Minister will get around to discussing the Scottish Executive's appalling record on health and what he intends to do about it between now and the next Scottish Parliament elections.

As we know, there are more patients waiting for treatment than there were in 1997 and 1999. Can the First Minister tell us why he is putting political dogma before the interests of patients and ruling out a partnership with the independent sector that has the potential to abolish NHS waiting lists within a year?

The First Minister: I am sure that the new Bavarian connection that is going to be developed between the Tories in Scotland and the Germans will be of some help to them in addressing the problems in the national health service.

The Conservatives are again raising the issue of spending on the NHS. We have just endured 18 years of the worst Tory Government in relation to public services. The Conservatives, along with the nationalists, are offering economic instability and massive cuts in public services amounting to £20 billion. I do not think that the Tory party is in any position to lecture us on the future of public services. We have a formidable record on the health service, which is why tomorrow the people of the United Kingdom will give us five more years to make more progress.

David McLetchie: The First Minister must stop mangling his facts. We have not just endured 18 years of a Tory Government; we have just endured four years of a Labour Government, and things are a heck of a sight worse, not better, as a

consequence.

The First Minister must stop trying to blind us with statistics and wake up to the reality. The reality is that general practitioners are in revolt and threatening to quit the NHS. In the past three weeks, I have met people from all over Scotland who are campaigning to save their local hospitals and stop the centralisation of many of the services that they have enjoyed for years.

As Mr Swinney rightly points out, many of our nursing homes are, unfortunately, unable to care for elderly and vulnerable people because of the current rates of payment that they receive from local authorities. Is it not a fact that, far from being saved four years ago, the NHS today is in turmoil wherever one cares to look?

The First Minister: We are becoming quite used to general abuse of the health service from David McLetchie and John Swinney week in and week out. Once again, we see the right-wing alliance between the two Opposition parties. [*Interruption.*] I am pleased that the SNP's deputy leader is not here, because she got quite excited the last time I mentioned that.

The Conservatives would deliver economic instability and massive cuts in public services. We have delivered the biggest hospital-building programme that Scotland has seen—eight new hospitals—an investment of £500 million and 1,500 more nurses and midwives over the next five years. We want to put that record to the country.

Where is Phil Gallie today? [MEMBERS: "Winning in Ayrl!"] Phil Gallie had better enjoy his last day on the hustings, because the sad fact is that he will be spending the next two years in this chamber before he is ousted in 2003.

Tomorrow, the people will vote against the Tories' plan to make cuts of £20 billion. They will vote for the party that created the national health service, remains proud of its achievements and has a massive sum of money to invest over the next five years.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Members are being unusually noisy this afternoon, which, I suppose, has something to do with what will happen tomorrow. I call Frank McAveety for a quiet supplementary.

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): Does the First Minister agree that the Executive should take no lessons from the Tories, who, over the 18 years for which they were in power, closed six hospitals in Glasgow and did not replace them? The health service is safer in our hands than it ever was in theirs.

The First Minister: I agree. It shows how desperate the Tories are that they wheel out Mrs

Thatcher during the campaign. Members may also have noticed the appearance of Michael Forsyth—if that is not political desperation, I do not know what is.

Schools

3. Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what progress is being made towards achieving the Scottish Executive's policy objectives for Scotland's schools. (S1F-01133)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): We have made major progress in delivering our policy objectives for Scotland's schools as set out in our most recent programme for government. We have also achieved a stable agreement to improve teachers' pay and modernise their conditions and have established an improvement framework with national priorities to continue the drive to raise standards in schools.

Karen Gillon: Does the First Minister agree that opening up educational opportunities for children in Scotland is key to developing a successful and vibrant Scotland? He has outlined some of the steps that are being taken, but I ask him to give the vision of the Labour party for Scotland and indicate to the people of Scotland that the choice tomorrow is between a Labour party that is committed to, and will invest in, Scottish children and education and other parties that have no vision and no money to put their policies into practice.

