

# **MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT**

Wednesday 15 May 2002  
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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## Scottish Parliament

*Wednesday 15 May 2002*

*(Afternoon)*

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

### Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** To lead our time for reflection this afternoon, we welcome Mrs Louise Purvis, who is a member of the executive committee of the National Prayer Breakfast for Scotland.

**Mrs Louise Purvis (Executive Committee of the National Prayer Breakfast for Scotland):** I adopted your land 42 years ago as a student at the University of St Andrews. I felt that I had come home, perhaps because my forebears set out from Fife centuries earlier. They adopted my land, the Shenandoah valley of Virginia. They felt that they had come home. Those Scots filled that valley with their values and priorities—faith, family and fellowship. Their input changed our history.

I returned to Scotland a decade later as a wife and mother. I was startled to see that those values of faith, family and fellowship were in decline.

I saw the worst consequences of that decline in the Scottish prisons. A group of us set up a lay ministry, Prison Fellowship Scotland, to help the prison chaplains to try to reverse the decline.

Just as I started going into prisons, my husband went into politics. I then feared for our faith, family and fellowship!

My fears were groundless. My husband, John, a Scottish Tory Presbyterian, along with a Welsh Methodist socialist and an Italian Catholic Christian Democrat, started a fellowship in the European Parliament. It is still going strong. Their fellowship gathering is an oasis of peace, unity and trust. There they are reminded how great is their God, and how, in the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“unto us a child is born ... and the government will be upon His shoulders”.

What a relief for politicians! There they recall that they are accountable, not only to their electorate but to God, their families, and one another.

When they meet, they study the life and teachings of the man whom many consider the greatest role model for leaders the world has ever known—Jesus Christ, a servant leader who, with a group of 12 men in fellowship, changed the world.

The European Parliament Fellowship later led to the birth of the National Prayer Breakfast for Scotland. It was founded by members of every political party for the leaders of Scotland. Some of you attended this event earlier today.

It also led to a European Prayer Breakfast. Last year, in the presence of several hundred politicians from 20 European countries, the President of Macedonia spoke movingly. He said:

“I have never read a book on politics and never intend to. The bottom line in my daily decision-making is, what would Jesus do?”

I pray that in the busy-ness of serving your constituents, you will keep foremost the real business of leadership—promoting the values and priorities that made your land and mine great: faith, family and fellowship.

**The Presiding Officer:** As members will know, it is the happy custom in the Parliament to welcome distinguished visitors who are in our midst. Today, there are three welcomes to be made. First, we welcome Mr Jaak Gabriels, the Minister for Economic Affairs and Foreign Trade in the Government of Flanders. He is here to mark the launch of the new direct ferry service between Scotland and the continent. [*Applause.*] Secondly, we welcome Señor Gabriel Elorriaga, the Secretary of State for Territorial Organisation in the Spanish Government. He is full of excitement, not only about what is happening here, but about something that I believe is happening at Hampden later. [*Applause.*] Thirdly, we welcome the members of the committee for agriculture and fishery from the Basque Parliament. [*Applause.*]

## Presiding Officer's Ruling

14:35

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** Before moving on to the revised business motion, I shall make some remarks, as a matter of courtesy and information, about the sub judice rule. I invite members' attention to what I am going to say.

Schedule 3 to the Scotland Act 1998 requires the Parliament to include a sub judice rule in its standing orders. That requirement is expressed in rule 7.5. Rule 7.5.1 states:

"A member may not in the proceedings of the Parliament refer to any matter in relation to which legal proceedings are active except to the extent permitted by the Presiding Officer."

Rule 7.5.3 states:

"Where any member refers to a matter in relation to which legal proceedings are active the Presiding Officer may order that member not to do so."

Those are the rules that the Parliament adopted.

The phrase "proceedings of the Parliament" includes lodged motions. The original motion that Mr Russell lodged was clearly sub judice and he agreed to my request to withdraw it and lodge a new motion, which I accepted within the rules. It was then scheduled for debate. I was informed verbally and subsequently in writing that, because of the current civil action against, among others, Scottish Executive ministers, no minister would be put up to respond to the debate. That is entirely and properly a matter for the Executive and had no bearing on my application of the rule. I informed Mr Russell of that and he saw no need to withdraw his motion. He helpfully volunteered to show me a draft of his speech in advance to help to avoid any sub judice problems. Through business managers and the clerks, I advised all members wishing to speak in the debate to seek advice from my office on the application of the sub judice rule. I trust that members will therefore recognise that I was keen to assist members by allowing the scheduled debate to proceed.

When I read Mr Russell's draft, I took the view that it fell foul of the sub judice rule. I accordingly informed Mr Russell and the Parliamentary Bureau yesterday. I recommended to the bureau that, rather than lose a members' business opportunity because of my ruling, it should consider substituting another topic. That is the reason for the motion that you are about to consider.

The broadcast and written media must take their own view on the application of the rules of contempt of court and make their own decisions accordingly. Freedom of speech has a central

place in the Parliament and the ability of members to represent their constituents is an essential and cherished duty of us all. Alongside that, however, we all must have regard to the interests of justice, including the interests of all parties to a court action. There is no question of gagging parliamentary debate on the McKie case. It would have been perfectly in order for it to be debated here at any time after the Minister for Justice's statement in June 2000 and before the civil action became active in March this year. It will become possible again to debate the matter once the court case has been concluded. In the meantime, it is vital to recognise the proper place of the courts and of the Parliament. That is my ruling.

## Business Motion

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** I warn members that my ruling on sub judice is as pertinent to this item of business as it was to the proposed item of members' business this evening. I call Euan Robson to move motion S1M-3109.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees—

as a revision to the Business Programme agreed on 9 May 2002—

Wednesday 15 May 2002

after "Decision Time" delete

*"followed by* Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-3076 Michael Russell: Scottish Criminal Record Office"

and replace with

*"followed by* Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-2988 Mr Lloyd Quinan: Autism Awareness Week, 12–19 May 2002".—[*Euan Robson.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Michael Russell has asked to speak against the motion. You have five minutes, Michael.

14:39

**Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP):** I welcome your statement, Presiding Officer, and the co-operation that you have given in this matter. I regret that we are now at this moment.

I accept that there is a requirement within the Scotland Act 1998 to have a sub judice rule. The question is whether the Parliament's sub judice rule is an appropriate one or whether it goes too far, as do other parts of our standing orders, in preventing appropriate debate and action within the chamber.

I object to the removal of the motion regarding Shirley McKie because it is obvious to common sense that the Parliament's sub judice rule goes too far. The common sense rule that should be applied is to ask whether the issue is being discussed in any detail elsewhere. The answer is yes. The issue is debated in the newspapers and on the radio. It was debated last night on "Newsnight Scotland" and will be debated this week on "Panorama". [*Interruption.*] I am trying to make serious points, despite interruptions. It is obvious that if the debate on the Shirley McKie case can take place in the media and elsewhere, members must ask why it cannot take place in Scotland's Parliament. It seems ludicrous to the public at large and to the media that we are forbidden from raising the case in Parliament.

The speech that I provided you with, Presiding

Officer, introduced no new material and made no new revelations or assertions. However, it went through the detail of the case and indicated not only the concerns of the community in Scotland to issues arising from the case, but those of the world forensic community. My speech could raise such concerns only on the basis of the previous case, which was concluded three years and one day ago today, in which Shirley McKie, who is present in the public gallery, was found not guilty of perjury.

In those circumstances, I was endeavouring to see what answer the Executive would give to the concerns of the international community. Despite the fact that a letter from world fingerprint experts, a copy of which I hold in my hand, was delivered to the Minister for Justice two weeks ago, I have not yet had a response from him.

Presiding Officer, I accept that your ruling is within the standing orders and I will not press the issue to a vote, particularly as another Scottish National Party member has a members' business motion for today. However, I ask you and the Procedures Committee to reflect on the fact that the sub judice rule is damaging debate in the Parliament and, indeed, is damaging the Parliament. It appears that in the very place where we should be—

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab):** Rubbish.

**Michael Russell:** Again, instead of trying to enter into debate, Labour members are interrupting.

Instead of having a sub judice rule that can command respect within the chamber and from the media, we have a sub judice rule that is suppressing debate and making Parliament look silly.

**The Presiding Officer:** Before I ask Mr Robson to respond to that, I will make two points about what you said. First, as I explained in my ruling, it is not the case that the Parliament cannot debate the case. All I am saying is that it cannot debate the case during the court action. The Parliament is free to debate the case before or afterwards. Secondly, on the wider issue of whether the rule is correct or not, I have explained the background, which is that Parliament has adopted the rule. However, Parliament is equally free to reflect on the rule. I will do so and I am sure that the Procedures Committee will also do so in due course. We do so with all our rules, as we are a young institution.

In the meantime, I am bound to implement the sub judice rule as it stands and I know that the member appreciates that fact. I ask Mr Robson to speak on the motion.

14:43

**The Deputy Minister for Parliamentary Business (Euan Robson):** The business motion simply reflects the decision of the Parliamentary Bureau. The bureau's decision was taken on your advice, Presiding Officer. There was no vote in the bureau. I do not think that it is appropriate for me to add anything to what you have said on this matter. I simply press the motion.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament agrees—

as a revision to the Business Programme agreed on 9 May 2002—

Wednesday 15 May 2002

after "Decision Time" delete

"followed by Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-3076 Michael Russell: Scottish Criminal Record Office"

and replace with

"followed by Members' Business - debate on the subject of S1M-2988 Mr Lloyd Quinan: Autism Awareness Week, 12–19 May 2002"—[*Euan Robson.*]

**Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. On what you just said, I wonder whether you would produce some form of guidance about what we mean by parliamentary privilege in the Scottish Parliament. It is clear that there is debate and disagreement about what coverage we have within the Scottish Parliament compared with the coverage within the Westminster Parliament.

As a result of today's debate, would you agree to provide guidance to all MSPs about parliamentary privilege?

**The Presiding Officer:** I think that I can help you here. I remind you that such guidance was published in the business bulletin in May 1999. If members would like that information, they have only to go to the Scottish Parliament information centre to find it. It is already there.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP):** I want to raise a point of order, Presiding Officer, notice of which was given yesterday. Rule 7.5, which you read out, indicates that there is clear discretion for you to have permitted the members' business debate on Michael Russell's motion to proceed. Is it the case that the decision not to proceed with that debate was taken by you and was not one that you were bound to take on the advice of lawyers?

**The Presiding Officer:** It was entirely my decision—as the rule states. I gave careful thought to the text that Mr Russell supplied. I took the view that the majority of it was clearly sub judice. That was my decision. The advice that I took in

reaching that decision is another matter, but I tell the member that I had come to that view before I sought any further advice.

**Fergus Ewing:** I am obliged for that answer. Having read the speech, I can say, without commenting on its contents, that it is one of the greatest speeches that Mr Russell has not made.

As a lawyer, I have noticed that lawyers do not always agree. Given that no indication has been given of exactly what it was in Mr Russell's speech that fell foul of the rule, will Mr Russell be provided with copies of the legal advice, as I requested in my e-mail to you yesterday? Will that advice be published in full? If not, why not? Publication of the advice is required to give the guidance that many members seek.

**The Presiding Officer:** The advice will not be published, because I take responsibility for decisions, whatever advice officials give me. We do not debate advice from officials in the Parliament. I am responsible for the decision that was taken and I think that it is the right one.

**Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** As the issue that Mr Russell wanted to be debated here related to an important forensic criminal matter and as your objection on sub judice grounds refers only to a civil action of damages, which is quite a separate type of problem, is it not necessary that we clarify exactly the extent of the sub judice rule? The implication is that an important criminal forensic debate in this Parliament could be blocked by someone who simply raised an action of damages. That is an important point and I ask the Presiding Officer to reconsider the extent of the sub judice rule.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will examine what the member has said, but my consideration is based on the fact that there is a current case before the courts. That is the matter that I have to deal with and my decision is based only on that.

No doubt this is an important matter and we will discuss it in future. However, we should now move on.



## Scottish Fire Service

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** The first item of business is a debate on motion S1M-3098, in the name of Richard Simpson, on the Scottish fire service, and two amendments to that motion.

14:47

**The Deputy Minister for Justice (Dr Richard Simpson):** The Executive has initiated this debate to confirm our commitment to the fire service across Scotland and our support for its work. Fires and their consequences can have a devastating impact on individuals and communities. It is imperative that we do all that we can to prevent fires from occurring in the first place. However, when fires happen, it is imperative that we have a well-equipped and trained fire and rescue service to respond efficiently and effectively.

The fire service is one of the key emergency services. At the outset of the debate, I wish to pay tribute to the men and women who work in our fire service, often in difficult circumstances, to ensure the safety of us all. The role of the fire service has been evolving and developing over many years but, as we take the first steps into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the time is right to give the fire service in Scotland a new vision and direction.

I see from a press release that the leaders of the Scottish National Party visited a fire station and have concluded that our vision is one of privatisation. I state categorically from the outset that there is no question of the Scottish fire service being privatised and so I am more than happy to accept the amendment in the name of Roseanna Cunningham. The references in the policy paper to the private finance initiative relate entirely to best value and issues of capital, not to the fire service itself.

The policy paper builds on an earlier review of the fire service structure in Scotland that was completed in April 2000 by a steering group made up of Scottish Executive, local authority and fire service representatives. The group's report concluded that the existing structure of eight fire authorities and brigades worked well and should be retained. However, the report also highlighted areas where further work would be beneficial in ensuring that the fire service was even more accountable and responsive to the needs of the communities that it serves across Scotland.

I believe that the publication of the policy paper will be seen as a landmark in the development of the fire service and its role. When the Deputy First Minister launched the paper at the Scottish Fire Service Training School in Gullane on 29 April, he

rightly described it as the most significant initiative in the development of fire service policy for many years. For the next few minutes, I will set out what lies behind the approach that we have adopted in the paper, our wish for an open and constructive dialogue on the recommendations and how, at the end of the consultation period, we intend to take the proposals forward.

I emphasise that, from the outset, we have kept the stakeholder interests—the fire authorities, the fire brigades, the staff associations and the unions—in the picture on the policy paper's preparation. It was important that we allowed the stakeholder interests to see the first draft for comment towards the end of last year. Although we had not expected to satisfy all sides' interests, the draft paper was, in the main, well received and supported by the main players. We were also able to take on board most of the comments from the stakeholders.

I hope that members have had an opportunity to read the policy paper. They will see that it acknowledges the enviable reputation that the fire service has as a can-do organisation and our desire to build on that reputation. We want to position the fire service for the challenges of the future and so that it can meet the six key drivers for change that we have identified.

**Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con):** The minister referred to the fire service's reputation. Will he comment on the fact that it reports 9,000 deliberately raised fires whereas the police service reports only something like 2,500? What is the reason for that discrepancy?

**Dr Simpson:** I cannot comment on that discrepancy, but I will examine it. The combination of hoax calls and deliberately raised fires is a major problem for the fire service and we must consider it. There is a question over the collection of data on vandalism, including fires, in Strathclyde. I think that the figures are more correct this year, but we will consider further the discrepancy that Mr Gallie raises. I thank him for his intervention.

The first and one of the most important drivers for change is the need for a much stronger fire prevention ethos with a big focus on developing community fire safety.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):** On prevention, does the minister agree that Central Scotland fire brigade, Stirling Council and the private developer Morrison Homes should be congratulated on putting domestic sprinklers not only into modernised property but into new build? I think that the minister is well aware of that. Will he tell us how that initiative will be promoted in other parts of Scotland until regulation requires every property to have domestic sprinklers?

**Dr Simpson:** I will deal with domestic sprinklers in my closing speech, as I imagine that other members will raise that important safety issue. I see Mr Matheson nodding.

The second key driver is the need to look at the current fire services acts, which date back to 1947 and 1959 respectively and are in need of review. The third driver is the need for a shared sense of direction among those who work in the fire service and those who are responsible for it. That leads to the fourth driver, which is the importance of partnership working internally between all the stakeholder interests and externally with the communities that the service serves. The relationship between central and local government and staff remains at the heart of our current thinking, but we need to enhance the role of the authorities and strengthen community safety planning.

**Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** Will the minister give way?

**Dr Simpson:** I am conscious of time, but I will take one further intervention.

**Tricia Marwick:** Will the minister explain what he means when he calls for

“the development of partnership schemes with the private sector”

in recommendation 4?

