

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 5 June 2003

Session 2

£5.00

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Scottish Parliament

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

Young People

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S2M-103, in the name of Peter Peacock, on young people. There are three amendments to the motion. I ask members who wish to contribute to the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

09:30

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): It is my great pleasure to open today's debate on Scotland's young people.

Our motion makes it clear that we have a great deal to celebrate in the strengths and attributes of Scotland's youth. We have much to do as an Executive and, indeed, as a Parliament to widen opportunity for young people—I am talking about each and every one of our young people—to provide them with support and to engage them in a range of issues to help them to achieve their full potential as citizens of Scotland and to make their distinct contribution to Scotland and much more widely. There can be few causes that we address as an Executive and as a Parliament that are more important to Scotland's future.

On this first occasion of speaking in my new ministerial role, I congratulate the spokespersons on education and young people from the other parties on their appointments. It was probable that Fiona Hyslop—whom I was teasing last week—was going to be appointed, but she denied it totally. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton previously fulfilled a ministerial role in relation to young people and education for a number of years. Robin Harper will speak on education for the Greens, and Rosemary Byrne will speak on education for the Scottish Socialist Party, as will Robert Brown for the Liberal Democrats. No doubt there will be much about which we disagree in the coming months because that is the nature of the Parliament, but I hope that there will be a great deal on which we can agree and work together. I pledge that I will always be happy to enter into discussions with colleagues through the normal channels to deal with matters constructively when possible.

In the gallery today are representatives of a number of youth organisations in Scotland,

including the Scottish Youth Parliament, Young Scot, the Edinburgh dialogue youth project, Who Cares? Scotland and the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum. I hope that the Parliament will welcome them. No doubt, in part they will judge us on how positive we are about their futures in Scotland.

Much has been said in recent weeks about the small group of young people who present particularly challenging forms of behaviour to Scotland. I will touch on that group before I conclude my remarks today.

I want to focus on the overwhelming majority of young Scots in whom we can all take great pride. We have a huge amount to be proud of when we consider Scotland's young people. They are talented, imaginative and committed, and are witty participants in a huge range of activities that make up and enrich our national life. We need think only of the splendid example on Tuesday this week, when the children from the National Youth Choir of Scotland Edinburgh children's choir entertained us in the Parliament, to see what talents we have in our midst in Scotland.

Every day our young people make a positive contribution to Scotland. They are a source of inspiration and optimism for our future society in so many ways and frequently display attitudes and concerns that are an example to us all. The inclusive attitudes of young people show real concern for and understanding of those of their peers who are excluded from our society in a variety of ways. Young people show tolerance, openness and awareness of international questions and issues, and they reject inequality, prejudice and racism. They convey all of that in their attitudes as we seek to develop a Scotland that is one nation of many cultures.

Perhaps above all it is through the concern that young people have for the environment that young Scots can inspire us to give environmental questions an ever-higher priority as this young Parliament continues to mature. I am constantly struck and impressed not only by the depth of understanding of key environmental questions that young people display, but by their commitment to tackling those difficult questions in positive ways. We should be inspired by young people and recognise and applaud the contribution that they can make, are making and will make in the future.

The second session of our young Parliament gives us the chance to dedicate ourselves to providing more opportunities for our young people, to supporting our young people better than we have in the past and to engaging with them on the issues of the day. We should make those tasks a key theme of the next four years.

Our young Parliament gives us the chance to shape our own future, to build a culture of aspiration and achievement and to instil a sense of belief in all our people. I want today's debate to contribute to that by celebrating the things that our young people do well, by recognising the contribution that they make to our society and by considering what we are doing and what more we can do to support them to ensure that all young people are able, and are positively encouraged, to develop and use their talents to the full.

Our job is to provide the opportunity to be healthy throughout a lifetime, and to have the strongest foundations possible in learning. That will produce literate and numerate young people with a sense of place, a perspective on how our society has developed to the point it has reached today and an understanding of our environment and our interactions with that environment. We can provide opportunities to extend learning into the sciences and the arts; to develop a distinct personality; to travel; to develop vocations and the work skills needed for a whole lifetime; to gain qualifications at school or further qualifications at college and university; to work and adapt as the labour market changes; to participate in sport and to be expressive through the arts; and to volunteer and to make a contribution to many aspects of our national life, which many young people do already.

We also need to support our young people when the going gets tough, to support them to achieve and to support them with the information that they need to make informed life choices, in the difficult decisions and in the transitions that they must make as they mature. We must support them with the infrastructure of good schools, colleges and universities, excellent sporting and arts facilities and good transport links. We must support them to achieve their full potential through the opportunities that we can create collectively as an Executive and a Parliament.

We need to engage our young people, their enthusiasm, their commitment to issues and their insight into the way our world works. We need to engage their passion for justice and equality by listening to them. We must engage them in the decisions that affect them. If we can do that successfully, we can have even more confidence that our young people will excel and make their mark both at home and internationally.

For centuries, young Scots have left our shores to journey to every corner of the world. Scots have made a huge impact across the globe. They have excelled in engineering, medicine, sciences, education and many more fields of endeavour. Too often in the past, however, migration by young Scots was born of necessity. We created far too few opportunities for our young Scots to stay and to be able to prosper in their own land. I hope that

young Scots will still travel far and wide and will continue to make their distinct contribution to a better world, just as they have done in the past. However, one of our tasks is to ensure that that does not happen from necessity, because we will have created the conditions to live for a lifetime in a Scotland brimming with opportunity for our young people.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): From the content of his remarks, the minister has obviously read the Scottish National Party amendment and recognises the need to provide opportunities for young people to stay in Scotland. What powers and initiatives will the Executive introduce to ensure that we have a future for our young people in Scotland?

Peter Peacock: I confess that my speech was written before I saw the SNP amendment so I am not going to give Fiona Hyslop the credit for having influenced my speech.

All Scots in the chamber feel passionately about the fact that, for far too long, so many people had to leave our shores to make a future. I come from the Highlands and Islands, so perhaps I understand that more acutely than most. We want to change all that, which is why we are investing all that we are in education and skills development and in trying to create job opportunities for young people so that they have the chance to stay here. At present, all the signs are that we have more job opportunities for young people than we had in previous generations. Among many other things, that will contribute to their ability to stay here.

As well as providing the opportunities we want our young people to have, we also have to recognise the challenges that they face. They live in an increasingly global culture and in a world with increasing global competition in the jobs market. As health is improved, lifestyles that challenge health are also developing; the growing worldwide trade in hard drugs that reaches into every Scottish community. It is because we recognise our obligations to support our young people and to develop their full potential and because we recognise the challenges that they face that we take a comprehensive view of what we do to provide that support. The Executive and all its agencies, together with Scotland's local authorities and voluntary organisations, take action every day to support our young people in all sorts of ways.

Not only do we have exceptional young people in Scotland, we have exceptional organisations in which they participate, which support and engage with them and which provide opportunities. In Scotland, we have one of the most comprehensive and advanced information services for young people in Europe, in the form of Young Scot.

Young Scot provides easily accessible information for all young people. The Young Scot card offers discounts in thousands of shops in Scotland and across Europe. There is a free, confidential 24-hour legal advice line and an action fund to provide grants to help young people to turn their ideas into action. In partnership with YouthLink Scotland, there is a European information service. A recent development is youngscot.org, which is a national information portal. The portal provides a national and local online news service, local information that is produced by teams of young people, online discussion forums, a vote of the day, entertainment, gossip and much more. The success of the portal speaks for itself. On average, there are now one million file requests a month. The portal has been developed as part of the dialogue youth project, a major national partnership initiative for which the Executive has provided significant funding. The project will provide a focal point for engaging with young people locally and nationally, stimulate lifelong learning, youth mobility, community safety, healthy lifestyles and enterprise education, and promote citizenship and social inclusion by involving young people as full partners in the design and delivery of services and facilities. No other nation has such an advanced and comprehensive means of informing, educating, consulting and engaging with its young people.

We are lucky in Scotland, in that we have in place the building blocks of a structure for youth democracy. We have local youth forums and councils in schools and the wider community. The Scottish Youth Parliament is the only youth-led parliament anywhere. We are currently in discussion with it on the support that it requires to strengthen and build on its already great track record. It must be able to engage fully in all areas of the country and all sectors of our communities.

In Scotland, we have a rich array of local authority and voluntary youth provision, ranging from the well recognised, uniformed voluntary organisations, through to the widest imaginable range of sporting clubs and organisations that are the backbone of our national sporting life, and to organisations that offer opportunities in music, drama and dance and in volunteering at home and overseas. We are extremely fortunate in having a voluntary sector that supports young people.

As members know, only yesterday the First Minister made clear our determination to recognise the value of the contribution that our young people make through volunteering activities. We will introduce a certificate in community volunteering, giving young people credit for the work that they do and allowing them to build on that in future.

In the points that I have outlined, I have said nothing of the other, comprehensive provisions that we make for our children and young people: the pre-natal and post-natal care to ensure a healthy start to life; the extensive range of child and family support systems through our expanding sure start programme; and the massively expanded child care and pre-school provision. Our primary and secondary schools have falling class sizes, classroom assistants and programmes of early intervention to ensure that we can support any child who is in danger of falling behind. There are more job opportunities than there have been for a generation, and fewer young people in Scotland are unemployed.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the minister, in his new position, agree with his predecessor that we have to improve the adult to pupil ratio in order to provide the support that he has mentioned; or does he agree with the SNP that it is the teacher to pupil ratio that we have to improve?

Peter Peacock: We are advancing on both fronts. We are improving the adult to pupil ratio through, for example, the employment of classroom assistants; but equally we are increasing the number of teachers in our classrooms to improve the teacher to pupil ratio. I will touch on that point again.

In addition to the job opportunities that we are creating for young people, there are more opportunities for training and further and higher education—more than for any previous generation of young Scots.

I have not yet referred to the establishment of Scotland's first commissioner for children and young people, which was approved by the Parliament in the previous session. That should provide a unique opportunity for children and young people to have their voices heard whenever they require them to be heard.

By touching on the wide range of things that we do already, I do not mean, in any sense, that we are complacent about what we must do in future. That is why "A Partnership for a Better Scotland" sets out more things that we must and will do for Scotland's young people. We will build more modern schools with more modern sporting and arts facilities; reduce class sizes further in primary and secondary schools; create more modern apprenticeships; review our student support for higher and further education; create a concessionary travel scheme for young people to make them more mobile; and develop a youth work strategy for Scotland to provide every primary school pupil with access to at least one year of free music tuition. Many other things will flow from the partnership agreement.

All that activity, on the part of and on behalf of young people, is good and positive. However, we have to acknowledge that not all our young people live in secure, enabling and nurturing environments that allow them to take full advantage of the opportunities that we create and that are available. The Executive is committed to helping less-advantaged and vulnerable young people in our society. We share the United Kingdom Government's commitment to defeating child poverty within a generation. Since 1997, we have already dramatically reduced absolute levels of child poverty. Child poverty is not just about low income and worklessness in the households in which children live; it is also about poor education, poor health, poor surroundings and a poverty of aspiration. We have to break into those cycles of deprivation through what we do both nationally and locally. As I have said, we want all young people in Scotland to have the opportunity to grow, to develop and to realise their potential.

Some children and young people will need more help and support than others. Some face particular challenges—disability, vulnerability, deprivation, or the drug and alcohol abuse of their parents. The earlier we can provide support, the better the chances of success in allowing those children to develop their potential. Our universal services have a key role to play in ensuring that they reach all children and young people and their families. For some children and young people, securing equitable access to universal provision will not be enough. They will also require targeted services that are built around their individual needs. We must ensure that we reach the young people who are the hardest to reach, including those who become invisible to services or who fall into the cracks between services. "A Partnership for a Better Scotland" commits us to the aim of delivering world-class services for our children. We will build and expand on the range of good provision that is already available for children and young people to help to close the opportunity gap.

We seek to close that gap in a wide range of ways, some of which I have already mentioned. Our sure start programme is expanding; we are expanding flexible child care provision; we are planning improvements to support school-age children by modernising comprehensive education, ensuring that, by 2007, every school in Scotland is an integrated community school. We are also working to support improvements in the health of children in school, providing free fruit in primaries 1 and 2 and continuing to support breakfast clubs and improve school meals. We are also putting a greater emphasis on physical activity. We will legislate to end the current bureaucratic hurdles that are faced by children, giving additional support for learning needs and targeting better interventions to help children who are in the care of local authorities.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I am a fellow Highland MSP, and it has been put to me that many school meals are bought in from elsewhere. The Moray firth is the top area in the UK for organic fruit and vegetables. Would the minister encourage the use of more organic food in schools? Would he encourage schools and education authorities to buy more food locally?

Peter Peacock: I am all for local authorities meeting the nutritional standards that they are required to meet. They can do that in the ways that they think are best locally. I am a great believer in devolving power to local authorities to allow them to make the decisions and choices that will suit their communities.

We are expanding support for the changing children's services fund, to help local authorities, health boards and voluntary organisations to plan together to deliver a more preventive and better integrated approach to services for children and young people.

However, there is a small minority group of young people who pose difficulties that differ from the norm. We are all aware of the need to tackle the most serious and persistent young offenders. Most of our young people are a real asset to Scotland. Even most of the minority of young people who get involved peripherally in offending behaviour and crime and who come to the attention of the formal agencies tend to do so only once before stopping. We must recognise that a small number of disruptive and sometimes dangerous young people offend and behave antisocially time and again. That small group has a disproportionately negative impact on the quality of life in many of our communities and that has to be confronted determinedly and on a number of fronts. Tackling and reducing youth crime is one of our greatest challenges. Youth crime brings misery to many individuals and communities. It damages the life chances of young people themselves—all too often, other young people are the victims of youth offending. We need to make our communities safer places in which to live. We are determined to do that and, among a range of other measures, we are committed to extending antisocial behaviour orders.

We want all our young people to be as engaged, as imaginative and as productive as the majority already are. We want to foster and encourage the positive attributes that we should recognise our young people have in abundance: imagination, creativity and wit; leadership in society, politics, business and the arts; tolerance for others from other backgrounds; and the ability to be outward-looking and have a clear understanding of our place in Europe and the wider world. We want young people to be confident enough to take advantage of the opportunities that are available.

We can ensure that structures and support are in place to allow young people to reach their full potential, and we will see the rewards of that. Among young people abroad, Scotland is already regarded as one of the places to be. We should have the strength of belief in the Parliament to recognise that for ourselves.

I look forward to hearing contributions on how we can take this work forward, how we can provide more opportunity and better support for our young people and how we can engage effectively our young people in the issues of the day.

I move,

That the Parliament celebrates the contribution made to society by the young people of Scotland, both at home and abroad; applauds their dynamism, intellect, enthusiasm, enterprise, creativity and individuality; will work in partnership with young people to help meet their aspirations; believes that the establishment of the new Children's Commissioner, measures to reform education by ensuring that the curriculum is built around the needs of the child and that education takes place in the most modern facilities, extending access to high quality sport and leisure facilities and support for youth work and volunteering will help young people to reach their full potential and participate in society; recognises that some young people require additional support and measures to do so, and commits itself whenever possible to making sure that appropriate support is provided.

09:50

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I congratulate Peter Peacock on his appointment. Where we agree, I hope to work with him constructively, as there is much scope for consensus and dialogue. I hope that he will accept my intention to do that for the common good of the young people of Scotland. Where we disagree, I hope that he will listen, engage and be open to persuasion. I do not expect him always to change his mind, but a fair hearing from him for me and other members on his initiatives will help him to receive a fair wind in those areas where consensus is reasonable, possible and, more important, expected by the Scottish people.

When I heard that the Executive was having a debate on young people, I was tempted, because of the rhetoric of recent months, to ask whether it would be a debate for young people or against them. For too long, politicians have used the word "youth" only if it is accompanied by the word "crime". Others may want to discuss that; I do not intend to, except to point out that if we want to consider who is best placed to deal with young people who are disconnected from society, we could do no better than to consider those young people who are connected with society. They are the ones who make up the bulk of our society.

Much is said about rights and responsibilities in today's world. Politicians have privileged rights to

pass laws, but they also have a responsibility to pass laws, and to do so in an even-handed, logical and consistent manner. We have had debates in which members have praised firefighters; within days, the same members have kicked the firefighters in the teeth in a vote. Let us not spend today praising young people in a worthy debate, just to kick them in the teeth when it comes to crucial votes on policy, law and resources.

On Tuesday, the youth, vitality and talent of young Scots transformed the chamber, when the National Youth Choir of Scotland Edinburgh children's choir transfixed us with its singing. I would like to congratulate the choir again on its performance on that day. It could be noted that the only standing ovation of the day was not for the symbols of Parliament, for the monarchy or for government. In our desire to find a new enemy to be seen to be defeating, let us not forget the abilities and potential of our young people.

Every member will gladly celebrate the contribution of the young people of Scotland to society, whether it is here or abroad. We will applaud the positive thinking and actions of young Scots. Scotland is a nation steeped in history, but it is a nation that must look to and build for the future. We must remember the past and the lessons that it can teach us, but we must stand where we are and face the future. That requires the courage to examine ourselves critically, and the confidence to look forward from where we are, and to find our opportunities and the strength to pursue them. Our young Scots must be at the forefront when we look to and build for the future.

The dynamism that marks youth is the force that we need to build and rebuild our country. It is the drive that we need to help to bring Scotland back into the top ranks of the family of nations. That will not be done easily or overnight, but it must be done. There will be no one here who does not want Scotland to grow, and no one who does not want Scotland's young people to get the very best that they can out of our country. The question is how we provide the platform for them to grow—the platform that will help us to rebuild Scotland. We cannot do that unless we acknowledge where we stand. It is still the case that one in three children in Scotland lives in poverty.

The Westminster Government made a commitment to tackle poverty within 20 years. We are six years in, and there has been limited progress. The Parliament must acknowledge that although we can tackle some of the supply-side issues and the education and skills issues, and while there can be early interventions and opportunities on health and other initiatives that were mentioned by the minister, until we have powers over tax benefits and the economic powers to ensure that we can truly tackle poverty, we have a very poor platform indeed.

I want a smart, successful Scotland, but for that we must have smart, successful Scots. We need those Scots to stay in Scotland and to contribute to Scotland. We can feed the international community with the talent of Scots, as we have done for many years, but our brain drain weakens our prospects for growth. The Scottish economy has a strong base but poor growth, and our population figures and prospects will cause serious damage in future. Members may have heard of the total fertility rate—I am not sure whether I am permitted to discuss such matters in Parliament. A comparison of the latest total fertility rates shows that Scotland's figure is 1.49, which is just below the European Union average; 20 years ago it was 4 per cent higher. We have had a dramatic change, which must be addressed.

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): How?

Fiona Hyslop: I was not looking for invitations.

There are young women in their 20s in Scotland who are saddled with student debt, and who have huge housing costs and face the prospect of paying £400 a month for child care. They are delaying having children until they are in their 30s and, when they have children, they have fewer children. We are pricing our young women out of motherhood. A birth rate as low as Scotland's is not sustainable economically in the long term. We need the next generation to earn the wealth and provide the services to us in our old age. Some members will need those services sooner than I will, but we will all need them. We need the economic powers of independence to build a vibrant Scotland that young people want to stay in and want to return to, and in which they want to bring up their children. In population terms, we could have the same results as Japan, where there were early signs of the population problems that are symptomatic of economic stagnation in a country that in recent decades had been one of the strongest economies.

In order for young Scots to be here, they must have the opportunity to build their lives. There must be opportunities for them to flourish in their own country. Too many of our young people find themselves forced to leave this country in their 20s to look elsewhere. We have a declining population and our death rate is outstripping our birth rate. We have an aging population—the age profile is becoming top-heavy. We have had a fall-off in the birth rate and a large part of the problem may be that our young people do not have confidence in the future of the nation and do not want to commit themselves to having children. How else do we explain our population rates and our prospects for growth? Those are the issues that we must address.

I turn to the Government's proposals. I welcome the establishment of the children's commissioner and congratulate the Education, Culture and Sport

Committee from the previous session on its work on that issue, which provided further evidence that the committee system is a powerful tool for democracy. I look forward to the bill and I invite the minister to indicate its timing so that we know when we can expect to get it on the statute book.

We must support resources for, and listen to, the Scottish Youth Parliament. The events that I have attended challenge our thinking. That is what is needed and we should welcome it.

Additional support for learning is an area in which we can work constructively with the Government. I have expressed concerns that parents have felt left out of the original process. When I questioned the First Minister, I was pleased to hear that publication of the bill has been delayed in order that some of the points that were made during the original consultation can be revisited. I hope sincerely that parents and young people will be involved in that process.

We should recognise the recent Auditor General's report about resources and provision for special needs and consider how we can deal with it. There is a great deal of angst, anguish and sometimes anger among parents and professionals about the actual delivery, rather than the principle, of mainstreaming. We must engage meaningfully with those concerns.

On charity law, I heard what the minister said about young people volunteering in environmental concerns and in the community. Many of the organisations that those young people deal with are charities. If we expect young people to volunteer, we should provide the framework of proper charity law and protection for such organisations. I hope that the minister will help to ensure that there is early legislation. It is not just the charities who need support, but the young people who benefit from them and who volunteer with them.

We must find for Scotland the confidence to know that the future, if not entirely rosy, at least contains the seeds of hope. We can improve the future if we try. I acknowledge the Conservatives' amendment—I will be interested to hear their speeches. Parents have such an important role that they need support. We ask a lot of the parents of young children and we expect a lot of them when it comes to learning opportunities, but we must consider how we can provide support for parents without becoming the nanny state. There are many concerns about that, and we must achieve that balance.

We must find for Scotland the vitality and verve that will create opportunities and openings to allow our people to stay in this country, but we must do more than that. We must address our population problem in the short term, and we must look furth

of our shores for new blood. We must encourage migration to Scotland and we must encourage young people to come and live here and build their future here. That means an end to the xenophobic policies of the current Government in Westminster, which sees those from other countries as a problem rather than an opportunity.

I want Scotland to draw more people to its shores to enrich our culture and to revitalise our nation. Those people can provide the drive and determination to improve themselves, as they have done in previous generations, to ensure that Scotland can become competitive and successful. Whether they are new Scots coming from all parts of the world or expatriate Scots returning to their homeland, I would welcome the contribution that they could make to this country. We already have open borders in Europe, but we cannot be complacent, and we must consider what we can do. We can do many things for our country, but we must base what we do on a strong system of support.

That brings me to education, where we must examine some of the curriculum issues that the minister touched on. We must consider core skills and allow teachers the space and time to provide the foundations for a good education. We must ensure that we have top-quality sports, cultural and leisure facilities. I assume that it is an oversight that culture is not mentioned in the minister's motion; perhaps he could touch on that in summing up.

Let us do what we can to ensure that our young people have the platform to fulfil their potential. We want to ensure that young people have opportunities, but let us not leave them with a massive debt hanging over their head for the facilities that we build in their name. Let us not leave today's primary schoolchildren paying for their school when they are into their working lives. The private finance initiative or public-private partnerships in education are the worst tuition fees yet imposed. Let us not hamstring the young of today with the debts of tomorrow. Let us dump the profiteer's charter and get rid of excess profits from education, put other practices in place and build on the success of not-for-profit trusts.

There are opportunities, but we must ensure that we know what we are saddling our young people with in the future. When we build for the future, we build the present into it. We should ensure that what we are doing here today, and throughout the country at all times, carries our best intentions for the future.

We must look to the future with confidence. We need to build a confident Scotland with confident people—young, old and in between—and confident parents to provide the support that we know is desperately needed. If our nation has the

guts to stand up and say, "Yes, we can," perhaps our young people will learn that same confidence—the confidence to face the world and say, "Yes, I can." That confidence is what we have to instil in our young people.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I wonder whether Fiona Hyslop has read the final text of the European youth convention. Perhaps she will allow me to quote from the opening statement, which says:

"We do not have fears or limitations from the past and can therefore look confidently towards our common European future."

Does she agree that the Scots involved in that convention are confident about their future?

Fiona Hyslop: I believe that we have a whole generation that has confidence, but what we have to provide for the next generation of young people is the confidence that their nation will be successful. I welcome absolutely the role of Scots in Europe. If we, as Scots, can look to other European nations and see their successes and what their young people can do, we must take inspiration from that. I hope that the European and External Relations Committee and other groups in this Parliament will embrace the future of Europe and the part that our young people can play in it. That is an agenda that we can pursue with some vigour in this session, and I hope that Irene Oldfather's experience will enable her to contribute to that.

It is about time that we stopped looking for other people to do things for us. It is time that we stood on our own two feet, as a nation and as a people, and I am sure that members know what my party believes is needed for that. We need to build opportunities into Scotland. We must encourage more people to come here—that will require opportunities and life choices—and we must tackle our low birth rate. Opportunities, life choices and confidence are the three pillars upon which our future must rest. In that vein, I will celebrate the contribution made by Scotland's young people. I will applaud the

"dynamism, intellect, enthusiasm, enterprise, creativity and individuality"

that they exhibit, and I wish them all the best. However, we must get up and stand up to help them. We must create the conditions for a confident and forward-looking Scotland so that we can build for the future.

I move amendment S2M-103.3, to leave out from first "will" to end and insert:

"recognises, however, that it is essential for Scotland that we have the powers to ensure that young people do not have to leave Scotland in their 20s to find a future; further recognises that tackling the low birth rate and developing an effective inward migration policy for Scotland are vital

elements towards ensuring that there are enough young Scots to maintain our country's vitality, and, in the meantime, notes that it is right for there to be a Children's Commissioner and for the Scottish Executive to develop measures in the field of education and youth work, and to provide additional support for learning, volunteering, culture, sport and leisure facilities for young people in Scotland."

10:05

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): I congratulate Peter Peacock on his new ministerial role and I welcome the constructive spirit in which he has approached today's subject. Having piloted the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to the statute book some years ago, I am well aware that there are a tremendous number of different aspects to the subject, as Fiona Hyslop pointed out in her comprehensive speech.

A nation's education system plays a vital role in the development of its young people. It opens up minds and it opens up opportunities, providing the opportunity for fulfilment and for young people to reach their full potential, as the minister put it. I cannot help reflecting this morning, as we stand in a forum belonging to the Church of Scotland, that Scotland boasts a proud educational history. It was the Church of Scotland's desire, as far back as the middle ages, to have a school in every parish so that Scots children might be able to read the scriptures that led to rates of literacy and numeracy unrivalled anywhere in the world. The Scottish enlightenment gave Scotland a reputation as a hotbed of intellectual thought, with great minds such as Adam Smith, David Hume, William Robertson and Adam Ferguson all contributing much to our political and economic understanding today.

However, a look at Scotland's educational system today paints a less inspiring picture. In the past four years, the pressure to reduce exclusions has tied the hands of head teachers and caused an unparalleled increase in levels of violence and indiscipline in classrooms. Official figures show that the number of reported incidents of violence against local authority school staff has increased 700 per cent, from 743 in 1997-98 to 5,412 in 2001-02. There is now an attack on a member of school staff roughly every 15 minutes.

I am sure that the minister is well aware of the NFO System 3 poll on school discipline that appeared in *The Herald* this week. Seventy-seven per cent of those asked believe that indiscipline in schools is a serious or very serious problem, while 52 per cent believe that pupils with emotional or behavioural problems should not be educated in mainstream schools. It is not often that we find ourselves sympathetic to the findings of an NFO System 3 poll, but in this case the results confirm what we have suspected for a long time.

Another extremely worrying development is that, according to Executive figures, up to 50 teachers a year are subjected to sexually motivated verbal or physical attacks. There have even been threats of rape to teachers in Scotland's schools. Even more disturbing is the view expressed by Pat O'Donnell of the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers in Scotland that, due to pressures on teachers not to report such incidents, the number of sexually motivated attacks was much higher than Government statistics suggest.

I urge the minister to review and withdraw the arbitrary target on exclusions, as it appears wholly inconsistent with a determined policy to enforce discipline in schools.

Peter Peacock: Does Lord James Douglas-Hamilton accept that we have made it very clear, in this chamber and elsewhere, that we will never second-guess a head teacher who needs to take action in a school if it is their judgment that a pupil must be excluded? Does he also accept that it is a minority of pupils who are indulging in such behaviour?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I am reassured by what the minister says, but I believe strongly that the target is inconsistent with the policy that he seeks to promote. I recommend strongly that he review the matter, as that is undoubtedly what the teachers want, and listening to teachers cannot possibly do any harm in that regard.

Rising levels of indiscipline are obviously having an adverse effect on levels of attainment. Scottish Executive figures show that, in 2001-02, almost half of pupils failed to reach the appropriate targets for reading, writing and maths by the end of secondary 2. However, like the discipline figures, those figures may underestimate the scale of the problem. A report that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education published in March found that 43 per cent of S2 pupils reached appropriate national standards in reading, but only 33 per cent of that age group reached the desired level for writing.

The Executive will no doubt protest that the partnership agreement is full of new ideas and potential improvements, but let us look at the reality. The partnership agreement states:

"We will encourage diversity and permit local authorities to fund specialist schools."

Given that several local authorities, particularly Glasgow City Council, can and do operate specialist schools, that partnership pledge does not take us much further forward.

If the Executive is serious about diversity, it should be prepared to learn from the English

system. Usually, it is the other way round, but I think that both systems can learn from each other. In England, schools decide whether they should apply for specialist status, which ensures that those who know the needs of the children best make the decision. Further, if diversity is a priority, why not allow parents to set up their own state-funded schools? To empower parents would create diversity and plurality in Scotland's education system by allowing faith schools of all denominations, Steiner Waldorf schools, Gaelic schools and schools specialising in arts, sports and music to be set up.

The partnership agreement states that additional teachers would be targeted towards reducing class sizes to a maximum of 20 in S1 and S2 for mathematics and English and a maximum of 25 for primary 1. Will that mean that five and six-year-olds will be confronted in primary 2 with expanding class sizes? It would be good if that point could be clarified.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I note that the Conservative member is more than halfway through his speech. Does he intend, at any point, to say something positive about the great mass of children?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Indeed, I do; that will become abundantly clear. I have no doubt at all about that. I point out to Mr Stevenson that Scotland's education system is the envy of many in the world. However, that does not mean that the system is infallible or perfect. I am entitled to ask questions of the Executive where I think that clarification is required.

The partnership agreement promises guidance on how to bring the proportion of the school budget that is under the control of a head teacher up to a minimum of 80 per cent and move it towards 90 per cent. One might ask why, if indeed it is a head teacher's budget, a head teacher does not control 100 per cent of it. Further, given that the then Scottish Office issued a circular in 1993 that required local authorities to devolve decision making of at least 80 per cent of school-level costs to head teachers, why are some schools not enjoying even that meagre autonomy?

