

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 5 September 2002

Session 1

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 5 September 2002

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

Prisons

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We begin today with the ministerial statement on the prison estates review.

09:30

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): Scotland needs prisons fit for the 21st century. We consulted on proposals to achieve that goal, we have listened to what people said and we have considered the issues carefully. I now set out our plans to modernise Scotland's prison system.

Our approach combines investment in existing and new prisons. It builds on the existing roles of both the private sector and the public sector. This morning, I shall announce the largest ever investment programme in publicly run prisons, which will set us on the path to ending slopping out. That will be a significant achievement not only for the Executive but for the Parliament. Such an achievement is possible because we faced up to hard facts and hard choices during the estates review. It has not been a time for wishful thinking or political opportunism.

I shall also set out our response to rising prisoner numbers, especially the dramatic increase in remand numbers. I will set out our commitment to openness, accountability and excellence in all the work that is done by and in prisons and with prisoners. I believe that we have made the right choices, which will be welcomed by those who share our commitment to modernising public services and to correctional excellence. Prisons must help make Scotland a safer place by reducing reoffending.

I turn first to the alternatives to prison. Where public safety or the seriousness of the offence demands a prison sentence, the prison place must exist. However, sometimes people go to prison for the lack of a better alternative. We are committed to providing the right mix of custodial and non-custodial sentences for the courts to use. At the time of the estates review, we were already committed to those alternatives. We are in the process of extending the availability of drug treatment and testing orders. We have opened drugs courts in Glasgow and Fife. We have achieved national roll-out of restriction of liberty

orders—or tagging orders—and there are early signs of an encouraging rate of take-up by the courts.

We will go further still. I am considering extending the use of supervised attendance orders, which I believe offer the scope to end the use of imprisonment for fine default. That further progress should reduce the projected prisoner population by 700 places, which is a prison's worth of alternatives to custody. I shall also look closely at other proposals to offer the courts a more flexible mix of custodial and non-custodial disposals.

Even the most enthusiastic advocates of alternatives to prison recognise that new prison places are required to reduce overcrowding and to end slopping out. Some of our prisons are more than 100 years old. Most were built for locking people up, not for helping them confront and change their offending behaviour, and some were not even built as prisons. In the decades before the creation of the Parliament, all those prisons were starved of investment. The estates review threw into sharp relief the fact that the public sector has not built a prison for about 20 years and has fallen behind modern standards for the efficient management of prisons. That must end.

As well as building on the role of the private sector, we will invest to secure reforms in our publicly run prisons. All our prisons—public, private, existing and new—must provide an excellent service. The public has a right to expect that and to see the evidence of whether it is happening. We believe that there is more to do to ensure openness, transparency and excellence in all the work that is done in Scotland's prisons and with offenders in the community by the Scottish Prison Service and partner organisations.

The evidence of reform is beginning to come through. The Prison Service has reached a partnership agreement with the unions, which will be signed later this year. The agreement commits them to working together to making the public sector more competitive. That is in line with our commitment not only to excellence in public services but to valuing the staff who provide them. We believe that public services should become more competitive, including by adopting modern flexible working practices. We also believe that those who provide services to the public should be good employers.

We want to see further reforms in the public sector: first, of the way in which performance is managed; secondly, of our existing prison buildings; and, thirdly, in order to provide the new places that we need. In each of those areas, the public sector can learn from, and work in partnership with, the private sector. That is a big challenge for the public sector, but I want to see

the public sector rise to that challenge. Above all, I want the Scottish public to have the best services at the best value, whether those come from the public or private sector.

The first area that I mentioned concerns performance management. The chief inspector of prisons has drawn attention to the focus and clarity that has been brought by contract management for private prisons. He has called on the Prison Service to introduce similar measures in the public sector. I have instructed the SPS to bring forward proposals to achieve that. I expect that to result in published performance agreements for publicly run prisons and full reporting of performance against those targets. The Parliament has a key role in holding ministers and the Prison Service to account for the performance of our prisons. I see an important role for the justice committees in that aspect of our proposals. I look forward to discussing that when I meet them in joint session later this month.

Secondly, I want to see our existing prisons transformed. We have set the SPS the challenge of saving £12.5 million out of current expenditure, which it is succeeding in doing. Today, in advance of our announcement of the outcome of the spending review, I confirm that every penny of those savings will go into investment in publicly run prisons. Furthermore, I confirm that we will roll forward the SPS's existing capital investment programme for the next three years. We will top that up with new money in the spending review. The result will be a prison modernisation fund of more than £110 million for the next three years, which is a massive investment in publicly run prisons—more than ever before.

The modernisation fund will be used to back the implementation of development plans, which will start at Edinburgh, Perth, Polmont and Glenochil. Those plans draw on the best of modern prison design and set out to recreate that in our existing prison estate. I hope that we will be able to go on from there to all other publicly run prisons. As we proposed in the estates review, we will continue the work that is now under way at Barlinnie to create a fully modernised 530-place prison. We are investing the equivalent of the cost of a new prison in the publicly run estate. Taken together with other plans and work that is already in hand, that will create the equivalent in modern places of two new prisons spread across the publicly run estate.

Our investment in publicly run prisons will transform the existing prison estate, but we cannot create enough spaces in existing prisons to respond to the current levels of overcrowding and likely future growth. Prisoner numbers are at record levels and are set to go higher still over the next few years. Remand numbers in particular

have seen a step change: the remand population is 28 per cent higher now than it was in the same period last year.

We have decided to respond to that growth with two new 700-place prisons, which will be on sites in central Scotland that the SPS will identify in consultation with local authorities and others. I emphasise that a number of sites are still under consideration and that no decisions have been taken.

After careful consideration, we have decided that the first of those prisons should be privately built and privately run. That route brings the new capacity on stream as quickly as possible to respond to the rapid rise in numbers. I have already said that the remand numbers show the biggest increase. To secure value for money, we will procure fully flexible prison places, but our intention is to use those places to respond to the current rapid rise in remand numbers.

In tendering for the prison, we will seek innovative proposals to provide care and opportunities for those on remand, including needs assessment and detoxification services. Innovative proposals may also feature an appropriate role for voluntary and charitable not-for-profit organisations. As part of our commitment to openness and accountability, we will publish the contract for that prison just as we have done for Kilmarnock.

The second new prison is my challenge to the public sector. I want the Scottish Prison Service and the trades unions to have the chance to show that they can bridge the gap between the private and the public sector on competitiveness. If they can produce for me a robust and credible plan for the second new prison—a plan that is competitive, offers value for money and delivers the places that we need on time—I am prepared to take that project forward in the public sector or as a privately built, publicly operated prison. However, I repeat that I will have to be satisfied that the proposals offer value for money to the taxpayer, that they are affordable, and that they will deliver.

I turn now to the question of how we protect our communities by managing sex offenders. The debate has focused on Peterhead, but the issue goes much wider. Peterhead houses some 300 sex offenders and as many again are in other prisons. We have already responded to the MacLean committee's report with the measures that are in the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill. We are taking forward the recommendations of the Cosgrove committee. I am publishing today the report of an independent expert group of psychologists and psychiatrists, including specialists from Peterhead led by Alec Spencer of the Scottish Prison Service.

The focus of our efforts will now move on to proposals for comprehensive sex offender programmes across the prison estate, integrating existing work for long-term offenders with that for short-term prisoners and young offenders. We will welcome comments on the Spencer group's report before the end of the year. Thereafter, the SPS will hold discussions with partner agencies. Further proposals will be brought forward for the next session of Parliament.

We have listened to the consultation responses on Peterhead. We have heard how we might improve access to night sanitation, and we have heard from the families of offenders that some prefer to visit a prison where there are only sex offenders. We have always recognised the work of the staff at Peterhead as world class. We have always pledged that their work and the ethos that they have created will be protected. As our priority is to develop wider sex offender programmes, now is not the time to move the long-term programmes from Peterhead. Peterhead will therefore remain open and will continue to be the main centre for long-term sex offenders. The SPS will invest to improve the existing accommodation by installing electric power in cells. It is discussing the offer from the Prison Officers Association Scotland relating to prisoner access to night sanitation.

An important influence on our thinking has been the turnaround in the attitude of the local community—from initial, understandable, apprehension, to what is now committed support. I pay tribute to the dignified and effective campaign on behalf of Peterhead, in particular by the partners of the staff and by Aberdeenshire Council.

The decisions that we have reached combine alternatives to prison with investment in publicly run prisons and new prisons, in order to meet the rapid rise in prisoner numbers and to drive forward reforms in the public sector. Those measures meet the objectives that we set in the estates review. They show that we have listened. They are backed by our commitment to the principles of openness and democratic accountability that underpinned the creation of the Parliament. This programme of modernisation sets us on the path to ending slopping out, as the Parliament has long called on us to do. The measures are about more than buildings; they are a necessary further step in our work to modernise and reform the SPS and to sharpen its focus on correctional excellence. The measures have not been easy to shape, but I believe that they have benefited from the scrutiny that the Parliament is here to provide. In that spirit, I commend them to the Parliament.

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): We are now nearly three years into what has been one of the worst conducted parliamentary reviews I have

ever seen. Three years of shambles is no credit to the minister or the Executive.

I welcome the proposals on Peterhead. However, they are a statement of the blindingly obvious. It has been blindingly obvious—to Scotland, if not to the Executive—right from the start that this would be the result. I congratulate my colleagues Stewart Stevenson and Alex Salmond for the work that they have done in representing the views of their constituents in the face of the threat laid down by the Executive. Closing Peterhead should never have been under consideration in the first place. It is a disgrace that the community in Peterhead has had to put up with that threat for three years.

I have three major questions for the minister on the rest of his statement. He talks about “modern flexible working practices”. That theme ran through his whole statement. Will he clarify exactly what he means? Does he mean the dangerously low staffing levels at Kilmarnock that the chief inspector of prisons identified in his report yesterday? Does he mean worse employment conditions for those working in prisons? Does he mean lower wages for those working in prisons? Does he mean less training for those working in prisons?

I turn now to the proposal for two new prisons. The minister has proposed a privately built and privately run prison, despite virtually unanimous opposition—the only person whom we could identify as being in favour was a prisoner, I think in Shotts. Is the proposal not outright privatisation? Is that not what the minister is doing? If the minister is prepared to listen to Peterhead objectors, why was the virtually unanimous opposition to the rest of the review simply set to one side? If one group is to be listened to, why not the rest? Or is it a case of everyone being out of step except oor Jim? That is how it seems.

On the proposal for the second prison, it is stretching credulity to the extreme to accept that the SPS, as currently managed, and given its track record in terms of its attitude towards public versus private, will come forward with any proposal in which we can be confident. Will the minister confirm that his proposal means market testing? If it does not, it must be compulsory competitive tendering. Which is it? To the Scottish National Party, it looks suspiciously like one or the other.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to Ms Cunningham for offering a welcome to the fact that Peterhead is not to close.

As her questions went on, we saw clearly how bereft the SNP is in addressing any of the serious issues facing our prisons. After all, only yesterday Mr Swinney was calling for longer sentencing for

people who carry knives. That, of course, would lead to more people spending longer in prison. We heard nothing from the SNP on how it will deal with the increase in numbers.

In my statement, I said that we value the staff who work in our prisons. Of course I would not support dangerous employment practices, and of course I believe that training is vital in all parts of public service, not least in the prison service.

I make no bones about this: there is a challenge to the public sector—both to the SPS and to the trade union side—to come forward with proposals that will bridge the gap that has been identified by the evidence taken by the Justice 1 Committee. I have gone on record as saying that, all other things being equal, I would like to see the public sector, rather than the private sector, in the lead. However, ministers have an obligation to achieve value for money for the taxpayer. That is why we are offering the opportunity and the challenge. I hope that the challenge succeeds because I want it to succeed. I assure Roseanna Cunningham that this is a question neither of market testing nor of compulsory competitive tendering. It is a challenge to the SPS and the trade unions. As I have indicated, in the agreement between the SPS and the trade unions that is due to be signed later this year, there are clear indications of what they are doing to make progress. We want to encourage that trend. I have said it before and I will say it again: if value-for-money considerations can be satisfied, I would much rather go with the public sector than the private sector.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): I welcome the minister's decision on Peterhead, which is a victory for common sense. The STOP: Closure of Peterhead Prison Officers Partners committee has written to say:

"It is our opinion that the Justice Committee has shown what the Scottish Parliament should be doing."

The letter continues:

"We commend your fairness, honesty, unbiasedness and determination to find out the truth, this truth being for the benefit of all residents of Scotland."

Would the minister like to be associated with that very generous tribute to the Justice 1 Committee? Will he say, in detail, how he intends to modernise Peterhead?

Does the minister acknowledge that the public must be protected from dangerous criminals and that there must be sufficient places in prisons to accommodate the disposals of the courts in the public interest, without overcrowding?

Finally, does he agree that there is undoubtedly a role for both the public and private sectors, each of which has a great deal to learn from the other, in a rolling programme of modernisation in the

best interests of the Scottish public and the rule of law?

Mr Wallace: I am pleased that Lord James welcomes the announcements that I have made, particularly with regard to Peterhead. The way in which the consultation procedure progressed is a tribute to the Parliament and what many of us who fought to establish the Parliament said that it should do. There is no monopoly of wisdom in the Government. As I said on the day on which we launched the estates review, if we put out matters for consultation we will listen. As I said in my statement, one of the things to which I gave much weight—and I accept that in the past I made quite a bit of the distance to Peterhead and the difficulties that that caused for families in visiting—was the cogent and compelling evidence from families of prisoners at Peterhead that they found some benefit in getting out of their communities to visit a prison where there were only sex offenders. That was an important factor, as was the Spencer report, which was published today. I agree that that shows how a consultative mechanism can work properly.

I accept that there will be people for whom prison is entirely appropriate, either because they pose a threat to the community or because the seriousness and gravity of their offence is such that the community expects a custodial sentence to be imposed. Our obligation is to accept the people sent to prison by the courts. That is why we must address overcrowding. Addressing the problem is not a luxury and we cannot simply wish it away. We would like to see prisoner numbers reduced, but we are faced with increasing numbers, particularly in remand prisoners over the past year, and we must address that. That is why I have indicated that although the private prison to be procured will have to be fully flexible, our intention, as far ahead as I can see, is that the prison will cater for remand prisoners. That is why we want needs assessment and drugs detoxification facilities built into that prison.

As I made clear in my statement, there is a role for proper partnership between the public and private sectors in the provision of services. Above all, the public want good-quality services and value for money.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): I am bound to welcome the £110 million investment in the public sector prisons and the modernisation of some of the draconian conditions that prisoners and staff have endured over too many years. Of course, there are many issues on which I would like further detail and discussion, not least the assurances on workers' terms and conditions, which I have raised over the past few months.

How speedily does the minister believe that he can eradicate the draconian practice of slopping

out, which will assist prisoners and staff in doing their duties? How quickly after reducing overcrowding does the minister believe that we can move towards a service that is about correctional work and rehabilitation that will ultimately reduce the offending population?

Mr Wallace: I recognise the concerns about terms and conditions that Pauline McNeill has raised on many occasions. She will recall that the contract establishing Kilmarnock agreed a baseline for new staff. We might want to consider ways in which that could be taken forward in any future contract. We will give that further attention.

I welcome Pauline McNeill's welcome of the unprecedented investment in our current public estate. That is an important investment to ensure that we address questions of overcrowding and make progress in ending slopping out. The most likely time that slopping out can be ended—for several reasons, including the need to invest in the new estate and the arrangements for decanting and moving prisoners—is probably about a year after the completion of the second prison. The work that we are doing in investing in the public estate should allow us to make considerable strides towards ending slopping out sooner rather than later.

The final question was about alternatives to custody. I confirm that alternatives to custody—as have been debated in the Parliament—are very much part of our agenda. We want to ensure that alternatives to custody are of a quality that will persuade the judiciary and the public to have confidence in them. We want the judiciary to feel that they can impose non-custodial sentences with confidence. Pauline McNeill also said that we should act in order to let the Prison Service get on with addressing issues of correctional excellence. It is not a question of waiting to get on with delivering correctional excellence. That is already part of the vision and remit of the Prison Service. I hope that some of the things announced today, not least those aspects relating to performance monitoring—an issue that I will discuss with the justice committees convened by Pauline McNeill and Christine Grahame—will enhance the important task of the SPS in promoting correctional excellence, thus reducing the risk of re-offending by those who go through our prison system.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I welcome the minister's statement and the changes made since the prison estates review. They show that consultation with the general public and the views of the justice committee were taken seriously. The minister has moved a considerable way. I am among those people who would have liked him to move still further. However, he deserves credit for the improvements that he has made.

I have two questions. First, it is never quite clear from the media whether announcements such as today's or previous statements about prisons and justice are departmental announcements or announcements of Cabinet policy. Will the minister clarify that point? Secondly, will the minister give us an assurance on alternatives to custody and the prevention of re-offending? I know that the minister means well and tries hard—I do not mean to be patronising—but there are huge bureaucratic and legal obstacles. It is a very difficult task and many of the ways in which we do things must be changed. We must invest much more in creating communities that do not produce so many criminals. Will the minister give an assurance that he and the Cabinet will address the issues of alternatives to custody and preventing people from offending and re-offending?

Mr Wallace: I welcome the fact that Donald Gorrie welcomes the statement. Donald Gorrie referred to some media reports and I know that sometimes there are those who seek to drive wedges between members of the partnership Executive. I know that Donald Gorrie's concern is for unity. I assure him that the fact that the First Minister was in the chamber to hear my statement shows that it is a united view and represents the policy of the Administration.

Donald Gorrie, quite properly, continues to press the matter of alternatives to custody. The Executive has done far more than has ever been done in taking forward a range of proposals to promote alternatives to custody. Recently, there has been the all-Scotland roll-out of the tagging and restriction of liberty orders. We are considering how restriction of liberty orders can be applied in other circumstances. Proposals are currently before Parliament in the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill, which also includes measures relating to supervised attendance orders. Drug treatment and testing orders are an important development—initial evaluations show that DTTOs have been a considerable success—but require a considerable amount of supporting infrastructure if they are to be rolled out. We plan to continue to roll them out in a further seven sheriff courts in the near future, and more beyond that.

I accept the importance of continuing to push that agenda forward. However, as I said, it is important to ensure that there is public and judicial confidence in such methods so that they are used. That is why we have changed the basis of criminal justice social work and have brigaded the criminal justice parts of social work departments into 11 mainland units, allowing them to achieve better uniformity and quality of practice. We also attach considerable importance to the community safety partnerships, which are a significant element in reducing offending in every community.

I reassure Donald Gorrie that there is a commitment on all those points. In criminal justice social work there has been a considerable additional financial commitment over recent years. That commitment indicates how seriously the Executive treats such issues.

The Presiding Officer: Unusually, the list of members wanting to ask questions goes off the bottom of my screen. I appeal for short exchanges in order to allow more members to speak.

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I want to raise two issues. The minister made great play of reducing the prison population by some 700, using alternatives to custody. Will the minister confirm whether that will be a reduction of 700 in the overall prison population or whether it will be nothing more than a reduction in an increasing prison population?

Could the minister also refer to the £110 million modernisation fund that he announced today? The minister will be aware that capital investment is already taking place in Edinburgh and Polmont and that plans have been submitted for Perth. Does the £110 million constitute any new capital investment? Is the money that is already being spent in those three prisons included in the £110 million that the minister announced?

Mr Wallace: Current investment at Barlinnie and in new house blocks at Polmont and Edinburgh is not included in the £110 million. On what is included in the £110 million, we had already indicated that the £12.5 million savings for years 1 and 2 were going to be applied for capital investment. I have been able to confirm that that will be carried through into year 3.

Michael Matheson: So it is not new money.

Mr Wallace: It is money that has not previously been committed to capital investment. New money will come in the spending review—about £15 million.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Is that extra money or is it already in the system?

Mr Wallace: That is included in the £110 million; it is new money.

We are rolling forward the £20 million capital investment that is currently in the baseline. That money had not previously been confirmed as being available. By any stretch of the imagination that is substantial investment. Over and above that, there is the current expenditure at Barlinnie, Polmont and Edinburgh, which is about £150 million in total.

The 700 equivalent places in non-custodial sentences will come off whatever the prison population would have been. I made the point that, much though I regret it, the projections are that the

prison population will increase. For example, if we had done nothing to promote the alternatives to custody, the prison population would be, for the sake of argument, 7,400, but the fact that we are promoting the alternatives to custody makes it 6,700. That is the basis of that calculation.

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): I welcome the minister's statement and in particular the recognition of the need to modernise the prison estate. Will the minister agree to meet me, Premier Prison Services and East Ayrshire Council to explore the possibility of extending the current facility at Kilmarnock? Will he respond to the concerns that I have previously raised with him about the terms and conditions of employment of my many constituents who are employed at Kilmarnock?

Mr Wallace: I preface my answer by saying that I was careful to say that we are not making any announcements or decisions today about sites. However, I recognise—Margaret Jamieson has been arguing the case on the behalf of her constituents—that the option of doing something at the existing prison at Kilmarnock, whether by extending it or building another one nearby, has some attractions. I am certainly willing to meet Margaret Jamieson, East Ayrshire Council and the prison company to consider that option. I have to say that the option would have to offer good value for money and would not mean that the existing prison would come on to the Executive balance sheet. That is not just an accounting matter. It would wipe about £60 million off the money that is available for investment in publicly run prisons. We have not made any decisions yet. I am not ruling the option out and I am certainly prepared to meet Margaret Jamieson to discuss the issues that she has quite properly raised with me.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the statement on Peterhead as far as it goes. However, there is no commitment to new build there. The minister said that there is a saving of £12.5 million from current expenditure. Is it not the case that, over the past three years, £40 million to £50 million has been clawed back out of the SPS budget? If that money, together with the £12.5 million, had been applied three years ago to building new house blocks, the minister would not be in this position now. Does he agree that, if that money had not been clawed back, we could have had the new house blocks and that a considered position, reflecting the Justice 1 Committee's views, could have been taken about new build prisons in Scotland?

Mr Wallace: I suggest to Christine Grahame that she goes to Polmont and Edinburgh to see the new house blocks that are currently being built and will be completed within the next year.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The minister has talked about the partnership agreement with the unions in the prison service and there has been a lot of talk about flexible working conditions. Does he accept that he needs to ensure the modernisation of Scotland's prison management if he is to secure the modernisation of prison estates? What does he propose to do about that?

Mr Wallace: What I have said is clear. We want to take forward the chief inspector of prisons' recommendation that we examine ways in which to improve performance management. Let me reiterate the important points about that. I will instruct the SPS to bring forward proposals, including on published standards for the performance of publicly run prisons and full reporting of performance against the standards. We want to get on with that and I am instructing the SPS to start preparing that work. I can usefully discuss the matter with the Justice 1 Committee and the Justice 2 Committee when I meet them at a joint meeting later in the month. I believe that those committees, as well as ministers, could have an appropriate role, on behalf of the Parliament, in ensuring that the standards are being met and that there is proper accountability and transparency in the management and operation of our prisons.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): Does the minister agree that the frank admission in his statement and in his answer to Mr Matheson that prison numbers will rise is indicative of the fact that existing alternatives to custody are not working and do not enjoy the confidence of the courts? Will he undertake a study to investigate why the alternatives to custody are not working and will he take any administrative measures that might be necessary to ensure that they do work, including perhaps taking their administration away from social work departments? Does he appreciate that, if he fails to do that, the pressures on the prison estates will become much greater in the years ahead?

Mr Wallace: I welcome what is implied Conservative party support for alternatives to custody. That is encouraging. However, I cannot accept the premise of Mr Aitken's question.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): We suggested tagging.

Mr Wallace: I indicated that in the first four months of the roll-out across Scotland of electronic tagging orders—which Mr Gallie properly points out were introduced by the Conservative party; I am always prepared to give credit where it is due—there have been 129 orders. That is an encouraging sign in a relatively short period.

The evaluations of drug treatment and testing orders are also very encouraging. However, I do

not underestimate the intensity of the scheme—part of the purpose of drug treatment and testing orders is that they involve an intense sentence. A range of agencies is involved in trying to give proper support and in trying to break the cycle of drug abuse and dependency. The initial evaluations indicate that the orders are succeeding.

The number of receptions in prison for fine default has gone down considerably. Dr Simpson has reminded me that it is at its lowest for 10 years. In a range of ways, alternatives to custody are working. I am not prepared to interfere with the independence of the judiciary—that is an important principle and I do not think for one moment that Bill Aitken would suggest that I should do so.

Taking together what we are already doing, such as making changes in the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill with regard to supervised attendance orders and making additional resources available to criminal justice social work, I think that we should see alternatives to custody having an impact on the number of prisoners.

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I congratulate the minister on his statement. He has demonstrated a genuine willingness to listen and respond to consultation. As he said, the situation is not only a challenge to the public sector; I believe that it is a huge opportunity. With that in mind, what time scale does the public sector have for producing proposals for the building of the second prison? What is the likely time scale for building the first private prison for remand prisoners?

Mr Wallace: Having made the announcement today, I believe that it is only fair that the SPS management and the trade union side have a proper opportunity to work up proposals. I am not imposing a deadline now. That would be premature. Given the numbers involved, we are not going to hang around, but I could not put a timetable on things today.

I announced the procurement of a privately built, privately operated prison which, as I said, will be used for remand purposes. We want to proceed with that as quickly as possible, but no decisions have been made about the site, which is an important consideration. Mr Lyon will recognise that we have no control over issues such as planning permission.

Tommy Sheridan: Does the minister agree that his statement was nothing more than a testimony of failure? There has been a failure to reduce prisoner numbers generally and a failure to reduce the number of women prisoners. Moreover, the minister has failed to convince anyone of his opinion that Peterhead prison should close. Is not

his announcement a complete abdication to the failed Tory privatisation ideology that the state should convict and send citizens to prison, but that the private sector should make profit from imprisoning those citizens? Is not it a disgrace that the Executive now promotes a failed Tory privatisation ideology for the criminal justice system? Is the minister ashamed of that failure?

Mr Wallace: No, no, no, no. It is self-evident that I do not agree with Mr Sheridan. Given how often he talks about the public sector, I am disappointed that he failed to welcome the biggest ever investment in public sector prisons. That speaks for itself.

Tommy Sheridan is well aware of the work that is in progress to establish a time-out centre in Glasgow.

Tommy Sheridan: The minister has failed.

Mr Wallace: The time-out centre is not a failure. It is an innovative approach to dealing with the serious issue of women offenders. The complex issue of trying to treat young women, many of whom have chaotic, drug-dependent lifestyles, does not lend itself to the cheap comments of Tommy Sheridan. We are trying to take a serious issue seriously. The measures that we have put in place show our determination to reduce the population at Cornton Vale and to bring order and stability to the lives of people who, rather than being maliciously criminal, have simply found themselves in wretched circumstances.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I thank members of every political persuasion for articulating the case for Peterhead. I am sure that that was an important part of the minister's decision-making process. On members' behalf, I thank the Peterhead prison officers' partners for their dignity and for the way in which they conducted themselves during their campaign. Does the minister agree that their campaign shows that politics is relevant and that people can get involved in the political process? I hope that that relevance will be reflected in a high turnout at next year's election.

I thank the minister for the reprieve of Peterhead, but his announcement of investment from the new fund for building in the central belt—welcome as it is—does not entirely remove the uncertainty over a prison and staff that Clive Fairweather yesterday described as a role model for the Prison Service. Will the minister accept the suggestion of the Spencer report—as I understand it—that the 450-place prison that is required for long-term sex offenders should be built at Peterhead?

Mr Wallace: I thank Stewart Stevenson for his welcome of the decision on Peterhead. I repeat what I said about the dignified and effective role of

the partners of the Peterhead staff. On the occasions that I met them, they put their case forcefully but fairly, and not without humour at times. That effective campaign shows the importance of ordinary people becoming involved in the political process. When the Parliament was set up, we hoped that that would happen.

I said that Peterhead will remain open and will be the centre for the treatment of long-term sex offenders in Scotland. The Spencer report raises a number of issues, on which I will obviously want to reflect. I look forward to the response of Stewart Stevenson and others to the report. It would be wrong to prejudge the outcome of my considerations.

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): I invite the Deputy First Minister to focus on what I think is the central issue to emerge from the prison estates review, which is the efficiency and humanity of the publicly run estate in Scotland. As a comparison, I draw the minister's attention to the Accounts Commission report on the education sector that came out earlier this summer, before the publication of the prison estates review. In the education and health sectors, the publicly funded alternatives are now often only at a slight cost disadvantage when compared to the private sector alternatives. However, the prison estates review contains the revelation that the privately funded alternatives are hundreds of millions of pounds cheaper than the publicly funded options. For all those who care about public services, is not the issue why an agency of the Executive runs inefficient services throughout its estate in relation to security, staffing and operational considerations? Those issues were clear to us 10 years ago, when the Kilmarnock experiment was first mooted.

Given those circumstances, what confidence can Mr Wallace or the Parliament have in the management structure of the Prison Service to deliver either value for money for the public purse or humane conditions for prisoners? The present system is not only vastly more expensive than the private option, but fails to monitor the literacy levels or throughcare experience of those in its care. For all those who care about public services, that is the central issue that emerges from the review.

Mr Wallace: I take the points that Wendy Alexander makes. It is important that we achieve value for money in the public sector and that the services are delivered properly and humanely. That is the challenge that has been set down with the procurement of the second prison.

Clive Fairweather's inspection report on Kilmarnock in March 2000 states:

"The benefits of clear direction and a specified level of performance were apparent. Staff at all levels understood

their role and their contribution to the successful operation of the prison. The standards set for Kilmarnock are higher in many cases than elsewhere in the SPS".

Clive Fairweather went on to recommend

"that the SPS considers how the performance management of its other prisons can be improved in light of the experience at HMP Kilmarnock."

He particularly mentioned the clarity and focus at Kilmarnock, which he had not encountered in other parts of the estate. The SPS management are aware of those comments. I made the announcement about future performance management changes on the back of those comments.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I pay tribute to the Peterhead campaign, the Peterhead community and the support of Stewart Stevenson and Alex Salmond.

One reason for the increase in prisoner numbers is society's failure to reduce reoffending. I direct the minister's attention to Craiginches prison in Aberdeen. In that prison, 85 per cent of prisoners are drug users. The area has some of the highest rates of drug-related crime in Scotland, but there is a pathetically low level of drug rehabilitation services in the prison. Craiginches did not merit a mention in the minister's statement, despite the fact that it faces some of the biggest challenges in the prison estate. Will the minister consider the drug rehabilitation services in Craiginches? Will he say what investment he intends to give to Craiginches to begin to reduce reoffending?