**Dr Simpson:** There are areas of community safety, for example, in which it may be that we should have partnerships with the private sector. An illustration of that is the one that my friend Sylvia Jackson just gave of a partnership with the construction industry in the implementation of voluntary fire prevention measures. That model of community partnership and private partnership working is entirely appropriate.

The fifth driver—a powerful driver for change—is the Executive’s commitment to a modernising agenda throughout the public services, which is combined with a requirement to deliver best value. I am, of course, aware that the Fire Brigades Union is meeting today to discuss its proposed pay claim. Over the years, the role of the fire service has changed. That will be no different for the Scottish fire service of the future. Changes taking place in the built and natural environment are the powerful sixth driver in determining our future strategy.

The chapter of the Executive’s programme for government covering the justice department sets out as its clear objective

“A Scotland where people are safer and feel safer”.

The fire service has a key role to play in delivering that objective. A shared vision and a sense of direction are vital for the fire service. The policy

paper provides a new aim and vision for the Scottish fire service of the future. We want a service that makes a full contribution to building a safer society by working with others to reduce death and injury, as well as damage to property and the environment, that is a result of fire and other emergencies.

We believe that that will be achieved by creating an organisation that works with communities to reduce the risk from fire; that assists promptly and effectively when fire and other emergencies occur; that has a well-equipped, skilful and highly motivated work force that can work safely and whose composition reflects the diverse communities that it serves; and that continuously improves its performance to deliver best value.

Prevention is the key to reducing the tragedies and hardships that are caused by fire. Scotland has the sad distinction of having twice as many fire fatalities per head of population as England and Wales. Any long-term strategy must place greater emphasis on the need for the public to be well educated about the risk of fire and the importance of prevention. Preventing fires from starting requires the community and the fire service to work together to deliver a safer society. In the section of the paper that deals with prevention, we examine the importance of the community safety partnerships that are now well established throughout Scotland.

**Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** Will the minister give way?

**Dr Simpson:** I do not have time to take a further intervention. If Richard Lochhead raises in debate the issue about which he would like to ask me, I will try to deal with it when I sum up.

There are several excellent examples of Scottish brigades working in their communities with other organisations, particularly on fire safety. We are keen that all fire brigades should participate in their community safety partnerships to advance the multi-agency approach to community safety.

Fire stations are often located in the heart of the community—particularly in rural areas—but that physical presence is not always fully utilised to the benefit of the community. Equally, we must never forget the important role that our rural and retained firefighters play in delivering a local and consistent service. I commend to members the recent survey of rural, retained and voluntary firefighters. The survey is an interesting document that is worth reading, as it illustrates those firefighters’ absolute commitment to their communities. As I have made clear on some of the visits that I have made, I value that commitment enormously. The paper highlights some of the advantages for the community of opening up our fire stations for wider use.

Brigades work hard, often with other agencies, to assist young people to grow into responsible and active members of society. In the section of the policy paper that deals with prevention, we consider ways in which that approach can be developed. For example, we commend those brigades that operate fire cadet schemes. We also consider some of the issues to do with enforcing fire safety and highlight the fact that effective work on fire protection requires a strengthening of the powers of the fire service in relation to fire investigation. Recently, there has been considerable publicity about the development of domestic sprinklers. Experience in other countries suggests that residential sprinklers can make our homes much safer. Indeed, they are already fitted in numerous commercial buildings in this country. The paper considers some of the issues relating to the merits of domestic sprinklers.

However, no matter how successful our prevention strategy eventually becomes, it is impossible to conceive of a time when we will not need the firefighting and rescue capabilities of the Scottish fire service. It is therefore important that the service is well equipped and well trained to undertake its task.

In the section of the paper that deals with intervention, we consider the current arrangements for national standards of fire cover. We highlight the fact that the current approach is property based. The main weakness of that approach is that it does not take into account the presence of people and their activities. The public expect the fire service to respond quickly and to make their lives safer. To do that effectively, the fire service will have to become a risk manager. The policy paper explains the work that is being done to move us from the current standards of fire cover to an integrated risk management approach.

A change in the basis for determining fire cover, from standards of response time and appliance availability to risk management, brings with it the need to provide public reassurance. The paper highlights the current pathfinder trials that are taking place in brigades as we move towards a risk management approach and consider how that might be developed.

The paper also addresses the changing role of the fire service. The requirement for the fire service to respond to non-fire emergencies—particularly road accidents, chemical spillage and rescues from flooding, from buildings and from collapsed trenches—has increased dramatically. Who can forget 11 September, which shocked us all? It forced us to re-examine our capacity for dealing with major emergencies on a scale that was previously unimaginable.

**Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP):** Will the minister give way?

**Dr Simpson:** I declined to take an intervention from Richard Lochhead.

**Tommy Sheridan:** It is a small point.

**Dr Simpson:** I must be equitable. I hope that the member will get a chance to raise his point later in the debate or when I am summing up.

Although 11 September highlighted the commitment and dedication of the emergency services, it also showed the potential strain on resources, resilience and readiness in responding to natural disasters and major incidents. In February, the Deputy First Minister announced that the Scottish Executive was to earmark £5 million from the capital modernisation fund to give the fire service the proper tools to do its job.

New equipment is to be purchased to improve the service's capacity to deal with the unimaginable. It will also enable the service to deal more effectively with major incidents that occur more routinely, such as gas explosions, accidents involving heavy vehicles and aircraft, and rail accidents, which have been in our minds over the past week.

The impact of those changes and the contribution of the fire service to making Scotland safer is recognised. However, there is no statutory requirement for brigades to provide special services and we therefore need to consider whether that work needs to be underpinned by new legislation.

In delivering our vision for the Scottish fire service of the future, the work force will continue to be our key resource. The contribution that it makes will be essential to the delivery of a full and developing agenda. Much of the future strategy in this area will be developed on a UK basis through projects such as the integrated personnel development system. Only yesterday, I opened a seminar in St Andrew's House on the new training system and I welcomed the coming together of fire service interests throughout the UK on an issue of national importance on which Scotland, in many respects, is leading the way.

We have begun to restructure our commitment and approach to fire service training. We have put in place a system for co-ordinating and developing a national strategy for training, which centres on analysis of needs and delivery outcomes and will seek to promote a proactive and co-ordinated delivery of fire service training to all staff. Modern delivery methods of training and rethinking existing local, national and UK practices will be used to ensure that value and quality are maintained.

In the section of the policy paper on the work force, we also look at the importance of the fire service being inclusive of all members of our community. Before I speak about that, I will say a

word about the seminar that I attended yesterday. It is important that we operate on the basis of individuals' background experience when we receive them into the fire service. For example, someone who wants to transfer from the forces' fire service into the Scottish fire service has to go through the basic training, even if they have had 20 years' experience. We need to address such issues.

Clearly people bring their personal capabilities and capacities to their work. The integrated personnel development system changes the system from one with a bureaucratic provision of training to one that focuses on the individual and their role for the future. At the moment, once staff in the fire service have been promoted, they go through a training procedure and experiential learning. Under the new system, staff will be trained before the promotion. Their capabilities will be acknowledged at an early stage and they will be given the opportunity to become involved in that sort of training.

We value the health and safety of members of the work force, who risk their lives on our behalf as they protect the public. In recognition of the pressures that brigades are experiencing in meeting their pension costs, we have announced an additional £5 million to assist brigades this year. We are aware of the significant bulge in retirement that will take place over the next two years because of the change in shift patterns in 1974. We are addressing that issue—

**Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP):** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Dr Simpson:** I have already declined other members. Have I two and a half minutes left, Presiding Officer?

**The Presiding Officer:** It is up to you whether to take an intervention, Dr Simpson. You have two and a half minutes.

**Fiona Hyslop:** When the minister addresses the retirement time bomb, will he distribute those funds on a needs basis, rather than on a per capita basis?

**Dr Simpson:** A working group that involves all the stakeholders is considering precisely that question. However, I add a cautionary note: those who have managed the retirement process best should not be perversely disincentivised by not being given money. I am sorry—that was a cumbersome way of saying that we must distribute the funds appropriately and I am not sure that either a per capita approach or an approach that is based on perceived need is the right one. For example, people must manage their sick leave, but levels of sick leave are much higher in some brigade areas than they are in others, which raises questions about how that sick leave is being

managed. The issue is complex. We will consider the report produced by the stakeholder working group. The pensions issue is also being considered at the UK level.

Finally, the paper sets out the need for the Scottish fire service continually to improve its performance and to deliver best value. The public expect the fire service to be effective and efficient in its use of public funds. The paper identifies the ways in which those expectations might best be met through partnership and collaboration and touches on the concept of a new common fire service agency. Let me be clear that that concept is not about centralising services or detaching them in any way from local democratic involvement. It is more about improving the use of existing resources, through collaboration, the sharing of best practice and joint management.

Our consultation paper is substantial, but we considered it important to ensure that the sweep of all current and future issues was included—I make no apology for its comprehensive nature. We want to have an open and constructive period of debate during the consultation process, which begins with this debate. The comments from members of all parties will make an important contribution to that process and we will listen carefully and take note of the points that are made during the debate. We intend to deliver on a number of recommendations by introducing new legislation for the fire service after the next election.

These are exciting times for the fire service in Scotland. There are challenges ahead, as well as opportunities to create a modern, effective and efficient fire service that is rooted in and serves our communities. We look forward to working with all stakeholders in developing the proposals in the policy paper. I recognise that the fire service already has a good reputation. It has always been a dynamic service, changing to meet the public's needs. The future depends on building on what already exists, developing new ideas and ensuring that the fire service in Scotland continues to be a first-class, modern organisation. To that end, I commend our consultation policy paper to the Parliament as a demonstration of our commitment to ensuring that we have a fire service that is modern, effective and efficient and truly a Scottish fire service of the future.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Executive's commitment to developing a fire service that is modern, effective and efficient and which will also have a specific duty to enhance community fire safety, as set out in the consultation paper *The Scottish Fire Service of the Future*.

15:08

**Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP):** The paper covers a great deal of ground. Its subject

headings, if not the detail that it contains, are comprehensive. Before I move into the meat of my speech, I must say that a considerable amount of the paper does the English language a great disservice. To be frank, parts of it are almost incomprehensible. When ministers prepare such documents, I urge them to think about the concept of plain English.

I am sure that all members will endorse the sentiments of the Deputy Minister for Justice on all Scotland's firefighters, whether they are full time, retained or voluntary. Those people provide society with an invaluable service, frequently at great risk to themselves. They have to be at the forefront of a wide variety of emergencies and would be on the front line of the worst emergencies that we could imagine. They do their work and we thank them for it. Society owes a huge debt to our firefighters for the danger that we ask them to face on our behalf. In return, that poses an obligation on us. We must ensure that the service within which our firefighters work is as modern and well resourced as it can be. We owe our firefighters the best and, in spite of the minister's comments, the best does not come if the cream is skimmed off in profit.

We are three years into the Parliament's existence and this is the first time that we have debated the future of the fire service. That makes the debate important. It is always instructive to look at the motivation behind any set of proposals. Section 1 of the document, which bears the same title as the debate, outlines what are described as "The drivers for change":

"Community Fire Safety ... the legislative basis ... a shared sense of direction ... partnership ... a modernising agenda and the requirement to deliver a value-for-money service"

and

"Changes in the built and natural environment".

Six drivers are identified. In truth, the first and the fifth drivers form the meat of the debate.

Having reflected on the drivers for change, I am surprised that the figures for the number of people who are killed in fires in Scotland each year do not make it into that list. I suppose that those figures could be thought to fall under the community safety heading, but nowhere are they specifically addressed. I would have thought that having one of the worst fire safety records in Europe would count as a key driver for change within the fire service.

The United Nations has published a fire statistics study showing that in Scotland in 1996—the last year in which it was able to publish detailed figures—there were 2.09 fire deaths per 100,000 of population. That rate was significantly higher than the rates in other European countries.

For example, the same study showed a rate of 0.74 in Austria, 1.47 in Belgium and 1.17 in Germany. The Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland all had rates of less than 1. Although the figures for one year can be skewed by one or two very bad incidents and figures vary from year to year, it is possible to identify a trend. During the past 13 years, the fire death rate in Scotland has ranged between 2.69 and 1.52 fire deaths per 100,000, which is significantly higher than the rate in most comparable European countries.

Sources within the fire service readily admit that the UK has one of the worst fire safety records in western Europe and that Scotland has the worst record in the UK. A Home Office report entitled "Fire Statistics United Kingdom 1999" stated that Scotland has had a

"consistently higher death rate than the United Kingdom overall".

Therefore, I certainly support the recommendation that all fire brigades participate in their local community safety partnerships to advance the multi-agency approach to community safety.

We must face the stark fact that more than 70 per cent of all fire brigade responses in 2000-01 were a result of deliberately started fires and that fire-raising in 2000-01 in Scotland alone is estimated to have cost £187.7 million. That figure is only the financial cost; it masks the human cost. Working together to tackle the problem is extremely important.

Given the high percentage of fire brigade call-outs to fires that are deliberately started, it is perhaps surprising that the police have recorded a steady decline in arson over the past decade, as Phil Gallie suggested in an intervention. With closer working, it might be possible to resolve that puzzle, but it is perhaps more important that we reinforce a joint approach to crime and fire prevention.

Any approach to community safety that does not involve the fire service will be only partially successful. It is incredible that initially Scotland's fire brigades were not formal players in community safety partnerships, although many brigades currently play a role in local CSPs. "Fire: Raising the Standard", the joint report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary for Scotland and Her Majesty's fire service inspectorate for Scotland, goes further and recommends that brigades should

"ensure that they are represented on appropriate community safety fora at all levels. This will enable them to develop strategies with key partners and effect change through key practitioners. Brigades should also consider the merits of a local liaison officer."

I think that that would be a more appropriate approach. Although the consultation document

recognises that a number of fire brigades have become involved with CSPs, it leaves unsaid the implicit corollary—that others have not. I hope that the minister will, in closing, tell us which brigades have not become involved and—more to the point—why not. Is it simply because, initially, CSPs were targeted towards crime prevention, or are there other more specific reasons for non-involvement that need to be addressed directly?

On community safety, the issue of sprinklers looms large and my colleague Michael Matheson will focus on it. I urge the minister to back Mr Matheson's bill. That would be one practical outcome of this debate.

I have one or two questions on section 4 of the document, which deals with intervention. Various figures are available for call-out times based on current risk categories and the Audit Commission reports give comparative figures. However, on a recent visit to the brigade in my area, I was surprised to discover that the figures do not necessarily mean the same across all the brigades. They measure slightly different things because each brigade has its own definition of what it is measuring.

A similar problem applies to the application of guidelines. My local firemaster tells me that, potentially, there are three different sets of guidelines for brigades. I therefore have some difficulty with any current assessments of success. The consultation document does not make it clear whether it is intended to find a standard set of comparators that will mean the same for each brigade, or whether we are to continue with figures that give what may be called a slightly false picture that does not compare like with like. At present, we do not know whether the picture is true unless we go behind the figures and check exactly what is being measured.

Paragraph 45 of the consultation document talks about pathfinder trials in Strathclyde and Lothian and Borders and the possibility of moving away from national standards of cover towards the risk management approach that the minister mentioned. There is an indication that it is intended to implement the risk management approach across all brigades—again, the minister referred to that. However, I understand that the current pathfinder trials have already been in existence for a couple of years and that any roll-out would—to use the euphemistic language of the document—“take longer”.

I know that the Executive does not like to be tied to time scales—we are still waiting for promised legislation on wildlife crime “soon”—but I wonder whether a clearer guide could be given as to what “take longer” will mean, given that the current trials have not yet finished and are already a couple of years old. It would be useful for us to know the time scales.

In the section on intervention, reference is made to “other services”, comprising all call-outs that do not relate to fires. That is probably a fair definition. Those services make up a significant amount of the fire service's work. We all accept that that work—whether it is flood rescue, dealing with chemical spillages or even rescuing Jack Russell terriers from sewers—is work that would have to be done by someone.