As we can see, the partnership agreement provides a blueprint for more centralisation and a more top-down approach to our schools. All schools are to deliver the Executive's class-size targets regardless of whether they believe that that represents the best use of the school's resources. All head teachers must accept and adopt the new community school approach, even if they might rather use the additional resources to allow their schools to specialise. Senior management will still have to look on in frustration as violent and aggressive pupils are allowed to continue disrupting the education of others. At least, it is not

easy for senior management to deal with such a situation because of the target for exclusions.

Vast amounts of school-education funding will continue to be spent by bureaucrats even though it is certainly the case that the money would be better spent at the chalk face. However, it does not necessarily have to be like that. We acknowledge that every child is a unique individual and we want to create a diverse education system that is fully responsive to the needs of all our country's children. That can be done only by providing parents with real choice in the education of their children and by giving schools and head teachers the flexibility to cater for such choices.

I am sure that all members will acknowledge the central role that is played by parents and families in enabling young persons to become responsible adults and so fulfil their potential. Given how keen the First Minister has been of late to make parents more responsible for the actions of their children, I was more than a little surprised that there was no mention of that sentiment in the Executive's motion. That is why I lodged my amendment. I welcome Fiona Hyslop's support for it. I am sure that the omission of a reference to parents and families from the Executive's motion was an oversight and we hope for Executive support for my amendment's proposal in due course.

High standards, more opportunity and increasing choice are essential for our young people. We hope that the Government will work its way round to supporting those aims, because our children are Scotland's future.

I move amendment S2M-103.1, to insert at end:

"whilst recognising the central role played by parents and families in enabling young people to become responsible adults and therefore fulfil their potential."

10:15

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Today is United Nations world environment day—happy world environment day, every one. I thought that I would mention that specifically because we, as adults, create or influence hugely the environment for our children and young people. I do not mean only the physical environment, although I will talk about that; I mean also what we might call the spiritual environment, which is the sense of values with which children grow up.

We do not always set an example of responsibility. Other speakers have referred to the fact that in many respects—for example, in relation to PFI or environmental issues—our young people will have to pick up the tab that we are leaving, which means that there will be financial or, in some cases, deadly toxic legacies for them to deal with.

My amendment talks about education for social and environmental responsibility becoming part of the school curriculum. Part of the reason why that is necessary is that we are not teaching well by example. When there is a debate on young people, all members get briefings from various organisations that deal with young people—I have a big sheaf of them—which stress the virtues of young people and all the good things that they do, such as volunteering, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and so on, which is great.

Young people are judged by much higher standards than adults are. Most adults would not come anywhere near young people's level of social, environmental and other commitments. We ought to take our hats off to young people because they are, in many ways, much better than we are. Even very young children have a great sense of justice and environmental responsibility, which we, through the sort of society that we have created, kick out of them over the ensuing years as they move into adulthood.

I mention briefly, because one of my colleagues will talk about it later, that one of the things that the amendment asks for is the reduction of the voting age to 16. Young people of 16 are much more politically, environmentally and socially aware than adults and, in many cases, they are fitter to have the votes than adults. They should be given the vote; they exercise civic responsibilities in many other ways and they should be allowed to do so by voting as well, which would also start their engagement with the political process at an early age.

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): Eleanor Scott speaks about lowering the voting age to 16. I think that one of her party's representatives suggested at a hustings in Glasgow during the election campaign that young people should be allowed to vote at an age when they feel responsible and capable of voting. Is that, in fact, the Greens' policy?

Eleanor Scott: Our policy is to lower the voting age to 16. Like anyone else, a young person at 16 can decide whether they feel responsible enough to exercise their right to vote. Some adults obviously do not take that responsibility even when they are much older.

We acknowledge and welcome the Executive's acknowledgement of young people's values, but we know that that is just a prelude to a lot of negative stuff, such as has come out lately about young people. A kind of punitive spiral about young people has been much aired in the press, but I suggest that the Executive has fed the press that image because it panders to the view that young people are troublemakers. Everybody says that that is not the case, but at the same time the Executive is looking at a kind of punitive approach

to dealing with young people, whether they are offending or in trouble.

I should mention the children's hearings system—a uniquely Scottish system—which is about 30 years old now and perhaps needs a bit of revision. However, when it began it was unique in its recognition that young people who are in trouble or who cause trouble are troubled youngsters, that justice-based approaches cannot be separated from welfare-based approaches and that the two should go together.

As I came down here on the train earlier in the week, I was reading the education document, "Moving to mainstream: The inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools", which is very much about greater mainstreaming inclusion of all special needs pupils. It is interesting that pupils who were not previously included in the mainstream and who have significant disabilities—such as sensory, physical and learning disabilities—are to be encouraged, if they and their parents wish it and it is felt that it is right for them, to be included in mainstream education and that schools are expected to provide appropriate support. When I was involved in community child health, the main reasons for opening a record of needs for a child were social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. It seems that while one lot moves to the mainstream, another lot is being shunted out. I talk to teachers about the difficulties of dealing with pupils who have behavioural difficulties. They do not ask for exclusions, but for support, for which the Executive must provide adequate resources. Pupils can be brought back and successfully helped and reintegrated into schools and subsequently into society. Such processes are labour intensive and there is no cheap way of doing them, but they will be an investment for the future.

I want to say something about the Executive's punitive approach, which could result in the ultimate sanction of parents being jailed for their children's behaviour. Such a sanction, with many caveats, is in the partnership agreement and would simply result in more children being moved to local authority care. We know the statistics relating to children who leave the system for looked-after children; health, employment and educational attainment outcomes are poor. The state makes the worst parent of all.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Does the member agree that many young people suffer great difficulties because of what their parents have done to them through neglect and abuse, and that some youngsters who go into care are already deeply troubled and damaged? Although many things can be done to make the care system much more sensitive and sympathetic, we cannot

say that that system has created such problems. We must confront the fact that, from a very early age, some young people have their life chances severely diminished because families and parents do not support them appropriately, but neglect and abuse them.

The Presiding Officer: The member should wind up.

Eleanor Scott: I make a distinction between children who are brought into the care system for reasons that relate to their own welfare and children who are brought into it for justice-based reasons. There are children who need to be looked after because their families cannot, despite all the support that has been made available—and support must be made available—adequately look after them. I am talking about young people who are brought into care because they cannot be supported within the family and their offending behaviour addressed. It would be a sad indictment of society if there were no provision of support.

The Presiding Officer: Will you close, please?

Eleanor Scott: I am sorry—I will sit down now.

I move amendment S2M-0103.4, to insert at end,

“and calls upon the Scottish Executive to ensure that educational programmes dealing with sustainable development and environmental and social justice issues are included in the curriculum in order to foster responsible attitudes, that opportunities for outdoor education are emphasised, that particular attention is paid to those one in seven young people who are reported to have “disappeared” from the system and are not in a job, training, education or on the unemployment register despite government measures such as the New Deal, and that the minimum age for voting and standing in elections is lowered to 16 years.”

10:22

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Like other members, I warmly welcome the appointment of the Minister for Education and Young People and the Deputy Minister for Education and Young People. Based on his track record, Peter Peacock richly deserves his promotion to the Cabinet and my friend Euan Robson has the unique distinction of being the only Liberal Democrat business manager to have come out at the other end unscathed. His performance yesterday showed that he will be a superbly effective minister. Sorting out the nation's education problems should be a scoosh case for him after his experience of herding cats as our whip. I look forward to working with both ministers and with representatives of the other parliamentary parties.

On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I welcome and endorse the motion that is before the Parliament. Unlike some motions in the first session, it is a positive and forward-looking motion

that strikes the right balance between optimism and realism. It provides a vision around which the Parliament can unite.

The different parliamentary parties have many areas of contention, but I hope and believe that the importance of, and support for, young people are not sources of division. Young people are our future and our legacy, and opportunities for and empowerment of them are what we should be about. In the words of YouthLink Scotland, young people are

“moral beings, enthusiastic learners, passionate believers and tolerant democrats”.

That final point in particular is extremely important.

The role of the children's commissioner has been touched on; that role is vital. The commissioner's duties include the important duty to give priority to groups of children and young people who do not have adequate means with which to express themselves and make themselves known. I have no doubt that there is a basis for a fruitful relationship with the Scottish Youth Parliament, which has achieved much, but is capable of achieving much more to articulate an effective voice for Scotland's youth.

There has been something of a contest for who can sound toughest on youth crime but, in this debate, it is important to remember that, of approximately 1 million young people who are under 16 in Scotland, only 1.4 per cent are referred to the reporter on offence grounds, and that only 0.1 per cent are persistent offenders. I will say something later about children and young people who fall out of the system and who are failed by our modern society, but we should celebrate the achievements and contributions that are made by young people. Many of them will have recently finished their standard grades or highs and are awaiting the results of their hard work. The fact that many have been volunteers in the rich diversity of the voluntary sector has been touched on. Many benefit from the life opportunities that are offered by community youth work and the uniformed organisations, and many have musical, artistic or sporting achievements. It is the business of the Parliament and the Scottish Executive to ensure that opportunities, educational facilities and staff are in place and that they are organised to the best effect, and that children have life-enhancing opportunities to widen their horizons. Such provision is tailored as far as possible to the needs of individual children.

In the first session, one of the Liberal Democrats' most significant contributions was in enhancing the importance of educational opportunity in the Executive's work. There was more money for teaching staff and investment in buildings and materials, and there were more

opportunities at tertiary level through the restoration of universal entitlement to free university tuition and the return of student grants. The second partnership agreement, which builds on the work that was done in the first session, is heavily geared to further substantial and effective investment in education, which is a crucial commitment of the Labour and Liberal Democrat led Scottish Executive. There are commitments to modernising and rebuilding school buildings to the highest standards and to integrated community school principles, to increasing teacher numbers to 53,000 by 2007, with increases in support staff, and to more flexible and available child care, which—in turn—builds on our landmark achievement of offering nursery school education for every three-year-old and four-year-old whose parents want it. Those are the resource commitments, but the use that is made of those commitments is important. In particular, having more teachers means that we can target the reduction of class sizes at the crucial primary 1 and secondary 1 and 2 stages, tackle the problems of transition between stages and widen choice and opportunity.

Fiona Hyslop: The previous Executive reduced class sizes from 32 to 30. There were concerns that, in order to achieve that minimal reduction—obviously, we wanted a greater reduction—there was a great deal of disruption for many pupils and the development of composite classes in many local authority areas, particularly in high-population areas such as West Lothian. Does the member agree that welcome class-size reductions should be implemented at a pace that is suitable for young people and that the disruption should not be too evident?

Robert Brown: I accept that there are issues in that regard, which ministers with responsibility for education have tackled over many years. However, although we have made considerable progress, it is important that buildings and staff resources are in place to make such achievements possible, and that there is targeting at the transition stage.

Liberal Democrats have rightly drawn attention to the experience of other countries and to the importance of changing the ethos of primary 1 in order to support less formal teaching methods, to improve confidence and to enable early professional intervention where necessary. There should be more teachers to support the transition from primary to secondary and more imaginative choices for 14 to 16-year-olds, who are often bored at school, but could be stimulated by opportunities that can be offered to develop vocational skills or to experience the more adult environment of further education colleges for part of their school courses. Such proposals are in the partnership agreement and I hope to see

considerable progress on those matters during the session.

Literacy and numeracy tools are central to opening the door of opportunity for people, but education must advance on a broad front and must include in particular citizenship, environmental and enterprise training and education in the widest sense. I have been a strong advocate of the importance of the availability of modern studies up to higher level in all Scottish schools; however, it remains a mystery to me why head teachers in one or two areas do not think it necessary to let children learn about modern Scotland, its new democracy, its place in the world and the social and political challenges that are offered here and in other countries.

Like others during the election, I had the privilege of attending mock elections. I attended a mock election at St Mungo's Academy in the east end of Glasgow. There were ballot boxes, pupil candidates, posters, rosettes and all the usual paraphernalia, and there were investigative young journalists quizzing people with questions that would put the severest of the Parliament's committees to shame. Every class took part in the vote. Above all, there was enormous enthusiasm throughout the school, which does enormous credit to that school. Such an election had the huge benefit of making democratic politics relevant and exciting to young people, which is a trick that has eluded many of us in the traditional political parties.

I remind the minister of the importance of simple traditional themes in engaging young people. I talked to some youngsters recently, who told me that what they wanted in their area was a football park with a dugout like the one at Ibrox. Such matters are not unimportant because the biggest single question is how to engage young people. Above all, young people want the opportunity to kick balls about the place, to engage in football and to have the relationships with older people—particularly male role models—that go with that.

Eleanor Scott *rose—*

Robert Brown: Let me finish the point, if I may. In some parts of the country, dads and lads schemes are being pioneered by the YMCA. In Maryland in the United States of America, midnight basketball schemes have been pioneered for a number of years. Such schemes, which are targeted at high-risk times in high-risk areas, have enormous benefits, including a reduction in crime in the areas involved.

Eleanor Scott: Does Robert Brown agree that although many young people would benefit from the dedicated sports facilities that he mentions, many young people would equally welcome the chance simply to play informally in their areas?

Does he agree that one thing that we must do to improve the health and integration of our young people is to reclaim the streets for them to play in?

Robert Brown: That is absolutely correct. There is no single answer to the question of what we should do for young people; I am trying to emphasise the importance of sport in the youth ethos and the importance of providing opportunities for young people to access local football facilities and other sports facilities, especially in the evenings.

I have four quick points to make in conclusion. First, let us carry through the mission that the Executive set in the programme for government to work with teachers and to reduce the bureaucratic pressures on them. I am not convinced that teaching is better or that children are more accomplished as a result of the existing system of national testing of children from ages five to 14 and other central monitoring. We need light-touch sampling and more time for teachers to teach.

Secondly, let us support the people who can make a difference. That means not only teachers, but leaders from the scouts, guides and other uniformed organisations, and professional youth workers in local communities. We have a social work crisis—a recent Audit Scotland report shows that we are short of 200 social workers. Part of the solution is to have more youth workers, who add meaning and opportunity to the lives of disadvantaged children.

I can think of few better investments than supporting more substantially than we do at present the trained and largely volunteer leadership of the scouts and similar organisations. In particular, we should support those organisations in expanding into new areas. In 2002, there were 764 leaders and 4,412 scouts on the greater Glasgow scout roll, but I am not convinced that we make the best use of that huge resource. I understand that the Executive is carrying out a survey of youth clubs, which is due to report around now and which should make interesting reading in the context of the debate.

Thirdly, let us reduce further the number of young people who are involved in crime by properly resourcing the children's hearings system and the courts in order to provide effective diversions from crimes and to provide restorative justice projects. Let us move away from spending money on the system to spending money on trying to avoid people appearing before the system in the first place. There are a number of good projects that have that aim.

Fourthly, as has been mentioned, similar considerations apply to children in care, who are far more likely to be disadvantaged in terms of emotions, education and opportunities than the

average person is. As we have debated many times, such children are more likely to end up homeless or in prison.

This is an age of great potential and opportunity for young people, but it is also a time of huge waste of potential for the many children who are handicapped by poverty, their environment, health problems, addiction, parental neglect and poor education and social opportunities. We can change much of that for the better. I believe that the partnership agreement provides a framework that will allow us to make a major difference in the next four years—nothing is more important than success in this matter. I support the motion.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to the open debate, I have two points of information. First, a number of members whom I would expect to speak have not yet pressed their request-to-speak buttons. I ask them to do so now so that I can finalise my list. Secondly, as I am anxious to escape the straightjacket of four-minute speeches, I will allow speeches of six minutes, during which I expect members to be willing to take a couple of interventions.

10:34

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): We welcome the part of Peter Peacock's motion that congratulates young people's contribution to Scotland and we welcome the positive approaches to the direction of young people that are mentioned in the motion. However, we are concerned that the aspirations are unachievable given the continuing and increasing levels of poverty and deprivation among young people in Scotland.

Much has been said about youth crime and the problems that young people cause, although members have given a more positive message today, which I welcome and appreciate. However, when the cameras have not been on debates and when the public gallery has not been filled with young people, there have been worrying and scathing attacks on young people in relation to their connection to crime. Too often, we hear the words "crime" and "young people" in the same sentence, even though the Scottish police question the emphasis on youth crime. Serious assaults, robberies and sex offences are on the increase, while the rate of young people's being involved in crime has been unchanged for about 10 years.

Many members will be familiar with Tom Wood, the deputy chief constable of Lothian and Borders police, who said last week:

"The facts are that young people are no worse or better today than they ever have been. And there is no more youth crime than there ever has been".

He should know. Johann Lamont is shaking her head, but Tom Wood said it and I just quoted him. Johann Lamont should phone him and laugh at him.

Johann Lamont: Does Rosie Kane think that the constituents who come to me in tears about their difficulties and experiences of youth disorder, or the young people who feel that they cannot reclaim the streets to play in, are making it up? The issue is a serious one for them. Does the member accept that, while respecting young people, we should also have the respect to acknowledge that in some of our communities we need to challenge their behaviour as we would challenge the behaviour of bullies in schools?

Rosie Kane: I acknowledge that and I will mention the point in what I am about to say.

Tom Wood is not wrong. He is a front-line worker who knows what he is talking about. I do not say that there is no crime, bullying or disruption in our communities—I live in Govanhill in the south side of Glasgow, so I am more than aware of what happens in communities. However, when there is a road traffic accident, we do not take all the cars off the road. Instead, we find out what the problem is, we get an ambulance, we deal with the problem and we try to prevent it from happening again.

In other debates, although not today, we have heard generalisations about young people from throughout Scotland—as members know, we will touch on that issue this afternoon. Young people have been badly let down and have been pushed to the wall for decades. Many of the young people of the past are now the adult parents of the young people about whom we now voice concerns. Their problems are a result of their being born into poverty. Although we have heard in the Parliament for four years that one in three children lives in poverty, nothing has been done. Young people who are born into poverty and into housing schemes have few or no resources; they have nothing but hopelessness, endless despair and desperation.

As members know—and as I always say because I cannot stop saying it—until recently, when I became a member, I was a youth worker. I have not thrown away my clothes and experiences from that time and I will not do so. I was also a counsellor for ChildLine Scotland. I know that many other members have worked in that subject and have specialist knowledge of it, and I hope that they bring that knowledge to the chamber. I cannot leave behind the feelings of despair of the young people in Drumchapel with whom I worked.

Members have talked about trying to prevent young people from leaving the country; I could tell them about young people who do not leave their

housing schemes and about others who do not leave their beds because of depression and hopelessness and because they have nowhere to go and nothing to do. For decades and until recently, our communities were slashed and burned because elected representatives closed down amenities and community centres; for example, the swimming pool in Govanhill was closed down.

Stewart Stevenson: The member has movingly defined the problem, and I relate to it. However, what positive action, within the powers of the Parliament, would she have us undertake?

Rosie Kane: Initially, I would look for a reversal in the continuing trend of closures and attacks on young people in the communities. Our community centres and youth clubs, and anything that we are given in our communities, have little or no input from the young people who are expected to use them. They might not all want to play football—some young people might want to sit somewhere that is comfortable and where it is safe to talk. Some young people might want to stand on the street corner. Have we really asked them?

On Tuesday night, I spoke at a public meeting in Drumchapel. Eight young people turned up for that public political meeting. They turned up because, for a number of reasons, they were aware of this debate: I am glad that they were. Those eight young people, aged 16 and 17, knew Jack McConnell's name. I am pleased by that, because it shows that they are engaging with politics. They told me that they would like to come to the Parliament to hear what is happening, but I told them that they did not really want to come to the Parliament, because sitting for a whole day to hear what is happening would leave them bored rigid. They are young, vibrant, motivated and electrified but, I am sorry to say, it is not very exciting to sit here all day.

However, one of the young women, who is 16 and called Sandra, said to me, "Rosie, I'll come to the Parliament and sit there all day. I'll show the Parliament that I can sit there and pay attention, but I wonder whether the Parliament will do me the same service and pay attention to me in the future." Sandra is homeless—she is 17 and she stays in two different homes. Her life is chaotic. I ask members to spare a thought for Sandra and for the rising suicide rates, and I ask them to congratulate the organisations and children who are in the public gallery.

10:42

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): I am sure that we would all like to think that we know a thing or two about being young, as we were all young once. A friend of mine was recently asked by his son whether he had ever heard of someone

called Eric Clapton. My stepson asked whether he could borrow my Stevie Wonder CDs, as they apparently mix well with DJ Spooky's work.

Youth culture is hard to define, but it is, indeed, diverse. It is not all X-Boxes and MTV. I am happy to recognise the contribution of young people. I have no difficulty with that. Today, I shall talk about the contribution that young people make and the challenges that lie ahead.

One of the best aspects of being an MSP is having the opportunity to attend end-of-term school concerts. I never cease to be amazed by the quality of the performances that teachers and pupils produce. This year at Hillhead High School, I sat in admiration listening to the pupils' version of the musical "Little Shop of Horrors", and the hip-hop dance routine of Hyndland Primary School would not have been out of place on a Justin Timberlake video—I am just testing members. The fifth-year pupils who came to Kelvin School for the blind to assist in a mock election made an invaluable contribution to their community. Daniela, a pupil there, has just cut her first single thanks to a local musician. When we witness such things for the first time, we want to nominate every child for a special award. However, we come to realise that there is genuinely an abundance of talent, which is to be found in almost every school in the country.

I congratulate Fiona Hyslop on her promotion to her role as SNP spokesperson on education. She talked about young women being priced out of motherhood. That is a risky theory for the SNP to hold to, as it suggests that women on low incomes who have children have more faith in Scotland than women who attain higher education qualifications have. It is fair to say that women in their 30s are making legitimate choices about not having children, which is a consequence of their having control over their fertility. Perhaps the SNP would like to expand on its theory.

I have a lot of work to do for the under-12s in my constituency. Their demands are clear. Hillhead Primary School wants more and better skateboarding parks and Garnetbank Primary School wants more youth clubs. I have written to the First Minister on the subject. I agree with Rosie Kane that young people should be asked what they would like to do. There should be a national survey to collect the views of young people. Save the Children has conducted surveys that show that the under-12s value street games whereas the over-12s value sports centres highest. I inform Robert Brown that many girls would like to play football, too. Green spaces, which children want, must be protected. We must not allow building on green-belt sites and playing fields.

The biggest issue that children and young people of all ages and backgrounds raise with me

is that they want to be occupied. We should strive to ensure that they have access and free entry to sports facilities. I congratulate Glasgow City Council on its scheme to provide free swimming. In Manchester, an inspirational scheme buys up low-frequency radio licences and allows budding young DJs and presenters to learn the ropes. There are many such initiatives from which we can learn.

Not all young people have those opportunities and that is a challenge for members of all political parties. A warm home, a decent school, a caring environment, a modern apprenticeship, a permanent job or a place at college or university—those are just some of the things to which every child should be entitled by right. According to Save the Children, two thirds of children leaving care have no standard grades. They have poor employment prospects and are, at some time, on the poverty line. It is important to remember that qualifications and skills lead to better-paid employment, which raises people out of poverty.

I congratulate the Executive on what it has done in the area of music, which is close to my heart. I hope to reconvene the cross-party group on contemporary music, if members are interested. The fact that we will change the rules to allow young, unsigned bands to use public money to progress their talent is an important step. The new deal for musicians also makes an important contribution.

Too many children are losing their childhood through continual disruption and constant moving around the school system, which does little to allow them to make friends and build confidence in their abilities. Looked-after children must continue to be a priority for the Executive, as I am sure they will be.

I am concerned about the extent of the trafficking of young people and children around the world. In London, there is widespread concern about the number of teenage women who are being trafficked from eastern Europe into prostitution. The Parliament has passed important legislation that makes such trafficking an offence and I look forward to further legislation to stop children being trafficked into slave labour.

There is a lot of work for us to do and I encourage ministers to work together to tackle child poverty and to create opportunities for our young people. I hope that we recognise our international responsibilities and acknowledge that other countries can learn a lot from Scotland, which has a lot to offer. It is a big challenge for us all to create those opportunities for children without forgetting the other children around the world.

10:47

Mr Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It is difficult for me to persuade myself that I was ever as confident and energetic as today's bright young Scots. However, many Scots youngsters are not as confident, well educated or motivated as they could be. On behalf of all young Scots, I ask the Parliament to support the SNP amendment because, in the post-war years, successive generations of our young people have been let down by the Government. Scottish youngsters are paying a heavy price for economic mismanagement and our state-sponsored dependency culture. Their well-being and future are vital if Scotland is to be at ease with itself and be all that it can be.

To achieve that end needs much more than simple, direct action. SNP analysis proves that, until we have the power to compete and grow our economy at levels that close the gaps between us and other countries and regions, we will only create more poverty and haemorrhage more talent. That would give us the worst of both worlds in relation to young people, demotivating the deprived and exporting the educated. Nobody wants that outcome. We want more bright, healthy, confident and motivated youngsters who will stay or return with skills, experience and capital and attract other talented people to Scotland.

We cannot ensure that outcome while all the wonderful attributes of Scotland and its people are undermined—as they are—by our current monetary and fiscal union. A major manifestation of that is the fact that Scotland is losing about 40 per cent of its Scottish graduates, including more than 90 per cent of the graduates from the Highlands and Islands. Other countries would regard that situation as very wrong, very dangerous and in need of an urgent fix.

At the other end of the scale, many families with children are struggling to get by on low wages, part-time work and subsistence self-employment. Alternatively, they are part of the hugely underestimated group of economically inactive people who have been shunted into incapacity benefit dependency and early retirement or who have fallen through the slats of the jobseekers programme.

Hugh Henry: Jim Mather speaks about people being shunted on to incapacity benefits and about families struggling to get by on low wages—indeed, SNP members have voiced their strong views in the Parliament about the eligibility of young people to claim benefits. However, earlier, he also spoke about a state-sponsored dependency culture. What exactly does he mean by that?

Mr Mather: I am talking about the vast number of people who are pushed on to incapacity benefits. At the weekend, we saw data that suggested that 100,000—not 20,000—people are on benefits in the west of Scotland and that, in one family in four, no one is in work. That is part of the issue.

Of course, some members will say that, in spite of those figures, many poor youngsters are better off than middle-class youngsters of the previous century in terms of food, housing, clothing, travel and entertainment, but the justification for helping those low-income families is clear. Young people's sense of well-being comes from their feeling of self-esteem, which is relative, as it is measured in comparison to how others are doing. The evidence proves that extreme inequality makes people on the lower rungs feel defeated even if they are better off than most of humanity. That is not only a matter of hurt feelings; many people in communities that suffer as a result of great inequality are marooned there and have poorer health and shorter life expectancies than others. We must tackle that issue if Scotland is to be all that it can be morally, socially and economically. The problem is that the benefits system and social inclusion initiatives alone cannot provide a solution.

Mary Scanlon: Is Mr Mather questioning the medical examinations that determine eligibility for incapacity benefits? Is he saying that those examinations are not rigorous enough and that some people on incapacity benefits are healthy enough not to be?

Mr Mather: I am suggesting that many people in difficulty are having to play a game—one that the Tories invented. A mutant and deviant economy has been created in Scotland—Mary Scanlon knows it and I know it.

As I said, the benefits system and social inclusion initiatives alone cannot provide a solution, just as the initiatives outlined in "A Smart, Successful Scotland" cannot provide a solution to the problem that we face in relation to exporting our skilled and talented youngsters. The solution is to tackle the core problem that prevents Scotland from being able to compete. We must learn from other economies and produce a plan of action that can be delivered by a Parliament with a complete range of powers. Nothing else works. In our hearts, we all know that that is the case.

Look at what Ireland has done since 1986. It has implemented a series of simple measures that are all working to produce results for future generations of young Irish men and women. Those simple steps include: consistent and strong support for education; muscular involvement in the European Union; keeping promises to lower taxes on growth; doing a deal with the unions to ensure

wage restraint in return for lowering pay-as-you-earn contributions; early adoption of the euro, which allowed Ireland to position itself as the only English-speaking country in the euro zone; and the implementation of a policy that is fair to the west of the country, as it delivers 50 per cent of foreign direct investment jobs to that area.

If we are serious about maximising the potential of young Scots to contribute to our society and its prosperity, we need to implement similar measures. If we do not take similar steps, this informed and streetwise generation, as well as future generations, will condemn this period of parliamentary democracy in Scotland as blind, perverse and doctrinaire. We must prevent that from happening. We must support the SNP amendment.

10:54

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): We have heard some amazing speeches in today's interesting debate. The last speech took quite a bit of getting used to; I think that we will all have to go away and read the *Official Report* to see what Mr Mather suggested in the middle of his speech, as what he said seemed a fairly damning indictment of the attitude of our young people.

As a father of five, I claim only a small amount of knowledge about the young people of today. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton highlighted the need to encourage parents in their role of bringing up their children. However, that also means that children have to learn to trust and speak to their parents.

The bond between parent and child starts before conception—the health of the young mother-to-be is where the health journey of all children starts. I am concerned about the fact that that has not been mentioned today. Opportunity is nothing without health. Whatever we say in the chamber and whatever fancy schemes we come up with, if we do not ensure access to health care and health education from birth, we are in deep trouble.

I have always believed in early screening, as that gives the professionals an opportunity to pick up problems that will develop later in life and that might deprive children of their education. Something as simple as a hearing failure can result in a child being written off as incapable of learning. Little things like that make a difference to people's opportunities. It is right that, regardless of any health problem, children should have access to an education that is appropriate to their ability. If a child's ability is impaired in any way because of a health problem, we have to deal with that at an early age. The health service has become nothing more than an accident-and-emergency unit that intervenes when a problem arises. We have to move away from that if future generations are to enjoy healthy lives.

I am always staggered when a minister who is responsible for health replies to a question about, for example, a trend in the growth of asthma among children by saying that no statistics are held centrally. How can ministers make policy decisions when there is no Government central statistical unit that can pull together the knowledge and information that is needed to make positive decisions?

People have talked about the role of teachers. I believe that teachers do not have enough support in dealing with health problems at school. I regularly ask about protocols and I welcome the recent one about how teachers should manage and store children's medicine and how they can encourage children to be responsible for their self-medication programmes, which is a vital aspect. I welcome the work that the Executive has done on that, but I would like it to go further.

In the coalition agreement, we heard about free dental checks, which was presented as a wonderful policy. However, what about access to children's dentistry? At the moment, there are a few community dentists, paid for out of the public purse, who cannot deal with children's dental problems as they do not have enough support. Some of them have access to a school only once a year and there is a limit to how many children they can see in a day. I would like the ministers to tell us how they intend to deal with that. If dental hygiene work is done early on so that problems are picked up, that can help the situation. However, that is not happening; instead, we have a sticking-plaster approach.

Another problem that young people can face as they grow up is substance abuse. Drugs, alcohol and tobacco are addictive and must be used responsibly. The chief medical officer is due to produce a report today—at 10.30 am, I think. I do not know all the details, but he is concerned about young people's binge drinking. I am not a killjoy, but I would stress that such aids to enjoyment as alcohol need to be used sensibly.