Mr Wallace: I accept much of Richard Lochhead's analysis that drug misuse is a considerable driver of rising prison numbers. That experience is shared in countries other than Scotland. That is why we must tackle drug misuse through a range of policies, not just through penal policy. The emphasis must be on rehabilitation and education as well as on enforcement. Anyone of a fair-minded disposition would acknowledge that the Executive has introduced a raft of policies to deal with drug misuse.

On dealing with drugs in prisons, given the number of receptions in prisons of people against whom there is recent evidence of drug abuse and the number of abusers who are revealed through random drug tests, we can see that a lot of good work is done in prisons to get people off drugs. However, I am not complacent and know that more can be done. The Cranstoun initiative in throughcare has been an important recent development. As I said, we also see the provision of detoxification facilities as playing an important part in the procurement of the proposed new prison, not least because of the problem of drug misuse among people who are remanded in custody. I accept the importance of addressing

drug misuse as part of a general approach to penal policy.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I welcome the minister's statement, which has at its heart the long-overdue modernisation of our prison estate. However, the minister referred to a 28 per cent increase in the number of remand prisoners over the past 12 months. Will he tell us how the proposed new remand facility will impact on the rest of the prison estate and how it will free up valuable, experienced prison staff to undertake a more rehabilitative role? That is essential if we are radically to reduce the current reoffending rate.

Mr Wallace: Scott Barrie is right to highlight the figure that I mentioned. The profile of the prison population shows that the number of short-term prisoners has remained relatively stable. There has been an increase in the number of long-term prisoners, but that is not unrelated to an increase in serious drug offences and the fact that the police are achieving record levels of detection, which means that more criminals are being caught. Nonetheless, the 28 per cent increase in the number of remand prisoners is staggering and we are trying to reach some analysis and understanding of why it has occurred.

When people are placed on remand in our existing prisons, they are often there for a short period and there is a churning effect that puts a considerable strain on prison staff. As we intend to use the proposed new prison for remand prisoners, it will be geared towards dealing with that problem. I have also mentioned the detoxification facilities, as many remand prisoners are received while they are suffering from the effects of drug abuse. Such facilities will be important for the remand prisoners who will use the new prison and for those in existing prisons where staff will have less pressure on them and will therefore be able to devote more time to rehabilitation work.

Phil Gallie: In view of the minister's comments on remand prisoners, will he tell us what proportion of remand prisoners are in prison for offences that they have committed when they have been released early from prison sentences that have been set previously by courts? In the light of Pauline McNeill's comments on corrective and rehabilitative procedures in prisons, does the minister agree that short sentences do not allow for those procedures? Will he reconsider the legislative process with a view to making sentences mean what they say and ensuring that there is time to work with prisoners in prisons?

Mr Wallace: In an experiment in England, courts had to sentence either under or over a certain length of time, so that sentences were not of a medium length, which Phil Gallie thinks ineffective. As a result, magistrates tended to sentence over

that length of time, which led to an increase in the prison population. Phil Gallie's point underlines the importance of having a range of sentences, both custodial and non-custodial.

I cannot answer the question on the proportion of the increase that is made up of prisoners who are released early and have reoffended. As I said in my response to Scott Barrie, we do not have a breakdown of the drivers behind the increase. We are trying to get work done on that, as having an understanding of the increase might allow us to make other decisions. This is purely anecdotal, but the increase may be a result of people reoffending while they are on bail. The number of people on bail is increasing, as is the number of people on remand, but the two figures do not always square. There is a possibility—it is no more than that—that people who have offended on bail are being remanded while they await their trial.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The minister has gone some way towards answering the main points of my question about the provision of information to the Parliament on the performance of our prisons. However, I would like him to expand on that a little. Will that information be of the quality that is required to enable the Parliament to provide the scrutiny that he seeks? Will it be made public, so that we can get feedback from the public sector and from members of the public? Will he also confirm that the information will include details of the rehabilitation programmes that are taking place and the impact that they are making?

Mr Wallace: As I said, I hope that, by the time I meet the justice committees, I can flesh that out in more detail. Some of the points that Rhoda Grant has highlighted, concerning openness and transparency, are important and would influence us in the direction of making the information public. Rehabilitation is a vital part of the Prison Service's work, and it would be odd if we monitored performance but did not make available information on that key function and objective.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I, too, welcome the statement and the demonstration of the fact that, when people choose to engage in the political process, they can make a difference. I pay particular tribute to those who made the case for the retention of Peterhead prison: Aberdeenshire Council, for its thorough and detailed report; the prison officers' partners; the local community; and the local elected representatives.

First, will the minister give us an indication of his time scale for decisions and long-term planning for developments at Peterhead? Secondly, Wendy Alexander asked a pertinent question about value for money on the personnel side. On the fixed-asset side, is public build apparently so much more expensive than private build because

contractors submit tenders at a premium price for public works? Would it be possible to investigate a fixed-price publicly built prison?

Mr Wallace: As I said in my answer to Stewart Stevenson, the response to the Spencer report will play an important part in our thinking. Although I could not put a time scale on it, Peterhead is to remain open. We cannot commit for ever and a day but, as far as I can see, Peterhead will remain the centre for treating long-term sex offenders.

On Nora Radcliffe's second question, and at the risk of incurring the Presiding Officer's displeasure, I note that there is a certain public works contract for which he has some responsibility and which shows the difficulties of managing public contracts.

The Deputy Minister for Parliamentary Business (Euan Robson): That is unfair.

Mr Wallace: Euan Robson says that that is unfair. However, even in France one of the major public buildings—I think that it is the national library—is experiencing some difficulties. Nora Radcliffe raises an interesting point about the possibility of a fixed-price public build contract. I shall reflect on that and decide whether any advantages could flow from it.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Parliament and the Executive are addressing a problem that has been neglected for decades. Does the minister acknowledge the importance of having a vigilant and independent chief inspector of prisons at this time of major change? Will he pay tribute to the excellent qualities that Clive Fairweather has brought to that task? The whole Parliament will expect his successor, Andrew McLellan, to bring the same qualities to that important job.

Mr Wallace: I welcome the opportunity to say in Parliament what I said in the foreword to the chief inspector's report, which was published yesterday. I salute the work that Clive Fairweather has done in his years as Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons. He has been robust, but he has been fair—he has given credit where it has been due, but he has not held back in criticising when he has felt that criticism has been due. Those are the qualities that make a good chief inspector of prisons. Anyone who followed the work of Andrew McLellan when, as the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, he visited every Scottish prison will know of his commitment to excellence in the prison service. Ministers will not expect an easy ride from Andrew McLellan.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): After that comment, the words "forked tongue" come to mind.

I draw the minister's attention to the real state of

Kilmarnock prison. Far from being a model of excellence, it is an absolute shambles, as illustrated by an article in today's *Daily Record*, in which a warder who has left the prison confirms what I have been saying for months. Does the minister realise that drugs and weapons are rife in Kilmarnock, that employee morale is crippling low, that the warder who left the prison was left in charge of 92 prisoners, that the pay and conditions arrangements mean that, in February, he was paid just 56p above the minimum wage and that, when he was under attack, it took five minutes before another warder was on site? As he says,

"Prisoners are treated like kings while the prison officers are treated like slaves."

Will the minister lift the scales from his eyes, conduct an independent investigation into the running of Kilmarnock and recognise that, if this shambles is the best example of privatisation in the prison service, it should not be repeated?

Mr Wallace: It is fair to say that figures for serious assaults are the best comparative indicator, as they are classified on the same basis across the prison estate. In the year to 31 March 2002, the number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults in Kilmarnock was lower than in Edinburgh and the same as in Aberdeen, Barlinnie and Glenochil. Over the same period, there were two serious prisoner-on-staff assaults in Kilmarnock compared with one each in Edinburgh, Barlinnie, Glenochil and Perth. Although any assaults are a matter for concern, those figures do not bear out the claim that Kilmarnock is a particularly violent prison.

It is also worth noting that, in the most recent survey of prisoners, the percentage of prisoners in Kilmarnock who expressed concerns about safety was similar to that in Aberdeen, Glenochil, Perth and Shotts and was significantly lower than that in Edinburgh.

On the ratio of warders to prisoners in their care, I point out that, earlier this week, some people associated with the SNP benches drew attention to the Coleman prison in Florida, wherein, as we found on investigation, one prison officer supervises between 256 and 340 prisoners at any time. That is not the sort of example that we should be following.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Although I am pleased that the minister has announced an increase in funding for the modernisation of the public prison estate, what guarantee can he give us that the vast majority of offenders who are given custodial sentences will serve their sentences within the public Prison Service?

Mr Wallace: Many prisoners who serve long sentences will serve time in more than one prison. There is a likelihood or a possibility of a prisoner

serving part of their sentence in the public sector. It is still the case, following my announcement, that the majority of prisoners will be held in the public sector.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the retention of Peterhead prison, as that recognises the unique and vital work that is carried out there to prevent serious sex offenders from reoffending. However, I would like to know whether Peterhead will be forced once more to conduct a campaign to stay open in five years' time. As the sex offenders unit is about people rather than buildings, can the minister assure us that Peterhead will continue to carry out its vital work in the long term rather than just in the short term?

Mr Wallace: I have indicated that, as far ahead as I can see, Peterhead will continue to be the centre for the treatment of long-term sex offenders. I am aware of Gil Paterson's serious interest in the issue of tackling sex offending. I am sure that he will find the Spencer report informative. The report has a number of conclusions and, based on them, we believe that there should be a focus on the shorter-term sex offenders. In those circumstances, we did not think it right to move prisoners from the longer-term prison.

It is important to remind people that treatment of sex offenders also takes place in prisons other than Peterhead. I do not want anything that has been said today or anything associated with the fact that Peterhead will stay open to detract from the valuable work that other Scottish prisons do in dealing with sex offenders.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I agree with the minister that, if we are to meet the central challenge of slowing down the rise in prisoner numbers, much of which is due to drug misuse, we have to develop alternatives to custody and introduce innovative ways of breaking the cycle of reoffending.

Does the minister agree that, if we are to roll out the drug treatment and testing order and drugs court pilot schemes, we must increase the number of places on day and residential programmes for drug addicts? If we are to break the cycle of reoffending, it is important that we go beyond the provision of detox facilities to much more effective drug treatment in prisons, as we are beginning to do through Cranstoun Drug Services. It is also important that we improve rehabilitation and throughcare, which has hardly been mentioned today.

Will the minister consider holding a pilot scheme for halfway houses, which Richard Simpson, Sylvia Jackson and I have long advocated and which could play a central role in the provision of

alternatives to custody and helping to break the cycle of reoffending?

Mr Wallace: I said in my statement that I am prepared to consider innovative alternatives to custody. As Keith Raffan indicated in his question, it is not possible simply to turn the tap on and immediately have a system of DTTOs across the country. If the orders are to work and to command the public and judicial confidence that we want them to, it is important that they are implemented properly. We are intent on ensuring that that happens. However, there are a number of other initiatives that merit consideration and today is not the last word in the development of alternatives to custody.

The Presiding Officer: Three members still wish to ask questions. If the minister is agreeable, I propose to take all their questions at once in order to protect the next debate. I encourage Cathy Peattie, David Davidson and John McAllion to ask their questions as quickly as possible.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): How will today's announcement deal with overcrowding in the women's prison at Cornton Vale?

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): What we have had today is a postponement of a final decision on Peterhead. Will the minister give us a date when a decision will be made on the long-term programme for the building?

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): If the minister accepts that only the state can deprive people of their liberty, does he agree that it follows that only the state can own and manage the prisons in which people are held? If so, does he agree that the proposal to build and run a prison for profit is not only offensive but runs counter to all the principles that, until these recent right-wing times, underpinned penal policy in this country? He talks about value for money, but what does the fact that we have allowed a few powerful and privileged people to profit from the imprisonment of their fellow citizens tell us about the values of this society?

Mr Wallace: With regard to Cornton Vale, what I have said today about the development of alternatives to custody is important. People will have seen the letter in *The Herald* that commended the Executive for some of the initiatives that we have taken in that regard. Obviously, the time-out facility will be an important development in relation to reducing the prisoner numbers in Cornton Vale.

I totally refute what David Davidson said. Peterhead will remain open and I do not think that I can be more unequivocal than that.

I respect the view that John McAllion expresses

but it is important to remember that ministers remain responsible for the welfare of every prisoner who is given a custodial sentence by the courts, be they in the public or private sector. I take that responsibility seriously and I believe that the proposals that I have announced today will allow us to discharge that responsibility more effectively.

Fuel Poverty

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I allowed the questions on the ministerial statement to overrun in view of the importance of the subject and because of the wishes of the Parliament, but we are now tight for time on the next item of business, which is a debate on motion S1M-3350, in the name of Ms Margaret Curran, on the Scottish fuel poverty statement, and two amendments to the motion. I therefore appeal to the opening speakers to be as brief as possible in order to allow others into the debate.

Before I call the minister to speak, I advise members that there is a business motion to be considered at the end of the morning.

10:39

The Minister for Social Justice (Ms Margaret Curran): I will get moving quickly, Presiding Officer.

I am pleased that we are having this debate on fuel poverty, particularly at this point in the parliamentary session, because I have an agreement with my colleagues in other parties that we will do our best to ensure that social justice gets the debates that it deserves. My colleagues and I will lobby our business managers to ensure that that happens.

The Scottish Executive is committed to ending fuel poverty by 2016. The Parliament knows that fuel poverty blights lives. It results in ill health for, for example, the elderly, young children and sick or disabled people who are already vulnerable. It forces people to choose between heating their homes and buying food or other necessities. We cannot tolerate such a situation and will make every effort to end it.

We have said that we will reduce the number of households in Scotland that are in fuel poverty by 30 per cent by 2006. That is a demanding target. In 1996—the last year for which we have figures—738,000 households were in fuel poverty. Moreover, as we have said many times in debates in the chamber, fuel poverty is the direct result of low incomes, poor energy efficiency of homes and high energy prices. We have taken action on all three issues and we know that the number of households in fuel poverty has fallen.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Ms Curran: The member must bear with me, because I am really under pressure and want to move through my speech. I am obviously happy to debate the issues, but I would like to get into the flow and see then how my time is going.

We know that the number of households in fuel poverty has fallen because of our steps to raise incomes by tackling unemployment and through the benefits system. For example, benefits have been introduced such as the minimum income guarantee, the working families tax credit and the winter fuel allowance for pensioners. We have also invested in our housing stock through programmes such as the central heating programme and the warm deal, and we have enhanced building regulations so that we now build homes that can be heated efficiently. Furthermore, we have ensured that the price of energy remains affordable for all. In each area, we have worked to ensure that people are able to heat their homes without having to give up paying for food or other necessities. As I said, we cannot tolerate such a situation any longer.

Through taking those steps, we know that we will have improved the health of elderly and infirm people, people on low incomes and families with young children. We know that their lives have been made better by the action that we and our partners have taken to tackle fuel poverty in Scotland.

We have already achieved much in the three and half years since the Scottish Parliament was formed. For example, we have worked with the UK Government to prepare and publish the UK fuel poverty strategy. We have, in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, made a legislative commitment to end fuel poverty and we have published our own fuel poverty statement under that act. We have improved 140,000 homes through our warm deal programme, which provides insulation for homes, makes them easier to heat and offers a direct contribution to the environment.

Furthermore, we have launched the Scottish Executive central heating programme, which is, in the United Kingdom, unique in its scope and offers social tenants and elderly people free central heating, insulation, energy advice and a benefits check.

To date, we have installed 10,000 heating systems and are fully on course to achieve our target to complete the programme by 2006. Finally, we have continued to work with local authorities and other partners to develop local arrangements that address fuel poverty throughout Scotland. For example, we now have partnerships in place in Dundee and Lanarkshire, which will work with communities to ensure that provision is as broad as possible.

In all that, we have worked to build strong partnerships across the public, private and voluntary sectors to ensure that each contributes to delivering the change that we want for people in Scotland.

The energy companies—Scottish Power plc, Scottish Gas and Scottish and Southern plc—are investing in the energy efficiency of homes in Scotland through the energy efficiency commitment, which is a statutory requirement under the Utilities Act 2000. They are also working to develop programmes and technologies that benefit consumers in Scotland. Moreover, Transco is supporting investment in central heating through its affordable warmth programme and it is providing advice to front-line professionals about energy efficiency measures and health.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations are working with local authorities and housing associations to develop best practice on promoting energy efficiency and tackling fuel poverty. Energy Action Scotland and Friends of the Earth Scotland are working to promote energy efficiency and to identify new ways of working in delivering fuel poverty programmes. In that respect, I am pleased to be able to announce today that the Scottish Executive will provide funding to allow Friends of the Earth to carry out research on energy auditing that will allow us to identify how improving information as part of the house purchase process can be used to tackle fuel poverty.

We have been assisted in developing the central heating programme by all those organisations. Other organisations—such as Help the Aged and Age Concern—have also helped us to understand how we can work effectively to meet the needs and concerns of elderly people in order to ensure that we get the maximum take-up of the programme. In addition, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, energywatch and the Energy Saving Trust have all provided us with assistance in developing our strategy and policies in Scotland and will continue to work with us in developing our future strategy.

Each and every one of those organisations has made a significant contribution both to developing the fuel poverty statement and policy and through their individual and collective programmes for tackling energy efficiency. I want to put on record the appreciation of the Scottish Executive—and, I am sure, of the Parliament—for those organisations' commitment and willingness to work together to end fuel poverty in Scotland.

However, much as I would always pay tribute to the work of the Executive, there is clearly more work to be done and we will continue to work together to take forward the work plan in the fuel poverty statement. By doing so, we will begin to develop better knowledge about fuel poverty in Scotland, which will enable us to evaluate our programmes and to target investment as effectively as possible. We will continue to raise

awareness of fuel poverty issues for landlords and consumers, and for others who are able to assist us in meeting our overall target.

We will also continue to improve the housing stock not only through our central heating programme and energy efficiency programmes, but through our investment in stock transfer and other housing improvement programmes.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): As far as evaluating the central heating programme is concerned, will the minister make any announcement today on changing the criteria for the installation of central heating in the homes of the elderly?

Ms Curran: I am not sure how up to date Mr Sheridan is on the matter, but we have previously announced that we will constantly review the central heating programme. If other resources became available, we would consider extending the programme. Indeed, Mr Sheridan will know that the programme is being extended in 2004. I assure the Parliament that we keep the programme under rigorous review.

The Executive will continue to promote greater domestic energy efficiency through building regulations and new technology. We will also continue to build partnerships, both at local level—by developing the work that we have carried out in Dundee—and at national level, through the fuel poverty advisory group.

We are beginning a key piece of work to review how our energy efficiency programmes are working. I have already said how we have exceeded the target for the warm deal in "Working together for Scotland: A Programme for Government" by offering insulation to 140,000 homes under the scheme since 1999. We want now to examine how we can continue to make our investment work effectively with the investment in energy efficiency that the energy companies are making under their energy efficiency commitment, and with the investment that local authorities and housing associations are making in their own stock. We intend to take that work forward with key stakeholders, including the Energy Saving Trust, Energy Action Scotland and Ofgem. I can also announce today that the Scottish Executive is making £1 million available this year for local authorities to spend on insulation through the warm deal programme.

That work plan—which will be developed further by the fuel poverty advisory group—and the investment that we are already making will ensure that we can meet our target of ending fuel poverty by 2016 and that we can reach our milestone of reducing the number of households in fuel poverty by 30 per cent by 2006.

The Executive and Parliament have a considerable track record on debating fuel poverty and of showing a commitment to ending it in Scotland. Through the partnership between the Executive and the Parliament and the partnerships involving the voluntary sector and the other organisations that I have mentioned this morning, we have made large strides. However, I call on all members to maintain the commitment to tackling the problem and to support our plan of action so that we can truly end fuel poverty in Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament commends the Scottish Executive for its Fuel Poverty Statement and its pledge to work in partnership with Her Majesty's Government at Westminster and a range of organisations; welcomes the milestones for achieving its overall objective to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that people are not living in fuel poverty by November 2016; recognises the substantial investment that is being made in the Central Heating Programme and the Warm Deal and in improving Scotland's housing stock, and further recognises that the Statement affirms the Executive's commitment to tackling fuel poverty and meeting its objective.

10:48

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome this debate on a topic that might not hit the headlines, but which is of fundamental importance to the hundreds of thousands of Scots who still live in fuel poverty. Indeed, I congratulate the minister on securing two hours for the debate.

Unusually, I turn first to the Conservative amendment, which criticises the Executive's motion as self-congratulatory and then proceeds to be self-congratulatory as far as the previous Conservative Government is concerned. It appears that Bill Aitken realised he had to speak in the debate a minute before his amendment had to be lodged and simply flung something down. I do not think he has taken the issue seriously.

As the minister stated—and as the fuel poverty statement confirms—fuel poverty can have a severe and, for vulnerable people, possibly life-threatening impact. Cold and damp homes not only make people ill but slow down, or militate against, full recovery. The minister has covered the statement well; however, I want to focus on a number of areas outlined in our amendment, some of which were touched on by the Social Justice Committee's report in response to the Scottish Executive's draft consultative statement on fuel poverty.

For example, Energy Action Scotland estimated, when giving evidence to the Social Justice Committee, that there are up to 30 grant schemes throughout the UK, some of which overlap. That leads to confusion not only for the public, but for those who offer advice, which makes it difficult to ensure that the best advice is always provided.

The Executive should undertake an assessment, beginning with the schemes that are under its direct influence, with a view to establishing a single entry point while creating the most comprehensive and flexible scheme possible.

Resources are fundamental, and training of additional gas installers is vital if programmes such as the central heating initiative are to expand, and if the Executive's target of eliminating fuel poverty by 2016 is to be reached. Transco and the Gas and Water Industry National Training Organisation have made significant strides in addressing that problem, about which Robert Brown and the Social Justice Committee have raised specific concerns.

Although training is touched on in the minister's statement, SNP members seek reassurances that initiatives such as the retraining of 45 redundant NEC Semiconductors UK Ltd engineers will be carried out throughout Scotland. That must be done to ensure that there is no delay in delivery, particularly in light of the Eaga Partnership's evidence to the Social Justice Committee, which described the significant step change in installations that will be needed over the coming winter and beyond. The capacity to target and assist vulnerable groups will exist only if staff are trained to install and maintain systems.

As the statement acknowledges, there are a number of vulnerable groups living in fuel poverty that do not, as yet, benefit from the central heating programme. Although pensioners who have no central heating have, quite rightly, been prioritised, the time has surely come to consider additional qualifying categories, for example to include households that include at least one long-term sick or chronically ill person. Although we do not expect that to happen immediately, planning should be taking place now and a date should be set. Similarly, consideration should be given to extending the programme to families with children.

A number of individuals in Glasgow have expressed concern about the inflexibility of the criteria that are used in deciding who does or does not qualify for the central heating initiative. I shall mention some specific cases that I have dealt with in recent weeks, the last of which was only yesterday.

Mrs McFadyen is 93 and has lived for 65 years in Bucklaw Gardens, Cardonald. A tenant of the Western Heritable Investment Company, she has seen few improvements over the years. Fifteen years ago, with a cold home, she obtained two costly-to-run second-hand heaters to warm her four-bedroom house. Those heaters, which are now more than 20 years old, have denied her the central heating programme. What should she have done? Should she have suffered the cold and risked her health? She appears to be losing out

simply because she acted, out of necessity, on her own initiative. Mrs McFadyen is caught between a rock and a hard place. Should she give up the only heating that she has in order to obtain central heating, or should she cling on to what she already has?

Mrs Irvine is 88 and lives in Chirnside Road, Hillington. She has a heart condition. Without even an inspection, she was refused central heating, because she has two wee heaters in her hall and living room. Her bedroom, however, is always cold.

Mrs McCracken lives in Dormanside Road, Pollok. She moved from Craighbank because the house that she owned was scheduled for demolition through area clearance. Because she has not lived in her new home long enough, she has also been denied the heating that she needs.

Mr Speirs of Balgonie Road, Mossbank has a bad heart and needs constant warmth. He would qualify but, as a council tenant, he must wait until the capital programme—likely to be delivered post stock transfer—gets round to him. If he owned his home, he would have a new system installed sooner rather than later.

There are many similar cases. The lack of flexibility available to Eaga clearly means that individual circumstances cannot be considered if they are outwith the strict criteria that are laid down by the Executive. Discretion is vital if delivery is to assist our most vulnerable people, rather than its being merely a box-ticking exercise. The Executive must give Eaga more flexibility.

There are a number of ways of eliminating fuel poverty; income maximisation is one of them. Both the statement and the Social Justice Committee reports make clear the importance of ensuring that those who qualify for benefits obtain them. High-profile campaigns to raise public awareness of benefit entitlement are therefore essential. Debt blocking, whereby consumers—often the poorest—can be denied the opportunity to switch to a cheaper supplier, is another scourge. Although energy suppliers are making encouraging noises in that regard and are undertaking a number of pilot projects, debt blocking remains a significant barrier to the elimination of fuel poverty. On pre-payment meters, the poor also pay a significant tariff compared with standard credit customers. Surely the target must be to ensure equalisation of tariffs across the board—something that Scottish Gas has already implemented successfully.

The statement rightly points out that, along with income levels and fuel costs, poor energy efficiency in a home is a key contributor to fuel poverty. SNP members warmly welcome the measures for improving energy efficiency that are outlined in the statement, but we remain

concerned that the private sector—particularly the private rented sector, highlighted by the housing improvement task force—may fall behind. We believe that there should be a new decent homes standard across all tenures, to include dampness and condensation elimination, tackling serious disrepair, and that there should be energy saving measures such as insulation and fuel efficiency through the use of high-efficiency condensation boilers. Those measures are taken for granted in most of western Europe's small, independent and more prosperous nations.

It is unacceptable in the 21st century that 367,000 Scottish children and 119,000 pensioners live in properties that have dampness and condensation and that 39 per cent of all homes have their energy efficiency impaired because they require at least one urgent repair. In improving energy efficiency in the 90 per cent of homes that fall below current standards, it is important that people living in hard-to-heat homes, such as non-cavity-built houses, do not miss out because the insulation measures that are available to them are more limited. Special consideration is required to tackle their needs. I welcome the minister's announcement of the energy audit, but it is disappointing that the Executive has yet to set a target for improvement in national home energy ratings—a key recommendation of the Social Justice Committee.

Phil Gallie: I agree with many of the points that Kenny Gibson has made about energy efficiency in homes, but key requirements are the provision of cheap energy and the security of that energy. What proposals does he have for ensuring that cheap energy will be available in future to those for whom he shows concern?

Mr Gibson: If Phil Gallie wants us to have the power to ensure the availability of cheap energy, he will support our campaign for an independent Scotland.

The Executive has taken great care to explain in the statement its definition of fuel poverty, no doubt because that is an area in which concerns were raised in evidence to the Social Justice Committee and by the Scottish fuel poverty advisory group. We may have to agree to differ on this point, Scotland's party being at one with Energy Action Scotland in believing that the Executive's definition

"will falsely reduce the numbers of fuel poor and so wrongly influence future schemes and programmes designed to assist them".

As Shelter Scotland argued, the Executive's definition will disproportionately reduce the number of private tenants who are seen as fuel poor because of high rents in that sector. COSLA and Citizens Advice Scotland also had misgivings about the definition. Unfortunately, those concerns are not addressed in the statement.

We would like the Executive to reconsider adopting the definition that was suggested by EAS:

"A household is in fuel poverty, if in order to maintain a satisfactory heating regime, it would be required to spend 10% or more of its disposable income (excluding housing benefit and income support for mortgage interest)."

As a representative of Glasgow, I consider it a disgrace that Scotland's largest city—a city with more than half of Scotland's poverty and its worst housing conditions—will have to wait two years longer than the rest of Scotland for all homes in its socially rented sector to obtain central heating, as outlined in the process milestones that are listed on page 38 of the statement. Only yesterday, the *Evening Times* revealed a 25-year conspiracy supported by successive Tory and Labour Governments to do down the city. The fuel poverty statement can only add to Glasgow's sense of being unfairly disadvantaged. I urge the minister to work for the completion of central heating installation in Glasgow simultaneously with the rest of Scotland.

I move amendment S1M-3350.2, to leave out from "commends" to end and insert:

"welcomes the publication of the Fuel Poverty Statement and the positive developments contained within it; accepts the need for a single entry point to the plethora of grant schemes and initiatives available; believes that, to eliminate fuel poverty, resources both human and financial must be in place to meet this aim; urges the Scottish Executive to extend the Warm Deal and Central Heating Programme to disabled people, the long-term sick and all pensioners with partial or obsolete systems at the earliest possible opportunity; considers the establishment of a Decent Homes Standard as fundamental to reducing fuel poverty, not least through energy efficiency measures; has serious concerns regarding hard to heat homes, the inflexible application of criteria used in the Central Heating Programme, the delay in installing central heating in Glasgow's socially rented sector and the Executive's definition of fuel poverty, and seeks the commitment of the Executive to liaison with Her Majesty's Government on issues such as debt blocking, pre-payment meters and benefit uptake."

10:58

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): It is ironic that the Conservatives could largely have gone along with the Executive motion today had it not been for the complacent and self-congratulatory tone that inevitably attaches to any Executive motion. I must rebut immediately Kenneth Gibson's claim that, in lodging my amendment, I am in any way seeking to be self-congratulatory. I am basically pointing out the record of the previous Conservative Government and merely telling the truth.

That said, there was much in what the minister said this morning with which we can agree. She was quite correct to congratulate various bodies on the contributions that they have made towards

combating fuel poverty. She was right to underline the vital importance of energy efficiency, and she was quite right to express the view that an energy audit is absolutely essential. We have a major problem with fuel poverty, and statistics prove that beyond any doubt.

Let us examine what the Executive has done during recent times. The Executive is merely continuing with our policies; nearly every Executive initiative to eradicate fuel poverty is an extension of policies that were initiated by the previous Conservative Government.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I am very grateful to the member for giving way.

When reading amendment S1M-3350.1, I wondered whether Bill Aitken had in mind the Tory track record on pensioner poverty, lack of investment in council housing and mass unemployment, which the present Government is certainly not continuing with.

Bill Aitken: I am happy to debate unemployment, but that is not on the agenda for debate. Sarah Boyack will find the answers in the detail of what the Conservative Government did and what the Executive has done. In many respects, there is not a whit of difference in their actions.

The warm deal, which was introduced with a great fanfare of trumpets on 1 July 1999, is simply a rebranding and partial extension of the home energy efficiency scheme, which had been running since 1991. The only significant difference is a small rise in the amount of grant. We certainly agree with new housing partnerships, because they are likely to prove extremely beneficial in eradicating fuel poverty. They represent another Conservative policy.