**Tommy Sheridan:** A problem in the city of Glasgow during nice weather is the frequent setting off of fire hydrants, which the fire service then has to turn off. Does the member agree that we should invest in vandal proofing hydrants, not only in Glasgow but across Scotland?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** That is a fair point and it takes us back to some earlier comments. We need a joint approach to dealing with such issues. In the situation that Mr Sheridan describes, not only the fire service but the police and the local council would be involved.

As I say, those other services would have to be provided by somebody. If the fire service was not providing them, no doubt we would have to create some other arm of the emergency services in order to carry out the work. It is right that we should accept that aspect of the work and make the appropriate arrangements to put it on a proper footing. I would have no difficulty with that.

The fifth key driver for change is the

“modernising agenda and the requirement to deliver a value-for-money service”.

That title smacks a little of Blairism in its linguistic convolutions. Some expert in management speak has been very clever and decided that the fire service must ensure that all activities are subject to the 4Cs: challenge, compare, consult and compete. Two can play at that game. I would say, what about the 4Ps: people before profit and public need before private greed?

What does the report say about private finance? In truth, it does not say much directly. If one did not know about the privatisation agenda of the Scottish Executive and the Minister for Justice, one might be lulled into a false sense of security.

The Deputy Minister for Justice has said that he will accept the SNP's amendment. I am grateful for that. He went on to say that the comments on private finance relate to issues of capital, but he must know that that does not alleviate people's concerns. Not much reading between the lines is needed to work out where the Executive is heading. The Minister for Justice may sit and smile, but in the past month his department has put out press releases that were directed towards the use of private finance in the fire service. The Executive cannot run away from that issue.

It looks as though the Scottish Executive wants to cherry pick for privatisation all the bits out of which private companies might be able to squeeze a profit. That will deliver parts of a vital public service to the same brilliant service delivery standards that are currently on offer on our railways. To set that cherry picking in train, acceptance of the Executive's recommendations at the end of the document will spawn a plethora of consultants' reports—consultants to develop options for procurement and for control room facilities, consultants to examine the cost of information technology and so on. It looks as though PricewaterhouseCoopers is in for a lucrative time.

Before one goes down a new route, it is advisable to take advice from those who have travelled before. Here comes the Irish example. The Irish Government has recently completed a review of its fire service—perhaps that is where the Executive got the idea. The Irish Government's consultants' report, which was published in January, dismissed public-private partnerships as having "limited potential". The Irish seem to have maintained significant levels of capital spending, enabling them to tackle their infrastructure problems. Why cannot we do that?

The Executive will not have the firefighters on its side as it tries to push the service down the private finance route. Roddy Robertson of the Fire Brigades Union is on record as saying that the union is unhappy about the way in which it is being pushed.

That is why the SNP's amendment seeks to make it clear that the provision of Scotland's fire service must remain firmly within the public sector. I have said that I am glad that the amendment will be accepted, but the Executive must do more than pay it lip service. Private profit and public service do not sit easily together and the thought of any aspect of the fire service being privatised should set alarm bells ringing.

In the section entitled "Working with the private sector", the report refers back to an earlier paragraph that it claims points out that

"distinctions between services delivered by the public and private sectors are being eradicated".

They are certainly being eradicated by the Scottish Executive, but those distinctions remain important and I want to see them retained.

The earlier paragraph referred to is paragraph 15, which is the booby trap in the heart of the document. It asserts boldly that the Executive recognises that

"there is significant scope for more public/private sector partnerships"

within the fire service—we just do not get any

detail. Remarkably, the paragraph goes on to claim:

"Taking forward this sort of partnership in Scotland involves ensuring ... transparency in the process."

That does not sound like any example of private involvement in the public sector that I know of—a handy catch-all of commercial confidentiality is being employed as a sort of blackout curtain against scrutiny. That has certainly been the case in the Scottish Prison Service and I doubt that things will be any different in the fire service.

The Executive must do more than pay lip service to the SNP amendment. There is no doubt that the fire service in Scotland needs to develop, grow and modernise, but that must be achieved in the public sector. If the Lib Dems and the Labour party are no longer prepared to stand up for public services, the SNP will.

I move amendment S1M-3098.2, to insert at end:

"and believes that, as one of the key emergency services, the fire service should remain in the public sector."

15:24

**Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife (Con)):** I will address some of the issues that face the fire service. My colleague John Young will mention fireworks because he is a little cracker, Lord James will, as usual, sparkle and Bill Aitken can be relied upon to sum up with a bang. No doubt the debate will peter out like a damp squib when the minister replies—that is, if he is still responsible for the issue by the end of the debate.

As I often seem to have to do, I start by recording the importance of the subject that we are debating, while criticising the timing and approach of the Scottish Executive in calling the debate. We all acknowledge how vital highly skilled fire service personnel are, and the bravery and service they display daily, often in the face of genuine danger to life, in order to protect their communities. Today it is important that we highlight that work and thank our firefighters throughout Scotland, whether they are full time, retained or volunteers.

In recent years, firefighters have taken on many new roles, which makes a review of the service a valuable and worthwhile exercise. The Executive has started the review process by releasing one of its many costly consultation documents. Its laudable aim is to form the outline for the fire service of the future. The Executive even tells us that its proposals are likely to require legislation, but I am not so certain about that.

Individuals and organisations have until 30 July to respond. It is astonishing that the debate is

being held barely two weeks after the document was published and before people have had a chance to respond. What is the point of Scottish Parliament politicians discussing the document before we have had the chance to hear the formal views of the fire boards, firemasters, the trade union, any other interested parties and the public? A debate now either serves no purpose or brings us to conclusions without our having heard the necessary views from the consultation.

**Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mr Harding:** Not at the moment, thank you.

The research on pathfinders into risk management systems of fire response is not complete. The Executive wants more work to be done on the benefits of domestic sprinklers before it formulates a view. If such important issues are not yet evaluated properly, how can we take a view today? We should give more time to matters of immediate importance to the Scottish people and less time to incomplete consultations and glossy Executive documents. If we do not, this will continue to be a say-more, do-less-and-worse Executive.

Even in the fire service, there are more pressing matters. The pensions time bomb remains to be addressed and, in the coming years, fire board resources are likely to be severely overstretched at the expense of service provision. That time bomb was only partly addressed recently by a late stop-gap measure. However, I am pleased to hear the deputy minister say that the issue is being reviewed.

Later in the debate Lord James Douglas-Hamilton will address the Executive's abysmal track record in dealing with urban decay and crime. The fact that fire-raising and vandalism have soared since 1997 is testament to that and shows the links between tackling crime and the future of the fire service. Suffice it to say that there are discrepancies between the police and fire service in their recording of fire crime. The problem is worse than it first appears. The police recorded 2,403 crimes of fire-raising, but the fire brigade attended 39,000 fires that it considers were started deliberately. That figure includes more than 4,000 motor vehicles that were set alight deliberately. Indeed, since 1997, the number of vehicles that are set alight deliberately has more than doubled. Those simple statistics highlight the crime and disorder that are stalking Scotland's streets and make it clear that the Executive's talk of social justice is a sham and is not a genuine commitment to criminal justice.

I return to the proposals in the consultation document. I have some crumbs of comfort for the Executive. We welcome the Executive's

acknowledgement of the need for our fire service to do more work within the community. The concept of community fire stations being engaged in the wider range of community activities seems to be a reasonable way forward.

The fire service is already taking important steps on fire safety and education initiatives; further enhancement of those initiatives might go a long way to reduce loss of life and property. However, we need full local views on that before we can take such initiatives forward. Local work needs local variation and edicts from the Executive and the Parliament will not necessarily help.

One of the major issues in the consultation is about where the fire service is providing more special services. Its ability to deliver those vital services became more important in the wake of 11 September. It is therefore important that we ensure that fire brigades are able to carry out such duties. However, I am concerned that the automatic reaction of the Executive is that we must legislate because those duties are not currently statutory requirements. It is unfortunate that a Minister for Justice—who unfortunately has left us—who claims to be a liberal and who says that his party champions local decision making, has chosen to approach the issue in that way.

Dual manning also needs to be readdressed. Often, the same fire officer is trained in the use of various types of specialist appliances. Problems arise when no other specialist is available and two incidents occur at the same time that need the expertise of that one officer. That situation cannot continue if we want to give the best possible service to the public. I call on firemasters to address that issue in their responses to the consultation.

The success of our fire service throughout Scotland is the result of the fact that its diversity mirrors the diverse geography and needs of the nation. National guidelines, with monitoring by Her Majesty's fire service inspectorate for Scotland, would achieve the aim of standardising quality of service and minimum standards. That would also leave fire boards, with firemasters' local knowledge and advice, to take appropriate decisions on a local democratic basis on the extra services that each region requires. Thus, if the public do not feel that the fire service is appropriate or that it is better elsewhere, they can resort to local elections to change things. That is local democracy and genuine devolution—something that only my party appears to understand, among the parties in the chamber.

I reassert the Scottish Conservatives' appreciation of the work of our fire services. I caution the Executive on its need to hold endless debates on consultations that have yet to report. Let us get the debate in the Parliament back on to



the real issues. I call on the Minister for Justice to address increasing fire-related crime and fire service pensions. I trust that the Executive will listen carefully to the views that it receives during the consultation. I make a plea to retain local decision making and variation, rather than pursue the Executive's usual knee-jerk reaction, which is to legislate, prescribe and enforce. The Scottish Conservatives will continue to propose small government and real devolution as the philosophy on which Scotland's future should be based in order to achieve real results and better, more responsive public services.

I move amendment S1M-3098.1, to leave out from "welcomes" to end and insert:

"recognises the need for a commitment to developing a fire service that is modern, effective and efficient and that will also have a specific duty to enhance community fire safety and safer streets and therefore hopes that the Scottish Executive will give careful consideration to the fire service's response to the consultation paper *The Scottish Fire Service of the Future*, as it is the men and women within the fire service who put their lives at risk daily in order to protect Scotland's communities."

15:32

**Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD):** Like other speakers, I pay tribute to our full and part-time firemen, and to our retained and volunteer firemen who do such a huge job in our more rural areas.

The consultation paper deserves a welcome. I am always sceptical about anything that has a glossy cover, but it is better than some such documents. It provides a lot of food for thought and some serious ideas that we can discuss.

If we start with the control of the fire service, the Executive has quite rightly decided to stay with the present system, rather than have a national system. However, the present system of joint boards is far from perfect. I served on a joint board—there are far more of them now since the Tories wrecked local government, but they are probably the only way in which to proceed. However, by their nature, joint boards do not necessarily attract the best quality people in councils. It is not quite Siberia, but being on a joint board is not the road to advancement.

By their nature, joint boards are not always focused on keeping their eye on the ball. Often, investment in the fire service is fairly low down a council's priorities, because councils will address in-house priorities before they give resources to the joint board. When I was on a joint board, it was rumoured that one of our fire engines was so old that it would only go downhill. In truth, I think that it would manage to go slowly up a small incline, but that is not the sort of fire engine that one wants.

The consultation deals briefly with pensions.

Pensions are a major issue, which has built up. The Minister for Justice produced some money to deal with that, but the matter must also be dealt with in future. Fire service wages are a reserved matter, but we should press for an increase in wages, in particular for volunteer and retained firemen, who do such good work for us.

The existing fire response system is not as good as it should be. The last figure I saw was that the response time was within the target 79 per cent of the time. However, that means that 21 per cent of responses fell outside the target time, which is unsatisfactory.

The report says much about risk management instead of highlighting more old-fashioned ideas about being tied to property. Although that position is fair enough, we need a service that is as efficient and as responsive as possible.

Firefighters also carry out good work at road accidents. That is just as much a feature of the service's work now as is dealing with buildings on fire. However, that means simply that we need better traffic arrangements. The number of people who are killed on the roads is not acceptable, and dealing with the problem will lessen the pressure on the fire service.

Some time ago, I visited Strathclyde fire board's control centre and was impressed by the service's being able to answer an application for a fire engine from rural Argyll and to deliver it quickly. As the report suggests, it is worth considering introducing either a high-tech national control system—not national fire brigades—or a system of combined control systems for the police, the fire service and the ambulance service in order to prevent duplication. Although the possibilities of modern technology are amazing, such technologies are expensive and we should concentrate such systems into one.

The most important issue is fire prevention. Keith Harding implied that the whole system was a disaster by claiming that the number of fires had increased, and said that it was all the Executive's fault. Actually, as I understand it, the number of fires has not increased. However, despite the fact that we do things better now and have better machinery, there has been no reduction in the number of fires, which is a matter of great concern. Members have mentioned deliberate fire-raising. We need to tackle that problem through education and by providing fewer opportunities for people to start fires. For example, the arrangements for removing motor vehicles that have been left around the place are highly inadequate. Perhaps if such vehicles were removed, youngsters would not set fire to them.

I want to mention two particular features of fire prevention, the first of which relates to the

technical and mechanical aspects of fire safety. The report mentions sprinklers, which I am slightly worried about. We have a smoke alarm in our house—not a sprinkler—which infallibly goes off whenever my wife puts anything in the frying pan. I should add that, at such times, everything is under control. However, on the two occasions when food was seriously burning—it was probably my fault—the smoke alarm did not function.

**Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP):**

For the member's clarification, I should point out that it is a common misconception that domestic sprinkler systems are extremely sophisticated. Domestic sprinkler heads are activated only when the temperature of a fire reaches between 70 and 90 deg C. Members should not think that such systems operate in the same way as smoke detectors in houses.

**Donald Gorrie:** That is helpful. My remarks about smoke alarms were not meant to be a key part of my speech. However, one must speak from one's experience. If sprinklers work better, that is fine; I am not against them.

The main way to reduce the number of fires is to sort out people, which means dealing with education and the problem of providing worthwhile activities for our children, which will ensure that they do not go off and raise fires. I am appalled by incidents in which groups of youngsters attacked firemen who were putting out fires. Firemen have even required police assistance in certain areas. As far as reducing the number of fires is concerned, we must educate young people, provide better things for them to do and get communities working together to deal with the problem.

The fire service can play an important part in that along with youth work, the police and community education. To give one small example, the report says that some fire stations are being opened up as a community resource. That is excellent.

I welcome the report, but I hope that ministers will concentrate on preventing fires as well as on making the fire service more efficient.

15:40

**Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab):**

Like other Labour colleagues, I welcome the policy paper. Everyone accepts the need for a highly efficient and well-resourced Scottish fire service that is made up of skilled, competent men and women firefighters who are well paid for their arduous and sometimes very dangerous job.

I have no desire to repeat the comments that have been made by others. Instead, I shall focus on an area that is not covered in the report—although the report does mention rural fire

brigades—but which it is essential that we consider. I refer to the essential requirement for a fire service that is adequately resourced and trained to deal with maritime emergencies. Last week, in a written answer to a question of mine, the Deputy Minister for Justice told me that fires at sea are a maritime safety issue that is reserved to Westminster. He also said that in none of the 22 cases of fires on board merchant vessels in UK waters in the past three years had there been a request for assistance from a Scottish coastal fire brigade. That is perhaps fortunate for those involved.

In another written answer last week, the minister told me:

"The Maritime Coastguard Agency confirm that only one Scottish Fire Brigade—Highland and Islands—has a declared resource to firefight offshore."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 2 May 2002; p 557.]

Although maritime safety legislation is a reserved matter, if an emergency or fire on board any kind of vessel occurred in Scottish waters, it would surely be the case that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency would seek assistance from the nearest fire brigade. The coastguard people would not run around shouting, "This is a reserved power. What do we do now?" In such a case, Scottish firefighters would be engaged in saving lives.

Although there are—thank goodness—only a small number of such incidents on commercial craft, we must not lose sight of the proliferation of pleasure craft dotting around our waters. In any fire at sea, emergency services, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and air-sea rescue crews perform their difficult tasks with immense skill and bravery. It is clear that coastal fire brigades might be called upon to assist in local waters or even where vessels are moored in rivers and waterways and berthed in our docks. We have a duty to ensure that fire brigades that are based in our maritime communities have appropriate training, skills and resources to respond effectively to maritime emergencies.

A fire on board a ship can be immensely hazardous to deal with, even by the most skilled of firefighters. In many ways, it is a much more difficult task than dealing with a house fire, or even a factory fire, particularly if there has been no extra training. We must ensure that coastal fire brigades are equipped to deal with emergencies that are exceptionally uncommon but which, when they occur, can be extremely hazardous for all concerned. I have listened to comments from other members about training, but I would like to move slightly away from what has been said because I am concerned that there does not appear to be training for maritime emergencies. After all, we are an island.

