

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 30 June 2004
(*Afternoon*)

Session 2

£5.00

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 30 June 2004

(Afternoon)

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good afternoon. The first item of business, as always on Wednesdays, is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Cathy Ratcliff, programmes director of Mercy Corps Scotland.

Cathy Ratcliff (Mercy Corps Scotland): Normally, time for reflection is led by a religious leader. I do not represent any religion; I represent something that might be called a creed: the worldwide creed of humanitarianism.

The humanitarian sector has several codes of conduct that spell out the creed of humanitarianism. A very recent code, for example—produced in 2001 by many agencies, including my own, Mercy Corps Scotland—is called the “Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response” and is commonly known as the Sphere standards. It states its belief like this:

“We reaffirm our belief in the humanitarian imperative and its primacy. By this we mean the belief that all possible steps should be taken to prevent or alleviate human suffering arising out of conflict or calamity, and that civilians so affected have a right to protection and assistance.”

The charter’s three principles are: the right to life with dignity; the distinction between combatants and non-combatants; and the principle of non-refoulement, meaning non-repatriation of refugees who would face torture, death or imprisonment if they returned home. The first and third of these—the right to life with dignity and the principle of non-refoulement—are familiar to the Scottish Parliament with regard to people in Scotland. The second—the distinction between combatants and non-combatants—is, fortunately, not something that the Scottish Parliament has to grapple with in a Scottish context.

There are, of course, several humanitarian agencies headquartered in Scotland—for example, VETAID, Just World Partners and Mercy Corps Scotland, which I represent today. They are all supported by the Scottish public. Of course, some of the many aid workers working to preserve these humanitarian principles are from Scotland. A Scottish connection can pop up in strange places too: on a visit to Zimbabwe in January, I was

intrigued to find that the large pots that we had bought locally for cooking lunch for hungry schoolchildren had “Falkirk” embossed on them in large letters.

Humanitarian agencies, their staff and their staff’s families take risks and make sacrifices, because they believe in the humanitarian creed and want to try to ensure that humanitarian principles are respected for people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan and other places in turmoil. As we mark this week the handover of power from the coalition to the Iraqi Government, let us reflect on the aid workers trying to deliver the right to dignity in Iraq. Let us reflect also on the Iraqi people—so greatly affected by conflict and calamity—and wish them and their country well. Their immediate situation is difficult. May they come soon to a point where they have no need of humanitarian assistance.

Volunteering

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is a debate on a celebration of volunteering in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

14:34

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): Volunteering is in a strong position in Scotland, and this has been a good year for volunteers. More than one person in four in Scotland volunteers, and we have launched project Scotland, which is a unique project to encourage young volunteers. We have published our volunteering strategy to embed further the culture of volunteering in Scotland and, last year, we invested £374 million in the voluntary sector. We know that people flourish in strong families and strong communities, and that volunteers bring huge benefits to families and communities throughout Scotland.

In my constituency, Glasgow Baillieston, volunteers help children to learn to read; they care for elderly people; and they provide legal advice and information at Easterhouse citizens advice bureau. Members of Wellhouse Housing Co-operative, which serves an area that has been designated among the poorest in Scotland, turn out on wet weekday nights to work through management committee meetings, because they believe in the importance of decent housing and community infrastructure.

We could all say the same thing about the areas that we represent. It will be different people in different organisations carrying out different tasks, but they will all be supporting strong families and strong communities, building regeneration, creating economic growth and delivering public services by supporting people, nurturing talent, building confidence and creating change. Across the political divide, we all recognise the contribution that volunteers make to families and communities in Scotland. That is in no small part because volunteers get things done. For that reason alone they deserve our support.

People volunteer for a variety of reasons: because they want to help someone coping with a personal crisis; because they themselves have experienced a similar crisis; because they want to pass on experience, knowledge and skills; or because they are committed to a faith or cause. Volunteering develops important skills. Some of them, such as the ability to build friendships, confidence and citizenship, are more difficult to quantify, but they are nonetheless important to Scotland and to its businesses and services.

Volunteering also helps develop harder skills. It provides routes into employment, education and

training, it regenerates deprived communities and it provides routes out of poverty and disadvantage. Whatever the motivation, volunteering benefits the volunteers as well as those they serve. It benefits the communities we live in and the country as a whole.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the board of Volunteering First Midlothian. Does the minister agree that volunteer bureaux are particularly important for matching volunteers to volunteering opportunities, as well as for developing the skill sets and attributes that are now required in the complex world in which the voluntary sector exists?

Ms Curran: I strongly agree with that. There is evidence that volunteers and the people who facilitate and assist with volunteering have kept pace with many of the changes that have been happening in communities, and that they have moved with events. There have been some innovative developments in the sector, and we need to encourage that. Indeed, I hope to make some comments that will encourage that further.

That experience is borne out by the point that I was just about to make on the strong tradition of volunteering in Scotland. We compare very favourably with the rest of Europe and favourably with the rest of the United Kingdom. That is another strong reason why we must continue to support the sector.

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations estimates that more than 600,000 people volunteer regularly and actively support the work of Scotland's thousands of voluntary organisations. Some recent research suggests that as many as half of all people in Scotland did some form of volunteering over the past year.

We have a well-developed support network for volunteering. A national network of more than 50 volunteer centres covers every local authority area, and Volunteer Development Scotland, which I am sure is familiar to many members, promotes, supports and develops volunteering at a national level very effectively.

Of course, as I am sure many members will point out this afternoon, there is more to do. Despite our strong tradition of volunteering, there are shortages of volunteers in key areas. Young people, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are less likely to volunteer. That has led to the emergence of project Scotland, a unique new initiative that will give thousands of young people the chance to volunteer. It will be the catalyst for many more young people to take action and renew their communities. Based on a unique partnership bringing together the public, private and voluntary sectors, project Scotland will become one of the largest full-time volunteering

programmes operating in the UK, managing around 1,000 new volunteers every year. I publicly thank Julia Ogilvy and her team—I am sure that I do so on behalf of the Parliament—for their tremendous efforts in bringing project Scotland to fruition.

Project Scotland will give 16 to 25-year-olds from all backgrounds a chance to become volunteers. They will be offered high-quality volunteering placements and a choice of what they want to do. Each volunteer will be guided, supported and mentored, and will receive out-of-pocket living expenses along the way. Our vision is of full-time volunteering as a realistic option for all young people from all backgrounds.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give an estimate of the number of people who are likely to be affected?

Ms Curran: We hope that project Scotland will manage about 1,000 new volunteers every year.

When young people become project Scotland volunteers they will be eligible to apply to a bursary scheme that will allow them to access future education, training or business needs. Project Scotland has been designed by young people and it will build their ambitions. We in Scotland will benefit because it will build new links between the public, private and voluntary sectors for the mutual benefit of all. It will give young people the means to make a civic contribution and thereby to help Scotland to build a more confident approach.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): How will the new scheme interact with Community Service Volunteers Scotland, which has a long history of giving young people the opportunity to do voluntary work?

Ms Curran: I thank Maureen Macmillan for that timely intervention. It is important for us to envisage project Scotland developing from the significant work that has been done by many volunteering organisations in Scotland. With the new development we are trying to reach a specific new target by encouraging people who traditionally have not volunteered. The project rests alongside and complements the continuing work of volunteering organisations in Scotland, which we will continue to support as strongly—or perhaps even more strongly. They have contributed, and continue to contribute significant work.

As I was saying, the focus on youth volunteering is particularly important because we want to inspire young people to make their contribution to society. We want to ensure that they have the capacity to do that and that they are not put off by the barriers that they have faced in the past. I am delighted that project Scotland has already

secured significant support from the voluntary and private sectors.

As I indicated in response to Maureen Macmillan's intervention, since devolution the Scottish Executive has provided strong support to develop volunteering activity. Our funding for Volunteer Development Scotland and the national network of volunteer centres is £3.8 million per annum. The active communities initiative, which is a successful programme of support for volunteer projects, has received more than £6 million since 2001. Significantly, we are trying to encourage and facilitate volunteering throughout all the Scottish Executive's interventions. Our national sport strategy, sport 21, aims to sustain 150,000 volunteers in sport. Every health trust in Scotland has a volunteering policy and almost 300,000 people volunteer in community care—that is a significant contribution. All 139 courts in Scotland make use of volunteers in victim and witness support services. Those are just three examples, but there are many more; our task is to support and develop the people who carry out that range of activity.

The draft Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Bill, which was published for consultation earlier this month, aims to increase public confidence in charitable giving. We are developing a strong programme for the social economy and we will soon publish the strategic funding review of the voluntary sector, which we are carrying out jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the SCVO. As many members know, we launched a revised version of "The Compact between the Scottish Executive, its agencies, NDPBs and the voluntary sector in Scotland", and its implementation strategy, in February. Also, we set out a dynamic new approach to promoting volunteering as part of our volunteering strategy, the overall aim of which is further to embed a robust culture of volunteering in Scotland through four key strands of action.

The first strand is to close the opportunity gap in volunteering. The evidence shows that by the time people start work, more than 40 per cent of the better off but only 10 per cent of those on low incomes have volunteered. We want to dismantle any barriers that stand in people's way. Secondly, we want to improve the volunteering experience—we know that there is much that we can do to recruit and retain volunteers and ensure that they take the opportunities that can lead from effective volunteering. Thirdly, we want to monitor, evaluate and encourage continuing policy development, and finally, as I said earlier, we must involve young people.

This afternoon's debate enables the Parliament, across the political divide, to celebrate the contribution that volunteers make to Scotland. We

want to acknowledge the thousands of people the length and breadth of Scotland, of all backgrounds and ages, who volunteer, sometimes to benefit themselves, but mostly to benefit their community and their country. We see many examples of that during volunteers week but we should always remember that that work goes on throughout the year.

There is much that we know and can measure about the contribution that volunteers make to Scotland. They create jobs, make a significant contribution to growing the economy, deliver vital services, build community infrastructure and are generally accountable to the communities that they serve.

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

Does the minister recognise that volunteering should be independent of government and the state? I welcome the Executive's commitment to supporting volunteering, but is the minister conscious of the danger that by pushing volunteering strategies such as project Scotland she might alienate the very people who, if left alone, might volunteer?