The only measure that the Executive has taken independently has been the central heating programme, which was announced by Jackie Baillie on 18 September 2000. The programme is to be welcomed and I recall congratulating the Executive on it at the time. However, it is predictable that there have been implementation problems.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the biggest single contributor to a reduction in fuel poverty has been the privatisation of the utilities. I recall that such privatisation was resisted bitterly by the Labour party—or was that a different Labour party from today's? If that is the case, the personnel seem to be depressingly similar.

Tommy Sheridan: Would the member care to comment on the most recent academic research, which suggests that the privatisation of the gas and electricity utilities has produced no discernible improvement in efficiency, nor has it produced

price reduction? All that has resulted is the creation of multimillionaires through share dealing in those former public utilities.

Bill Aitken: Although Mr Sheridan has the advantage of having seen the particular study to which he refers, I have the advantage of being able to count. A reduction of 29 per cent, in real terms, in the costs of gas and electricity must affect poorer sections of society; there is no way that it could not affect them.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): It always helps Bill Aitken with his time to accept an intervention.

British Energy plc is not exactly a major success story. Is the member in favour of bailing out British Energy with up to £500 million of taxpayers' money?

Bill Aitken: I am in favour of doing anything that will result in a reasonable service for the customers who have to utilise energy. However, there are financial considerations that must be examined in every case. The British Energy issue is extremely complex and Mr Neil would not expect me to make an on-the-hoof response.

I turn to the figures, which show the extent of the problem. There are 738,000 households living in fuel poverty in Scotland, which represents 35 per cent of households. That is depressing. Forty-six per cent of households living in such conditions occupy local authority houses. Perhaps the most serious aspect of the problem is that 178,000 households—8 per cent of the total—suffer from extreme fuel poverty, which is defined as having to spend more than 20 per cent of household income on fuel.

Some of the people in that situation occasionally have to make a stark choice between food and heat. We all agree that that is not acceptable. The effects on health, which are particularly manifest in the very young and the very old, are not acceptable. Any move towards alleviating the problem is welcome.

That is why we gave a genuine welcome to the central heating programme. However, there is unfairness in the programme in that priority has been given to 100,000 council house properties and 40,000 pensioner homes in the private sector. As a fair person, the minister will be concerned about the net effect, which is that some people who live in genuine poverty in the private rented sector are not receiving the benefits of the central heating programme. I suggest that that difficulty could be reconsidered in a more sensitive manner.

In spite of the inherent unfairness in the system, in general, we welcome the central heating programme. The minister is rightly concerned about fuel poverty and has done much to tackle it.

However, unless we take steps to ensure that the most vulnerable section of our society—the elderly—is safeguarded, no matter who owns the property, we will not achieve our goals.

We support the warm deal and the central heating programme, although we have pointed out a significant unfairness in it. We also support new housing partnerships. How could we do otherwise, when they represent another one of our policies that has been hijacked by the Labour party? We recognise that the economic decisions that were taken by the Conservative Governments of the 1980s and the early 1990s—especially those on the privatisation of utilities—have made a major contribution to ensuring that fuel poverty, bad as it is, is not much worse.

I move amendment S1M-3350.1, to leave out from the first “recognises” to end and insert:

“believes that the Scottish Executive’s self-congratulation is unfounded given that substantial inroads into eradicating fuel poverty were made by previous Conservative governments, and recognises that the policies of those Conservative governments have had a lasting effect and that many of them have been continued by the Scottish Executive under a different name.”

11:06

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Before Bill Aitken spoke, I was struck by the contrast between the uncrowded press galleries for the present debate and the crowded press galleries for the statement on prisons.

Fuel poverty has been debated in the Parliament and in the Social Justice Committee on several occasions. Unlike some other issues, such as e-commerce, which, as a luddite, I regard as the epitome of an undebatable subject, fuel poverty is well worth a rerun. In days to come, people might ask what the Parliament achieved and what it did to better the condition of the people of Scotland. We will have justified our existence if we are able to say, “We got rid of fuel poverty.”

We spend much time discussing targets, standards and statistics, some of which is political mush. Each house that is insulated and each central heating system that is installed strikes an identifiable blow against cold and damp and illness and unnecessary deaths. In spite of all the technical difficulties and difficulties of definition that have been associated with the central heating programme, the programme bids fair to be the best thing that the Parliament and the Executive have done in the Parliament’s first session.

However, I want to raise several issues with the minister. The first is the availability of a sufficient number of gas fitters. Although I am aware of the recent opening of the gas fitters’ training centre at Queenslie, it is difficult to be content with

ministerial assurances on the matter. A participant as knowledgeable as Transco told us as recently as May, in private and in public, that there will be a shortfall in the number of gas fitters, which will compromise the ability to deliver the central heating programme.

Ministers have examined the support needs of colleges and I hope that they will continue to do so. I also hope that they are aware of the crisis that is looming because of the age profile of gas engineers. A relatively large proportion of such workers are in their 50s and are heading towards retirement.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): Does Mr Brown agree that the shortage of skilled fitters, which affects many trades in Scotland, is more of a legacy of the Tory years than anything that Bill Aitken mentioned earlier?

Robert Brown: I agree, but I do not want to get into an unsatisfactory debate about who is responsible. As members of the Parliament, we have the responsibility of dealing with the issue and it is up to ministers to provide answers to the specific issues that we are discussing.

I ask Margaret Curran to give assurances that the issue has been considered satisfactorily, that the support that is needed is there, that the transition training programme to retrain workers from other industries is being adequately made use of, and that people are getting into schools and talking about the potential long-term advantages of employment in the field.

Phil Gallie: I looked recently at the figures for further education courses and found that the number of courses for traditional engineering practices had fallen significantly. Would Mr Brown suggest to the minister that she and her colleagues could consider that area to try and improve the situation?

Robert Brown: Phil Gallie makes a fair point, and it is a worry throughout the scientific end of the educational spectrum. The answer has to lie in schools, colleges and the people who attend them being made interested in getting into that field. Quite a lot of useful work is being done by people who have experience of, or who work in, the industries going into schools, telling people what they are up to and trying to interest them in those particular jobs.

My second concern relates to the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995—Margaret Curran will not be surprised to hear me mention that. The publication of this year's HECA reports seems to be well behind the position in England, which is bad enough. Ministers seem to be reluctant to use the HECA reports as they do in England to allow local people to judge and comment on the performance of individual local councils. It would

be useful to consider the idea of requiring councils to appoint home energy conservation officials who would have the job of implementing home energy conservation more effectively than happens at the moment. The 1995 act is a productive mechanism as a driver in the field.

My third point is linked to that. Fuel poverty cannot stand apart from other issues of fuel conservation and conservation of energy. One is part and parcel of the others. In her introduction, the minister mentioned new techniques. Solar energy techniques are now sufficiently advanced to be considered for inclusion as a major component of housing policy. There are some innovative and successful projects in that field. Are ministers considering the potential of those techniques as part of stock transfer investment programmes, for example? Are ministers considering energy audits and looking at the need to integrate, and not only approaching the matter from the point of view of fuel poverty but considering it from the point of view of the world's needs? That was considered recently at an international level at the conference in Johannesburg. The two need to be matched together. There are major opportunities that would also advantage individual citizens and households.

I also mention an incidental by-product of what is hopefully a march to success on the fuel poverty issue—the dust mite problem. That matter has been raised with members in correspondence from the National Asthma Campaign Scotland. I had a meeting with people from the campaign not very long ago in order to be briefed about this issue. In its briefing, the National Asthma Campaign Scotland says:

"At this time of dramatic change in the standards of Housing in Scotland through the Warm Deal, Central Heating Programme ... it is vital that we do not eradicate one cause of ill-health—fuel poverty—only to create another—house dust mite infestation"

with all the problems that that causes to people who suffer from asthma. I would like the minister to assure us that account is being taken of that.

Kenny Gibson and others spoke about the extension of the system and that is something which, as Mr Gibson rightly said, the Social Justice Committee has taken up with ministers. We have had some assurances that the scheme will not stop at the end of the current programme. As I understand it, the scheme will move on to take account of missed-out people, and partial and obsolete schemes.

We must consider the problem of hard-to-heat homes, which is sometimes underestimated. It is simply not possible to bring some houses up to modern fuel standards. We must consider what we have to do about those houses in terms of building standards.

My final point is about the need to use care and repair schemes to help older people in particular to manage the improvements in their energy efficiency once they are in place. That is an important aspect, particularly to technophobes like me who cannot manage the video, never mind anything else.

Fuel poverty is a health issue and a social justice issue; it damages opportunities for children and it damages the quality of life of older people. There are few issues that are more central to the future of Scotland. I support the motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We move to open debate. I suspect that there are a few members who wish to speak who have not yet pressed their buttons and it would be helpful if they could do so.

11:15

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Like others, I welcome the Executive's statement on fuel poverty. The range of measures that has been taken to tackle fuel poverty, including the warm deal, the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, and the central heating programme, is evidence of how seriously the Executive takes the issue of fuel poverty.

I am pleased that the fuel poverty statement, which is of course a consequence of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, clearly sets out short, medium and long-term targets to reduce and then eradicate fuel poverty in Scotland. Shelter Scotland, in its briefing for today's debate, comments that the fuel poverty statement

"is a good foundation on which to build delivery of the strategy."

Shelter Scotland also emphasises the need for housing improvement to reduce fuel poverty. Although I agree with that, I argue that other factors such as economic stability, low unemployment and the introduction of a national minimum wage—none of which featured during the Thatcher years of the 1980s—also play a significant part in addressing the fuel poverty problem that faces poor homes in Scotland.

There can be little doubt that improving housing stock can have a major impact on fuel poverty. During the summer recess, I had the pleasure of hosting a visit by the deputy minister responsible for housing, Hugh Henry, during his visit to the new Link Housing Association Ltd homes in Petersburn in my constituency. When I first visited that area in the run-up to the Scottish Parliament elections, I was shocked by the dreadful state of the housing that people were being faced with and forced to live in. The 1960s, flat-roofed, breeze-block housing might have looked good on a planner's drawing board, but the reality of almost

40 years of harsh Scottish winters, not to mention summers, meant that not only did those homes look run down but they were among the most expensive properties in North Lanarkshire to heat.

The contrast between what I saw three and a half years ago and what I saw a few weeks ago could not have been greater. Not only do the homes in Petersburn look great, but they have been designed and built to be energy efficient. As many of the tenants told the minister and me, the homes are proving to be significantly cheaper to heat. That is an excellent example of how we can tackle fuel poverty in the long term, by ensuring that future housing reduces the need to burn as much fuel. Not only is that good for the pockets of tenants and residents, it is good for the environment.

I support Robert Brown's comments about the points that were raised by the National Asthma Campaign Scotland. Although the campaign welcomes the many benefits of improved insulation, it believes that improved ventilation and reduced humidity must also play a part in the design and installation of central heating systems to avoid an increase in the levels of house dust mites and the associated increase in asthma attacks. Many of us believe that that point is worthy of consideration and we urge the Scottish Executive to consider it.

The Executive's fuel poverty statement has been welcomed by Age Concern Scotland, Shelter Scotland and Friends of the Earth Scotland. They all see it as an important first step. I am sure that the minister will concede that there is a long way to go before we eradicate fuel poverty in Scotland. However, I believe that the Scottish Executive is to be commended for having the courage to set itself ambitious targets that are appropriate for Scotland in the 21st century.

11:19

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): As many members have said, this is not the first time that we have discussed the issue, and I am sure that it will not be the last time. Surely we should be saying that we are anti fuel poverty, rather than providing for fuel poverty. I always find that such debates take place in a rather strange world, in which we fail to recognise that Scotland is the largest energy producer in Europe. The fact that we, in the 21st century, are discussing fuel poverty in the country that is the largest energy producer in the European Union is frankly absurd.

The fuel poverty statement is to be welcomed, but, as has been pointed out by a number of people, there are still major problems. It is of little consequence if someone is lucky enough to be eligible to have a state-of-the-art central heating

system fitted under the Executive's scheme if they cannot afford to use it because the energy companies are allowed to charge extortionate prices for fuel supply. The charges that are levied on customers by the fuel suppliers are the major issue in fuel poverty. The situation involves many other issues, but the reality is that the cost causes poverty.

In a debate in the first year of the Parliament, while I recognised that we do not have legislative power over the standing charges for energy and fuel, I asked Wendy Alexander, who was then the minister responsible, whether she would consider at least making representations to Ofgem and to central Government to suggest the removal of standing charges, initially for pensioners, then for all people in receipt of benefit, as is done in a number of European countries that are not energy rich. Unfortunately, Wendy Alexander—who is no longer a minister—chose not to take that route. I ask the Minister for Social Justice and the Deputy Minister for Social Justice—who is well aware of the health problems that are caused by fuel poverty—at least to approach the energy companies to seek their agreement to withdraw standing charges for pensioners. That would be a major step forward. I hope that the ministers will consider doing that.

The introduction of the zonal system in Scotland is ludicrous. It would be laughable if it were not a total rip-off. There are nine zones, and the zone that someone resides in will determine the tariff that they are charged. The argument for zoning and charging different prices in different areas is that it costs different amounts to transport energy. As I said, for a country that is energy rich, zoning would be laughable if it were not a blatant rip-off. People who live in the shadow of, for example, the Torness nuclear power station or the Cockenzie power station will pay absurd amounts for their fuel because of the tariff zone that they live in.

Another anomaly that has been talked about often is prepayment meters. That is another issue on which politicians, and in particular the Executive, could make representations to the energy companies, because, as is well known, the tariff is higher for prepayment meters than it is for ordinary meters. People with prepayment meters pay a higher charge per unit, and who are those people? The people who are in fuel poverty. Many families and many households on low incomes utilise the prepayment system. They do so not through choice, but because the fuel companies have forced them into accepting that method of payment and supply because they have been late in paying their bills, which could have happened for many reasons. They have been given no alternative. It is straightforward: that is a ludicrously heavy-handed tactic which, unfortunately, is sanctioned by Government. All

that it does is make the energy companies richer at the expense of the most vulnerable group in our society.

The Executive has admitted that the cost of domestic gas is likely to rise by 15 per cent and that of domestic electricity by 5 per cent. Coupled with less than adequately insulated homes—although I welcome the suggestions in the statement and the audit from Friends of the Earth Scotland, which may assist us in this area—that just adds to fuel poverty. Addressing the dire need for fuel-efficient homes and cutting the increase in fuel charges would ease the burden for many. There is no requirement for legislation. Let us use our powers of persuasion.

I call on the minister to make real changes—reiterate what I have just said, speak to the energy providing companies, and suggest to them that such measures would be socially beneficial. If we are operating in a world of partnership—and partnership between industry and the Executive seems to be the buzz in the Executive at the moment—let us talk to the energy companies about being socially responsible and removing standing charges.

To anyone in a country that is not as energy rich as this one is, the fact that we are having this debate must seem ludicrous, and it is an example of the low sights of the Executive and, indeed, of many politicians in Scotland.

11:25

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I agree with one aspect of Margaret Curran's motion, and that is its recognition of the fact that we have to work with Westminster. The motion recognises the fact that fuel poverty cannot be isolated from the overall energy policies that we follow. I make that point to Kenny Gibson.

Alex Neil: Will the member give way?

Phil Gallie: Give me a chance to get into my speech. I will let Alex Neil in later.

I will pick up on some points that were made by Age Concern Scotland, and one point in particular, which recognises that problems of fuel poverty—for the elderly in particular—stretch across the private sector and cover owners and tenants. We have to examine that issue into the future. Current schemes build on the draught-proofing and so on that the last Conservative Government instituted as far back—I remind Bill Aitken—as 1980, when I became a councillor. Those schemes were welcome, and I welcome the fact that the Executive is building on them.

At the same time, I compliment the Executive on the introduction of the central heating scheme, which it should take credit for. However, it is one

thing to introduce a central heating scheme; it is another to ensure that the scheme is affordable. This Parliament should have the grace to recognise that since privatisation of the utilities, prices to individuals have fallen by 30 per cent. That is an important factor when we examine fuel poverty.

Alex Neil: Phil Gallie mentioned the need to work with Westminster. One of the things that Westminster has done in the past six months is to impose an additional tax burden of £7 billion on North sea oil over the next few years. Should not that money—or at least some of it—be earmarked to deal with fuel poverty in Scotland?

Phil Gallie: The money should never have been taken in the first place. It is a highly damaging tax. Perhaps the Executive could talk to colleagues in Westminster about that. I go along with Alex Neil's point.

The SNP's policies will result in massively increased fuel costs in the future if its anti-nuclear programme goes ahead. In Scotland today, almost 50 per cent of energy generation comes from the nuclear industry. We could say that that is renewable energy. If we follow on from Jack McConnell's comment yesterday that we are to meet a target of 40 per cent renewables without nuclear energy at some time in the future, the SNP policy would be a disaster for Scotland and a disaster for the people who suffer from fuel poverty today and in the future.

Mr Gibson: This is a debate on the fuel poverty statement. Has Phil Gallie, or any other member of the Tory party, actually read the fuel poverty statement?

Phil Gallie: Yes, we have, and we recognise its implications. That apart, I will highlight some of the future problems on the energy front that will affect fuel poverty. First, if we drop nuclear energy and go for generation by gas, that will have a major impact on importation and costs. If we go down the line of simply abandoning our nuclear programme and looking towards renewable energy, we will have nothing with which to top up. Nuclear energy is a base-load facility that provides cheap energy for the bulk of our communities. We must consider that.

I wish to highlight problems that we face with the supply of gas in rural communities. People would like gas central heating. Given our natural gas resources, gas central heating is a reasonable way of heating one's home, but when I approached a gas company recently to supply gas to Ayrshire villages, I found that the capital cost to individuals for the supply of gas ran at £3,245 in Crosshill and £4,395 in Maidens and Kirkoswald. That supply would cover about 230 households in Crosshill and 387 households in Maidens and

Kirkoswald. The capital cost of installation lies beyond the capabilities of most families and certainly the elderly. I ask the minister to consider that.

Finally, I will talk about alternatives. The people in rural communities who are obliged to use liquid petroleum gas experience problems with the minimum delivery levels that companies set. I acknowledge the problems that those companies face, but many individuals, elderly people and young families cannot find the cash for a 500-litre minimum delivery of LPG, which puts LPG out of bounds. Many requests for LPG deliveries are urgent, which shows that people cannot afford to put their capital into LPG containers. People ask not through choice, but through necessity, for urgent refills at the minimum level.

11:31

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Since the establishment of our Scottish Parliament, we have already begun to make a difference. The statistics that Margaret Curran reeled off at the start of her speech—140,000 homes helped under the warm deal and 10,000 heating systems installed since last year—are beginning to make a difference to all our constituents. From talking to pensioners in my constituency, I know how much those initiatives are welcomed.

Joint work has been undertaken with the UK Government on the winter fuel allowance for pensioners and the reduction in VAT to 5 per cent on domestic fuel, and action is being taken on low pay and to eliminate mass unemployment. Many good things have happened.

The five approaches that are set out in the fuel poverty statement concern the total elimination of fuel poverty. I will focus on energy efficiency, because it is vital that the Scottish Executive takes the lead on that. I agree with Shelter on the importance of investment in our housing stock. That means decent insulation and efficient heating systems, which are essential if we are to eliminate fuel poverty.

In March, the new building regulations came into effect. They deliver a 25 per cent increase in energy efficiency. That is an example of the benefits of our devolved Parliament. Double glazing, draught exclusion, insulation and combined heat and power systems will all contribute to reducing people's fuel bills.

New initiatives are coming along the track. The new European Community directive on the energy performance of buildings will set a new framework throughout Europe. EC research shows that improved energy efficiency could reduce carbon emissions by 22 per cent. If we think about the

debates in Johannesburg, new measures that involve energy auditing and energy efficiency must be strongly welcomed as part of the Executive's package. I welcome Margaret Curran's announcement on work with Friends of the Earth Scotland. That is a big step forward.

I see such measures in my constituency through the warmburgh initiative, which is a great example of partnership between the voluntary sector, local authorities and the energy companies. It means that people who live in tenements, who comprise half the households in Edinburgh, will have new opportunities. In my constituency, free energy audits and free energy saving advice are available. Crucially, grants to install energy efficiency measures can be accessed. The initiative is practical and it works. We would like more of that.

The challenge for the future is to incorporate new technology and examine new ideas. We should consider the opportunities that solar heating systems and photovoltaic technologies present. The new solar grants from the Department of Trade and Industry give us the chance to make a difference. The technology works, so we should roll it out with partnership between the Scottish Executive and the UK Government. It is a win-win solution. We can tackle and eliminate fuel poverty while protecting the environment. We in the Parliament must be in favour of that. Yesterday, the First Minister re-emphasised our 40 per cent renewables target. The fuel poverty statement mentions linking fuel poverty with renewable energy. I strongly welcome that link. That is a radical step forward that the Executive must develop.

I mentioned the new EC directive, which will push up standards. An important implication is that large building renovations will be required to incorporate new energy efficiency standards. That is a big opportunity for us in Scotland if we are thinking about brownfield developments that bring old buildings into new use.

The fuel poverty statement looks to the future. I hope that future legislation such as the building bill and future housing legislation will give us a new legal framework that will enable us not only to make our buildings wind and watertight when we improve them, but to build in energy efficiency standards for the future.

Tackling fuel poverty was one of the key objectives in Labour's 1999 manifesto. I am proud that we have made progress with our partnership Government in Scotland. We are working to eliminate fuel poverty. Energy efficiency must be part of that approach. It might be the less exciting part, but it is vital and will make a difference to people's health and their lives.

The commitments in the fuel poverty statement are measurable and practical. We can return to them, review them and examine progress. We must broadcast to people the facts that we are making a difference and that investment is coming to make that difference. We need to tell people that the work that we are doing in the Parliament is making a difference to their everyday lives. Several speakers, including Robert Brown, Karen Whitefield and the Minister for Social Justice, have touched on that.

We are making a difference. The challenge is to focus on that 15-year target, which is one of the things that we can be proud of. Along with free personal care and free local bus travel, fuel poverty initiatives are practical, tangible measures that our devolved Parliament is undertaking to improve people's lives.

11:36

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

The debate is welcome. I know that members of all parties are as committed as I am to ending fuel poverty. I welcome the new research that the minister announced, but we know some facts about fuel poverty already. We know that only those who are poor live in fuel poverty. People who are old, young or who have a long-term illness are more likely to live in a cold, damp home. People who live in cold, damp homes are almost certainly poor, because if they were not poor, they would not live in cold, damp homes—they would have alternatives.

Fuel poverty is a scandal in oil-rich 21st century Scotland. We pay a high price for it in ill-health and excess heating bills and in stress and worry for the families who are involved. I welcome the Government's central heating initiative and I acknowledge that it has made a difference to many people, but I will highlight the adverse effects of fuel poverty on two of my constituents in central Fife and how the Government's programme has not met their needs.

The first constituent is a 46-year-old disabled man whose central heating system does not work. He has mobility problems because of childhood polio and he has sciatica. He also takes medication for irritable bowel syndrome. However, he does not receive disability living allowance. He is unemployed and an owner-occupier. As a result of his illnesses, he spends much time at home, where the lack of central heating exacerbates his health problems. He needs a warm house, but because of his age, he is ineligible for help under the Executive's scheme. My office has spent months trying to assist him. We have contacted the local authority, charities and other agencies to try to find assistance for that young man. So far, we have been unable to offer him any assistance.

I would like to hear from the minister how that young man is to be assisted to get himself out of fuel poverty.

The second constituent is a pensioner from Glenrothes. She is entitled to help under the Executive's central heating scheme, but she has been informed that, because of the backlog, new central heating will not be installed in her home for 18 months. That will leave her throughout this winter in a cold, damp home. She phoned me last week and said that she cannot face another winter in that house without central heating. She is arranging to pay from her savings to have central heating installed.

I have pursued fuel poverty over the life of the Parliament. In last year's debate on fuel poverty, I voiced my concerns about the central heating scheme criteria. I will restate that Shelter Scotland said at that time that it would be

"very concerned if the Executive think their central heating scheme will be a major step in eradicating fuel poverty."

It is a step forward, but it is not a major step and we should not allow the Executive to believe that that is the case. I chose to highlight two individual cases to expose the inadequacies in the Executive's scheme. Common sense dictates that those two constituents should be given help and that they should be given help now. They should not have the worry and stress of facing another Scottish winter in cold, damp homes.

I believe that Margaret Curran is personally committed to tackling poverty. I urge her to look again at the central heating programme and consider ways of helping many more people out of fuel poverty.

11:40

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I would like to bring something of a Highland perspective to the issue. Before I do so, I want to say that real progress has been made and that is a tremendous thing to see. However, progress has not been made without the hitches that have been alluded to during the debate.

One of my constituents, Mr David Matthews of Rogart, had to wait for over a year before all the glitches were sorted out and his central heating system was installed. Before that happened, his hopes were raised and dashed again. Luckily, we have gone beyond that, but the period in which the glitches occurred was not at all helpful. That said, what is being done now is extremely good indeed. One hears nothing but good words about the workmanship and speediness with which the central heating systems are installed.

I echo Robert Brown's description of himself as a technophobe. I am also one, but Mr Matthews

describes himself as a reasonably sharp person. However, he told me that the dials and knobs that control his central heating system are almost beyond him. If the controls that operate the systems are wrongly designed, people will end up with radiators on when they do not want them to be on and that wastes money. It is worth bearing that point in mind.

Tricia Marwick mentioned the Scottish winter. Where are the hardest winters in Scotland to be found if not in the Highlands? I say to the minister that it is important that she takes an holistic approach in carrying out her good work. We could have another winter such as the last winter that we had in the Highlands when, under the new snow-clearing regime, some roads were blocked that had not been blocked in the past.

Such a winter means that, despite the best efforts and intentions of the Scottish Executive, lorries carrying oil will not get through to give people, who may have the best Rolls-Royce-quality central heating system, the oil that they need. Indeed, last winter, I spent Christmas day cooking the turkey on a Baby Belling—thank heavens I had one. I ask ministers to co-ordinate with BEAR Scotland and the local authorities. Things can go wrong despite the best efforts of ministers and events can fly in the face of what ministers are trying to do.

Everyone in the Highlands—Alasdair Morrison knows what I am on about—knows that every so often in high winds the hydro lines go down and people are plunged into darkness. I also say to ministers that it behoves them to stay in touch with the power companies. Ministers have to ask the companies what they are going to do and what their programme of investment is.

Tricia Marwick: I recognise that the weather in the area that Jamie Stone represents is cold and windy. However, does Jamie Stone recognise that we have a greater number of deaths each winter per head of population in Scotland than is the case in Siberia? If cold, wet, damp, windy conditions can be coped with in Siberia, how on earth is it that, in oil-rich Scotland, we cannot cope with them?

Mr Stone: It is nice to hear the nationalist drum being beaten from time to time. I ask Tricia Marwick to come and see the northern Highlands. She will get a shock when she sees what the weather is like.

It is important that ministers co-ordinate their work with the local enterprise network. Robert Grant, a coal merchant who lives in the village of Bonar Bridge, is one example of why that is necessary. Robert Grant has been in business for 29 years. His business operates in a way that allows his sales on the east side of the county of

Sutherland to subsidise his sales to western parts of the county—places such as Lochinver and Kinlochbervie. Because of competition and the fact that people are converting to the electric, his sales base in the east side of the county no longer supports his deliveries to the west side.

After 29 years of business, and with a son who would take over the business, he is thinking of coming out of delivering coal. What does that do for pensioners, crofters and all the other people who live somewhere like Lochinver and who need coal? It is not good news for them. I have written to the local enterprise company about the issue to ask what can be done by way of grant assistance and what approach the enterprise company will take to address the problem. That is an example of another issue that impacts on what ministers are trying to do about fuel poverty.

I am proud to be part of a Parliament that can look people in the eye and say, "This is what we have done for you." I have received nothing but good letters on the subject and letters of thanks for the central heating systems that have been installed. The scheme has been extremely well received and it makes an incredible difference to people's lives—ministers should be proud of that. That said, ministers have to ensure that what they are doing does not get derailed. I advise the ministers concerned to co-ordinate their work with the power companies, the local enterprise network and—in particular in the Highlands—with the people who clear the roads.

11:45

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Like many other members who have spoken today, I welcome the Executive statement and its commitment to eradicate fuel poverty.

We are all aware of the lack of robust information that makes the task of identifying those in fuel poverty difficult. We have heard stories from members today that can be added to the minister's list. In trying to reach our shared goal of eradicating fuel poverty, it is crucial that we continue to work in partnership with the voluntary and private sectors and, most important, that we continue to work at local level. Only in that way will we be able to identify the people who have to make a choice between whether they eat or heat their homes.

The Executive statement included mention of its use of continuous surveys to help to identify people in need. I await with interest the minister's findings in that respect and hope that she will decide to continue to use continuous surveys as a way of identifying people. She has promised to announce her decision on that later this year.

Much has been said this morning about the

introduction of the free central heating programme for pensioners. The Executive had hard decisions to make and it was correct to take the decision to reach the pensioners who had no central heating at all. Pensioners in my constituency have benefited from the scheme and will continue to do so. Unlike Tricia Marwick, I believe that the programme is a step in the right direction. I would be happy to take her—and anybody else who would like to come—to meet some of the pensioners in my constituency who are delighted with the way in which their systems were installed and the warm homes that they now live in.

I say to the minister that, having accepted that we must prioritise, which was a decision that the Executive considered very carefully, I have raised previously with ministers, both in committee and in debate in the Parliament, the plight of the pensioners who have partial or inefficient systems. Those systems are usually many years old and they could not be said to be energy efficient. My constituents, in common with people up and down Scotland, can spend a lot of money and a large percentage of their income on fuel without getting the benefit of a warm home. I ask the minister to advise me, today or by letter, what is the current position on that, what the Executive's thinking is on the matter and how we take it forward.

In her opening statement, the minister mentioned building regulations and the need for incentives to build fuel-efficient homes. I welcome her announcement this morning that funding will be given to Friends of the Earth Scotland to enable it to carry out energy auditing. I hope that Friends of the Earth will start that work in the private sector. If homes are given an energy rating, one that people can understand and on which they can put a price in real terms, that will provide an incentive to builders to build fuel-efficient homes. If such information were to be shown in sales pitches, it would act as an incentive to prospective purchasers to look out for fuel-efficient homes.

The Executive has set targets for the public sector. I believe that the new building regulations can be used to ensure that public funding is made available to councils, housing associations and individuals who apply for repair or improvement grants only if they demonstrate that the houses that they are building or the works that they are carrying out will ensure that those homes are heated and insulated to an acceptable standard and level to comply with recognised targets for fuel efficiency.