Another issue that concerns me, and which has already been mentioned, is the number of times that false calls are made to the fire brigade. We need to start talking to kids about that when we are doing surgeries in schools. I must confess that my brother ended up in court and was fined because he dialled the fire brigade. My parents also had to go to court. My brother then went off to become a priest; I do not know whether there is any connection, but it was an odd thing to do.

During the Local Government Committee's deliberations on local government finance, it became clear that there is a serious problem with the fire authority pension schemes. I am pleased that the minister has announced the formation of a small group to examine that issue, which must be addressed with some urgency. During our deliberations on local government finance, the committee also explored the fact that local government funding is now allocated on a three-year basis. Fire service funding is set on a three-year basis and every council knows that for the next three years, funding will not drop below a certain amount. However, allocations to each fire authority are still made yearly, which causes confusion. That needs to be considered, particularly in the context of ideas relating to capital programmes.

The motion commits the Executive to developing

"a fire service that is modern, effective and efficient and which will also have a specific duty to enhance community fire safety".

I urge members to support it.

15:45

**Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** I am sure that all members would support the Executive's desire to have an efficient and modern fire service, but we should be mindful of the extent of the problem of domestic fires in Scotland. Every year, there are about 13,000 fires in Scotland, the vast majority of which are controlled professionally and dealt with effectively by our fire service. Often, firefighters put themselves at risk in their work.

Sadly, fires take people's lives. In 1999, 107 people in Scotland were killed by fires. The minister referred to the average levels of fire deaths in Scotland compared to those in England and Wales. In Scotland, on average, there are 21 fire deaths per million of our population, which is double the rate in England and Wales.

Our record compared with that of England and Wales is only one aspect of the problem. If the rate of deaths in fires in Scotland is compared with rates in other European countries, it will be seen that we have one of the worst records in western Europe. That is not a failing on the part of our fire service, which is extremely professional and in

which people are very dedicated to their jobs. The rate is the result of social factors such as smoking, alcohol and the types of property in Scotland.

The costs of fires to our society are considerable. I am sure that all members recognise that the loss of human life is by far the most important cost of any fire, but we should not ignore economic costs. There are costs to the fire service, the health service, councils and to other agencies. In 1999-2000, the estimated cost to agencies in Scotland of dealing with fires was about £180 million. If the number of people who are injured, killed and the financial costs of fires in Scotland are considered, we can see the extent of the problem.

I want to turn to domestic fire sprinklers. We may want an efficient fire service, but we must also be prepared to prevent injuries and loss of lives as a result of fires. In "The Scottish Fire Service of The Future", the minister recommends that we should consider further the issue of domestic sprinklers. That is a missed opportunity. The Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association—CACFOA—supports wider use of domestic fire sprinklers. Firemasters throughout Scotland, an increasing number of local authorities and the firemaster in the minister's constituency all support greater use of domestic fire sprinklers. Sylvia Jackson, who has unfortunately left the chamber, spoke about a local private company that is extending its work in that area.

We require a radical approach to dealing with the number of fire deaths in Scotland and domestic fire sprinklers are a key way in which we can address that problem.

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

**Michael Matheson:** I am sorry, but my time is limited.

Fire sprinklers can reduce significantly the number of fire deaths in Scotland. We should look at international comparisons, which show that fire sprinklers have a dramatic impact. I note from the document that ministers have ruled out our transferring something directly from another country to Scotland, but our record is such that we should lead the way in the matter. We should also be prepared to ensure that those who are particularly at risk from fires are targeted as a first priority. We saw the desperate situation in Glasgow, when a number of students were killed in a house in multiple occupation. Such properties are particularly vulnerable to fires. Sheltered housing complexes and residential nursing homes should be targeted because they are occupied by vulnerable individuals. There is also an issue about firefighters. When they enter a residential nursing home or sheltered housing complex, it

often means that they will have to carry someone from the fire.

A number of members have said that they would like to commend our firefighters in Scotland for the work that they do. Firefighters support the wider introduction of domestic fire sprinklers. I ask members to join them in tackling fires by supporting the wider use of domestic sprinklers.

15:50

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians)**

**(Con):** For more than seven years, I had responsibility for the fire service in Scotland. It was impossible not to be impressed by the selfless dedication, courage and devotion to duty of the men and women firefighters in the service. In particular, I remember the massive gas explosion at Guthrie Street, very close to the Parliament headquarters, which sadly claimed two lives. I appeared at the scene some hours later and was present when the roof of the building came down with a terrific black cloud mushrooming out of the debris. The work of the firefighters and paramedics was outstanding. Nobody could have done more on that occasion.

The job of firefighters is potentially dangerous, whether they have to deal with buildings that are about to collapse; poisonous chemicals spilt on roads; fires on oil rigs, ships, or in high buildings; smoke-filled rooms; or any number of hazardous circumstances. They even rescued one of my sons when he fell down Arthur's Seat. That rescue came under the special services that they carry out and for which there is no statutory obligation, so I have a personal reason to be grateful to them.

I make three relevant requests to Richard Simpson for action. Incidentally, I notice that the minister does not appear to be in the chamber. I hope that he will read what we say this afternoon.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):** The minister indicated that he would be out and back very quickly.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** Yes, but as a matter of principle a minister should be on duty. If one minister cannot do so, another should be in place.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I hear what the member is saying.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** The minister should read the *Official Report*.

My first request is for a legislative basis for community fire safety, for which there is a strong need. The fire services receive many demands for rescue, which at present are not incorporated in legislation. Nonetheless, they operate a rescue service for cliff rescue, for rescue from motor

vehicles and for help to those who are trapped in machinery or who have had a substantial fall. The up-to-date legislation should give legislative backing to best practices, which have developed in the public interest.

Similarly, arising from the consultation paper—Richard Simpson acknowledged this in his speech—the role of fire services in the future should expand with a legislative base. There is, for example, an essential need for a legislative requirement for fire authorities to carry out community fire safety education. In other words, it is necessary to engage in fire safety and prevention activities in order to prevent fires from breaking out and from endangering life and property, which was the theme of Michael Matheson's speech.

It would be helpful to know what the up-to-date position is on putting smoke alarms into public sector housing and what percentage of housing in the public and private sectors have that basic fire precaution. It would also be helpful if the minister said what guidance is given to ensure that windows are installed that prevent young children from falling from great heights, but which can be opened if there is a need to escape through them should a fire break out. It is not always easy to give consistent guidance.

The second issue that I hope Richard Simpson will speak about is the difficulty over pensions. I urge the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice, who is considering the subject, to do so urgently and sympathetically. The pensions are a matter of enormous importance to the fire service and therefore to the nation. The matter should be cleared up with all possible speed.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important, we need the fire service to be supported by a safer streets campaign. We launched our own campaign yesterday. Given that in 2000-01 39,000 fires were started deliberately and more than 4,000 motor vehicles were set alight, strong community action is needed to prevent deliberate fire-raising. In 2000-01, such fires gave rise to 70 per cent of responses. Recorded crime in that connection increased by 17 per cent on the previous year. To protect the community, we need far more police officers on the beat. We want a strong, neighbourly police presence in support of local communities.

I ask the minister what the Executive's position is on selection to the fire service. Some years ago, I was told that in one part of Scotland there were so many applicants that they were selected on the basis of lots. Can he say whether the present system is based on fairness and merit? The minister will be aware that the fire service has not had time to respond to the consultation and that today's debate can be only a contribution during

the consultation process. I strongly urge the minister to support Scotland's firefighters, who deserve the best that they can be given.

15:56

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** I am happy to contribute to the debate and I welcome the opportunity to highlight the issues. I am of a generation that probably had a closer relationship with fire than others. I remember our chimney catching fire when I was a young girl because my mother threw her scones on it as they were not very nice. I do not know whether that reflected the quality of her baking or the quality of the housing in which we were expected to live, but she was fined for causing the fire. I also remember St Andrew's Halls being burned down. We lived close by and were in mortal fear of what would happen to our home as we watched the flames coming over the roofs. I am also of the generation that remembers Cheapside Street and other places where homes and factories were turned into death-traps. The tragedies lived on in people's minds.

We must acknowledge the huge steps that have been taken in my lifetime in relation to fire safety in our homes and in the workplace, although we recognise that there is still a great deal to be done. It is worth reflecting on past experience of fire tragedies, of which there have been all too many in my home city of Glasgow, and noting the key role of the trade unions and the broader labour movement in fighting to establish the right to safe working conditions for all in their workplaces. That right was not granted, but was hard fought for and won by the struggle of many in the trade union movement. It is important to ensure that, in acknowledging the role of the fire service, we acknowledge equally the role of the trade unions in the fire service. Any modernising agenda must ensure that the trade unions have the opportunity to bring their experience to any development of the service.

I have time to make only a few brief points. We must recognise the changing role of the fire service. It not only tackles fires but attends road accidents and other major incidents that impinge on our lives. It is important also that we develop the role of the fire service in our communities and that we recognise the often difficult role of firefighters in our island and rural communities. I have a cousin who is involved as a volunteer firefighter on the island of Tiree.

We must also recognise the difficulties and dangers that are faced by firefighters in urban areas in simply answering calls. We have all heard stories of fire engines being ambushed and firefighters being stoned, and there is clear evidence of the significant cost—in human and

resource terms—of arson and malicious calls. Firefighters can be under threat and endangered by youth disorder, and the capacity of the fire service to do its job can be seriously hampered by such activity. There is a challenge to us all to understand what happens to young people who change from loving Fireman Sam and aspiring to be like him to seeing firefighters as another acceptable target of their activity. It is important that people recognise that petty vandalism and what appears to be silly and trivial behaviour have direct and serious consequences. We should reflect on that in devising our criminal justice policy.

Fire hydrants have been mentioned. Perhaps there is a challenge to the adults who laugh while their children play under fire hydrants to take responsibility and recognise that they are a serious matter that must be addressed by everyone in our communities if we want to be safe.

I have no doubt that the fire service has a great deal to offer in challenging young people's attitudes. A good project in my constituency is a fire-safe house that is under construction at Pollok fire station. It will provide experiential training for 12 to 16-year-olds in the dangers of fire-related crime and anti-social behaviour. Its aim is to educate young people in the implications of fire-raising for themselves, their families and their communities and to allow them to experience the way in which smoke can prevent or hinder escape from burning buildings in a controlled experiment that may lead to a reduction in fire-related crime in the area. The facility will be open to schools, community groups, youth groups and similar organisations.

The community partnership work of the council, the Greater Pollok social inclusion partnership, Strathclyde fire brigade, the community safety partnership and Siemens Business Services is an interesting and challenging model, which I hope can be developed. I look forward to seeing its results.

We need proper health and safety, particularly fire safety, at work. We also need to ensure fire safety in our houses and that work is done so that all new build and housing improvement projects have such safety at their hearts. We are right to recognise that deciding how our most vulnerable can be kept safe and given a right to a safe and secure home like everyone else is an important social justice issue.

I welcome the report and support all the work that is being done by the fire service and others to ensure that our communities are as safe as possible.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We must finish the open debate by 16:33. There are eight

members to go, so I must keep them to a tight four minutes.

16:01

**Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP):** I start by picking up on Michael Matheson's statistics of 107 deaths and 2,000 injuries from fire in Scotland in one year. If one compares that statistic with, for example, the number of deaths on the railways, which are getting much publicity just now throughout the United Kingdom, it is clear that there are far fewer deaths on the railways, yet railway deaths receive acres of newsprint coverage and hours of television coverage, much of which is hysterical. It is clear that many sections of society must take fire much more seriously.

I will touch briefly on the situation in rural Scotland. For example, in Dumfries and Galloway, the majority of our coverage is from retained firefighters. We congratulate them on the job that they do. A survey was done recently of their attitudes. There is a problem with social change in the countryside. Fewer people stay in their local village during the day, because they commute to work, so there is a difficulty in retaining sufficient coverage within rural communities to man the local fire brigade during the day. We will welcome the result of the local thematic inspection that is under way.

In Dumfries and Galloway, there is only one full-time fire station, which is in Dumfries. The largest town in my constituency is 75 miles away from that full-time station. That point leads to the issue of safety on the ferries, which Trish Godman raised. I think that Dumfries and Galloway Council understands that there is a potential problem with the large ferries, which have large numbers of passengers, who travel into Stanraer and Cairnryan. However, it is clear that there is no recognition of the potential for a disaster to occur in the area in the council's grant-aided expenditure that would allow it to make suitable funding provision.

I note that the report refers to the effects of global warming, particularly in relation to flooding, but another issue is becoming increasingly important: fire on land and in forests. Despite the amount of rain that we seem to get every winter in Dumfries and Galloway, land and forests quickly dry out and add a source of problems that will grow as the years progress.

I was interested in the report's comments about making fire service buildings available for public use. I would be happy to encourage people to regard the fire service as their service and the fire station as their station, because that would enhance the recognition that fire is a community

issue. However, I am not entirely clear that we have many places where, as the report suggests, the fire station is the only public building within the community. I know that community provision in some parts of Scotland has gone downhill, but I do not think that we are yet at the stage where the only community building is the fire station.

The report states that we lack an objective assessment of the effectiveness of sprinklers in our domestic built environment. How will we get that domestic assessment? As I understand the situation, a sprinkler system for a new building costs less than £2,000. At a time when house inflation is ratcheting up rapidly, it would be nice to think that at least £2,000 of the increase in the cost of a house is being spent on something worth while, rather than on fuelling builders' profits.

It is clear that the loss of life from fire in Scotland is a blot on our society. That is not the fault of the fire service, but of society as a whole. It is yet another area in which we lag severely behind our European neighbours and in which we need to do much better, much more quickly.

16:05

**John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD):** I am pleased that we are having this debate because there seems to be a degree of consensus. After all, the members of the Scottish fire service have, over many decades, demonstrated their professional and dedicated commitment to providing firefighting and emergency services the length and breadth of our country. Whether the location is a croft or a castle, urban or rural, on land or at sea, our firefighters react immediately with outstanding courage and skill. We must ensure that our fire service is provided with the resources and investment that it needs to meet the increasing demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Like many other front-line service providers, the fire service constantly has to comply with ever-changing legislation. European Union directives, United Kingdom legislation, health and safety regulations and modern work practices and procedures all place an additional financial burden on the service's limited resources. Many brigades are finding it difficult—and some almost impossible—to meet the obligations that the restrictions place on them.

The Highlands and Islands fire brigade covers an area that is equal in size to Wales or Belgium and which includes the Western Isles and the northern isles, which have their own peripheral island communities. That poses an exceptional challenge for effective service provision that cannot be easily addressed or accurately costed. Added to that is the expectation that the brigade

will provide cover in the marine environment, for example at our oil and gas installations and to deal with shipping incidents or accidents around our coasts and harbours. That is a tremendous responsibility and takes tremendous logistical application.

Added to that are the many calls on the service to control moor or forest fires, which are common in many areas of the Highlands and which often burn for days and weeks at great cost in terms of staff time and equipment. Consideration must be given to allocating additional resources to meet that exceptional demand.

Our fire brigades respond instantly to every call on their services. There is nothing new in that: they have been doing it for years and will continue to do it. They perform a difficult and dangerous task on our behalf. We owe it to them to provide them with the support, equipment and resources that they need to continue to provide the professional and excellent service that the public have come to expect and currently enjoy throughout our communities. Accordingly, I am pleased to support the motion so that we continue to have a modern, effective and efficient fire service.

16:09

**John Young (West of Scotland) (Con):** When I became a councillor in Glasgow Corporation in 1964, I was put on the police and fire committee. When I asked why the two areas were not separate, I was told that they had never been dealt with separately. The fire service was obviously the poor relation in that committee.

We know that, in 2000-01, firefighters attended almost 40,000 deliberately lit fires in Scotland. Such fires make up more than 70 per cent of all brigade responses. It was also revealed by HM fire service inspectorate for Scotland that the number of arson attacks is spiralling out of control. In 2001, 11 people died and more than 400 were injured in such attacks. It is believed that teenagers and children were behind most of the attacks. In some parts of Scotland, it is suspected that the criminal fraternity could have been involved, particularly in relation to drug warfare.