The First Minister: I agree with Karen Gillon. People have a choice tomorrow between the nationalists' fiscal separatism as a smokescreen for separation and divorce and the cuts of £20 billion that would loom large if a Conservative Government were ever elected.

We have achieved much. We are committed to spending more on education in real terms over the next three years, we are setting national priorities to improve standards in schools, we are reducing class sizes in primary schools, we have put in place 62 new community school projects and we have agreed a deal with our teachers that they deserve. That deal will provide stability and will link excellence in standards in the classroom to a fair deal for teachers, whom we value and who will be at the core of the drive towards improvement in the years that lie ahead.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I want to address just one of the Executive's policy objectives. For several years, Labour has had a commitment to cut class sizes to 30 or fewer in primaries 1, 2 and 3. The Labour party has claimed that it will do so before 31 August 2001. No teacher believes that that will happen as it would require the Executive to take more than 1,000 children off the register every week for the

next 12 weeks. Will the First Minister come clean and say that the commitment will not be delivered by 31 August? Anything else is a fib.

The First Minister: We do not expect the nationalists to support anything that is in the interests of schoolchildren in Scotland. We are on track to achieve the commitment to which Mike Russell refers, and that will be very significant for Scottish schools, for parents and for children. Once again, instead of praising what is being achieved in the long-term interests of our country and our children, SNP members want to denigrate at every opportunity—they are talking Scotland down again.

Motorola

4. Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the up-to-date position is on the progress of the Motorola task force. (S1F-01132)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): The Executive is working closely with the Motorola task force to secure the best possible outcome for the workers who are affected by the plant's closure. The main aim of the task force is to minimise the economic impact of the closure. It is seeking to assist all employees to gain alternative employment within the shortest time frame possible.

The task force has been on site since 21 May on a 24-hours-a-day, five-days-a-week basis and has been providing both general information sessions for all staff and an on-site job shop. Agency services provided include those from the Employment Service, the Benefits Agency, the Inland Revenue and a whole host of others. The next meeting of the task force is on 11 June.

The Executive has invited the task force to bring forward proposals as a matter of urgency to facilitate access to training and further education opportunities for those experienced workers who wish to consider a career change to sectors that contain identifiable skills shortages.

Alex Neil: Is the First Minister aware of the frustration, anger and disappointment that is being expressed by Motorola workers, with particular regard to their being unable to obtain assistance for training until they first secure a job? Does he accept that they are in a chicken-and-egg situation, in that money is not being made available for training until they get a job, but they cannot get a job until they get money for training? Will he and the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning intervene as a matter of urgency?

How much of the £10 million that was allocated to the task force has already been spent or allocated, and what has it been spent on? The Executive said that it would do its bit; this is an

opportunity for it to do so by sorting out this mess.

The First Minister: I agree with Alex Neil's thoughtful contribution in relation to the difficult experiences of Motorola workers. Intervention has already taken place and the matter will be resolved. The situation that Alex Neil described does not make sense for the work force and the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning is dealing with the specific point that he raised. On the £10 million, if Alex Neil is satisfied, I would like to write to him explaining what has been spent, what remains to be spent and what we have spent the money on.

Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): Can the First Minister assure me that when proposals are put to the Executive by the task force, he will consider sympathetically support for those employees of Motorola who are currently taking further education courses—and who will wish to continue them—especially in cases where finances are particularly tight because more than one individual in a household is affected?

The First Minister: I am pleased to confirm that we will do that. It is important that the widest possible range of opportunities is available to the work force. The suggestion that Mary Mulligan has made will, in discussion with the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, be implemented, so that we can provide the work force with the fullest possible opportunities.