We could discuss the issue at greater length, but I am pleased and proud to be part of a Parliament that has progressed the issue so far. We have heard much from members on the Opposition benches, but they should put a price on their

proposals. We all agree that we have set targets that will be difficult to meet, but I look forward to working with the Executive to ensure that we eradicate fuel poverty.

11:50

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): It has been an interesting morning. We have heard about Jamie Stone's cold turkey at Christmas—no doubt with cheese—and Cathie Craigie wants me to put a price on my head. There is no chance of that happening. There is a broad consensus about the problem of fuel poverty and the need to tackle it and give it a high priority—many high-quality speeches have mentioned that. However, some gibberish has been spoken that needs to be corrected.

I want to focus on some key fundamentals in respect of tackling fuel poverty. I welcome all the Executive's initiatives, but we should recognise that, even when those initiatives are fully implemented, there may still be fuel poverty and cold, damp homes, as many people do not come under their ambit and will not qualify or be eligible for assistance.

I want to highlight three issues. First, fuel poverty cannot be isolated from the general issue of poverty in society. Whether we are discussing child poverty, pensioner poverty or any other kind of poverty, we should remember that many people who live in poverty must live in fuel poverty as a consequence. At the end of the day, there is only one fundamental and simple way to tackle poverty—by putting money into the pockets of the poor, one way or the other. We should ensure that they get decent jobs—which is the preferable option—ensure that they have decent pensions and that children have decent standards of living. Until society is prepared to put real money into the pockets of the poor, poverty will continue and fuel poverty will also continue. That is a basic truth—it is a fact of life and not an opinion. The Parliament does not have the power or resources to tackle poverty at its roots.

Secondly, I agree with Phil Gallie, which is unusual for me. He said that there should be cheap forms of energy in this country. However, his suggestion that cheap forms could be obtained from nuclear energy is absolute nonsense. I asked Bill Aitken what the Conservatives would do if British Energy threatened to go belly up. Would he be prepared to put in £500 million on top of the other billions of pounds of taxpayers' money that we have wasted in the nuclear industry to save British Energy? That should happen only if, in return, it comes back into the public sector. If there is any industry that should be publicly owned in this country, it is the nuclear industry.

Nuclear energy is not cheap energy. Lloyd Quinan made the important point that, in Scotland in 2002, we are discussing the incidence of fuel poverty and tackling it in perhaps five, 10 or 15 years, but we are living in a country that is not just the most energy-rich country in Europe—in global terms, Scotland is about the fifth or sixth energy-richest country in the world per head of population.

Robert Brown: Does Alex Neil understand that the issue is complex and is about more than fuel input? A package of measures from all sorts of directions is required. Does he agree that the aspect that he and Lloyd Quinan mentioned is a bit of an irrelevance to the central debate?

Alex Neil: Not at all. After the events of the past few days, I would have thought that for any Liberal Democrat to call someone else irrelevant would be something of a joke, given the situation that the Liberal Democrats face in the Administration. There is no longer either a coalition or a partnership. The old boys are certainly not being pally together.

Scotland is an energy-rich country, and not just in respect of oil. Scotland provides 30 per cent of natural gas for UK consumption. It is rich in uranium, coal, wind power and solar power. According to the European Union, Scotland is the renewable energy capital of Europe. That begs the question, why are we so energy rich, but so poor in respect of fuel poverty?

Phil Gallie: The report mentions November 2016 as the deadline for eradicating fuel poverty. Does the member appreciate that gas reserves are finite and will be much diminished by then? Will he explain how on earth nuclear energy will be replaced by renewables or anything else by that time, given the current state of technology, and how fuel prices will be kept down?

Alex Neil: I would be happy to debate energy supply at any time. I understand that gas and oil reserves are finite, but latest reports on reserves in the North sea and the Atlantic state that they will last at least another 40 or 50 years on the basis of current consumption. Therefore, there is no short-term problem to be faced and I am sure that, in 40 or 50 years, the technology will exist to replace those sources of energy with renewable sources.

Unfortunately, my time is running out. The final point that I want to make is that the Executive's fuel poverty initiatives are welcome, but we should recognise that some policies that have been implemented at Westminster fly in the face of the policies that the Executive has implemented, particularly in relation to certain tax policies that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has implemented. As we are discussing energy and fuel poverty, I should point out that, in his budget this year, the chancellor levied an additional £7 billion of tax on

the oil industry in Scotland. The argument about whether he should have done so seems to be over for the time being, but now that he has done so, we should get that £7 billion into the Parliament and earmark a good chunk of it to end fuel poverty, not in 2016, but by, say, 2006 so that people who are alive today will not need to live another 10 or 12 years in fuel poverty.

11:57

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): As Alex Neil was speaking, Cathie Craigie re-entered the chamber and sat down. I listened to him and a wee smile came across my face. Other people might not have a price on his head, but last night I read a wee story in the papers that said that Jim Sillars might be suggesting that John Swinney might have a price on Mr Neil's head. Perhaps we will let that stick to the wall.

It is good to put the debate in the big global context and the big picture, although it is right for Phil Gallie, Alex Neil and Lloyd Quinan to speak about energy issues, reserves and the way forward for the future. However, we must remember that gas is not a commodity that can be stored. We should remember that it will last no longer than three days in our pipes—I am talking about wet and dry gas. I returned from a visit to Norway last week where we were well briefed on many such important topics. Globally, we should remember what has been happening in India, where there have been major and massive power cuts in recent months. We should bear that in mind as we discuss the more immediate issues in Scotland.

Like Cathie Craigie, I have reflected on the work that our ministers have done and have done so with real pleasure that I am part of a coalition team that has delivered on a whole range of issues. As Jamie Stone said, our ministers, who are sitting on the front bench, have every reason to be proud.

Out of all the measures that the Parliament has introduced, I was most inundated with phone calls from pensioners and constituents about the central heating programme. It was the biggest issue to affect them. They warmly welcomed and were delighted by the initiative, which was probably part of the biggest-ever programme in Scotland to tackle fuel poverty and which has made a great difference to the people whom I represent.

I think about the work that the minister is doing in that area, but I also think about the new housing partnerships and the housing improvement task force and the impact that its work will have on the quality of homes in Scotland. I think, too, about the strategy that the minister spoke about earlier and how that will be supported by all the devolved Administrations, not just in Scotland but in Wales and Northern Ireland. I hope that we will have

eradicated fuel poverty by 2010 for the most vulnerable households. We look forward to that.

I will skip a bit of what I wanted to say because other speakers have said it. However, I want to highlight particular issues that I would ask the ministers to take on board. I have looked at various papers from various sources about issues such as the proposed index of housing quality. An issue that affected me and which many disability groups have raised with me is how controls and appliances are installed in homes across Scotland. Many people cannot get down to the switches to switch them on because the switches are at ankle level. They should be at waist level because people with arthritis simply cannot get down. Similarly, people who have had a hip replaced, as I did, cannot get down to switches for a time either. I once sat cold and freezing, huddled in blankets, until my family came in later in the day to put on the switches. That kind of thing comes home to one when one is personally affected. Since then, I have spoken about the issue with pensioners and I know that they are confronted with such situations all the time. Our standards should be clear and there should be no switches or controls in any homes in Scotland that are not accessible to disabled people, who are always the most vulnerable when it comes to fuel poverty.

Lastly, I want to highlight an aspect that concerns Crossgates, a village in my constituency. I suggest that the minister might consider making a visit to Crossgates, which got an award for being one of the most energy-efficient villages in Scotland. It has had particular regard to aspects that affect our most vulnerable groups. Crossgates is just another example of good work between the Executive, the local authorities and the private sector, which has also been involved. That kind of initiative replicated across Scotland would begin to make a difference to many people.

I applaud the important work that the minister is doing. As ever, he is a shining example to all of us and I wish him more strength to his elbow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to wind-up speeches. Times are as indicated, but we have a little time for interventions.

12:02

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): To watch Margaret Curran and Kenny Gibson—two vigorous politicians—agreeing on so much was an illustration of how much agreement there is about eradicating the scandal of fuel poverty from Scotland today.

There were a couple of exceptions, however, to that consensus. One of them, of course, was arguably the best deadpan comic turn outside the festival. That was Mr Aitken, who managed to

ignore 18 years, as Sarah Boyack rightly said, of pensioner poverty, three million unemployed—"A price worth paying"—and everything else, to illustrate that everything that the Executive is doing is down to him and a previous Conservative Government. Yes, really.

The second exception was the now sadly departed Mr Alex Neil, who provided a couple of fundamental points from a fundamentalist. I am sure that all politicians enjoyed Alex's creative and positive contribution to his own party in a recent Sunday newspaper article. Few will take lectures on the joys of politics from Mr Neil in that regard.

This has been an important debate. At the start of the last parliamentary year before next year's Scottish general election a warm, well-insulated, energy-efficient home must be the aim of any civilised community, irrespective of health, wealth or age. Society should, through its various means, deliver that objective. Therefore, the Government is right—and I accept that the Opposition has acknowledged that—to endorse and, indeed, enlarge its exacting targets for the eradication of fuel poverty.

I am sure that both ministers have a hard task in ensuring what is probably the most important aspect of the fuel poverty issue, which is the delivery of their objective across all the departments of government. Many members raised in the debate different aspects of the issue that spread across many departments and agencies of government. To ensure that the Government drives in the right direction on one particular issue is a key task and a difficult one. If Hugh Henry and Margaret Curran can deliver that and break down the traditional departmentalitis in government, they will have delivered something valuable indeed.

I will pick up on a couple of brief points from the debate. One is on energy deregulation. The latest studies show that simple free-market energy deregulation helps everyone and is best value, particularly for disadvantaged groups. It does not appear to me to be sensible that Scottish consumers pay more because they are less likely to switch between different suppliers, as happens south of the border. There is a need for ministers to consider that policy within the current debate on energy regulation.

The progress on the warm deal is, as members said, significant and welcome. Between April 1999 and March 2001, 96,300 homes have been insulated and emissions of CO₂ have been cut by 77,000 tonnes, which is a point worth bearing in mind in the week of the Johannesburg summit when societies and countries across the globe are considering what contributions they can make. All will recall the Rio statement of "Think global, act local". The warm deal strategy is surely an

illustration of that.

The other aspect of the warm deal that I believe is important is the number of people who have been taken out of unemployment and are part of the work going on in home insulation companies across Scotland. In my own constituency of Shetland, Shetland Heatwise does an excellent job in that regard.

On the central heating programme, considerable investment is being made on installing central heating and insulation in eligible properties, which are council housing and housing association tenants and pensioners in private homes. However, I raise one note of discord on the central heating programme and that is to do with the performance of the Eaga Partnership. In a week when other ministers have come a little bit unstuck in relation to quangos, it is important for ministers to keep a close eye on the performance of the agency that has been given the task of installing the central heating. I understand that I am not the only constituency member to have had representations about the speed of action from Eaga. I could read the minister various letters. Indeed, I have probably sent him a couple of them. I would be grateful, therefore, if in his wind-up speech Mr Henry could assure Parliament that ministers are keeping a close eye on the performance of that agency. It needs to perform for us to get the benefit of the programme.

I acknowledge that when Parliament is asked in a year's time what it has done as an institution in its first session, the central heating programme will arguably be one of the most tangible illustrations of change that Parliament has achieved. I agree with Sarah Boyack on that point. As a Liberal Democrat, my long-standing aspiration has been to tackle the scandal of fuel poverty. To be part of partnership parties that are doing something about it and to be able to say proudly that during the next election will be a subject of satisfaction for my party and me.

12:08

Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland)
(Con): I too am glad that the Executive has found time so early in the Parliamentary year to debate fuel poverty, particularly in the season approaching our traditional cold and wet winters—but that description could equally describe our summers.

We are indebted to the many organisations that take a strong and continuing interest in fuel poverty. If I do not name them all, forgive me. I am thinking of Shelter, Age Concern Scotland, Capability Scotland, the National Asthma Campaign and the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland. We are grateful to them all.

I listened carefully to all the opening volleys and although there were some spats there was much to applaud in all the contributions. It would be erroneous not to say that we welcome the extra money that the minister has given to local authorities for insulation.

Let us look at the background to fuel poverty. How does it arise? Fuel poverty is caused primarily by a combination of low income, high fuel costs and poor energy efficiency. Members referred to that in the debate. The health consequences of fuel poverty are severe. Members mentioned cases within their constituencies and facts that have been brought to their attention.

The number of cases of hypothermia is higher in Scotland than in England and Wales. Winter mortality rates are also high: there are 2,000 more deaths in Scotland during the cold part of the year than there are during the warm part. Asthma and other respiratory diseases can result from dampness and condensation. One need only look at classrooms of children to see the numbers using inhalers because of breathing difficulties.

Furthermore, if a household has to spend a greater proportion of its income on fuel, it necessarily cannot spend that money on nutritious food and other health-related activity. In this day and age, it is appalling that we make people make such decisions.

Mr Stone: Lyndsay McIntosh has given a wide range of causes of poverty, but does she recognise that an even harsher climate and things such as remoteness are extremely important causes of poverty in areas such as the Highlands and Islands?

Mrs McIntosh: I am happy to accept Jamie Stone's comments, but if he will forgive me, I shall come to those issues in a wee moment.

I noted Tavish Scott's pejorative winding-up comments, but we should consider the interesting facts about privatisation. In real terms, there has been a 29 per cent fall in domestic electricity prices. Members may doubt me, but those are the figures given in the Electricity Association's press release of 21 January this year. In real terms, there has also been a 29 per cent fall in domestic gas prices. That figure comes from the House of Commons library and is based on figures provided by the Office for National Statistics. To ascribe those changes to the birth of this Parliament belittles the efforts that were made in the past.

Karen Whitefield mentioned Petersburn. Let me describe the area for those who do not know it. Petersburn was like Bethlehem with its flat roofs. Karen Whitefield rightly highlighted how the Link Housing Association in Petersburn—which I too have visited—has made such a difference in the

fuel efficiency of the houses. The condition of the buildings is fantastic.

Karen Whitefield: I am glad that the member took the time to visit Petersburn, but I would have been grateful had she told me that she was in my constituency.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Lyndsay McIntosh, you have about one minute.

Mrs McIntosh: I will talk quickly then.

Karen Whitefield is right that huge strides forward are being made in Petersburn. She also made some excellent points about asthma and the dust mite problem.

Lloyd Quinan mentioned the inequality of pre-payment meters, which can make things difficult and disadvantage people.

Phil Gallie also made a good point. Given that he worked in the energy sector, I bow to his superior knowledge—

Mr Stone: Oh no, please do not.

Mrs McIntosh: We cannot take it away from him, Jamie. He knows what he is talking about.

Phil Gallie made a good point about liquid petroleum gas. That brings me to Jamie Stone's point about the huge difficulties involved in getting fuels to people because of the roads and because of the minimum fuel payments that are required.

Quite rightly, Tricia Marwick justified what she said by giving us examples of people who fall into those pockets that mean that they do not get to the top of the list. The situations that Tricia Marwick described should shame us all.

Jamie Stone mentioned transport and the problems regarding the requirement for a minimum quantity of fuel delivery. He also highlighted the problems in delivering coal. Such things can happen even if one has a Rolls-Royce system.

I feel sorry for Jamie Stone because he had to cook the turkey on a Baby Belling. Then again, he could have had cheese, of which I know he always has a large stock.

Cathie Craigie picked up on energy audits. Being a technophobe, I do not necessarily understand all the technical data. I am happy to go with whatever has a label saying that it is the most fuel-efficient.

Helen Eadie spoke about disability. There is no doubt that some people have difficulty in operating the controls—like Robert Brown, I am a technophobe and I need things to be clear—especially those who have conditions that come with old age, such as arthritis. We need to have systems that make things easier for people to use.

I apologise and crave the Presiding Officer's indulgence if I have overrun my limit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are more or less on time. Linda Fabiani has seven minutes.

12:14

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): I speak as a regional MSP who also covers Karen Whitefield's area. I have not yet visited the scheme that was mentioned, but I am going to—and I am not going to tell her when, because I do not have to.

The SNP believes that no one in Scotland should suffer from fuel poverty. Everyone would agree with that. However, as we have heard from Lloyd Quinan, Tricia Marwick and Alex Neil, we generate so much fuel energy that warm housing should not be dependent on wealth. It should be a basic human right in our energy-rich nation.

Low incomes and low benefits are given as the first major factor in causing fuel poverty. The Executive has acknowledged that in its statement. However, the Scottish Parliament does not have the power to alter benefit rates, nor do we have sufficient power over the economy to create the conditions for improving income rates. Fuel costs are given as the second major factor but, as Lloyd said, we do not have the power to regulate fuel prices.

Phil Gallie: Will Fiona give way?

Linda Fabiani: No. I am not Fiona, so I certainly will not. Phil is always on the ball—up to date with everything.

In the absence of the ability to use the fundamental levers to effect radical change, we have to do what we can. The SNP supports the coalition Government in its intent to eradicate fuel poverty. The SNP broadly welcomes the central heating programme and the warm deal. However, as we have heard today—from Sarah Boyack and Karen Whitefield in particular—those things in isolation are not enough to effect change. They can help only if they are part of a bigger picture.

Helen Eadie will be pleased to know that building regulations now insist that socket points should be at decent heights. I am sure that that will be a huge relief to her.

Energy efficiency in housing is crucial. The improvement in building regulations is a start; it is a statement of intent. I hope that we can achieve building standards and thermal efficiency in housing of a level as high as that in Scandinavia, where people do not suffer from fuel poverty and where the weather, in parts, is even colder than ours. However, we have had that debate before.

As Shelter, the Chartered Institute of Housing

and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations never tire of reminding us, without decent housing the expenditure on services for that housing—services such as central heating—will simply fly straight out of the single-glazed steel-framed window, or straight through the roof that has not been properly thermally insulated.

Expenditure and innovation are required, and there are many good examples. Fyne Homes Ltd in Lochgilphead has a scheme that uses a communal heating system for a housing estate. It is fired by woodchips. That is innovation and an example of the way forward.

Phil Gallie mentioned the problem of heating in rural areas where we cannot have natural gas. In Cairndow, people managed at the time—though I still do not know quite how—to get funding from Scottish Homes not only to put in wood-burning fires with back boilers, but to put in storage tanks and gas central heating as well. That gave people options in how to spend their money and heat their homes. It can be done.

The cheapest housing solution is not always the best. We have to acknowledge that we have great expertise among our social housing providers and their agents—the architects. Those people are capable of providing innovative solutions to help with fuel poverty. We have to fund people to make those real improvements. We have to judge applications for social rented housing not entirely on the cost per unit. We should judge housing developments on their long-term sustainability.

Let us set milestones for a decent home standard. That has been done in England. I know that there have been problems, but the intention is to have decent homes by a specific time. With such a standard, we could tie in the central heating programme, the warm deal and all the rest. We could start by improving the minimum tolerable standard, which has been in place for more than 30 years, which is ludicrous. We should be considering raising that standard.

The SNP wants this statement to work. I worry that it will not, because of some of the evidence that I heard at the Social Justice Committee about the lack of skills available to carry on the central heating programme. We must constantly monitor the programme's effect, carrying out investigations as to who it is reaching and picking up all those who are being missed.

We heard evidence at the Social Justice Committee that we should be front-loading the investment. It is only by front-loading the investment that we will ensure that we are not leaving to the end those who are most in need. That is important for people who do not come forward because they do not know that they are entitled, and because we could end up with a

backlog of poor housing.

Mrs McIntosh: Are you suggesting that by not front-loading we could miss the 2016 target completely?

Linda Fabiani: It worries me that there is potential for that. I hope that that will not be the case. When new initiatives are set out it is often those in the know who come forward first—those in areas where people are going out and actively encouraging them to participate. There are still houses in this country that have stone walls, where insulation is not possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer is indicating that I should wind up, so I will, although I could talk about the subject forever. I would like some clarification about one of the process milestones, in relation to private rented sector houses, for 2006. Will that also cover obsolete heating systems and partial central heating systems in places such as East Kilbride, which was used for dummy runs in the 1960s and 1970s for all sorts of nonsense heating systems that are now obsolete?

It is not even worth considering supporting the Tory amendment. I often feel that the Conservative party has a set amendment which rubbishes everyone else and says that the Tories are great, into which they slot the appropriate debate. They do not bother to prepare for the debate—they just come in and spout the usual old rubbish. However, the SNP amendment is marvellous and I urge members to support it.

12:22

The Deputy Minister for Social Justice (Hugh Henry): Debates such as today's present an opportunity for the Parliament to express in meaningful terms what it can contribute to the lives of ordinary men, women and children across Scotland. Although there is a lot of jargon associated with the debate—there are many acronyms and other terms that are only meaningful to professionals—in reality, the debate is about trying to express tangibly our desire, aspiration and determination to improve the quality of life of the people whom we represent.

I am sure that I am not the only person in the chamber or associated with the Parliament who has experienced at first hand just what fuel poverty means. We should not forget what fuel poverty does to the lives of ordinary people. We all know the statistics on mortality and ill-health, but unless one has first-hand experience of waking up in a house with an inch of ice inside the window, or of the humiliation of going to bed in the winter with more clothes on than you wore during the day because your house is so cold, or of living in a house where if you move 2ft away from the only coal fire you are immediately cold, then the rest of

the debate is academic. Unfortunately, for far too many people in Scotland that is reality. The pain, suffering, indignity and ill health that go with fuel poverty still blight too many households and the lives of too many people. That is why the Executive is determined to do something about it.

The statement and the Executive's programme set ambitious targets. In a sense, that ambition is relative, because we can look at other countries that have done so much better than us over so many years. In a sense, our ambitious targets are only ambitious because of our abject failure over so many years to have done something about it. We have come late to the debate, but having come late to it we are determined to do something about the matter. In relative terms, it is still ambitious for us to do what we intend to do in a short space of time. I am heartened by the consensus in the chamber—everyone shares the ambition to do something. We may quibble and argue about whether it is being done fast enough, but we all share the intention to do something about it.

I was amused by Alex Neil's attachment to dates and targets. He wants it done by 2006. Having had his fingers burned by the SNP's target to be free by 2003, I would have thought that he might want to ca ca on dates. Perhaps the target was to be free by 1983 or 1993. All I know is that Alex Neil's ambitions on dates are unachievable. We will do something about this problem and we will do it as soon as is practically possible.

A number of specific points have been made in the debate, which we will try to answer at a later date. Some of those can be dealt with if members write to either Margaret Curran or myself.

I will consider some of the general points that have been made.

Phil Gallie: Margaret Curran referred to a grant being made to Friends of the Earth for some kind of review. Given what the minister has said, it seems that he has a very firm grasp of the situation with respect to fuel poverty, can he explain the detail of the grant and its purpose?

Hugh Henry: The grant is being made in response to the issue that Cathie Craigie raised in her speech. There is a need to have an audit of the type of houses that we have and to encourage more energy efficient houses. Friends of the Earth will attempt to identify the energy efficiency of houses that are being sold. The aim is to give buyers information, not only about structural problems that surveys would pick up, but practical information about how much the house would cost to heat and what work would be required to make heating the house affordable. It is a trial to establish what that type of exercise can show us and whether there could be wider applicability. We

await the results of the exercise with interest. It is undoubtedly the case, as Cathie Craigie and other members have said, that we need to know more about the type of houses that we have and we need to encourage the creation of more energy efficient houses.

Kenny Gibson mentioned the need for a single entry. We are attempting to do that as far as possible, to ensure that there is simplicity for those who require help and information and to eliminate complexities where possible.

Robert Brown and other members have mentioned the need for training. We are keeping a close eye on that. We recognise that there is a need to have qualified engineers. We are not aware of immediate problems, but we are in contact with the agencies involved to ensure that, if necessary, the resources are put in to have qualified engineers to deliver the systems and meet the targets.

Some interesting points have been raised about asthma and ill health. We will reflect on that matter. Asthma is an increasing problem in our society and it would not be wise to tackle one problem by creating another one. We will examine closely what has been said.

Cathie Craigie, Robert Brown and other members have mentioned partial systems. By 2004, we will move on to public sector tenants who have partial systems. The intention in that phase is to give priority to the elderly. Beyond that, we will have to consider the resources that are available to us for those who are in the private sector. We recognise that partial systems are a problem, as are—as Linda Fabiani said—some of the houses that are now approaching what could almost be described as their mid-life crisis. Those houses were put up with the best of intentions, but some of them had peculiar heating systems. With Communities Scotland, we will examine that matter closely.

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab):

As the minister knows, many of my constituents have benefited from having heating systems installed and others are in the process of having them installed. However, pensioners who rely on peat-fired stoves and heating systems are unfortunately excluded from the initiative. Does the minister agree that it is time to revisit the criteria for the scheme and to include those who are physically unable to cut, dry and take home peat to heat their homes?

Hugh Henry: Alasdair Morrison raises a similar issue to that raised by Phil Gallie and Jamie Stone, which is the problem of supporting people in rural areas. We must consider that. We do not want to ignore the plight of those in isolated communities.

Tavish Scott mentioned complaints and I have had correspondence from other members and from constituents on that. So far, the Eaga Partnership has met the targets that we set, but we will continue to discuss with Eaga to ensure that it meets targets and deals with complaints. In the first instance, complaints should be directed at Eaga, but if the system fails to respond, ministers will want to do something about that. However, at present, the targets are being met.

There are real and tangible examples of success. Members have mentioned correspondence from people who have benefited from their new heating systems. Mrs Baird, who is in the public gallery, is one such person. She did not have central heating until last Christmas. She told us that it was nice to get up each morning to the warmth.

As Robert Brown said, the central heating scheme might be the single best thing that the Parliament has done. I echo the comments of Mr and Mrs Hughes of Liberton who told me, when I visited their home, that if the Executive does nothing else for them, receiving their first central heating system will have made it worth while. Those are the words of ordinary people expressing gratitude, but also what they think they are entitled to. Such words make the scheme worth while, but they should also make us more determined to ensure that the targets are reached and surpassed as soon as possible.

Business Motion

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S1M-3346, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a business programme. I ask Euan Robson to move the motion.

12:33

The Deputy Minister for Parliamentary Business (Euan Robson): The motion includes the Scottish National Party's debate on Thursday 12 September.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Wednesday 11 September 2002

2:30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Debate on Scotland's Links with the United States of America

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—debate on the subject of S1M-3325 Mary Scanlon: Ferry Services to the Northern Isles

Thursday 12 September 2002

9:30 am Scottish National Party Debate on Acute Services Review

followed by Scottish National Party Debate on Performance of the Scottish Economy

followed by Business Motion

followed by Ministerial Statement on Spending Review 2002

2:30 pm Question Time

3:10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3:30 pm Executive Debate on Spending Review 2002

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—debate on the subject of S1M-3210 Cathie Craigie: Causing Death by Dangerous Driving

Wednesday 18 September 2002

2:00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 1 Debate on Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 September 2002

9:30 am Stage 1 Debate on Debt Arrangement and Attachment (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motion

2:30 pm Question Time

3:10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3:30 pm Executive Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

(b) that Stage 1 of the Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Bill be completed by 1 November 2002

and (c) that the Justice 1 Committee reports to the Justice 2 Committee by 17 September 2002 on the Act of Sederunt (Fees of Solicitors in the Sheriff Court) (Amendment No.3) 2002.—[*Euan Robson.*]

Motion agreed to.

12:34

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:30

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Before we begin question time, I know that members will welcome the chairman and members of the Estonian Parliament's Environment Committee, who are in the gallery. They have been meeting our committees today. *[Applause.]*

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Road Transport (Moray)

The Presiding Officer: It is with particular pleasure that I call Margaret Ewing to ask question 1. We are glad to see her back. *[Applause.]*

1. Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer and fellow members, for that warm welcome back. I thank everyone in the parliamentary complex who gave me such support and encouragement during my recent illness. It is good to be back to see everyone again.

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will make a commitment to improving the road transport facilities in Moray following the representations made to the Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning by the Elgin bypass steering group. (S1O-5470)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): I, too, welcome Mrs Ewing back to business.

I was happy to hear the views of local representatives when I visited Elgin last week. Moray Council has agreed to let me see the results of its recently commissioned investigation into traffic issues, which will inform future discussions.

Mrs Ewing: I thank the minister for his reply and for his interesting visit to Elgin. As a former candidate in Moray, he perhaps recalls with nostalgia the importance that the constituency attaches to an Elgin bypass and to the A96 as a whole. When he receives the results of that survey, will he be able to give us a clear time commitment for the building of such a bypass?

Lewis Macdonald: I will not, but I shall await the results with great interest and read them closely. As Margaret Ewing said, Elgin is a town that I know well and I am familiar with its traffic situation. When Moray Council and its partners lobbied me last week, they were clear that they needed to put a case together before looking to us for whatever support might be available. I was

impressed with the rational basis on which they put their case and with their broad base of support, which included the town's trade unions and business community as well as Elgin community council. I was also impressed with the informed way in which they recognised that, although it was useful to us to hear views and opinions, we would need to make a judgment on the basis of evidence.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, say to Margaret Ewing that it is nice to see her back again.

As the minister knows, I have also been involved in the campaign for the Elgin bypass. I appreciate what the minister has said, but I am concerned about the present dangers to pedestrians, especially the elderly. The trunk road cuts right through the town of Elgin and, for example, separates sheltered housing complexes from the post office—old people find it difficult to cross that busy road. What progress has been made in dealing with the safety issues on the road?

Lewis Macdonald: We are aware of those issues, some of which have been highlighted by the significant roadworks in Elgin this summer. That is why the Executive has asked BEAR Scotland Ltd to undertake a review of pedestrian-crossing facilities in the centre of Elgin. I also understand that the local authority will seek the inclusion of two pedestrian crossings in Tesco's scheme for the development of a new store.

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): I remind the minister that Elgin is not the only town in Moray that awaits a bypass. The people of Keith continue to wait in hope that an announcement will be made some day, preferably not never. Will the Executive take this opportunity to answer the calls of Scottish business by committing itself to significant capital spending on transport infrastructure in its upcoming spending review, so that it can help to remove the barriers to economic growth, which is currently inhibited by the lack of development of our roads network?

Lewis Macdonald: Mr Johnstone will be aware that we have a significant programme of capital investment in our roads and transport systems generally, which will continue to bring the benefits to business to which he refers. There is no proposal in the programme for a bypass at Keith. However, there is an agreed proposal for a bypass at Fochabers, which will make a significant difference to traffic movement on the A96. That will be implemented as quickly as possible.