Rosie Kane: Does David Davidson agree that we should curb the advertising of cigarettes and alcohol, particularly on football strips?

Mr Davidson: Personally, I agree. However, that is a matter for people at large to decide. If the Scottish Parliament wants to have that debate, it should do so. Obviously, a lot of money goes into sport through sponsorship, but I do not think that encouraging sport—a healthy pastime—while at the same time covering football strips in tobacco advertising is a clever way in which to send a clear message about health and sport. I see that the lady is smiling and I am glad that we are on the same side for once.

Of course, parents have a role to play in relation to the misuse of drugs. Recently, a charity that came to the Parliament to talk to MSPs made it clear that most children will listen to their parents and take their advice on drugs if the parents are well informed. We have a duty to ensure that parents are given the tools that they need to bring up children with an understanding of what is going on around them that allows them to behave in a safe and responsible manner.

The Scottish Parliament is not playing enough of a role in relation to mental health services for young people, which is a territory that is almost never spoken of. I am talking not only of self-harm and eating disorders, but the general problems and anxieties that young people have. Young people frequently have nowhere to turn and often end up in a state of desperation and withdrawal. In many cases, that leads to drug or alcohol abuse.

We must move away from the idea that young people simply have to play hard and work hard. They should play hard and work hard, but they should do both in a responsible manner. We should ensure that health care is provided to our children not just at the doctor's surgery, but starting from the cradle.

People should grow up understanding what it is reasonable to do, what it is not reasonable to do and how to look after themselves in our society. The Parliament has to play its role if we want to create a framework in which good health is something that everyone seeks to achieve, rather than something that people have only if they happen to be in the right place at the right time.

11:00

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I would like to warmly support—sorry, that was a split infinitive. I would like warmly to support the speech made by my colleague, Robert Brown. As he is not in a position to hand me any goodies, I can congratulate him in all conscience. I also congratulate the members who have already spoken. I agreed with all or most of every speech. It is encouraging that the Parliament has a serious and enlightened attitude towards doing things for young people.

The Executive has made some progress in the past. I would award it a beta plus for its performance on education and youth matters. The motion is constructive and forward looking and it is not too self-congratulatory. I will concentrate on one area in particular. The motion mentions

“support for youth work and volunteering”.

Those are warm words, but warm words must be followed by cold money, without which things are a waste of time. There should be more money and it

should be much better directed—we must fund things more intelligently.

The nature of the funding to the voluntary sector is ludicrous. We tend to go for new projects, but we do not adequately provide core funding or fund old projects. We are constantly reinventing the wheel. We need only go round the corner from here to see that, at the Edinburgh City Youth Cafe at 6 Victoria Terrace. One of the good projects that the youth cafe has run for three years—which is right on the button of the Executive's policies on youth work to help young people to get out of trouble and to stay out of trouble—is closing because of a lack of funding. Such examples are replicated all over the country. That is a ridiculous waste of money and we should get a grip on the situation.

We should support learning outside school. Most people learn more outside school than inside school. I am speaking as a former teacher—from a long way back. Young people's attitudes are often shaped more outside school than inside school. There is peer-group pressure in the clubs and sports teams, for example, in which young people get involved.

Community education has become a cinderella service and in many areas is not provided. Central Government uses the traditional Scottish excuse of somebody who has been found out: “It wisnae me.” Central Government will say that local government decides such things. If local government is starved of money, central Government cannot complain when that starvation extends to the various organisations that receive money from local authorities. Clubs are funded less and less because councils are strapped for cash. We should get over that false argument by central Government and develop a better system of funding that involves national Government, local government and the voluntary sector. That would allow us to target money better than we do at the moment.

We must invest in sport, the arts and community activities, which will help for the future. Even if we take the most narrow academic line, some good research from England and the continent shows that investment in sport and music activities in and around schools benefits young people's academic performance, attendance and whole attitude. Even taking such a narrow view of life, we can recognise that investing in sport, the arts and community activities is a good use of money.

We must invest in youth workers and social workers. The failures of the youth justice system largely spring from the inadequate number of social workers, which means that we cannot supply non-jail or non-probation activities quickly enough. Community service and other work carried out through restorative justice are

insufficiently supported. As well as increasing the number of social workers, we should invest in increasing the number of schemes such as the ones that currently succeed—although there are not enough of them—in keeping young people who have been in trouble out of jail.

We must train volunteers more. The previous Executive cut the grant to national youth organisations for training volunteers for no reason at all. That was absolutely ludicrous. We must stop making such silly decisions and invest much more intelligently. There is a huge resource of volunteers, but they often have to be helped, trained and guided in the right direction.

As other members have said, we must reflect the priorities of young people. If we gave them some say in how money is spent, that would be beneficial. Many of the small grants that are allocated to small organisations—perhaps £1,000 or even less—can make a huge difference to a sports or youth club and enable it to achieve a great deal more. We are not talking about huge sums of money. If a large number of small grants are well spent, with young people assisting and saying what the money should be spent on, that would do a great deal of good.

I have one simple plea: let us create an intelligent structure for intelligent funding. We are intelligent people—or we are supposed to be. At the moment, we are presiding over an idiotic system. We have to change it.

11:06

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): As the MSP for Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber, I am often asked to present prizes at secondary school prize-giving ceremonies. When I did so at schools in Kingussie and Kinlochleven, I was struck by the amazing breadth of achievement in academic subjects, sport and art. I was genuinely awestruck by the huge diversity of achievement to which our young people have aspired in their schools. The vast majority of children in Scotland are achieving. They are confident and they are set to do well. However, we should examine the situation of those who are in difficulty and work out practical measures that can let them achieve the same excellence. I was recently reading through new members' maiden speeches. Marlyn Glen was quite right to say that we should praise children for doing well and praise school staff for helping them to achieve excellence.

Some of the finest establishments for helping children to achieve excellence in sport are in my constituency. There is the Glenmore Lodge outdoor activity centre and Clive Freshwater's establishment, Loch Insh Watersports, where

generations of children have learned about canoeing. There is the Scottish Outward Bound Association's Loch Eil centre, which I am visiting this weekend. There is the Badaguish Centre, which specialises in helping children with disabilities. I heard about one young blind girl who heard the sound of running water in a burn for the first time. That outdoor centre provides an excellent service, but it lacks the necessary funding.

Such facilities are regarded as add-ons, as Donald Gorrie suggested, whereas they ought to be regarded as essential. Thirty years ago, I heard the principal of Glenmore Lodge saying that every child in Scotland had the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors. That is no longer the case, although it should be the case. It should be an essential and not something that is liable to be cut when the fiscal going gets rough.

In the previous session, Lloyd Quinan was right to say that it is a disgrace that there is no proper, worked-out national strategy for autistic children. That must be put right in this session. I heard on "Newsnight Scotland" last night about the approach used to promote literacy that has been adopted in schools in Clackmannan. I am no expert in the field, and I might get contradicted, but if such an approach is so successful in Clackmannan, why is it not being taken up elsewhere?

The problem of youth crime must be viewed in context. It concerns only a small minority—Robert Brown spoke of 0.1 per cent as really serious offenders. However, I am afraid that the 1,000 or so young criminals who get into serious trouble make the lives of many throughout this land an utter misery. My constituents have related experiences to me that I could not begin to relate to the chamber. I refer to the foul language, the offensive behaviour, the yobbery, the vandalism, the damage to property and the complete lack of respect for human decency of a very small minority of children.

What do we do about those young people? In the remainder of my speech, I want to discuss one scheme that has been shown to work and has been adopted by a partnership of Grampian police, Northern constabulary and the Army. The Highland youth advantage scheme has been carried out in barracks at Gordon and Fort George. The scheme is intended for kids who are identified either as having committed crimes or as being liable to do so. They are identified by social workers, by education departments, by schools and by police community beat officers. The scheme offers children who are in difficulty, have committed minor crime and are perhaps on the cusp of committing major-league crime the opportunity to attend a five-day residential course that is run by the Army and the police.

For many of those young people, the course is probably their first taste of discipline. It consists of a mixture of sporting activities, Army drill and advice about drugs, fire raising and good citizenship. It is probably the first time that many young kids have had the chance to do many things, but in a disciplined, orderly way. The scheme has been so successful that, according to the evaluation report, hardly any of the children who took part in it have reoffended. That must show that it is a terrific success.

I mention the course today because it seems to me self-evident that it should be replicated all over our country. I am amazed that that has not yet happened. I hope that the Executive will agree to examine seriously the evaluation report and to provide funding to ensure that the course can be replicated throughout Scotland.

I will cite some of the comments of children involved in the scheme. One said:

"I liked everything apart from having to get up early, but I'd get used to it".

Others said that

"There is a lot of discipline",

that they learned

"How to get on with people and work as a team",

and that the Army and police were

"Very friendly and easy to talk to".

Can members imagine some of the young people of whom we may be thinking saying that before they went on the course? One young person commented:

"Just to say that it was great fun and as I was having fun I was learning at the same time. I would easily go again".

Operation youth advantage is designed to divert young people away from offending behaviour and to improve their life chances by giving them an insight into Army life. The first pilot project evaluation was compiled by Jim Urquhart and Graham Sedgwick of Grampian police. I commend them, the Army and Northern Constabulary for their work. I hope seriously that this positive suggestion will be taken up and analysed by the Executive and replicated throughout Scotland.

11:13

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I want to pick up points made by three of the previous speakers.

For a large part of her speech, Fiona Hyslop laboured on the subject of Scotland's low birth rate. Is it not the case that a number of European countries face the same situation? That is especially true of the Scandinavian countries—the very countries that SNP members would like

Scotland to look up to. We should see low birth rates as a world and European phenomenon, rather than one that affects Scotland alone.

Unfortunately, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton is not here to confirm this, but he appeared to say that young people who experience social, emotional and behavioural difficulties should not be accommodated in mainstream schooling. That would be a very dangerous path for us to take. In the previous session we debated the poor attainment levels of young people in the care system, which are closely related to the fact that they do not receive the consistent schooling that most young people receive and move school remarkably frequently.

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): Does the member agree that if we want to raise standards for young people who are looked after, the people who look after them should be professionally trained and in full-time employment? Currently, young people who are looked after are looked after by staff who are temporary, who have been moved on and who are not always professionally trained.

Scott Barrie: I agree absolutely that the people who look after our looked-after children should be trained to the highest-possible standard. After all, by definition young people who are looked after are perhaps the neediest and most vulnerable members of our young population. I endorse the member's comments.

If we are serious about raising the attainment levels of young people who are in the looked-after system—especially those who are accommodated away from their homes—it is important that as far as possible they should be in mainstream schooling, so that they have the anchor and security that they deserve.

I want to pick up on comments that Eleanor Scott made in response to an intervention from Johann Lamont. It is important to point out that the vast majority of referrals to the reporter to the children's hearing are made on care and protection grounds, rather than on offence grounds. More often than not, the large number of young people who come before the children's panel do so because they need care and protection, rather than because they have committed offences. The state has an ultimate responsibility and duty to ensure that the best-possible care is offered to those people.

I want to touch briefly on three issues: throughcare and aftercare services; formal education and young people's participation in it; and general youth provision out of school. The minister referred to the valuable role that organisations such as the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum play. I make a plea for us to

ensure that that organisation continues to be funded and is able to offer the support that young people who are in the care system need not just while they are being looked after but after they have left the system. That is an area in which some of our statutory services have fallen down. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 makes provision for aftercare services to be provided to young people up to the age of 25. They should continue to receive support from statutory agencies, if they choose to seek it.

Much of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000, for which the minister was partly responsible in a previous incarnation, concerned the statutory right of young people to be involved in their education. Visiting both primary and secondary schools in the Dunfermline West constituency during the four years since I was first elected, I have always been impressed by the fact that every school has a picture of the people who are on its school council. School councils are not tokenistic. The issues that young people raise through them are taken on by head teachers and senior staff in schools. That should be encouraged.

Like other members, ever since I was elected I have made a point of conducting school surgeries in all four of the high schools in my constituency. It is very interesting to listen to the issues that young people bring to surgeries that are held specifically for them. It is difficult to expect young people to attend the more formal surgeries that we hold, which they may not think are for them. If we go into their environment, they will tell us what issues affect them.

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): The member makes the point that in his surgeries he listens to what young people say. I am sure that that is a recurring theme of debates such as this. Does he believe that the Executive has listened to what young people have said, but lacks the ambition to implement that, or that the Executive has not listened to young people since this issue was debated previously?

Scott Barrie: I am unclear as to what the member is referring to. Perhaps we can discuss that matter another time, if not later in this debate.

On general youth provision out of school, one thing that disappoints me is that, even when the formal authorities such as the police and the council support suggestions that have been made by young people, communities often veto the plans. In particular, I think of a village in my constituency where a youth shelter was sought by the young people and was seen to be a good idea by both the council and the police but was successfully vetoed by local residents. The residents said that they vetoed the proposal not because they did not want the young people of the

village to have access to the facility but because it might attract youngsters from elsewhere into their community. Such small-mindedness is counterproductive; we should be taking on the issues of young people.

I am conscious that I am out of time, so I shall not give other examples, although I am sure that others will. I finish by making a plea to councils and to the Executive on the importance of detached youth work. Not all youth work should be concentrated within static places such as youth clubs or community centres. We need to revisit that issue, because too often in the past detached youth work has suffered when cuts have had to be made in youth provision.

11:22

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): At the outset, I welcome Peter Peacock, who is in the chamber—I see that he is slinking away, although I am sure that he will be back—to his new ministerial post. I congratulate him on bringing the debate to the Parliament in the early days of the session. It is quite appropriate that our debate centres on our young people, and I thank the minister for that.

The debate should be welcomed and supported by all members. It is an interesting statistic that Scotland has approximately 1 million children who are under the age of 16. In addition, we have another 325,000 people who are in the age range 16 to 21. That is a significant slice of our population. They are our future. They will become the educationists, the entrepreneurs, the business leaders and—dare I say it—the politicians in the years to come.

Throughout the 21st century, Scotland's future and its financial and political identity on the world stage will be determined and sustained by the support, encouragement and opportunity that we provide for those young people who are in their early-learning years. The Gaelic world has a saying, “Ionnsachadh òg, ionnsachadh bòidheach”—early learning is the best learning.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats believe that our education system must be restructured so that our young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills that are needed to develop and thrive in this modern world. Each individual must be enabled to attain their full potential, as has been reiterated by several members today.

I am pleased to see that the new partnership agreement with our Labour colleagues states:

“We will provide more flexible learning and development opportunities so that pupils' experience of education is matched to their individual needs”.

We must be conscious of the fact that people do not learn at the same rate or have the same ability

to learn. I hold the view, with which many would agree, that too much emphasis used to be put on directing people towards academic qualifications, as if everyone had to have a certificate or a qualification before they could be considered fit for work experience.

However, attitudes have changed. Experience has clearly demonstrated that many young people would have preferred, and should have been advised—and, indeed, encouraged—to take up a trade apprenticeship, which would have equipped them with the vocational skills that are so badly needed in today's world of work. Apprenticeships have the added benefit of providing the potential for enhanced employment prospects. I know many people who, having attended further education college or university to gain the degree that they aspired to, have found it difficult to come back into the world of work and find gainful employment. That is disappointing, as there are other opportunities.

We now have an opportunity—I believe that this is the appropriate time—to reform the educational curriculum. We should increase pupil choice by simplifying the curriculum and making it more attractive and stimulating for the participants. Such a reform would, I hope, involve the combined co-operation of our schools, colleges and workplaces.

We should also ensure that the young people who do not participate in our education system enjoy the same financial benefits as their counterparts in full-time education. It has been brought to my attention that students who go on to further and higher education enjoy benefits, such as free travel passes, free entry to some national institutions and free entry to other activities, that are not available to 16-year-olds who leave school to take up a vocational trade. That issue should be addressed so that all young people enjoy the same privileges.

The Parliament must give young people our full support. As I said at the outset, they are our future. It is those young Scots who will create and develop this great Scottish nation of which we are all so proud.

11:27

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I welcome the opportunity to use my first speech in the chamber to discuss a motion that mentions young people in such a positive light. It makes a change from seeing the almost daily media portrayals of young people as dangerous, feckless or reckless. I worry that, over the coming months, the Parliament will add to that portrayal by focusing so heavily on antisocial behaviour orders. The bill on that matter will be aimed almost entirely at young people, despite the fact that young people are by

no means the only ones who engage in antisocial behaviour.

My own experience of youth work was that it was a challenging and rewarding period of my life. The concerns of the young people with whom I worked covered the whole range of issues. The young people showed the dynamism and individuality to which the motion refers.

However, for the young people with whom I worked, school, far from being a place of safety and learning, was a hostile and violent environment. Many of them had left the education system early or had barely participated in it because of the discrimination and prejudice that they faced daily. Most had not been given the information and support that they needed to protect their health, with sexual morality often used as an excuse. Like all young people, they left school in the knowledge that they would not be entitled to the same minimum wage as the rest of us. Entry to further or higher education could saddle them with daunting levels of debt.

The sport and recreation facilities to which the motion refers are obviously welcome but, in a society that structures its transport needs around the car, young people's access to facilities is a crucial issue. Far too many young people are left dependent on lifts—a perk that can be given or taken away.

For those for whom the home environment was not safe, the prospects were even more grim. With no automatic right to social housing, they could be exploited by private landlords or by those who were only too eager to offer accommodation with their own sinister interests at heart. Many of those who had been in the care of local authorities had life histories that should make Scotland ashamed. Passed from pillar to post and abused, unsupported and criminalised, they were young people for whom violence and exploitation were a part of daily existence.

As Johann Lamont mentioned, to say that is not to criticise those who are working to offer support to young people. Scotland has many dedicated and hard-working professionals working to combat those problems. However, far too many of them are stressed out and overworked because of understaffing. As a result, many young people will fail to meet the potential to which the motion refers, unless vital public services receive increased funding.

As for enabling young people to participate in society—another of the motion's aspirations—there are increasing opportunities for them to do so, as long as they do not want to do so inside this chamber, and as long as they do not want to affect the decisions made in the chamber by voting. To keep the bar on democratic participation at 18 is

not defensible. The arguments have been well rehearsed. Young people work, pay tax, receive services, have families and are bound by the laws that the Parliament passes. They should have the right to tell us what to do and to sack us if we ignore them.

The motion contains aspirations that we can all support, but for too many young people in Scotland, those aspirations are not and will not be met.

11:31

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): I have been as fortunate as many of the MSPs in the chamber today—and as Pauline McNeill said, it is a good part of the job—to be allowed to celebrate young people's achievements in our schools and constituencies. Like Fergus Ewing, after discussions with young people I am constantly left impressed by their maturity and hard work.

We have had a constructive debate today, but I warn members that I am about to ruin that. Peter Peacock's motion is constructive and forward looking and members have made positive contributions. However, it is not all good news. We cannot deny that there is good and bad in all sectors of society; we should not pretend that there is no bad. We all know and are all frustrated by the fact that good news does not travel fast and bad news travels faster. We hear too little about the achievements of young people and today will probably be the same.

This morning, the airwaves were dominated by a motion from some MSPs that we should ban the word "ned" and not be allowed to use it, rather than by today's debate and the celebration of young people in Scotland. In the terms of that motion, it is "hurtful" to describe the delicate little souls—bless them—as neds. What are we supposed to call the gangs who hang about the streets? Track-suit ambassadors? Should we rename shoplifters retail stock relocation operatives, or drug dealers independent pharmaceutical consultants? I look forward to the committee debate when that subject comes up.

Rosie Kane: It is neither funny nor interesting to speak about young people in that way. To call young people neds, drug dealers, shoplifters or anything like that is to make a huge assumption. They are young people in their own right. Does the member agree?

Mr McNeil: No one said that and I will not allow the member to put words in my mouth. They are there and they are a reality in our society.

Whether an MSP should be spending his or her time on such issues is a matter for public debate. I

am always wary of politicians—as young people should be—whose response to every ill is to ban it. It is not so easy. Murder and theft have been banned since the time of Moses, but they are hardly a thing of the past. The only serious way to tackle problems is not to ban their effects but to examine their causes.

The way to stop adults referring to some young people as neds is to stop some young people behaving like neds. We should be honest and challenge unacceptable behaviour and have the courage to take action. If that means extending antisocial behaviour orders and tagging offenders, so be it. If that means asking parents to take more responsibility, so be it.

Ms Byrne: Would the member deal with those people and the social services that are employed to look after them by ensuring that local authorities can provide the full social work complement needed to support those young people whom the member is calling neds? Is he aware that there are not enough social workers in Scotland and there is not enough support for such families? Does he agree that instead of castigating such people we should be putting resources into providing them with support?

Mr McNeil: I am castigating bad behaviour. We must recognise it and face up to it because it is a problem that faces us all. I am not here to demonise young people and to introduce some sort of old fogey's charter. Young people have enough reasons to resent politicians. Tommy Sheridan wants them to have free healthy school dinners and replace the Happy Meal with three doses of cabbage in the school canteen. Rosie Kane wants to stop computers being put into schools by private companies. The SSP wants to ban whisky advertising, horse racing and dog racing—life would be pretty grim. The SSP has a higher tally of bans than the Taliban.

I am not saying that the Labour party will be any more popular. Ours is the party that has promised more police and teachers so we are hardly likely to be popular either.

Having a go at youth crime is not synonymous with having a go at young people. As I said last week and as I will continue to say in future—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You are in your final minute, Mr McNeil, and will you stand nearer your microphone?

Mr McNeil: I took two interventions, Presiding Officer, one of which was nearly as long as my speech.

As every young person can tell us, the main victims of young people's antisocial and criminal behaviour are other young people. It is young

people whose education is disrupted by violence, who are bullied, who are effectively excluded from community resources by gang violence and who are robbed and assaulted in the streets. It is young people who tell me that we have got to take action against criminal behaviour in the street.

I will cut my speech short at that. When the ministers come to act, please will they remember that it is young people who are the real victims of youth violence and whose life chances are dramatically affected by that violence?

11:37

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

First, I pick up on a point that Fiona Hyslop made. Instead of sniggering at it, people should take the subject of fertility seriously and I thank her for raising the issue. I do not want to turn the debate into one on health, but Fiona Hyslop did not mention the dramatic rise in the incidence of chlamydia that was announced last week. Chlamydia is a symptomless sexually transmitted disease that leads to infertility and it is a very serious issue.

I note that the motion mentions

“work in partnership with young people to help meet their aspirations”

and

“ensuring that the curriculum is built around the needs”

of young people. We should also note that, in 2001-02, approximately 20 per cent of S2 pupils failed to reach level D for reading, writing and mathematics.

I also note that the motion says that education should take place

“in the most modern facilities”

and, of course, all members would sign up to that.

Last week, I visited Nairn Academy. I was there a year ago to see its healthy eating options and I am pleased that that project has progressed. Instead of glad-handing and having tea and cakes with the rector, I was taken on a tour of the toilets. I assure members that they were disgusting. The male toilets were closed because of a health and safety hazard. When we talk about education taking place in modern facilities, we should not just be talking about classrooms. Pupils are also entitled to excellent toilet facilities.

Another point in the motion mentions

“extending access to high quality sport and leisure facilities”

that will help young people to reach their full potential. All members could sign up to that.

The motion sounds impressive and I welcome the objectives that it outlines. I hope that the

minister does not lose focus on those objectives over the next four years.

I note from the partnership agreement the proposal to enable 14 to 16-year-olds to undertake courses in further education colleges as part of the school-based curriculum. Given that more than 3,000 pupils left school in Scotland last year with no recognisable qualifications, surely the partnership with further education colleges needs to be firmed up. I was a lecturer in further and higher education for two decades before 1999 and I am aware of what the further education sector can offer. However, it has generally been quite difficult to get schools to part with their pupils, because the schools fear losing teaching staff due to lower pupil numbers.

Many members mentioned discipline problems. I never had a discipline problem in 20 years in further education, which was generally because there were more mature students in classes. The teacher was not needed to sort them out and they sorted out any potential discipline problems.

Stewart Stevenson: They were afraid of Mary Scanlon.

Mary Scanlon: That is right. I would sort out Stewart Stevenson quickly enough.

I ask the new Minister for Education and Young People to put pupils first, and give them the option of education and training in further education. As John Farquhar Munro said, we should get rid of the snobbery of academic qualifications and give greater value to the trades, crafts, skills and apprenticeships that are available in further education. Whether it is hairdressing, plumbing, bricklaying, building or engineering, people will be unlikely to be unemployed for any length of time with any of those basic skills.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to implement free personal care or any form of home care simply because the number of available home carers is insufficient, yet anyone entering that profession would be encouraged to do an access course and then a three-year degree course in social care. Many people have to leave after one year due to financial hardship and are unable to complete the course, although one year is likely to be sufficient to get started in a career in care.

We should encourage private and public sector organisations to recruit more young people and to give them work-based training as well as further education.

I am sorry that Peter Peacock has left. I ask him to take another look at music tuition in schools given that, as the convener of Highland Council, he abolished free music tuition and introduced means testing for music tuition in schools. Many parents throughout the Highlands do not want their

financial details to be in council offices to decide whether they are poor enough to be eligible for free music tuition. A generation of talented youngsters from less well-off families have not been helped to meet their aspirations or reach their full potential. I hope that that will change and that pupils across Scotland will have access to music, drama, arts and sports, in order to realise the talents and potential that are in every one of us.

Finally, on the subject of neds, I am pleased to see the Deputy Minister for Justice at this debate. *[Laughter.]* I did not mean that he fitted into the ned category. Nonetheless, I would not pick a fight with him. The level of illiteracy in our prisons is alarming.

I welcome joined-up working, social inclusion, aspirations being met and people reaching their full potential, which can best be achieved at school age. That would help to reduce the ned culture, and would give youths confidence in their own abilities to enjoy and contribute to life in Scotland.

11:44

Mr Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I follow the excited speech of Duncan McNeil with the statement that young people must be listened to. I disabuse him of the idea that the SNP is about to ban horseracing. That would have to be run past the parliamentary leader at Westminster, and I suspect that he might object.

There is too much well-meaning jargon in the Executive's talk of partnership with young people. Listen to the youngsters; listen to what they have to say about their school experiences and out-of-school time. Where is the evidence that the Executive really does listen? Does it hear the views of the large number who escape—who get out of their family surroundings and communities because they think that there is little future there? Look at the brain drain of our youngest and brightest. Look at the census data, which I spoke about in my first speech last week, and ask whether they do not show one of the root problems that requires creating a different future for Scotland, so that those young people will stay here.

What does the partnership agreement do to encourage a positive view of Scotland's future? Does the Executive instruct Careers Scotland to provide detailed information on exciting jobs in every part of Scotland, so that well-qualified people can return to those areas? Does Careers Scotland give enough detailed knowledge to young people before they leave to do such jobs, or do those exciting jobs not exist yet? How are young people valued when so much of the recent election propaganda was so negative? Refusing to

seek more powers for our Parliament and rubbishing those who boost national self-confidence is the other side of the coin of failing to listen to young people—and older Scots for that matter.

I wonder if the Executive has listened to Carol Craig's trenchant analysis in "The Scots' Crisis of Confidence". That book underlines so much of what has not been heard about the real condition of so many young people in this country. I urge the Executive to start to analyse the experiences that so many of our young people have in Scotland today.

I quote Highland Youth Voice. That group, which is part of the Scottish Youth Parliament, was involved recently in an exercise in Drumnadrochit to bring communities together. It said, having been able for the first time to publish its own materials:

"These new materials are some of the first published by young people for young people."

The fact is that far too often we talk down to young people. As adults we say, "This is what is good for you", but we do not encourage enough young people to speak for themselves.

I notice that Peter Peacock's motion does not mention culture. That is not an oversight. It shows the level of priority that the Government gives to that aspect of our lives. Look at the low priority that the Executive gives to Gaelic and to Scots. Those languages were blocked in the last Parliament, and there is no urgency to address the fact that those are the underpinning means of expression of our young people and of many communities.

I turn specifically to examine one positive message that could be built upon. I wish to address the work of Fèis Rois, which is the Gaelic music youth learning group based in Dingwall, and is part of Fèisean nan Gàidheal. It proposed a couple of years ago—and the Executive eventually backed this—that Fèis Rois should set up a traditional music musicians-in-schools scheme, which would allow young people in primary schools in many parts of Scotland to hear traditional music, or any kind of live music, for the first time.

Imagine a situation where primary 6 and 7 children in social inclusion partnership areas—for example, in North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, Dunbartonshire, East Ayrshire and North Ayrshire, for a start—had not heard any live music. We have a rich musical culture, and we also have a rich modern musical culture, but many young people never get to experience it. The results from those experiments are amazing. The feedback from the youngsters is terrific. The school head teachers are saying, "When can we have the young, talented musicians back to play our traditional

music and songs, and to teach dance and song as a legacy to leave in the schools?" At the moment, only 4,000 children in Scotland have experienced that excellent time.

I wonder what 10 years of such experience would do for people's self-confidence and for a generation growing up in which only a few have experienced such activity. Fiona Hyslop's amendment, which mentions the fact that additional support is needed for culture and sport for our young people, addresses a problem that the Executive is skating over. I ask the Executive to consider the Fèis Rois experience and see that it is extended to the whole of Scotland as quickly as possible.

11:50

Mr Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in a day-long parliamentary debate on young people. Although I am the youngest member in the chamber this morning, I was also very kindly described by *The Herald* as the Parliament's new "young fogey" after my maiden speech last week. As a result, I feel especially qualified to bring the generations in the chamber together.

Greater understanding between the generations is crucial if we are to move away from the stigmatising of younger people that had a damaging prominence during the election campaign. Instead, we must move to a culture in which we embrace young people as active citizens who have much to offer society.

As I said, greater understanding is crucial in that respect. When I spoke to a member of Midlothian's young people forum, which is a pioneering project that brings together local government agencies, the police, youth workers and—most important—youngsters, he told me about the results of a police survey on the needs of young people and a similar one on the needs of old people in Penicuik, in my constituency. Older people told the police that they wanted better street lighting to reduce the fear of crime that comes from young people hanging around on dark streets. However, young people also wanted better street lighting to reduce the fear of bullying from gangs on the centre street. We must not forget that many people have shared needs and concerns, and must guard against pigeonholing when developing Government policy.

Today we have an excellent opportunity to debate the way forward for younger people, their potential and the steps that Government should take not only to protect, but to empower them. I will focus on those aspects.

As far as younger people's facilities are concerned, I had the pleasure of visiting the

Langlee community centre in Galashiels on Monday night and met youth workers and youngsters benefiting from a fantastic resource that is almost bursting at the seams. The centre's evening clubs for young people not only give them space and a degree of structured freedom that is a perfect supplement to school, but also provides space for parents. I am delighted to learn that at the centre on Monday the Prince of Wales will attend a final team presentation for a Prince's Trust Scotland volunteers course. The centre's youth work and attitude to young people is a perfect balance of freedom and responsibility.