Universities (Applications)

5. Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Executive intends to maintain the growth in applications to Scottish universities. (S1F-01135)

The First Minister (Henry McLeish): We welcome the continuing rise in applicants to Scottish universities as evidence that the Executive's policies to increase participation and widen access are already working. We will continue to support and encourage all Scots in realising their potential by raising aspirations and removing real and perceived barriers to entering higher education.

Iain Smith: Does the First Minister agree that the figures published last week, which showed a 13 per cent increase in applications to Scottish universities by Scottish students, demonstrate that Scottish students are voting with their feet in favour of the funding package provided by the Liberal Democrat-Labour partnership Executive, which has meant an end to tuition fees, the reintroduction of grants of up to £2,000 and the fact that 99 per cent of all students will leave university with less debt than they would have under the present system?

The First Minister: That is the essential

difference at the heart of education politics in Scotland. The coalition is delivering for students and universities in Scotland, and therefore it is delivering for the Scottish economy. There is no doubt that the abolition of tuition fees and the introduction of maintenance grants will help significantly.

We are also attracting students from the rest of the United Kingdom and from overseas. It is our aspiration to have the best university system in the world. Of course, as part of that aspiration, we must ensure that student support is made available.

Education remains a key issue and I have no doubt that it will be one of the key issues to dominate the election over the next 24 hours.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): Does the First Minister accept that young people are concerned? Whatever he may choose to call the graduate endowment, it is seen by many potential undergraduates as a tax. What would he say to young people who say that they are deterred from the prospect of going into higher education because they still see a charge at the end? I have encountered instances of their concern in recent weeks.

The First Minister: If there is a disincentive to young people entering university education, it has not been measured in our figures. There is a significant increase in the number of students, which has been helped by the fact that tuition fees have been abolished and that 50 per cent of students will not pay the graduate endowment. It would help students if they got the right information from the nationalists and the Conservatives. The graduate endowment is not about deferred tuition fees—it is about the abolition of tuition fees.

I want to make an important point. Although the SNP may not like it, we are also introducing maintenance grants for students from low-income backgrounds. The combination of all that means that we have the best student package in the United Kingdom. The figures are up, and we warmly welcome them.

Motion Without Notice

15:47

The Deputy Minister for Parliament (Euan Robson): I seek permission to move a motion without notice.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I am minded to accept a motion to bring forward decision time. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Euan Robson: In order to allow for the fact that business has concluded early, I move,

That the Parliament agrees under Rule 11.2.4 of the Standing Orders that Decision Time on Wednesday 6 June 2001 shall begin at 3.48 pm.

The Presiding Officer: It would have been helpful if you had proposed a time of 3.47 pm, Mr Robson, but never mind.

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: We have 28 seconds to fill.

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): Do you take requests, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: No. However, I hope that all members will have a happy day tomorrow. I will not be able to participate, as I am classed as either a peer or a lunatic.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Presiding Officer, in the 28 seconds left, would you care to explain your support for increased fiscal autonomy?

The Presiding Officer: That point is definitely very much out of order.

Decision Time

15:48

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The first question is, that motion S1M-1990, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, on designation of lead committees, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Committee is designated as Lead Committee in consideration of the Police and Fire Services (Finance) (Scotland) Bill and that the Bill should also be considered by the Finance Committee, the Justice 1 Committee and the Justice 2 Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S1M-1989, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, on approval of statutory instruments, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) (No 2) Order 2001 be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S1M-1981, in the name of Angus MacKay, which seeks agreement that the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill be passed, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill be passed.

Prescription Charges (Exemptions)

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S1M-1793, in the name of Brian Adam, on prescription charge exemption for severe and enduring mental illness. It would be helpful if members who wish to participate in the debate would press their request-to-speak buttons.

I invite Mr Adam to introduce his motion. Other members in the chamber—[*Interruption.*] Order. There should be no conversations, as a debate is about to start.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes Mental Health Week in the second week in April; notes the omission of severe and enduring mental illness from the scope of the National Health Service (Charges for Drugs and Appliances) (Scotland) Regulations 1974; expresses concern at the incidence of suicide amongst high-risk groups identified in the Mental Welfare Commission Annual Report 1999-2000, and agrees with the conclusion of the Millan report that essential medication for chronic mental conditions is fundamental to successful care in the community.