Nephrops (West of Scotland)

The Presiding Officer: To keep it in the family, question 2 is from Fergus Ewing.

2. Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I am used to my wife having the last word, but nowadays she has the first word as well.

To ask the Scottish Executive whether a submission should be made to the European Commission calling for the west of Scotland total allowable catch of nephrops to be increased by removing the 10 per cent reduction introduced last year and, if so, whether it has made any such proposal to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and what DEFRA's response was. (S1O-5503)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Scottish Executive has put that proposal to DEFRA and it is in agreement that such a case should and will be put to the Commission.

Fergus Ewing: I am pleased to hear that news and I hope that the minister will agree that nephrops in plentiful supply are vital to west coast fishermen in Scotland, not least to those in Mallaig in my constituency. It is also important to note that the nephrops fishery poses no threat to the cod species. Does the minister agree that—to paraphrase Michael Hestletine—never in the history of the common fisheries policy have so many crustaceans survived in vain?

Ross Finnie: Gosh, I do not know how long it took to come up with that. I am bound to say that Fergus Ewing has not had enough to do during the summer recess.

I support the view that we need to restore the catch in the west of Scotland. For the benefit of other members, let me say that I believe that the nephrops catch should also be restored in the North sea. Fergus Ewing is right about the sustainable level—to judge by the figures, the current quota is way below the sustainable level. First, we will argue for the restoration of what was cut, but we will do so—as we did last year—on the basis that the bycatch is not relevant, as our evidence proves. Secondly, we will continue to argue that the overall catch should be set in line with the science, which did not happen last year.

Mr David Davidson (North-East Scotland) (Con): I appreciate that the minister agrees that that fishing stock is of immense importance to Scottish fishermen and processors. What was his department's view of the fact that no scientific evidence was offered on why a 10 per cent cut was necessary?

Ross Finnie: The 10 per cent cut and the setting of the total allowable catch were based on a total misconception about the nature of the bycatch. The persistence of the Scottish Executive, and then DEFRA, led to evidence being put to the Commission to demonstrate that the

way in which Scottish nephrops fishermen fished did not sustain the Commission's position. We made that case and I believe that the Commission accepted it for that time. It is now important to ensure that the Commission accepts that that was not just a one-off and that it is the way in which we fish for nephrops. What was cut should be restored.

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I welcome the minister's commitment to continue to fight the battle in Europe. In his reply to David Davidson, he said that we now have proof that the bycatch is insignificant. What more proof does Europe need to make its decisions? Surely by dint of that proof a decision should be taken to restore what was lost with the 10 per cent cut.

Ross Finnie: When achieving the substantial restitution of catch—to a level above what the Commission originally suggested last year—we made that very point. The fact that we achieved that restitution indicated to me that the Commission accepted our case. The Commission has come back and now wants to take averages of figures over several years. We are making our case. We do not accept the Commission's position and the point that I have been making persistently is that the evidence that we have produced and the argument that Fergus Ewing and others are making is that the sustainable level of the fisheries is way above the TAC. There is no reason for Europe not to accede to that, but no doubt we will have to battle the case.

The Presiding Officer: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Scottish Transport Group Pension Funds

4. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made in regard to the ex gratia payments from the Scottish Transport Group pension funds surplus. (S1O-5487)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): Significant progress has been made and, by the end of last week, more than 2,500 payments had been made to pensioners, to a value of approximately £20 million.

Dennis Canavan: I welcome the fact that payments are—at last—being made. Is the minister aware that, under the current proposals, the Treasury will pocket more than 60 per cent of the surplus, while the ex-employees will receive less than 40 per cent and will also have to pay income tax? In contrast, in the case of the National Bus Company south of the border, about 60 per cent of the surplus went to the ex-employees, who received tax-free payments, as is usually the case with lump-sum payments from pension funds. Will

the minister pursue those matters with the Treasury and the Inland Revenue in order to ensure full justice for the STG pensioners?

Lewis Macdonald: We are continuing to discuss with the Inland Revenue the taxable status of individual ex gratia payments. As Mr Canavan will know, the rules of the schemes in Scotland are different from those in England and have produced some differences in terms of their taxable status. In addition, the trustees of the Scottish schemes chose at an early stage not to make payments direct from the pension scheme in the way that the trustees from the English schemes chose to do. That was a matter for the trustees and is not something over which ministers have authority. However, we are continuing to discuss with the Inland Revenue whether there is any way of addressing that issue in order to improve the tax position of the Scottish pensioners.

I should add that, since my appearance at the Public Petitions Committee in the chamber a few weeks before the recess, we have spoken with the Treasury and have obtained an additional £8 million in accumulated surplus over the period to the wind-up of the scheme.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): What progress has been made in considering the claims of families where the bus pensioner has died?

Lewis Macdonald: The progress that has been made is that, where a beneficiary has died since the key date of 7 June 2002, which is when the scheme was wound up, the position is now straightforward: the benefit is paid at 100 per cent, as it would have been in other circumstances. We have also found a means by which to address the position in those cases where a beneficiary has died since 18 December 2000, which is the date on which the Scottish ministers announced agreement with the Treasury on distribution of the surplus. Those arrangements will allow 100 per cent of benefits to be paid to those widowed since December 2000.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Is it not inconceivable that the Scottish pensioners will be liable to income tax on those payments when their counterparts in England receive the payments free of tax? Does not that amount to a regime of fiscal apartheid and make a mockery of the claim that there is fairness in the United Kingdom?

Lewis Macdonald: If Mr Ewing had listened closely to my answer to Mr Canavan, he would appreciate that the difference between the arrangements in Scotland and England is not one that lies with the Government or the Executive, but one that relates to the means by which the trustees of the different schemes chose to make payments to pensioners and beneficiaries. We are

aware of the points that have been made by pensioners, which is why we have sought and obtained additional funds from the Treasury, so that the average pay-out to Scottish pensioners will be at least £1,000 more than the average pay-out to English pensioners. Clearly, we also want to address the tax position, which is why we are continuing to discuss the matter with the Inland Revenue.

Railtrack (West Coast Main Line)

5. Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with representatives of Railtrack over the upgrading of the west coast main line. (S10-5490)

The Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Iain Gray): The Scottish Executive is in regular contact with Railtrack on a wide range of issues, including railway infrastructure projects.

Nora Radcliffe: It was reported in August that Railtrack might look to save money on the west coast mainline project by upgrading the line only as far north as Manchester. The upgrading is to allow tilting trains to tilt, which increases their maximum speed to 125mph. Full upgrading could cut journey times between London and Glasgow by up to an hour. Does the minister agree that it is essential to maintain a coherent rail network and to keep faith with the train operator that has purchased the tilting trains? Does he agree that, if we are to ensure journey times from Scotland to London that persuade travellers to use the most environmentally friendly mode of transport, which is the train, rather than the most polluting form, which is air, there can be no question of not upgrading the line along its complete length?

The Presiding Officer: That question was rather long.

Iain Gray: I agree with everything that Nora Donaldson said—[*Interruption.*] I agree with what Nora Radcliffe said, even if I cannot remember her name. [*Laughter.*] I apologise to the member.

The Strategic Rail Authority, which is responsible for the project, has made it clear that the upgrade covers the whole line, will increase capacity and will lead to shorter journey times along the entire route, including the Scottish part of it.

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): Will the minister give a categorical assurance that the current projected reduction in travel times will be achieved? If so, by what date will that happen? If not, why not?

Iain Gray: As my previous answer made clear, the Strategic Rail Authority is responsible for the matter. Along with its partners, the authority is

reviewing its plans to upgrade the west coast main line. It will complete its review very soon and will issue a long-term strategy for this key route. We will then know the answers to some of Mr MacAskill's questions.

West Lothian College

6. Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to resolve any short and longer-term structural financial problems facing West Lothian College. (S10-5469)

The Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Iain Gray): The Scottish Further Education Funding Council is responsible for funding Scotland's further education colleges. The council works closely with all our colleges to promote their efficiency and financial stability. Ministers have provided additional funding for the creation of a new FE development directorate in the Scottish Further Education Funding Council to improve governance and management across a wide range of issues, by drawing on existing expertise within the sector.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the minister recognise that the situation of West Lothian College is unique? Does he understand that it was the first private finance initiative-funded college and that it was set up by the old Scottish Office under the previous Conservative Government? Does he acknowledge that 13 staff members are being made redundant in an area where we need to ensure that students can learn new skills after the job losses at Motorola and NEC? Does he recognise that a one-off payment now to help a successful college that has to turn away students would save the taxpayer money in the long term? Does he agree that even the biggest fans of PFI—I am certainly not one of them—would never have set up a PFI contract of the sort under which West Lothian College has to operate?

Iain Gray: I recognise the unique circumstances of West Lothian College. That is why to some extent it has been treated in a unique fashion in its funding regime. The college has received funding growth to 43,000 units of student activity four years earlier than planned. It has received special funding of around £3 million per annum and £120,000 as its share of the capital allocation that other colleges receive but that it does not need because it is a PFI project. In recent years, the college has received significant increases in funding. Last year, the increase was 30 per cent—more than for any other college in Scotland.

I look to the Scottish Further Education Funding Council to work with West Lothian College to ensure its long-term future. I am happy to agree that the college has enormous potential and is doing extremely good work.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): I am glad that the minister recognises the potential that West Lothian College has, both because of its location in the fastest-growing part of Scotland and because of the demand for further education that exists in the community. Will he encourage the funding council, in its on-going discussions with the college, to seek a short-term solution to the £800,000 deficit that the college currently faces so that learning opportunities for the people of West Lothian are not damaged?

Iain Gray: I met the chair of the Scottish Further Education Funding Council only a week or so ago and that was one of the topics that was discussed. I have certainly made it clear to her that we expect the funding council to work with the college to see what possibilities there are for improving its financial position. I know that Mr Muldoon has also been in touch with and met representatives of the college. There are possibilities that are worth exploring and I expect them to be explored quickly. I think that a meeting is taking place on Monday, at which I hope progress can be made.

Schools (Vending Machines)

7. Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will support local education authorities that remove confectionery and soft drink vending machines from schools and what steps it plans to take to ban the installation of such vending machines in schools. (S10-5449)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Nicol Stephen): The use of vending machines in schools was one of a number of additional issues that were considered recently by the expert panel on school meals in its interim report "Hungry For Success", which is currently out for consultation. The panel took the view that education authorities should establish working guidelines for school vending machines with the objective of promoting healthier choices and improved diet. Ministers will receive the panel's final report by the end of this year.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: Yes, but I would like to hear the minister's personal opinion. To most people it is the greatest possible hypocrisy on the one hand to urge children to have a better diet, to eat fewer sweets and to consume fewer sugary drinks, while on the other hand to help to finance state schools—mainly in areas of high deprivation—by having vending machines in front halls. Professor Hanlon, the director of the Public Health Institute of Scotland, has called that scandalous. I would like to hear the minister's own view.

Nicol Stephen: Dorothy-Grace Elder knows that I do not stand here to give my personal opinion on any matter, but rather to answer questions to the

Scottish Executive. The Executive's view on the matter is very clear. We want to see healthier options in our schools and we are going to take action on the expert panel's report when it is provided. The issue of branding on vending machines is important. We support many of the initiatives that many education authorities have taken on vending machines.

We do not have the power to implement a total ban, but it would be interesting to hear the personal views of members on how such a ban might be introduced. The Parliament could, however, take a lead on the issue because, as members know, there are a number of vending machines in our accommodation across the road on George IV Bridge.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: Yes, but we are adults.

The Presiding Officer: I for one depend on them.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): Will the minister join me in congratulating North Lanarkshire Council and the south Coatbridge social inclusion partnership on their pilot schemes to provide free accessible drinking water in four Coatbridge primary schools? What steps does he intend to take to ensure that all Scotland's children have access to free drinking water throughout the school day?

Nicol Stephen: I support those initiatives and—in my view—they should not be pilot projects. I believe that all schools in Scotland and all pupils should have access to free water. There are also a number of interesting pilot projects on access to free school milk. I support Aberdeen City Council's initiative, which was launched last week, to make free school milk available in its primary schools. There are a number of initiatives on the matter. It is not all about school lunches, however. There should be access to high-quality food, water and milk from breakfast time on throughout the school day.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I want to go back to vending machines. I wonder whether the minister acknowledges that parents' greatest concern is their children's leaving school premises at break time to buy sweets and drinks in local shops. At least if the schools have vending machines on the premises, it keeps children in the school building and reduces risk to them. Ultimately, decisions about such matters should be taken not by the Scottish Executive or local authorities, but by head teachers in consultation with school boards.

Nicol Stephen: I agree fully that head teachers and school boards have an important role to play in the matter. Dorothy-Grace Elder and other members said that this is a children-versus-adults matter, but we must balance that with parental

choice and personal liberties. We should ask ourselves whether we should restrain our children and keep them in their school buildings throughout the day; that is an important question. Unless we change the guidelines and rules, there will always be an issue about choice.

In my view, the best approach is to make our school meals far more nutritious and attractive and to ensure that far more young people in our schools want to take up the school meals, water and milk that are available. That is what the main initiative will be in the Executive's response to the expert panel.

Football (European Championships)

8. Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made recently on the joint Scottish-Irish bid to host the European football championships in 2008. (S10-5488)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Mike Watson): Good progress has been made over recent months. We have secured bid sponsorship from BT, Diageo and the British Airports Authority and we will announce another major bid sponsor next week. At present, we are concentrating on preparations for the Union of European Football Associations inspection visit, which will take place in two weeks.

Mr McNeil: I thank the minister for his response. Does he accept that having a healthier national game would stand us in better stead when we bid for such prestigious events? Does he further accept that grass-roots facilities are key to such bids? Will he come to my constituency to see the work that is being done by Gourrock Youth Athletic Club which, with no Government funding, is working to keep 700 local kids off the streets, off their computers and off drugs?

Mike Watson: The Executive is very much in favour of youth football and youth sporting activities. We are considering the physical activity task force report and I have no doubt that the sort of activities that will benefit from the spin-off from a Euro 2008 championship bid will include youth football and youth sports in general. UEFA demands such spin-offs from bidders; we are complying with that demand.

On Duncan McNeil's first point about the success of the national team, a successful bid would also have a knock-on effect on the standard of the Scottish football team. For example, there is clear evidence from this summer's world cup in Korea and Japan, and from other tournaments, that countries' performance—during and after such competitions—benefits from hosting the competitions.

Energy Intermediary Technology Institute

9. Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Executive when it will announce the location of the energy intermediary technology institute. (S1O-5462)

The Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Iain Gray): Scottish Enterprise is working up details on the proposed ITIs—including the ITI for energy—for consideration by its board. An announcement will be made in the light of the board's decision.

Brian Adam: I thank the minister for that reply, although I am not sure why it requires my thanks. The plans have been worked up for at least two years, but when are we likely to hear the announcement? A time scale would be much appreciated, particularly in light of the implications of the oil tax for the oil industry. The industry's confidence has been shot and drilling in the North sea is at a low ebb. We need an early answer to questions about when the establishment of the energy ITI will be announced, and where it will be located.

Iain Gray: I expect that it will be possible for announcements to be made soon, and that an announcement on the energy ITI will be the first of those announcements. Responsibility for making that announcement lies with Scottish Enterprise which, as we learned last week, achieved 18 out of its 21 targets for last year. The ITIs are central to Scottish Enterprise's programme every year, so we should have a fair degree of confidence that it will make an announcement soon.

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): Does the minister agree that it is important that the ITIs get off to the best possible start, given the investment that is required? I hope that the minister will soon be convinced, as I am already, that Aberdeen is the best location for the energy ITI, if it is to succeed. The energy ITI should be in close proximity to the oil and gas industry, which is becoming increasingly involved in renewables. That would benefit all in Scotland who have energy research expertise, wherever they are located.

Iain Gray: Before a decision about the location is made, a set of criteria will be drawn up and locations will be judged against them. Given Aberdeen's position as the oil and gas capital of the United Kingdom and Europe, I think that it has a pretty strong case. I should acknowledge that Elaine Thomson has made that case to me more times than I care to remember. I am sure that she will continue to do so.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): Does the minister agree that, wherever the institute of energy is located, it must concentrate on the skills shortages that exist in the electricity industry and

on the possibilities for the renewables sector? Will he also consider how the institute can link to academic Scotland and encourage more graduates to look for opportunities in the oil and gas industry, which is still a great Scottish industry?

Iain Gray: The ITIs are expected to create a link between industry and academic research. That link will work in both directions by commercialising the results of academic research and by commissioning research for which there is a clear market. The central purpose of the energy ITI is to make it clear to people that the sector has a great future in Scotland and that it needs the brightest and best people to work in it.

Drug Misuse

10. Brian Fitzpatrick (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive how it is helping local communities to tackle drug misuse. (S1O-5493)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Dr Richard Simpson): Communities throughout Scotland are benefiting from all four pillars of our drugs strategy. The strategy is backed by about £130 million in new resources over three years. For example, our enforcement organisations are achieving excellent results in seizing the drugs that cause most harm. Treatment and rehabilitation of drug misusers helps them to reintegrate into their communities and reduces drug-related crime. Through our "know the score" communications strategy, we are giving young people and communities the opportunity to obtain factual information about the risks of drugs and about where help and advice can be obtained. This summer, the Scottish Executive and the *Daily Record* launched the Scottish communities against drugs initiative—SCAD—which gave about £500,000 to 56 community groups across Scotland for anti-drug projects.

Brian Fitzpatrick: That investment is welcome, but will the minister acknowledge that the structure of our drugs policy depends on our securing local community support and that securing that support depends on providing evidence to communities that we are committed to effective treatment of drug users, including offending drug users? Will he urgently consider making drug treatment and testing orders a disposal that is available to the sheriffs at Dumbarton, as he has been urged to do by Jackie Baillie and me?

Dr Simpson: Drug treatment and testing orders have proved to be effective and we have published our evaluation of them, which has allowed us to roll out the programme. At the moment, three centres operate—in Glasgow, Fife and Aberdeen—and we have announced seven more sheriff courts in which the disposal will soon

be available. However, there are staffing issues and the evaluation showed us that, if the disposal is to be effective, we need to have appropriate staff levels. There are some constraints on us, but we will roll out the initiative as soon as we can.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister investigate the chronically low level of drug rehabilitation services at HM Prison Aberdeen at Craiginchies so that we can reduce reoffending and crime in our local communities?

Dr Simpson: I met the Aberdeenshire drug action team while the Parliament was in Aberdeen and we have had further discussions. There are particular problems in Aberdeen that need to be addressed.

Contrary to rumour, I spent the summer meeting drug action teams throughout Scotland and have found that effective working partnerships are being established and capacity is being built. I will not deny that there are particular problems in the Grampian area that are related to cocaine and to getting quick treatment. We are aware of those problems and will address them.

NHS 24

11. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive when it intends to launch NHS 24 nationally. (S10-5464)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): NHS 24 is rolling out throughout Scotland as part of a phased programme over the next two years. It is currently available in Grampian and will cover the rest of Scotland by the end of 2004.

John Farquhar Munro: I am sure that the minister will agree that the potential benefits of NHS 24 will be best appreciated in remote rural parts, where access to any form of medical assistance might be many hours away. As a result, will he consider rolling out the scheme in the Highlands and Islands as soon as that is practically possible?

Malcolm Chisholm: NHS 24 is an important part of redesigning services from the patients' point of view in order to provide right time, right place care. However, John Farquhar Munro is right to say that the service has particular advantages for members of the public and health care staff in rural areas. Last week, when I launched NHS 24 officially in Aberdeen, I was pleased to talk about the people who are already benefiting from the service. I know that it will be rolled out across the Highlands very soon, which will be of great help to members of the public who are concerned about that. For example, 30 per cent of calls are being dealt with appropriately

through nurse advice. However, rolling out the service will also help general practitioners in the Highlands, who will not have to take so many out-of-hours calls, but instead will have that work done for them by the NHS 24 staff in Aberdeen.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The business cases for NHS 24 call centres were based on the premise that no nurses would be displaced from the NHS. Will the minister outline the effect on nurse recruitment and retention in the NHS trusts where call centres exist?

Malcolm Chisholm: Last week, I also spoke to a large number of NHS 24 staff. It is clearly a nurse-based service and the nurses involved come from a variety of places. For example, I was pleased to speak to a nurse who was previously employed in Germany. I also know that many nurses are working flexibly at call centres, which means that they might be working part time there in the evenings and part time in the NHS.

However, we are very aware of the potential for nurse displacement, which is why we are rolling out the service carefully. For example, in the west of Scotland, we have set up a forum that involves human resources directors and others from trusts in the area to ensure that the roll-out is carried out with minimal damage to other health care institutions. That said, the matter has to be governed by our overall programme to increase both the recruitment and retention of nurses, which is why that is currently a key priority for us.

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): Having set up and managed the first NHS patients helpline, I should put on record my support for the concept of NHS 24. However, the minister might have to take account of the fact that GPs in Aberdeen are a little underwhelmed by the way that it is working so far. The concept itself is not to blame and I ask him to ensure that, in reviewing the service, he looks back at the original standards that were set 10 years ago. By doing so, we might be able to get around the problem of nurse recruitment.

Malcolm Chisholm: I certainly agree with the idea of learning lessons, because I support a culture of continuous improvement in the health service. I should say that, during my previous visit to Aberdeen, I was pleased to speak to some GPs who welcomed the service. However, I notice that two individuals were recently quoted in a newspaper and accept that one or two GPs have concerns. I will certainly be pleased to listen to the issues that they raise. That said, the fact of the matter is that a great deal of work has been done with GPs in the Grampian area and a vast majority of them welcome the service.

The service has been improved and is different from the English service, partly because it is very

much integrated and involves GPs. With our service, calls can go straight through to GPs, whereas in England people have to put down the phone and make another call.

Public Transport

12. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made in improving access to public transport for older people and people with disabilities. (S1O-5499)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): Good progress is being made in a number of areas, including the launch earlier this week of Enable's thistle travel card with Executive support, the agreement that the national free concessionary travel scheme for blind people will continue indefinitely in its present form and the introduction of free local off-peak bus travel for pensioners and disabled people at the end of this month.

Johann Lamont: I welcome the minister's positive response. He might be aware of Glasgow City Council's excellent work in involving the users of the council's internal transport service in shaping the service. I should add that the users and carers grabbed the opportunity with both hands and to great effect. That approach could be considered as a model for use elsewhere in the country.

However, given the fact that many older people and people who have disabilities would prefer the independence of travelling on the public service system, what steps are being taken to ensure that those who deliver our public transport service, such as private bus companies and others, take proper account of the needs of the elderly and those who have disabilities in training their staff and in making decisions on timetables, routes and other issues—matters which in turn shape the capacity of people to use those services?

Lewis Macdonald: The Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 requires local authorities to consult representatives of users when setting up quality partnerships or quality contracts with private bus operators to secure services in their areas. That provides general support for the objective that Johann Lamont identifies. The thistle travel card, which I launched this week, is for use by people who have learning disabilities. The transport operators that have signed up to that scheme, including the Confederation of Passenger Transport, agree to undertake training of their staff to assist those who have disabilities in using public transport.

First Minister's Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Before we begin First Minister's question time, I should say that I always appreciate notes from members beforehand if they feel that they have a particular reason to be called to ask supplementary questions. It is impossible to deal with such requests if the notes are simply passed up to the desk, especially as one of this afternoon's notes was unsigned, which makes it very difficult.

I do not normally reveal my hand in advance but, in view of the statements yesterday and today, I do not propose to call any extra supplementaries on questions 3 and 4. In that way, I hope that we will get to questions 5 and 6 and perhaps allow other members in on questions 1 and 2.

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S1F-2046)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): As I heard other members doing when I arrived this afternoon, I welcome Margaret Ewing back to the chamber. It is good to see her back in action. [Applause.]

Next week, the Cabinet will, as ever, discuss matters of importance to Scotland. We will also have a presentation and discussion on improving performance and management in Scotland's public services—a key part of our investment and reform package, which will be announced in the spending review.

Mr Swinney: I thank the First Minister for his answer and also for his kind words about Margaret Ewing, which are warmly welcomed on this side of the chamber.

In April, the First Minister told the Scottish Trades Union Congress conference that any privatisation under his Government would not lead to a two-tier work force. In Kilmarnock prison, experienced prison officers will be paid £9,000 less than their counterparts in the public service. If that is not a two-tier work force, what is?

The First Minister: I warmly welcome the statement that the Deputy First Minister made this morning. With both public investment and a proper mix of public and private provision, it will ensure the improvement and modernisation of Scotland's prison services. Within that, there will, of course, be contracts in the private sector and contracts in the public sector. The objective in all those contracts should be the service that is provided and the outcomes that are desired, and that is

what we will continue to concentrate on.

Mr Swinney: That was a very revealing answer, as it gave absolutely no commitment to the First Minister's claim that he would attack two-tier work forces in Scotland. The situation looks bad enough judging from the figure that I gave in my first supplementary question, but the staff ratios in private prisons are also a cause for concern. For every 100 prisoner places, there are 104 staff in the public sector prison in Aberdeen. In Inverness there are 100 staff and in Edinburgh there are 82 staff, but in Kilmarnock private prison there are only 53 staff for every 100 prisoner places. Is it not the case that the only way in which private prisons can work is by driving down the cost of staff and the number of staff? Is that not the intention of the First Minister's reforms?

The First Minister: Absolutely not. Many of those issues will continue to be discussed, as they should be, in the working group that we have established, which is discussing the two-tier work force with the STUC and the trade unions. That is right and proper. It is also right and proper to put on the record the fact that the work done by staff, the conditions in which they work, the physical environment of the prisons and other matters are different in the design of public and private prisons in Scotland. Such differences contribute greatly to the figures that Mr Swinney quotes, but again he distorts those figures to scare the Scottish public, and that is wrong. I advise Mr Swinney to consult occasionally—

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): The First Minister is desperate.

The First Minister: Right. I shall advise Mr Crawford as well. I advise both Mr Crawford and Mr Swinney to consult someone else on this subject, rather than just me. I advise them to consult someone who said, in January 2001, in a comment on prisons, that they were

"neutral on the issue of whether the service provision is from a public or private sector provider, judging each case on the merits of quality and efficiency of service. Value for taxpayers money is the priority."

The person who wrote the article from which that quotation is taken was the SNP's finance spokesperson, Andrew Wilson.

Mr Swinney: I have given the First Minister the facts from the Scottish Executive's consultation documents on the prison service. If he will not listen to the facts, perhaps he will listen to the opinions of a former member of staff at Kilmarnock prison, who said in today's *Daily Record*:

"I was often left on my own on a wing in charge of 92 prisoners ... Management are only interested in making as much money as they can."

Those are the types of reform over which the First Minister is presiding. Is it not the case that the

First Minister's plan for private prisons is morally repugnant and that it puts private profit before public safety?

The First Minister: It is certainly not. The plan to modernise Scotland's prisons that was announced this morning is the best plan for Scotland's prisons and the best plan for Scotland. It will ensure that we have the right prison for remand and the right investment in the public sector and it will ensure, above all, that we meet the objectives that we set.

We have done that work with absolutely no assistance from the Scottish National Party. SNP members have come to the Parliament month after month to criticise the proposals that were put out to consultation. The new proposals that were announced this morning outline a real alternative. They demonstrate that we have listened to people in making our decisions. One of the reasons why it was easier to listen to the members who sit behind me rather than to SNP members is that the members who sit behind me at least responded to the consultation. There were only two SNP responses to the consultation. No SNP councils responded, but let us give credit where it is due. Stewart Stevenson made a submission to the prisons consultation on behalf of his constituents and I congratulate him on that. He also deserves some credit for his involvement with the campaign by partners of the staff.

There was only one other response. It did not come from the current leadership of the SNP; it came from Alex Salmond. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: The SNP leadership might have some credibility if Mr Swinney agreed with his finance spokesperson and came up with some ideas of his own. It would have helped if, this morning, Ms Cunningham could have welcomed the progress that has been made and the listening that has been done to the people of Scotland.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Is the First Minister aware of the proposed closure of the Burntisland plant in my constituency, which was announced today by Alcan? Will he assure me that urgent action will be taken to ensure that everything is done to explore all options in the 90-day consultation period and that Alcan's customer base is aware of that?

The First Minister: I have been aware of Marilyn Livingstone's concern about the matter. In recent months, Iain Gray, the Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning, has been involved in discussions with Marilyn Livingstone and with the company. He sought to ensure Alcan's continued presence in Burntisland and, once it became clear that the company was considering leaving the area, he sought to ensure

that it would try to find a buyer rather than announce a closure. Today's extremely disappointing announcement requires discussion with Fife Enterprise and other local bodies. We will do all that we can to assist in the provision of alternative employment in that area. I am sure that Marilyn Livingstone will want to be involved in that process.

Cabinet (Reshuffle)

2. David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether he has any plans to reshuffle his Cabinet. (S1F-2049)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): As First Minister, I have no plans to reshuffle my Cabinet. Members of my Cabinet remain focused on delivering improvements in education, health and transport, on tackling crime and, most important, on growing the Scottish economy to create jobs.

David McLetchie: That answer will come as a surprise to very many and a relief to very few.

In case he is unable to recall it, I remind the First Minister that water was the portfolio that Wendy Alexander did not want in March 2001. It was dumped in the lap of Mr Finnie, in whom the public has so little confidence that he is now being parodied as a latter-day Little Bo Peep. We all know that the First Minister is stuck with the man because of the coalition deal with the Liberal Democrats, but the man does not have to be stuck with the job. Will the First Minister consider reshuffling responsibilities and perhaps give water to a Cabinet minister who is able to give it the attention that it deserves?

The First Minister: I will absolutely not do that. Presumably the enthusiastic response that we heard from the Conservative back benches was encouraged by Nick Johnston's most recent remarks.

Water is an important issue. I was here yesterday afternoon. I heard Ross Finnie apologise for the error that he made in good faith during the course of the debate. I also heard everything else that he said. Frankly, it is far more important that we invest in the water supply systems that we need in Scotland and that that is completed in the way in which progress has been made in recent years, and in the way in which further progress will be made in the years to come.

Secondly, it is important that we set the right standards, get the right scientific advice and take prompt action on that advice. Both Ross Finnie and the Minister for Health and Community Care have been actively involved in that over the past month and I have every confidence that they will see it through to the right conclusion.

David McLetchie: Perhaps the First Minister might like to consider the potential cost of that confidence. The First Minister will be aware that a number of businesses in Glasgow were already considering making compensation claims against Scottish Water in respect of the interruption to their supplies. There is now a real prospect of 150,000 domestic consumers joining in because of the failure of the minister and Scottish Water to implement the recommendations of the health board report—a failure in their duty of care that was vividly illustrated by the minister's performance yesterday.