However, members of the previous Parliament met the staff of the centre who were concerned about its long-term funding. As the centre faced an uncertain future during the education funding crisis in the Borders two years ago, I implore the minister to work closely with local authorities to provide surer funding to such centres.

I want to touch not only on empowering young people, which is what happens at Langlee, but on protecting them. Yesterday, when the Parliament debated school meals, members expressed differing views on universality and targeting. However, there can be nothing but universality as far as child protection services are concerned.

Around 3,500 children are fostered by local authorities in Scotland, and the numbers vary considerably from authority to authority. As Johann Lamont pointed out, such children are looked after for many reasons. Some have been harmed or neglected. Sometimes parents can no longer cope with their children because they are ill or because of other problems within the family unit. Although dedicated foster parents provide outstanding care, I again implore ministers to work with local authorities on funding matters.

This week, one of my constituents who is a foster parent spoke to me passionately about the need to ensure that local authority care services have a surer financial footing. Like all carers, foster carers provide a vital service, but receive little prominence. Providing a stable and caring foster home for a youngster who a few years ago was disruptive and would inevitably have fallen into crime has given him a future as an active citizen.

That said, I am concerned that all the agencies are still not working together closely enough to ensure that young people in foster care are receiving the support—especially the counselling—that they need at such an important stage in their lives. I have been told that, in the Borders, a child has had to wait up to four months before receiving counselling. Such examples are unacceptable. We must provide children with the protection that they need, and I hope that the minister will speak to his colleagues and ensure

that Government agencies work together to implement the child protection plan that was announced in March. Furthermore, I hope that on the anniversary of its implementation the minister will return to the Parliament to report progress on the first year of the three-year programme.

Today we have the opportunity to congratulate our young people and celebrate their imagination, creativity and energy. We also have the opportunity to ensure that we listen to young people and engage them as partners. As someone who started up a business in his 20s, I warmly congratulate the Shell LiveWIRE Scottish young entrepreneur of the year, Mike Welch, who works in Peebles. I am excited about the enterprise in schools agenda that the Executive is taking forward and again look forward to the minister and his colleagues reporting back on progress in that area.

I am delighted to support the motion.

11:55

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab):

We have had a constructive debate so far and, like John Farquhar Munro, I congratulate the ministers on bringing such an important matter to the Parliament so early in this session.

I regret that, although as individuals we might recognise the importance and potential of our young people, our society is in danger of being a little bit agist. As Duncan McNeil pointed out, we too often—perhaps even unconsciously—judge our young people not on their actions, but on their appearance, the colour of their hair, their looks and their clothes.

If members need any evidence of that, I mention a black kid who appeared in my community, wearing baggy pants and a back-to-front baseball cap. Parents who saw him talking to other young kids immediately assumed that he was a drug dealer. In fact, he was a missionary from Africa who was involved with the local church. Furthermore, as a member of the constituency Labour party, I grew up with a young woman with pink hair and Doc Marten boots who is now the Minister for Justice. It is clear that judging people on appearance can be very misleading. My daughter very much aspires to the pink hair and Doc Marten boots and keeps asking, “If Cathy Jamieson can do that, why can’t I?”

That is why today’s motion is important. I hope that the minister’s positive speech this morning will send out a message to all our decent young people that the Scottish Parliament and the Executive recognise and welcome the contribution that they make to our communities.

In that respect, I want to celebrate the achievements of young people in my constituency.

I draw the minister’s attention to the North Ayrshire skateboarders’ group, which is an innovative project that has been initiated by young people. No doubt members will recall that I have been known to take an interest in rollerblading and skateboarding.

Working on their own initiative, the young people took steps to set up a skateboard park in our community. They researched the project, visited other successful sites in Scotland, raised money themselves to support their appeal and are presently awaiting the outcome of a lottery grant application which, if successful, will seal the deal on the park. They have also worked with the local council to get their plans approved and to identify a suitable site, and are on the threshold of success.

In setting up the initiative, the young people have learned a great deal about community politics, how to make one’s voice heard and how to interact with politicians and local people. I am sure that ministers will join me in congratulating them. In fact, just this week, they have set up a website about their project to keep interested parties abreast of developments.

In his opening speech, the minister mentioned supporting young people. Another youth project in my constituency has been developed by the Cornerstone church in Kilwinning. The church opens its doors to local teenagers, some of whom are recovering from drink and drug addiction problems. Such a scheme offers those teenagers hope and an opportunity to participate in music, drama and sporting activities within a structured environment. Moreover, it offers a mentoring service that allows young people to discuss issues of concern in a safe environment in the hope that they will be diverted from the streets into positive engagement and activities and given the ability to make informed choices.

The group is looking to extend the scheme, and has applied for funding towards the costs of creating a youth café, which would be open after school hours and at weekends. I hope that the minister will comment on whether that project, which mentors young people in such a way, is eligible for Executive support as outlined in the partnership document’s proposals for a new mentoring scheme.

It would be remiss of me to speak in this debate without mentioning the work of the European Youth Convention, which I referred to during Fiona Hyslop’s speech. The convention transcends barriers of geography, language and culture. Almost a year ago, 210 children from 28 countries came together in Brussels to tell us about the kind of Europe that they want. As politicians, we have a duty to listen to what they said. As well as better engagement with young people, they want us to

address the issues that preoccupy the partnership in the Scottish Parliament—social progress and employment opportunity.

I just have time to mention the safety of our young people. In the Parliament's first session, I regularly drew the minister's attention to the issue of tobacco sales to underage children. I take the opportunity to ask the minister about progress on the pilot project on test purchasing that the Lord Advocate initiated. We have a duty to protect our young people. We know that people start smoking before the age at which they are legally entitled to buy tobacco. It is important that we exercise our duty as legislators to ensure that those who put private profit before children's health are prosecuted for doing so.

I welcome the motion and am happy to support it.

12:01

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):

I am glad that I made the effort to get here in time, because Peter Peacock's opening speech was superb. At the risk of sounding sycophantic, if more members attained that level, the Parliament would be a far better debating house.

Although I agree with several of the many points that have been made, there are some that I disagree with—for example, those on class sizes. I went to school during the war. Even though the best teachers were away because of the war, those who were left were superb. Classes of 50 or 60 pupils were not uncommon in the early 1940s. I am probably the biggest underachiever out of my class of about 40 or 50. I have managed only to become an MSP; the rest of the pupils in my class went on to much bigger things in life. I ought to give the school—Dalziel High School in Motherwell—a little plug, because it was an excellent school. The quality of teaching does not seem to be mentioned as much as the number of pupils in classes. If the quality of teaching is of the correct standard, the class size does not matter as much. I have a lifetime's experience to prove that to myself.

Jeremy Purvis mentioned his description as a "young fogey". I am not sure whether I am the father of the Parliament; if I were, I would alter one or two pedigrees. I am pleased to see that I am keeping my hair a bit better than the young fogey is managing to do. That is an aside.

Mr McNeil—a middle-aged fogey—mentioned the old fogey. I do not like to hear derogatory terms being used for children and young people. I would not call them neds; I would say that there are a few delinquents in our society. There is a parallel with calling someone a pensioner, which implies a belief that they are old, done, beaten and

past it. Don't you believe it—we are up for it. That is why we call ourselves senior citizens. We are ready for anything. I would rather call someone a delinquent than a ned, because "ned" is a derogatory term, which we should strike from our vocabulary.

Many points have been made, but I must compliment the minister on his speech, which was exceptionally well balanced. He talked up the situation of young people and dedicated only a small percentage of time at the end of his speech to those in our society who need to be reprimanded and brought into line.

I will leave my speech at that, because it is getting near lunch time and members will want to get to their seats.

12:04

Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (SNP): It is right that the theme that has run through the debate is about listening to young people. We can do nothing more important than listen to what young people tell us.

It is an unfortunate fact that, in general, we hear about young people only when things go wrong. That applies in other areas of life, too. When things go wrong with young people, we tend to hear in the newspapers and on radio and television that they are involved in crime, the drugs culture and violence. Some young people are involved in those aspects of life, but older people are also involved in them. Unfortunately, although only a small minority of people—whether young or old—take part in such activities, there is a perception that young people are involved in crime, violence and drugs. For many people, that perception is their reality. We must address that perception and consider how we can dispel the myth that all young people are criminals, which is far from true.

The reality is that the young people who are involved in drugs or crime are a tiny minority. We all know what problems exist in our communities, because the same problems exist in urban and rural communities throughout Scotland. Duncan McNeil mentioned the problem of youths hanging about streets and causing problems. We must put in place whatever powers and legislation are needed to deal with those problems and to make life better for everyone who lives in our communities.

Stigmatising young people is not the way to go about doing that. We must identify people who are causing problems, regardless of their age, and must tackle the problems that they cause. As politicians, it is our job to put in place the social, educational and political structures that allow our young people to develop their talents, expand their

horizons and achieve their goals. Although that is our responsibility, not the responsibility of young people, if we do not listen to them, we will not know what their hopes and aspirations are. We must start listening properly to the young people of Scotland.

Young people have been involved in seminars and there is the Scottish Youth Parliament. Politicians sit down with young people and allow them to speak on a range of subjects. After nodding in agreement, the politicians go away and forget completely what the young people said. Then they bring forward an idea and say, "This will be good for them", even though they have forgotten what the young people actually said. That cannot go on for much longer.

It is not that long—although it is longer for some members than for others—since we were the young people of Scotland. I invite members to think back on how they felt when people ignored what they said or patronised them. They should think about how they feel now, when people ignore what they say and patronise them. That happens daily and it is not a good thing; we should not visit it on the young people of Scotland.

If we take anything from the debate, we should take from it the idea that we must listen properly to the people of Scotland. If we listened to what young people say that they want, we would be surprised. Like us, they want decent communities and jobs and they want to live in a Scotland in which they can aspire to, and can achieve, a better life. Young people want the things that we want; the similarities are incredible. I wonder how that works out—after all, we raised them. Given that we accept what the young people of Scotland want, why do we find it so difficult to address their concerns? That is the task that we face.

I will conclude with a personal anecdote that highlights what I am talking about. I will tell members something that I perhaps should not, even though my mother will kill me for it. In a debate last week, I mentioned that I grew up in Ardrossan. Although it is a great place with brilliant people, it has a few areas where Mike Tyson could make a living as an Avon lady.

When I went to school in Ardrossan, it was best to be able to handle yourself. One day, at Stanley Primary School, I was unfortunate enough to get into a fight. The other boy and I were taken to the head teacher's office and, because I had won the fight, I was told that I was a budding thug. I am not a thug, but I am not a pacifist either, so members should not push their luck. That has stuck in my mind for 31 years because the head teacher—who was not a bad man—was not prepared to listen to my explanation of what had happened. He did not know why there had been a fight, but I was branded as a budding thug at the age of 12. I am

not a thug. I am far from being an angel, but I am not a thug.

I remember clearly how I felt when that head teacher refused to listen to me and branded me. Sadly, that still happens today. People in authority are refusing to listen and they are branding young people. Let us try to put a stop to that.

12:11

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): The minister, when he opened the debate, paid tribute to Scotland's young people. He also praised those in all spheres of Government and civic life who work hard to ensure that facilities, support and opportunities exist to enable young people to have good health, education, leisure activities, the chance to have lifelong training and learning provision and to have jobs that allow them to play their part in Scotland's economic life.

Fiona Hyslop of the SNP was equally voluble in praising young people and celebrating their achievements. I wish to associate myself entirely with those remarks. I welcome the young people who are here today in the gallery and those from the organisations that work with young people, particularly the young group at the back.

Unfortunately, Ms Hyslop went on to reprise her party's constant whinge that the ills of Scotland, as it sees them, can be cured only by divorce from Westminster. As usual, relatively few suggestions were forthcoming as to what actions the SNP would take to create the conditions for a future Scotland, other than those that are contained in the coalition proposals. The only suggestion that I think I heard was to encourage population growth. I searched for a suitably alliterative word to go with Scotland that would be acceptable in the chamber, but I could not find one, so I will call the SNP suggestion "procreating for prosperity". I wonder whether that will form part of training for enterprise in the brave free Scotland of the Opposition's dreams.

Astonishingly, Jim Mather seemed to assert that incapacity benefit claimants lie on their forms in order to get those benefits. I am glad to allow him the opportunity to retract that. Will he take that opportunity?

Mr Mather: The reality is that we have higher unemployment, lower wages, limited opportunities and pervasive poverty in Scotland.

Members: Answer the question.

Mr Mather: What does the member suggest as a positive option? What is the Labour party's positive option that would turn that situation round? The Labour party has institutionally trapped people in poverty—what will it do to protect them?

Christine May: Mr Mather has given us sufficient answer by not answering the question.

Let me provide some examples of the efforts that are made by and on behalf of young people, with the support of the current and previous Executives. The skate park at Tanshall in Glenrothes in my constituency was provided with money by the previous Executive, but organised, designed and managed by the young people and those in the community and local authority who have helped them to get the park up and running. Another example is the Fife off-road biking project, which means that motorbikes will no longer disturb the community and bikers will have a safe and suitable place for practising the sport—which should have a good deal more support, instead of football, but there you are. The youth bus shelter at the Broom in Leven, again designed by and on behalf of young people, has for years allowed those young people to hang out in a location of their choosing that does not disturb others and which allows them to enjoy themselves.

The FRAE Fife youth group—the minority-ethnic capacity building social inclusion partnership in Fife—is working with minority-ethnic young people in my constituency to improve understanding, increase opportunities and allow others in the constituency to hear the valuable contribution that their traditions make to our cultural life. The Clued Up project and the Lee O'Brien Solvent Trust, both of which deal with solvent and drug abuse, are other examples of young people working within projects to help their peers.

In this national volunteering week, many young people will volunteer and work in voluntary groups, again supported by the Executive. They deserve to be celebrated. On 2 July—which is the last week of the school term—I, like many others here, will attend constituency schools. I will go to Glenwood High School to present prizes—not just to the young people who have achieved academic excellence, but to those who have made significant personal gains. We will be celebrating and congratulating them, their parents and their teachers.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): As well as being congratulated by us, and as well as being supported in their own areas, young people must be able to come to Parliament, be involved in it and enjoy it. Will the member join me in congratulating and welcoming the children from Machanhill Primary School in Larkhall, who are here today to be part of our deliberations and part of our Parliament?

Christine May: I am absolutely delighted to join Karen Gillon in welcoming the young people from her constituency, and their teachers.

In this session of Parliament, I want us to build on the work of the previous session in creating the

conditions for, and laying the foundations of, a prosperous and successful life for Scotland's young people. They themselves have made it clear to me, as they have made it clear to many others, that what they want is the opportunity for all of them to live safely. I have sympathy with Rosie Kane when she describes young people where she lives who are afraid to come out because of the violence and intimidation that they might suffer and when she describes the opportunities that have to be created to allow those young people to play their part. I want them to be able to learn and to grow and I will look to the Executive to introduce proposals that will allow that.

12:17

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): I was heartened by the minister's positive note this morning about young people; it flew in the face of what has been happening over the past few weeks and during the election campaign, when young people were ostracised and castigated. As members will know, I will continue to work until the end of June as principal teacher of pupil support—in Campbell Martin's old school of Ardrrossan Academy. As such, I am perhaps exceptional in the chamber in having the responsibility of implementing Executive policy on education and social inclusion. It is a job that I love and a job that I am sorry to be leaving, but I hope that I will make an impact on education here that will make a difference to the young people whom I work with. In this, my first speech, I want to comment on some aspects of the partnership agreement that will directly affect young people and their families.

At the outset, it should be said that this generation of young people are no different from any other. They have the same fears, hopes and dreams of all previous generations. The only difference is that those in this generation have less chance of having their aspirations met. In those circumstances, to hear new Labour politicians castigate Scotland's youth during the election campaign was stomach churning.

Karen Gillon: Will the member take an intervention?

Ms Byrne: Not at the moment.

That comment came from people who should know better. It is not that long ago that some of them were working, often up against local hostility, in the former Strathclyde Regional Council's excellent youth intervention teams.

Since the Denis Healey cuts in the late 1970s, education has suffered year on year from chronic underfunding. Resources have been whittled away until we have only the bare bones of a

comprehensive education system from cradle to grave. As in the other public services, underfunding is the biggest obstacle to progress. That merits not a mention in the partnership agreement. Until the keystone of secure funding is in place, all the tinkering and blame in the world cannot obscure the real reasons for failure.

Section 3 of the partnership agreement talks about Scotland's children and young people having energy and enthusiasm. It talks about local authorities, health boards, the voluntary sector and other organisations working with the partnership

"to provide the best and most exciting opportunities that we can"

for children and young people. More fine platitudes, but how many of those organisations have asked for the parents of young people to go to jail for failures in the system? If that is the best and most exciting opportunity that we can offer, we suffer from poverty of vision.

Nowhere is that more the case than in the proposals to jail the parents of under-16s. Will we jail the local authorities that cannot provide the support systems for those young people, and who cannot provide enough social workers, psychologists or speech and language therapists? A recent study has estimated that 50,000 of our children live with a parent who has a drug dependency problem, yet there is no mention of support for drug rehabilitation or detox facilities in our communities. I work with people in my community who are desperate to set up a drug rehab facility in the area. Such a facility is badly needed, the impact on our community would be huge, and yet that issue is being ignored.

The rapid increase in part-time, short-term working has left many young people in the care of grandparents, aunts, uncles and neighbours. Is that social network to suffer prosecution for kids in its care? It has been repeated today that a third of children are born into poverty. That fact has been acknowledged, but we do not seem to have enough nous to do something about it. The Executive commits funds for secure units and jails, but is content to adopt a target for poverty reduction. We know that young people who feel isolated from society are more likely to commit crime, yet the agreement proposes legislation to isolate them further.

While the Executive looks at Scotland's youth and sees potential criminals, my party looks at Scotland's youth with hope. Our manifesto, written with young people's involvement, is a million miles removed from the partnership document. We will campaign for community youth forums to identify which amenities are needed in each area, for free access to publicly owned cultural and recreational centres, including sports centres, art galleries and

museums, and for free rail, bus and ferry travel for school students and benefit claimants. Those three measures alone would do much to engage young people in our communities and encourage active citizenship.

This August, I hope to visit the Woodcraft Folk Celtic camp at Auchencairn in Dumfriesshire. The camp will bring together children and young people from Palestine, Portugal, the Basque Country and Latvia, to live with Scottish, English and Welsh groups. I am told that Palestinian kids especially enjoy Scotland's summer showers. Those kids, from some of the poorest parts of the world, will live together and learn from each other the principles of co-operation, equality and peace. If only some of that spirit could be seen in the partnership agreement. Perhaps we will have to depend on the next generation to put principles and people before profit.

12:23

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): I am delighted to have a chance to speak in the debate. I would like to highlight the importance of culture and sport in the development of Scottish youth. If we want good culture and sport in Scotland, it is essential that we encourage the involvement of young people from an early age. That involvement in culture and sport enriches the lives of children and young people, so it is necessary to correct misconceptions about the arts and to provide introductions to demystify classical arts such as opera, ballet and the theatre, for young people's benefit. We must open more young eyes to the myriad pleasures that those arts can produce.

There is an organisation in Edinburgh called TAB—The Audience Business—that has helped to increase visits to the arts from 3.3 million in 1998 to 3.9 million in 2002. One of its successes has been a campaign for residents, called wiZ kidZ, which has encouraged parents to take their children to artistic events. There is a free newsletter, which provides an overview of arts events for young people and gives information on what is available and what it is about. It is estimated that, over the past three years, the campaign has inspired more than 60,000 visits to arts events by children and their parents here in Edinburgh. Monitoring in 2002 showed that 82 per cent found the scheme most useful and that 86 per cent had taken their children to an arts event as a direct result of the wiZ kidZ campaign.

In 2001, TAB also ran a campaign called arts explorers, which concentrated on helping disadvantaged young people in the 15 to 18-year-old age group to get a better understanding of and better access to the arts. It ran workshops on being an audience and how to be a critic, and

sought to explain different art forms in a way that promoted understanding. Many of the young people had never considered going to plays, concerts or ballet, but they have found their lives greatly enriched. That is good news both for them and for the arts.

I would like to see that kind of scheme repeated all over Scotland. In the Highlands, Highlands and Islands Arts, or HI-Arts, is active in that field. The good thing about such initiatives is that they involve young people and their parents together, because parents are usually the people who are best placed to help their children and shared cultural experiences are of enormous value to families.

Last year, I attended a meeting at Murrayfield on finance in sport, and the businessmen there were looking for instant success and quick profits. They look the whole time for stars, but what is important for young people is participation, rather than simply watching their football heroes on television. Physical activity and the spirit of competition of active games are healthy and work against obesity, which is a growing problem among young people all over the United Kingdom. It is therefore important that more sports facilities and playing fields are made available and that there is proper sport education and training in schools and colleges.

A bid was launched recently to make Inverness and the Highlands the European capital of culture in 2008. As a precursor, Highland Council made a pledge to young people in the area that they would have the opportunity to participate in sports and games for at least six hours every week. It also pledged a programme of free music tuition in schools and free attendance for young people at cultural events that visit Inverness and the surrounding area. Sadly, the bid failed, but I seem to remember someone in the Scottish Executive saying that they would do their utmost to ensure that those pledges were honoured. I look forward to that happening, and perhaps the minister, who knows the Highlands well, can enlighten me further and tell me whether there has been any progress.

In the Highlands and Islands—the area that Peter Peacock and I, among others, represent—there are diverse activities specific to the region in which young people should be encouraged to participate. The truly Scottish game of shinty should receive more attention and support, and angling—particularly trout angling—is underutilised in the Highlands. It would prove useful if more young people received training in angling, which is potentially a good source of tourist income in all parts of Scotland. That is healthy recreation, and with the advances in eco-tourism there should be more opportunities for

youngsters to become experts in such subjects as ornithology, geology, mountaineering, hill-walking, sailing, skiing, local history and, of course, the Gaelic heritage. Those are all subjects that can produce not only extreme satisfaction for the participant, but the possibility of job creation in the future.

The Conservative amendment stresses the importance of parents and the family in the development of young people. That is absolutely right, and I agree with Fiona Hyslop's criticism of the nanny state. Government can help by providing a good infrastructure and opportunities. Government can identify things for young people to do that are relevant to their futures and which will make them stronger and forge them into better citizens. Above all, we should encourage young people to do things that will help them to gain confidence. Scotland has previously experienced a golden age of enlightenment; perhaps this Parliament can help to promote the foundation or another one. Talent abounds among Scottish young people and we must ensure that it is not hidden under a bushel.

Business Motion

12:30

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-102, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 11 June

2:30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stages 2 and 3 of the Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Final Stage of the Robin Rigg Offshore Wind Farm (Navigation and Fishing) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 12 June

9:30 am Scottish National Party Business

followed by Business Motion

2:30 pm Question Time

3:10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3:30 pm Executive Debate on Investing in Public Transport

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 18 June

2:30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Debate on Patient Focus and Public Involvement

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5:00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 June

9:30 am Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Business Motion

2:30 pm Question Time

3:10 pm First Minister's Question Time

3:30 pm Executive Business

followed by

5:00 pm

followed by
Ferguson.]

Motion agreed to.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

Decision Time

Members'

Business—[Patricia

14:30

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Pentair Enclosures

1. Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Scottish Enterprise regarding the future of the Pentair Enclosures factory at Macmerry. (S2O-93)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): We have had extensive discussions with the company through Scottish Development International and Scottish Enterprise Edinburgh and Lothian in order to pursue the options of diversification, a management buyout and the sale of the facility as a going concern. However, the company has chosen to close the facility and the focus of the agencies involved is now on supporting the workers involved in finding alternative jobs.

Mr Home Robertson: I am grateful for that reply. Does the minister share my concern about the loss of 55 more manufacturing jobs in my constituency and about the removal of the company's machinery to China? As he knows, I have taken the matter up with the president of the Pentair corporation and with Scottish Enterprise. In view of the fact that it has not been possible to transfer the business as a going concern, will the minister undertake to do everything possible to help to secure new opportunities for the work force at Macmerry? Will he intervene to instruct Scottish Enterprise to bring new manufacturing jobs to the Pentair factory as soon as possible?

Lewis Macdonald: I certainly share the concern about the loss of jobs anywhere and our thoughts go to the 55 people involved and their families, who are affected by the closure. We have already made great efforts through the agencies that report to ministers to propose alternative solutions from the one that the company has chosen to take. That being the case, I expect the local enterprise company to work both to support the staff, as John Home Robertson requested, and to talk to the company about how the facility can be used to sustain employment in the community.

Mr Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what extra steps will be taken—I am asking this question as a supplementary.

The Presiding Officer: It is a supplementary to Mr Home Robertson's question.

Mr Mather: To ask the Scottish Executive what extra steps will be taken to encourage at least one ferry operator to tender for the Campbeltown to Ballycastle route.

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that that is the wrong question. We move on to question 2.

Church of Scotland (Homes)

2. Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take in view of the possible closure of Church of Scotland homes for elderly people. (S2O-88)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Tom McCabe): We understand that the Church of Scotland is considering the future of its care homes and no decision has been made with regard to closures. We regularly meet representatives of the Church of Scotland to discuss a range of issues and we last met them on 27 May. We will meet again once the review of older people's services has been completed.

Mr Stone: The minister will understand that I would be deeply concerned by any proposal to close care homes in the most rural and remote areas, not least because of the lack of local alternative provision. The people involved are happy where they are and the trauma of relocating them to places as much as 50 miles away would be unacceptable. Accordingly, will he ask officials to consider directing priority Scottish Executive funding to the particular rural problem that I outlined?

Mr McCabe: I am fully aware of the concerns that the member expresses, which are also the concerns of his constituents. I know that he is aware of the recent agreement on care home costs that was reached between local authorities, the independent sector and the voluntary sector. Part of the agreement was to establish a working group that would consider an assessment method for comparing the costs of care throughout Scotland. The group is seeking a mutually acceptable method of assessing those costs and the Executive will act as an observer on the working group. I know that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has asked councils to explore fully all issues with regard to the closure of Church of Scotland homes and I assure Mr Stone that we will consider fully any recommendations that come out of that on-going work.

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): Is the minister aware of the fears of the people of Troon, who have witnessed the closure of their Church of Scotland residential home and are witnessing the impending closure of their council care home at St Meddan's Court and a shrinking

supply of private care home places? Will he allay those fears by guaranteeing that anyone who needs a care home place in future in Troon or anywhere else in Scotland will get one?

Mr McCabe: The member will be aware that local authorities have a duty to ensure that adequate care is provided. I appreciate the concerns that the member's constituents have raised with him about potential closures. However, I remind him that in the recent past, the Executive has supplied an additional £52 million in funding to local authorities for such services.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): The minister mentioned continuing talks with COSLA. The Church of Scotland minister in Whithorn told me recently that talks between COSLA and the Church of Scotland have been on-going for 13 years. Does the minister agree that it is high time that the process was concluded by the Executive's stepping in to support the church in its care programme, for all the good reasons that Jamie Stone mentioned, and because, if the church is forced to close its homes, the only alternative will be for the whole cost of care to fall to the taxpayer, rather than the current shared cost?

Mr McCabe: I am more than well aware that discussions have been undertaken for a considerable time with the Church of Scotland and about the balance between publicly provided services and the independent and voluntary sectors. Considerable progress was made with the recent agreement on care home costs that my predecessor, Mr McAveety, concluded. The discussions that I mentioned and their outcomes are on-going. I am confident that, with good will from all parties concerned, we can make considerable progress.

Ferry (Campbeltown to Ballycastle)

3. George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made on the Campbeltown to Ballycastle ferry tendering process. (S2O-94)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): The tendering process for subsidy to reinstate the service attracted no bids. We have pursued alternative means of reinstating the service, but they have not led to a successful outcome to date.

George Lyon: Will the minister confirm that the Executive will continue its commitment to finding an operator for the route? In light of the discussions that he and his officials have had with ferry operators, will he consider reviewing the criteria in the contract, with a view to altering them and proceeding to offer a revised contract for the route?

Nicol Stephen: On the first point, I can give that confirmation. We have approached several ferry companies. We remain committed to the project and to exploring all feasible options for reinstating the route. On the second point, it is clear that no bids were made under the proposed contract terms, so they are a key factor to be considered.

Mr Mather: What extra steps will the Executive take to encourage at least one ferry operator to tender for this crucial route?

Nicol Stephen: We are discussing those issues with the ferry operators to which I referred. I am not in a position to reveal those extra steps, but we are committed to the project and I hope to provide more information soon.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Is the Executive preventing Caledonian MacBrayne from tendering for the route? If so, why?

Nicol Stephen: No.

National Health Service (Highlands)

4. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take to improve standards in the health service across the Highlands. (S2O-124)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): High standards of health care and services are important not only in the Highlands but throughout Scotland. That is why we established NHS Quality Improvement Scotland to focus on improving quality and standards and why we will promote a culture of continuing improvement in NHS Scotland.

John Farquhar Munro: One concern of my constituents is postcode prescribing and the availability of beta interferon. The partnership agreement contains a commitment to ending postcode prescribing by ensuring that NHS-approved drugs are made available in each NHS board area. When does the Executive plan to implement that policy?

Malcolm Chisholm: The partnership agreement makes it clear that drugs that have been approved by NHS Quality Improvement Scotland should be made available in each NHS board area and I have made it clear that drugs and treatments that that body recommends should be available to meet clinical need. There is no delay in implementing the policy; we will monitor its implementation to ensure that that commitment is met. That is an important strand of the organisation's work, along with its wider work on national standards, to which I referred in my first answer.

Carers (Support)

5. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it offers carers. (S2O-104)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Tom McCabe): Carers receive public support from various sources including local authorities, the national health service and voluntary bodies. The Executive is providing £21 million this year to local authorities for the benefit of carers, in addition to the £250,000 that it is providing to voluntary bodies for information and support services.

Irene Oldfather: The minister will be aware that next week is national carers week. Does he agree that too many carers continue to live unidentified in the shadows? What action can the Executive take to address the situation?

Mr McCabe: I appreciate the mention of national carers week. It is clear that it is an important event in Scotland each time that it comes around. A number of measures are being developed to identify and support carers. In the recent past, the Executive introduced free personal and nursing care, which assists not only those who are cared for but their carers. The joint future agenda allows local authorities and the national health service to improve support for carers through better, more co-ordinated services.

The Executive is developing a strong, outcome-based focus for carers initiatives with specific outcome measurements. Irene Oldfather might be aware that best-practice guidelines are being developed. I assure her and the chamber that the Executive recognises fully the contribution that many thousands of unsung heroes make in caring. We will continue to pursue improvements in the support of carers.

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): Given that nearly 5,000 young people below the age of 16 care for someone from their own home, what plans does the Executive have to ensure that those young people are disadvantaged neither academically nor socially?