Ms Curran: I accept Tricia Marwick's key point, but I probably do not agree with her conclusion that our volunteering strategy might have that effect. It would be remiss of us if we said that volunteering had to be so independent of government that it was never to get government support and that organisations were to be abandoned, in a sense, to continue their work on their own. That would be a fragile basis for volunteering and not one that would maximise its contribution to society. It is possible for Government to support volunteering, create the infrastructure and give the resources to create the necessary organisations. At the same time, I accept that volunteering must be independent. By definition, that is its greatest contribution. The voluntary sector steps in in situations in which government sometimes cannot provide services, encourages people to contribute who perhaps would not contribute to the work of Government—for political reasons or whatever—and also sometimes provides proper criticism of government and service delivery, which we need to hear.

I have said before that I think that it is possible to have a partnership and be independent. I am sure that there are many married women in this chamber who have had cause to say that in the past—theirs is a view that we can learn from. Tricia Marwick is right to suggest that we should always guard against any controlling instincts that Government might have with regard to volunteering and allow volunteers to operate separately from Government. However, I still maintain that we must resource and support volunteers.

I believe that we thrive and develop and become better, more confident citizens when we are part of strong families and strong communities. Those who volunteer make a major contribution to building such families and communities. Volunteers take action where others have given up. They tend to seek solutions and common ground and they want to get things done. They persevere to build, to organise and to change things when many of us gave up years ago. They believe that one person can make a big difference. We should be clear that the volunteers of Scotland make a huge difference. I hope that we can celebrate that this afternoon.

14:46

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): When I volunteered for this debate—

Members: Oh.

Stewart Stevenson: I thought that I would get that joke in before anyone else did. When I volunteered for this debate, I did not realise that I would have the most dreadful frog in my throat. If I do not use my full time—

Phil Gallie: That will be a change.

Stewart Stevenson: Phil Gallie should not encourage me; I might just run over.

It was particularly appropriate that, before this debate, we heard from the Mercy Corps Scotland. In my constituency, the Banff rotary club is working closely with Mercy Corps Scotland in relation to mercy ships that are providing medical assistance off the coast of Africa. I am sure that we all have examples of local organisations that are selflessly supporting those who are less well off than themselves.

When I disagree with the Executive today, I will be disagreeing with myself and other colleagues by the same token. I say that because I think that we all—individually and collectively—have more to do and responsibilities that we do not fully acknowledge.

The other day, someone said to me, "There's a lot of it about." What she was referring to was Government interference in volunteering. Given the plethora of Government announcements, research and consultation that touches on the subject, it would be tempting to agree with her. I certainly accept that the Government sees volunteering as a good thing. Jack McConnell stated in the preface to the "Working Group Report into a National Youth Volunteering Programme":

"I wholeheartedly endorse the recommendations of this report"

and he stated that he wants to bring together

"the public, private and voluntary sectors in a long term creative partnership",

which is first class.

There is a particular social value in encouraging those with more resources and skills to contribute to society. There is a moral case for volunteering, although, of course, we sometimes think that we see more of a financial case. That is a temptation to which we are all subject. If we can get a volunteer to do something for us rather than our having to pay someone, there is a clear and defined benefit from doing so.

As politicians, I hope that we are all used to the practical benefits of volunteering, as our own political parties depend on, and are sustained by, our local party workers who work as volunteers. Indeed, I spent 40 years as a volunteer before I gave any real thought to coming to places such as this. I would argue that political parties are perhaps over-professionalising nowadays and are depending too much on the services of people whom they buy in. The role of the volunteer, who will fold and deliver leaflets, knock on doors, man stands in our high streets and participate in local democracy at all levels, remains absolutely vital, but there is a sense in which it may be being marginalised. There is a message for all of us in that perhaps the public see that and are getting a little disconnected from politics. However, this debate is not about politics per se. I am merely illustrating some aspects of volunteering.

The Executive's compact with the voluntary sector is interesting in the light of the minister's remarks. Few members would disagree with its statement that

"The Compact acknowledges that the voluntary sector and the Executive have their own spheres of action".

However, there are issues in some of the Executive's material that are causing concern to people in the voluntary sector. For example, under the heading "Sources for funding" in the voluntary issues unit section of its website, the first thing that the Executive says is that a number of grant schemes are available

"For activities that promote Scottish Executive objectives".

I say to Margaret Curran that that is perfectly proper and that it might be perverse for me to say that the Executive should support people who are working against the Executive's objectives, but that raises real difficulties for a Government of whatever complexion in allocating money to the voluntary sector.

In announcing the renewal of the partnership with the voluntary sector, the Government said:

"We share a commitment to delivering the best for our communities."

On the other hand, there is something in the announcement that causes difficulties for some volunteers. The Government added:

"We are also committed to driving up standards in the voluntary sector, by modernising the legal and financial frameworks".

That is good, but in a sense puts on to the voluntary sector many things that volunteers—particularly of my age group—have spent their lives working with in large organisations, and want to escape from.

The statement mentioned

"the challenge of delivering a real culture change and the need for all partners to recognise Compact implementation as a core function within their everyday business".

In a sense, we may be over-regulating and over-guiding some people in the voluntary sector to the detriment of Government objectives and perhaps to the detriment of wider public policy. The challenge is, are we transferring interesting and challenging work from local volunteers generally to paid professionals and leaving the low-grade work for those who will work for nothing? Perhaps that is turning people off in general.

Initiatives that seem to come from the centre are welcome, and it is heck of a difficult for somebody in my position—or for anyone else in the chamber—to argue against them. However, some things that are going on cause me a little concern. For example, Pat Shearer, who is an assistant chief constable in Grampian police, is doing an excellent job in getting more special constables on board. I thoroughly support that, but one mechanism that is being explored is starting to pay them to some extent. I wonder whether that really is the right way to go. In the McInnes report on the legal justice system, we see an attempt to support the professionals' view that there is little place in the criminal justice system for unpaid lay justices, and I have concerns about that, which I know that others share.

We want to raise standards and create opportunities for involvement, and we must do that, but by directing centrally we may be turning off some of the very people who bring professional standards, expertise and broad life experience who would enhance the volunteering benefit that the community would accrue. As one gains life experience, one is perhaps wearied by the filling out of forms, the evaluation of outcomes and the working within defined structures. We must retain space to be outside the box.

When I worked in the business world, I managed many staff on a substantial budget and I thoroughly enjoyed it. My last company medical, in 1998, showed that my blood pressure was 140/90—well within the range for a 52-year-old, as I was then. Interestingly, today it is 110/60. Why has it dropped in those six years? I am now doing a job that I volunteered for. When I get up in the morning, I decide pretty much what I do each day.

There are more constraints on me now than there were during my previous 40 years as a political volunteer, but there are far fewer than there were in the world of business. The result is contentment—modest contentment, as my party is not in Government—and a lower blood pressure, despite another six years under my rather expanding belt.

That neatly encapsulates the objectives—assuming that one ever thought in such structured terms—of the great majority of Scotland's volunteers. It is hard to disagree with Margaret Curran, who wrote:

"In its early days volunteering was about the 'haves helping the have nots'";

however, we must not create an environment in which the haves discontinue to support the have nots. There are disturbing signs that the level of charity giving in areas of relative prosperity in Scotland is relatively low compared to the excellent giving in areas of relative deprivation. We must, therefore, be careful and realise that there are more things to learn.

The minister said that she has put £374 million into the voluntary sector. The information that I have is that £262 million has been given in direct grants to organisations. So, there is plenty of evidence of Government good faith on this subject, although there is a danger that that will distort the operation, as talk of money raises awkward issues for us all.

I conclude by going back to James VI, who in 1604, as I said in a previous debate on smoking, identified the fact that smoking could cause strokes and exacerbate problems in the brain. I very much welcome the awarding of the Queen's award for voluntary service to the Deveron stroke club—one of the many worthy awards that have been made. On a final note, the honours system perhaps focuses on financial contributions from political has-beens at the expense of rewarding the volunteer. It is time for change, minister.

14:58

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Like other members, I welcome the debate, which gives us a chance to highlight and praise those individuals who give up their time for good causes and the good of others without thought of reward. The voluntary sector in Scotland is an integral part of a responsible society. The Conservatives recognise that people have a responsibility to others, whether to their families, to their local communities or to themselves.

Mrs Thatcher's famous remark about society was, typically, taken out of context. She was criticising those who would seek to blame society for all the woes of humanity. In that *Woman's Own*

interview, she said that responsibility lay with individual men and women and their families. However, although she advocated personal responsibility, nowhere did she suggest that we should not help our neighbours or those who are less fortunate than us.

Any responsible Government has a role in the fostering and facilitation of that sense of responsibility for others. Let there be no doubt that the Conservative party has a long and proud history of creating the kind of society that I am talking about. Social housing is a good example—from Disraeli's radical legislation in the 1870s and the Conservative ministers of the 1930s who laid the foundations for modern council housing through to Keith Joseph's recognition in the 1960s of the potential of housing associations.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I was a councillor for part of the 1980s and 1990s during the reigns of Mrs Thatcher and John Major, when our block A housing grant from the Government was slashed. How does Mr Brocklebank square that with what he has just said?

Mr Brocklebank: I acknowledge that, in a previous existence, Jamie Stone was a Conservative. Perhaps it was because he misunderstood many of the things that happened at that time that he chose to join a party that is not so laissez-faire as the Conservative party, but more full of waffle.

I will get back to my theme. Keith Joseph also set up local authority social service departments. Much of the legislation that created the framework for a mixed economy in the provision of social care, such as the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, was the result of a Conservative Government.

The public sector, through local authorities, still directly provides and organises social services, but local authority social services departments fund other organisations, such as voluntary groups and charities, that provide care directly. Of course, Governments must help to create the economic climate in which people are encouraged to take responsibility for others. That means a climate in which taxes are kept low and enterprise is encouraged. It is often said that Governments that seek to create an enterprise culture by limiting the role of the state are guilty of creating a selfish society. I believe that socialists have got that wrong. Throughout history, charitable giving has been highest in the free-enterprise countries, including the United States. As Ronald Reagan once remarked, we do not make the poor rich by making the rich poor.

Stewart Stevenson: Can the member tell us what percentage of its gross domestic product the United States provides to the third world?

Mr Brocklebank: I cannot, but I am sure that Stewart Stevenson can. Let us hope that he gets more of the facts right than he did on the television programme that he was on the other evening.

Had capitalism not allowed the businesses of the Rockefellers, the Mellons and the Carnegies to prosper, the great charitable foundations that they set up—not least here in Scotland—would have been impossible. Governments can encourage people to be responsible for others through voluntary activity by donating their time, energy or money to voluntary organisations. That is the right way of demonstrating a commitment to the less fortunate, whether by helping those closest to us or by assisting those who are many miles away in other countries.