Since 1994, more than 4,000 vehicles have been torched. Stubble fields have been set alight. Last month, in the Muirhouse area, gangs of youths started 19 fires almost at the same time. Those firebugs cost us £0.5 million a day or £188 million per annum.

Another growing problem is the increase in the use of fireworks. It is astonishing to think that the black cat firework is a recent invention and is perfectly legal. It is approximately 1.5ft high and its instructions state that it should not be detonated

within 80ft of any structure. It has a velocity equivalent to a mortar bomb and costs around £70. Last November, in Mike Watson's Glasgow Cathcart constituency, the lock-ups between two tenement blocks were purposely set on fire by fireworks. When the firemen arrived, teenage thugs fired rockets at them. Other fireworks were allegedly discharged at trains.

I understand that appropriate shops are only supposed to store 1,000kg of fireworks. However, the shopkeeper could store similar quantities elsewhere and use the excuse that the fireworks are for his or his friends' personal use. The thousands of dodgy fireworks that are imported every year from the far east are a huge potential risk. HM Customs and Excise says that it does not have enough staff to carry out proper checks. Storage abuse of fireworks is another potential risk.

I believe strongly that fireworks legislation for Scotland should be controlled by the Scottish Parliament and not by Westminster. After all, a fire and its aftermath involve Scottish fire services, Scottish ambulance services, the Scottish national health service, Scottish police, Scottish local authorities and the Scottish legal system. That said, I am not a member of the Scottish National Party.

Thugs who shoot at firemen and various individuals and who set houses and other inhabited places on fire must be charged with attempted murder or, in some cases, murder. We will have none of Jim Wallace's nonsense of 16 and 17-year-olds being brought before children's panels.

The fire service of the future must be adequately equipped with all manner of support. Recruitment requires to be rewarded. I am sure that the fire service knows that, as well as its many tasks, new challenges are always around the corner. The fire service does not have to be told that those challenges could be dangerous and unpleasant. As has been mentioned, on 11 September, the New York firefighters, along with many others, faced a horrendous experience. Many gave their lives. One hopes that the same does not happen here in the future, but if it does, I am sure that our firemen will be equally courageous in their actions.

During the past 150 years, respective fire services have proved highly adaptable. An outstanding example was seen during the second world war, when the National Fire Service—more commonly known as NFS—was established. In Northern Ireland during the past decade, firemen and firewomen have bravely faced a magnitude of problems. The fire service and all those who serve in it deserve a big salute from the Parliament.

16:13

**Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab):** I join others in paying tribute to our existing local fire services. I welcome the Executive consultation paper that we are discussing. The debate is timely, not least because the Fire Brigades Union is meeting today to discuss firefighters' pay and conditions. My good comrade Johann Lamont touched on some of those issues earlier.

Like Johann Lamont, the first and only real contact that I had with the fire service was a result of my mum's actions in our kitchen, which completely gutted the room and caused the death of my youngest sister. To go through such a fire brings home the real danger of fire.

Section 3 of the Executive consultation document highlights the priority of fire prevention. The old adage "prevention is better than cure" is surely no more appropriate than when discussing fire. In particular, the human cost of fire is huge. In Scotland, we also bear a substantial financial burden because of our poor record and the number of fires, both accidental and deliberate.

I am pleased that one of the recommendations in the Executive consultation document is that the fire service should be involved more closely with young people. Wilful fire-raising and malicious calls are problems among young people today, just as they were in my youth. A fire engine—blue lights flashing—charging along a street demands attention and can give youngsters a distinct thrill. Given that, I can understand why some young people make repeated malicious 999 calls, although I certainly do not condone that behaviour.

With that in mind, I was pleased to launch an initiative last November at Touch Primary School in my constituency, along with the local firemaster, to highlight to young people the consequences of hoax calls. The project has now been rolled out to all the primary schools in Dunfermline and west Fife. Although it is early days and the change may only be coincidental, there was a noticeable reduction in the number of hoax 999 calls in the first quarter of the year compared with the number in a similar period in 2001. That is only a small example of community involvement, but it demonstrates clearly how specific projects aimed at specific age groups can have a dramatic effect.

A second example that I would like members to consider comes from my social work practice in Cowdenbeath 10 years ago. A young lad who had a history of playing with matches got involved in a serious wilful fire-raising escapade and set fire to some straw that decimated two haystacks and caused £3,000 worth of damage. Through early intervention and the children's hearings system, a referral was made to the Fife fire and rescue service headquarters at Thornton, which was only

too willing to accept the lad. The fire service put in place a customised programme to assist him to understand the consequences of his actions and how catastrophic their effects could have been for him and others.

At the time, I was surprised by how few young people were referred to the fire service for such assistance, given how many of them were involved in similar incidents. I hope that nowadays such referrals are made much more readily, given the fact that our fire service is only too willing to work with young people to show them the consequences of their actions. I am convinced that, if the fire service were to work actively with young people—particularly young people of primary school age—we could make a dramatic impact on the number of wilful fire-raising incidents in which young people are involved. That would benefit everyone in society.

16:16

**Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** Since the Parliament was established, we have discussed the national health service and the police force, so it is about time we discussed and recognised the role of the fire service.

I welcome today's debate and many of the aims that are outlined in the Executive documents, particularly the emphasis on prevention. Recently I attended an open day at Ellon in Aberdeenshire, at which members of the fire service were present in great numbers. Many people from the local community also turned out, as they welcome the efforts that local fire services make these days to build bridges with communities.

Fire services in my area—Grampian and Tayside—are under as much pressure as those in other parts of the country. One outstanding issue that has been mentioned is pensions. I recognise that the Government has provided £5 million to address the issue, but that is only short-term help. I ask the minister to indicate what long-term solutions the Executive is considering, for example the idea of a central pensions agency, which has been mooted by some brigades. We must explore all the options. In Grampian, one third of fire service employees are set to retire in the next five years, which will impose a huge additional burden on the service.

There are also financial issues relating to the building of new fire stations in Aberdeen. We are in the ludicrous position of relying on Tesco, a supermarket chain, to supply new fire stations for the service in the city. I understand the financial pressures that have led to that situation. Tesco said that it would buy the current major fire station in Aberdeen and build two new fire stations elsewhere in the city in exchange for the site. That



is great, but in this day and age should we have to rely on supermarket chains to modernise our fire service infrastructure and build new stations? According to the fire service, because of funding constraints, that is the only option available to it. Can we address that issue?

I do not think that the answer lies with the private sector. The last thing that we want to do is to involve the private sector in running our fire service. People who join the fire service do so to serve the community, rather than private shareholders. We must find solutions in the public sector.

**Dr Simpson:** Will the member give way?

**Richard Lochhead:** I will.

**Dr Simpson:** It is very kind of Richard Lochhead to give way to me, given that I refused to take an intervention from him.

Capital expenditure in the fire service will increase from £15 million in 2001-02 to £19.6 million in 2002-03, and will rise to £22.6 million in 2003-04, but if the fire service can get the money to build new fire stations in better settings by selling existing premises, it should do so.

**Richard Lochhead:** I accept much of what the minister says, but building even one or two new fire stations would cost £10 million or £12 million.

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

**Richard Lochhead:** Unfortunately I cannot give way to the member, as I have only two minutes left.

I am interested in some of the ideas that the fire service has mooted, such as the suggestion that commercial premises that run faulty alarm systems be charged for causing false alarms. Perhaps we should consider that.

I turn to the situation with retained fire services in rural Scotland. There is a looming crisis in fire cover in rural Scotland and the minister should turn his attention to that in his closing remarks. We all welcome the role that people play in serving the local community through the retained fire service. I phoned Tayside fire service this morning and heard that 40 out of 260 places are vacant. That is a vacancy rate of 15 per cent, which is double the rate for 2000. In Grampian the rate is 17 per cent, as 83 out of 478 places are vacant. Last year, 68 places were vacant, so there is an upward trend.

Alasdair Morgan eloquently laid out some of the challenges that our rural communities face, given the changing nature of dormitory towns. People do not live and work in their communities any more; they go to the city, or wherever the work is, and that leads to problems. A variety of solutions have been suggested, such as getting more females

involved, providing child care facilities and introducing more attractive pay schemes. People who are in the Territorial Army receive tax benefits, but retained firefighters who work the same hours do not get such tax benefits.

I urge the minister in his closing remarks to guarantee that some of the rural fire issues will be pushed higher up his agenda and that he will address the issues that have been mentioned in the debate.

16:21

**Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. Like many others, I have recollections of images of the fire service and its impact on my life over the years. There were many fires and explosions in the Clyde shipyards. The abiding memory that I have is that, as we were running away from the danger, the professional firemen were running in. The debate gives us an opportunity to salute that professionalism.

Many of the images of the fire service—whether of New York, arc lights or firefighters attending accidents or fires—are dramatic, but I would like to concentrate on some of the less dramatic aspects of firefighters' work.

I welcome the renewed emphasis on fire prevention through work with the community, which the policy paper outlines. This might be a well-worn cliché, and it has been used already today, but prevention is always better than cure. I encourage people to swap their chip pan for a deep fat fryer or to renew the batteries in their smoke alarms, as it could be argued that such steps are equally as important as a fast response time to house fires.

I welcome the policy paper's suggestions on how to develop fire prevention work. I note with interest that it proposes that fire services work with local authorities, the police and others in community safety partnerships to promote fire safety and that fire stations be opened up to act as a community focal point.

I want to mention Trish Godman's station at Port Glasgow and Greenock. The crews there are certainly engaged in their community. They were at a plant sale last Saturday and are often at charity events. They provide access and work in schools—their work is very visible.

Bob Wright, chairman of the Strathclyde Fire Brigade Preservation Group, told me that there is a combined fire brigade museum and community fire safety centre in Lauriston Place in Edinburgh. He argues—that this is where the vested interest comes in—that the old fire station in Greenock could house a similar project for Strathclyde. He

suggests that it could be a focal point for fire prevention education, combined with a fun day out for children and young people, which would address some of the points that have been made. It could run practical initiatives for parents and sell smokeless ashtrays and discounted smoke alarms and provide advice about how and where to fit them. It could even start a chip pan trade-in scheme—who knows?

As with all such projects, funding is the key issue, but Bob Wright argues that housing the projects under one roof with private and voluntary sector involvement would make the scheme viable. Such a scheme is an ideal vehicle for driving forward some of the commendable proposals in the policy paper. I am confident that the Strathclyde Fire Brigade Preservation Group will make submissions during the consultation period. I hope, and expect, that its views will be taken into consideration.

16:25

**Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP):** I am pleased to contribute to the debate. I echo the points that Duncan McNeil made when he paid tribute to the fire service. Firefighters' dedication to public service should underpin any review of the fire service. My much-loved uncle was a firefighter in Ayr. Like many firefighters, he suffered from a bad chest and a bad back, which did not help his health. When we talk of firefighters' dedication, we must remember that their personal contribution may result in their health suffering.

I am conscious that the debate is taking place to coincide with the Fire Brigades Union's conference in Bridlington. I am sure that it was not decided to hold the debate today because the minister did not want to receive the FBU's contributions at this time. Nonetheless, to ensure that the FBU's views were aired, I contacted members of the FBU from my constituency who are in Bridlington to find out their views and to raise those views during my speech.

The minister will be aware that, on 7 February, I raised the issue of firefighters' pensions and pointed out that there was a crisis in provision because of a lack of proper funding. The joint fire boards had sought a meeting for months, and finally managed to meet the minister on the morning that I asked my question in Parliament. I was pleased that that meeting miraculously managed to take place. I remind members that the problem was caused by the combined efforts of Labour local authorities and the Conservative Government, which conspired to achieve a quick fix in fire brigade funding by paying pensions and running costs out of pension contributions.

I acknowledge the points that the minister made

earlier in the debate when he said that he would not want to reward bad behaviour or practice by taking a needs-based approach to the distribution of moneys for pension contributions that have been made available recently. However, why should Lothian and Borders fire brigade suffer because of the bad practice of Lothian Regional Council in the 1980s and 1990s? If we do not resolve the problem and end up with a per capita settlement for Lothian and Borders fire brigade pensions, we will be back at square one in a year and the consequence for my constituents would be threats to front-line services. I welcome the long-term review that is detailed in the consultation paper, but that immediate problem must be resolved.

I recognise that we must debate other issues that are raised in the consultation paper. The idea of combining control rooms is controversial. Page 30 of the document refers to the situation in Strathclyde, where five fire brigade control rooms have been reduced to one. Is the minister considering spreading that idea into other emergency services? Will others have the skills that are involved in being a controller in a fire brigade control centre? We must have a full debate on that controversial issue. I am concerned that the document says that that review of shared control rooms must be conducted urgently. Why should that review be urgent? The matter is serious and goes to the heart of the future of the emergency services. I would be loth to think that the review is about realising the capital that could be released from sales of fire brigade premises and properties. I hope that when the minister sums up the debate, he will reassure us that the review is not driven by such considerations.

The debate has been wide ranging. I have picked up on pensions and control rooms, but others have talked about fire prevention. However, we have not covered the implications of fireworks for fire prevention. I hope that the chamber will have the opportunity to have a members' business debate on Shona Robison's motion on the sale and use of fireworks.

We must recognise the sense of duty and the dedication of our firefighters and the public service that they provide. We should have public service, not private profit. It would be difficult to maximise resources for front-line fire services if we were to pay out profits from pumps at the same time. That is the central problem with using private finance in capital initiatives, whether for buildings or for equipment.

I am glad that we are having this debate, but it should not be our last debate on the issue. I am sure that we will be able to bring the matter back to the chamber to see what progress is being made as the review continues.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh):** The final speaker in the open part of the debate is Colin Campbell. I would be grateful if you could manage to give your speech in three minutes, Mr Campbell.

16:29

**Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will not speak as quickly as Fiona Hyslop did—I will miss out little bits of my speech.

My first point is about community safety partnerships, which, I noticed, are multi-agency activities. The police are one of the key agencies involved in those activities. I have lodged a number of questions about increasing police manning levels to enable the police to do the educational and preventive work that they need to do to deter people from setting fire to things throughout the countryside.

I noticed some talk in the document about risk management. Risk management is a complex thing, which I would not hope for a minute to understand. I always have a lurking suspicion that when risk management is spoken about, it might mean doing less with fewer in terms of appliances and people. Although I might be being a little cynical, I seek an assurance from the Deputy Minister for Justice that that is not the intention.

In relation to the work force, I was interested in the minister's assurance that training will not oblige recruits to repeat elements of training that they have undergone elsewhere. I wonder whether he is contemplating a commonality of training for a number of the uniformed services.

When I was in education, I advocated the idea of training for job promotion before one gets promotion. We learned on the job, as ministers do in the present context. Passing the relevant training course should not necessarily guarantee that a person gets the next job up in the system.

I was worried by what I read about radio communications on page 31 of the document, in paragraph 95:

"With Scottish police forces planning to migrate from the system they share with the fire and ambulance services in 2004-05, brigades will have to consider replacing their existing radio system by 2005."

Too right. Why is there a disjointed element to all this? Why are the emergency services not all working together on radio communications and planning the proposed changes up front? There is a lack of what the forces would call "jointery" in the approach that is being adopted. People will have to get their heads round that.

Another aspect that I am interested in is public-private partnership. I refer to that because the

Ministry of Defence's fire service and all its emergency services—the whole game; the people and everything else—are up for public-private partnership. That is a reserved matter, which we cannot talk about.

I draw members' attention to page 36, paragraph 111 of the document, which says:

"The Executive is undertaking a review of the arrangements for local authority capital investment and this will extend to Fire Authorities."

It continues:

"The wider use of initiatives like PPP and PFI is one way of delivering these benefits."

We should not be in any doubt about where the Government is coming from, because it has used PPP a lot in the defence sector. The document also says:

"The Executive is currently reviewing a number of PFI models and 'total care packages', the concept of which is to effectively outsource the provision and maintenance of equipment and vehicles over a long period of time."

I am deeply concerned about the interface between the commercial ethos that that proposition represents and the fire service ethos. The fire service is a service. I seek an assurance that if the application of PPP goes ahead, the service ethos—the team spirit and esprit de corps—of the fire service will not be threatened.