Mr McCabe: As I mentioned earlier, a range of measures is in place to identify the people who provide care in their community. The previous questioner rightly pointed out that we are not in possession of the full information. Work is under way to ensure that we know exactly who cares, where and when and to ensure that we provide them with as much support as possible.

We believe that the best-practice guidelines that are being developed will make a significant contribution and I give a firm assurance that we will continue to work in every way that we can to continue to offer and improve on the support that is available to carers.

Judiciary (Diversity)

6. Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it is taking to increase diversity in the judiciary. (S2O-121)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): In 2002, we established the independent Judicial Appointments Board for Scotland to make recommendations for the appointments of judges and sheriffs. Ministers gave specific guidance to the board inviting its members to consider the means of attracting a wider range of people to serve on the bench. I look forward to receiving the board's recommendations.

Kate Maclean: No doubt the minister is aware that one of the personal qualities that is required by candidates for the judiciary is an understanding of people and society. When some judicial judgments are looked at, such an understanding does not seem to be much in evidence. Does she agree that it is important for the judiciary to reflect the diversity of Scottish society sooner rather than later? If so, could she provide me with an assurance about the time scale of the proposals to achieve that?

Cathy Jamieson: I agree with what Kate Maclean said. It is important that the public has confidence in the judiciary. One way of achieving that is to have more diversity in judicial appointments. That is part of our agenda to modernise the justice system and the board is working on it at the moment. I look forward to receiving the board's first annual report, which is due to be published later this summer.

National Health Service (Fife)

7. Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made in regard to the implementation of the "Right for Fife" review of Fife's health services. (S2O-113)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): The Scottish Executive met with officials of Fife NHS Board this morning to resolve outstanding issues.

Christine May: Is the minister aware that uncertainty over the future of Fife's health services has affected staffing and provision not only in hospitals but in other areas such as primary care? Does he agree that staff in Fife's hospitals and primary care facilities would benefit considerably from his reassurance about the imminent implementation of the "Right for Fife" preferred option?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am concerned about that uncertainty, about which representations have been made to me. That is why I am keen that the outline business case should be approved as soon

as possible. I am pleased to report that officials from the NHS board and the Health Department had a positive meeting this morning to discuss Fife's financial plan. Subject to some detailed clarification, which is expected very soon, the department believes that there is a sound financial basis for Fife to take forward the "Right for Fife" project. Once the department has received the clarification, it expects to approve the outline business case very soon and enable Fife to move forward with detailed planning of the favoured option.

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

Does the minister agree that one of the success stories of Fife NHS Board has been the number of specialist general practice nurses, who have helped to relieve pressure on the hospital sector? What measures is he taking to encourage an increase in the number of specialist general practice nurses, who do such a tremendous job in treating patients who have chronic conditions such as diabetes, asthma, stroke and coronary heart disease?

Malcolm Chisholm: I agree that that has been one of the strengths in Fife; others, such as public involvement in primary care and good joint working between primary care and Fife Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, were highlighted in the NHS Quality Improvement Scotland report that was published last week.

In general, we are keen to increase the number of practice nurses. Throughout Scotland last year, there was an increase of about 200 in the number of practice nurses. Further impetus will be given to that process if the GPs vote in favour of the proposed new GP contract, because that will increase the resources that go into general practices by a third. Much of that money may be spent on other health care workers such as practice nurses.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):

I am glad that the minister's officials had some good discussions this morning. A headline from this morning's *Dunfermline Press and West of Fife Advertiser* is "Hospital set to cancel surgery for a month?" How is it right for Fife that the NHS board is giving active consideration to the cancellation of surgery during August? Is he aware that it is reported that a financial problem exists—perhaps of up to about £18 million—that is forcing the board to consider those desperate measures? What action will he take to ensure that surgery is not cancelled in August? It is high time that the situation was sorted out.

Malcolm Chisholm: I apologise to Bruce Crawford as I have not read the paper that he has in his hands, but I read another paper that carried a clear statement from Fife NHS Board that there is no question of surgery being cancelled for a month in Fife this summer.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I welcome the minister's statement. People in my constituency and others have been worried about some of the press reports and I am pleased to hear what he is saying. Will he give us assistance in respect of the release of funds, which is urgently required if we are going to move to the full business plan?

Malcolm Chisholm: I pay tribute to the work that has been done by Marilyn Livingstone and Christine May, who have lobbied me hard on the issue. It has been a matter of ensuring that the redesign plans are built on firm financial foundations. That is precisely the reassurance that was given this morning. As I announced, I am confident that, subject to clarification of the further fine details, approval will be given very soon.

Hate Crimes

8. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made by its working group on extending legislation to protect women and disabled, lesbian, gay, bisexual and older people against hate crimes. (S2O-126)

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): The Executive will shortly discuss with representatives from relevant groups the key topics to be covered under the working group's remit. We will use feedback from the discussions to produce a consultation paper, which is likely to be published in the autumn.

Robin Harper: I thank the minister for her reply, which is encouraging. I draw her attention to a point that has come up recently. She will be well aware of the appalling level of crimes of violence against lesbian, gay and bisexual people and of that against disabled people, which has been outlined by Capability Scotland. Is she aware of recent research that shows the appalling level of violence within the home against older parents by their own children? Is that a matter of concern?

Ms Curran: Any evidence of violence against people, particularly against vulnerable people in the context that Robin Harper describes, is a matter of concern. The working group will examine a variety of research, including research from the Disability Rights Commission that indicated a level of concern. We will obviously give very serious attention to that research. The research basis of the evidence is crucial, but so is the action plan and consultation that emerges from it. I am happy to discuss that with the member.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): In considering whether we should have a law on hate crimes, will the minister consider the fact that a great number of gay men do not report that they have been victims of crime? Given that surveys by

an organisation in my constituency, Beyond the Barriers, show that only 17 per cent of gay men have reported such crimes, will she consider how people can be given the confidence in the criminal justice system that they need to come forward in the first place to report crimes against them?

Ms Curran: That is done in two ways. First, we must engage with that community and create a climate in which those issues are given proper attention. It is proper that Scotland should recognise the variety of issues that are faced by communities, and I think that the Executive has made significant strides with its equality strategy in that regard.

Secondly, there is a dilemma that faces all legislators. As soon as we legislate for a crime, the figures show an increase in reporting that seems to indicate that there is a greater problem than we believed existed. Pauline McNeill's evidence suggests that we could have some hidden problems in Scotland. We should not run away from those hidden problems. We should look at the evidence and encourage people to come forward, even if it means that challenging statistics are sometimes produced. I hope to give confidence to vulnerable communities that are on the receiving end of inappropriate violence by assuring them that we are determined to move forward on a variety of fronts.

Museum of Flight

9. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what meetings it plans to have in respect of the bid from the National Museums of Scotland for a Concorde aircraft to be added to the collection of the Museum of Flight at East Fortune. (S2O-79)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Mr Frank McAveety): Scottish ministers have written to the chief executive of British Airways supporting the bid by the National Museums of Scotland for a Concorde aircraft. Discussions have taken place between the National Museums of Scotland and British Airways, and the Scottish Executive meets the National Museums of Scotland regularly.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I welcome the minister's answer. Is he aware that more than a third of all MSPs have signed John Home Robertson's motion to support a Concorde going to the Museum of Flight at East Fortune in his constituency? In view of the fact that the wings of Concorde were designed by a constituent of the Lothians and that the early test flights were at Prestwick, will he continue to give very strong support to the National Museums of Scotland in its bid to British Airways in that connection?

Mr McAveety: I thank Lord James for that compelling argument in favour of the application. I

support my colleague's local constituency interest in identifying bringing a Concorde to East Fortune as an added advantage to the tourist attractions of East Lothian. We genuinely recognise the importance of the bid in relation to the role that Scotland has played in the development of Concorde. We have submitted the written application and we hope that BA will consider it when making its final decision. I hope that, along with our colleagues, we can make the issue fly for the benefit of Scotland.

Nuclear Power Stations (Environmental Implications)

10. Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has considered the environmental implications of new nuclear power stations being built at Torness or Hunterston. (S2O-103)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Lewis Macdonald): No, because no application to build a new power station at either site has been made.

Ms Byrne: Will the minister clarify whether it is indeed the Executive's policy not to build any new nuclear power stations? Will he comment on the views of his coalition colleague, John Home Robertson, who stated that he is in favour of a new nuclear power station at Torness, and on the views of the Westminster Minister for Energy and Construction, Brian Wilson, who has stated that he is in favour of a new nuclear power station at Hunterston?

Lewis Macdonald: I am sure that John Home Robertson will speak for himself, but I can tell Ms Byrne that, from the Executive's point of view, the partnership agreement states clearly that we will not support the further development of nuclear power stations while waste management issues remain unresolved. The resolution of those waste management issues is something on which we will work jointly with our colleagues in the UK Government.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the minister acknowledge the fact that nuclear power stations, unlike Concorde, do not emit greenhouse gasses? Will he further acknowledge that, if we are serious about reducing carbon dioxide emissions, we will have to start thinking about replacing old polluting generating plant with new nuclear power stations? If there is to be a new reactor built somewhere in Scotland, we would be delighted to have it at Torness.

Lewis Macdonald: I have no doubt that the debate on the future of energy policy will continue both here and at Westminster. The Executive's position on nuclear power is as I stated in response to the first supplementary question.

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green):

Given the statement in the partnership agreement on the failure to find a solution to waste disposal, will the minister tell the Parliament whether he expects a solution for the disposal of waste in the lifetime of this Parliament? Will he promise us that that solution will not involve permanent disposal anywhere in Scotland, particularly in the South of Scotland region? How can he continue to license nuclear power stations to produce waste for which there is no disposal solution?

Lewis Macdonald: Mr Ballance will be aware of the United Kingdom Government's proposals on a nuclear decommissioning authority and on the establishment of a committee on radioactive waste management. We in the Scottish Executive will work with colleagues on that process.

I do not think that Mr Ballance's question was intended to imply that nuclear power stations should cease to operate without a proper decommissioning process, although it might be interpreted in such a way. That would be the most dangerous possible route to follow and certainly does not commend itself to us.

Fife NHS Board (Meetings)

11. Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when it next plans to meet Fife NHS Board. (S2O-78)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): Scottish Executive Health Department officials met representatives of Fife NHS Board this morning.

Tricia Marwick: The minister is aware that next year, Fife NHS Board faces a deficit of almost £18 million. It has made a farce of the "Right for Fife" health consultation and consultants at the Queen Margaret hospital and the Victoria hospital are now waging campaigns through the media. Will he guarantee that the financial problems of Fife NHS Board will not result in a poorer health service for all the people of Fife?

Malcolm Chisholm: The issues that were discussed this morning and have been discussed in the past few weeks aim to ensure that Fife NHS Board's plans are clinically safe—that is the most important issue—and financially affordable. As I said earlier, we are now almost there on the second important criterion. I am confident that, in the very near future, the outline business case will be approved and that the further detailed work can be done—that includes the work of the group that I asked the board to appoint in relation to the development of services at the Queen Margaret hospital in Dunfermline. Of course, I insisted that local people were involved in planning.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): When officials from the minister's department next meet

Fife NHS Board, will the other sections in the "Right for Fife" document, as well as the provision of acute hospital services, be highlighted? Does he agree that the implementation of the "Right for Fife" proposals, with their emphasis on better and more local primary care services, would considerably benefit all Fifers?

Malcolm Chisholm: That is an important point and connects with one of the key messages that I would like to stress about the health service throughout Scotland. In general, the policy direction is to have more services delivered in local communities, but the corollary is that, for some services, it is clinically safer and better in respect of the quality of care to concentrate services for certain specialisms. That is the framework for all the acute services reviews and the controversies that we all know so well throughout Scotland.

Young People

12. Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on use by ministers—I repeat, by ministers—of the word "ned" in relation to young people. (S2O-98)

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): As this morning's debate indicated, the Executive recognises that the overwhelming majority of young people make a significant contribution to life in Scotland. However, a number of young people engage in unacceptable—I repeat, unacceptable—forms of behaviour, and I repeat that they must be tackled.

Rosie Kane: They must be tackled, but must they be called "neds"? Does the minister agree that our children deserve positive and supportive language from the Parliament? Has she read "Performance Audit: Dealing with offending by young people"? It states:

"The key to tackling youth offending lies in the provision of good quality programmes and supervision delivered by well trained staff."

Ms Curran: That is why we are doing what we are doing. Rather than blame people who use the term in question, it is much better to try to solve the problem. With all due respect, the member has a strange sense of priorities. I am quite happy to tell my constituents, such as elderly women who are mugged and hard-pressed families whose car tyres are regularly slashed, that the Scottish Socialist Party's policy is to say to them, "Look, be careful how you describe that, because you might hurt their feelings."

Let me make it abundantly clear—[*Interruption.*] If I get shouted at, I will just keep going. I say to Tommy Sheridan that we know whose side we are on. The job of socialists in Scotland is to respond to the experiences of ordinary working people.

Such people tell us about the huge problems in their communities that affect the quality of life not only of adults, but of young people. We are responding to the needs of communities and young people by tackling the problem, not by engaging in frivolities.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): Does the minister agree that the term “ned”—which is, in fact, an abbreviation of ne’er-do-well—is not a collective description of young people, the vast majority of whom behave in a perfectly appropriate manner, but is an appropriate description of those who behave in the antisocial manner that the minister described, no matter what age group they belong to?

Ms Curran: Let me make the Executive’s position abundantly clear. We will not engage in semantics on the issue; instead, we will focus on the policies and services that we are delivering to tackle the problem. The Executive parties are the only parties in the chamber that are dedicated to tackling the causes of the problem rather than to arguing about semantics.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Will the minister refute the notion that only those from difficult and troubled backgrounds are involved in youth disorder? That notion insults the many young people who, no matter what difficulties they face in their lives, do not feel the need to bully or intimidate those around them. The notion also disregards the hostile and unacceptable behaviour of some young people from prosperous backgrounds. Does she agree that our constituents do not seek a semantic debate about how to describe behaviour; instead, they seek respect for their demand for peace in their communities for themselves and their children?

Ms Curran: I agree with Johann Lamont, who has had a strong influence on the development of our policies on the issue. It is vital that we begin to understand the causes of youth disorder in our communities. We should not be glib and make sweeping statements. Some members’ deliberate misinterpretation of the situation does a disservice, not only to our policy, but to the young people involved.

We must be careful that we do not give out inconsistent messages. As the minister with responsibility for equalities issues, I have said that we must create new crimes to tackle hate-related issues and racism, with which all members have agreed. I honestly do not see the difference between bullying a person because they are black and bullying a person because they are old. That is why we are tackling the issue and why we will take a comprehensive approach.

Scottish Natural Heritage (Relocation)

13. Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it intends to respond to concerns raised with regard to the proposed relocation of Scottish Natural Heritage from Edinburgh to Inverness. (S2O-102)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Allan Wilson): The First Minister has stressed that the Executive will take as flexible an approach as possible in implementing the relocation. A meeting took place with the chairman of Scottish Natural Heritage on 2 June to discuss the concerns that have been expressed. Today, officials discussed with SNH a package of measures that are designed to address those concerns and to ensure that the relocation is as smooth as possible.

Susan Deacon: I am pleased to hear that dialogue is continuing, but the minister will be aware that many people, including members of the Scottish Parliament, representatives of the unions and members of SNH’s board, have expressed considerable concerns about the matter. I stress that those concerns are not about the relocation policy, but about the substance and handling of the particular decision on SNH. Does the Executive plan to reconsider or modify the decision in the light of those concerns? Will the Executive examine further the specific concerns about best value, operational effectiveness and the impact on staff and will there, at any stage, be an independent assessment of the decision?

Allan Wilson: Over a 30-year period, the move to Inverness will cost, in net present value terms, somewhere in the region of £22 million. On the same basis, the cost of the other options considered ranged from £15 million to £22 million.

The Executive’s policy is intended to ensure that the economic benefits associated with public sector jobs are shared throughout Scotland. It is more than simple policy, however. We have to be cognisant of the concerns of the staff who are involved. All efforts will be made to minimise the scope for redundancies and ensure that any necessary redundancies—if they arise—are negotiated on a voluntary basis, with staff and their representative trade unions. Officials are working closely with the SNH board and management to ensure that the relocation takes account of staff wishes in that regard.

Mr Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): When will the minister publish a strategy for job dispersal that, first, allays the fears of workers in departments and agencies such as SNH who may find themselves working in Inverness or other parts of Scotland and, secondly, ensures that every part of Scotland has

a fair share of public sector jobs that will underpin many fragile economies?

Allan Wilson: I advise the member that I have responsibility not for relocation policy per se, but for the relocation of SNH. We took the view that the relocation of SNH should bring benefits in terms of the development of relocation policy that would outweigh the financial aspects to which I have referred. Efficiency benefits can also be secured in the longer term, and it is important to have regard to both staff interests and the wider economic benefits that the relocation policy brings. The member will accept the fact that the relocation policy is in the interests of the wider economic development of Inverness and its environs.

Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): Will the minister consider an argument, on the grounds of value for money or operational effectiveness, for SNH to retain some staff in Edinburgh?

Allan Wilson: That is something that we are discussing with SNH. SNH has indicated that it intends to see whether some reduction in the proposed 100 per cent dispersal could be argued as being either sensible or desirable on the basis of the functional relationships that may exist within the organisation. Such an argument could be made on the grounds of the reduction of risk or costs. However, we have said that we would be willing to consider such options only if they proposed a modest change and still delivered the vast majority of relocated jobs to Inverness.

Nursery Nurses

14. Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive how many discussions it has had with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in the past two years regarding a pay review for nursery nurses. (S2O-101)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): COSLA and the Scottish Executive are in regular formal and informal contact about a wide range of issues and do not hold centrally records of how many contacts are made in relation to any specific issue.

Carolyn Leckie: Given the fact that it takes 10 years for a nursery nurse to reach their maximum salary of £13,800 and the fact that they are entrusted with the care and development of the young people whom we discussed this morning, does the minister value that job and agree that their pay is a political issue? As a member of the Parliament, does he hold the political view that nursery nurses are not adequately paid, or does he believe that one MSP is worth four nursery nurses?

Peter Peacock: Nursery nurses perform a vital job in a vital sector of our education and care

service, and we very much value their work. That is why we have invested significant sums of money in it over recent years—£80 million a year more than in 1999 and £185 million each year. There are now 27,000 individuals employed in that sector. However, nursery nurses are employees of local authorities, for the most part, and this dispute must be resolved between local authorities and the unions that are involved. We encourage COSLA and the unions to keep talking. We want a fair settlement for the nursery nurses that is also financially sustainable for the local authorities.

National Health Service (Returning Staff)

15. Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what further plans it has to attract health professionals to return to work in the NHS. (S2O-106)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): There are many recruitment and retention initiatives, including various return-to-practice courses and incentive schemes.

Mr Davidson: Many universities provide those courses, but I am asking the minister which schemes the Executive has in mind to attract back a great pool of talent that is underused, partly because of the inflexibility of working hours in national health service contracts.

Malcolm Chisholm: We have funded, increased and promoted a large number of schemes. For example, there has been a big increase in the number of nurses doing return-to-practice courses. Those were funded over the last year, and they will continue to be funded by the Executive. It is not just nurses who go on those courses: allied health professionals, doctors, dentists and pharmacists also attend. That may be of some comfort to Mr Davidson, in case he has to return to work in that sector one day.

First Minister's Question Time

15:10

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. (S2F-42)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The Cabinet will discuss a number of important issues.

Mr Swinney: I am sure that it will, and this is one of them. On 9 January this year, the First Minister told me in Parliament that his reforms to the criminal justice system were having an impact in securing more and faster convictions. At the same time, thousands of criminal cases were being dropped because of delays and time bars. When the First Minister made his remarks in January, was he aware of the developing crisis? If he was, what did he do about it?

The First Minister: When I made my remarks in January, I was aware of what had happened prior to January and of the fact that the system was improving. It is important to state the facts on these occasions. There were not thousands of people missing trial in January, although there were over the past year, because of the introduction of a new computer system. That new system is vital. It will be state of the art and it will make a huge difference to the speed at which criminal trials take place, to the speed at which it is possible to make convictions and to the way in which the whole system works—from arrest to sentencing and beyond, the system will be joined up. That will not just make a difference to the capturing and conviction of offenders or people who are charged; ultimately, it will ensure that they do not reoffend in future.

Mr Swinney: The First Minister cannot have it both ways. He stood up in Parliament and said that his reforms were having an impact, and we all assumed that the situation was getting better. In fact, nearly 1,300 cases had been dropped due to delays in Hamilton; 2,500 cases had been dropped in Airdrie; and nearly 8,000 cases had been dropped in the city of Glasgow because of the impact of the First Minister's measures. If, as we are to believe, crime is the First Minister's top priority, how can that have happened and why did he do nothing about it, while telling Parliament that his reforms were having a successful impact?

The First Minister: That is simply not true. The reforms are having an impact and they were having an impact. If we listen accurately to independent people in the system, we will hear exactly what they say and will learn from that. We

hear that the implementation of the new system caused a significant delay and led to 8,000 cases being dropped last year and to the increase that was identified this week. We were well aware of that. It was an impact of the implementation of the new system.

However, it is exactly because of the new system that delays are no longer taking place at the same level. The number of delays will consistently reduce and, in due course, there will be not just a return to previous levels but a much faster system of prosecution and conviction in our courts, which will be of benefit. That is already the case elsewhere in Scotland, and it will happen in Strathclyde when the current problems with the information technology system are finally worked through.

Mr Swinney: Let us pause for a moment. The First Minister has just told us that he knew about the matter, but did not think that it was worth telling Parliament about it until one of my colleagues lodged a parliamentary question in order to bring the information to the surface. If we are to listen to independent people on the issue, let us listen to a representative of the Scottish Police Federation. He spoke in the newspapers this morning of the despair among officers. He says:

"At one stage they were told not to dictate cases until four months after the incident had taken place."

There was an instruction to police officers to delay the judicial system.

Given the gravity of the situation, will the First Minister, who is so keen to listen to independent opinion, authorise HM chief inspector of constabulary for Scotland to investigate the situation and tell us exactly what has gone wrong?

The First Minister: We know what has gone wrong: the IT systems at Strathclyde police and at the procurator fiscal offices in that area were well out of date; they needed to be modernised and they needed to work together. When those systems do work together, they will be not only the best in Europe but among the best in the world. Representatives of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were in this country recently, and congratulated us on the new system that is in place and on the difference that it will make. They said that they wished that it was in operation in parts of America.

That system will be what ensures that the whole system works more effectively, not the sort of nonsense that we heard this morning from the SNP's justice spokesperson, who suggested that the Crown Office should get its act together and ensure that the figures come down. We cannot send procurators fiscal into police offices to type reports in an effort to get the reports up to the

procurator fiscal's office more quickly. The SNP's suggestion was a piece of nonsense.

The delays have been identified and are now coming down. We will end up with a system that not only works more quickly, but does so in the interests of victims. From beginning to end, the system will be more successful.

Mr Swinney: The First Minister is back to his usual definition of things getting better when, in fact, they are getting worse. The figures have got worse in the past 12 months, while the First Minister's reforms have been progressing. Why can the First Minister not simply own up to the fact that the Executive is not improving the justice system as quickly as it needs to be improved? When the First Minister tells the Parliament that he has had a great impact, he is talking a lot of nonsense.

The First Minister: When senior members of Strathclyde police and those who run our prosecution service say independently, as they did this morning, that the figures would have come down had it not been for the delay that the introduction of the new information technology system in Strathclyde caused, we should believe them, not call them liars. Then, we should ensure that the numbers stay down permanently in every part of Scotland so that victims get justice and those who need to be prosecuted are prosecuted properly and on time. That is exactly what this system promises and will deliver.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues he intends to discuss. (S2F-47)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I speak regularly with the Prime Minister and discuss issues of importance to Scotland.

David McLetchie: I am sure that the Prime Minister will be as interested as Mr Swinney was in the issue of the court cases being dropped. Around 17,000 cases have been dropped this year, which is five times more than were dropped in 1997.

In response to Mr Swinney, the First Minister blamed the problem on the failures of a newly introduced computer system. Is that system the same one that, three years ago, Mr Wallace, then the Minister for Justice, told us would improve the prosecution system—the integration of Scottish criminal justice information systems project? Why has that system taken three years to roll out when, according to Mr Wallace, it was supposed to be making a difference by May 2000?

Will the First Minister also tell us what categories of crime are involved when decisions are made to drop cases because of the delays? I am sure that the public would be interested to know exactly what cases are not being prosecuted as a result of the delays that we have heard about today.

The First Minister: It is hard to respond to a question that contains so many inaccuracies.

It is an absolutely ludicrous assertion that a system that was announced in May 2000 would have been expected to start making a difference that month when it was not even operating in offices at that time, never mind two years later. The introduction of the system has been successful in most parts of Scotland. The one area in which it was not immediately successful and where, as a consequence, there have been delays is Strathclyde. That has led to a considerable rise in the number of cases not being proceeded with. That is to be regretted. It is not only disappointing but worrying to people in the Strathclyde area.

The situation that I have described is not the same as saying that Scotland is a lawbreakers' paradise. The nonsense that we heard from Mr Aitken this morning is the sort of irresponsible rubbish that will lead to people thinking that they can get off with serious crimes.

This morning, I received categorical assurances that the fiscals offices in the Strathclyde area, as elsewhere, will prioritise the serious cases to ensure that those that must go to court are dealt with first. As they will have done that in this case, I say to Mr McLetchie that his second point is wrong as well.

David McLetchie: The fact of the matter is that 17,000 people are getting off scot-free. If that does not make Scotland a lawbreakers' paradise, I do not know what does, even if, as the First Minister alleges, the problem has come about purely as a result of systems failure.

I am not convinced that the matter is purely one of systems failure and I wonder whether the First Minister will consider the ways of improving the efficiency of our justice system that we suggested during the election campaign, such as the recruitment of additional police officers and procurators fiscal and the introduction of weekend and evening courts to reduce some of the backlogs that are resulting in cases being written off.

Given that the Scottish Executive is fond of setting targets for itself, and bearing in mind what the First Minister has said, will the First Minister give an undertaking to Parliament today to reduce the number of cases that are dropped as a result of systems failure to 1997 levels before the end of this session in 2007? In other words, 10 years on, will he finally get back to delivering the levels of

efficiency that Labour inherited from the Conservatives?

The First Minister: I will give the member one crystal-clear guarantee: that the clear-up rate for crime in Scotland will not go down to the levels of 1997, when the Conservatives were last in power, and that it will be at least as high as it is today, because we will ensure that the system operates even more efficiently and effectively than it does at the moment. That needs to happen in a number of different ways. It cannot involve only one part of the system at any one time.

It is easy to criticise solutions as they are introduced. Action is needed on youth crime and on the children's hearings system. Action and new legislation are needed to tackle violent and serious offenders. We have already taken such action this year. Action is needed on parole and remission. The sentencing commission that we will establish will consider that issue. Action is needed on reoffending. The proposed correctional agency is one solution to that problem. Action is needed to modernise our courts. That is why we will not only modernise the high courts, but work reforms and modernisation through the whole system. Improvements in liaison between the procurators fiscal and the police are needed at local level. That is why we have reorganised the system in the past 18 months. We have increased the number of staff and the resources available to them to ensure that that happens. Action is also needed on antisocial behaviour.

Together those elements will make a difference in the Scottish criminal justice system. To describe Scotland today as a lawbreakers' paradise is irresponsible in the extreme. For the Conservative party to do that is an absolute disgrace.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): I welcome the First Minister's comments about the need to modernise the judiciary. In view of the disgraceful decision this week by the appeal court to dismiss charges of culpable homicide against Transco following the deaths of four members of the Findlay family in my constituency, the First Minister should be aware that confidence in the Scottish judiciary is at an all-time low. What steps will the Scottish Executive take to restore some of that confidence? Furthermore, what steps will the Executive take to support my constituents and me in having this legal loophole closed, to ensure that big business is held accountable for its actions, in the same way as any of the rest of us would be, and that the deaths of four innocent people lying in their beds are never again described by a court in this land as irrelevant?

The First Minister: We all share the sense of disappointment that exists in Karen Gillon's constituency on this matter. It is important that I am cautious in responding to the member's

question, as legal proceedings in relation to health and safety legislation are still under way and it is important that those proceedings are able to be brought to fruition in due course. It is also important that, if there is a loophole in Scottish law, we consider ways of dealing with that. If, after we have had a chance to examine the full outcome of the case to which Karen Gillon refers, we find that it is necessary and appropriate for us to take further action, we will do so.

Council Tax

3. Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): To ask the First Minister what powers the Scottish Executive has to abolish the council tax and whether it will use these powers in view of comments made by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that the tax is regressive. (S2F-57)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I do not believe that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has made such comments, although I am happy to deal with that point if Mr Sheridan would like me to do so. I am also happy to confirm to him that local taxation, including the council tax, is a devolved issue, and that we have no plans to abolish the council tax.

Tommy Sheridan: That is a grave pity. The Scottish Socialist Party believes that the council tax is grotesquely unfair. A person such as the First Minister who receives a salary of £120,000 and lives in North Lanarkshire will pay only twice the sum that is paid by a hospital cleaner living in that area who has a salary of only £10,000. Can the First Minister defend a system under which he is 12 times better paid than a hospital cleaner but pays only twice as much council tax?

The First Minister: Any taxation system needs a range of taxes, including taxes on income, on inheritance and on property. As I said to Mr Sheridan last week or the week before, as a socialist, I believe that property taxation has a place in the system of government taxation in this country. I also believe that local taxation has a place.

Mr Sheridan supports a Scottish service tax, which would be uniform across Scotland and would take away from local authorities the right to raise their own revenue. I believe that that would be anti-democratic and that Mr Sheridan's policy is wrong. I believe that property taxation, including a reformed and improved council tax, has a place in the taxation system.

Tommy Sheridan: The First Minister wants to continue to defend the wealthy and the well paid, who pay a pittance of their salaries towards local services, while the low-paid workers and the pensioners of this country are left to carry the heaviest burden. Does the First Minister accept

that a tax based on income is fairer than the unfair council tax? Will he do what his Executive partners said that they would do if they won power, which is to replace the council tax with a personal income-based tax?

The First Minister: I believe that within the system there is a place for a property tax and a much more significant place for income tax, which is why that is what we have. One reason why the current system of local government funding operates as it does is that we need to ensure that there is a contribution from national coffers and from the fairer income tax system to local services. However, we also need to ensure that there is a contribution at the local level.

Studies have consistently agreed with the conclusion of the Parliament's Local Government Committee in its 2002 report, which stated:

"The Committee shares the views of many of the witnesses that the Council Tax is sound, but that ... properties need to be revalued on a regular basis."

The committee's report clearly stated that a Scottish service tax was not a good idea, as it would

"destroy local accountability for councils' spending decisions."

We need to make choices in this chamber. I believe that there is a place in this country for property taxation alongside income tax. I also believe that taking away from local authorities any ability to raise their own revenue would be fundamentally anti-democratic. Mr Sheridan's policy is wrong.