15:49

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Although my motion was originally intended to be timed to coincide with mental health week in April, I am glad to present it to Parliament today.

The issues involved in my motion have been raised by a number of members, including Adam Ingram, Jamie McGrigor and David Davidson, in similar motions, questions and letters to successive ministers. We are looking for the inclusion of

"severe and enduring mental illness"

in the list of items that are exempted from prescription charges. For some time, that case has been pressed on a variety of grounds, but ministers have been unmoved. I will go over those grounds and highlight what has changed that should allow reconsideration.

Given that only a minority of people—probably only 10 to 15 per cent—who receive continuing treatment for severe and enduring mental illness do not receive free prescriptions, the financial impact on the national health service of providing free prescriptions across the board to such people would be negligible. However, if that were done, the impact on the affected individuals would be rather significant.

There is a lack of equality in the system in that free prescriptions are provided for people who

have chronic physical illness, but not for people who have chronic mental illness. That contrast does not reflect well on a Government that seeks to reduce discrimination. Mental health is one of the three key areas that the Government is trying to tackle. Patients who have epilepsy or hypothyroidism receive free prescriptions. I cannot see any reason for the distinction between those illnesses and enduring and severe mental illness.

When the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care's predecessor wrote to me, he suggested that people who did not take their medication because they could not afford it—or for whatever other reason—could be hospitalised. That is not exactly a solution to the problem. It is not a reasonable alternative to the free provision of medication. The costs that are involved in hospitalising a patient for a day would be much more than the cost of providing the drugs for a whole year, but the costs that would be involved in hospitalising a patient for a day are far from the end of the story. Weeks—perhaps months—are required for the successful restabilisation of patients. Even then, continuing care in the community might be required, which is provided using psychiatric nursing. The cost of not providing free prescriptions greatly outweighs the cost of providing them.

Continuity of care in the community is of course required as an ideal, but the free provision of medication should be an essential part of that. The Millan report recommends that compulsory medication should be available for those who have mental illness and who receive their care in the community.

People who have enduring mental illnesses are at an increased risk of suicide. Medication is an obvious preventative measure. As I understand it, some mental illnesses have a 15 per cent lifetime risk of suicide. As I understand the research, for patients who have taken themselves off medication for a year, there is perhaps a fivefold increase—it may even be up to twentyfold—in the risk that they will commit suicide.

Under the Mental Health Act 1983, individuals who tend towards suicide cannot necessarily be sectioned. Whether they are sectioned is dependent on their communicating their feelings to somebody else. The problem cannot be identified until it has already happened.

Those arguments have been advanced in the past and have so far not persuaded successive ministers.

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): Does Mr Adam agree with me that, because Scotland has a higher percentage of suicides per head of population than the rest of the UK, this is a singularly Scottish issue? Is not it a

shame that, when the Minister for Health and Community Care replied to my question a few weeks ago, she said that she would not review prescription charge exemptions? Part of her answer indicated that she would work in parallel with the UK Government. Should not we try to overcome this difficulty in Scotland?

Brian Adam: I agree with Mr Davidson. The matter is devolved and ministers have the right to act. Indeed, in response to previous questions, motions that I have lodged and letters that I have written, I have received a similar reply to that, which does not surprise me.

What has changed? The issue was reviewed in 1998 as part of the comprehensive spending review and it was turned down for the duration of the UK Parliament. That Parliament is at an end. Given that the issue was included for consideration as part of the comprehensive spending review, the principal case against it must be financial. The matter is devolved and I ask the minister to consider it for part of the additional unallocated funds from this year's comprehensive spending review, because mental health is one of the Government's three key areas for action.