Such claims could cost millions. Could the First Minister tell us who is going to pay? Will it be the rest of us as Scottish Water customers, or all of us as taxpayers? Will the water industry commissioner be able to recommend payment of compensation to customers to forestall a flood of legal actions?

The First Minister: Those matters will all be dealt with in the proper way, with the right advice and ensuring that the right decisions are taken in the public interest, in Glasgow and elsewhere.

However, it is entirely wrong to paint a picture in which either Scottish Water or the health services in either Glasgow or Edinburgh appear to be entirely negligent in the matter. In my view, in both cases, serious mistakes were made in communication and mistakes were made in co-ordination. However, in both cases, the public health officials, in particular, did their jobs and did them well.

Scottish Water spotted that the levels of cryptosporidium had increased. That would not have happened in years gone by. The main reason why it would not have happened in years gone by was chronic underinvestment. One of the reasons why today's standards are different in Scotland—as in England—as was described yesterday by Ross Finnie, is that the level of investment in Scotland by the Conservative Government between 1979 and 1997 was appallingly low. That is why the programme of investment that we now require will take those high standards in Scottish Water even higher. That programme of investment is right and Ross Finnie is the right guy to do it.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): What representations have been made to the United Kingdom Government over the pay claim of the Fire Brigades Union? What arrangements have been put in place in the event of a strike? The First Minister is bound to be aware that limited action has been taken by the fire brigades in both Fife and Strathclyde. The Scottish public would expect some reassurance that arrangements are in place and would like to know what arrangements the Cabinet has made.

The First Minister: The Cabinet is discussing every possible eventuality and paying particular attention to the progress of the negotiations. However, in the past half hour we have welcomed the announcement by Nick Raynsford of the office of the Deputy Prime Minister in London that there will be an independent inquiry into the fire service. That inquiry will consider the role of the fire services, pay and conditions and future arrangements for determining pay and conditions. That is a significant step forward. It is the step forward that should contribute to there being no strike.

I strongly advise the Scottish National Party to join with all the other parties in the chamber in asking the firefighters to resist striking and putting lives at risk, and in asking all those involved to get on with the negotiations and to ensure that we find a solution to this long-standing problem.

World Summit on Sustainable Development

3. Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the outcome will be of his visit to the sustainable development summit in South Africa. (S1F-2038)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): While the summit may not have delivered everything we would have wished, some important international agreements were reached. In addition, on education and energy we developed links with South Africa that will deliver significant benefits for the future. As I said in the chamber yesterday, I am committed to ensuring that the summit outcomes will be minimum standards in Scotland. Wherever possible, we can, we must and we will do more.

Richard Lochhead: I welcome the fact that Scotland was represented through the First Minister at the summit in South Africa, despite the fact that it was not at the heart of the negotiations, where many of us would like it to be. Is the First Minister aware that many people are referring to the summit as the world summit of shameful deals, because there was no clear road map towards sustainable development in the action plan that was produced? Does the First Minister recognise that here in Scotland we do not have our own strategy towards sustainable development? Will he explain why that is the case, and will he give an undertaking to the chamber today to bring one forward in the near future, so that Scotland can make her own contribution to saving the planet?

The First Minister: I presume that Richard Lochhead was not here yesterday, so I would be happy to send him a transcript of my statement and the discussion that took place afterwards, and to send him the variety of documents, press releases and information that has been produced by the Executive over the past three years and

three months to take forward our work on sustainable development, on which we have a clear strategy. We have action plans that are now delivering and which work towards targets that are more ambitious than those in many other parts of the world.

Although many of the outcomes of the summit, in particular in relation to energy, are disappointing for those who believe passionately in sustainable development, a number of other positive agreements were reached, in particular on water and sanitation. It is important that we take those agreements forward, and ensure that the action that is carried out makes a difference, in particular in the developing world. I hope that Richard Lochhead, when he learns more about the outcome, will be able to support that.

Scottish Prison Service (Estates Review)

4. Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Executive will ensure that public safety is paramount in all decisions relating to the Scottish Prison Service estates review. (S1F-2051)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We made it clear when we launched the prison estates review that public safety was paramount and central to the decisions that we would take. As the Deputy First Minister announced this morning, the Scottish Prison Service has been instructed to bring forward proposals to improve the management of prisons in Scotland and for full reporting of performance against those standards. One of the key performance indicators will cover public safety.

Margaret Jamieson: I hope that the First Minister will forgive me for taking a second bite at the cherry by asking him to meet me to explore ways of improving the terms and conditions of my many constituents who are employed at Kilmarnock prison. That would lead to greater public confidence in safety at Kilmarnock.

The First Minister: Those matters are rightly primarily for discussion between the trade unions that represent the people who work there and the employer. It is right and proper that they have discussions about terms and conditions. I understand that this morning the Deputy First Minister gave a guarantee that he would have a discussion with Margaret Jamieson on this matter. I am happy that that discussion will take place but, ultimately, these matters are for the private employer and the trade unions to resolve.

Release of Convicted Prisoners

5. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): To ask the First Minister what consideration the Scottish Executive will give to an amendment to the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill

to allow prosecutors a statutory right to be heard on behalf of the public interest before convicted prisoners, including those convicted of rape, serious assault, murder or culpable homicide are released. (S1F-2033)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Although bail in such circumstances is rare, it is clearly a matter of great concern to the public and to me when someone absconds while on bail after being convicted of a serious offence. Decisions on bail are rightly a matter for the courts, but we want to be sure—we all need to be sure—that courts have proper information before them when they take these decisions. Jim Wallace will shortly discuss this matter with the Lord Justice General.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I welcome the First Minister's answer. As a non-practising advocate, I ask the First Minister whether it is not shameful that such decisions can be made about people who have been convicted of serious crimes. They can be released on bail after conviction without the prosecution's having any opportunity to present issues to do with protection of the public. Could the matter properly be addressed by the Justice 2 Committee in due course?

The First Minister: I understand the concerns that the member raises, but I do not want to exaggerate them. The case that the member and others highlighted recently was the only case last year, so we should not scare the public into believing that loads of murderers are out there on bail and are therefore a threat to public safety. Every case that might cause such concern is significant in its own way. I understand the concerns and I have some sympathy with them. I hope that the Justice 2 Committee might consider the issue. We would welcome any advice that the committee wanted to give.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I ask the First Minister to consider whether a bail hearing on an indictable offence and a bail application in an appeal against conviction on an indictable offence should be heard in public and not in chambers. In the first instance, which occurs pre-trial, the accused's rights are protected by section 4 of the Contempt of Court Act 1981. At present, those proceedings take place in private. It would assist the public if they were in the public domain.

The First Minister: As I said, the Minister for Justice will discuss those matters with the Lord Justice General soon. The minister will have heard what Christine Grahame said and I am sure that he will include those issues in his discussions.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Another concern is striking the balance between releasing alleged criminals on bail and

remanding them into custody. Will the First Minister assure me that our justice system does all that it can to get that balance right, so that minor offenders are not on remand in prison and the public do not find that people who are charged with more serious violent offences are out on bail, to the dismay of their alleged victims? I also ask for assurances that the proposed new remand prison will separate those who have been charged with serious violent crimes from those who have been charged with lesser offences, so that they do not come into contact with one another.

The First Minister: I was a member of the Cornton Vale prison visiting committee back in the mid-1980s. At that time—never mind now, when the figures are significantly worse—I was surprised by the number, even in a women's prison, of remand prisoners who were in the same area as prisoners who had been convicted of serious offences.

The increased use of remand by our courts requires our attention. That is why the Deputy First Minister was right this morning to propose a new prison that will be for the purpose of remand, at least initially. If, through that measure, we can secure a different arrangement for those who are on remand and keep people who may be innocent or involved in minor offences away from those who have been convicted of more serious offences and from the possibility of being dragged into a life of more serious crime, that will be an important step.

We should also continue to discuss with those who are responsible for our courts the number of people who are being put on remand. We must do that to ensure that our health services can deal with the treatment to which prison is in some cases thought to be the only alternative and that only those who require to be detained are in our prisons. For others, when there is a safe alternative for the public that holds people in some restraint but not in prison, that alternative should be available.

Looked-after Children

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is a debate on motion S1M-3351, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on throughcare and aftercare of looked-after children, and two amendments to that motion.

15:35

The Minister for Education and Young People (Cathy Jamieson): I welcome the opportunity the debate gives us to look at the important issue of what happens to young people after they leave local authority care. It would be fair to say that the issue has not had the attention it deserves over the years, but that is something that we can now put right.

Every young person needs help, advice and support to make a successful transition to independent adult living. Supporting our own children when they leave home is one of the most important responsibilities that we have as parents. Local authorities, as corporate parents, have that important responsibility for the young people they look after. For young people leaving care, the change to adult living can be doubly daunting. They may have little or no contact with their natural families; they may not have a foster family to provide support; or they may have felt at home in the children's unit that they now have to leave. We have a duty to young people who are leaving care to make sure that the proper support systems are put in place to help them make the best possible start to their lives as independent young adults.

On Friday, the Executive published the report of the working group on the throughcare and aftercare of young people leaving the care system. I acknowledge that the title of the working group is a bit of a mouthful and that some young people do not like the term "care leavers", but for the ease of getting through the debate, I will use that term where I can.

The group is made up of representatives from local authorities, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Association of Directors of Social Work and various voluntary and advocacy groups that work with looked-after children. Over the past two years, the group has been advising the Executive on how to improve throughcare and aftercare services for young people. I want to take this opportunity to place on record my thanks to the members of that group for their work. I look forward to their continuing efforts to advise the Executive over the coming weeks, months and years.

I am pleased that members of the group are

able to join us for the debate. I am also very pleased that some of the young people who are directly affected by the issues that we are discussing today have joined us for the debate. I want to take this opportunity to welcome them to the public gallery. I know that they will take a keen interest in what we say now but also, more important, in what we do following the debate and how we will act in the future. I was pleased to have an opportunity to meet them earlier today and to hear at first hand their thoughts, experiences and initial responses to the report. I hope that the debate in the chamber this afternoon will be positive.

For reasons that I will explain during the course of my speech, I am unable to accept the wording of the amendments to the motion, although I welcome them and understand the spirit in which they were lodged.

In September 1999, the Scottish Executive consulted on proposals to enhance throughcare and aftercare services by creating a one-stop shop for advice, guidance and assistance for young people leaving care. Young people aged 16 and 17 years who had been looked after away from home would have their needs assessed and supported by local authorities. The proposals included the measure that those young people would generally no longer be entitled to claim some benefits.

Responses to the consultation indicated support for that approach, but concerns were expressed about how the system would operate in practice. On 19 November 1999, we announced that we supported the principle of an integrated service for those young people and set up the working group to look in detail at how the system should work. Measures to strengthen existing duties on Scottish local authorities to provide a service, including a needs assessment, to all young people leaving care were included in the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001.

In June this year, the Executive published research by the University of York that showed that current levels of throughcare and aftercare were patchy across Scotland. The working group concluded that the Executive's initial focus should be on improving the current support system to young people before the enhanced duties on local authorities were introduced and before Department for Work and Pensions benefits were withdrawn; otherwise, there was a risk that, instead of improving a service, the service might deteriorate. Therefore, with the agreement of the DWP, the Scottish Executive decided to delay the introduction of the measures until 1 April 2004.

The University of York research pointed to significant variations in throughcare and aftercare arrangements throughout Scotland. Some of the

research does not make pleasant reading. Fewer than half of the young people who were surveyed had received a planned throughcare programme and 40 per cent of young people leaving care had not had a formal leaving care review. It was clear that many local authorities had difficulty in identifying young people who might be eligible for services.

I said at the time of publication and repeat that that is disappointing news. The research shows that, at a critical point in a young person's life, they may receive little help or advice. The situation is simple. We need to make improvements if we are to provide our young people with the support that is crucial to them to make a successful transition to adult living.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): On financial support, is the Executive prepared to argue with the Department for Work and Pensions that all the benefits for the affected young people will continue and that there will be no financial losses? The minister knows that the group is concerned about that.

Cathy Jamieson: One reason why I want to consult more on the report's recommendations is that it is absolutely vital that we get things right. Today I heard from young people who are concerned about bursaries, housing benefits and other supports. I want to ensure that we continue to work with people out there who provide guidance and support to young people and that we keep negotiations going.

The research pointed to how we can make a positive difference. Planned throughcare programmes, placement stability, continuity of care and support are all likely to provide better outcomes for young people. Many young people say that they would like to remain longer in the care system and make the transition more gradually. It is no coincidence that those young people who were surveyed who had experienced at least one of the positive measures had significantly better experiences in moving on to adult living than those who did not. We need to take note of those experiences and build on them so that, in the future, a full range of support is available to all young people leaving care.

The working group also commissioned a consultation with young people to allow them to speak in their own words. As always, young people's own experiences contain the most powerful messages. I will give a few examples—members who have read the report will have read the following words. One young person said:

"I have started to think about moving to my own flat—what I am going to buy, and how I am going to budget my money. No-one talked to me about this in the unit. I would like someone to start helping me to think about this."

Another said:

"The worst thing was money and going from a house full of people to just me with nobody supporting or helping me."

Another said:

"I had nobody to fall back on."

Members should think about their own experiences of moving on from the parental home, or the experience that they gave to their children—their help, support and advice, being there for their children when things went wrong as well as when there were things to celebrate. The fact that young care leavers can feel so isolated and unprepared must be a wake-up call to us all. It is sad that such messages are all too common. In the past, too many care leavers have ended up homeless and unemployed or in prison. Too few have been able to fulfil their potential, in employment or in education.

The findings of the research and the consultation reinforced the conclusions of the working group about current practice and improvements that are needed. The report's recommendations are important. They will be circulated and consulted on, as I want as many agencies and organisations as possible to take the messages on board and act on them. The consultation should be an active consultation. I do not propose to discuss the report in detail, as I do not have enough time, but I want to highlight some recommendations.

It is clear that the group was in no doubt that improvements to existing services must be the starting point. They want their concerns noted that the mechanisms for monitoring and tracking young people were not in place in many local authorities. They recommend that, from April next year, local authorities should record the status of the young people concerned to allow the authorities to see how they are making progress towards providing a better service. Knowing about the accommodation, education and employment arrangements of young people as they take their first steps to independent living is vital if a proper support package is to be provided. I do not think that it is too much to ask corporate parents to know where their young people are moving on to.

The group also recommends that new assessment tools be introduced to put together packages for young people in a better way. Not all young people will need or want a full package of support, but only through discussion with them will their real needs become apparent. I stress that when we are talking about assessment we are talking not about a mechanistic tick-box approach but about actively engaging with young people to find out what they need for their circumstances and to help them to move on with their lives. It is important that young people are part of and have

ownership of that assessment process. During the consultation period I want to hear more from young people about that and the other proposals.

We also recognise, as does the group, that one model will not fit all areas and the group highlighted features that should be common. Again, those are not rocket science—they are not difficult things to do—and I hope that people out there will take note and act on them. The features include nominated key workers to act as a contact point for young people; the development of minimum service standards so that young people know what they are entitled to; clear written policies so that young people know what they can expect; agencies working together and sharing information in a way that makes sense; partnership agreements among all the agencies, such as Careers Scotland, that can help to provide support; a way of sorting out problems or complaints; and a designated senior manager to promote corporate responsibilities to young people.

The outcomes are also important. Young people are clear about that. They want a decent quality of life. They want to be able to make the successful transition to independent living. They want an accurate, accessible, quick service that provides financial help when they need it and which leaves them no worse off than under the current system. Young people also want to be able to resolve complaints.

I presume that Lyndsay McIntosh will make the point in relation to her amendment that we should try to get some of those common features in place much earlier. I accept the spirit of her amendment but I am keen that we do not lose the focus on closing the gap for the most vulnerable young people. That is why, unfortunately, although I accept the spirit of her amendment, I cannot accept the wording.

I believe that the recommendations in the report, if we take them forward constructively, will help to close the opportunity gap for young people. Every young person deserves the chance of a successful and a prosperous future. Young people leaving care should not be left on the margins of society, struggling to cope without help and support. I repeat that we would not want that for our own children and we should not want that for any child or young person. We must improve services for vulnerable young people. We need to continue to work together on the issue, and I hope that there will be many positive messages for young people listening to the debate that Parliament intends to take their situation seriously.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that young people leaving care need effective support to make a successful transition to independent, adult living; welcomes publication

of the report by the Throughcare and Aftercare Working Group and the Executive's intention to consult on its recommendations, and believes that the policy initiatives led by the Executive will close the opportunity gap for these young people and lead to real improvements in their lives.

15:48

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

It might surprise the minister to know that there are members, indeed some on her own benches, who query why it is necessary to have yet another debate on looked-after children. However, I think that the answer is obvious. We need to have as many debates as it takes until effective action is taken and we can improve the situation. We need to go on highlighting the extent to which we are failing those vulnerable children. We know that looked-after children are the group most likely to experience homelessness, sexual abuse, drug misuse and self-harming and to become involved in crime. We need to raise the issue again and again until it is no longer acceptable for 75 per cent of looked-after children to leave school with no formal qualifications and for up to 50 per cent of young homeless people to have had a care background.

Those statistics are unacceptable and the facts are shocking but we have known for some time about the poor outcome for looked-after children. We have likewise been all too painfully aware that relevant and adequate support was not available to them as they made their way to independence. For those looked-after children and young people with disabilities or mental health issues, the problems are simply compounded. However, we also know that, with appropriate and reliable support, many of those young people are able to make successful transitions to adult life.

We welcome the working group's report. Its findings and conclusions have a great deal to commend them. Like the ADSW, we welcome the report's call for an increase in the range of accommodation, support, employment and training for young people leaving care. That is why our amendment urges the Executive to endorse the recommendations and commit to full implementation. I am sorry that the minister has not been able to do that, although I heard the explanation that she gave.

The University of York research that was mentioned said that only 39 per cent of the young people surveyed received a throughcare programme. The research also highlighted that many local authorities lacked appropriate procedures and systems for monitoring and evaluating young people leaving care. Implementation of those recommendations must surely be a priority that we would welcome. However, any new system for monitoring support must be workable. It must also be based on the

reality that is faced by the young people concerned and by the front-line providers.

Ultimately, the vital improvements that we all want to see in our support services for looked-after young people will not be solved simply by putting additional pressures on already overstretched local authority social work departments. The overall underfunding of children's services nationally has been one major factor in the current lack of service provision. As we have heard in the past, the services have been allowed to deteriorate into crisis. I therefore repeat my call to the minister to continue to act with all possible urgency to address recruitment and retention problems in social work.

Without the staff and resources to implement the changes, the working group's report could become simply another paper exercise. That would only perpetuate the situation whereby, despite the statutory requirement, there are children and young people who do not have a social worker assigned to them to support them in their time of greatest need. The research confirms that provision is poor and patchy throughout Scotland. Although local authorities already have a duty to provide throughcare and aftercare, there are too many cases in which that duty is not met.

Young people themselves recognise that there is a problem. In the document "In Their Own Words", one such care leaver wrote:

"In my area, there are only three workers for the whole area. Each worker has an average of thirty young people to deal with—this is very unrealistic."

Of course that is unrealistic. I am glad that it is proposed that the young people affected are to have a greater say and involvement in the planning and implementation of their assessment and action plans. Choosing their own key worker and being involved in and agreeing to every aspect of their own throughcare and aftercare programme is one of the best ways of ensuring its effectiveness.

Finally, I note that it is important that we recognise that all the working group's recommendations respond to, and are informed by, the concerns of many care leavers and of those who work with them. Indeed, many members of the working group have worked closely on throughcare and aftercare and have years of experience, so they accurately reflect the views of affected young people. We can therefore be assured that the working group's recommendations are sound, well informed and most likely to be effective.

Rather than waste an awful lot more time on more debates and more talking, all of which jeopardises still further the life chances of too many of Scotland's children, I make one simple plea to the minister. Just do it.

I move amendment S1M-3351.2, to leave out from "believes" to end and insert:

"urges the Executive to endorse the recommendations highlighted in the report and to ensure their adequate resourcing and effective implementation."

15:54

Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con): Despite my amendment to the Executive motion, I should say at the outset that the Conservative party also welcomes the report by the throughcare and aftercare working group. We appreciate their endeavours, but the purpose of the amendment is to underline just how desperate the situation can be for youngsters leaving care and making their own way in the world.

Every parent wants the best for their child—the best education, the best care, the best opportunities, the best jobs, and the list goes on. From the moment we set eyes on them, we carry in our hearts every aspiration that our children can be the best that they can be. It is unnatural to think otherwise. We all wish that there was no need to have this debate, but sadly, there will always be need for a system of looking after youngsters who have no families or who are otherwise disadvantaged. We have a duty to such children and we must do our best for them, as we would for our own.

As I am sure the minister is aware, the figures are depressing. There are around 11,000 children being looked after by local authorities in Scotland. Around 1,300 of them are over the age of 16, and, in many cases, their problems are immense. That is illustrated by the lack of educational attainment, the tendency towards offending behaviour and the fact that it is estimated that between 20 per cent and 50 per cent of our young homeless people have been in council care at some stage in their young lives.

We must consider what we can do to break a relentless and depressing pattern. The Executive seeks to do its best, and where those measures will improve the life chances of those disadvantaged children, we will support them whole-heartedly. However, we remain concerned that the report's recommendations tackle symptoms that cannot get at the root cause. For example, we should be making greater efforts to achieve educational attainment when up to 75 per cent of those children who are being looked after leave school with no formal qualifications and with limited opportunities in the world of work. That must be a top priority and an example of what I mean by intervention at an earlier stage. It is no use getting aerated just before the diet of exams when youngsters are leaving school.

We must consider the role of local authorities and recognise that the care service provision is far from perfect. We recognise that there are significant difficulties concerning the employment and retainment of social workers, particularly in child and family services. It should concern us all that, despite statutory requirements, some local authorities fail to provide assessments and advice for young people leaving their care. A cynic might be prompted to ask whether some youngsters are being discharged from care early to save money, as after discharge they become eligible for benefit. I do not know if that is the thinking behind early discharge, but if it is, the Executive must act.

At present, local authorities are struggling to provide a service—that much we know. However, I am anxious to know how the Executive hopes to guarantee that the implementation of the report after consultation will be more successful. The report poses as many questions as it answers and, as I say, the purpose of the Conservative amendment is to underline the importance of those questions. In its briefing, Barnardo's raised points about the ability to achieve continuity and stability in care placements, about the age at which young people leave care and about whether there are sufficient resources for a reliable service.

I believe that there is an opportunity for our charities, and especially our voluntary groups, to become even more involved. This goes back to the issue of continuity. I hope that the Executive will consider seriously the role that voluntary organisations can play in helping to fill gaps in provision. It strikes me as a win-win proposition. The youngsters benefit through continuity and through seeing role models for their future life and those diamond volunteers get the satisfaction of helping youngsters to start off better equipped. What is not to like?

I do not decry the Executive's motion, or indeed the SNP's amendment, but I had hoped that the minister might accept my positive amendment, which was lodged in a spirit of encouragement and the desire to do more. However, I understand her hesitancy.

I move amendment S1M-3351.1, to leave out from "and believes" to end and insert:

"but believes that the difficulties for young people leaving care should be addressed at an earlier stage to give them the best chance of coping with the challenges of successful adult living."

15:59

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I have quoted Shakespeare before as saying:

"When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions."

I also remember waiting for corporation buses when I lived in Glasgow, and finding that none would come for ages and then they would all come together. Those are examples of annoyances, but, in this case, having a cluster of debates about this particular vulnerable group of young people is a matter, if not for congratulations exactly, for comfort. It means that we are taking those people seriously and putting them high up on the agenda.

I believe that the Parliament has its heart in the right place and I hope that it has its head in the right place. When people stand back and consider the work of the Scottish Parliament—work that they often denigrate—they will see that in legislation, policy documents and debates, we have repeatedly turned our attention to trying to improve the lot of disadvantaged groups and individuals throughout Scotland. We have turned our attention to children with special educational needs and adopted and looked-after children. Changes in the regulation of care have been enacted and we have considered disability rights and the treatment of adults with incapacity. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee is considering a proposal for a bill for the protection of children. That raft of statutes and policy documents would not have been given the time at Westminster. They should be a source of pride for us.

The group of young people that we are discussing today are especially vulnerable, having come through a care system that does not always meet their emotional, social and educational needs. There is a difficult transitional point when throughcare and aftercare is necessary to allow young people to move as best they can towards independence. Members have quoted statistics that demonstrate the difficulties in education and care.

I welcome the publication of the report, the minister's remarks and her clear commitment to this vulnerable group. The "Report from the Working Group on the Throughcare and Aftercare of Looked After Children in Scotland" seems to strike a balance between empowerment and protection for such youngsters. One of the annexes that has been quoted from repeatedly gathers together poignant and telling comments by young people on their experiences as they have made the transition. I am glad that the recommendations of the working group pay attention to some of the issues that are raised in the survey by the University of York, from which the comments are taken.

At lunch time today I was speaking to two young men, who are representatives of the Scottish youth parliament, at an event that was dedicated to enabling us to listen to the voices of young disabled people. I was pleased to be able to say to

those youngsters that the Scottish youth parliament, which gave evidence to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee some months ago, had helped to shape our thinking about the creation of a commissioner, not only for children, but for children and young people. That is important, because we wish young people who are moving from care still to have an advocate and focal point for exercising their rights and enabling them to have their voices heard. I hope that the minister will recognise that that goes alongside the recommendations in the report.

It is possible to say that, having had several debates around the topic, we should stop talking and get on with things—that is what Irene McGugan did not quite say. I do not really think that Irene McGugan believes that we should stop talking. It would never be right for us to stop talking. I welcome the further consultation. The report's recommendations will continue to be discussed and scrutinised. Several organisations have made it clear that there are still debates to be had on the details of certain points.

I hope that the recommendations will be considered urgently as a programme for action. I ask the minister to recognise that resources of time, money and professional expertise are required if the recommendations are to be progressed. For example, some of the recommendations might need statutory instruments to put them into force—we should get on with it.

When councils are required, as they should be, to improve the current system and provide a good, even service across the country, they need to be resourced properly. Councils will be asked to report on service delivery, to record information on individuals, to track them and to provide plans for each young person, but all such things take time, money and professional expertise. Like Lyndsay McIntosh, I think that there is potential for the voluntary sector to take part in the process in partnership with the local authorities and other agencies.

I would have supported the SNP amendment as it stands, if it had been an add-on to the substantive motion. Unfortunately, the SNP chose to take a wee bit out of the motion before adding the amendment. However, I agree with it in spirit.

The minister has made it clear that things are already happening. I hope very much that action will be accelerated and that, when we next have a debate about this group of youngsters, there will be solid, recognisable progress to report. I know that Cathy Jamieson cares deeply about this issue and am confident that progress will be made.

16:05

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I pay warm tribute to the working group on throughcare and aftercare for all the work that it has done and commend it on the report that it has published.

We should not underestimate the importance of the Scottish Executive's decision to delay until 2004 introduction of the enhanced duty on local authorities to be responsible for young people leaving care, including through the provision of direct financial support. Although that one-stop approach is to be welcomed in principle, there was much concern about how it might be implemented. If we are serious about ensuring that young care leavers get the services that they richly deserve, it is important that we get implementation of the enhanced duty right.

As Irene McGugan said, the poor outcomes of care leavers are nothing new. We all know the statistics, which have been damning for as long as they have been collected. The situation was probably just as bad before that. Neither is it new for us to place duties on our local authorities, which are responsible for young care leavers. However, we cannot by legislative framework alone improve the services that are provided.

The Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 placed on social work departments the duty to be responsible for young people leaving care. In the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, that duty was enhanced and placed on local authorities as a whole, rather than just social work departments. The 1995 act also strengthened the concept of corporate parenting. However, many of our local government officers still see looked-after children as the sole responsibility of social workers or the social work service.

Before the previous local government reorganisation, there was a housing duty on district councils and a social work duty on regional councils. When young people who had been in care were facing homelessness, it was sometimes very difficult for them to access the services that they required, because they had to deal with two different councils. One might hope that a unitary system of local government, such as that which currently exists, would go some way towards eradicating that problem. However, not all our local authorities have taken on fully the corporate parenting role and realised that they have duties and responsibilities as parents to the very vulnerable young people whom we are discussing.

Lyndsay McIntosh asked whether some young people would not be eligible to receive services because they had been discharged from care early. It is difficult to say whether that is happening. Many young people want to get away from the social work service and to leave the

formal looked-after system. They do not always know what is in their best interests in the long term. It is important that local authority services encourage them to consider what is in their best interests.

Mrs McIntosh: That is the point that I was trying to make. Does not the member think that allowing more people from outside social work—for example, from the voluntary sector—to interact with young people could have great benefits? That may be just what young people are seeking.

Scott Barrie: I have no difficulty in endorsing what Lyndsay McIntosh says. Involvement should not be restricted to the voluntary sector. Local government services as a whole must realise that they have a responsibility to young people in the looked-after system. That is enshrined in legislation and we are trying to enact it in practice.

The minister noted the difference between the average age at which looked-after young people leave their placement, which is 16 and a half, and the age at which the vast majority of young people do so, which is in the early 20s. We must build on the good examples that exist in some areas. There, young people who have left their care establishment—whether it be a children's home or a foster care placement—are encouraged to return at an indeterminate point afterwards, so that they can take advantage of the services that are available. They may be helped with their washing or given informal advice and guidance. I see that as another way of developing the throughcare system in the way that I would like it to be developed.

I ask the minister what priority the Executive gives aftercare. A member of the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum put it to me earlier today that care leavers are not looking for preferential treatment over other young people. However, they are in a unique position compared to that of other young people, given that the state is their parent. They are asking for a level playing field in ensuring that the services that are delivered to them are exactly what we would expect from any good parent.

16:10

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): In my day, and perhaps the minister's day too—I will accept that I am older than her, although just a skoosh—we used to talk about children in care, but now we talk about looked-after children. I welcome that change, because those children are being looked after on society's behalf. That fact should never be forgotten. They are our children and it is our duty to look after them. Surely we must give them the same standards of care and the same type of opportunities that we expect for our biological children.

This debate is about throughcare and aftercare and in the time that I have been allotted I will touch briefly on each. On throughcare, I will focus on children who are being looked after in residential care homes. The minister has rightly put at the top of her priority list the educational outcomes for looked-after children. The lack of formal qualifications that this group of children are achieving has been mentioned in the debate.