Online Pollution Register

4. Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): To ask the First Minister how communities affected by pollution can make use of the new online pollution register. (S2F-59)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The new inventory provides easy access to information on emissions from industrial processes for people living in the communities where sites are located. Access to such information is vital if we are to secure environmental justice for local communities across Scotland.

Karen Whitefield: I welcome the publication of the information. The First Minister will recall that he visited the landfill site at Greengairs in my constituency. Is the First Minister aware that the site, which is operated by Shanks Waste Services, is listed as seventh in the top 10 of Scotland's worst toxic polluters? Does the First Minister agree that significant steps must be taken to ensure that the views of local residents are more effectively taken into account during the planning process, so that we can prevent communities such as

Greengairs from being blighted by such high levels of pollution in future?

The First Minister: I am not so sure that it is entirely accurate to turn the information that has been published about individual sites into a league table of emissions as Karen Whitefield has suggested.

At the same time, we all recognise the particular difficulties with landfill waste. That is why, in this session, the Government has established clear targets for reducing the level of municipal waste in Scotland that goes to landfill from around 90 per cent to 30 per cent. We want to ensure not only that more municipal waste is recycled and composted but that we minimise waste production in the first place. Those are important targets for us as part of our environmental policies, in which we are investing more money than ever before. We must ensure that communities have a greater role in planning decisions, but we also need to sort out the way in which we in Scotland deal with our waste.

Scottish Water

5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive is satisfied with the performance of Scottish Water. (S2F-40)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): In Scotland, the provision of water services must become much more efficient. Communities deserve better quality at a reasonable cost. We will monitor closely the performance of the new organisation, Scottish Water, as it works towards that objective.

Murdo Fraser: I am not sure that the First Minister's response will bring much comfort to the many small businesses in Scotland that have seen water bills rise this year by 200 per cent, 300 per cent and up to 500 per cent in some cases. If the First Minister is serious about the Executive's stated aim that

"Growing the economy is our top priority"

why does he tolerate a situation in which some Scottish businesses are paying 16 times more in water charges than the equivalent businesses in England?

The First Minister: We have a serious problem with Scottish water services and that is a direct result of years of past under-investment. In order to improve the quality of Scottish water and achieve the efficiencies that will ensure that any increases in costs are kept to a minimum, it is critically important not only that we invest, but that Scottish Water's management makes the efficiencies that will improve the organisation's performance.

Investing more money and driving efficiencies through the organisation will mean tough decisions. When we debate such issues in the chamber, I hope that we will remember that both those objectives must go hand in hand. In that way, we will benefit not only Scottish Water's business customers, but domestic customers and householders.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): That ends questions to the First Minister.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I have previously complained that more than half of First Minister's question time is regularly taken up by questions from party leaders. The situation now seems to be getting worse instead of better. Today, more than three-quarters of the time was taken up by questions from party leaders. Will you please in future give more opportunities to ordinary back-bench members?

The Presiding Officer: Members will be aware that, after Mr McLetchie's question, I now allow one or two questions, which is specifically intended to create a space for back benchers. Once First Minister's question time increases to 30 minutes—as I hope it will—there will be more opportunities for questions from back-bench members.

Young People

Resumed debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is the continuation of the debate on motion S2M-103, in the name of Peter Peacock, on young people.

15:32

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I apologise to the chamber for not being present at 9.30 this morning for the start of the debate. My knuckles have been duly rapped and I assure members that it will not happen again. Who said that it is only youngsters who misbehave and get themselves into trouble?

The Executive's motion is worthy and I applaud its positive aspects, particularly the praise of young people's contribution to our society. As I and others have said in previous debates, we often hear only about the negative aspects of young people, so it is good to hear about their positive achievements.

We have all heard the old saying that labels stick. With young people, because of peer pressure, the label not only sticks, but things become worse—young people start to emulate the behaviour suggested by the label that they have been given. That is sad, especially when we consider that only 2 to 3 per cent of young people become offenders. It is sad that we give all young people the same label. I do not blame any one person, but I must single out some of the newspapers that make out that all young people are vandals. As I said, only a small percentage of young people commit crimes.

Campbell Martin said in his speech this morning that the vast majority of youngsters want what everyone in the chamber and outside wants—they want to be treated fairly and equally and they want to achieve their aspirations, just as we want to achieve our aspirations. We should remember that. I thank Campbell for mentioning that in his speech and for reminding everyone in the chamber that young people should be looked on as citizens of the future.

No one will disagree with the statement that we were all young once. Every one of us was young once. I am sure that some of us—or most of us—got up to some kind of mischief in our lives. Perhaps we dressed strangely. Irene Oldfather mentioned that the Minister for Justice had pink hair and wore Doc Martens in her young days. I hope that Nicola Sturgeon will not be too mad at me if I reveal that, as I recall, at one stage in her life, although she did not have pink hair, she wore Doc Martens—perhaps it is something to do with

justice. That did not make either of those people delinquents. Members may agree or disagree with that, depending on their political party. We are not all perfect. We should remind ourselves of that.

The motion mentions many things and I applaud many of them, such as education and sport and leisure facilities. I do not want to get into a debate about PFI or PPP—whatever people want to call it—because that is for another day. However, I assure the chamber that those members who visited schools during and outwith the election period and spoke to pupils and teachers can verify that the pupils said—they certainly said it to me at the schools that I visited—that they had lost facilities because of the new PFI or PPP schools. That is a fact of life. They lost meeting places, some of them lost sports grounds and some lost assembly halls. I urge the Executive—if this is not the responsibility of the Executive, I will take it on board myself—to carry out an audit of the facilities that were available in those schools prior to PPPs and PFIs. I am not surprised, although others might be, at the lack of space and the lack of available rooms to hire in the new PPP schools. I ask the minister to respond to that issue when he sums up.

One concern that I have about the motion relates to sports facilities. Yes, it is all well and good to mention sports facilities—they are marvellous things—but we have to realise that we are losing sports facilities to developers hand over fist. We are also losing green-belt areas. Some kids cannot afford to use the new sports facilities and some kids just want a green space to kick around in.

I was going to mention various other issues, but I see that my microphone light is flashing. Do I have one minute left?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, you have two minutes left.

Ms White: I am sorry; my light is flashing.

As I was saying, we have to examine the issue carefully. We are losing a tremendous amount of playing fields and green spaces. That is frightening. The issue has to be examined with the National Playing Fields Association.

The SNP amendment refers to

“powers to ensure that young people do not ... leave Scotland”.

We also need powers to correct the terrible benefits system, whereby 16 to 18-year-olds cannot access benefits. The Parliament has to have powers over that. Most of the young rough sleepers who are seen on the streets are 16 to 18-year-olds, who get no help. I know that Barnardo's and other groups help, for which I applaud them, and that there have been lots of initiatives.

However, those kids are the most vulnerable in society. They come from care homes. We have to examine giving the Scottish Parliament power over the benefits system. That would be one small step, but we should be pushing for it.

The Scottish Youth Parliament could have more to do with matters other than just youth issues. I have spoken to many members of the Youth Parliament and attended many of its meetings and I know that its members desperately want to be more involved. I hope that we can take up the rough sleepers initiative and explore it further, not just within the committees, but with ministers and members of the Youth Parliament. I know that its members want to be more involved with the Scottish Parliament. It would be marvellous if we could arrange that.

The motion does not mention anything about nutrition or the eradication of poverty. If the Scottish Parliament does not do something to eradicate poverty and deal with the associated health issues, we will let down not only young people, but everyone in Scotland.

15:40

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am delighted to take part in this debate on young people, in view of the fact that there was largely a consensus this morning on the need to celebrate young Scots and their contribution to society and especially given that so many young people have been in the gallery listening to the debate. Too often, we focus on difficulties and problems instead of on the majority of young people who, as Sandra White pointed out, live lives that are not so very different from ours.

One of the most important things that adults can do is to lead by example. Whether we debate lifestyle choices or—as we did yesterday—discuss choices on a menu, we need to examine our own lives to see what messages we give out. If we expect young people to be active and to avoid chips and fizzy drinks, we must make healthy active choices ourselves. The proposals in the partnership document to introduce mentoring schemes support that idea. Young people have their own lives to lead and will make their own choices—we need to encourage that approach. In response to the SNP's concerns, I think that we need to support those young Scottish women who are choosing not to settle into family life. Our young people are Scotland's future and their choices might well be different from ours. We should welcome that difference.

That is why the Youth Parliament is so important and why it is so excellent that we are focusing on young people and recognising that we need to listen to them. Perhaps we should follow their

good example in many areas. Unfortunately, we all know young people who live in difficult circumstances, some of whom are not far from despair. It is essential that we work together to support them towards a more hopeful future.

I am struck by the agreement among members of all parties and by our shared aspirations. This kind of positive debate does not sweep the issues out of sight but helps to move the focus and might play a small part in a culture shift in how society sees young people. The message that we need to send to young people is still the same: "We are on your side." However, we must also recognise that antisocial behaviour must be challenged and dealt with; we cannot and should not try to avoid tackling difficult issues that involve young people.

We must always be sensitive about how young people are labelled and the negative effects that that might have. However, I am sure that the labels that young people put on one another are the most insensitive ones. We are becoming aware of more and more labels, some of which can be helpful. For example, we are now used to labels such as SEBD, which stands for social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; ADD, which stands for attention deficit disorder; ADHD, which stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; and ODD. For any member who is not quite up to date on all the labels, I should point out that the last one stands for oppositional defiant disorder.

I mention those labels not to be cynical or critical, but as an attempt to move the debate on. We need to see young people as individuals. The truth is that young people know, by how they are treated, what others think of them. The Executive's proposals will improve that treatment by prioritising, investing in and valuing young people in Scotland. We should certainly ask young people for their opinions; indeed, that approach is becoming more widespread.

I hope that the many young people who have visited the Parliament today will take the opportunity to make their views known and to influence the programme for government. I support the motion.

15:43

Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): This debate is about Scotland's future. If we want our country to succeed, all members should recognise that we can influence that success. We pass the laws that will change or influence Scotland's future, but our young people will become the scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, artists, small businessmen, inventors and sportsmen who will mould it. We are responsible for giving those young people the conditions in which they have the best opportunity to fulfil their potential. I have

always maintained that we all have a unique talent; the problem is that not many of us ever identify it. We must provide the conditions that allow more of our young people to identify their talents.

As I have said, if we want our young people to succeed, we must give them the conditions in which to do so. In May 2000, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland announced that £1.3 billion was needed to repair Scotland's crumbling schools. It is estimated that, at current levels of investment, it could take as long as 30 years to address the backlog. Everyone in education—the teachers, the parents and the pupils—has highlighted the fact that the physical school environment is vital to effective learning and teaching.

On 12 June 2002, the Executive announced its school building programme to fund work on 79 schools with a capital value of more than £500 million. PPP is just one of a number of new funding routes, including the new deal for schools, the school buildings improvement fund and capital allocations. On 25 June, the Executive unveiled the first stage of a rebuilding programme to rebuild and refurbish 300 schools—that will provide PPP investment of £1.15 billion. On 3 February 2003, the Executive published its school estate strategy and announced that, over the next three years, there would be an extra £110 million in grant funding from the Scottish budget.

As well as giving our pupils a good environment in which to work, we must give them more choices. We should provide more flexible learning and development opportunities, so that pupils' experience of education is matched by their individual needs.

Fiona Hyslop: The member mentioned PPP and PFI. Because of PFI funding, West Lothian College, which is the only PFI college in Scotland, has problems offering the types of courses that the huge numbers of students who want to go there want to do. The PFI project is harming and limiting the educational opportunities at the college. Is that a concern?

Mike Pringle: It would be a concern, but I am not sure how the member knows that PFI is the specific cause of the problem. I have no knowledge of that.

The partnership agreement is specific. I will give examples of measures that will have the most effect. We will introduce more flexibility in the curriculum for three to six-year-olds and improve pupils' confidence and attainment by changing the ethos of primary 1. We will free up the curriculum, introduce less formal teaching methods and enable earlier professional intervention. We will

reform and simplify the curriculum to make it more stimulating and to increase pupil choice.

As well as making provision for time in school learning, we must encourage our young people to play. A national project that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England carried out recently proved that sport could improve children's performance at school. Schools that increased pupils' choice of games and exercise found that attendance improved, bad behaviour dropped and concentration and motivation increased. Exam results climbed and the teachers all felt less stressed. The schools that were involved in the project made the changes by arranging for teachers to be trained in physical education, investing in extra equipment and hiring and training play assistants. Many of the schools also used outside coaches to teach swimming, dance and gymnastics.

The Scottish Executive's school sports champions scheme involves top stars visiting schools and encouraging young people to adopt healthy, active lifestyles. The scheme is part of a major investment in school sport and, in providing young people with valuable role models, will be an important component of the active schools implementation plan.

We must do more to encourage talent. A 13-year-old constituent of mine is a keen athlete; her sport is field archery. She has participated in two world outdoor championships in Switzerland and was champion on both occasions. She is world indoor champion, European champion, Scottish indoor champion, Scottish outdoor champion and United Kingdom champion. She travels throughout Britain and Europe to compete and has the prospect of competing in the United States in 2004. Her family and friends fund all that activity. They have made funding applications under sportscotland's talented athlete programme three times, but the applications have been refused each time. Such a youngster deserves our help. I will write to the minister to ask him for suggestions.

The picture might not be as bad as we make it out to be. The debate is about the positive contributions that the young people of Scotland can make to our society. I would like to finish on such a contribution. The pupils of a school in my constituency—Brunsfield Primary School—can be proud of their efforts. Its badminton team has swept all before it by winning all the cups and trophies in the under-12 category. The team's success comes just a month after it won the Royal Bank of Scotland Scottish quich at Grangemouth, where it became the top under-12 school team in the country. It was the first time that an Edinburgh school had picked up the quich in 25 years of the competition. I believe that the members of that

team are the sort of young people whom we want to encourage and I hope that they will be the ambassadors for Scotland's future.

15:50

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): There have been differences of opinion and tone in the debate—that is healthy—but one general principle around which we can all unite is the idea that prevention is always better than cure. If we can take steps to nip problems in the bud rather than having to pick up the pieces later in life, that can only be a good thing.

When I mention prevention, I am not only talking about diverting young people from criminal or antisocial behaviour, although I commend projects such as the Magdalene youth strategy project in my constituency, which has had enormous success. I am also thinking about preventive measures to tackle the number of teenage pregnancies, the incidence of sexually transmitted infections, which Mary Scanlon mentioned, the rising number of young women with eating disorders and the number of young people in this and other western countries who exhibit mental health difficulties of one sort or another.

Those are big issues and we cannot unpick them all today, but it is important to acknowledge that the earlier in the life cycle that we address them, the more successful we are likely to be. I find myself in the unusual position of enthusiastically having common cause with David Davidson—it is a pity that he is not here to hear me say that. He was the first member today to stress the link between, on the one hand, health status, nutrition and nurture—not just in the early months and years, but from birth and even conception—and, on the other, behaviour in adolescents. The evidence for that link is now overwhelming.

I would not make the quantum leap to say that more breastfeeding will result in less youth crime, but there are more connections than might appear at first sight. A huge amount of work has been done in the area—I know that the Executive has conducted research and that many Executive programmes that were developed in the first session of the Parliament are based on a recognition of those connections. Although work on health, education and social justice is not often described in terms of youth or youth crime policies, it is carried out in recognition of the fact that early intervention can make a real difference. I commend much of the work that is under way.

We have some way to go. We have to face up to the fact that society has changed, habits and lifestyles have changed, practices have broken

down and some of the learning that used to be passed down from generation to generation is no longer being passed down. Family models have changed; families are more dispersed and the job of bringing up children can be all the more difficult in an isolated situation. That makes it all the more important that we think about how we support families and individuals. I am concerned—I appreciate the point that Fiona Hyslop made—when people suggest that that is somehow akin to creating a nanny state, because I do not think that it is. It is right that the Government should continue its role of enabling, facilitating and supporting.

In many respects, there is no more important job than that of being a parent and bringing up the next generation. I point to a piece of work in my constituency—I know that other members can point to similar work. This week in Musselburgh, the East Lothian positive parenting forum launched a report considering in depth the needs and wishes of parents in the area. I commend the report and others like it to those who are making policy decisions. Although many of its findings are not rocket science, certain things scream out, such as the desire of the vast majority of parents to do a decent job, to be listened to and to get practical support in key areas such as child care, not just through statutory services, but through the community and support from other parents. That is something that statutory bodies and voluntary organisations can stimulate, enable and facilitate.

Parenting is arguably the most demanding and rewarding job that anyone can do, but it is a job; it is not something incidental in our lives that can just be tagged on after everything else. It is sad that we are asked to do just that all too often these days. We must address that problem.

Of course there are financial pressures on parents. I do not have time today to talk about that, but I acknowledge that there are profound problems for people bringing up children in poverty. However, there are also pressures on many people who are in professional work, on middle-class people and, I am sure, on members in the chamber today, because those people are time poor. Many children who have Sony PlayStations and Nike trainers might just like a wee bit more help with their homework or a few more bedtime stories read to them. As policy makers, we can do things to make the job of parents easier and to ensure that people can strike a better balance between work and family life. If we do that effectively, I have no doubt that it will make a difference to the outcome of the next generation.

I am glad that we are talking about not only young people, but the theme of families. Having agreed once with the Conservatives, I must rein

back from that quickly, because I have a bad feeling. A hallmark of the Thatcher years was the fact that the right hijacked much of the language about and emphasis on the family. The right made the notion of family narrow and judgmental and created a model of so-called success that involved a married couple with a mortgage, a car, a foreign holiday and 2.2 kids.

Families matter, but they come in every shape and form. It is our job to support families in whatever form they take and to speak openly and comfortably about the importance of families as building blocks in our communities and societies. We must be careful not to overemphasise the language of failure and blame, which can have adverse and unintended consequences, whether for young people or parents. We must work to help the vast majority of young people and parents who need support, not judgment. The more we do that, the more we will achieve and the fewer problems we will have in future.

15:56

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I am pleased to participate in the debate, but when I first read the Executive's motion, I was a little concerned that it would mean more of the usual consensual guff. Fortunately, having followed the debate closely—members might be surprised to know that—I recoil from that judgment, although I am of the judgmental type from the right that Susan Deacon described. I add from my knowledge of Margaret Thatcher that a less judgmental mother I do not know. Perhaps that is because she had to bring up Mark and Carol Thatcher.

I have a growing waistline and not a great deal of hair, but it is not very long since I was chairman of the Scottish Young Conservatives. I recall fondly that campaign organisation, which I confirm was really a marriage bureau, although the lack of women meant that it was probably more of a civil partnership bureau.

I will base my observations on my experience as a parent and on my interrelationship with many organisations as a result of being a parent. We can see good work by young people and good work for them by many voluntary organisations.

I will touch on a matter that is close to the heart of Malcolm Chisholm, who represents Leith. Leith Athletic boys club was established by locals to take kids off the street, including girls. The other weekend, it achieved an astounding result when its under-12 team won the Scottish cup for the third year in a row. That result is astounding because each year a different team is required to undergo the trials and tribulations of winning the tournament. That achievement should be

recognised. The club has grown in recent years and has undertaken a great deal of work to give people the opportunity to learn how to win and lose with dignity, which is important. Such experiences help to build up the whole picture for young people.

Callander youth project works closely with the education department in Stirling and works with children who might otherwise be cast to the streets and expected to be truants. The project gives those children a second chance and the opportunity to learn with tutors and mentors, which provides a way back to school and to mainstream education. The work of bodies such as that is important to society—by getting in behind what the state can do, they give us added value. Of course, many other organisations, such as Barnardo's, also work with local authorities.

We must pay due regard to the role of parents, and in doing so we must recognise the important role of fathers. A significant body of evidence shows that the lack of a father is a contributory factor to youth crime. Although we should not have a general rule on the subject or be prescriptive about it, when marriages, partnerships or families break down and the father is no longer in the home, we should look to see that both parents are available to guide the children, give them an example and provide encouragement to them.

In debates such as this, it is easy for members to say how important it is that we support the good work of young people. However, young people judge politicians by the actions that we take. I do not want to add a discordant note to the debate, although colleagues might be surprised if I did not. I want to highlight two areas of concern to young people in which politicians play a role.

The first area is that of low pay. The evidence plainly shows that it is those who are the lowest paid in the United Kingdom who have suffered the largest tax increases under the Labour Government. As members know, young people coming into the job market tend to be low paid. Gordon Brown has given young people that experience.

The second area is the graduate endowment, which in essence is a new tax on young people. The Scottish Parliament had the opportunity to resist the graduate endowment, but sadly it voted for the tax. I mention those areas not to score party-political points, but to flag up the fact that, although politicians can agree motions such as that which we are debating today, and can say that we support and cherish the work of young people, we must also consider the consequences of the laws that we pass and the effect that they have on young people's lives and livelihoods.

I am grateful for the opportunity to put on record my support for young people and to wish them

every success in the new Scotland that they will build.

16:02

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I will focus on a particular part of the motion, which is about young people requiring support. There has been some discussion in the press about the desirability of excluding pupils from mainstream education. I will highlight an example from my constituency where good support is given to young people with behavioural difficulties.

Last Friday I was fortunate to visit Dumfries High School, which has obtained funding through the alternatives to exclusion programme to establish the Schoolhouse. The school has taken over the vacant janitor's house and converted it into a learning base, which is staffed by two teachers. Pupils who are excluded from school because of behavioural problems are required to attend the Schoolhouse during the period of their exclusion.

Instead of those young people missing out on their education and being left at home or hanging about on the streets where they can get into more trouble, they are kept on the school premises. They can continue to learn in a safe, secure environment without interacting with other pupils or causing problems in the mainstream school.

I was impressed to find that the Schoolhouse was neither a sin bin nor an easy option for the young people whose behaviour had caused them to be excluded from being educated with their peers, even for a short period. The Schoolhouse pupils continue with their studies and attend other sessions, including group and one-to-one sessions during which they address some of their behavioural problems and consider how their behaviour affects teachers and fellow pupils.

The Schoolhouse pupils will shortly be given access to computer-based learning support, which is in operation throughout the rest of the school. That support will help the pupils develop their literacy and numeracy skills. It uses a series of programmes that are tailored to individual need and to levels of attainment.

The pupils not only engage in academic activity, but work in the garden and undertake vocational activities. I was very impressed when I visited. It was very quiet; a group of pupils were working together on their individual educational activities in one room and in another room two young boys who had been excluded from school for fighting each other were working together and helping each other with their homework. The general atmosphere was supportive, quiet and disciplined. I felt that the young people were continuing to learn and to understand their difficulties.

I was informed that two of the excluded pupils were helping another pupil, who is school phobic. One of the boys had been in trouble on many occasions during his school life, but he was anxious to help a young lad who was finding it difficult to come into school. He was going home to try to help the other boy to come in the following day. I thought what a contrast it was to pupils being sent home to hang around on street corners; they were engaged in doing something positive and in addressing their own behaviour.

I was impressed by another aspect of the project. I often meet teachers and head teachers and they are sometimes stressed—being a teacher is a stressful occupation. One would think that teachers who deal with the most behaviourally challenged children would be the most stressed, but they were not; they were incredibly enthusiastic. They often do not take a coffee break. If other teachers are too busy to give them relief, they are quite happy to work with the young people through their coffee breaks because they are so enthused by and passionate about their work.

The only concern is how the project will continue to be funded once the alternatives to exclusion project ceases, as it is a three-year pot of money. Can ministers consider how these excellent projects can continue? They are on short-term funding. How can we ensure that those excellent projects continue once the three years is up?

I extend an invitation from the head teacher, Colin Mitchell, who said that he would be delighted to see the Minister for Education and Young People or the Deputy Minister for Education and Young People, if they are ever down in that neck of the woods, to demonstrate to them the value of the work that is being done. Let us see how projects that are examples of excellence can continue, because they are important and contribute greatly to the support of young people who otherwise would have behavioural difficulties.

16:07

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): The debate covers a wide range of subjects. I will focus on a couple that are local to me.

The motion mentions education taking
“place in the most modern facilities”.

Nobody in the Parliament would argue that children should be expected to go to school in old-fashioned and outdated accommodation. The problems arise when we consider how the facilities are provided. The financial effects of PFI/PPP are well known and I am sure that that debate will continue in the chamber over the next four years.

I will consider some problems that are being caused by the wholesale disposal of public assets

for private profit. In East Kilbride and Hamilton, which are both in Lanarkshire—where I live and which I represent—a school closure programme has been instituted. It is underpinned by the need to sell off development land to finance the PPP.

Half of all secondary schools in East Kilbride will close, as will Earnock High School in Hamilton; the issue of Craighead School in Hamilton is a special case and requires a whole debate to itself. The upshot is that school pupils will face longer journeys to school, which increases the risks to their safety, and school rolls will rise to among the highest in Scotland—so much for reducing class sizes and investing in Scotland's youth.

The Executive's motion mentions

“extending access to high quality sport and leisure facilities”.

My colleague Sandra White raised this issue. School closures to facilitate profiteering remove sport and leisure facilities from communities. Schools that are run under PFI/PPP restrict access to their facilities. We have heard the good and cuddly public intentions of the Executive, but the policies cut away at the very fabric of the infrastructure that the Executive says it wants to support.

As the SNP amendment stresses, we are facing problems of population demographics. Scotland needs to attract immigrants, and the SNP considers there to be a need now for a positive immigration policy for Scotland. As one of the wealthiest countries in the world, Scotland should also be looking to play a full part in alleviating suffering here and elsewhere. I would like Scotland to play a full and active role in welcoming asylum seekers, first because it is right and secondly because their presence would add great value to our country. That is why I despair at the way that asylum seekers are treated here—not by their neighbours, because Scots generally welcome anyone who comes here. Sadly, it is the UK Home Office's draconian policies and intentions that are very much at odds with the sentiment in Scotland, in this chamber and elsewhere. Ministers here, including the First Minister, have made very sensible statements about immigration and asylum issues and I urge them to keep putting their views forward in the strongest terms to their Westminster counterparts.

I live near Dungavel, which is now an asylum seeker detention and removal centre. The conditions inside the centre are as good as the staff can make them, but here we are having a debate about our young people while we are locking up other folk's young people in a prison environment. We are not even allowing those youngsters outside that prison environment for education purposes. There has been much

argument about whether the coalition in Scotland will or will not lock up the parents of antisocial young people, but in this country we are locking up both young people and parents, where no crime has been committed. There can be no moral basis for that from a country that signs up to many—but unfortunately not all—of the United Nations conventions on children and young people. I, for one, am deeply ashamed to live in a country that houses an institution such as Dungavel.

Although I can agree with the sentiment of the Executive motion, I believe that that sentiment can be improved upon by agreeing the amendment lodged by Fiona Hyslop and by following that with reasoned action. I urge members to support the SNP amendment.

16:12

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab):

Young people and politicians have one experience in common. Both receive a bad press because of the activities of a small percentage of their number. Politicians should not complain about such treatment; we are legitimate targets of the fourth estate and we can, and do, return fire. Young men and women have every right to complain about such skewed generalisation. As the timely briefing provided by Young Scot, YouthLink Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament reminds us, young people are overwhelmingly positive contributors to society, and we do no service to our young constituents if we forget that 98.6 per cent of the 1 million young Scots under 16 are not referred to the reporter on offence grounds.

I am not for one moment saying that we should pretend that there is no problem whatsoever. There is a very real problem with a tiny number of persistent young offenders, and to claim otherwise would be blinkered and dishonest. However, we must keep things in their proper perspective. I know from 20 years' experience of teaching in the secondary sector, and from work in my constituency, that young people are by and large enthusiastic, bright and creative citizens of Scotland. They are neither angels nor devils; they are individuals and they are our future.

I am delighted that the Executive's motion celebrates young Scots' positive contribution to society. I would like to refer to a number of examples from my Glasgow Anniesland constituency. A group of senior students in Drumchapel High School have made a video of day-to-day life in their new-build comprehensive, which demonstrates the wide range of educational and social activities on offer to pupils. The video is excellent, its production professional, its content imaginative and its purpose worthy. Its purpose is to ease the anxieties of primary 7 pupils, at whom

it is targeted, as they prepare to make the difficult transition from primary 7 to secondary 1.

Incidentally, the Drumchapel SIP provided the funding to enable the video to be delivered to every household in Drumchapel in an effort to increase the number of children and families choosing to complete their secondary education in the excellent new modern facility that is Drumchapel High School. That is a small but powerful illustration of all age groups in a community co-operating positively with a commendable purpose.

In my constituency, I have had the pleasure of attending Jordanhill Primary School's pupil council, the elected members of which range from primary 4 to primary 7. They produced their own agenda, chaired their own meeting, composed their own questions for me to attempt to answer, listened to each other and to me courteously, sent out a minute of the meeting timeously and asked me to arrange for them to come and see the Parliament at work on a Thursday in September. I hope that they will not be disappointed.

Those are only two examples of young people making a positive contribution to the life of Scotland. I am delighted to record such activities in the *Official Report*. I mention also the new youth forum that is being set up by the community support unit in Drumchapel in conjunction with the SIP to support young people's participation in influencing the development and delivery of local services for young people, the thriving pupil council at Kelvindale Primary School or the development of a Yoker community campus that will provide a setting for young and not-so-young people of that community to acquire the appropriate skills training to access employment and make the fullest use of their abilities; I realise that there is not enough time to go into detail.

This debate in our young Parliament is an opportunity to affirm our belief in the young people of Scotland. I am pleased to support an Executive motion that reflects such a positive analysis and approach. I will not vote for Eleanor Scott's amendment, although it mentions lowering

"the minimum age for voting and standing in elections ... to 16 years."

We should not be afraid to consider such a reform in due course. After all, if we want young people to contribute to our community as responsible citizens of a modern democracy, we should treat them as such citizens.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mark Ballard should keep strictly to three minutes.

16:17

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

For a long time, we have been told that young people are apathetic, more interested in PlayStations than politics and are neds who cause trouble and terrorise honest folk. However, to assume that all young people are neds is no fairer than assuming that all politicians are numpties. We must go beyond such stereotypes—of politicians and of young people.

One of the few uplifting sights that I saw during the dark days of our illegal and immoral military intervention in Iraq was the number of young people who passionately demonstrated their opposition to war. To see more banners representing schools in Edinburgh than those representing trade unions was amazing—there were certainly more banners representing schools in Edinburgh than those representing the Labour party at the demonstrations in Edinburgh.

When an issue is important to young people, they are passionate about politics, about being involved in the political process and about having their voices heard. During the gulf war and the struggle that continues against Blair and Bush's imperialism throughout the world, it was and is important for young people's voices to be heard. That is why we need to involve young people in the political process. Young people of 16 and 17 are old enough to join the Army and should be old enough to vote on where the Army goes. They should have their say about military interventions.