The Millan committee concluded that essential medication for chronic mental conditions is fundamental to successful care in the community. The logical conclusion of that is to remove any barrier to compliance. By doing so, the logic of the case for making the prescriptions for severe and enduring mental illness free will be understood.

Many people who have severe and enduring mental illness are active participants in their communities. Some are in employment. If, for whatever reason, they stop taking their medication—because many are in poorly-paid employment—not only will society lose them, but we will lose the contribution that they can make to society. That is discrimination against a particular group of people who are already stigmatised. Perhaps we ought to consider whether we can make a separate—possibly Scottish—case for dealing with that, especially if the issue is largely financial, given that the financial costs are fairly small.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Mr Davidson, I think that you may have cancelled your request to speak. Do you wish to speak?

15:56

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): I do, indeed.

I congratulate Brian Adam on securing the debate today. It is unfortunate that it did not take place when he wanted it to. I understand the

reasons for the debate. Many organisations in Grampian have written to him and to me as representatives of that area. Mental health support groups of all types are anxious to see movement on the issue.

We face a great difficulty. Many mentally ill people are capable of performing part-time work or, in some cases, poorly-paid work. They fall into the poverty trap because, if they are not on income support, they do not qualify for free prescriptions, unless they happen to have another illness such as diabetes or hypothyroidism.

In considering the matter, I asked the minister a few weeks ago for a total review. Mental health sufferers—possibly up to 20 per cent of the population—have a good case, but it is unfortunate that many other ailments are not covered by the motion.

I would go further and suggest that we need a review of the whole prescription charge exemption system. I do not want MSPs to play the needs of one interest group against those of another. People do not choose to be ill and they do not choose which illnesses to have. Some illnesses require much more medication, in different forms, than others do. I accept that there is an exemption where a drug—for example, chlorpromazine, a common drug for the treatment of mental illness—may be given in different doses and only one charge is made. However, the charges vary according to the drugs and many are very expensive. Some people cannot afford the prescription charge season ticket, which is a fairly major hit that must be paid up front.

As Brian Adam rightly said, medicine is only one part of care for the mentally ill—a large part is care in the community. It is surprising to find that 80 per cent of the funding for mental health is spent in the hospital service, yet 80 per cent of sufferers live in the community. I thoroughly approve of people being out of institutions where possible and if it is good for them, but such decisions are clinical decisions and are not for us to comment on.

I have received support in the form of a letter from the Royal College of General Practitioners to the Conservative health spokesperson. Although the RCGP welcomes the debate, it supports the position that I have stated previously. The RCGP comments:

“a wider debate on prescription charge reform is urgently required in Scotland ... The current system for prescription charging is outdated, inconsistent and illogical. Some long-term conditions entitle sufferers to blanket free prescriptions for all their medications”.

That is regardless of whether the prescriptions relate to a patient's life-threatening disease. All the GPs and people working in mental health that I have spoken to agree that we need a review.

As I said to Mr Adam, it is within this Parliament's gift to carry out that review. It is important that we are talking about mental health, because no family in Scotland does not recognise the problems of the range of mental health conditions. It falls upon members to decide whether there should be a review. I would like the minister and his colleagues to come forward with the offer of a review so that the Parliament, through its committees and through debates in the chamber, can consider a proper, thorough and fair examination of who should receive free prescriptions.

I said previously that the system is unfair. As I know from my past as a community pharmacist, that unfairness is manifested when people come to a pharmacist with a prescription for multiple items, for which they have to pay, and say, “I can only afford two out of the five. Which ones should I have?” We cannot continue to tolerate that in the 21st century in Scotland.

16:01

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): I would like to endorse much of what Mr Davidson has said, and I would like to thank my colleague Brian Adam for securing this debate. It is just a pity that more of our colleagues are not present. Perhaps other business is in the offing.