When I used to visit children's homes during my working day, the number of children who were not at school, many for what seemed spurious reasons, never failed to sadden me. We, as a society, and the minister must address whether we are ensuring that looked-after children are receiving the same kind of parental support in their education that we, as parents, give our children. That means that social work and education departments must get together to ensure that the children attend school regularly, that they do their homework, that they have a quiet place in which to study and that, if difficulties arise at school, the child's key worker approaches the school quickly to resolve the problem as any caring parent would do. That means that social work departments have truly to assume the role of a good parent who attends parents' night, takes an interest in the child's education and, most of all, wishes their child to achieve their full potential.

We are failing miserably in aftercare. Homelessness statistics show that up to 50 per cent of homeless young people are former children in care. As parents, do we say once our children have reached 16 or 18, "Out you go, I have no further responsibility for you"? Of course we do not. I have two 30-somethings whom I will worry about until my dying day, whether they like it or not. When looked-after children reach so-called maturity, they become a low priority. Resources dry up and the pressures on the system come into play. If one asks any looked-after young adult they will, with very few exceptions, say, "I was on my own after leaving care."

The road ahead is clear. The Executive must match the rhetoric with resources. I ask the Executive to address as a matter of urgency the crisis that exists in social work departments up and down the country. Most of all, let the members who are in the chamber, and the members who should be in the chamber listening to this important debate, acknowledge that we must do for society's children what we do for our own children.

16:15

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): I could not agree more strongly with Kay Ullrich when she said how important it was for children to reach their full potential.

We recognise the importance of continuity when it comes to providing for young people who are leaving care. Continuity is particularly important for young vulnerable persons, such as those who have learning difficulties, mental illness or some other frailty or difficulty that has caused them to become homeless. They definitely need support. I remember visiting a young boy who was put into care in London after he had been found sleeping on the streets because he could not get along with his stepfather in Edinburgh. He also needed support.

I welcome the constructive way in which Cathy Jamieson has approached this subject. I should mention that I am the chairman of the Edinburgh support group of the charity Hope and Homes for Children, which operates overseas in war-torn communities.

In 1995, we passed the Children (Scotland) Act, which I had the good fortune to pilot through the Commons and which gave local authorities a duty to give guidance and assistance to those under 19. The legislation also contained a provision that allowed authorities to guide and assist young people between the ages of 19 and 21 who applied for assistance.

I was slightly disappointed to read in the "Report from the Working Group on the Throughcare and Aftercare of Looked After Children in Scotland" that 39 per cent of the young care leavers in Scotland who were surveyed had not been part of a throughcare programme. I think that the minister recognises that that requires attention. I was also saddened to read that, despite the fact that authorities have a duty under section 73 of the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 to carry out an assessment of the needs of young people who are leaving care, 40 per cent of those young people did not receive a formal leaving care review. I hope that improvements will be made in that area, too. The report also said that some authorities were unable to give an accurate figure for the number of young people who had left their care and to whom they owed a duty of care.

It is refreshing that the Executive has recognised that young people, on leaving care, need effective support to make the transition to independent adult living. In order to show that that support is in place, the Executive must consider the real, pressing problems that exist at local authority level. Why, despite statutory obligations, do many authorities lack appropriate policies on the reviews, guidance, procedures and adequate data collection and processing systems that are deemed to be necessary for monitoring and evaluating the progress of young people who leave care? Is it simply that the resources are insufficient? If so, it would seem less than wise to place a great many more burdens, however

worthy and constructive, upon local authorities without addressing that issue.

One of the unanswered questions in the brief that was provided by the Scottish Council for Single Homeless was:

"Will the resources transferred to local authorities be adequate to meet the enhanced responsibilities, duties and expectations bestowed upon local authorities?"

I suggest that the issue of resources must be dealt with.

If the issue is not one of resources, we must ask whether local authorities have got their priorities absolutely right when it comes to care leavers. I ask the minister a question that was echoed not only by Lyndsay McIntosh but by Ian Jenkins. In view of the fact that Barnardo's Scotland and other voluntary groups provide outstanding services for care leavers, is not it time to consider giving them a more prominent role in the delivery of aftercare services for Scotland's care leavers?

The brutal reality is that young people who leave care can be very vulnerable. I ask the minister to give this subject increased priority in the years to come, and to pay particular attention to young persons who leave care.

16:19

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): There is no point in having a debate unless it is followed by action. In my research for this debate, I looked back to a debate that we held in January 2000, during which I gave a typically brilliant, constructive and sensible speech. I might as well have saved my breath, because the result was zero. There has been no improvement in tackling this issue, although I am sure that individuals have been working away at it. We have not made progress, and we must have some action.

First, councils and other organisations must be given adequate resources. Regrettably, the Scottish Executive has been no better than any other Government at providing resources to back up its good words but, if we do not have adequate resources, we are all wasting our time.

However, many improvements can be made without calling on large sums of money. Other members have mentioned the voluntary sector and I think that, in addition to voluntary organisations, we should recruit voluntary individuals to help support young people in addition to the statutory people who are supposed to help. If the right sort of people could be found to act as honorary aunties, grannies, granddads and so on—

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): While I would never challenge the importance of volunteers and mentors, does not Donald Gorrie

agree that that service should be provided by a professional organisation, whether through the local authorities or voluntary organisations such as Barnardo's?

Donald Gorrie: I am suggesting that people should supplement what social workers and the voluntary sector should do. There is a huge amount of talent in society and people could help young people with cooking, shopping for their home, running financial affairs, sorting out benefits and so on.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): The point that Cathy Peattie made needs to be emphasised strongly. From my reading of the report of the working group and a report by the University of York, I understand that the real issue that we are addressing is the failure to deliver a statutory service that must be delivered. That statutory service was well outlined by Kay Ullrich: it can be caring, but it is a statutory service on behalf of the state, which everything adds on to. That is the failure that we are addressing today.

Donald Gorrie: I think that the volunteers whom I am discussing could add value to the statutory service and could achieve a great deal. The volunteers would not only be older motherly and fatherly types, but would include young people. When a mother in England, I think, advertised for people whom she would pay to play with her autistic child, a lot of kids came along and wanted to help without payment. That is encouraging. There are many young people in schools who would enjoy helping people with problems and would be of great use doing so. We should use that sort of talent.

We have to get stuck in earlier, before people get into difficulties and go into residential care. We should have much more support in the family, from statutory people and volunteers.

We have to raise expectations. I believe that people perform to expectations. The children of people in this chamber expect to succeed and, therefore, they succeed. The children about whom we are talking today expect to fail and, therefore, they fail. We have to crack that and persuade them that they have talents. We can use their talents to ensure that they contribute to the community rather than contributing to the problems that Jim Wallace has with his jails.

The hardest problem is to get professionals at the local government and national Government levels to co-operate. We have to cure council and Government officials of the serious diseases of pigeon-holing, insularity and tribalism from which they suffer. I was interested to hear from a group of young carers that they felt let down by the schools and even more badly let down by social workers. We have to get people who work in those

professions to co-operate in helping young people in need.

Let us act to ensure that we can have a debate in a few months' time to celebrate what we have achieved rather than saying warm words and doing absolutely zero.

16:24

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): I welcome the report and the recommendations. I admit to having some sympathy with the SNP amendment, as I believe that it is time that we stopped talking and got on with the work. Like Ian Jenkins, I think that, if it had been an add-on amendment, I would have been in the difficult position of having to vote against the Executive for the first time, although perhaps the Executive would have decided to support the amendment.

However, I appreciate the minister's comments about why further time for consultation is necessary. I hope that she will confirm that the consultation period will be short. Three months has been indicated. We should stick to that time limit, because we have been at this point for two years and need to move things forward quickly.

I hope that the minister will also tell us that, even during that three-month period, local authorities can be doing things to improve the situation and to reduce the number of young people who leave care without the appropriate support. The local authorities must provide those services. A further consultation period can be useful.

I will focus my comments on young people with disabilities who leave care, because I think that there is a gap in the report on that issue. The minister has said that one size will not fit all. That is particularly true for young people with disabilities who leave care. It is important that actions are tailored to meet the needs of those young people, especially those with complex special needs because of multiple disabilities. Although we can support those young people through working with voluntary agencies and health boards, we need to consider how their needs will be taken into account when the recommendations are implemented.

Capability Scotland has specifically requested that local authorities be asked to compile data on the disabilities of young people who leave care and on where they go and the kind of support that they receive, which are big issues for those young people. I know that the minister has a particularly good track record on the subject and I am sure that she will consider that request sympathetically. I hope that she will comment positively on the points that I have made when she winds up.

16:27

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): My purpose in supporting the amendment is not to seek to break the existing consensus but to drive things forward and improve the situation for the youngsters involved. Although we know where we are and where we need to go, we must ensure that we actually go down that road. In a nutshell, we must ensure that we can check against delivery. As Donald Gorrie pointed out, all the warm words, eloquence and rhetoric in the chamber or elsewhere will not provide the warm homes, comfort, loving and guidance that the children require. As a result, checks are required.

Irene McGugan said that we need to take resourcing issues into account. I heartily endorse that point. We must ensure that people in front-line services, particularly in social work departments, are provided with the necessary means. I do not want to go into financial matters, because the subject has been discussed before. All parties must look to their position on the funding that they are prepared to provide. Instead, I will make two points, the first of which relates to a position that will require political courage to adopt. Again, that is an issue for all political parties in the chamber. My second point concerns an attitudinal change that all parties should be required to make.

As I said, my first point relates to a question of political courage. Although it concerns funding, it is also a matter of the cultural attitude towards the youngsters, who statistics show are more likely to be involved in crime or to end up in custody, through no fault of their own. That is meant not as a condemnation, but as a sign of an understanding of the circumstances in which they—and we—find ourselves.

At the moment, our society is greatly worried about youth crime. I have to say that I worry about nomenclature. As a parent of two teenage children, I think that we are in danger of stigmatising a generation when, in fact, my children are, in many respects, less predisposed to misbehaviour than many of my peer group were a generation ago.

The fact is that the issue that we are discussing brings to the fore the question of youth crime, which involves resources. We are all facing the clamour for more bobbies on the beat. I do not think that any party in the chamber would repudiate such a desire. We are also facing the clamour for more secure places for youngsters, which I support. However, we must be aware that, because of the circumstances in which the children about whom we are talking find themselves, they do not evoke public sympathy. In fact, they often inspire public opprobrium.

It will take courage by members of all political parties to say that we require to find resources to

deal with the matter at the same time as finding resources for police officers, secure units and so on. We must find those resources not in response to any namby-pamby liberal agenda; we must provide them because they are necessary to break the cycle of despair in which many youngsters find themselves. We cannot simply marginalise those young people and leave them to be excluded for ever and a day. Unless we address the issue and find the resources to put in at the beginning, we will for ever require more secure places and more police officers, because we will not have broken that cycle. It will take some political courage from everyone in the Parliament to be prepared to stand up and ask for resources, because the issue is not a great vote winner. It may be important in the chamber and to a section of society that is in touch with what is going on but, as far as the tabloid press is concerned, it is not at the forefront.

As I said, an attitudinal change is also required. The resourcing of social work, voluntary and professional, has been neglected. The attitude has been to denigrate social work departments. We must move away from that. Many of us who were in the chamber yesterday afternoon heard Karen Gillon's debate about looking after public servants. We all, quite rightly, laud our police officers, firemen, nurses and emergency workers, but let us remember that social workers, community workers and youth workers are public servants too—we must stop denigrating them. The issue is not simply a matter of finding the resources. We must have political courage as a chamber and as a body politic and we must try to encompass an attitudinal and cultural change within our society, lauding the role that public services and social work undertake and recognising the need to break the cycle at the outset rather than picking up the pieces at the end.

16:32

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Just because children are in care and have had their 16th birthday, that does not mean that they are ready to make their own way in the world. Let us face it—we would not expect any 16-year-old to make the transition to independence without understanding, practical support and their fair share of false starts. We must ensure that young people are ready to leave care. Many of their peers who live with their families do not leave the nest until they are in their 20s and they are likely to come back when the going gets tough or when they want their washing done.

Leaving home is not a one-off event. It is a prolonged process, taking two steps forward and one step back, as any parent will tell you. Young people leaving care services need continuing support until they are fully established in society at

large. They often need transitional funding for housing or for other purposes. They need help in managing budgets, knowing how to cook and all the basics of daily life that we all take for granted. They can also be vulnerable when things go wrong and they need someone to help them pick up the pieces when necessary. One means of doing that is supported accommodation, where help is on hand when needed, but not enough such accommodation is available. Case workers need time to spend with young people and sometimes even crisis management is difficult. Support comes not just from statutory agencies but from the voluntary sector and self-help groups. Local authorities need to work closely with all the agencies that provide support.

Sometimes it is tempting and easy to dismiss children and young people as difficult. As a parent, I have to say that all children and young people can occasionally be difficult. Those young folk in care have more cause than most. They need time and patience to overcome the problems that they have to work through. We must also ensure that they are not forced to go home and that, if they do, there is some way of following up on that move. If things go wrong, someone should be there with other options.

We must ensure that children in care do not miss out on the basics of education. Why do so few children in care progress to further and higher education compared with other kids? They need more assistance than most because they have bigger obstacles to overcome. Sometimes teachers are not aware of the problems that children face in their home lives or in care. We must ensure that there is partnership and dialogue between education and care services. The question is not one of ability. It is about opportunity and missed opportunity. I welcome the report so far and I look forward to its implementation. I am confident that Cathy Jamieson will ensure that the opportunity gap is closed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a little time in hand as we move to wind-up speeches.

16:35

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): During the debate, there has been some comment about us talking rather than doing. It is worth remembering that the problems that we are considering have been around for a long time. If there were simple solutions, they would have been found long ago.

As has been pointed out, it is a worthy undertaking to have a debate on the throughcare and aftercare of looked-after children. It is good for us to talk about such matters. It is sad that the press gallery is empty, because the subject is

more important than what a newspaper might say about a politician—it affects real people's real lives. As has been said, if a child's life is blighted at that early stage, their life is blighted for good.

The debate has been of a high quality. On my way from the Holyrood site, I was wondering what I was going to say. I have been inspired by all the contributions, which have come from all parts of the chamber. Scott Barrie showed his encyclopaedic knowledge of local authorities and how they work. I hope that members listened carefully, because Mr Barrie exhibited a detailed knowledge of where the problems can lie. Kay Ullrich spoke extremely well; I am only sorry that she will not be with us in the next session of Parliament. She made a weighty contribution and I shall return to her comments later, because she got to the heart of the matter.

The minister has listened to the points that are made in the report. I have every faith that she, the Executive and all the main parties in the Parliament will work towards the solutions. Those solutions are not easy and will not be attained without considerable thought.

Donald Gorrie valiantly played up the role of the voluntary sector. The work of the voluntary sector can be constructive if it is passed on to the statutory sector. I see no difference between Mike Russell's point and Donald Gorrie's point. Donald Gorrie is talking about unblocking the extra assistance that is available, a subject to which I will return. Lyndsay McIntosh also mentioned the voluntary sector.

The debate has been good because it has been consensual and constructive. There has been a common recognition of the problem, which I will draw on my experience to summarise. I was elected to Highland Council in 1995. The councillors from the Ross-shire area got together in the committee room in Dingwall and divvied up the area chairmanships. There was a scramble for planning, for economic development, for roads and transport and for education. Social work was left on the table. A councillor who will remain nameless said, "Och, we'll give social work to Jamie." For my sins, I became the Ross-shire area chairman of social work.

I do not remember a single debate being held in my four years as chairman of social work for the Ross and Cromarty area of Highland Council. An official would occasionally mention that one of the children had escaped and would tell me the line to take if the press should ring up. I would hear councillors expressing delight in the coffee room—never in the chamber—about a rumour that an institution in their ward was closing, which would mean that they would not have children in care on their patch.

Kay Ullrich used the phrase “our children”, which is a strong sentiment. That is precisely what such children are—they are our children. If we were all to acknowledge that, it would make a big difference. If social workers and social work bodies could recognise the equivalent of parents nights and other such events—events that we hold for our own children—for children in care, that would broaden everything out and make a huge difference.

Until now, there has been a tendency among politicians at all levels inadvertently to treat the social work service as a cinderella service—a service that is best forgotten about and preferably not talked about. We are talking about it today and we should talk about it more. That will allow us to approach the problem that Kenny MacAskill identified about the mindset and the need to change the way in which we see looked-after children. We must get away from the Victorian mentality of putting them away and not thinking about the problem. We must see such children as forming part of a greater family. One of the best councillors in Highland Council, who is no longer with us, tackled the issue by using the expression,

“We are all God’s children.”

I make a final point to add to what Donald Gorrie said. He talked about the voluntary sector. For those of us who take an interest in the church, I should mention the book by Harry Reid, former editor of *The Herald*, called “Outside Verdict”. It is a bit of heart-searching that asks, “Whither the Church of Scotland?” I do not think that he mentions such young people to any great extent, but the churches are there and they could get involved in the voluntary side. If the church worries and wrings its hands about why people are not going to church, why should it not get out there among those young people and show them the good that could be done by all churches and by all faiths? We might then see the pews filling up a bit more. There is a lesson there for all of us: from churches to Barnardo’s to social work departments. This is a good debate.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Stone: No, I am winding up.

I commend the motion to the chamber. I believe that, had the SNP amendment been positive, we could have adopted it. However, the reality is that we are all singing from the same sheet. Let us sing very loudly and get right behind the minister in what she is trying to do.

16:41

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I find myself in a somewhat unusual position today in

that I could support the motion and each of the amendments.

On the motion, I have a slight concern about going to consultation yet again. My concern dates back to the Scottish Standing Committee, when we took through the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Much of the discussion and many of the words used in today’s debate were used at that time. However, when I read the report, I find that despite the hopes and aspirations of members who conscientiously went through the legislative process and tried to give powers to local authorities, those powers do not seem to have been implemented in the way that we would have wished.

That particular committee was somewhat unusual in that it was able to take evidence. We took evidence from youngsters in the 16 to 17-year-old band. Their situation was extremely moving because they described their position as very lonely once they had left social work care. I felt that that had to be addressed but, sadly, when I read the report, I feel that we have not yet come to terms with the issue.

I note that in the minister’s foreword to the report she did seem to take on board the recommendations. It is just a pity that we were not able to commit to at least some action on that report, rather than delaying. I accept that there are issues that have to be left to be dealt with in negotiation between the minister and her colleagues—perhaps with respect to funding.

Irene McGugan talked about funding for local authorities. It hits me that that is a problem for the Parliament, because we might well want money to go into the block grant to address the situation. However, at the end of the day, and with local government democracy, there is no guarantee that that money will go the way that the Parliament and the ministers would wish. That is something else that we have to address.

Lyndsay McIntosh offered statistics to demonstrate why this particular group of people must be treated with some special interest. Kay Ullrich’s comments brought the issue down to an extremely homely level and the things that she said about young people represented all of the things that those young people do not have access to in their present lives. On that basis alone, it was a moving contribution.

When we think about children of that age, it is not just about what we can do for them. It is about how their lives are affected. When our children passed their exams, had a success at sports or got engaged or married, they had someone to come back to and relate to. The children we are talking about today do not have that. Whatever the efforts of a social worker, no matter how good that

social worker is, and no matter how hard they try, they can never replace a parent and child relationship. Perhaps there is a message there.

I know how difficult it can be to find foster parents. I would like the Government to place greater emphasis—perhaps using advertising—on foster parents to see if we can get more parents to take these children on board at as early an age as possible, and perhaps even at the difficult ages of 13 and 14, so that there is a prop for those children as they go into the future.

I have one point on what Michael Russell said about statutory requirements. Perhaps one of the failings of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 was that we gave local authorities a way out. There is no statutory requirement. We gave them a responsibility for people to the age of 19, and an optional responsibility for those aged between 19 and 21, but the way out was that that responsibility applied only if it was deemed necessary. In a future examination of the legislation, perhaps we could close that way out and take Mike Russell's advice and introduce a statutory requirement.

16:46

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): This has been an important debate, but I want to cut through some of the warm words and mushiness that we have heard, in particular in the past 10 minutes. It is a cause for some anger—the minister will accept that, and we certainly heard anger in Scott Barrie's speech, among others—that we are in this position. The reality of the position that we are in cannot be overstated.

We see in front of us an alarming set of circumstances. We see not just the failure of a system, but the failure of us collectively. The minister referred to corporate parenting in her introduction. We see the failure of us as a society, and the failure of us as the people who are responsible for guiding and moving society forward in Scotland. The statistics are terrifying. We are not talking about a large number of young people. The report's estimate is 11,000 people, of whom 1,300 are over 16, but we are dealing, for example, with a set of young people, almost two thirds of whom have no standard grade exams, most of whom—83 per cent—have experience of truancy, and 71 per cent of whom have experience of exclusion. Think about those numbers. Within that small group of people, there was that level of experience.

But it gets worse. Less than 1 per cent of that number go to university, so about 110 people out of that group go to university—a tiny proportion compared to the average in Scotland. If we compare those children with Scottish children in general, there is one statistic that sticks out like a sore thumb: 45 per cent of young offenders held in

custody in 2000 had been in residential care at some time. Just think about that. We are talking about 11,000 young people, which probably represents much less than 1 per cent of Scotland's young people, but 45 per cent of young offenders who were held in custody in 2000 had been in residential care at some time. Many of us react with horror when we see such figures applying to ethnic minorities in other countries or to groups of people, but in our own country there is a group of people, the proportion of which exhibiting offending behaviour is vastly in excess of the proportion in society. We should not lose sight of those figures. It is possible to have warm words, and it is possible to be cuddly in this debate, but there are hard, raw facts at the centre of it.

Scott Barrie: On the appalling imprisonment statistics to which Mike Russell referred, would he say that it is important that we bear those statistics in mind in other debates? For example, we had a debate last year on school exclusions. If members had known those statistics in that debate, it would have put that issue in a better context.

Michael Russell: I have no difficulty in accepting that point. That is the context in which we have to examine the issue. Indeed, Mr MacAskill made those points in his speech.

The group is not a static group; it is a group of people who move on, and when we fail them once, we fail them for ever. We cannot go back and change that failure.

I want to say one or two things directly to the minister, and I say them while acknowledging her personal commitment to these matters, and the personal commitment that we have seen across the chamber today. There will be no division along political lines on this matter.

First, the minister should beware the siren voices that talk all the time about the voluntary sector. There is a statutory service and it is vital that we have it. Kay Ullrich illustrated the purpose of that. That is our responsibility and we must exercise it. There is much room for voluntary effort, but the responsibility starts here.

Secondly, we need to take action, rather than just talk about the issue. That was the point of the SNP's amendment. I am sorry that the minister does not accept that. Our amendment accepts that a problem exists and says that we must go ahead on the basis of the working group's report. We are accepting an Executive report, because what we have identified is clear. We all know and acknowledge that the need exists and the reports show that. A statutory framework is in place. Phil Gallie is right that it could be improved, but it does exist. The individual, caring will exists in the caring professions and in the chamber, so what is absent?

I suggest that two requirements are absent. One is resources. Local authorities have difficulty with resources and say so. Oversight is also absent. We should begin to talk about the carrot-and-stick approach. Extra resources are undoubtedly required, but we should also have a cast-iron method of checking and inspection. As all the voluntary agencies say, that should start with the provision of data. We do not know the totality of the problem.

The minister will have total support if she is going into battle with the civil service and others who are failing on the matter. If she can return to the chamber—perhaps as early as next week, with the budget consequentials—and tell us that the log-jam is cleared, that the carrot and stick are in place and that the situation will improve, she will have support.

All of us want to make certain—*[Interruption]*—I am sorry that Mr Stone is not taking the matter seriously. I am taking it seriously.

Mr Stone: I know Mike Russell for the good actor that he is.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Michael Russell: All of us want to make a difference. We will support anyone who makes that difference, but we will not willingly return to the chamber to debate the matter once more in abstract without seeing progress.

16:52

Cathy Jamieson: The debate has been interesting. Perhaps I am about to ruin my political credibility by agreeing with something that Phil Gallie said, but I was taken back a few years by the speeches of Lord James Douglas-Hamilton and Phil Gallie to the time when the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 was being developed, when I was one of the people who accompanied young people to give evidence and who argued for a stronger statutory basis to the provisions. I pay tribute to the work that Lord James Douglas-Hamilton did at that time. He listened to much of what was presented on behalf of young people.

We have heard a great many warm words, but they have been underpinned by quite a lot of anger and annoyance that we have not made progress as quickly as we would like. I reassure the chamber that when I say that I want to get the report out and to have people comment on it, that does not mean that nothing will happen from today onwards or that nothing has happened in the past months. Since I have been actively involved in the process, it has been clear that action would be needed on many issues—before the report was published. I took that action, not the least of which involved the transfer of resources from the

Department for Work and Pensions. That action could not have waited to be published as a recommendation for consultation. We had to take a decision and take action.

I am committed to making progress on the points that the report raises. The purpose of a short consultation period is to address some of the issues that were raised this afternoon. I hope that people will engage with the comments that Karen Gillon made about young people with disabilities and with the issues that Phil Gallie and others raised about ensuring that resources are targeted on the young people who need them most. The working group suggests that allocating money to local authorities through grant-aided expenditure is the right route, but it wants to ensure that that money delivers the service and the outcomes that we want. Michael Russell was right to highlight that issue.

There must be discussion about how we put that in place in a meaningful way. I have made it clear this afternoon that I do not want what is being done to be a paper exercise. I want to engage actively with local authorities in order to take the working group's recommendations forward. Indeed, we have done that already by putting seminars together and getting people involved.

I also want to work actively with the local authorities and others on how we get the assessment framework right. I want to get right how we make the decisions, how we help to support young people, and how we involve them in the process. I hope that people will take account of the fact that what is being done is not a case of kicking something into the long grass. I would not stand for that and I will not hesitate to step in to ensure that progress is made on the matter.

I want to give a very strong message today to everybody who has concerns about young people in the care system. As many members have rightly identified, the young people in the care system are our responsibility—they are our children and they deserve our attention and to be our top priority. However, at the end of the day, responsibility lies with the local authorities. One of the challenges for local authorities is how to get to the top of their agendas the issue of young people who are moving through the care system and leaving care and how to deliver services for those young people. I suggest that all members in the chamber should take a particularly close interest in what is going on in their local authority area and get actively engaged in that discussion.

I mentioned the fact that Executive officials have taken forward a number of issues with local authorities. I mentioned that seminars are happening and that further seminars will take place. One of the things that emerged from the seminars that have taken place is that every

representative who attended them is extremely enthusiastic and committed to providing the best service to young people.

We have to get this right, as we may have only one chance to decide how we use resources and what system we put in place. We have a responsibility to do that. As I indicated earlier, I thought long and hard about saying that we would accept the report's recommendations.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Does the minister accept that the report has big implications for the education of teachers and social workers? Will she commit to examining those implications?

Cathy Jamieson: Rhona Brankin has identified another area and we must examine what those implications mean in practice. Scott Barrie and others outlined clearly that the responsibility for looked-after children is not only the responsibility of local authority social work departments. A corporate responsibility exists across local authorities.

The point that was made in relation to the educational attainment of young people in care is important. We need to understand better the situation of young people in the care system who are trying to continue their education. I want to make the point that for the small number of young people who go through the care system and on to university—some young people who have done that are sitting in the public gallery today—that is a difficult thing for them to have done. We need to raise the aspirations of young people in the care system. We must be good parents and not allow them to fall out of education at too early a stage—we must make it possible for them to reach their full potential. That is why the Executive has committed additional resources to supporting looked-after children in order to raise educational attainment.

I want to restate clearly that I expect local authorities to make it a top priority to have young people moving through the care system. The working group, I, other members and—most important—the young people will continue to examine how the local authorities are delivering. I do not want to get to the stage where I have to return to the chamber and debate the issue again without being able to say that action has been taken and that progress has been made. I want to arrive at a point where every young person who is moving through the care system can say honestly, as only one young person was able to say in the report:

"I'm not ready to move on, but feel I have plenty of support and people to talk to."

It is simply not good enough that only one of the young people who was surveyed felt able to say that. The next time that I come back to the

chamber to debate the issue, I want to be able to report that action has been taken to change the situation and that young people in the care system know that we have changed things for the better.

Motion Without Notice

17:00

The Deputy Minister for Parliamentary Business (Euan Robson): Presiding Officer, I seek your leave to move without notice motion S1M-3358, which seeks to appoint Duncan Hamilton in place of Kenneth Gibson on the Local Government Committee.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I am minded to accept the motion, but I need members' agreement. Is it agreed that a motion without notice may be moved?

Members indicated agreement.

Motion moved,

That S1M-3358 be taken at this meeting of the Parliament.—[*Euan Robson.*]

Motion agreed to.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following committee membership change—

Duncan Hamilton to replace Kenneth Gibson on the Local Government Committee.—[*Euan Robson.*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

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

The first question is, that amendment S1M-3350.2, in the name of Mr Kenneth Gibson, which seeks to amend motion S1M-3350, in the name of Ms Margaret Curran, on the Scottish fuel poverty statement, 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)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 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, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (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)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 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)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, 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)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 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)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 44, Against 61, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S1M-3350.1, in the name of Bill Aitken, which seeks to amend motion S1M-3350, in the name of Ms Margaret Curran, on the Scottish fuel poverty statement, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)

McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 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)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 14, Against 94, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S1M-3350, in the name of Ms Margaret Curran, on the Scottish fuel poverty statement, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, 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)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 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)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 15, Abstentions 30.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament commends the Scottish Executive for its Fuel Poverty Statement and its pledge to work in partnership with Her Majesty's Government at Westminster and a range of organisations; welcomes the milestones for achieving its overall objective to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that people are not living in fuel poverty by November 2016; recognises the substantial investment that is being made in the Central Heating Programme and the Warm Deal and in improving Scotland's housing stock, and further recognises that the Statement affirms the Executive's commitment to tackling fuel poverty and meeting its objective.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that amendment S1M-3351.2, in the name of Irene McGugan, which seeks to amend motion S1M-3351, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on the throughcare and aftercare of looked-after children, 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)
 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)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (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)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, 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)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 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)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 42, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fifth question is that amendment S1M-3351.1, in the name of Lyndsay McIntosh, which seeks to amend motion S1M-3351, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on the throughcare and aftercare of looked-after children, 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)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 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)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (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)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, 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)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fitzpatrick, Brian (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 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)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)

Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Mrs Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 47, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S1M-3351, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on the throughcare and aftercare of looked-after children, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises that young people leaving care need effective support to make a successful transition to independent, adult living; welcomes publication of the report by the Throughcare and Aftercare Working Group and the Executive's intention to consult on its recommendations, and believes that the policy initiatives led by the Executive will close the opportunity gap for these young people and lead to real improvements in their lives.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

NHS Dental Services (Moray)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): I ask members to move along and clear the chamber. I also remind those who wish to speak in the debate that they should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S1M-3309, in the name of Mrs Margaret Ewing, on NHS dental services in Moray.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that the provision of NHS dental services in Moray has reached crisis point; finds it unacceptable that residents of Moray now have to travel to Aberdeen to register with an NHS dentist, and believes that the Scottish Executive and Grampian NHS Board should increase their efforts to recruit and retain dentists to the area.