I am pleased to support Eleanor Scott's amendment and am pleased that, although Bill Butler said that he would not vote for the amendment, such issues are receiving wider recognition across the political spectrum.

I thank the Presiding Officer for the opportunity to give a curtailed speech.

16:19

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): The debate has been a good one. As other members did, I begin by welcoming the new ministers to their portfolios. The Minister for Education and Young People made a positive opening speech, which contributed to the tenor of the debate.

The debate has been MSPs' second standing ovation of the week for the children of Scotland. We can take great pride in much that our young people do, such as volunteering and their hard work on exams, which has just finished for this year. Mike Pringle was correct to say that children are our country's future. For the most part, the children whom I meet—whether they are my children, my children's friends, or the children whom I meet through my job—are a credit to our country, which is in safe hands.

Colleagues' comments have shown that we share an aspiration for our young people: we want to build a confident country in which young people have a candid attitude about their future. That applies not only to children from middle-class backgrounds, but to children from all backgrounds. No matter where or into what situation children are born, we must through our actions give them the platform of opportunity that will ensure that they build a better Scotland, not only for themselves, but for all of us.

There have been some good speeches. I highlight the virtuoso performance by Duncan McNeil—perhaps not everyone agreed with him, but he was certainly entertaining. Susan Deacon and Linda Fabiani also made good speeches. The standard of debate has been quite good and I hope that the young people who are present have enjoyed some of the insights about MSPs and realise that we are not just numpties. We have had the interesting thought that Cathy Jamieson might turn up to the chamber sporting pink hair and Dr Martens, but I assure members that I will not be wearing Dr Martens or dungarees. I see that Cathy has just entered the chamber. I am a bit disappointed that the only pink thing she is wearing is a tee-shirt—we will have to work on that. The idea that Mary Scanlon spends her spare time trailing male toilets and picking fights with male MSPs is also entertaining.

The SNP spokesperson on young people suggested that members should all go forth and procreate for the Parliament. I note that David Davidson, who has five children, has already done his bit. Fiona Hyslop was obviously successful as a whip, because she managed to persuade Shona Robison to do just that. I wish Shona all the best.

It is up to members, whether or not we are lucky enough to be parents, to provide a platform of opportunity for young people. We must put in place the infrastructure and services that will deliver the appropriate educational, social and political background to encourage our children and give them the opportunities that they deserve. I will pick up on some of the themes that have been raised in the debate, but I would also like to mention a couple of points from my personal and professional experience as the former convener of the then Health and Community Care Committee.

One group of young people that I would like to highlight are the young carers of Scotland. About 17,000 young people in Scotland care for and support parents and other family members who suffer from physical disability, mental health problems, chronic illness or drug and alcohol dependency. As a result of that caring role—some young people care for more than 50 hours a week—they are often isolated from their classmates and from the society of other young

people, which is why they often end up experiencing problems. I am glad that the Community Care and Health (Scotland) Act 2002, which we passed in the previous session of Parliament, gave those young people the right to an assessment of their needs and, I hope, to be cared for.

One of the best moments in the previous session of Parliament was towards the end, when we were considering Margaret Jamieson's and Bill Butler's stage 3 amendments to the Mental Health (Scotland) Bill. On the final day of consideration of the bill, Parliament forced the Executive to think again and to put in place proper proposals to ensure that the mental health needs and requirements of young people in Scotland are considered and that the need for the provision of age-appropriate mental health services for young people, and of mother and baby units is taken into account. Those measures were a result of evidence given to the Health and Community Care Committee that vulnerable young people were being treated in psychiatric units alongside disturbed adults, and that other young people had to travel hundreds of miles to receive the care and support that they needed. On that occasion, the Parliament gave the Executive the clear message that the situation was unacceptable and decided to change it by statute, which was right.

I will pick up on one of Brian Monteith's points and send some consensual guff in his direction. I record my thanks to Family Mediation Scotland, which does a great job of talking people through separations and marriage splits, focusing on what is best for their children. The service is not interested in the parents, who are adults and must live with the consequences of their decisions. What is important is the fact that thousands of young people and children have to live with the consequences of those splits. Organisations such as Family Mediation Scotland should be given our full support.

Members have rightly highlighted some of the improvements that were introduced in the previous Parliament, including the school building programme, the student funding package and the children's commissioner. Some of the schools in my constituency—Craigmount High School, the Royal High School and Craigroyston Primary School—have benefited from those improvements. Other members have mentioned improvements that will be delivered in the next year, focusing on the antisocial behaviour issue, reduced class sizes, concessionary travel, and so on. I agree with many of the points that have been made in the debate.

I agree with Sandra White about the importance of protecting our playing fields and green spaces, although I expect that the Deputy Presiding Officer

will request 250 lines that say, "I will not be late in future," from Sandra White. I also agree with Susan Deacon's point about prevention and the health agenda that must be progressed by the Parliament. We must not look at the issues just in four-year bites, but for the generation to come and the generation beyond that.

It is important that we all accept the principle that our families are not just the two, three or four children that we have, but the family that we care for as a state. We should give them our full attention. Donald Gorrie was absolutely right: we are saying warm words to children and young people about volunteering, but it is time for us to move on from warm words to cold cash. We must give them a proper funding package to allow them to do the job that we have all rightly highlighted today. We want a good, tolerant, well educated and healthy Scotland, and the children and young people of Scotland want exactly the same.

16:27

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): I am grateful to the electorate in Central Scotland for giving me the opportunity to deliver my first speech in the Scottish Parliament in winding up the debate. The subject of my speech has aroused some interest among constituents and friends alike, who know that there is often a bit of latitude concerning the content of such a speech. They have not been short of suggestions for what I should say—some serious, some absurd. My favourite suggestion—made, perhaps, with the Holyrood project in mind—was that I should tell everyone that I know a cracking wee painter called Malki. I am happy to confirm that I do.

It is not only a privilege, but an onerous responsibility for any individual to be elected to serve the people as their representative, be it in local government or at parliamentary level. I entered politics because politics is all about people, and the ultimate honour that a person can have is to be given the opportunity—which, as elected members, we all have—to make a difference and attempt to improve the quality of life for people in Scotland. That said, I am conscious that for a growing number of people, the title MSP is not a badge of honour. When they comment with feeling that the Parliament has exceeded their expectations, it is safe to assume that they are not being complimentary. The mixed emotions that devolution has aroused were summed up for me in a letter from a well-wisher who wrote:

"I am delighted to note you will be representing us in that great symbol of Scottish incompetence and wish you every success there!"

The debate has, rightly, paid tribute to the vast majority of Scottish youth. However, is it any wonder that people are disillusioned with the

Parliament when the Minister for Education and Young People lodges a motion in which the Executive promises to

"work in partnership with young people to help meet their aspirations",

but then doggedly insists that head teachers should comply with a policy that makes it virtually impossible for them to exclude disruptive pupils, thereby preventing the majority of well-behaved, hard-working pupils who are keen and eager to learn from getting on with their education?

Peter Peacock and Fiona Hyslop both highlighted proposals to introduce smaller class sizes but there is, to be frank, no sense in reducing class sizes if disruptive pupils are to remain in the classroom. Head teachers should be given the flexibility to set their own discipline policies, because they are best placed to decide on the policy that will drive up standards and attainment levels in their individual schools.

Linda Fabiani mentioned Earnock High School, in Hamilton, which is a centre of excellence that is under threat of closure. She will be pleased to know that a decision about its closure has been deferred and that a further period of consultation on its future is to follow.

It is important to recognise that the coalition's paternalistic one-size-fits-all approach merely stifles the excellence and achievement that Labour and the Liberal Democrats state they are committed to promoting. Worse still, the Scottish Executive's failure to tackle discipline in schools is having a knock-on effect in that it is the same small minority of youths who cause disruption in the classroom who go on to cause havoc and chaos in their local communities.

Our amendment to the motion recognises the central role played by parents and families in enabling young people to become responsible adults. That is certainly the case in addressing youth crime—parents and children must all face up to their respective responsibilities, about which Susan Deacon spoke effectively during the debate.

There must, in order to tackle the vexing problem of youths who become repeat offenders, be early intervention. We must identify early the parents who might be struggling to cope with children who are most at risk of becoming involved in crime. The children's hearing system has a crucial role to play in that regard, but it is prevented from fulfilling its full potential because it is overburdened with 12 to 15-year-old persistent offenders.

Repeat offenders under 16 years of age should be referred to youth courts, thus freeing up the children's panels to concentrate on the at-risk children.

Scott Barrie: What does Margaret Mitchell suggest should happen to a young person who is referred to a children's panel on the basis of the offences that they have committed, but who is also deemed to be in need of care and protection because of neglect in the home? Would such a person go to court or a children's panel?

Margaret Mitchell: It is clear that any child who has emotional problems that could be helped by the children's panel should remain within the children's panel system. The proposal to deal with some young people in special youth courts relates to persistent young offenders who do not come into the category that Scott Barrie mentioned.

Instead of freeing up the children's panels in the way that I have suggested, the Scottish Executive is squandering precious resources on the creation of youth courts for 16 and 17-year-olds who should, at present, be referred to adult courts.

There is also an important role to be played by the voluntary sector in the development and management of projects that channel young people's energies into worthwhile pursuits. Organisations throughout the country are doing good work but, too often, that work is undermined by unnecessary wrangling between local authorities and central Government about how resources should be targeted and coupled, in some instances, with local authorities' lack of responsiveness.

Linda Fabiani: My point relates to an earlier comment by Margaret Mitchell, but I think that it fits in well at this point, given that she has mentioned wrangling between the Scottish Executive and local authorities. I am sorry that I was not in the chamber when Margaret Mitchell commented on South Lanarkshire Council's new consultation period in relation to East Kilbride and Hamilton. I would like to make clear that the new consultation period that she mentioned relates to which schools should be closed, rather than the basis for closing schools.

Margaret Mitchell: That might be the case in East Kilbride, but it is not the case in Hamilton. Linda Fabiani can confirm that fact if she cares to check.

On the voluntary sector, I agree with the worthwhile points that Donald Gorrie made today.

Scotland should be proud of its diverse and talented young people but, equally, the Scottish Executive should be made to address the policy areas that have been highlighted today and in which it is failing some of the most vulnerable people in our society. I urge Parliament to support our amendment.

16:34

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I congratulate Margaret Mitchell on her debut on the Conservative's front bench and I welcome Peter Peacock to his new job. I notice that Margaret Mitchell's initials are MM, Peter Peacock's are PP and mine are SS. There is a message there somewhere.

One of the interesting things about our having a debate on young children is that we are all experts because, I hope, we were all children and young people at some point. The difference between some members and others is that some remember what it was like to be a young person, whereas others are no longer capable of that. I ask Jamie McGrigor to stop looking at me like that. I know that he is in the latter category, although he has a mischievous look—perhaps he oscillates between the two.

I will pick up on one thing that Margaret Mitchell said. The issue to which I refer is sending youngsters to youth courts, family courts—as we would advocate—or children's panels versus sending them to the main courts. It would be broadly accepted that many young offenders who are sent to the adult court view that as a badge of pride and promotion, which is not something that we should encourage among our young folk.

Parents look forward to the birth of their children with great enthusiasm. My colleague, Shona Robison, has told me that she certainly looks forward to the birth of her child in about a month's time. We need to help parents convert that enthusiasm for birth into positive support for their children and for giving them positive help to make their own choices in the future. The clever parents will learn from their children, who will pick and choose what they want to learn.

Susan Deacon asked us to support parents, but it would be rather surprising if any member were to suggest that we should oppose parents. That goes to the nub of some of the difficulties around a debate of this kind. The debate is consensual, which is great, but does it lead us anywhere? Let us see where it takes us.

My father was a country general practitioner, and used to have a particular way of dealing with senior primary school children when they were about to get an injection. Just as he came up to them with the syringe, he would ask them, "Are you married?" While they were giggling at that, they got their jag—it was a bit of distraction therapy. I wonder whether, in doing that, he created a psychological link between getting a jag and being married, which perhaps accounts for part of the reduction in the number of married people in society today. That illustrates that communication between adults and the young can in fact have serious long-term effects.

Peter Peacock said that we should engage and listen. All of us would pride ourselves on our listening skills, which are a necessary attribute for politicians. In considering our responses to what we hear, however, I am drawn to the conclusion that many of us are not so much hard of hearing, which comes with age, but hard of heeding, which comes from indifference and a lack of preparedness to respond genuinely to what people have to say.

I turn now to the role of children in society and to the activities in which they engage. Like other members, I receive many invitations to get involved in events that are driven by and involve children, and which are for children. I very much enjoy and welcome the opportunity to attend such events. I recently attended the Scottish heat of the Global Rock Challenge event in Aberdeen. It involved several thousand children putting together music-based pieces of entertainment in competition with other schools. It is a great disappointment that that particular event nearly folded because it depended largely on commercial sponsorship that was withdrawn at the last moment. It is fortunate that the public sector, including the police and the local authorities, filled the gap, but it is still an illustration of the vulnerability of provision for children when the private sector is brought in; we cannot always get private sector bodies locked in.

Pauline McNeill referred to low-frequency radio in Glasgow, I think meaning low-powered radio. That is an excellent way of joining children in one place to others elsewhere via a modern medium, and allows them to gain new skills. I welcome and encourage that.

I regret the fact that, despite my intervention suggesting that he say some positive things about children because he was some way through his speech, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton did not find himself able to do that. However, other Conservative colleagues did so in their speeches.

Robert Brown brought a most intriguing idea to us—that there should be midnight football games for youngsters. I would be happy to play football with youngsters at midnight, if that is a way of diverting them from less salubrious and desirable activities late at night. Robert is on to a winner.

My colleague Fiona Hyslop asked when the children's commissioner would be appointed. I hope that the minister is listening so that he can give his response to that question. Fiona Hyslop illustrated perfectly the dangers to which Patricia Ferguson is currently exposed by the extension of her period as business manager, because she actually asked when the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill would be passed. If someone is shut in a smoky back room, they forget that certain things have

happened. I know that Fiona Hyslop meant to ask when the commissioner would be appointed.

Rosie Kane brought emotion and knowledge to the debate. She described with passion some of the problems that young people experience. I cannot in any way criticise her analysis, although I must—given their absence during the winding-up speeches—criticise her stamina and that of her colleagues in a debate in which I thought they would wish to be fully involved. I cannot support her nostrums and solutions, for the simple reason that she gave none. She seems to be obsessed by labels at the expense of behaviour. Let us guide our young people away from unacceptable behaviour and create the facilities to reward good behaviour. The SSP has a long way to go before it makes progress on that issue.

Scott Barrie asked about the low birth rate. Scotland's birth rate is declining faster than that of any other country in the European Union. Alone among countries in the European Union, we have a shrinking population. I do not have a magic answer to that problem—I am infertile, so I cannot contribute to the solution. I hope that others who are not so constrained will play their part.

Rob Gibson spoke about the benefits of exposing our children to live music. As a nine-year-old, inspired by Lonnie Donegan, I used to play a tea box with a hole cut out the back into which I put my foot, a single string and a broomstick. That did more to put children off music than anything else, but standards of musical performance have improved considerably.

I hope that during the recent election politicians have all been exposed to some of the views of young children. Far and away the best contribution to political debate in Banff and Buchan was made by a primary school age pupil who spoke up at an evening hustings organised by New Deer community association. She expressed forcefully and in a focused and proper way what she and her colleagues wanted for her community. The best hustings overall was that which was held at Peterhead Academy.

Young children deserve to be listened to; they have much to say to us. However, there are hard issues. We must recognise that much of the relationship between adults and the young is based on trust and understanding: we do not understand them and they do not trust us. If we have done anything today, I hope that we have started on a road towards building trust and understanding between young people and us.

David Davidson referred to mental health, for which we need better provision.

I will close by asking a few questions and making some comments. How many older people trust young people today? We must break out of

the cycle of mistrust. Too many of us fail to judge our young by what they do, too many of us fail to judge our young by what they think and too many of us judge our young by what we think they do. Our young learn their failings from us, so it is time that we changed our ways and learned the valued virtues of enthusiasm, energy and commitment from the great mass of our young who possess them.

I support the amendment in the name of Fiona Hyslop.

16:44

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): The debate has been excellent. It has provided a good opportunity for many to contribute and for a wide range of views to be expressed. The striking thing has been the generally positive tone of the speeches—although there were one or two unfortunate exceptions. It would have been wrong to drag the debate into a party-political squabble, because the interests of young people and of Scotland's future are far more important than scoring party-political points.

The attendance of a number of young people who have come to listen to our debate has been welcome. Along with Peter Peacock and his deputy, Euan Robson, I had lunch with some representatives from the Scottish Youth Parliament, Who Cares? Scotland, the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, Young Scot and the dialogue youth project. Those young people are anxious to make a contribution. They want their voice to be heard and they have a strong opinion that deserves to be heard in the Parliament.

I cannot remember whether it was Sandra White, but someone suggested that there should be more dialogue and engagement with young people. At lunch time, the minister gave a commitment to the young people that we would explore ways in which the Scottish Youth Parliament and youth organisations could engage jointly with the Parliament in a debate about the future of young people. I know that Peter Peacock will explore ways in which that might be done constructively.

Today has been an opportunity to celebrate the contribution that is made by young people. As several members have indicated in the course of the debate, although young people need to be supported, nourished and cherished, they nevertheless have much to contribute to society in general and perhaps to politicians in particular. Young people have an honesty of approach that is sometimes lacking in many other quarters. Their tolerance not only of other young people, but of many others in society could sometimes serve us

well. They are open and non-judgmental. They are also caring and, as Eleanor Scott mentioned, they have an awareness of the environment and of their surroundings.

Young people have a passion about living in a better society both locally and, just as significant, internationally. They are at the heart of many of the Scottish charities that make a significant contribution beyond our shores. Young people are often the driving force behind organisations such as Concern, which is currently raising money for good causes in parts of the world that face disaster. Young people have also been a huge influence in the fundraising activities of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund. In organisations such as Christian Aid and Oxfam, young people are the backbone of much of the valuable work that is done. It is right that in today's debate we have paid tribute to that work.

Another significant point is that, as well as talking in general terms about what young people contribute, members have been able to mention many specific and glowing personal examples of the difference that young people are making in schools, communities and projects throughout Scotland. It is right that we individually and collectively recognise that contribution. It is also right that, as the minister did this morning, we recognise the need for the Executive and the Parliament to support young people by putting in place the systems that they need to allow them to continue to make that contribution. We have heard much about some of those actions today.

Let me emphasise the point that I made at the beginning about the commitment and willingness of the minister—this should extend to all of us—to listen to, and engage with, young people in the decision-making process. The theme that is emerging is that, yes, we want to listen to and take account of young people, but we also want to feed back to them what is being done and how we have reflected on what we have listened to. I hope that we can all commit to that.

I will comment on some specific remarks that were made during the debate. Fiona Hyslop asked about the children's commissioner. I am advised that that should happen by the end of this year and the Parliament will make the appointment rather than the Executive.

I will not try to follow Fiona Hyslop's argument about procreation, creating babies and whether independence would create more babies.

Stewart Stevenson: The sun would shine every day.

Hugh Henry: Yes, the sun would shine and it would never set. Fiona Hyslop's comment was interesting.

Mr Monteith: Will the minister take an intervention?

Hugh Henry: Not following my comments about procreation.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton made the pertinent comment that education opens minds and opens up opportunities. That is why we want to do so much for young people: to ensure that every young person in this country has the ability and the opportunity to live their life to its full potential. We need to acknowledge some of the diversity that has been talked about.

As Lord James Douglas-Hamilton said, there are particular problems and difficulties with discipline and threats in schools. Those problems are not insurmountable: some of them are resource based and that should be tackled; some of them are policy based, but we should not allow that to get in the way of developing a better environment in which young people can learn.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton—echoed by Margaret Mitchell—made a comment about head teachers and their responsibilities. I do not understand the descriptions of head teachers that have been given. Margaret Mitchell said that schools should have their own discipline policies. They have. As far as we are concerned, head teachers are free to make their own decisions. The minister has said that we will not try to second-guess head teachers. I do not know where Margaret Mitchell's line is coming from. Head teachers are critical to the delivery of good discipline in schools.

Eleanor Scott talked about young people's environmental responsibility and their sense of justice. However, she misunderstands the debate that we are trying to have about making parents responsible. We are not talking about jailing parents for the actions of their children. We are talking about parents taking responsibility for giving care and attention, and for nurturing their children. We are talking about taking action against those parents who neglect and fail their children. Any action against a parent will be taken because of their failure to recognise what a court has asked them to do to be a good and caring parent. We are not talking about holding parents responsible for their children's actions.

Robert Brown and other members talked about the very small number of young people—0.1 per cent—who are engaged in persistent offending. However, as Duncan McNeil, Johann Lamont and others indicated, it is that small number of people that is causing disproportionate mayhem in communities throughout Scotland. We would be negligent if we turned our backs on those communities and said that we are doing nothing to support them. We have good, decent communities

made up of hard-working and responsible families who are being terrorised by a handful of people.

Although we understand the causes of some of the social problems in our country, and we understand how poverty can leave people dispirited and undermined by not allowing them to participate fully in society, it is in no way right to use that to justify and excuse people behaving badly, carrying out acts of violence and causing mayhem. The biggest insult in that analysis and language is to the decent people and decent families on low wages who are struggling to bring up their children and give them some leadership and guidance, and who would not tolerate their children behaving like that. Simply to excuse the bad behaviour of others because of poverty demeans the good parents who are trying their damndest to bring up their children.

Many examples have been given of what young people have contributed. Pauline McNeill talked about the talents of school pupils at secondary and primary levels; others echoed her comments. She also raised the important issue of the need to protect open spaces and playing fields to allow young people to enjoy life, participate and develop.

Pauline McNeill, at the end of her speech, touched on two issues that are important to the Executive and, I hope, to the Parliament. It is absolutely right that looked-after children will continue to be a priority. Scott Barrie has made many speeches on that issue, as have other members. As a society, we are failing many of those children, and we need to continue to do more. Pauline McNeill also mentioned something that may not be a headline issue or a day-to-day issue, and that is the horrendous trafficking of young people for sexual exploitation and profit. Commendably, in this Parliament we have already passed legislation to protect young children in those circumstances, but she is right that we need to do more.

I do not have time to follow the line that Jim Mather developed. He suggested that those who are claiming benefits are playing the game. That was an insulting and gratuitous remark. We should not engage in such remarks in a debate on young people.

David Davidson raised issues that are worthy of further exploration, possibly by committees of this Parliament as well as the Executive. He mentioned examining the relationship between parents and children. He also mentioned significant health issues, to which the partnership will give priority.

When Donald Gorrie talked about local government being starved of money, he was being inaccurate. More money has gone into local

government in recent years than ever before. How that money is used is a question for local government, but we are investing in an unprecedented way to allow local councils to provide services.

Fergus Ewing asked a specific question about a local project. The evaluation is being done. We will reflect on it, then make a decision depending on what comes out of it. Fergus Ewing made a number of interesting points.

Patrick Harvie said that the media described young people as dangerous, reckless and feckless—I say to him that the media may have been talking about the Green party rather than young people. Perhaps he read the wrong report.

Duncan McNeil put in the proper context the need to challenge and castigate unacceptable behaviour wherever it takes place.

So many other issues and questions were raised in the debate that I do not have sufficient time to cover them. However, on Irene Oldfather's question on test purchasing, the pilot projects started in February. They will run for the rest of this year, and a further report will be produced.

The debate has afforded a welcome opportunity for the Parliament to engage positively across party boundaries in expressing our support for a section of society that is often unfairly castigated and condemned. We have been able to say clearly and specifically that a lot of good is going on involving young people.

In my area, the flexicare project involves young people in volunteering work on Saturdays with kids who are disabled and handicapped. Moreover, PACE Youth Theatre, which is Scotland's largest youth theatre, involves between 1,500 and 2,000 young people in drama and arts and helps to engage other young people by producing plays about bullying and drugs. I also want to recognise the achievements of schools in Renfrewshire, such as Johnstone High School in my constituency. Those individual examples can be repeated the length and breadth of Scotland.

We have much to celebrate and to be proud of. It is right for the Parliament to record that it appreciates and values our young people's contribution.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):

There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S2M-103.3, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, which seeks to amend motion S2M-103, in the name of Peter Peacock, on young people, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Mr Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Mr Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)

Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGregor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Mr Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 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)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 33, Against 76, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S2M-103.1, in the name of Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S2M-103, in the name of Peter Peacock, on young people, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that amendment S2M-103.4, in the name of Eleanor Scott, which seeks to amend motion S2M-103, in the name of Peter Peacock, on young people, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Frances (West of Scotland) (SSP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Mr Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Mr Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)

Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGregor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Mr Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 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)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 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 34, Against 78, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S2M-103, in the name of Peter Peacock, on young people, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament celebrates the contribution made to society by the young people of Scotland, both at home and abroad; applauds their dynamism, intellect, enthusiasm, enterprise, creativity and individuality; will work in partnership with young people to help meet their aspirations; believes that the establishment of the new Children's Commissioner, measures to reform education by ensuring that the curriculum is built around the needs of the child and that education takes place in the most modern facilities, extending access to high quality sport and leisure facilities and support for youth work and volunteering will help young people to reach their full potential and participate in society; recognises that some young people require additional support and measures to do so, and commits itself whenever possible to making sure that appropriate support is provided whilst recognising the central role played by parents and families in enabling young people to become responsible adults and therefore fulfil their potential.

The Presiding Officer: I have one small item of housekeeping. We are hoping to complete the cover photograph for the current annual report after this item of business. As the report relates to the previous session, I ask returning members who wish to be in the photograph to make their way out through the exterior entry down the steps towards the Mound. It will take about five minutes.

Rural Rail Services

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-89, in the name of Jamie Stone, on rural rail services. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

My screen shows that a considerable number of members wish to speak in the debate. The standing orders make it clear that members' business debates should last no more than 45 minutes. However, the Presiding Officers have discussed the matter and have decided that members' business debates should be concluded no later than 6 o'clock. That means that the minister will be called at approximately 5.50. We will work on that assumption, so members may need to be prepared to give very short speeches.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that the contract to operate Scotland's internal rail services over the next seven years is shortly to be awarded; recognises that the provision of affordable, reliable and regular rail services across all of the Scottish network is important to the social and economic well-being of communities, and believes that, in considering the tender proposals offered by the competing train operators, the vital needs of communities served by rural lines should not be forgotten.

17:06

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a great pleasure to speak in the first Liberal Democrat members' business debate of the new session of Parliament.

I was brought up beside a railway line. If one could apply the telescope of history and use it to look back at the years in question, one would see me as a small boy in the fields on the north side of Tain waving at passing engine drivers. Over the years, I have continued to take a considerable interest in our railways in Scotland and I remain a member of Friends of the Far North Line. In my days as a councillor, I was a member of the Highland rail partnership, which involved the local authority, rail companies and other interested parties in promoting the use and development of railways in the Highlands. Mr Frank Roach of the Highland rail partnership is sitting in the gallery. He has contributed a great deal to all that has been achieved in the Highlands.

One of those achievements has been an increase in the movement of freight by rail on the far north line. The fact that Safeway takes its goods up as far as Georgemas Junction means that heavy traffic is taken off the road system in the far north. Additional commuter services have

also been introduced—for example, there is now a morning commuter service from my home town of Tain to Inverness. That service, which came into being as a result of the work of the Highland rail partnership, has proved to be a huge success. The reopening of Beaulieu station in John Farquhar Munro's constituency is another achievement. However, we still need to do more.

Mr Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I am grateful that the member has given way so early in his speech. He will share the concerns that I felt when I visited the Scottish Borders Tourist Board last week and was told that its call centre receives many calls from people who have been discouraged from visiting the Borders because there are no rail services there. Jamie Stone said that much more needs to be done. Will he confirm that a railway to the Borders is part of the work that needs to be done?

Mr Stone: Our new member has already learned the parliamentary arts. I back his call—he is correct.

We need to get still more freight off our road system and on to rail. There are opportunities in the Highlands and, I am sure, in other rural areas for the movement of perishable goods by rail. In my constituency, I can think of Mrs Angela Mackay of Kyle of Tongue Oysters. It would be very good news if we could help such people to get their fresh products down to the market where the money is—London. We can make further moves on that front.

Some of our stations in the Highlands lie unused. It gives me pleasure to inform members that Jim Cornell of Network Rail is also in the gallery. There are plans to examine the use of Tain station and Brora station in my constituency, which are lying empty. Those buildings could be used for craftwork or for a coffee shop or restaurant, for example.

Of course, I must mention in passing the fact that many of my constituents support the concept of a Dornoch rail crossing. However, there are the caveats that money must first be found for the crossing and that, if it were to be built, the Lairg loop, which supplies much of the interior of Sutherland, should not be closed.

I turn from the good news to the not-so-good news. My colleague John Farquhar Munro will talk about his experience later in the debate. I am afraid that everything is not particularly great on the railway front. I had a particularly bad experience when I was travelling north one night after a meeting of the Parliament. The 19:40 train from Edinburgh to Inverness was dirty, the lavatory doors were locked, there was no trolley and the train was late in arriving.

Last week in First Minister's questions, I referred to the time when the Justice 2 Committee was

travelling from Edinburgh to Inverness and shortly after the train left Edinburgh, the lavatory doors locked themselves, because the computer had gone on the blink. There was no opportunity to use a station toilet, because there was no stop long enough until the train got to Aviemore. Although that might be a humorous point, it was a pretty unpleasant experience for all the people travelling on that journey.

One of my constituents, Mr Ian Robertson of Thurso, wrote to me recently outlining a truly horrific calendar of incidents, which I will share. On 23 December 2002, on the 06:57 Thurso to Inverness train—a two-car, class 158 unit train—one toilet flooded and the other was locked out of use. The air conditioning broke down, the windows were so dirty that it was impossible to see out and a trolley service was provided only as far as Lairg, where it was withdrawn without notice. On the 10:40 Inverness to Edinburgh train—a four-car train with two class 158 units—the toilets were in a poor state. In one toilet the seat was no longer fixed to the bowl and it leaked and the other had no paper or hand-drying facilities.

I could go on and on, but my time is limited, so I will refer to only two of the incidents that are outlined in the letter from Ian Robertson. On Thursday 6 February 2003, on the 06:57 Thurso to Inverness train, passengers were turfed out at Ardgay to wade through slush and slither over ice up to the road as the rest of the journey was decreed to be by bus. Two people fell on the uncleared, ungritted surface. One was a child and the other was a lady who was white and shaken and had to be helped on to the bus. In the letter there are references to breakdowns, blocked toilets and a lack of trolley services.

In fairness to the present incumbent, I should say that the nature of the original franchise was probably unhelpful. In the days when it was introduced it was driven by cost alone. My appeal to the minister is that when the Executive considers the new franchise, it should put quality of service at the top of the agenda.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member give way?

Mr Stone: No, I am sorry. I have only seven minutes and I think that I am in my last one.