Tricia Marwick: I am confused about where the member is going with his speech. He seems to equate charitable giving with volunteering. Volunteering happens in many areas and involves many people, from the very poorest to the middle classes and the rich. I am not sure what he is saying about people doing things for others.

Mr Brocklebank: I thank the member for raising that point. I hope that the answer will become apparent as I develop my argument. I have now given way on four occasions; if I move a little bit faster, some of the threads will come together.

Governments must ensure that voluntary organisations are not strangled by bureaucracy, an issue that Tricia Marwick talked about. Voluntary organisations must be allowed the freedom to serve the communities and interests for which they were established. At the very least, Governments should simplify their approach to the voluntary sector by, for example, making the grant-making process less bureaucratic and having less of the form-filling mentality that so often hampers progress. I recognise the hallmarks of the voluntary sector—diversity, innovation and flexibility. Those are what we should be promoting and championing. Over-zealous interference can suffocate those core values, which is why I have concerns about some of the Executive's volunteering strategy, which sounds depressingly similar to many of those other initiatives, consultations, targets, overarching frameworks and all the other jargon terms that have been imported from the realms of new managementspeak.

Ms Curran: I appreciate that the member has already taken a number of interventions, but I am worried that all that talk of Mrs Thatcher has gone to his head. He is confused about this afternoon's debate, which is supposed to be about celebrating volunteering. Will he clarify whether he believes that we should abolish local authority services and substitute them with unpaid volunteering? If there is to be no accountability, targets, regulation or

monitoring, that would be an interesting development in Tory policy.

Mr Brocklebank: I do not suggest that in the slightest; both sides have a role to play. My worry is that volunteers who give up their time will find their efforts stultified or frustrated by the amount of rules and form filling that seems to be envisaged in the strategy that Ms Curran outlined.

We would all like to see greater involvement in volunteering among people from diverse backgrounds and circumstances, but the hard fact is that most volunteers happen to be white, middle-class ladies of a certain age.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Brocklebank: No, I have taken enough interventions.

Of course it is desirable to attract other social groups, but the volunteer organisations already try to do that. The strategy appears to want to set quotas for the types of people that the Executive thinks should be involved in volunteering, but that is unworkable and quite wrong.

Encouraging people to participate by showing them that their contribution is valued is the most important aspect. All MSPs are involved in volunteering, even though that may be only within the narrow confines of being a member of a political party. However, some of us come into politics to make a difference, which is precisely what volunteering should be all about.

Perish the thought that members might think that I know little of what I speak—that is perhaps a hostage to fortune—but I have some personal experience of the voluntary sector. Charity often begins at home, but that is especially true if a person cares deeply, as I do, about the area in which they live. I am a life member of the St Andrews Preservation Trust and a founder member of the St Andrews green-belt forum. Both those non-profit organisations were established to protect, preserve and, I hope, enhance for future generations the ancient community in which I am fortunate to make my home.

Volunteering may begin at home, but it should have no limiting horizons. Having lost both parents to the curse of cancer, I have been involved with cancer research charities for many years, including a period as a Scottish committee member of the Cancer Research Campaign. I mention that only in passing to establish some basic credentials in the sector, but I am well aware that others have worked much harder and in far wider fields. Whatever the reasons for volunteering, we are deeply indebted to the thousands of selfless people who work tirelessly for others.

Project Scotland is an interesting idea. I certainly see nothing wrong in encouraging young people—including those who are directionless—into community work, especially if that means involving them in removing graffiti, which all too often has been perpetrated by some mindless youngsters, and in repairing vandalism, to which such youngsters have often contributed. However, those may be arguments for another day.

Having mentioned the record of caring Conservatives in government, I finish by mentioning another caring Conservative. William Wilberforce, the pioneer of slavery reform, wrote:

“My walk is a public one. My business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men.”

That is the essence of volunteering. It is about getting involved at all levels, both locally and nationally, and committing ourselves to work for the benefit of others. Surely there can be no more noble enterprise than that.

15:08

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I am delighted to be able to agree entirely with all that Margaret Curran has said today—there is a time for everything. After so many interesting exchanges, it is good that Margaret Curran and I can end our stay in this building on a note of agreement and harmony.

Voluntary and independent sector organisations reach parts of society that are not reached by local government and national Government. Such organisations are the third arm of public life in Scotland. They deliver essential local services that contribute greatly to community life.

Liberal Democrats aim to enhance the independence of those groups, improve their funding and ensure that they are fully valued by the Executive. I absolutely agree with Margaret Curran’s comment that we can be in a partnership and still operate independently. In the partnership agreement between the coalition parties, we made five specific pledges, the first of which was to

“encourage the more active involvement of young people in the lives of their communities and wider society through the introduction of a scheme, alongside the existing Millennium Volunteers scheme”.

As a result, project Scotland has now been introduced.

Secondly, we pledged to

“support those who make a valuable contribution to the people and communities of Scotland through their work in the voluntary sector and through volunteering. In order to ensure that the sector is valued by government, we will rationalise and improve its funding mechanisms, respecting its independence.”

Our third pledge was to

“encourage compacts between local authorities and the voluntary sector and improve the partnership with health boards.”

Fourthly, we pledged to

“act on the recommendations of the strategic funding review”

on

“3 year rolling core funding”.

Our final pledge was to

“secure a Scottish Opportunities Fund”.

Work on those commitments is under way and they will be delivered.

Many members will have seen Volunteer Development Scotland’s briefing for this debate. I received a copy not only at my desk in the Parliament, but from Linda Clark, who works just around the corner from my constituency office in the volunteer centre on Banchory High Street. I mention Linda because I know from working with her that she is involved in many activities that aim to help people in our local community. As with anything else, if one needs something done, one asks a busy person to do it. Dare I say it, but she is also involved in a political party—not my own, I hasten to add. I simply point that out to highlight that we should not baulk at acknowledging the voluntary work that is carried out in the political field. Indeed, Stewart Stevenson mentioned that point earlier.

One of the main points in Volunteer Development Scotland’s briefing is to ask MSPs to play their part in working with others to create a Scotland where anyone who wants to volunteer can do so readily. The Scottish Executive’s volunteering strategy, which was launched last month by the First Minister, aims to embed a robust culture of volunteering in Scotland.

However, we must address certain issues first, several of which have already been mentioned. My colleague Donald Gorrie, who is our spokesman in this field—he cannot be here today, which is why I am making this speech—has suggested that a positive recruitment campaign might help to mobilise early retirees, who are often highly skilled and well informed, to get involved.

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Like Donald Gorrie himself.

Mike Rumbles: Indeed, I was thinking of Donald Gorrie when I said that, but never mind.

Donald Gorrie has also identified a problem with the speed at which volunteers are accredited through Disclosure Scotland. Potential volunteers often have to wait a disproportionately long time to be accredited, which can discourage uptake and at times put at risk the effectiveness of various voluntary projects. He suggests that the problem

might be helped by introducing a volunteer passport or database to allow volunteers to move between organisations without the need to reapply for accreditation.

There is no doubt that Scotland needs more volunteers, that volunteers need to be valued and encouraged and that MSPs must ensure that they do their bit in the process. Over the next few months, a package of measures affecting the voluntary sector will be introduced or implemented, including charity law reform, the strategic funding review and the Executive's volunteering strategy. We must aim to encourage people from every walk of life to get involved in contributing positively and practically to their communities. It is undoubtedly in all our interests for that process to be successful. I am delighted to have participated in this debate on celebrating volunteering.

15:14

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I will reminisce for a few moments about my first role as a volunteer. When I was 11, I sat on the back of a van, hurling bundles of newspapers around Dumbarton. At the time, I thought that it was just good fun and did not think that it had any public benefit, but it was in fact the beginnings of a doorstep recycling scheme for the area. My parents and others in the community had organised the scheme back in the days when such issues were not even on the agenda of local authorities.

For many years, most domestic waste that was recycled in Scotland was collected by small voluntary organisations and through community effort. Those self-starting individual organisations led the way in finding solutions to problems that the private sector made worse and about which the public sector was not yet doing anything.

In the same area now, the voluntary sector recycling scheme provides training and employment to the community and a higher quality of environmental services than my local authority can manage. The social benefits of training for those who are trying to get back into work after long-term unemployment or illness are matched by the environmental benefits that the services can offer.

Years after my first voluntary role, I was living in Glasgow and I was harassed out of a flat by a landlord who, I am glad to say, will probably now fail the fit-and-proper person test. My parents told me, "Of course you can come back and live with us. You're our son and you're always welcome here. And you're going out to work on our new furniture recycling project." So I was back on a van, but this time, as I was a little bit older, I was

humphing wardrobes around instead of bundles of newspapers. However, I was essentially doing the same thing as previously, which was diverting waste from landfills. We collected unwanted furniture and household goods from people who had no other intention than to put them in a skip and we distributed those goods to people who needed them. Anything that we could not use was disposed of as responsibly as we could manage.

We were constantly amazed by the amount of stuff that people put out: beds, sofas, washing machines, cookers—you name it. We were able to furnish an entire flat for many people at zero cost. All that was done from material that, as I said, would have ended up in a landfill site and all the work was achieved by volunteers. That project has gone on to achieve much more, including creating sustainable employment and increasing its range of services.

Meanwhile, I had moved on to other things: I was back in Glasgow working in the HIV field. I was in contact with a wide range of organisations that relied on volunteering, from my employer—who benefited from volunteers in office roles and in conducting sexual health outreach work on the commercial gay scene and in public sex environments—to community centres, arts organisations, youth groups and a host of other organisations and settings.

The Steve Retson Project was one of the first of its kind in the United Kingdom. It is a dedicated gay men's sexual health clinic within the national health service and not only provides services, but engages the community that it serves as volunteers to work in reception. The project aims to defuse the tension and anxiety that many people feel about accessing sexual health services and to create a friendly and welcoming environment. Volunteers have also taken part in conducting research among the target group, raising awareness of the service and designing the look and feel of the service and the marketing material. As members of the steering group, volunteers help to determine the direction that the work takes. At the beginning of September this year, I will be delighted to join the Steve Retson Project and its many staff and volunteers to celebrate its 10th anniversary.

Much of the work in the wider HIV field started as proactive community-driven health activism. It was creative and imaginative and it sometimes broke the rules, but it was free to do so because it involved volunteers acting on their own initiative. Little by little, that work has turned into public services. Policy makers determine the priorities, but the voluntary sector delivers them—it is still doing excellent work and still innovating and getting results. However, in the move from health activism to voluntary sector service provision,

perhaps something has understandably been lost. The retention of the proactive and energetic spirit of the volunteers whom we are celebrating requires the support of funding structures, but that is not always easy for big funding bodies to achieve.