16:33

**George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD):** There has been much consensus in the debate. As the minister said, the fire service is one of our key public services and we owe the firemen and women a great deal of gratitude for the work that they do on our behalf every day throughout Scotland.

"The Scottish Fire Service of The Future" lays out a new vision for the role of the fire brigade in years to come. Most members have agreed that the key areas that must be tackled have been identified in the document. There has been consensus, except on the use of public-private partnerships. The minister's decision to accept the Scottish National Party's amendment seemed to be welcomed by all members, except SNP members. I suspect that they hoped that the Executive would reject their amendment to feed their paranoia about privatisation.

At some stage, the SNP must explain to us how, in the unlikely event that it gets its hands on power, it would fund all the new hospitals, schools and waste-recycling systems that the Executive is delivering using public-private partnerships. Could it be that the SNP recognises that it will never be in the position of having to face up to that difficult question?

I want to highlight the role of retained and voluntary firemen, who are the backbone of the fire service throughout rural Scotland and throughout my constituency. Research conducted by Her Majesty's chief inspector of fire services found that the main reason for volunteers joining up was to help the community and to do something worth while. Volunteers also said that there was an excitement about the work and their training. There was great camaraderie in working in a close-knit team.

Many volunteers in my home town of Rothesay, and in many other towns in my constituency, give up their time willingly and are on call for many hours of the day and night. Just as impressively, their employers are willing to allow them time off work so that they can take on that commitment. Any time that the pager goes, volunteers drop everything and rush to help. They deliver a top-quality fire service. Those men and women bring tremendous pride to their job. There is great spirit and camaraderie. They appreciate the high standard of the training regime that they have to go through. They are absolutely committed to delivering a quality service.

We should consider whether the fire service in rural Scotland represents a model that could be applicable to other public services. There is a need to deliver quality public services in even the remotest island communities. The model of the fire service may be applicable to the ambulance service and the NHS, which struggles to deliver a service of equivalent quality in the communities that I represent.

I was talking to one of our lead general practitioners at the weekend. He was bemoaning some of the big challenges that GPs have to face in island communities and he drew my attention to the voluntary nature of much of the work of the fire service. He suggested that it could be a model to help deliver other public services to the same high standard.

I hope that ministers and colleagues in other departments will explore that model, to ensure that rural and remote communities enjoy the high level of service that the fire brigade delivers throughout Scotland. I support the motion.

16:37

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** It gives me great pleasure to contribute to this consensual debate. I am sure that the minister senses the change of atmosphere from this morning when he and I last crossed swords. Perhaps both of us have had enough excitement for one day.

**Dr Simpson:** Bill Aitken should speak for himself.

**Bill Aitken:** In the past, I have had scathing remarks to make with regard to glossy brochures and documents from the Executive. However, this document has a degree of merit. It is even produced in fire-engine red. Fiona Hyslop has also seen fit to wear a jacket of fire-engine red to show her commitment to this cause.

This has been a good debate with a number of interesting speeches. Everyone has spoken sincerely on the contribution that our fire service makes. We should perhaps examine that contribution in a little more depth. Not only is the service involved in firefighting in the conventional and well-understood sense, it is involved in, for example, road traffic accidents, floods, and the clearance of toxic and corrosive fluids, and it fulfils an increasingly useful educational function.

The job of members of the service is dangerous and complex and, as Scott Barrie knows, sometimes it is harrowing. The job is always hazardous. I have no figures to back up this statement, but it seems to me that individuals in the fire service still find time to make various charitable contributions to wider society.

A number of interesting points were made in the debate. Roseanna Cunningham highlighted the financial cost of fires. Michael Matheson spoke about the number of people who die in fires, which is an issue that concerns us all greatly. The figures should be falling, but they are not. Better building construction, safer industrial processes, more sophisticated detection devices and more comprehensive firefighting appliances are still not bringing down the death toll or the monetary cost of fires. Perhaps education is the answer. Perhaps, as Duncan McNeil suggested, we should be considering ways in which we can get through to people that far too many fires, particularly in domestic circumstances, are caused by carelessness—for example, by dropped matches and chip pan fires. I was somewhat intrigued by the definition of the smokeless ashtray. I look forward to Duncan McNeil's explanation on a later occasion.

The fire service, more than any other public service, is subject to the effects of criminality. Much of that is dealt with in the consultation document. Criminality has many forms—sophisticated attempts at insurance fraud are a form that is becoming ever more common. However, a more serious type of criminality is vandalism. Some of that may be put down to mischief of the type that was outlined by Scott Barrie, but some of it is pure wickedness. There is no other way to describe the deliberate setting on fire of an occupied building—it is an act of profound wickedness. We must also be concerned about vandalism of firefighting equipment and malicious 999 calls. We must take a dual

approach: there is an education role to be fulfilled, but there must also be an element of deterrent. I suggest to the minister that some of the suggestions that we heard this morning when taking evidence on the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill do not send out the appropriate deterrent messages. However, that debate is for another day.

We must consider ways of making the fire service more effective and efficient. We must add to the tremendous commitment of those who work in the fire service. There is a case for risk management on a more sophisticated basis. I suggest that the minister examine how all the public services might work more cohesively towards risk management. Many of the disciplines involved are of a similar type and require only to be adjusted to fit a certain aspect of public service. The fire service and the police have a close relationship—as do the fire service and other bodies, such as the Health and Safety Executive.

Today's debate has been good and uncharacteristically consensual. I am sure that that will be reflected at decision time.

16:43

**Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):**

I am well known for my consensual speeches and I am sure that today will be no different. I begin by paying tribute to the retained auxiliary and volunteers in the Scottish fire service, particularly as this the first debate in the Scottish Parliament on the fire service. If the fire service is so important to the Executive, why have we had to wait three years for a debate?

We have heard from ministers who seem more focused on producing publications than on delivering the services that they talk about. The minister indicated that no legislation will come before Parliament before the elections in 2003. However, many of the provisions that are set out in the consultation paper on which we can all agree could be implemented without legislation. It would be helpful if the minister could indicate a time scale for implementing some of those recommendations.

The consultation exercise should not be an excuse for doing nothing. Trish Godman raised important points about fire at sea and Michael Matheson addressed serious issues about the appalling number of fatalities in Scotland and the financial cost of fires. Many members have commented on the changing role of the fire service and it is important that that is reflected. Many members have spoken about personal issues that are not contained in the document, but which form a worthy part of the debate.

However, six of the 28 recommendations in the

document tie up more taxpayers' money with consultants rather than with service delivery. There is even a recommendation—number 20—to appoint consultants to “reduce bureaucracy”. That is a real case of creating paperwork to make more paperwork.

I am concerned that the document contains recommendations that might lead to a reduction in the service. We have already reaped the results of the privatisation of key industries. Air traffic control, Railtrack and the national health service are the most obvious casualties of new Labour privatisation. The fire service cannot be viewed as anything other than a vital public service. It is there for our protection and safety. As ever, new Labour is far from clear about what it means by increased private sector involvement.

The consultation document recommends

“the development of partnership schemes with the private sector”

and the minister claimed that an example was the private sector producing fire alarms. However, tucked away at recommendation 26, the document says clearly that:

“The Executive will appoint consultants to evaluate the suitability of implementing the PFI model as a means of reducing public expenditure.”

I might be a cynic, but that suggests to me that we are going far beyond working with the private sector to produce fire alarms. We are appointing the private sector to tell us why we should place the fire service in the private sector—in order to cut public expenditure.

We have seen what cutting public expenditure does to public services. PFI costs. The minister need only recall the royal infirmary of Edinburgh, which is cutting services to pay for the PFI project. That is not the way forward.

Like Roseanna Cunningham, I welcome the Executive's acceptance of the SNP's amendment. However, the Executive should be doing more than paying lip service to the amendment, which was carefully crafted.

**Mr Monteith:** I detect a slackening in the member's consensual approach.

Richard Lochhead said that people give their time to the service because it is public. I thought of how dedicated people are in the education service, whether public or private. Given that the pay is generally the same in both sectors, people do not decide which sector they will work in on that ground.

I hear what Tricia Marwick is saying about the fire service—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Your question is a bit long-winded, Mr Monteith.

**Mr Monteith:** That is my nature, as you well know, Presiding Officer.

Does Tricia Marwick draw a distinction? Does she believe, for example, that the RNLI should be nationalised because it is in the independent sector?

**Tricia Marwick:** It is a pity that Mr Monteith did not take the opportunity to make a speech rather than intervening for such a long time in my speech.

Roseanna Cunningham said that reducing the number of fatalities should be one of the drivers for change. I urge the minister to take that on board.

Many interesting points have been raised today. Many of the recommendations can be implemented—there is consensus on them—and I hope the minister will not delay that.

I return to the subject of public services and private money. It is obvious that if money is taken from the public purse to pay for private profit, there will be less to spend on services. That is certainly what is happening at the royal infirmary of Edinburgh.

We do not need to spend more public money on another firm of consultants from the private sector to have them explain what will happen if we move the fire service to the private sector. We have already seen the effect of Labour's privatisation and the collapse in standards that goes with it.

The Executive's consultation document asks for views on its recommendations. We look forward to hearing the views of the key partners in the consultation, not least the Fire Brigades Union. I trust that the minister has listened, will listen and will act on some of the points that have been raised in the debate so far.

16:49

**Dr Simpson:** Bill Aitken was right, as the debate has been fairly consensual, with the exception of the Conservatives. Keith Harding said that the consultation was unnecessary, the paper was inappropriate and a waste of paper, and that we do not need legislation. However, Lord James said that we must legislate on some things. I did not quite understand where the Conservatives were coming from, but I accept Bill Aitken's offer of a not too exciting time this afternoon.

Roseanna Cunningham, Michael Matheson, Donald Gorrie and others referred to one of the central aspects of the debate, which is the number of deaths in Scotland compared with in the rest of Europe. As they will be aware, the number of deaths came down from 111 in 1999-2000 to 78 in 2000-01 but, as Roseanna Cunningham clearly

pointed out, if we take the statistics over time, we have to examine why we have more deaths in Scotland. As Michael Matheson said, the fire service is not the cause of that.

Many members have referred to a variety of issues, which I will run through. Smoke detectors are an issue. Members will know that we have embarked on a smoke detector campaign. The number of smoke detectors that are found to be inoperative in fires is staggering. We need to increase the hardwiring of smoke detectors to ensure that the issue is tackled effectively.

**Alasdair Morgan:** I understand that there is a type of smoke detector that is not hardwired and that has a life expectancy of around 10 years, although it is more expensive. Is the minister considering those?

**Dr Simpson:** We will consider anything that will improve the prevention policy, to which many members have referred.

Michael Matheson also referred to sprinklers. That issue is being examined. He is aware of what we are doing from the meetings that we have had. We have asked the fire sub-committee of the Building Standards Advisory Committee to carry out a needs-based assessment of residential sprinklers.

**Helen Eadie:** In addition to examining domestic sprinkler systems, will the minister consider the need for sprinkler systems in hospitals, which are found in hospitals in other countries?

**Dr Simpson:** We need to examine the issue as a whole. It is complex and I do not have time to go into it today, but we must be careful with expenditure and its prioritisation. We need to identify how many lives would be saved by sprinklers and at what cost, because in spending money across the whole Executive, we may save more lives if we put our money into improving health rather than sprinklers. The cost per life has to be considered carefully.

Duncan McNeil referred to chip pans, which is an important issue.

**Richard Lochhead:** He knows all about them.

**Dr Simpson:** Yes, people should stop eating chips, but we should get them to stop cooking chips in open pans and to use proper deep fryers instead, because that would help. Johann Lamont says that scones are a problem. I am not sure about that, but clearly chip pans are an issue. Smoke detectors, sprinklers, chip pans and other factors in the built environment are important and we need to examine them.

I say to Donald Gorrie that we are taking a number of initiatives. We are addressing issues to do with landlords and houses in multiple

occupation in a positive way. The furniture in social let premises now has to meet fire standards. We are ratcheting up the situation and addressing fire prevention.

**Michael Matheson:** I have a question on houses in multiple occupation and the cost of installing domestic sprinklers. Does the minister accept that if we place an obligation on the owners of HMOs to install such systems when they are seeking licences, the cost would be neutral to the public purse, and the burden would have to be taken up by the owners?

**Dr Simpson:** There is no such thing as a free lunch. We would have to examine what that would do to social tenancies and social landlords. We will need to prioritise if we decide to bring in sprinklers, and that will have to be done in an effective way.

Many members referred to community safety partnerships. I cannot tell Roseanna Cunningham which brigades are not involved in those partnerships, but I know that legislation requires all brigades to be involved and that most are. If they are not formally involved in partnerships, they are involved in various community safety groups. However, we have to ensure that all brigades are involved.

Tommy Sheridan referred to hydrants. Work is going on in Strathclyde to make hydrants safer. That leads me to the issue of vandalism, which a number of members mentioned. It is important that we have good education in that respect. Scott Barrie referred to specific valuable initiatives by individual fire brigades. A lot of fire brigades are involved in initiatives with local groups in community safety partnerships. We need to encourage that.

Colin Campbell, Roseanna Cunningham and Keith Harding mentioned risk management and other members mentioned the pathfinder trials. We think that risk management is the most appropriate approach to take, and we will tackle the problem of standard response times that Donald Gorrie referred to. At the moment, response times relate to property not to activities; as people are the most important factor, it seems more appropriate to relate response times to them. We will conclude the pathfinder trials as rapidly as possible, although I will find out the time scales.

As for the design of windows, to which Lord James Douglas-Hamilton referred, we need to address the question of escape. Written building standards already exist and are administered by the local authorities. We do not intend to examine that issue at the moment but, if Lord James has any specific comments on it, he can get in touch with us.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** Is the minister aware that babies and very young children can fall

out of windows to their deaths? It is important that we take that consideration into account.

**Dr Simpson:** Modern window design takes that into account. However, we need to consider all the issues.

Many members have mentioned the enormous contribution that is made by volunteer and retained firefighters and I was very interested in Richard Lochhead's intervention about recruitment issues. As Alasdair Morgan pointed out, the problem is that people are not staying in their communities but are commuting much more. We need to encourage businesses that have remained in communities to re-engage with them so that we can continue to develop both the retained firefighting system and the system of volunteer firemen that George Lyon referred to. That is very important not only for the fire service but for the special police, which have seen an enormous drop in numbers over the years. Individuals can make—and are willing to make—a massive contribution. We simply have to introduce the mechanisms, and provide encouragement and training to ensure that people are involved as much as possible.

Trish Godman, Alasdair Morgan, John Young and others referred to offshore firefighting. There has been, and will continue to be, discussions between brigades and the fire service inspectorate about that matter and we will need to address a number of key issues. I do not have the time to cover that important area, but I might get in touch with members about it later.

On general funding, I should point out that we are substantially increasing the amount of capital funding. Members also raised the important issue of pensions. I accept that our current solution is only short term. The short-term working group will examine the immediate situation in Scotland. Meanwhile, the long-term issue of how pensions are funded is being addressed at a UK level.

A number of my Labour colleagues raised the question of pay. Of course firefighters should be paid a fair wage for a fair day's work. However, in common with new Labour's approach to other matters, investment must be matched by modernisation, which means that we must ensure that practices are fully modernised in response to any significant wage increases. Both sides of the equation will have to be addressed.

Call centres, which Fiona Hyslop referred to, form part of that modernisation agenda. Such centres help to improve the service's efficiency, and we have to consider carefully how much we merge them with other agencies. However, the present process of modernisation in call centres for both the fire service and the police is making efficiency savings and allowing us to improve matters considerably.

I point out to John Farquhar Munro that the brigades in Scotland are generally much better funded than their English colleagues. However, we will continue to consider that issue carefully.

Despite the nationalists' attempts to revitalise the debate on PFI/PPP, I think that they have accepted that we intend to retain the service in the public sector. Our acceptance of the SNP amendment quite clearly demonstrates our commitment in that respect. However, if the nationalists are saying that they would consider no mechanisms for improving the efficiency of organisations and saving money for the public purse, they have a duty to tell us where they would find the money.

With regard to producing and maintaining fire service vehicles, we will watch the London contract closely. It seems to be efficient and to save money, and there is a specific service for maintaining the vehicles. We will monitor that and continue to examine other areas in which parts of the service might be susceptible to PPP arrangements, but we will not consider that for the core service. That is why we are accepting the SNP amendment.