The ScotRail staff do their best, but I fear that they might be hampered by the nature of the contract and that they might be in an impossible situation. However, we cannot tolerate the next franchise-holder offering a quality of service that is anywhere as low as the quality of the service that we have now. There must be a considerable improvement, because the general public deserve it. The sort of service on our trains that I have outlined is unacceptable if we are to encourage

visitors to the Highlands and to all parts of Scotland.

17:14

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): We can hardly say the words “rural” and “trains” without talking about the Borders railway line again. It is almost three years to the day since the Parliament voted unanimously in Glasgow for reinstatement of the Borders railway line from Edinburgh to Carlisle, which I thought was excellent on the part of the Parliament. Some 20,000 people had signed a petition, which passed via the Public Petitions Committee to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, the Transport and the Environment Committee, the Rural Development Committee and the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee. As Jeremy Purvis rightly said, it is not just enterprise and tourism that are affected, as people in the Borders are socially excluded because they do not have a railway line on their terrain.

I welcome the debate, which has allowed me to piggyback, as it were, and bring back to the chamber the issue of the Borders railway line. There are concerns. Yesterday, at a meeting of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on Borders rail, when we had a presentation by the non-Executive bills unit, it became apparent that a bill on the Borders railway will not be introduced before September. That is not the fault of any member, as the matter is for the bill's promoters. The bill will be kicked into touch until September. The group was also advised that it will be about June next year when—if members will forgive the pun—the proposed train hits the buffers. Then, the minister will have to come clean and tell us what funding the Scottish Executive will contribute. The Executive has been like a bagful of eels in dealing with the matter over the years. We still do not have a commitment on the £130 million. If hardly anything is provided by the so-called partners, we want to know that the Executive will fill the gap, whatever it is. I leave a space in my speech in the hope that the minister will fill it.

Mr Stone: I acknowledge the passion with which Christine Grahame speaks. However, will she explain why the Borders rail link was not in the SNP's election manifesto?

Christine Grahame: I am glad that Jamie Stone read the SNP's manifesto, which did not refer to specific lines. What we have said about the Borders railway line is that we will need the money from the Strategic Rail Authority, which Michael Moore, the MP for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale, has acknowledged. He is most concerned that the SRA does not have the funding and has not made a commitment to provide

funding, which is why the line must go all the way from Edinburgh to Carlisle. [*Interruption.*] I will give Liberal Democrat members Michael Moore's press release.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD) *rose—*

Christine Grahame: I cannot take an intervention as I have little time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is in her last minute.

Christine Grahame: The line is proposed to be single track. That is a serious issue, because having a single-track line with only passing loops pretty well excludes the possibility of freight, Mr Rumbles, or express lines, which are required.

Mike Rumbles: The member referred to me. Will she take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is winding up.

Christine Grahame: Going cheapskate at this stage will mean expense later. I would like the minister to consider the additional cost of sophisticated signalling if the line is single track.

The Parliament must be aware of a range of issues. Although three years have elapsed, the matter is not resolved. A single track is not good, and we do not have a funding pledge.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many members wish to speak in the debate—

Mike Rumbles: What about the SNP pledge?

Christine Grahame: Your—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me. Many members wish to speak, so I will keep speeches strictly to three minutes.

17:17

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I congratulate Jamie Stone on instigating the debate, which is on a subject in which I take a close interest. All my Mallaig cousins worked on the railway and ran the west Highland line for a good many years.

In the previous parliamentary session, I spent a considerable amount of time encouraging individuals and groups in the west Highlands to submit to the Executive suggestions for the improvements that they would like in Highland rail services, so that those improvements might be included in the new franchise. As I was encouraged by the then minister with responsibility for transport to do that, I hope that rail services in the Highlands will be enhanced when the new franchise is announced.

Several parts of the service need to be improved, and some improvements are easier to achieve than others. I hope that the easy improvements are included in the new franchise, but we should not lose sight of the need for considerable long-term investment in Highland railways.

I had hoped that, by now, we could look forward to a much-improved sleeper service to the west Highlands. That service has tremendous tourism and business potential, but has suffered from the aftermath of the Hatfield tragedy, as the prolonged engineering works further south have made the service unreliable and unattractive. I hope that we can retain our long-term aspirations for the sleeper service—including more powerful locomotives and increased capacity at Euston—so that it can better serve the west Highlands, which have no airport to deliver travellers from London on business or pleasure.

I would like the proposal to link the west Highland sleeper with a commuter service from Crianlarich to Oban to come to fruition. Children are taken to Oban High School by that service, which is how country pupils went to the school when I attended it. Road transport was used, but I am pleased that the journey is once again being undertaken by rail.

I am pleased that the Executive is committed to including the sleeper service in the franchise, but I would also like it to consider commuter services to Fort William from Mallaig. The Mallaig to Glasgow train leaves too early to make it an option for commuters. Can we not aspire to a Lochabernet to complement the Invernet?

Commuter services around Inverness are steadily developing, particularly from Tain southwards. I am disappointed that the SRA's withdrawal of funding has meant that the commuter services to the north from Kingussie cannot as yet be developed. However, I am encouraged to hope that that project will be included in the rail franchise.

As John Farquhar Munro will talk about the Kyle line, I will not mention it except to say that it now has a Sunday train, as does the line to the far north. That means that students can travel home from university for the weekend. We need more trains on the far north line. When Bristow Muldoon, the former convener of the Transport and the Environment Committee, was on a golfing weekend in Dornoch, he was appalled to discover how few trains could take him south to Inverness. He was also appalled to find that there was no railway station in Dornoch. I will not go into the missed opportunity of the Dornoch firth crossing other than to say that the crossing would have made a considerable difference to travelling times.

People in the Highlands travel by car because rail travel is neither a convenient nor a faster option. We must change that. I believe that the Highland railways have an enormous social, environmental and economic development potential. I hope to see that potential realised.

17:21

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): As this debate is my first opportunity to speak in the new session, I congratulate the Deputy Presiding Officer on her new office.

The minister is not in the chamber. I hope that he will return within my three minutes. If he does not, he will have to read my speech in the *Official Report*, although I see that Euan Robson is indicating that he is writing down my remarks. Christine Grahame mentioned the Borders rail link, which Euan Robson knows well. Perhaps he will convey to the minister the concern that was felt by many people when the First Minister read out the programme for government and said that the Executive's commitment to transport stretched from Airdrie to Aberdeen.

Last week, the minister gave a less than enthusiastic response to Mr Purvis's question about funding for the Borders rail link. The issues around the rail link will have to be resolved. I do not agree with Christine Grahame on many things, but I agree with her that, sooner or later, the Executive will have to decide whether it will fund the Borders rail link.

Mr Purvis: Will the member take an intervention?

David Mundell: No, I cannot. I have very little time and no minister.

I will concentrate on Lockerbie station, which is on a main line—many rural communities are served from main lines. I want to express my disappointment about the reduction in services from Lockerbie station. Last year, there was a great hoo-hah when Virgin announced a range of new services between Lockerbie, Glasgow and Edinburgh only for us to discover a few weeks later that we were going to have reduced services.

The matter was raised with the SRA and, after due time, we received a response. However, one is not filled with confidence in the SRA when a letter opens with the sentence

"I am sorry for the delay."

That sentence is just a little bit too close to the organisation's performance.

It is not acceptable for the SRA to say that it is all right to reduce services from a station such as Lockerbie because it is addressing the larger issue of Virgin's timing and punctuality. Lockerbie is a

railhead for the south of Scotland. If people in the south of Scotland are to have access to Glasgow and Edinburgh, we need to increase services from Lockerbie station, particularly the early morning services, which have been promised repeatedly but never delivered.

I am also concerned about a letter that I received from the minister's predecessor, who advised that a proposed service from Edinburgh or Glasgow to Carlisle, which was part of the ScotRail franchise, would be the subject of "a rigorous business case". I see that Nicol Stephen is now back in the chamber, so I can say to him that I find it difficult to understand why, every time a rural service—such as those to Lockerbie or the Borders rail link—is mentioned, it has to be the subject of "a rigorous business case". The new Edinburgh tram link is not to be the subject of a business case, so let us have some consistency.

17:24

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): I apologise for having to leave early, but I have a train to catch. I will read the minister's comments with great interest in the *Official Report*.

The fact that I have to leave early is part of the problem that we are addressing in the debate. In the South of Scotland region, an area of roughly 150 by 50 square miles has no railway station. My nearest station is more than 30 miles away from where I live and it has only two bus connections a day. It has no shop and no phone; there are no taxis and it is out of mobile phone range, so I have to catch my train.

Last year, a Spanish academic who was looking at international book towns throughout the world came to visit us in Wigtown. He travelled all the way from a small village in Spain to Barrhill station to discover, having arrived there, that he had to hitch a lift from a fellow passenger to complete his journey.

Part of the problem is the lack of rail services and, in particular, the lack of integrated rail services. The integration of rail and bus must be part of the SRA's specifications. The SRA states that, when re-letting franchises, one of its objectives is

"To deliver a safe, more reliable service of consistently high quality for rail passengers."

That does not instil me with any confidence, as the SRA stated, in announcing the cuts last month, that improving rail services is the same as reducing rail services.

Another of the SRA's objectives in re-letting franchises is

"To deliver a value for money service for passengers and taxpayers."

I regard that as a commitment to cheapness rather than to high quality.

Another objective is

"To secure accountable, viable operators who are passionate about delivering for their customers."

That is fine, but it is not enough. The issue is not only about delivering for customers of the rail companies; it is about attracting new customers and new passengers to solve road congestion.

We must determine what the Executive's financial commitment to rail services is. In the Executive's costing of its programme, all the road schemes are costed in detail every year up to 2007. For example, the expenditure on the Aberdeen western peripheral road is thoroughly costed year by year up to 2007, despite the fact that the project has not yet received planning permission. However, the rail costs are not even known. That worries me. No financial commitment has yet been given for the Borders rail link.

We also look for a commitment for a station at Stow for the residents of the Borders; for a new rail link at Lanark to allow the residents of Lanark to come into Edinburgh; for new services from Stranraer to the new port of Cairnryan; and for other rail services. We need the Executive's commitment.

17:28

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I congratulate Jamie Stone on securing the debate. A couple of years ago, we enjoyed a congenial hour or so on the Great North Eastern Railway rail service from Edinburgh to Inverness. The service is very good, but it could be improved. I would like a much faster link between Inverness and central Scotland.

Many people in my constituency of Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber do not have a car; for them, as Jamie Stone suggests in the motion, the rail service provides a vital link. Not everyone can afford a car and not everyone wants to have a car. In the Highlands, it is difficult to travel without a car. Unlike the Greens, I am not anti-road. I think that, over the next four years, there will be a forensic destruction of the Greens' traffic policy, which will show their proposals to be utterly hopeless for the Highlands, where the car, if not a necessity for everyone, is certainly a necessity for many people to go about their business, pick up their kids, get to work and generally have a life of any quality.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Will Fergus Ewing take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: No, I am sorry. I will in another debate when there is more time.

This week, I received a letter from the Friends of the West Highland Line. I was appalled to note that a meeting that John Chamney had arranged with the Executive's team leader to discuss the future of the west Highland line was cancelled and that no alternative date has been set. The tender is to be agreed shortly and the specification is vital. As Maureen Macmillan said, if we do not have in that specification protection of the west Highland line—never mind an expansion to more than two sleeper cars, without which the service is barely viable economically—what future is there for the line, which is so important to the west Highlands and a magnificent tourism attraction?

I hope that that will be put right. Perhaps in his closing remarks, the minister will confirm that Mr Chamney, Fraser McDonald and others at Friends of the West Highland Line will have an opportunity to make an input. They know a great deal about how the service can be improved and how savings can perhaps be made. It is essential that that happens before Porterbrook, the owner of the remaining 12 cars, has sold or scrapped those cars, which would remove the possibility of extending from the two existing cars.

I had the pleasure of meeting the minister's family in Aberdeen. I suggest that it might be enjoyable for him and his family to experience the delights of the Strathspey steam train in my constituency. If he would like to do that, I would be delighted to accompany him and persuade him, perhaps in one of the local hotels after the journey, of the need to extend that line to Grantown-on-Spey.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Even with three-minute speeches, we will not meet the requirements of standing orders. I am therefore minded to accept a motion without notice to extend the meeting by 10 minutes. Is it agreed that a motion without notice be moved?

Members indicated agreement.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by 10 minutes.—[Mike Rumbles.]

Motion agreed to.

17:31

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I, too, congratulate my friend and colleague Jamie Stone on securing this important debate. The contract to operate Scotland's internal rail services over the next seven years will soon be awarded, and I could not agree more with the terms of the motion, which states that

"the vital needs of communities served by rural lines should not be forgotten."

I make no excuses for raising a specific constituency issue during the debate. I know that the minister is well aware of the importance to the people of the Mearns of the reopening of Laurencekirk railway station. I raised that issue with the previous transport minister during the first session, and the Executive has been supportive. Indeed, a few weeks ago, I took the Deputy First Minister to Laurencekirk station to emphasise to him the importance that my constituents attach to the issue. I know that the Minister for Transport would be sympathetic to action being taken over Laurencekirk station, because it would fit neatly into the Executive's declared transport policy of getting people off the roads and into our trains—although the trains will have to stop at some stations.

I am well aware that, in the first instance, it is up to Aberdeenshire Council to support the reopening of the station. The council has commissioned a feasibility study, and I know that the preliminary report was positive and acknowledged the merit of further work being done. I hope, therefore, that the minister will take this opportunity not only to indicate that the rail contract will ensure that we have affordable, reliable and regular rail services, but to confirm the Executive's willingness to support the vital needs of our rural communities by emphasising their importance in the contracting process. One way of doing that, specifically for my constituents, would be for the minister to confirm the Executive's willingness to support in principle the reopening of Laurencekirk station.

17:33

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): It is often with some nostalgia that politicians and the public look back at the golden age of steam and the role that railways played in rural community life. Nostalgia is important, because it reflects those aspects that we value from the past, but at the same time we must be wary of allowing nostalgia to blind us to developing a fresh vision of the future. Railways were hubs of the rural community in all senses, providing not only transportation but a centre for social and economic activity. It is those valuable aspects of the past that need to be built into the future of our rural railway network. We should not forget that urban as well as rural communities are served by rural lines, and that those lines constitute a tangible and physical link between rural and urban areas and their inhabitants. To put it another way, enhancing rural rail services can benefit us all.

We need a fresh approach to establishing stations and rural lines as viable entities that also serve the wider needs of our communities. Community rail partnerships and the micro-franchising of certain rail services are delivering

viable futures for many lines in England and in the Highlands.

In particular, the Huddersfield to Sheffield rail partnership's work is geared towards the simple aim of getting more people using the line, focusing on the least well-used services. The partnership even originated the idea of live music on scheduled trains and it still runs monthly jazz trains and other special events. It is at the forefront of community development initiatives on the railways and works with local schools on educational projects and local community groups such as women's institutes on station garden projects. The partnership has also been successful in working with passenger transport executives to build the case for integrated bus links to outlying areas. Its work has been a great success—I am sure that the Highland rail partnership has been a great success, too. Rail traffic growth on the line is well in excess of the national average and there is the highest level of service that has ever been seen on the line. Additional evening and Sunday services have been introduced over the past three years.

Many small communities and towns in the region that I represent would benefit economically and socially from railway stations and services being placed at the heart of their communities. Some places, such as Blackford and Greenloaning, need reopened stations, whereas others, such as Dunkeld, need better utilisation of existing station facilities. Towns such as St Andrews and Leven need new routes to link them up to the network. Such improvements and reopenings will need a bold Executive to make them happen and real participation from communities to make them a success. I urge the Executive to consider how it can foster a new golden age for rail in Scotland and work with communities from the bottom up to deliver really joined-up thinking.

17:36

Mr Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I, too, congratulate Jamie Stone on securing this debate. He will forgive me if I talk about a proposed railway rather than an existing railway service.

It will be a proud day when I begin to commute by rail from my home in Galashiels to the Parliament in 2008 after the next election—I fully expect to have a seat. I will join many people from Galashiels and—I hope—from Stow, who will join the railway there through Midlothian to go to Edinburgh. The Borders railway will be for the people of Midlothian, the Borders, Edinburgh and Scotland.

I trust that the minister will be constructive in using the clearly stated funding proposals for rail

services over the next session and that the Borders railway will be complete by 2008. I was delighted to hear that David Mundell was in the Parliament for the First Minister's statement. He would also have been in the Parliament for the Deputy First Minister's speech in the debate on the programme for government, in which the Executive's commitment to the Borders railway was clearly stated.

It is interesting that the SNP's principal speaker this afternoon has changed the party's policy from that of 1999. Then, the line would be paid for by a not-for-profit trust. In 2001, she said that Scotland was swimming in enough cash to pay for the line outright in one go. Today, the party will review the proposal for the railway—

Christine Grahame: Will the member give way?

Mr Purvis: I am sorry—my time is extremely limited.

The SNP will review the proposal for the railway. If it is satisfied with that review, it will ask the UK SRA whether it wishes to separate itself from the rest of the UK to pay for it. I am glad that the prospective rail passengers and commuters who will join me in 2008 do not have to rely on an SNP Administration.

17:38

Mr Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Rural rail service issues would be best dealt with by a Scottish Government that controlled the track and every other aspect in question—there cannot otherwise be an integrated service. I would be very happy if a Scottish rail service could implement Christine Grahame's proposals. Any petty point scoring about how that should be done should be laid aside and we should tackle specific points that could be dealt with by the franchise. I wish to speak about one or two of those points.

I would like to know what the minister has to say about the major issue of disabled access to platforms and trains. There are specific examples from the far north line of difficulties of accessing platforms and trains in many stations. In the franchise process, we must find out whether that will be taken into account.

The small units that are used in the north have room for only two bicycles, which is a bigger hindrance to people coming to tour in the north than the hindrances related to airports. Many of the people who come via the railways spend a lot of time travelling and spending money in small places. We should address both the issue of people who regularly travel with a bicycle and the issue of those who turn up and hope to get the use of one.

Many stations could be opened for commuter services. For example, Evanton—the village in which I live—and Conon Bridge could be added to the existing Tain service. In order not to be seen as selfish, I point out the need for us to consider the best way in which to provide quicker services for longer journeys. I underline that, although the Friends of the Far North Line might not wish to discuss the matter, it is essential that the Executive should give a time at which the Dornoch rail bridge will figure in plans for the north of Scotland's rail service.

If we are to stop the depopulation of Caithness and increase the population in the north, we must have a quicker rail service. We can turn the north line into a far quicker service, although we must protect central Sutherland. The north line is at the end of an extremely long line; it is not a branch line, but part of the main spine of Scotland, which goes all the way from Thurso and Wick to the Borders. I ask the minister to take that on board and to say what he intends to do about the Dornoch rail bridge.

17:41

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): I welcome the new Minister for Transport to the debate. I am delighted that he is here and I hope that his influence and aspirations travel west to my constituency. I will not say why, only that I have great hopes that he will do something spectacular in my area.

I congratulate Jamie Stone on raising the issue of Scottish rural rail services and on securing a slot in the parliamentary timetable to debate a complex issue. As Jamie Stone mentioned, he and I have had several not very pleasant experiences of the service from Edinburgh to Inverness. My experience as a passenger on the service has been disappointing to say the least. The trains are regularly cold and draughty. On one train, the automatic toilet doors could not be closed, the toilets were filthy and had overflowed and no water was available in the taps or the toilet. It was obvious that the train had not been cleaned for days, because when I checked out the several newspapers on the luggage rack, some of them were five days old. The train had not been looked at in five days, which is not good enough. I wrote to ScotRail about the matter, but I received the usual reply: "Sorry. We regret the incident and are addressing the situation." I wonder how much effort ScotRail is putting into addressing the situation.

When the new train contracts are put out to tender, it is vital that, as well as stipulating train times, frequency and fare structure, a minimum level of cleanliness and hygiene should be specified. We have penalties for late trains, but I

would like penalties to be introduced for dirty trains. That might sound harsh, but given our aims for tourism, it is vital for Scotland that we portray the right image to tourists, who will remember late trains and dirty toilets and recount that to their friends at home.

I understand that, relatively soon, more than 20 new 170 Turbostars are to be introduced into the Scottish network. The net result of that will be that the current 158 Sprinters will be pushed north to operate from Inverness. Although that is welcome, it will cause a problem for the Highlands as the 158s have a history of reliability problems. Will the minister ensure that those trains will be given overhauls when they are handed over to whomever wins the new rail contract? It is important that their reliability is improved, as, unlike in the central belt, in the Highlands people are usually many miles away from the nearest train station and many hours away from the next scheduled service.

How much time have I got?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have run out of time. I would be obliged if you would sum up.

John Farquhar Munro: In conclusion, I urge the minister, in assessing the new bid, to consider interconnecting rail services at the rail terminuses. Linking services to other services, either by bus or ferry, is vital for rural and island communities. Integrated transport now seems an impossible concept.

I was going to say something about concessionary travel for pensioners—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: But you are not.

John Farquhar Munro: Such travel is currently available on the buses. Why do we not introduce it on the railways as well?

17:46

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I would willingly have let John Farquhar Munro have one of my minutes, as I agree with what he was saying.

I welcome the debate that Jamie Stone has initiated. The attendance in the chamber has not been terrific, and it is pity that more members have not been here to hear a good and constructive debate. However, it is interesting to note that six of the members who are here come from the Highlands and Islands region. That shows that this is a crucial issue for us.

I agree with a lot of what has been said about service standards, reliability and, in particular, integrated transport. The principle of accessible transport for all is dear to the heart of green policy.

I say to Fergus Ewing that we are not anti-car; we are simply anti-traffic. One of the things that we should have—which we used to have but do not any longer—is a motorail service from Inverness. Frank Roach, who is in the public gallery, will remember that a group of us staged a demonstration whereby we attempted to board a train, each of us with a bit of car under our arm, to explain that that was the only way in which people could get a car on a train now that the motorail service had stopped. The motorail concept seems eminently sensible. It should be reintroduced and actively promoted, for use by tourists and locals.

Someone mentioned the proposed Borders rail link being a single-track rail. We have put up with that for most of the track north and beyond Inverness but it is, frankly, not good enough. A motion has been lodged to upgrade the A9 to make it a dual carriageway all the way to Inverness, and I believe that Jamie Stone has lodged an amendment to continue that dualling further north. I respectfully suggest that he might wish to withdraw that amendment and propose that the money be spent on upgrading the rail line. That would be a much better use of public money. The road at least has two lanes; the railway does not.

The proposal to transfer freight to rail is also a good one. That is a safer way of transporting freight, although a lot of people are not using rail in that way. In the course of my work, I have travelled frequently to and from Caithness and Sutherland by car on the A9. Despite the skill and courtesy of the lorry drivers, who are very good, that is a difficult road on which to drive. The answer is not to upgrade the road. The topography of the place means that it will always be difficult to drive on the A9. The freight should be transported by rail. The only way in which life will be improved for road users is by getting the heavy traffic off the roads.

That is all that I want to say. I could have let John Farquhar Munro have an extra minute.

I welcome the debate and hope that people will take rail seriously. People on the continent would not for a minute put up with our level of investment in rail and the standards that we accept as normal. That is really sad. We need to raise our eyes a bit. I hope that members from the Highlands will encourage members from the rest of Scotland to do just that.

17:49

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): In any discussion about railways, I start by saying that the east coast main line ends at Aberdeen. I have had assurances in Parliament about that from the SRA. However, it does no harm to remind the SRA

and everybody else, from time to time, that that is the case. I hope that the SRA will honour the assurances that it has given to me that that is the case.

Happily for me, the Aberdeen to Inverness line runs right through my constituency, with stations at Inverurie, Insch, Huntly and Keith. I hope that there will soon be a station at Kintore, when the Aberdeen cross-rail project finally comes to fruition after many years of having been on the go. It is moving forward. I am told that the level 4 costing process is almost complete—I do not understand entirely what that means, but it sounds like another milestone met and passed and I am all for it.

My local council has been supportive of rail travel. It has used public transport funds to install closed-circuit television in stations at Inverurie and Stonehaven and a car park extension at Inverurie and there are longer-term proposals for a transport interchange there, to add to the cycle lockers that are there already, which are a minor improvement but represent a start.

In passing, I say that it would be good if a lot more were done to implement the proposals for a better transport interchange in Aberdeen. Although that city benefits from having the train station and the bus station right next to each other, they are situated in a post-industrial wilderness that does nothing for people arriving in Aberdeen.

It is important to get freight off roads and on to rail, as one of the main benefits arising from a railway system relates to freight. Bulk pulp that arrives in Aberdeen harbour for the Inverurie paper mill gets transported to the paper mill by train, I am happy to say, but sadly the finished paper is not transported by train. That is because the railway industry could not meet the requirements of reliability and just-in-time delivery that the paper industry requires. There is a lot more to be done to sharpen up the rail industry's game if it is to get the business that is there to be had.

Rail is important for tourism. Railways take people into the heart of our main cities and are therefore the obvious form of transport for tourists to use. Foreign visitors arriving by air expect to be able to use public transport and I cringe when I am on the Aberdeen to Edinburgh line and I see stations that are deserted in the evenings and have no catering or luggage facilities. People who have paid handsome sums of money to travel by train expect good service and the situation makes me quite ashamed. It is not good enough. In that regard, I agree with the point that was made earlier about the lack of facilities for cycles.

In closing, I want to say that our internal rail system should be such that no one should be

flying from a Scottish city to London. Our rail service should make that an irrelevant option.

17:53

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen):

As nostalgia has been mentioned—by Mark Ruskell, I think—before responding to the points that have been made perhaps I might be allowed to recall the days back in the 1980s, when a young Liberal candidate in a constituency called Kincardine and Deeside launched the campaign for the reopening of Laurencekirk station. Of course, I cannot announce anything in that regard tonight, but I can say that that former young candidate would be extremely proud if the Scottish Executive were able to play a part in the reopening of that station.

The fact that Jamie Stone and many other members, not all of whom represent rural areas, have spoken tonight shows the importance of this topic. The Scottish Executive is committed to keeping the Scottish Parliament well informed of progress relating to the Scottish passenger rail franchise and today's debate provides an early opportunity for me to brief everyone on the latest developments.

Clearly, letting the new ScotRail is one of the big priorities for the Scottish Executive in the coming year. I have listened to what everyone has said today about the problems that are faced by passengers on our network and I am determined to deliver a better deal for passengers in the next franchise. The quality and reliability of the service must be paramount.

Today's debate has focused on the importance of public transport to rural communities. There is no doubt that, to improve social and economic inclusion in rural areas, it is vital that we make appropriate public transport provision for the varied needs of rural communities. That will require new investment. We firmly believe that rail has an important part to play in building up our public transport network. A significant element of rail investment, including the Borders rail link, can be paid for from the £3 billion of new investment that the Scottish Executive is committed to over the next 10 years.

Christine Grahame: Will the minister take an intervention?

Nicol Stephen: I will in a second but, to allow the member to respond further, I will add that it seemed to be an astonishing admission on the part of the SNP that its policy is not to fund the Borders rail link from Scottish Executive funds, but instead to rely on the United Kingdom Government to fund it through the SRA. That makes the SNP policy clear: no Scottish Executive transport division funding and no Borders rail link.

Christine Grahame: I would like to clarify this important point. I have in front of me a press release from Michael Moore, the Liberal Democrat MP for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale. He is one of the vice-chairs of the all-party group on rail in the House of Commons. He showed great concern that the Strategic Rail Authority is not committed to funding the whole line. Michael Moore said:

"We cannot let this happen as the full route is crucial to the future of the Borders."

Michael Moore and Archy Kirkwood were most anxious about the fact that there is no commitment to the line on the part of the SRA.

Will the minister confirm whether any money at all is coming from the Strategic Rail Authority to fund the total length of the Borders rail line?

Nicol Stephen: Christine Grahame has not changed the position that she outlined earlier. She and the SNP expect the SRA to fund the line, but the commitment of the Executive and the transport division is clear. In due course, provided there is the right partnership, we expect funding to flow from the Scottish Executive for what is a very important project. Under devolution, Scottish ministers have the power to issue the Strategic Rail Authority with directions and guidance for the Scottish franchise. In return, ministers have the honour of being responsible for funding the franchise.

We know what passengers want from their railways—and we believe that that is the right basis on which to go about funding the franchise. Passengers want high-quality, safe, reliable, regular and clean services. They also want a high-quality service from staff.

I appreciate the feelings that have been expressed in the chamber this evening, and it is clear that things are not always good enough at present. As a result of our understanding of the priorities of the public and the Parliament, one of the things that we are addressing in the next franchise is the quality of service that rail travellers can expect. We announced funding for 28 new trains, which will lead to substantial improvements to the fleet and will improve the quality of passengers' journeys. The old class 158 trains on the Highland main line, for example, will largely be eliminated by 2004, and will be replaced by new Turbostars. Those trains will provide more seats and will significantly contribute towards our commitment to reduce overcrowding.

Generally speaking, the next franchise will be more prescriptive than the last, in that the public sector—the Executive and the SRA—will closely specify what the private sector delivers. There will be a system of incentives for good performance and penalties for poor performance. That is known

as a performance regime. Performance regimes will set out in substantial depth what we require. That means, for example, that toilets will be clean and lockable—and unlockable; trains will be tidy and clean; graffiti will be removed quickly from trains and stations; and if there is supposed to be a trolley service on a given service, a trolley service is provided. There will be regular and rigorous monitoring of those standards and we will take steps if the franchisee is failing to meet its obligations. If they are not met, there will be penalties.

I have tried to focus on the quality-of-service issues that were clearly the main concern in the debate. I have much further detail on the franchise bid, but I will not have time to cover it all, as I appear to have just seven seconds left in which to speak.

In conclusion, as members know and as John Farquhar Munro indicated, we have a shortlist of four bidders for the franchise, and the SRA is presently developing the specification to issue to those bidders. We are working closely with the authority in that regard. Once the documents are issued, which is expected within the next month or so, the bidders will have three months in which to prepare and submit their bids. We will then evaluate the bids and identify a preferred bidder.

I expect to be in a position to identify a preferred bidder in spring next year. That means that a short extension beyond the current expiry date of 31 March 2004 is very likely.

The franchise will be let on the basis that broadly the same network of services will be provided as at present. However, we are also building on that network. For example, the franchise will incorporate the new trains that I have mentioned. We are also taking steps to run services on new rail lines, as has been said tonight. No one would be happier than I if I am the Minister for Transport when we announce our support for services on the new Larkhall to Milngavie route, the Stirling-Alloa-Kinross route, the Airdrie to Bathgate route and the Borders rail line. Services will be run on all new rail lines as soon as they are reopened.

I hope that that is good news for the future. For the first time in decades, we are considering new investment in our railways in a real and substantial way. Everyone in the Parliament will support that.

Meeting closed at 18:01.

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