Much like the concept of embracing diversity, celebrating volunteering is one of those aspirational things that we can all support, but it is sometimes easier said than done. I am sure that we will all mention many of the projects in our regions and constituencies and the work that is done by them. However, many of the projects will be experiencing difficulties in meeting the needs of volunteers and in supporting them. It is sometimes hard for organisations that live year to year on short-term funding to support volunteers. Many of them achieve impressive results, despite those problems. We should enthusiastically celebrate their work.

There is much to improve in the way that we treat voluntary organisations and in the resources that we make available to them, not just in funding, but in advice, training and simplified services to help them to access the other organisations with which they need to interact. Once we have got that right for small organisations, the volunteers will have much more to celebrate.

15:20

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): I cannot help but notice the relaxed and jovial atmosphere in the chamber today. I wonder whether it is because the recess is coming up. It reminds me of when I was at school and we brought in our Ker-Plunk. I wish that I had brought my games in today; it feels a bit like that.

Given our celebratory mood and high spirits, I think that we are all happy to celebrate volunteering in Scotland and I welcome the opportunity to do so today. I know that Volunteer Development Scotland and a huge range of other organisations are delighted to see that volunteering is on the political agenda. Of course, as the minister said, it has been on the agenda already this year. In May, the Executive launched project Scotland, its strategy on volunteering for young people. Some people wondered whether "project" should be pronounced with the stress on the second syllable or on the first—I suppose that it could be either.

Project Scotland is aimed at involving young people between the ages of 16 and 24 in volunteering for up to a year in modules of three to four months. That offers an excellent opportunity for young people and for the organisations that they volunteer for. Volunteering in that way allows young people to become involved in an extensive

range of activities. Volunteering can help to develop skills and awareness. It can help with training and can give an excellent colour to a curriculum vitae. It is a two-way street, because the organisations obviously benefit, as do the wider community and the service users.

Because of the huge benefits that project Scotland can provide for young people, I ask the minister whether resources for the project will be targeted on reaching the wider community, so that all young people can be included. It is important that young people from all backgrounds are brought in. That is essential for the young people and for the organisations, but especially for the service users.

Phil Gallie: Does Rosie Kane know whether, when youngsters get involved in those volunteering packages, they are removed from the unemployment register?

Rosie Kane: I shall leave that question to the minister; I cannot answer it in my speech. I wish that I was the minister, but perhaps that will happen some day.

I want to blow my trumpet a wee bit. I have had the privilege in the past of working with Barnardo's Scotland, with Equal Say and, just before coming into the Parliament, with ChildLine Scotland, where I was a telephone counsellor. If you will allow me, Presiding Officer, I shall indulge in a wee story about an experience of mine at ChildLine. First of all, I applied to become a counsellor there because I was interested and thought that I would have a go anyhow, despite thinking that I would not be accepted because I had no qualifications. Not so—I was given a careful and extensive interview and accepted into training.

The training that I received was second to none. It built my confidence and my ability as a parent, as well as improving other areas of my CV and helping me into employment with young people further down the road. The training at ChildLine was on-going and it was an amazing and challenging experience for me. I was supported and assisted by excellent and dedicated workers throughout my training and when I was on the phone lines, right up to the point when I had to leave. I worked with a whole team of dedicated volunteers who operated on regular shifts. It was important that the system was structured to accommodate regular callers and so that we could build a supportive team, which was what made the work interesting.

Many of the calls that we received—unfortunately, I do not have the statistics—were from ordinary working-class children who sounded a lot like many of us, or a lot like me. At ChildLine, we were all trained to reflect back to young

people. When somebody speaks to a ChildLine counsellor, the counsellor repeats back what they have said, so that they know that the counsellor has heard them. I shall tell members a wee funny story about that.

I was at my point and the woman next to me was on a call. She suddenly started to panic a wee bit and tapped me on the shoulder, saying, "Can you help me?" I said, "What is it?" She had lived most of her life south of the border and I suppose that she wasnae aware of "Parliamo Glesca". She told me that there was a wee boy on the phone who had said to her, "Ma big brother's gaunae gie me a doin—he's just kicked ma heid in." Of course, that women did not know what the big brother had given the wee boy or what he was about to do—it is a terrible tale. I quickly explained what was happening and what was about to happen to the child and she was able to respond to him in a warm, caring and supportive manner, as we were trained to do.

That story is important because it is a good wee tale that shows that everyone from every background has something to give to volunteering, because everyone from every background can be a service user. It is important that we find out what the barriers are to volunteering and cut through them. It is essential that we deal with the barriers to volunteering among black and ethnic minority people, as that is an important issue for organisations. The issue could be addressed by helping organisations to reach the entire community—they know how they want to do that and we should listen to them.

Long-term funding is essential. When I was at ChildLine, it had started a course for young people aged 16. The course was funded through the millennium fund, but that funding has been taken away. The course was incredibly good for the young people and for the service users—empathy and support went hand in hand. Many projects have precarious existences, however. Given that volunteers in the voluntary sector are a vital cog in the Scottish economy, it is essential that today's celebration includes a big long-term gift—we know that the organisations have a very good gift list.

15:26

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to contribute to today's debate and to celebrate volunteering in Scotland.

I am sure that we are all aware of the vital role that volunteers play in our communities—from those who care for a friend or a relative to those who serve on management committees for national voluntary organisations. Volunteers contribute to our society on a scale that could never be replicated by the state.

We have had many debates in the Parliament about volunteering, so by now we are all aware of the facts and figures on volunteering in Scotland. However, the large and impressive figures often obscure the fact that volunteering is making a real difference locally and is improving communities throughout Scotland.

At the start of the debate, I thought that all members understood how volunteering works in Scotland, but it is quite obvious that one person in the Parliament—Ted Brocklebank—does not. I do not understand or accept the notion that middle-class, middle-aged ladies patronise the masses of Scotland, do good deeds and thereby make Scotland a better place in which to live.

Mr Brocklebank: Will the member take an intervention?

Karen Whitefield: Go on—hang yourself higher.

Mr Brocklebank: It is very kind of Karen Whitefield to take my intervention, given that I did not have time to take hers.

Does Karen Whitefield disagree with the statistic that the bulk of people who work as volunteers in Scotland are white, middle-aged women?

Karen Whitefield: I do not know what Mr Brocklebank did during volunteers week, but in my constituency I threw a party for volunteers. Most of the 70 people who came along to have a cup of tea and a cake with me—as my thanks to them for volunteering—were not middle-aged women. They came from all sorts of backgrounds. The one thing that they had in common was their desire to make their communities better places to live in. They do voluntary work because they have something to give. They want to give the people who live in Airdrie and Shotts and surrounding villages an opportunity to do something—whatever that may be. The activities in which the volunteers are involved include a breastfeeding support group, a local toddlers group, a lunch club and the local opera in Shotts. The volunteers came from diverse backgrounds, but they all got something out of volunteering—it improved their self-confidence and it made them feel good about themselves. I can honestly say that most of them were not volunteering to patronise people or to do good because they thought that they had an obligation to do so.

I will highlight a couple of examples of how the efforts of a relatively small number of willing volunteers can impact on an entire community. A recent example in my constituency is the creation of the Chapelhall scout group. The process started last October when a number of parents met at the school to pick up their kids. They were concerned that there was nowhere for the young people to go in the evenings—there was nowhere for them to meet up and do anything recreational.

Six months later, after a lot of hard work, the eighth Airdrie Chapelhall scout group was formed in March of this year. The group now has 27 adult leaders and 77 beavers, cubs and scouts, most of whom have been invested in the scout movement. In fact, the group has been so successful that it now has a waiting list of young people who want to join it. The group has already taken its youngsters to a weekend camp and launched its own website. The scouting movement wants to use the group as part of its strategy for recruiting adult volunteers. That is a wonderful example of the difference that volunteering can make to a small community such as Chapelhall. It also serves to show that, contrary to popular belief, the ethos of volunteering is alive and well.

The minister mentioned project Scotland, which is aimed at attracting young people between the ages of 16 and 25 into volunteering. I am pleased that the volunteering strategy ensures that there will be increased resources to support young volunteers. I am sure that the minister will agree that organisations such as the Chapelhall scouts play a vital role in attracting future generations of volunteers, in that they allow youngsters to see and experience the benefits of volunteering and working collectively in their communities.

Another excellent example of the difference that volunteering can make at a local level is the getting better together project in Shotts—a healthy living project that is funded by the New Opportunities Fund. It is operated by a management committee that is made up of volunteers who, like most volunteers in Scotland, wear many hats in many voluntary organisations in the community. They are able to pull on their wide experience of working in the Shotts community to represent health-related groups. The project provides valuable support and resources to local groups such as the breastfeeding group, sure start and the local food co-operative. It has built strong links with schools and has organised health events and food fairs for young people. The fact that the project is driven by local volunteers is key to its success. Their local knowledge ensures that the project responds to local needs and that all sections of the community are aware of the services that are offered.

The Parliament has provided an excellent vehicle for the voluntary sector to engage with the legislative and policy-making process. The Executive has consistently made clear its commitment to supporting the voluntary sector. That commitment was set out initially in the voluntary sector compact, in which the Executive detailed its commitment to working in partnership with the sector. In the recently launched volunteering strategy, the Executive makes equally clear its commitment to supporting volunteers in Scotland and to removing barriers to

volunteering. In future, the introduction of a bill to modernise charity law will ensure that charity regulation provides adequate safeguards. Although all that is to be welcomed, I urge the minister not to become complacent. As I said at the start of my speech, volunteers in the voluntary sector provide a vast array of services that it would cost the state hundreds, if not thousands, of millions of pounds to replace.

15:33

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Ted Brocklebank alluded to the fact that, on Monday of this week, four volunteers performed for their country in an international fixture against Wales. What he failed to mention was that Scotland won that fixture. It behoves me to congratulate the four volunteers: Robin Harper, Richard Baker, Stewart Stevenson and the team captain, Jamie Stone, on doing something that many members present would admit, if they were honest, they would not volunteer to do.

I wish our team success when it takes on the *Daily Mail* team in the challenge that is coming up—although I gather that Ted Brocklebank's decision about which team to support might be affected by conflicting loyalties.

Mr Stone: Will the member give way?

Fergus Ewing: Certainly. [*Interruption.*] Jamie Stone is the sort of Liberal who sits with the Scottish Socialists. [*Laughter.*]

Karen Whitefield was right to mention carers. In thinking about the debate, it occurred to me that, although carers are volunteers, they do not volunteer to become carers. Most carers, particularly those who look after an elderly parent or relative, are carers not only because they want to be but because they have to be—they have no choice about it. That is why it is particularly important that Crossroads and other organisations that care for carers should continue to receive our support.