Despite the lack of attendance, I am sure that those who rely on medication as part of their care package will be heartened by the fact that we are discussing such a motion in Parliament. Both the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Scottish Association for Mental Health have intimated their support for this motion to me, as convener of the cross-party group on mental health.

As I have said before, prescriptions for medication can be a vital component of the care programme. That has been reinforced by many of the recommendations in the Millan report. The report noted that:

“It has been the stated aim of Government that the reduction in hospital places would be accompanied by a transfer of resources to community based mental health services, although we received evidence from many quarters that neither service was adequately resourced. Together with changes in medication, these developments mean that it is now possible for many more people, even with severe mental illnesses, to live with support in the community.”

My main concern with the current system is the basis set for exemption. I have previously raised parliamentary questions, as have other colleagues, on eligibility for exemption. The minister stated that she would not be reviewing the current criteria for conditions that they

“should be easily recognisable, lifelong and life-threatening”.—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 15 May

2001; p 184.]

I would argue that many people with a mental illness could be covered by those criteria and that exemption from prescription charges should be conferred on them. The Government surely must review the current list of medical conditions that are eligible for exemption. To my knowledge, the list has not changed since it was drawn up in 1968. Since then, much has changed in society, in the medical profession and in pharmaceuticals. In particular, much has changed in diagnoses and the number of new conditions has increased.

Costs of medication for people who have enduring mental illness can range from just £2 per week to £28 per week. I will cite the cases of two of my constituents. One suffers from clinical depression and has to pay £31.90 every four months. Another suffers from manic depression and has to pay £30.15 every two months. Both are in full-time employment and therefore do not qualify for free prescriptions. Those people already have the anxiety of their illness; they do not need the added pressure of financing their medication. Those examples clearly show a disincentive to take up work opportunities, which runs counter to the Executive's social inclusion agenda.

The Executive has assured the people of Scotland that mental health is one of the three key health priority areas. That has to be reflected in the levying of prescription charges. The Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 has been reviewed, and the subject of charging patients on long-term medication was highlighted as an area that should be reassessed. The minister has the opportunity to make changes and the power to extend exemptions on prescription charges. I urge him to take that opportunity and the necessary steps to extend exemptions.

16:05

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I had not intended to speak, but this is an important debate. Like Adam Ingram, I regret that there are not more members here. The issue of chronic illness and how prescriptions and medication are paid for deserves review, although I do not wish to judge individual cases at the moment.

I am diabetic and I get all my prescriptions for free, but I do not need them all to be free. I get things free that I would be perfectly happy to pay for. Health problems that are chronic and lifelong, and which have a chronic need for medication, should be serious candidates—regardless of whether they are mental or physical health problems—for free prescriptions.

I hope that the minister will keep the issue under review. I agree with almost everything that

members have said, including the fact that this is an area that is worthy of discussion. The idea of a review ought not to be put aside.

16:06

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): I congratulate Brian Adam on securing this debate which, in the wording of the motion, brings together several topics, including mental health week, suicide, the Millan report and prescription charges. I begin by assuring Adam Ingram that mental health is one of our three priorities, and we are proceeding with a wide-ranging agenda on it, one part of which, the Millan report, has been referred to on more than one occasion.

I read the report right through earlier this year, and the only reference that I can recall to the subject under debate today was in relation to those who are compelled to accept treatment. The Millan committee felt that medication ought to be free for those people. I cannot give an Executive response to that report, because currently we are considering it with a wide-ranging reference group, which includes users and carers. That group is helping us to work through some of the issues. There will be a statement on that later this year, and a new mental health bill will follow next year.

Brian Adam tried to connect prescription charges with mental health, and I understand and share his concerns, but the reality is that many people with various physical illnesses might well put forward exactly the same case, which is the point that David Davidson made. That highlights the fact that this is a complex issue, which has to be considered carefully. Change would be a major exercise, and it should be remembered that we are in the middle of a much wider programme of change and development in the health service and community care. In view of that, we do not regard reviewing the prescription charge arrangements as a priority at present.