17:07

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): I thank everyone who signed the motion. I am glad to see such a huge interest in Moray. I particularly welcome Nora Radcliffe, because although Keith is not within the Moray constituency, it is within the Moray area and I know the problems that there have been in Keith. I would also like to thank members who have stayed behind for at least the opening of the debate.

When I lodged the motion, it was in the knowledge that there is also a general problem throughout Scotland in the context of national health service dentistry. Any of us who are interested in the subject must have seen the extremely useful research document by the Consumers Association entitled, "The gap in Scotland's dental care". No pun is intended. The research shows that access to NHS dental treatment has turned into a geographical lottery, with patients' ability to access treatment increasingly dependent on where they live. Nowhere are those problems more acute than in the Moray area.

In my parliamentary office, which I share with Angus Robertson MP, we have received well over 200 complaints from individual constituents. We have met and spoken with dental practitioners in the area and sent out a full questionnaire to all the practices in Moray. The dentists who have responded so far represent approximately 40,000 of my constituents. I have a couple of quotations from those dentists. The first said:

"I am currently resisting the move of my practice to private work but I am working longer hours with higher expenses for less income and will be forced to go private to maintain my standards or go out of business."

Another dentist said:

"My practice receives up to 30 calls per day from people

wanting to join the NHS and private lists that closed over a year ago."

In some areas of Moray, waiting lists for both NHS and private patients have been closed for as long as four years. Not a single practice in Moray is taking on any new NHS patients. Additionally, it can take as long as three years to be given an appointment to see an orthodontist, never mind the length of time that might be involved in subsequent treatment.

The nearest place for registration with an NHS dentist is in Aberdeen. The most westerly tip of my constituency is Forres and surrounding areas. A trip from Forres station to Aberdeen costs up to £25.30 per adult and £12.75 per child. That is expensive for anyone on a basic income, not to mention the fact that a child would need to be taken out of school for a day and that an adult would lose a day's wages. Not everyone has a car. The monthly costs for private dental insurance for two adults and three children range from £17.62 to £78. Those are the basic facts about what is happening in Moray.

I am sure that the minister will point out that, last December, the coalition Executive allocated money for three additional salaried dental posts in the NHS in Moray. However, those posts were finally advertised in the *British Dental Journal* only in August this year. The closing date was 20 September. If we assume that the successful applicants might need to complete contracts elsewhere, it will be the end of this year before those dentists can possibly be in place.

I tried to find out from Grampian Primary Care NHS Trust why the appointments had taken so long. I know that the money is not time-barred, but given the fact that the crisis already exists and that the money is there, I wanted to find out why on earth the three dentists could not have been appointed earlier. The primary care trust claimed that the reason for the delay was the need to find accommodation at Dr Gray's hospital, where at least six months were required for the alteration of sewing rooms. It seems to me that, in the interim period, at least some of those who were interested in becoming dental practitioners in this beautiful part of the country could have been accommodated somewhere else in the area or even with the other existing practices. It seems to me and to my worried constituents that a whole year has been wasted.

The fact that the posts will be filled in the near future is of some comfort, but I wish to highlight the need to address the medium and long-term effects of the current situation. The report of the chairman of the local dental committee pointed out that, of the 21 local practising dentists, 11 were over 55 years of age.

The Scottish survey of general and community dental practitioners in 2000 highlighted areas of serious cause for concern for the future. Two thirds of dentists said that they planned to retire early at the age of 55. Half of that group planned to reduce their clinical hours in the years before retirement. Of those planning to retire early, 74 per cent said that they might stay on if the NHS system were to value quality rather than quantity of treatment.

When those three new dentists arrive, we will welcome them with open arms. They will have taken a wonderful choice to come and live in Moray, which is a marvellous community with great facilities. However, the problem will not stop just with those appointments. We need a medium and long-term strategy if we are to lose people through early retirement.

In April, the minister announced the concept of the golden hello as a step to help rural areas. Now that the graduation period is over, will the minister indicate whether there has been any interest in the golden hello? What has the take-up been?

I ask the Government to address the age levels of practising dentists throughout Scotland, to ensure that there will be a continuous supply of new graduates coming into the profession and that we do not end up with many practices having no newcomers while everyone else is retiring.

Those matters are vital and I appreciate the fact that members have stayed behind to listen to the debate. I hope that the positive way in which I have explained the issues will meet with a positive response from the minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that the debate is specific to Moray, so I will be listening for some geographic or service links to Moray in members' speeches.

17:15

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Part of my constituency lies in Moray, but the problems of a lack of dental services, or a lack of access to dental services, are acute throughout the north-east. The seriousness of the problem is not in doubt, as Margaret Ewing has demonstrated.

We should commend the efforts of Grampian NHS Board and the Scottish Executive in measures such as the golden hello and the attempts to recruit salaried dentists—not only in Dr Gray's but, in years gone by, in Aberdeen and other parts of Grampian. However, those efforts come up against the underlying problem of there simply not being enough dentists, full stop. Margaret Ewing highlighted the age profile in the profession—a profile that means that the problem will get even worse.

Part of the problem has been that professional bodies, when projecting the number of training places required, have failed to realise that most professions are now gender balanced. If half of their professionals are female, the bodies will have to factor in the career breaks required for child bearing and child rearing. That may sound sexist. I hope that, in years to come, either parent will take the career break for child-rearing purposes. However, we are not there yet.

Even if we had enough dentists, the issue would arise of whether they would choose to practise in the NHS. The way in which NHS dentists are treated and remunerated has serious effects and will have to be considered carefully.

One thing that will have to happen if we are to meet the requirement for dental practitioners in the north-east is that dental training places will have to be provided in the north-east. If people have completed a university course and graduated, have done vocational training, have committed themselves to accommodation, and have built up social networks, they will tend to stay where they are. To get equity of access to dental services, we will have to train more dentists and ensure that some of those training places are in the north-east.

It is great to have Margaret Ewing back. I thank her for raising an extremely important issue and I hope that we will hear positive answers from the minister. Many of these questions require long-term answers, but we have to make a start now.

17:18

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I, too, am delighted to see Margaret Ewing back. If I may say so, Margaret looks very well. It is nice to see her back in her stride, as feisty as usual, for the people in Moray.

I picked up the following figures in the tea room about 10 minutes ago. I was actually quite shocked to see the fall in the number of registrations for general dental services. Since 1997, the registration of children has fallen by about 64,000 and the registration of adults has fallen by 197,464. When comparing health board areas, we see that the percentage of adult registrations in Highland is 38 per cent and in Grampian is 46 per cent, while in the Borders it is 58 per cent. The situation is mixed throughout Scotland.

We often talk about access to dental services and I have come across something that has surprised me. Will the minister confirm that there is no guarantee of access for patients to general dental services, unlike the case with general medical services?

As Margaret Ewing has outlined, the position in Moray is particularly critical. I, too, draw members' attention to the Consumers Association report, which notes that more than 50 per cent of dentists in Moray are over 55. Unless action is taken, the position is likely to get worse rather than better. In the same study, the Consumers Association pointed out that in Edinburgh, 40 per cent of dental practices were not taking on all NHS patients and in Aberdeen 80 per cent of dental practices were not taking on all NHS patients. That means that if Moray patients are seeking NHS dental treatment in Aberdeen, they will have to seek out the 20 per cent of practitioners who will welcome them as NHS patients.

The Consumers Association report also states that dentists had commented that it was not worth taking on NHS patients because of the low fees that dentists get from the NHS. In the Highlands and Islands, one practice had not taken on an NHS patient for five years and another practice quoted charges of £105 an hour. Several dentists in the Highlands said that NHS work did not pay enough to make it sustainable.

Like many members, I welcome the dental action plan, "An Action Plan for Dental Services in Scotland", which was introduced in August 2000. I know that we can all be quite carping and critical about the glossy brochures, but the action plan is excellent and two years later it is probably time to carry out a progress report and produce an update. If everything in the plan had been implemented, people in Moray would not face the problems that they do today.

The other point that has come to my attention in the Highlands is the statutory obligation on authorities to provide dental checks for schoolchildren three times throughout their education. It was confirmed quite recently at a meeting between MSPs and NHS Highland that NHS Highland does not meet that obligation.

Looking back at my file on dentistry, I found several letters from dental therapists, who were seeking to review the dental auxiliaries regulations under the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978. The regulations allow them to practise in the public health services but forbid them to work in general dental services. I understand that dental therapists are not the answer to the shortage of dentists. Nonetheless, given that they can carry out some extractions, some fillings, cleaning and polishing, scaling and giving advice, the removal of those restrictions would be very helpful. I understand that Westminster is currently considering that issue.

The dental action plan proposes the establishment of drop-in centres in the major cities and enhancing the role of mobile services. I understand that a drop-in centre is being

established in Edinburgh. The use of mobile units would undoubtedly be helpful in rural areas.

Can the minister confirm that NHS 24, given that it is up and running in Aberdeen, is giving advice on dental problems, as promised in the action plan? Can the minister confirm that NHS 24 is also giving advice on access to dental services, which would be so helpful for the people in Moray?

Page 13 of the action plan says:

“Primary Care Trusts should review locally how GDS and CDS—

that is general dental services and community dental services—

“can work together effectively to complement each other’s services”

and draw up a local service plan. Do all areas in Scotland have a local service plan? Are they doing what the Executive has asked them to do and are such plans sufficient to meet the needs of patients?

Finally, I am sorry that Ian Jenkins is not here tonight because he regularly makes the point that the difficulties in accessing dental treatment mean that in many cases oral cancer is not picked up.

17:24

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, welcome Margaret Ewing back to the chamber. I am pleased that she had the first question of question time and opened today’s members’ business debate. As one would expect, she presented her arguments with dedication and focus. I congratulate her on securing the debate.

As we have heard, nearly every member of the Parliament has some experience of the issue of dentists and the lack of NHS dentists. I receive a large number of letters expressing concern about the lack of dental provision in Moray and throughout the Highlands and Islands. Far too many people feel that they have been left high and dry by the continuing drift of dentists into private practice. I do not altogether blame the dentists. I receive letters from dentists who say that they have tried to include an NHS dentist in their practice, but that they cannot attract new NHS dentists. People come to a town, examine the practice, see what they will be paid by the NHS and then go to another place where they can work privately and be paid more.

This problem dates back not four years, but as long as 10 years. I remember when my dentist closed his NHS lists. I hung on and was assigned not to a partner, but to an assistant. Assistants came and went, while the partners practised privately. People could have their teeth examined and take out Denplan at vast expense. I refused to

have my teeth examined so that an estimate could be made of the cost of keeping them in trim, because I knew that it would be horrendous. I said that I wanted to stay with the NHS and that, if I needed to have extensive work done on my teeth, I would face that problem when it happened.

Recently two old-age pensioners who had been with an NHS dentist all their lives were suddenly told that they could no longer receive treatment on the NHS and that they had to go private. The alternatives were not explained to them properly. They had to ask their MSP where to find a dentist who would treat them on the NHS. People in that situation must be given much more information. I raised the issue with the local health board, which said that it would ensure that people were given proper information about where they could access NHS dentists.

For many people there is no alternative. As has been mentioned, people in Moray have to travel to Aberdeen, which means paying £25 for a return ticket on the train. If they do not do that, they are forced to pay more for the treatment that they previously received. That is not an option, so they do not go to the dentist. I am convinced that, as a result, dental health is declining in the Highlands and Islands.

Mary Scanlon mentioned oral cancer. All sorts of problems may go undetected because people have stopped going to the dentist. We do not want to return to the situation that existed in my mother’s generation. People would go to the dentist at 20 to have all their teeth removed, so that they would never have to pay to go again. We must ensure that this problem is addressed.

As Margaret Ewing said, the situation in Moray is very serious. No practices in Moray are taking on NHS patients. The Executive has responded to concerns by announcing investment of £1 million, which I welcome, and I hope that the money will improve the recruitment and retention of NHS dentists. There are some training practices in the north—the practice that I use is one of them.

The new investment is welcome, but will it be enough to stem the movement of dentists into private treatment work and to encourage new dentists to work in the NHS? The answers to those questions are not immediately forthcoming, as the investment will take time to filter through. We must accept that. However, I notice that in the announcement this investment was described as an initial package. I hope that, given the spending review and the increase in health service spending nationally, dental service provision will feature heavily in forthcoming spending announcements.

Grampian Primary Care NHS Trust is also taking action. At the beginning of August, the trust informed me that it intended to mount a

recruitment campaign for salaried dentists who will be directly employed by the trust, as a way of tackling the shortage. As Margaret Ewing indicated, the new suite at Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin is receiving financial support from the Executive. However, again there has been a delay.

In mentioning Grampian Primary Care NHS Trust, I am reminded of another case that I dealt with in Moray. The case involved a young teenager who required orthodontic treatment on the NHS. She was told that she would have to wait five years—she would be grown up before the treatment could take place. The alternative was for her to pay several thousand pounds to have the work done within a few months. It is not on for people to have to make such choices.

We need long-term thinking and long-term plans if the problems in Moray and elsewhere are not to be repeated. I hope that the minister and her officials will examine closely the reasons why this situation has developed. The situation is not new; it did not start under the current Administration. It started at least 10 years ago, when the then Government cut the fees that dentists received from the NHS. The situation has developed over time, but many people are left wondering why the welcome measures that the Executive has announced were not put in place much earlier. Hindsight is valuable, but so is an evaluation of why the situation has developed so that we might try to prevent something similar from happening again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As of now I would be grateful if the speeches were kept to under three minutes.

17:30

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I say very well done to Margaret Ewing for securing a debate on this important topic. It is good to be able to add my welcome back to her. It is also good to see her introduce, so early on, a debate on a topic that members can get their teeth into. In Margaret Ewing's abscess our hearts have grown fonder, but meantime we have tried to put the best floss on it.

That is enough of the cheap jokes. Although perhaps, given that we are talking about the decline in dentistry in the NHS in the north-east, they are entirely appropriate. The trouble is that we are trying to get dental health on the cheap and that simply does not work.

In the NHS in Grampian as a whole, we have half the number of dentists per head of population that Edinburgh has and a quarter of the number that there are in Manchester and, Dr Ewing advises me, in Cuba. In rural Aberdeenshire and Moray, matters are considerably worse.

I pose a few questions. If members were dentists, would they wish to work in an area in which they would have to work four times as hard as dentists in Manchester? Would they wish to work in an area in which the backlog of dental decay is likely to be large? Would they wish to work in the NHS when they could earn more, get more time to do a quality job and get some time off by working in the private sector?

To be fair, I acknowledge that initiatives have been taken. Investment is being made in community dental facilities, but it has proved impossible in my constituency to get dentists to work in them. We have had the bounty to bring in new staff after they graduate. One dentist of whom I am aware managed to recruit someone to their first appointment after graduation, but they failed to qualify for the bounty because more than a year had passed since they had qualified. The dentist coughed up the money to ensure that they got the member of staff.

Advertising in Finland has been conducted. Finland has too many dentists and we have too few, but even so we are still unable to recruit dentists from there. We are on a downhill disaster curve and things can only get worse. There is an economic risk to life in the area that NHS Grampian covers. Senior people are coming into companies in the north-east and finding that they cannot get their promised dental care. That will damage the reputation of the north-east's quality of living.

As an MSP I am extremely fortunate that I can get NHS dental care in Lothian, but I cannot get it in my constituency. We support Nora Radcliffe's suggestion of conducting NHS training in the north-east. I suggest that we follow the Australian model of encouraging graduates to go to the areas of greatest need. One of the ways in which we might think about doing that is by allowing the Executive to pay off graduates' student loans. There is a gap in dental care in the north-east and we must address it as an absolute priority.

17:33

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I congratulate Margaret Ewing on keeping the subject of access to NHS dental care on the agenda.

We have heard a lot of statistics and I want to throw in a few more that are relevant. The Scottish Executive's figures show that 51 per cent of adults and nearly 25 per cent of our children are not even registered with an NHS dentist. It is not surprising to find that 56 per cent of our five-year-olds have signs of dental disease and 18 per cent of adults do not have any teeth at all. One third of Scottish dentists no longer take NHS patients and a further

10 per cent will accept only certain NHS patients. The problem is not just focused on Moray and Grampian; it is a Scotland-wide issue.

I want to focus on the last statistic that I will present, which is that the British Dental Association's recommended ratio of dentists to the population is one dentist for every 2,000 people. In Moray and Aberdeenshire there are 4,400 people for every dentist. That unacceptable situation has not improved since we had our first members' business debate on the subject two years ago.

I recognise and welcome—as I did at the time—the Scottish Executive's £1 million package and the attempts that have been made to encourage, with golden hellos, recruitment of dentists to the rural north-east. So far in the debate, the minister has been listening to the problems that members have described, but, although I am short of time, I will identify two solutions to those problems. We are here not only to identify problems, but to share our ideas on how to solve them.

The simple issue is that, with the closure of the Edinburgh dental school, we do not have enough dentists—full stop. We must open another dental school, and the best place for that would be Aberdeen. The problem is particularly focused on the north-east because, as we have heard, it is difficult to bring people up to the north-east unless they are training there. A new dental school in Aberdeen is necessary.

I am afraid that we must also focus on breaking the link with the UK national health service. One hundred per cent of dentists said in a survey that a review of NHS and laboratory fees is necessary. Therefore, we must change the system. It is about time that the Scottish Executive examined the situation. If it identifies a problem that is specific to Scotland, it must break the link with the UK approach. We should have Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. This is a devolved matter, and we must tackle it. I ask the minister to consider breaking that link with the UK arrangements.

17:37

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Margaret Ewing on her initiative in leading this important debate. I hope that the minister will address the problems in Moray as a matter of urgency.

The problem of access to NHS dentists in Moray is replicated elsewhere in Scotland and must also be addressed with urgency. I have pursued the situation in Angus with the Government and Tayside NHS Board on behalf of my constituents. I ask the minister, in her reply, clearly to set out the situation in Moray and nationally with respect to the appointment of salaried dentists and the joint appointment of community dentists, who provide

general services for part of their time. How have such dentists contributed to a solution to the problem? I know that, in Arbroath, an application has been approved for a joint salaried general dental/community dental practitioner, which should help the situation. How many such joint appointments have been made recently and how might they help, not only in Moray but nationally?

I also ask the minister to give us an assurance that the Executive will deal with all such applications as expeditiously as possible. Can she indicate how long it takes to process applications for joint salaried general dental/community dental practitioners and applications made under the Scottish dental access initiative? There must be no delay in processing those applications, because patients urgently need those dentists. I note that a dental access initiative application for Arbroath is in the hands of the Executive. I ask the minister to undertake to investigate that application and to ensure that it is dealt with as quickly as possible.

I congratulate Margaret Ewing on drawing attention to a problem that extends beyond Moray, but about which she feels acutely on behalf of her constituents. She has performed a service not only for the people of Moray, but for worried patients throughout Scotland.

17:39

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Margaret Ewing on securing this important debate. I welcome her back to the Parliament—she is back with a bang. SNP parliamentary group meetings over the past few months have not been the same without her.

The problem exists not only in Moray but across Grampian. I have with me a letter that is being sent to all the patients at Westhill dental practice this week by the eight dentists who work at the practice and who serve that large community, which is outside Aberdeen. The opening line of the letter, which indicates that the practice will no longer take NHS patients, says:

"We have continually strived to maintain and improve standards, but this has become increasingly more difficult under the National Health Service."

The situation pertains elsewhere in Grampian. New figures today show that, in Aberdeen, only three out of the 38 practices take NHS patients. That is a tiny percentage. Indeed, the dental health line that was set up in Grampian 18 months ago because of the number of people who were looking for NHS dentists receives—believe it or not—3,500 calls a month.

If someone has an examination at a dentist on the NHS, they have to pay £5.32, which is topped up by the NHS to £6.65. A scale and polish costs

£13. A dentist sees around four patients an hour, which means that, if they all get an examination and a scale and polish, the dentist gets about £60 for that hour. Out of that money, the dentist has to pay for trained nurses, all of their equipment, control of cross-infection, a receptionist, rent for the premises and a living wage for themselves. That is the root of the problem. As Mike Rumbles said, we have to address that situation. If a dentist goes private, they can charge £25 for an examination alone, so the economics of the situation are evident.

Salaried dentists are a small step forward. The ones in Grampian have huge waiting lists and can make only a limited impact. There is a time-bomb element to the problem as well because, if someone has not been to the dentist for 18 months, their membership of that practice automatically lapses, which means that that practice will not readmit them to the NHS list. We need an education campaign to counter that.

Salaried posts are not the only issue, as the problem in Grampian also relates to a shortage of dentists. Today's figures show that 40 out of 190 posts in Grampian, including Moray, are vacant—that means that there is a 21 per cent shortage of dentists. Grampian cannot attract dentists because dentists see the area as “professionally isolated”, to use the official phrase. In order to get adequate training in the area, we have to consider the consultants' position in hospitals, which is also under stress, and we have to establish a dental school in the area. Dundee dental school has five applications for every place, which demonstrates that there is a demand for places. We should create those places in Aberdeen.

The problem is a serious matter for Grampian and many issues relate to it. We seem to be putting obstacles in the way of people who are trying to lead a healthy lifestyle and we have to address that urgently.

17:42

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): In an entirely impartial and unbiased way, I warmly congratulate Margaret Ewing on her excellent exposition of the topic.

I will address some of the deeper issues that have led to the crisis in Moray. If young children have proper oral and dental care, they will not need to see a dentist other than for a check-up. A simple plan such as sending a birthday card from the dentist to every one-year-old child, as happens in the Highlands, will make parents aware of the need to register and will encourage them to do so, if we assume that there is someone for them to register with. Why not extend that scheme to include two and three-year-olds? Perhaps it should be rolled out across Scotland.

Toothbrushing in nurseries and primary schools does not seem to cost a lot but would make children aware of the importance of brushing their teeth, especially if they do not have proper support at home.

We need more trained dentists, dental hygienists and therapists, as Mary Scanlon said. I am not sure that a new dental hospital could be delivered—I do not know how much money the Liberal Democrats plan to commit to that in their manifesto—but I would like the minister to address the serious problem that is faced by the Glasgow dental hospital. It has a budget of £3.6 million, but that goes to the University of Glasgow, with only £2 million being passed to the dental school. The other £1.6 million is taken by the university for administration. I do not know the answer to that, but I think that it is a serious problem. The dental school is being asked to train more dentists—the number of students in the first year has risen from 70 to 77—which is to be welcomed, but the problem is that there are only 45 members of staff, as opposed to the 79 that there were 10 years ago. I think that it is wrong that £1.6 million is being creamed off by the university for administration and I urge the minister to examine that matter closely.

The problem of dental erosion will become increasingly serious. I do not want to be alarmist and describe the situation as a time bomb, but one study shows that the consumption of fizzy drinks by children has increased sevenfold in the past 30 years. The acid in fizzy drinks is corrosive and one of the primary causes of dental erosion, which is hugely costly to treat. Indeed, it can be treated only by some experts. As a result, should fizzy drinks be sold at schools and in vending machines? I think not.

I am happy to support other members' suggestions about training. It might be possible to have another training facility for hygienists and therapists and to extend the range of their work, as happens in the NHS.

Mary Scanlon mentioned that there is not a similar legal duty to register with a dentist as there is with a general practitioner. However, there is another problem. I believe that a child's registration with a dentist lapses after 18 months. What is the point of that? At the very least, a child's registration should continue until he or she becomes an adult. That simple step could again be taken without a great deal of cost.

17:46

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mrs Mary Mulligan): I, too, join members in welcoming Margaret Ewing back to the chamber. It is great to see her and I look

forward to debating many other issues with her. However, it seems that I keep having to return to the subject of dentistry, and I am glad to have the opportunity this evening to hear about people's difficulties.

I must start my speech by acknowledging that there have been difficulties. However, as members have pointed out, those difficulties have not arisen over the past year or two, but are the result of progressive problems in the profession. The Executive seeks to address those problems and to find answers that will ensure that my constituents and other members' constituents are able to access dental treatment.

In the primary care sector, where about 90 per cent of dental patients are treated, most general dental practitioners are independent contractors to the NHS who are free to choose whether to accept NHS patients. It is regrettable that in some parts of Scotland, including Grampian—Moray in particular—there has been a declining commitment to the NHS by some general dental practitioners.

Access is one of a number of problems that are being addressed by the implementation support group, which was set up to progress the action plan for dental services in Scotland to which Mary Scanlon referred. In order to achieve improvements in dental provision, we need the people to deliver them; indeed, we need the right number of people with the right skills in the right place.

In planning the dental work force, we have agreed a target output for the dental schools of 120 graduates per year and we have put the funding in place to reach that target. That is way ahead of our neighbours south of the border and we recognise that it is an important part of delivering the service.

Mr Rumbles: Two years ago, in the initial debate on the matter, I said that the target of 120 dentists in the dental action plan was not a great one to achieve. In fact, we were producing many more than 120 dentists in Scotland. The problem is that we do not have enough dentists—we need more.

Mrs Mulligan: One hundred and twenty dentists is an achievable target. Instead of simply increasing that number, we need to find out how to retain those people in Scotland and in our more remote and rural areas.

Maureen Macmillan: Will the minister consider giving more support to training practices in the Highlands? More training practices being in receipt of support would attract new dentists who—it is to be hoped—would be retained in the area.

Mrs Mulligan: I will come back to that point in a moment.

We are also able to offer postgraduate vocational training places for all Scottish graduate dentists. Moreover, to enhance the dental team, we have put funding in place to increase significantly the numbers of trained professionals complementary to dentistry.

As well as getting the numbers right, we regard the quality of training as being vital. Although dentists can register to practise on graduation, the NHS insists on one year's postgraduate training. In Scotland, we have successfully piloted two-year general professional training and we aim to increase the provision for all graduates of Scottish dental schools.

Planning the dental work force is also about having people and their skills in the right place. We need to make sure that dentists will choose to live and work in all parts of Scotland.

One of the issues that has been raised is that of fees being paid. Fees are set annually by the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration—which is independent of the Government—following representations by the professions, and particularly by the British Dental Association and by health boards. In Scotland, we have accepted those recommendations in full and we have also provided additional allowances for rural and remote areas.

On 25 April, a £1 million package of measures to improve recruitment and retention of NHS dentists and to ensure that patients are able to access NHS dental treatment was introduced. That package includes funding for vocational training places for all new dental graduates and a £3,000 allowance to each new dental graduate who takes a training place in any of eight designated areas—including Grampian—where access to NHS dentistry is outstripped by patient demand. It also includes a £5,000 allowance over two years to dentists who have completed training and are entering substantive NHS practice, or £10,000 over the same period where the post will be in one of the designated areas. That will enable the development and funding of an education and support programme for all new dentists who have completed training, and will provide grants of up to £10,000—based on the amount of NHS work—to dentists establishing new vocational training practices and offering a training place. We want to ensure that training places are available in order to ensure that people stay in Scotland.

We are also currently in discussion with the dental profession about further measures to encourage recruitment and retention, focusing on the older dentists and returners to NHS general dental services. Margaret Ewing mentioned the fact that many dentists are in the older age bracket. We recognise that and are discussing with the British Dental Association in Scotland how

we can assist those dentists to remain in the profession and ensure that they get a living wage for what they are doing.

From 1 April, we also introduced a new career structure for salaried dentists employed in NHS general dental services, with salary scales for two new grades of promoted posts. That will enhance recruitment and retention by providing new opportunities for advancement and will enable the provision of a wider range of treatments through the salaried service. We are currently discussing the details with the profession.

We recognise that many dentists prefer to be close to the area where they did their undergraduate training. I do not accept that that necessarily means that we must have a dental school in Aberdeen, but it does mean that the local trusts in Grampian, with support from the NHS board and the Executive, must make particular efforts to recruit and retain staff. To that end, we have encouraged both dental schools in Scotland to develop outreach training that will give undergraduates experience in rural areas and in hospitals away from the dental schools, for example in Aberdeen. That will build up a relationship and attract dentists to the areas where we know we have difficulties.

We already have in place a number of measures to encourage dentists to further their contribution to the NHS and to locate in areas where NHS services are underprovided. Those measures include the availability of grants under the Scottish dental access initiative and the provision of salaried dentists. I can tell Andrew Welsh that we deal as quickly as possible with requests for salaried positions. There have been no delays and there is no question of delays. I am also aware that, this year, we have agreed to 14 additional places. I do not know the total number, but I will get that information for Mr Welsh.

Mary Scanlon: Does the minister acknowledge that Mike Rumbles's suggestion that there should be a new dental school in Aberdeen would be extremely difficult to implement, given that there is a need for a wide range of training, skills and experience to set up such a school? Does she agree that it simply would not be possible to do that, given the shortage of dentists in Scotland now?

Mrs Mulligan: As I said, we must consider what we have at the moment and decide how we can use it in the best possible way. By ensuring that students leave the dental hospitals recognising the opportunities that exist in other parts of Scotland, we can build on the numbers that are moving at the moment.

The dental access scheme encourages dentists to establish or to expand NHS dental practices in

areas of high oral health need, or in areas where patients wish to receive NHS treatment, but are having difficulty in finding a dentist who is willing to provide such treatment. To date, more than £1 million has been offered to practitioners in Scotland under the initiative. In Grampian alone, £94,500 has been spent. I encourage other dentists who are committed to the NHS to consider whether there is scope to expand their practices with the help of the capital grant that is available.

Margaret Ewing referred to the fact that Grampian Primary Care NHS Trust has recently advertised for salaried dentists to work in Moray. I understand that the trust has received expressions of interest, and that work at Dr Gray's hospital will be completed this year. I regret the delay that Margaret Ewing mentioned, but the completion of the work represents progress.

We have recently introduced a remote areas allowance of £1,500 for dentists in remote and rural areas and we have increased the continuing professional development allowances for such dentists, to reflect the increased travelling time to their local postgraduate centres.

I hope that although the measures that I have outlined are not conclusive, they demonstrate that we are taking the issue seriously and that we are seeking to increase the numbers of dentists throughout Scotland, particularly in the areas in which we know there are problems in accessing NHS dental services. We are not complacent—we acknowledge that we must intensify our efforts and I am willing to listen to suggestions about how we can do that. The Executive wants in Scotland a dental service of which we can all be proud.

Meeting closed at 17:56.

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