If I can be serious for a moment, the real nitty-gritty issue in the debate is the administrative and bureaucratic burden that is placed on people through having to raise money only to make payments that seem unduly burdensome to the care commission, for example. Those payments take up a great deal of the money that it takes a lot of effort to raise. I hope that the minister might address that issue.

I also hope that Stewart Stevenson will write an autobiography. I am sure that, if he does so, he will be spoilt for choice for a title, such were the number of roles that he has played. One such title could be "I Was Alex Salmond's Chauffeur", which I gather was a voluntary but expensive role.

Another possible title is "I Was Jimmy Shand's Laundryman". I believe that that was a role for which he was paid, which perhaps means that it does not qualify as a voluntary role.

All of us have participated as volunteers. Members can believe this or not, but I am an ambassador for the girl guides. I have carried out many duties in that role. Some weeks ago, I was honoured to be asked to present prizes to girl guides, one of whom was a girl of 11 who won a prize for bravery. She had taken a first-aid course that had included artificial resuscitation. One day, when she was being driven by her uncle, the car crashed and overturned several times. The girl was unhurt but she had the presence of mind to get out of the car and then break a window to get back in to administer first aid to her uncle; she also alerted the emergency services. I think that members will agree that she showed extraordinary presence of mind for a girl of her age. Had it not been for the fact that she had taken a first-aid course through the volunteer effort of the girl guides, goodness knows what might have happened that day.

Mr Stone *rose*—

Fergus Ewing: I will give way to Jamie Stone—he was a bit slow on his buzzer earlier.

Mr Stone: I wanted to intervene earlier to make a rude comment about Ted Brocklebank, but I was sitting at the wrong desk and did not have my card with me.

Given the case that Fergus Ewing has just outlined, does he agree that we could further improve on the recognition or awards that people are given for such acts? The situation is patchy: some local authorities recognise such people; they issue special chits for volunteers—almost like certificates. The girl whose bravery that Fergus Ewing highlighted should be praised to the skies.

Fergus Ewing: I agree entirely, which is why I thought that it was appropriate to mention that example. I may not take many more interventions from Jamie Stone in future on account of the fact that he has a higher brain power than me. I thought that I was safe today, however.

I know that this seems unlikely, but I was young once and served in a mountain rescue team for a number of years. The first thing that I did was to drive the Land Rover—which was called Alf, after its registration plate—into a stank. The vehicle was rescued but thereafter I displayed my lack of prowess in various activities. Members of mountain rescue teams play an essential role and I am pleased to welcome the fact that funding has been secured, on a three-year basis of £25,000 per team, for the Cairngorm, Glencoe and Lochaber teams, which carry out most of the call-outs. I also want to mention the auxiliary fire

service in my constituency. It plays a vital role, but is under threat.

We all have examples to give and anecdotes to relate. I think that this is the last speech that I will make in the chamber. Apparently there is a new building down the road, about which I have read. I volunteer to go there—indeed, I am looking forward to it. Some members—I am thinking of Christine Grahame and me—volunteer for posts that others describe as akin to a thankless task, or even a poisoned chalice. We volunteer because we want to—that is why all volunteers carry out the work that they do. We want to encourage that spirit in Scotland. I hope that, on that point at least, all members can agree with Fergus Ewing.

15:39

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I want to pick up on two things that Fergus Ewing referred to—namely, carers who volunteer involuntarily, as it were, and extraordinary young people—and to highlight the debt that we owe to young carers, who often pick up burdens from which adults walk away. It struck me when Fergus was speaking that that group of involuntary volunteers needs our support.

I am not a numbers person in any way, shape or form, but I came across a statistic in the last session that I made a point of noting—the estimate that public funding of the voluntary sector amounting to £1.8 billion delivered services worth £41 billion. That is a huge return in anyone's language, and it illustrates the importance of the voluntary sector and the fact that it reaches many places that could not be reached without it.

The voluntary sector is wide and disparate. It ranges from professional bodies with paid staff who raise funds and organise the volunteer work force, right down to one or two people who organise a local service on an entirely voluntary basis, often on a shoestring. Most of what I want to say relates to the smaller, more local part of the sector, where, unfortunately, it seems that there is a downward trend in the number of people who are choosing to become involved. However, if other trends are examined, that is not surprising. For many couples, paying a mortgage—especially at current levels—and maintaining a modern lifestyle means that both have to work full time, which leaves little surplus time and energy to take on any voluntary activity.

Twenty or 30 years ago there was a large pool of wives and mothers—of all ages, I say to Ted Brocklebank—who were not in full-time paid employment, but who ran a wide variety of community activities, such as scouting, meals on wheels, sports clubs, playgroups and other family support groups, and a great deal of informal

looking after or looking out for elderly or vulnerable neighbours. That pool has largely dried up. We have to look for other ways to maintain the voluntary activity that makes communities work.

Many of the current recruitment projects are targeted at young people, before they embark on a career or take on their own family responsibilities. The opportunity to do voluntary work can bring benefits to them in developing social and practical skills that may enhance their employment opportunities. It also brings them less tangible but perhaps more important benefits, such as experiencing the satisfaction that is to be gained from contributing to someone else's welfare, widening their social circle across age groups and feeling more a part of their community—and a valued part at that.

I agree with the comments attributed to Donald Gorrie that another group of people who have time, energy, experience and skills to offer are the newly retired. Those people do not need financial support to enable them to take on voluntary work, although they need information, which is where the volunteer centre network makes a valuable contribution.

The perennial challenge in dealing with the voluntary sector is how to regulate and fund it without stifling those very aspects that are its strength—informality, flexibility, the individuality of the volunteers and, often, a local focus on activity. On regulation, I suggest that local authorities are best placed to evaluate the voluntary organisations on their patch. They should be allowed to do that in the context of a light-touch framework that guards against abuse without being too prescriptive. That is what central Government should provide.

On funding, the difficulties that come up again and again are short-termism and the tension that exists between maintaining established projects and allowing new ones to get off the ground. We have moved away from annuality in local authority funding, and we should eliminate it elsewhere. Perhaps we should consciously defend a proportion of available funding against innovation.

Governments develop policies to improve the lives of their citizens, but they have to be delivered by people and, to be effective, they have to reach right down to the individual. At that level, the voluntary sector knows what it is doing and is a wonderful resource that we should cherish.

15:44

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands)
(Con): I welcome the teachers and pupils of Lochside RC Primary School, who are sitting in the public gallery, having travelled all the way from Fort William to be with us today. The school

recently ran a voluntary project that involved a back-to-school day for MSPs, during which some members, including the First Minister, visited the school. The school raised £640 for global education.

The good thing about the Executive's volunteering strategy is that it highlights the great work of volunteers in Scotland and the fact that the rate of volunteering in Scotland is higher than the rates in the rest of the United Kingdom and other European countries. Unfortunately, as usual, the Executive's control-freak mentality will work against all the good that Scottish volunteers have done. One of the key themes of the strategy is to make volunteering more socially inclusive, which demonstrates the Executive's mentality and its desire to control the voluntary sector from the centre rather than allow it the freedom to function as it wants. The Executive's idea that volunteers come only from better-off groups in Scottish society is frankly not true. Ted Brocklebank may well be right about the vital statistics of middle-aged ladies, but voluntary sector managers in Argyll tell me that they get willing volunteers from all walks of life. Tricia Marwick made that point earlier and I agree with her.

The desire to volunteer comes from the individual and stems from a feeling of responsibility, which is the most important element of democracy. People in free countries will retain rights only as long as they accept the responsibilities that go with them. While it is important that more people volunteer, it is preferable that they do so for the right reasons. It is also preferable that volunteers are people who can achieve results. Since nearly everybody has the potential to help in some way, the key is to identify the right people for the right tasks.

The Argyll council for voluntary service, which is based in Lochgilphead, has informed me that an audit carried out two years ago identified that volunteering had a value of £28.2 million to the Argyll and Bute economy, which is an enormous amount of money for a sparsely populated area—it is the second highest figure in Scotland. The audit also showed that funding has an important but time-consuming role in volunteer organisations. On average, volunteers spend 34 per cent of their time fundraising. That work is essential and volunteers do it efficiently so that most of the money that is collected goes to the purpose for which it is intended.

I spoke with Alison Logan, the manager of the Helensburgh and Lomond carers project, which is part of the Princess Royal Trust for Carers. The organisation runs a 24/7 service on the £23,000 a year that it gets from Argyll and Bute Council. The half-yearly funding was meant to come in on 1 April, but it was received yesterday afternoon. It

would be helpful if the small amount of money that is provided was produced on time. Alison Logan did not complain, but I realised what a wonderful job the carers were doing on their allowance of £44 a week, especially those who work with people with Alzheimer's disease and mental disability. She emphasised the point that some people are put off volunteering by the background checks. More assurances should be given that such checks are carried out in the strictest confidence.

My father worked for the lifeboat service for 35 years and was convener of the lifeboat service in Scotland for 16 years. At a dinner during the 1970s, he sat next to the Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, who asked my father how much money had to be raised to run the lifeboat service. When my father told him that it was £17 million, Jim Callaghan exclaimed, "My goodness, that's cheap. We did a survey that showed that it would cost our Government £170 million." That is 10 times the cost of the volunteer lifeboat service.

I cannot speak in a debate that celebrates volunteering without referring to the lifeboat coxswains and crews, who volunteer to risk their lives in order to save the lives of others. There is a local service in each coastal area, but the parts are united in a UK-wide club, which is respected and revered. They are their own bosses and they hate interference. In my local town of Oban and throughout Scotland, it is considered an honour to be asked to be a member of the lifeboat crew. When one thinks of the terrible disasters in places such as Longhope on the island of Hoy in Orkney and Fraserburgh in the north-east, where entire crews lost their lives only to be replaced by new crews of volunteers within 24 hours, one realises the sacrifice that is made. We should celebrate that extraordinary bravery, selflessness and dedication.

The same applies to the members of the mountain rescue squads at Glencoe, Ben Nevis and Cairngorm, who, like the lifeboat crews, volunteer to risk their lives in order to save others but receive hardly any Government support. We are incredibly lucky to have voluntary organisations of such calibre—they save lives as well as vast amounts of money for the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It seems extraordinary and ironic that the Royal National Lifeboat Institution should have to pay VAT on new lifeboats. How long does it take for volunteers to collect the millions that the Chancellor of the Exchequer receives in VAT? Surely the Government could help by removing the tax in that instance. That would certainly be a cause for celebration.