I know that some groups have raised the issue of prescription charges, but in my contacts with mental health groups, and user groups in particular, it has not been at the top of their agendas. We also found that to be the case in our consultations on the health plan last year. While we acknowledge the concerns, we have to retain a sense of perspective on prescription charges. For example, the 1.6 per cent increase in prescription charges this year was the lowest for 20 years. We should remember that the charges bring in £45 million for the national health service. People have to reflect on the hole that would be made in NHS finances if there were free prescription charges for chronic mental illness, although I accept that they have not been arguing for that particular position today.

Brian Adam: I recognise that £45 million is a not inconsiderable sum, but will the minister accept that exemption of the group that the motion mentions would involve a much smaller amount of money? If free prescriptions were extended, the amount affected could be counterbalanced by reduced costs, particularly in hospitalisation, and even in care in community.

Malcolm Chisholm: That is the case for mental health exclusively, but I make the point that many people would not regard it as fair to except only one category. That is the point that David Davidson made.

When medical exemptions were introduced in 1968, only 42 per cent of national health service prescriptions were dispensed free, whereas that figure now is 90 per cent. We can reflect that the majority of people receive free prescriptions.

A pre-payment certificate is available to cover all prescriptions for four months for £31, so I am unsure why the constituent to whom Adam Ingram referred should pay £31 for two months' prescriptions.

The issue was connected to the serious problem of suicide. It was unfortunate that it was perhaps implied that the high rate of suicide was somehow connected to prescription charges. No evidence for that exists. We should also reflect that not everyone who commits suicide has recent experience of mental health services. The confidential inquiry into suicide and homicide that was produced earlier this year showed that 25 per cent of those who had committed suicide had had recent contact with mental health services.

We take suicide seriously. I read the most recent annual report of the Mental Welfare Commission, which highlights the problem. The Executive is committed to developing a framework for the prevention of suicide and self-harm as an urgent priority. I have been pleased to speak at two major seminars on the topic in the past few months. The most recent took place in Dunblane a couple of weeks ago, when we considered the draft framework. I thank the Scottish Development Centre for Mental Health for undertaking much of the work on that. The draft framework is being revised in the light of comments and we will issue the framework for consultation shortly. Work on preventing suicide encompasses the promotion of mental health and well-being and the development of services. Those are the two substantial parts of our mental health agenda.

The motion refers to mental health week. Every April, the World Health Organisation holds a mental health day. Scottish mental health week takes place every October and is run by the Health Education Board for Scotland. It seeks to raise awareness about mental health and helps to

tackle the fear and stigma that are often associated with it. Concerted action to deal with stigma is also a major priority for us. I know that the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on mental health will welcome that, which is part of our wider work on promoting mental health and well-being. From the health improvement fund, £4 million has been set aside for that work in the next three years. Detailed announcements will be made about what will be done.

I must refer to the service agenda, which complements the promotion agenda, as our health plan said in December. We are accelerating the implementation of the framework for mental health services and have given an extra £2 million this year for projects that are directly linked to it. About a year ago, we established the mental health and well-being support group, which will ensure that the framework is implemented throughout Scotland.

We also said in the health plan that

"severe and enduring mental illness is only the tip of the iceberg".

We seek to extend mental health services in primary care for the wider range of people who can suffer mental health problems at some point.

At least one speaker mentioned employment. Developing employment opportunities for those with mental health problems is critical, and the new futures fund helps in that. Two weeks ago, I was pleased to open a project in Aberdeen that is run by Rehab Scotland. It was a superb demonstration of good practice in working on employment issues with those with mental health problems.

My time is up and I know that Brian Adam will not be pleased with what I said about prescription charges. However, I hope that he will note the points that I made about them and that he will welcome the broader mental health initiatives that we seek to drive forward.

Meeting closed at 16:15.

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