There are other issues that I have not had time to address. In winding up, I commend to the chamber the motion, as amended by the SNP amendment. We believe that it is important to hold this debate. The points that members have made have been useful and I commend the motion, as amended, to the chamber.

## Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:01

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S1M-3107, on the designation of lead committees.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees the following designation of Lead Committees—

the Justice 2 Committee to consider the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Source Records) (Scotland) Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/205);

the Justice 2 Committee to consider the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Juveniles) (Scotland) Order 2002 (SSI 2002/206); and

the Justice 2 Committee to consider the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Cancellation of Authorisations) (Scotland) Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/207).—[*Euan Robson.*]



## Decision Time

17:02

**The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel):** There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S1M-3098.2, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, which seeks to amend motion S1M-3098, in the name of Dr Richard Simpson, on the Scottish fire service of the future, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that amendment S1M-3098.1, in the name of Mr Keith Harding, which seeks to amend motion S1M-3098, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

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

### For

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)  
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)  
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)  
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)  
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)  
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)  
 Hamilton, Mr Duncan (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)  
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)  
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)  
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)  
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)  
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)  
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)  
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)  
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)  
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)  
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)

White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)  
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

### AGAINST

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)  
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)  
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)  
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)  
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)  
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)  
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)  
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)  
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)  
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)  
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)  
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)  
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)  
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)  
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)  
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)  
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)  
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)  
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)  
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)  
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)  
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)  
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)  
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)  
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)  
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)  
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)  
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)  
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)  
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)  
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)  
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)  
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)  
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)  
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)  
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)  
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)  
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)  
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)  
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)  
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)  
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)  
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)  
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)  
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)  
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)  
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 48, Against 59, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The third question is, that motion S1M-3098, in the name of Dr Richard Simpson, on the Scottish fire service of the future, as amended, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Executive's commitment to developing a fire service that is modern, effective and efficient and which will also have a specific duty to enhance community fire safety, as set out in the consultation paper *The Scottish Fire Service of the Future* and believes that, as one of the key emergency services, the fire service should remain in the public sector.

**The Presiding Officer:** The fourth question is, that motion S1M-3107, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the designation of lead committees, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament agrees the following designation of Lead Committees—

the Justice 2 Committee to consider the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Source Records) (Scotland) Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/205);

the Justice 2 Committee to consider the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Juveniles) (Scotland) Order 2002 (SSI 2002/206); and

the Justice 2 Committee to consider the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Cancellation of Authorisations) (Scotland) Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/207).

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

Before we come to members' business, I remind members that the debate will not be extended, because the Holyrood progress group question time will take place in the chamber at the conclusion of members' business.

## Autism Awareness Week

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr Murray Tosh):** The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S1M-2988, in the name of Lloyd Quinan, on autism awareness week. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons and I ask those members who are leaving the chamber to vacate the premises as quickly as possible.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament acknowledges Autism Awareness Week 2002 and the forthcoming Autism Awareness Week 2003 by supporting both the Scottish Society for Autism and the National Autistic Society in Scotland in their efforts to promote and care for those affected by the condition and notes the incredible amount of work carried out by the very effective network of smaller support groups.

17:04

**Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP):** I am delighted again to be afforded the opportunity to raise awareness of autistic spectrum disorders in the chamber, even if it is slightly due to the hand of fate and the interference of our esteemed legal establishment. Nonetheless, as I look around the chamber, I see many faces from the many debates that have been held on the issue over the past two or three years and we must congratulate ourselves and the business managers on putting ASD regularly and firmly on the Parliament's agenda. That has gone a long way to increasing awareness and understanding of the condition throughout the country, which is marvellous.

I have stated many times that my knowledge of the condition has been gained by the sheer determination and continuous campaigning of parents, carers and professionals, some of whom are in the public gallery. I thank them and commend their efforts.

There is little point in my raking over old ground by citing statistics and explaining the condition to members. It will suffice to say that the number of those who are diagnosed is growing rapidly every day. That increase includes not only children but adults. We cannot afford to waste any more time in debating how to address the situation. The time has come for action.

I am an active campaigner for the rights of those on the spectrum and am the convener of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on autistic spectrum disorder. I stress the importance of implementing the recommendations of the Public Health Institute of Scotland's needs assessment report. Many members have received

notes of concern—as I have—from many organisations as to the scope of the consultation process that led to the report. We must take those concerns on board, but the report is a basis for the best way forward, if only because it is at least a step in the right direction. I am sure that the positive feedback of carers, sufferers and organisations can add to and strengthen the report's recommendations as they are implemented.

I draw attention to some of the report's recommendations. First, it recommends early identification and appropriate early interventions. We in Scotland are well positioned to use means of early identification, new means of identification and new forms of diagnosis on a biomedical level. Much work in that area has been done in Scotland and it would be foolish of us not to take advantage of that work and our expertise and thereby allow a full life-term plan to be laid out for all sufferers.

Secondly, the range of services that are delivered must be seamlessly delivered and planned and developed in a multi-agency way. I have frequently talked about the necessity for a national strategy that is focused on the individual and that uses multi-agency methods and many members have agreed with me.

Thirdly, the report recommends the planned and sensitive management of the transition between childhood and adulthood, which must be carried out between agencies. At the moment, the transition period is the most difficult period for parents, carers and professionals but, most important, it is the most damaging period for sufferers. Continuity is the key to treatment of people with ASD. It is vital that there should be continuity of provision, teaching and treatment. The terrible break between school and adulthood is allowing people to fall into wrong areas of support.

Fourthly, all planning should be carried out with the person at the centre of the services to ensure that individual needs are assessed. The only thing that I will say about the condition itself is that it is different in each sufferer and therefore treatment must be individualised for each sufferer. If we do not understand that simple and basic principle, we will fail. However, I genuinely believe that we do understand it. Finance is required. The simple fact is that our society will be denied the abilities of many people with ASD if the required finances are not made available.

What should our approach be? As I have said, we need joint policies, strategies and operational arrangements among agencies, skilled and experienced professionals and targeted funding. We have some skilled, trained and experienced professionals, but we do not have enough of them. This is a great opportunity for this country to

become a centre of excellence in training. We can provide not only for our own sufferers but for sufferers throughout the UK and Europe, if not the world. As I said, the expertise exists in Scotland. Let us make something of that. It would be a positive contribution to the world and, more important, a positive contribution to our own economy.

In my opinion, targeted funding can be delivered through a central base—that is the national strategy that I keep talking about. However, we also need a centre of excellence that can set out the strategy and policies nationally and that can be used as a resource for training, information and research. That is not a new idea. As many members know, we have the potential for that centre of excellence in Struan House and in the Scottish Society for Autism's planned facility in Alloa. Again—I cannot restate it often enough—that would enable us to make our contribution to the world, not just to our own society.

I have stated in the chamber and in the cross-party group that the benefits for the autistic community of the creation of a centre of excellence would be huge. It could ensure that special skills and quality of life are nurtured and not ignored, as many of those needs are today.

The Scottish Society for Autism runs an excellent school and the National Autistic Society runs a complementary facility at Daldorch. Those are very special places, where children and adults can be cared for and educated and where, most important—this is why they work—the environment is geared towards continuity of provision, education and treatment.

Struan House is an exceptional centre, but it is far too small to cater for demand. That is why the SSA has set out its appeal for a new school and centre for training research and assessment. I understand that both Nicol Stephen and Hugh Henry have visited the school—I hope that Frank McAveety will do so too—and have seen the benefits that it provides for the Scottish autistic population and the international community.

I urge Frank McAveety in his reply—I accept that he is new to the brief—to commit the Government to the changes for which I have asked. We know what is happening out there. We need action. Further consultations could be useful, but only in terms of the action that is required. I ask the minister to implement at the earliest opportunity the recommendations from the PHIS needs assessment report. More important, I ask him to recognise the report's limitations, listen to carers and professionals and, most important, recognise the needs of each individual sufferer.

17:13

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston)**

**(Lab):** I would like to make a brief speech as vice-convenor of the cross-party group on autistic spectrum disorder.

I congratulate Lloyd Quinan on securing the debate, albeit at very short notice and rather unexpectedly. I also congratulate him on his commitment to the cross-party group.

I recognise, as did Lloyd Quinan, the individuals and organisations who are members of the cross-party group. They faithfully come in some numbers from throughout Scotland to attend the group's meetings. It would be good if some more MSPs joined the group and came along to the meetings, given the commitment that has been shown by individuals and organisations.

As the constituency member for Coatbridge and Chryston, my mailbag and my surgeries continue to include approaches from parents of children with ASD. As I have mentioned before, those approaches tend to focus on problems with service provision.

It is fair to say that it is known that an increasing number of children are being recognised as having ASD, including Asperger's syndrome, but it is not known whether that is due to better diagnosis or an increase in the incidence of ASD.

It is recognised that not enough is known about the causes of autism. Malcolm Chisholm acknowledged that when he responded to the report by the measles, mumps and rubella expert group last month. There is an urgent need for much more research on the causes of autism. Malcolm Chisholm recognised that, too. Perhaps Frank McAveety may want to update the chamber on what is happening to address that need, as Malcolm Chisholm acknowledged that it was an issue.

When the diagnosis is made, many parents feel that they should be able to access assistance to understand the issues and challenges for them and their child and to access the appropriate services to allow their child to reach his or her full potential. However, as Lloyd Quinan said, assistance is not available for many parents, who report that after the diagnosis is made they are left feeling as if they are in a kind of vacuum and that they do not know where to turn next. They do not experience joined-up working and continuity between services. While they are coming to terms with the diagnosis, they are left wondering what the future will hold for their child and their family.

Nursery and school provision are still major issues for many of my constituents. I will not go into the details of those issues, as I have done so in previous debates on this subject. The nature of

ASD means that each child's case is unique. Although some children will be able and will want to attend a mainstream school or nursery, others will thrive and develop their potential better at a school specifically designed for children with autism, such as Struan House.

For more than 20 years, Struan House has provided excellent education and care for many of Scotland's children with autism. However, because of the increasing number of children who are diagnosed and because of the increasing number of parents who want to exercise their choice and have their child educated at a school such as Struan House, demand is exceeding supply. As Lloyd Quinan said, there is a proposal to establish a new Struan House, which would be not only a school, but a centre of excellence. Some funding support for that visionary project has been secured. I hope that the Scottish Executive will assist in ensuring that the dream of having such a centre in Scotland will become a reality in the near future.

Although I am sure that the organisations that will receive assistance through the £500,000 of new investment that was announced last month by Malcolm Chisholm will welcome that money, the specific issue of training for service providers has still to be addressed—people such as teachers, health service staff, social services staff and educationists. In particular, we need to increase the number of psychiatrists who have knowledge of and expertise in ASD. Services that are appropriate to specific needs also have to be provided, as one-size-fits-all approaches are not acceptable. I agree with Lloyd Quinan that there is a need for continuity and person-centred planning throughout a person's life.

On a positive note, I am pleased by the attention the Executive is giving ASD. It has been pushed, in part, by the work of the cross-party group—that is what the cross-party group is for—but complacency is not an option. Today's debate will help to keep the issue firmly on the agenda and I again congratulate Lloyd Quinan on securing it.

17:18

**Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):**

I congratulate Lloyd Quinan on securing this debate about increasing awareness of autism.

It is now nearly a quarter of a century since Struan House was established in Alloa. The Scottish Society for Autism had small beginnings but now has 430 staff at eight locations. There is also a craft centre for adults at Alloa and a horticultural centre at Balmyre. Like many colleagues, I have visited all three centres and seen the remarkable work that is done by the society—not least by Jim Taylor and his outstanding staff at Struan House school.

As others have said, the facilities at Struan House are inadequate and cramped, and there is a proposal to establish a new Scottish centre for autism at a cost of £5.1 million. Scottish Executive support for that is vital. I know that discussions between the Executive and the Scottish Society for Autism are being held. We must build on what has become not only a Scottish centre of excellence, but an international centre of excellence—although even the new school will increase the facilities only from 30 to 36 pupils and then, we hope, to 54 in three years' time. The new Scottish centre will provide an educational outreach service; further advisory support services for families; a badly needed centre for training for professionals and carers; and an improved diagnostic, assessment and research service.

It is estimated that autism affects 28,000 people in Scotland, 8,000 of whom are children. We need financial support from the Scottish Executive not just for the new Struan House school project, but for improved diagnostic and assessment services.

Schools in Scotland report a lower rate of ASD than do schools in England and Wales. It is thought that that is largely because of different methodologies, so improved diagnostic and assessment services are a major priority.

We also need more research into whether the large increase in the number of children with ASD at primary school, compared with secondary, is due to an increasing prevalence of autism—as many believe—or because there has not been effective diagnosis of secondary school children with ASD. We need more resources: not just financial ones, but more specialist practitioners and more specialist training to meet the needs of the children with ASD in Scotland's schools. More children are being diagnosed and reported as having ASD than ever before.

If we are to place children with ASD in mainstream classrooms, they must have adequate support. By that I mean adequate support as defined in several ways. We must have more speech, language and occupational therapists, more educational psychologists and more special needs support assistants. We must also have more basic teacher training in behaviour management for all teachers and substantial training in ASD for some teachers. If we place children with ASD in mainstream classrooms without adequate support, that will place unfair pressure on teachers, on children with ASD and on their fellow pupils.

17:21

**Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP):** I want to touch on two issues. The first is inclusivity for young people with autism; the

second is adults with ASD.

We start from the premise that the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000 will introduce in August next year a presumption that children will be educated in mainstream education. To remind chief executives of local authorities that that will happen, the Executive issued a circular, dated 5 April 2002. On planning, the circular states, on page 3, paragraph 13:

"Education authorities should also from the date of this circular begin to consider the placements of children already attending special schools or special units when they undertake their annual reviews of children's progress during the 2001-02 year."

In other words, the attitude is that local authorities should address the policy now. That is not happening. There are a couple of reasons. The main one, as usual, is resources. There simply is not enough money to fund placements for children with special needs or autism in which they get support from educational psychologists, speech therapists and so on.

The second issue that requires to be addressed is the attitude of some professionals. Unfortunately, out in the educational world there are head teachers who are not happy about taking children with autism or special needs into their schools. Some educational psychologists are also resisting the policy.

I know from members' business debates and others that the spirit in the Parliament is to place such children, as far as possible, within their local schools, but that is not happening. I know of a child who has been at a local nursery two years, whose mother is having a terrible time trying to get her into a local primary in September. That is the reality.

An issue that is often not addressed—but not by members—is the problem of adults with autism. Autism is for life. I know of a case involving a beautiful 22-year-old girl. It is difficult for people to understand that she has a problem. They just presume that she is not autistic. She was placed in accommodation with someone else who has autism. Lloyd Quinan rightly said that everybody is different. That placement was a disastrous match. The girl was bullied, harangued and had two beatings from the other person. She had to be quickly placed somewhere else. Her parental home was not an option. She has no friends and is well aware of her difficulties, so she took it out on her parents by behaving aggressively.

To the outside world, however, the girl appears to have no problems. She contains it. She was placed in so-called emergency supported accommodation. The carers came in on rotation. They changed each day and she had no idea who they were.

Anybody in the chamber who knows anything about ASD knows that it is important that the daily life of a person with ASD is structured, predictable and stable. The girl, however, was in an unstable situation. For two months, her parents slept over in the flat with her at night because there was nobody to come in. They are exhausted. It is a wonder that their marriage has survived the stress.

I would like the minister to advise us of the strategies that are or will be in place for dealing with adults with ASD and what data we have. I do not expect those answers today.

I have lodged a parliamentary question on funding in this area. Could the funding come from the centre? That would make rucksacking—where the funding follows the child—a lot easier because local authorities would not suddenly find that they do not have the resources because of accidents that happen in their community.

17:25

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):**

Christine Grahame raised a good point. I have heard anecdotally that many marriages do not survive the bringing up of an autistic child. It has also come to my notice recently that many mothers with autistic children cannot work due to their commitments, so it leads to financial problems as well.

I welcome our new Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care to what I think is his first health debate in his new post.

When reading the Scottish Parliament information centre's research note on autism, I noted that the majority of parliamentary questions on the matter have been asked by Margaret Ewing. I hope, Presiding Officer, that you will not mind if I pass on the best wishes of my group and, I am sure, of many other members to Margaret Ewing and her family, who are in the chamber.