There are many other voluntary bodies that help the Government. In Scotland, all fishery board members—except for the clerks, who are normally

paid—do their work for no money at all. That must save the Scottish Executive a small fortune, and it should think carefully before it makes changes to that arrangement.

Volunteering raises people's morale and produces self-respect. We can celebrate the fact that 45 to 50 per cent of Scots volunteer, because it shows that, underneath everything, at least half of us are responsible, caring, wonderful people who love one another and take responsibility for the communities in which we live.

We Conservatives believe that it is the Government's job to encourage the voluntary sector in two principal ways. First, politicians should set an example, which many do, by donating some of their time and energy—or even their money—to voluntary organisations. Secondly, the Government should give voluntary organisations freedom from bureaucracy and overtaxation. We are disappointed with the Executive's strategy, which seems to be more about centralisation, control of volunteering and imposing its own agenda rather than reducing interference and giving the sector the freedom to develop itself.

15:51

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and I apologise for my late arrival. The Communities Committee was in a video link with our Westminster colleagues to discuss the draft Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Bill, so that is why I was late. I believe that that link was a first for the two Parliaments.

I apologise to the minister for missing a bit of her speech, but if Mike Rumbles agreed with every word that she said, I will have to look at the *Official Report* very carefully—perhaps I will reserve judgment until I have done that.

It is important to celebrate volunteers and volunteering and to recognise their importance. I welcome the continuing commitment from the Executive and local government to work in proper partnership with those who give voluntarily of their time. Like many others, I am surrounded by examples of how I benefit, how my family benefits and how the communities that I represent benefit from the voluntary activities of others, whether through the beavers and the brownies, parent-teacher associations, church-run groups, the localised support for asylum seekers in my community or the gala days in my constituency, which give me hours of endless fun queuing up for face painting.

At a more serious level are the volunteers who make organisations distinctive, such as those who will make Glasgow Housing Association fulfil our

dream of a housing organisation that is responsive to local needs, or those in housing co-operatives and citizens advice bureaux who not only deliver a service but are part of shaping that service, telling Government what it needs to be. We need to celebrate the time and effort of those people. When, as a young woman and political activist, I sat about thinking that I was being busy by talking to people like me about how we were going to change the world, such volunteers were just getting on with it. They understood that action is sometimes just as powerful as words.

Sometimes, volunteers are characterised as do-gooders who do good things for those who are bereft and poor, but people are not one-dimensional. During the Communities Committee's consideration of the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill, we went to communities where people had strong things to say about antisocial behaviour, but the same people were trying to solve those problems; they were talking about youth disorder, but were running youth clubs at the same time.

People come to voluntary work for all sorts of reasons, perhaps because of their life experience. A young girl whom I taught in Castlemilk was mercilessly bullied, but while she was dealing with the bullying, she worked in her local community, gave of her time and talked to young people who were experiencing the same thing. Volunteers often bring more than simply their time: they bring their life experience. However, in some of our communities, there is an issue over the need for disclosure, which might deter people who have something to say about what happened to them, and we need to be careful that it does not silence them and stop others learning from their experience.

I am conscious that I do not give back the benefits that I have experienced from voluntary activity, but I know that I will—at some point in my life, I will go and work in the Marie Curie hospice at Hunters Hill in Glasgow, because I know that formal organisations can never give the compassionate care that that organisation can give.

Volunteers and paid members of staff who support families and individuals who are suffering enhance services, rather than substitute for them. They bring something very special. In my community, volunteers often do much more successfully what formal organisations are charged with doing. I am thinking of local youth clubs and voluntary football groups, which reach out to youngsters in a way that formal groups and formal services never can. I am aware that we do not make it easy for those groups to get the benefit of the investment that we want to put into sporting and youth activities. We need to consider

how we can build a bridge for groups that do things for nothing, as we are investing in more formal structures that might not give us as good a service as those groups can.

We should recognise that volunteers do not just work in the voluntary sector—for example, people volunteer in health and education. People's motives can vary widely. My mother became a volunteer after she was widowed, because that filled a space: she had been caring before, and was now able to give a bit of time to others. We know that the voluntary sector could not survive without volunteers but, in recognising that, we should not categorise volunteers and put them into boxes. We should recognise the diversity among volunteers, and in doing so, we must not over-organise. There is a danger that, in wanting to work with the sector and to recognise those who volunteer, we wring the goodness out of what is the finest of human instincts.

I understand that the balance is a fine one. We know why we need to regulate. We know that there are people who have sought to abuse the system in order to damage volunteering. We must be careful, but we also have to listen when people tell us about being deterred from doing the things that they have always done because they do not fit into the same boxes any more. We must be careful about creating jobs for those who manage the people who do the volunteering.

On the issue of charity law, there is an important connecting discussion around the charitable sector and volunteering. Sometimes, we seek to rationalise in a way that is not necessarily rational. I often ask people in my community why they volunteer. I cannot imagine anything more ghastly than taking 20 brownies off to brownie camp, but I am very glad that people do it. There are people who do much bigger things week in, week out. For example, often carers are also involved in delivering voluntary activities in their communities. It is almost as if busy people do even more. We must be careful that, in trying to manage and support those who volunteer, we do not try to do the impossible in rationalising what is an aspect of the human condition that speaks to the good in us all.

I welcome the debate and the Executive's commitment. I congratulate and celebrate all the volunteers who do so much for others in my area and throughout Scotland.

15:58

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): As I am speaking late in the debate, much of what I was going to say has already been said, but I echo the remarks that other members have made about the volunteering that starts at home—

that undertaken by carers. It could be the pensioner who looks after their spouse or partner or the young carer who looks after the parent who is unable to look after themselves.

I will mention the Golspie young carers who came and performed a dramatised version of what I suspect were some of their own experiences in front of members of the Health Committee and other members of the Parliament, some of whom are here for the debate. We heard about examples of young children supporting an alcoholic mother and managing to keep the other children in the family together. They suffered at school because they were not sleeping. They were tormented—sometimes bullied—and found support and help from the local young carers association, which helped the family to stay together. To watch children who had gone through such experiences was an extremely humbling experience for us.

Mr Stone: Christine Grahame will recall that the group applied to the Scottish Executive for funding, but had its application knocked back.

Christine Grahame: I am obliged to the member for highlighting that—no doubt the minister will address the matter.

I come now to the funding difficulties of some organisations, particularly small organisations, which perhaps do not have the administration or resources to apply through what can often be a quagmire of forms. We really must do something about that.

There is a project at a school in Peebles that involves children helping children. Secondary pupils at Peebles High School formed an organisation called Up to You. The young people are trained and go out to primary schools and advise other young people on sexual health, alcohol problems and drug problems. Because the project involves primary 7 pupils listening to third and fourth year pupils, they do listen. The people involved are not fuddy-duddies—whether or not that means the middle-aged ladies about whom Mr Brocklebank knows the statistics—but people of much the same age.

Volunteering in the community can be large scale or small scale. On the former, I was involved with Citizens Advice Scotland for many years as a volunteer duty solicitor. I know that solicitors have a bad name, but many of them volunteer unpaid—members might think that the word “unpaid” never comes out of a solicitor’s mouth—to give advice at surgeries at CABx on a rota system. CABx do an excellent job, but I say to the minister that the state of their funding puts them under enormous pressure. I note from the briefing paper that we received from Volunteer Development Scotland that

“90% of people involved in Citizens Advice Bureau are volunteers”.

In this year alone, Roxburgh citizens advice bureau, which has served the community for 30 years, helped the public to claim £800,000 to which people were entitled but which they might not otherwise have scooped.

Haddington CAB ran an excellent outreach project called good advice, better health, but it has had to cease it because it has no funding, despite the fact that 76 per cent of the people whom it contacted had never used the citizens advice bureau before. The health projects that it did took stress off people, and general practitioners praised it greatly, but it did not have funding. I am not alone. The minister knows that every MSP in the chamber has examples of such projects and, for the life of us, we cannot understand why funding has not been secured for them.

That applies also to Independent Special Education Advice at Dalkeith, which does not understand why it does not get funding. I, Donald Gorrie, Robin Harper, Margo MacDonald, James Douglas-Hamilton, Dennis Canavan and Rosemary Byrne—that is some campaign team—asked for a meeting to help us to understand why the organisation, which represents parents throughout Scotland and whose staff started out as volunteers and have children with special needs, cannot get funding for its work. There are problems with how we choose which organisations get funding and with how people access funding.

I will give an example of the excellent things that voluntary organisations do. In Jedburgh, young people have set up the dry dock youth project, which has its own management team. They have humble beginnings, although they already have 200 young people on their books and they intend to do outreach projects. As we say, it is important that volunteering starts with young people.

The briefing paper from Volunteer Development Scotland lists some issues that MSPs should raise. I agree with them and I will run through them quickly in my last minute. As MSPs, we have a duty to ensure that volunteers are not used in place of paid workers. There is a danger that volunteers can be used as a cost-cutting exercise, and that should not happen. We have a duty to assist with applications for funding in appropriate circumstances. I would like the minister to address the disclosure forms issue, which puts huge pressure on voluntary organisations. That includes payment for disclosure forms and the time that it takes to comply, quite rightly, with the care commission requirements. There is also the issue of bringing facilities up to date.

In my final comment—I am glad that Ted Brocklebank is not here as I can say this behind his back—I notify the ladies and women in the chamber that I am setting up a collection fund to purchase a spade for Ted Brocklebank. I will tell him when, and when not, to use it.

16:04

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Like others, I will reflect briefly on my experience of volunteering, which ranges from running a youth club in Paddington to teaching seamanship at Gordonstoun and involves the children's panel, Lothian health council, the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme and the John Muir trust. Not the least fun, I raised money for Barnardo's by busking on Waverley station concourse at Christmas—as an official busker, not an unofficial one. Recently, I have done a lot of work with Community Service Volunteers and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

I was quite surprised that the minister did not specifically mention environmental volunteering, which is one of the most important areas of voluntary work, particularly when it is linked to helping young people to gain greater confidence and helping people with mental health problems. It is an extraordinarily valuable addition to the range of volunteering in Scotland.

The new volunteer development scheme that the Executive is funding—for which I praise the ministers—is designed for people between the ages of 16 to 25, but I note that 30 per cent of people who volunteer started to do so during their school years. Patrick Harvie started volunteering when he was 11 years old, for example. Clearly, there is an opportunity to use school policies to encourage more children from less well-off families or who are less academic than others to get involved in volunteering when they are at school, rather than simply saying to people that we will pay attention to them when they reach the age of 16.

The level of volunteering in schools could probably be increased to 50 per cent if we simply worked with schools. However—and I say this as a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland—the worst thing that ever happened to volunteering in schools was when my union decided to use the withdrawal of good will in schools as a weapon in the strikes that got us well-earned money. I think that schools are still suffering from that. That was an extremely sad thing and was the only time that I have ever totally disagreed with my union. I was quite prepared to lose money and go out on strike but I was not prepared to stop doing the things that I love with children who trusted teachers to demonstrate the spirit of volunteerism.

I voice my support for what Christine Grahame said about the Golspie young carers. Nobody who met them could fail to be impressed by the fact that, of all the things that can be done for young carers, allowing such carers to meet together as peer groups throughout the country is the single thing that will help them the most. The costs of

that are low—all that is needed is a co-ordinator and a little bit of money to get the process started. What the Golspie young carers are doing should be rolled out across Scotland.

I thank the minister—if it was her, or someone else in the Executive if it was not—for the intervention that took place in response to a letter that I wrote about a similar peer-group self-help project, the care project in Edinburgh, which is designed for adults. Again, it requires only one volunteer to co-ordinate the project but it does immensely valuable work and does a tremendous amount of good for the people who take part in it because of the mutual support that they can give each other.

Nora Radcliffe: Does the member agree that, while support is important, the vital work that must be done relates to identifying young carers? That is the starting point that leads to the other things that we can do.

Robin Harper: Indeed. That issue goes back to school policies. We must recognise that the guidance policies of schools give us an opportunity to identify children who are carers. When teachers see children in school who, for no apparent reason, are tired, fractious, inattentive and not doing their homework, they must consider whether the issue might be that the child is taking care of their parents or family. I was a guidance teacher for many years and I got no specific training on that matter. I wish that I had, as children whom I was supposed to be helping might have passed all the way through secondary school without my ever realising that that was the case.

These days, all schools have activity weeks during which the kids do all sorts of wonderful and fun things, such as go climbing, go on river holidays, visit France and Germany and so on. When I taught at Broughmuir High School, I ran an outdoor activity, but I also ran a volunteering project. Of the 600 pupils in years 1, 2 and 3, 100 a year wanted to volunteer, even when all those other activities were on offer. There is a pool of volunteerism among young people and we really should be ensuring that young people are very much aware of the opportunities to volunteer.

I was asked to give the prizes at Broughton High School last week. Of the 80 certificates that were given out, 50 certificates were not for passing exams and doing well in academic subjects; they were for voluntary work, work with the school community and excellence in the arts, such as music, drama and dance.

16:10

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): The debate is on celebrating volunteering in Scotland, so it is rather unfortunate that the SNP and the

Tories have felt unable to do so fully and have had to aim at least some flak in the direction of the minister about the role that the Executive has played in project Scotland. It should be obvious to everybody who is involved in the debate that the role of the state—of the Government, if you like—is that of an enabler. Its role is to get people involved in volunteering; it is not about top-down direction. The Government has an enabling function and the fact that that has not been widely recognised is disappointing.

On Monday, I attended an event at which certificates were awarded to young people who had been involved in the Prince's Trust's work away project. The project gives young people between 18 and 25 the opportunity to spend three weeks in a structured work placement in another European country. There were three groups from all over Scotland. The young people had been to Poland, Portugal and Spain and had been supported by partner agencies in those countries. I found the experience to be enlightening. While working in those countries, the main benefits were clear to the people involved through the experiences that they gained, but there were other benefits on returning—I do not mean only the certificates that the Prince's Trust gave them.

I spoke to a number of them about their experiences and there were four recurring themes. One was that their experiences while they were away and their preparation for the three weeks in another country had helped to build their self-confidence. They also thought that their experiences would help them to get a job—in fact, three of them could not be at the awards ceremony because they already had jobs. Others thought that the experiences would encourage them to go to college. However, the one thing that they all said was that their experiences would encourage them to get involved in other aspects of volunteering, as they now understood what volunteering was. Prior to that, they had no concept of what volunteering was, far less about what they should do to get involved in it.

Of course, volunteering is not new. Robin Harper referred to the role of teachers in sports activities, but for generations, and certainly since I was a child, which is a few generations ago, parents and other people—not necessarily the parents of the children involved—have been involved in sports clubs, cultural and drama organisations or whatever. Those are well-established activities, as is involvement in trade unions and political parties. However, if such people are asked whether they have ever been involved in volunteering, they will almost certainly say, "No. I don't get involved in that." That is because volunteering is now more associated with some form of caring or with the delivery of services that were previously provided either by

organisations such as the health service or by local authorities. Perhaps what volunteering involves must be made more widely known.

Christine Grahame referred to citizens advice bureaux. The first volunteering organisation that I became involved with when I was a student was a citizens advice bureau. There is now a network of 77 citizens advice bureaux throughout Scotland that deal with the fairly important and fundamental issues that people take to them, from debt to employment, housing and consumer affairs. I have been particularly impressed by the CAB in Maryhill in Glasgow, which has recently initiated a project with asylum seekers. It encourages asylum seekers to get involved with the CAB in a volunteering capacity.

It would be wrong to suggest that those who are involved in volunteering are a true cross-section of society in Scotland today. There is a bias towards the better off and, if not the middle aged, certainly those who are beyond what might be termed youth. Volunteer Development Scotland gave a briefing to all members today. It has highlighted that matter by showing that, of the young people who leave school in social classes A and B, 41 per cent become involved in some form of volunteering, whereas in classes D and E, only 10 per cent do so. More telling is the fact that it says that that gap is never closed.

In her opening remarks, Margaret Curran talked about that opportunity gap, which must be closed. There is an exhortation to MSPs in the VDS briefing that action needs to be taken now to address the demographic challenge and the social class divide and to dismantle barriers. That is just the sort of challenge that project Scotland was established to deal with. It is clear that more young people are needed in volunteering, as people who become involved in volunteering at an early age are much more likely to carry that involvement into adulthood and into areas of Scotland in which volunteering has perhaps not been anything like as well established as it could have been.

The millennium volunteers, which are now being delivered through the volunteer centre network, are one way of doing that. Specific sections of the population are being targeted, especially those aged 16 to 24, who have been under-represented in volunteering.

I spent four years on the board of the Volunteer Centre Glasgow, and it is an organisation for which I have great respect. However, it has been telling me recently that one of the barriers that it faces in getting people involved is the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. The disclosure process undoubtedly puts some people off, not least because of the administrative difficulties, which mean that it can sometimes take six to 10 weeks for people to gain clearance. I also know, from

talking to sportscotland, that many people do not get involved in sporting activities because of the disclosure processes that they have to go through. Therefore, when we are encouraging people to volunteer, we must bear in mind the fact that there are barriers to be overcome. We can find ways to do that.

The sort of opportunities that the volunteer centres get involved in—especially befriending, which is open to people of all ages—are extremely important, as are the carer centres that they run. That is the kind of organisation that people tend to associate with volunteering; however, as the debate has shown, volunteering goes much wider than that. If one of the results of the debate is a proper valuing of the work that volunteers do, that will be of great benefit. It is not just about celebrating volunteering as a way of thanking people who get involved and recognising their work; it is also about inspiring others—people who do not get involved, for whatever reasons—and letting them know that the doors are there and can be opened. Project Scotland will play a role in that and should be supported by all parties in the Parliament.

16:16

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I would have liked to start by thanking many individuals and organisations, but it would be unfair of me to single them out—there are far too many. Therefore, I broadly welcome the debate for giving me the opportunity to thank the many people who give of their time in volunteering on a daily basis.

Volunteering is not just about people taking a couple of hours off to do something that interests them. As the minister pointed out, volunteering is good for the economy of Scotland and generates £2.2 billion per annum, which is 4 per cent of the GDP of this country. Not only does it generate income for the country; it also employs around 100,000 people. I mention those figures so that people will not think that volunteering is just something that people do as a pastime, but will recognise that it has an impact not only on the welfare of the people who do the volunteering and those who are on the receiving end of it, but on the economy of Scotland as a whole. Volunteering is an economic asset.

I am not going to go into the arguments that Ted Brocklebank made regarding predominantly white, middle-class people.

Mr Brocklebank: Will the member give way?

Ms White: If Ted Brocklebank will let me finish, I will give way. His arguments have already been made and I do not want to give them any more mention than they deserve. In the areas where I and others work, it is not just white, middle-class people who volunteer.

We have to accept that there are difficulties—especially in disadvantaged areas and among young and elderly people—and that only about a quarter of charities can pay people's child-care and travel costs. Transport costs are especially important in rural areas. We must acknowledge that when we discuss resources and funding for charities, as one of the main reasons why they cannot encourage as many people as they would like to give of their time is the fact that people cannot afford it. That has been recognised in what most members, including the minister, have said.

The centrepiece of the volunteering strategy is project Scotland, which the minister and most other members have mentioned. I welcome that initiative. However, as the convener of the cross-party group on older people, age and aging, I question why there is no specific strategy or project for elderly people. I have just come from a meeting of the cross-party group, which asked me to mention that. We are not talking about people who are in their 90s or who are 100; we are talking about people who are aged 50 and over—which includes myself and other members who will admit to their ages—who give a great deal of their time and have a lot of expertise to offer.

When we consider the life experience of those people, and the fact that they want to continue getting life experience through education as well as volunteering, we do them a great disservice. Perhaps we should have a strategy specifically for them because, if we consider the facts, ours is an aging population, so why should we not produce a strategy and a project with those people in mind? I am sure that most of the charities and the cross-party group that I chair would be more than happy to give evidence on that or to work towards such a strategy for the minister. The group was very specific in asking me to raise the point in today's debate, so I ask the minister to consider the issue in conjunction with the other areas that I have mentioned.

I go back to project Scotland and the concerns I have about it. To answer Lord Watson's criticisms of some of the SNP's comments, I am not criticising the minister, but I am concerned about some of the aspects of project Scotland; perhaps the minister could clarify some things for me.

The strategy mentions 16 to 25-year-olds and the gap between the transitional year and funding, which means that a volunteer gets three months-worth of moneys. How would that work if the young people were not in education? How would it work if they were receiving unemployment benefit or something like that?

The minister also goes on to mention that the Executive is hoping to get 1,000 volunteers and that the cost of setting that up in 2005 might be met from sponsorship. How will that work? Is the

Executive going to fund it for a year and look for private sponsorship afterwards? I ask that because I believe that sometimes organisations suffer from a lack of funding three or four years after setting up, which is a problem. Perhaps the Executive will give project Scotland false hope by giving it money for one year when it might not be able to get sponsorship after that. That is not an attack; it is a point on which I am looking for clarification.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): You have one minute left.