I fully support Lloyd Quinan's motion and agree that there should be a seamless service. I also agree with Kenneth Macintosh's motion S1M-2428, that we should recognise

"the everyday challenge faced by children and adults on the autistic spectrum, and their families, in gaining appropriate support from the statutory services".

As a former lecturer in further education, I am aware that the learning difficulties of many teenagers and adults were discovered in further education. The phrase "slipped through the net" is often used. I did not understand what Asperger's syndrome was until about five or six years ago. That sort of thing is a cause for great concern.

I produced a report for the Health and Community Care Committee that was

unanimously accepted. It was not only about the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine. It examined the need to integrate health statistics and recommended that a special needs register be set up; that parents, health visitors and general practitioners be given more extensive and accurate information; and that a system of consistent assessment and diagnostic checks be introduced. All those recommendations were accepted by the Minister for Health and Community Care a year ago. The situation has moved on and I hope that we will get an update on that movement today.

A document produced by the Scottish Society for Autism recommends that the Scottish Executive fund and encourage improvements in diagnosis and assessment and that the national initiative for autism screening be implemented. I am also aware of the checklist of autism in toddlers system—CHAT—that was successful in diagnosing and assessing children under school age. I understand that that pilot project is ongoing, that there are no recommendations and that it misses certain people. I understand that there is a Westminster working group on the matter as well.

Lloyd Quinan mentioned the Public Health Institute of Scotland. It recommends that there be a Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guideline, a local audit, clinical networks and so on.

Recommendation 28 of my favourite document, "The same as you? A review of services for people with learning disabilities", says that

"The Scottish Executive should commission research into the number of people with learning disabilities in prison or in secure accommodation and the arrangements for assessing and providing them with care."

There are lots of booklets and recommendations, but I think we are a long way away from providing a seamless service.

In the brief time that Frank McAveety was on the Health and Community Care Committee, we discussed supported accommodation and housing support in relation to the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Bill. It has come to my notice recently that people with mental health problems and learning disabilities in Inverness are being moved from the category of supported accommodation to that of housing support. That may be for the best reasons. I would like to think that it is. I would like to think that it is not because there is fearfulness about the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001. I would like to think that those vulnerable people will not be taken advantage of. I hope that the minister will keep an eye on that.

17:30

**Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab):** I commend Lloyd Quinan and Elaine Smith for their excellent work on autism and on the speeches that they made at the start of tonight's debate. I also place on record my thanks—and, I am sure, the thanks of many others—to Michele Savage, who was parliamentary officer for the Scottish Society for Autism, for her work. She has moved on to another job, but she did an excellent job on behalf of the SSA in mobilising awareness of the importance of the issue.

A series of issues could be raised, but I will focus on two or three. The first is the decision that ministers are about to make on the future of new Struan House. Lloyd Quinan was correct to say that a great deal of work has been done at Struan House over the past 15 or 20 years. New practices have been developed there and new forms of support for people with autism have emerged. It is important that that work is continued and supplemented, and that the present constraints on the number of people who can be supported are overcome.

The issue is difficult. Any request to ministers for additional resources presents problems in that ministers have options for what to do with the resources. It is important to acknowledge that best practice has been built up over a long time and that new Struan House is an opportunity, as Lloyd Quinan and Elaine Smith said, to extend that good practice and for the SSA to become a leader beyond the confines of Scotland. I hope that ministers will consider with sympathy and understanding the application that is being made and that they will respond positively to it.

Secondly, I highlight the need to ensure that we provide appropriate support for carers of people with autism as well as for those who suffer from autism. The courage of those who care for people with autism constantly strikes me. The kinds of difficulties that they have to face up to, the problems that they have to address and the difficulties that they encounter in managing their lives are a huge burden. Generally, they accept that burden happily in that they want to do all that they can for the person for whom they are caring.

Wider society has an obligation to do what we can to provide respite care, training and other appropriate forms of support. It is correct to say that those with autism need different kinds of care because their conditions differ. It is also fair to say that those who care for people with autism often need different kinds of support, depending on the circumstances and problems they encounter. We have to be very aware of how much we depend on those who take on the caring role. One of our obligations is to consider systematically the kinds of services and support that such people need and

to try to find ways of providing them.

A connected point is the need to identify best practice. One thing that I am constantly told when I deal with constituents who care for people with autism, as well as when I deal with people with autism, is that there is a constant process of trying to reinvent the wheel—trying to bring a record of care into existence or trying to get the building blocks of support in place.

We should be able to find a better way of dealing with this issue, either through the education system or through the care system. I hope that the process of learning for best practice will be embraced actively by the relevant authorities—the Executive, health authorities and education authorities—so that we get better mechanisms that are more suitable for people who need services.

17:35

**Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD):** Lloyd Quinan and Elaine Smith deserve great credit for pursuing the issue of autism and for making the tone of the debate very constructive. Some people have wrongly regarded MMR and autism as the same subject. Today we have heard that, quite apart from MMR, there are huge issues relating to autism that we must address.

When I was young, many people—especially young people—were regarded as very stupid or very bloody minded. We now recognise that those people had a particular condition. A great deal of research has been done into autism and considerable progress has been made in identifying it. A little—though much less—progress has been made in dealing with the condition.

Progress has been made not because of the powers that be, but because groups of volunteers, usually with a family interest in autism, have worked with very dedicated medical professionals to investigate the issue. Our task is to harness with Government the work of voluntary organisations and the professionals who work with them. As other speakers have said, there is some confusion about how we deal in our education system and elsewhere with people who have specific problems.

I accept that we want to help people individually. This might be a daft suggestion, but if we brought together the voluntary sector and the relevant parts of local and central Government in a sort of parliament of people who deal with medical and similar conditions, we might work out a more coherent way of dealing with the problems. We should harness the energy of the volunteers and tie that in with good use of public funds. At the moment, a considerable amount of money is wasted.

My proposal would also help to bring about a rational discussion. Occasionally, I am distressed by the fact that political correctness enters into discussions about issues such as autism. Christine Grahame spoke about money following the person. I agree with her. When, at council level some years ago, I proposed that assistants should follow children with problems who had been brought into mainstream schools, I was regarded as a latter-day Luddite and was pooh-poohed entirely. I might have been wrong, but I was denounced on the ground of dogma, rather than with rational argument. We must consider issues of this sort sensibly.

We should bring together the knowledge, skill and energy of people such as those who are involved in the autism organisations and we should support them with well-directed public money. That will enable us to deal with the conditions, as well as to identify them.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I must cut the time allocated to speeches to three minutes. I apologise to members who have yet to speak.

17:39

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP):** I warmly congratulate Lloyd Quinan on bringing his motion before the Parliament at short notice, and on the work that he, Elaine Smith, Christine Grahame and many others have done on the subject of autism.

The motion is on the subject of autism awareness week. The Parliament has done a great deal to promote awareness and better understanding of a condition that has in the past been misunderstood. Donald Gorrie, who has greater longevity than some other members, made that point. Partly through the efforts of members, we are beginning to understand a condition that remains far too mysterious.

Mary Scanlon kindly mentioned Margaret Ewing—she would undoubtedly have wished to contribute to the debate had she been able to. She sends her best wishes and has been very touched by the warm support that she has received from all members of the Parliament over the past months.

I will make two points. Des McNulty made one of them in part already, namely about the huge pressure on parents of autistic children. There are huge difficulties for parents who have kids who do not respond, who have repetitive behaviour and are different in other such ways. I am interested to hear what the minister thinks can be done to acknowledge that and provide concrete support.

The second and last point that I want to make is about availability of single vaccines. Single vaccines should be available. I formed that view

early, after meeting constituents who must deal with this very difficult condition, and nothing that I have read subsequently has made me alter it.

I come to the general point that I want to make. I have also recently spoken to a parent who already has one autistic child and who is now worried that the younger child might also have autistic spectrum disorder. He raised with me the point that whatever the general policy on the single vaccine, there is a strong case for allowing parents who already have a child who has been diagnosed with ASD the option of the single vaccine. Despite the lack of hard scientific knowledge, there must be a greater statistical likelihood of a younger child's being predisposed to ASD if an older child in the family already has it.

I do not expect the minister to respond unequivocally to that point today, because the issue is complicated. I hope that he will go away and address the point later. Who knows, I might even lodge a question on it.

17:42

**Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab):** I congratulate Lloyd Quinan on introducing the debate, despite the unfortunate circumstances around it. I state for the record that this is the first debate in which I have talked about issues relating to education. I am a ministerial aide for education and I clarify that I am speaking as a back bencher rather than with some sort of ersatz Executive hat on.

I welcome Mr McAveety to his ministerial chair. I hope that he acknowledges the cross-party nature of the issue and that he will approach the debate in the same style, rather than using his usual combative approach.

I endorse the recommendations that several members have made for the minister to look favourably on the new Struan House project, which the Scottish Society for Autism promotes. It is unfortunate that I was not able to check before coming here to speak whether Mr McAveety was able to sign the letter of support that came round before he became a minister. However, I know that a very large number of back-bench MSPs from all parties have signed it. That shows the support for the issue and the cross-party nature of that support.

Given that we are talking about what is in effect a special school, we might be seen to be swimming against the tide of educational policy. Christine Grahame talked about the importance of the presumption of mainstreaming, which the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000 included. I realise that the two positions are not in opposition. There is a presumption of mainstreaming and parents want their children to



be educated locally where that is appropriate, but there are many circumstances in which that is not appropriate. I hope that the minister will acknowledge that and the need for a centre of excellence, such as the centre that new Struan House will provide.

Many of the benefits of the new school have been emphasised. Those include the importance of early diagnosis that the research excellence will give and the centre's provision for training other teachers. I mention that particularly because I know that the Scottish Society for Autism provides outreach training for teachers, for example in West Lothian. Such a role for a school, or a centre of excellence, should be welcomed because it would benefit all communities in Scotland, not just those near Alloa.

I also want to mention the importance of support services generally. This week, I heard from a constituent—the mother of a six-year-old girl with autism. I will not go into the details, but the tone of the letter that I received will be familiar to all members, because it was angry and frustrated. The common factor in all constituents' letters on autism is that they are all angry and frustrated with the services that they have to battle to gain access to. We must take a joined-up approach and I urge the minister to work with his colleagues in education and elsewhere to deliver on the Executive's policy on autism. I also urge him to endorse Lloyd Quinan's motion and to implement the recommendations of the Scottish needs assessment programme.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I have great pleasure in calling Frank McAveety to testify to the effectiveness of the Executive's recycling policy and to respond to the debate.

**Mr Raffan:** Surely you mean resurrection, Presiding Officer?

17:46

**The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Frank McAveety):** That would be a sound theological position for me to adopt.

I congratulate Lloyd Quinan on securing the debate, albeit in unusual circumstances. It is interesting to note that this the third time since the Parliament was established that we have debated autism. That is testimony to the genuine concern to raise the issue and to identify ways of moving forward the agenda that was expressed by all who spoke in the debate. It does not matter how piecemeal some people may consider some of those moves—at least we are moving forward, in contrast with what happened in the past.

I thank my colleague Ken Macintosh for the

subtle way in which he reminded me of my responsibilities as a new minister and how I should conduct myself at the dispatch box. There are always occasions on which I listen to him, and, given the subtle way in which he gave his advice, I will take on board what he said.

The motion specifically welcomes autism awareness week 2002, but it also acknowledges autism awareness week 2003. As members, we often concentrate our minds on the future. Perhaps that was a good way of including a reference to 2003 in case some of us are not here then—of course, that depends on the circumstances that members find themselves in today.

Let me move on to the big issues. Members raised some fundamental points, which I will deal with as best I can—members will appreciate that I took up my portfolio just over a week ago. One or two areas require further deliberation, and the Executive is still considering the important matter of the future of Struan House and the request for funding. I am happy to discuss that matter with members after the debate or to respond in writing, and I hope that it will be concluded over the next few weeks.

I repeat the thanks that are recorded in the motion for the efforts of the Scottish Society for Autism and the National Autistic Society in Scotland to promote and care for those who are affected by autistic spectrum disorders. I am unfamiliar with some of the work that is being undertaken by smaller groups, but I hope that, in the time that I will be allowed to keep my portfolio as a member of the Executive, I will be able to visit those support groups. I record our recognition of the role that is played by members of the cross-party group. It is testimony to the work that they have done that they have made a difference.

Members raised the key issue of training for service providers. I recognise that establishing new service providers in the health sector or upgrading the skills and training for existing service providers does not happen overnight. However, we acknowledge that a skills deficiency has built up over time. The societies also recognise that, and I give a strong commitment that we are happy to continue to work them, as appropriate, to address that issue over the next few years. I respond to Lloyd Quinan's comments by noting that that is a step in the right direction, as it creates a base from which we can move forward. We must try to work together effectively.

A key theme during the debate has been seamless delivery. That is an easy point for members to make, but, because of professional jealousies or institutional barriers, things are more difficult out there in the real world. The fact that we debate and consistently raise the subject of autism

in the Parliament and identify it as an issue for Executive ministers to address feeds back to organisations on the ground. I hope that we will reflect on the policies and attitudes that those organisations strike.

Other issues have been raised on the role for education. Over the past three years, the innovation grants programme has supported projects that are aimed at improving standards and practice in schools in relation to autism. Those projects tackle difficulties that are caused by a misunderstanding of the problem through school exclusion and the consequential impact that that has on family relationships. They also seek to develop much more effective social skills for those who deal with individuals who suffer from autism. The aim is to work with local authorities to develop an effective training pack that will mean something at a local level.

Learning from around the country is important. I am sure that many members can testify to the good practice that exists in parts of Scotland. Like many things in Scotland, that good practice is not shared universally and we must tackle that.

The innovation grants programme will fund projects between 2002 and 2004. Five autism projects have been awarded 14 per cent of the £5 million that was available. The SSA and the NAS are involved with us in determining how to develop those projects. One of the projects is aimed at joining up training for professionals who work in the field of autistic spectrum disorders. We will review training provision for autistic spectrum disorders in Scotland to identify gaps in provision and to develop a targeted national training framework, which some members have mentioned.

Next week, I will have the opportunity to hear at first hand from more than 400 people who will attend a conference that is being organised by the NAS and the SSA. I look forward to getting a better handle on relevant issues.

The societies have helped with the database information, which is an essential tool for developing awareness, understanding and knowledge. Progress will continue to be made with the database, which was one of the recommendations in the report by the Public Health Institute of Scotland.

The national service network for people with autistic spectrum disorders was recommended in the document that Mary Scanlon referred to—"The same as you? A review of services for people with learning disabilities".

Mary Scanlon also raised the specific issue of prisoners and of conducting further research. I guarantee that we are engaging on the relevant recommendation, which has now been

implemented. We will look at the forgotten element of prisoners who suffer from autistic spectrum disorder.

There is also the broader issue of adults with autism. I do not have a specific response on that. I take that back—I will definitely respond to Christine Grahame on that issue.

Malcolm Chisholm commissioned the PHIS to prepare a needs assessment report for autistic spectrum disorders. That report, which was published a couple of months ago, refers to what we would define as an ideal service. Although that is a moving target, at least it gives us a target to aim for. It is important that we develop much more effective work on the ground.

Another area for which I have ministerial responsibility is developing the joint futures agenda, which has much in common with the issues that have been raised in tonight's debate. I give a commitment to move forward on that.

I am conscious of time; I do not know how much time I have left, but I notice that the Presiding Officer is making eye contact.

How do we harness the energy of volunteers and carers, who everyone says are the forgotten individuals in much of the process? It is time to address the needs of carers, because the relationship pressures and support service issues that have been raised need to be dealt with.

There are many other issues that I cannot deal with because of lack of time. If members have specific points that have not been covered, I would be happy to respond directly in writing.

I thank the cross-party group for continuing to raise the issue. I am sure that we will continue to be in contact on the matter. I pay tribute to the role that the autism societies in Scotland have played in supporting those who suffer from autistic spectrum disorders and the families who have to care for them. We are on a journey and we are moving in the right direction. It is important that we work together, as we have done throughout the debate, to find ways of making a genuine difference. I thank the member for securing the debate.

*Meeting closed at 17:55.*

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