Ms White: Thank you, convener. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I know that Murray Tosh has not put himself forward for the convenership of the SNP, but I thought that I would give him the opportunity, seeing as most other people have jumped in.

The minister mentioned percentages and age groups. Do we have figures for the number of 16 to 25-year-olds who take a gap year? How many of them do voluntary work? That information would be helpful because the minister is talking about getting 1,000 volunteers per year for her course, which would be something in the region of 0.2 per cent of the 600,000 16 to 25-year-olds in Scotland. Will the minister clarify those points? Do we have those facts and figures and do they tally up with the facts and figures that the minister is giving us?

16:23

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in the debate and to add to the many voices who want to celebrate the work of volunteers and to thank volunteers for the contribution that they make to individuals and to our communities.

The minister and others members have mentioned the value of volunteering to our economy and have pointed out that, without the contribution of volunteers, Government would be required to find a large amount of resources to fill the gap. Most of us know that volunteering is not just about financial considerations and how much it would cost if the Government had to replace or pay for the work that volunteers do; it is about the benefits that volunteers bring to the people they help, to our communities and to themselves as individuals.

In my constituency, volunteers are people of all ages and from all backgrounds and they do not all fall into the box described by Ted Brocklebank. Karen Whitefield gave an example from her constituency that disproved that particular piece of research and I can give an example from my constituency. The majority of the Kilsyth civic week committee, which organised a fantastic programme of events in my community, is under the age of 25. The minister might want to

comment during her summing-up speech on whether she pinched the idea for a debate on celebration from Kilsyth civic week. The theme for Kilsyth civic week was celebrating the work that is brought to the community by volunteers.

Like other members, I want to highlight some of the voluntary organisations in my community—there are far too many of them to mention them all today. In particular, I highlight one group that has volunteers from all ages and backgrounds. The group disproves the research that Mike Watson mentioned that suggests that volunteers are thin on the ground in areas that suffer from high levels of deprivation and unemployment. I refer to a group in the community of Croy, which is a village in my constituency. Although Croy has much higher levels of unemployment than other areas of the constituency, it has high levels of civic responsibility, civic pride and community spirit.

A few years ago, a group of volunteers representing community groups and organisations from across the locality got together because they thought that it was time that the village had a proper community facility. The local authority was approached, but it did not have the money available to provide the kind of facility that the volunteers thought necessary to support the different groups in the community in which they lived. The volunteers formed themselves into a committee that then managed to raise more than £1.5 million from different organisations, including the lottery, the local authority and the Scottish Executive. They were happy with the support that they received, because local government and national Government provided the support without interfering in the group that had got together to improve the local community.

I am pleased to say that the facility is now up and running. It provides accommodation and sports facilities for all groups, which range from a male-voice choir to a dancing troupe. Under one roof, all those groups are able to enjoy the facilities that have been provided thanks to the support of the voluntary group.

Another organisation in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth that operates—despite what some members have claimed—with the support of, rather than interference from, Government is the local council for voluntary service, which is called North Lanarkshire North CVS. We know that the name is a bit of a mouthful, but we have not been able to get anything shorter. North Lanarkshire North CVS, which was set up only in April 2002, aims to support and encourage volunteers, and it is managing to do so. Indeed, there has been an increase in the number of volunteers from the under-25 age group, while the number of volunteers from older age groups has been sustained. We know that volunteers often have to

spend a lot of time trying to raise funds rather than doing the work that they want to do, so North Lanarkshire North CVS has helped groups to raise funds for various projects. Last year alone, we were able to bring £750,000 into our community.

I believe that people want to volunteer. People want to help their communities, not because they see any financial gain or reward for themselves, but because they believe in the value of putting something back into the community by volunteering. Jamie Stone, I think, pointed out, that people value awards because they want to be recognised. North Lanarkshire is perhaps ahead of others in that, because we recognise the value of volunteers by holding awards ceremonies that recognise the work of those who contribute so much.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I regret that there are two members whom I cannot call, but we must move to winding-up speeches.

16:29

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Like many members, I have done voluntary work in the past. In particular, I used to help elderly people by, for example, taking them on outings to the bright lights of Inverness. That reminds me of an anecdote that John Farquhar Munro told me. When he recently visited an old folks' home in Portree, an elderly gentleman recognised him and said, "Oh, John Farquhar, is that you in here now?"

Margaret Jamieson: Did John Farquhar Munro stay there?

Mr Stone: Apparently not. As members can see, he is still with us.

This has been a good debate with some excellent speeches. I particularly enjoyed Stewart Stevenson's witty and thoughtful contribution. Rosie Kane let the chamber know about her ambitions to become a minister in a Scottish Socialist Party Government and I had slight disagreements with Ted Brocklebank and Fergus Ewing. However, I will not make that latter disagreement any worse. Patrick Harvie, Robin Harper and many other members also made thoughtful speeches.

I want to draw two important points out of the debate. I think that Robin Harper alluded to the recognition that volunteers receive; indeed, I made the same point in an intervention. I should point out that people who have done some volunteering work know that it is fun. I understand why Robin said that he wanted to carry on out-of-hours activities such as photography, chess clubs and so on.

However, such work also confers dignity on those who are less well-off in society, so I do not

believe that volunteers receive as much recognition as they could receive. For example, we know that some lieutenants are better than others at getting medals and awards, but such honours do not always hit the targets. People who have worked very hard all their lives in the voluntary sector might never receive any recognition. As I said in my intervention, some local authorities are better than others at recognising volunteers; for example, they hold civic award ceremonies. However, that does not happen in all the 32 Scottish local authorities.

The new Parliament could have a role in this. For example, the children of Golspie thought that it was wonderful to come to Parliament as Christine Grahame's guests. Their recognition by MSPs and parliamentary staff made them feel really good and will make them view their volunteering work as being something that is worth their while.

All MSPs have an opportunity to choose volunteers to represent their constituencies in the opening ceremony for the new building and we all know how hard it has been to choose that one person for the big day in October. I would bet that all of us could have chosen two dozen people without any bother. Like the children from Golspie, those people can come down here and receive some recognition. I also suggest that the Presiding Officers consider some system of civic awards that would be awarded by the Scottish Parliament.

Johann Lamont: There might or might not be an issue about recognition of volunteers. I know that citizens in Glasgow are recognised at certain times of the year and that people really value that recognition.

However, the real reward for many volunteers whom I know and who work with people with learning disabilities or with women who have survived domestic abuse is when Government policy matches their demands and shows an understanding that they have taken the right approach to services. We have seen particular evidence of that understanding in respect of women's organisations. I suggest that getting Government to listen to what voluntary sector organisations and volunteers have to say about their experiences is about as good an award as anyone can get.

Mr Stone: I do not disagree with that timely intervention; indeed, it takes me neatly to my second point.

I say to Ted Brocklebank that the issue is not about whether there is too much or not enough Government intervention; as Johann Lamont pointed out, it is more to do with recognition and co-ordination. I imagine that all members experience voluntary activities ebbing and flowing in and out of their lives. In parts of Ross-shire, we

used to have beach clean-ups until the district council was done away with. As a result, co-ordination with environmental health fell away, although it might come back again.

Co-ordination between the valiant efforts of the Scottish Executive and local authorities is important. For example, in my constituency, a charity called HomeAid Caithness—which has 11 volunteers and, through the new deal, seven young trainees—recycles furniture exactly as Patrick Harvie described. I do not know why it has happened, but for some reason Highland Council has left HomeAid Caithness and other such organisations out of its annual application for what is, in effect, landfill money. That is probably because of a lack of co-ordination, but it means that a fantastically useful operation is threatened.

There is still work to be done on all fronts in the 32 local authorities and in the Scottish Executive. However, that is not to gainsay their good intentions. Many voluntary activities would not happen if they did not receive funding and other assistance. I prefer to view that as support rather than as interference. However, it could be a little bit more co-ordinated.

It has been a real pleasure to take part in the debate. I will not tell any more stories about John Farquhar Munro, because he has reappeared in the chamber.

16:35

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): It is not often that I rise to commend Jamie Stone for his help to the elderly. However, as I came into the chamber earlier, he offered to carry in my large bundle of documents for me. I thank him very much for that.

I was not as willing a volunteer for the debate as Stewart Stevenson. I was more of a services kind of volunteer—when Bill Aitken sought Conservative speakers for the debate, I failed to step back in time. I have some regrets about speaking in the debate, although I have enjoyed my times speaking in the chamber, which perhaps involves self-gratification. I get most enjoyment when the ire of the entire chamber is poured on me but—sadly—I do not think that that will happen today because we have had a reasonable debate that has included good speeches from around the chamber. From the minister's speech on, I have mainly agreed with the contributions.

Cathie Craigie: Does Phil Gallie agree that part of Ted Brocklebank's speech was disgracefully out of touch?

Phil Gallie: No—I do not. Ted Brocklebank's comments held a fair degree of truth. The speeches of Nora Radcliffe and Johann Lamont—

who referred to her mother's volunteering—enshrined the truth of Ted Brocklebank's statistics, which were the facts. However, times are moving on and I agree that circumstances are perhaps changing.

Johann Lamont: Will Phil Gallie give way?

Phil Gallie: I do not have time—Johann Lamont must let me move on.

Johann Lamont: Oh, come on.

Phil Gallie: Go on, then—but wait until I get my earphones on.

Johann Lamont: My mother would have been deeply distressed, if she were still with us, to be described as middle class.

Phil Gallie: I got the impression that she was certainly middle-aged; I was not considering class. When I consider my past, I do not feel that class descriptions are adequate now. They are in many ways an outdated mode of description.

I want to pay tribute to volunteers who have not been mentioned in the debate: our volunteer servicemen, particularly those in the reserve forces. They face great dangers and I am sure that the whole Parliament joins me in paying tribute to them.

Before I entered Parliament as an MSP, I was my party's economic development spokesman in the run-up to the first Scottish Parliament elections. I became aware then of the voluntary sector's massive financial contribution to the Scottish economy. That contribution is reckoned to be about £2.1 billion currently, but I do not believe that that figure matches the voluntary sector's full effect. The services that individuals contribute through their own time and efforts must add considerably to that financial contribution. I commend all volunteers for their contribution.

Volunteers come from across the spectrum; they act, for example, as cleaners, drivers, community leaders and youth workers. Lord Watson said that the latter individuals must be cleared by the state before they can work with young people and we all go along with that. However, the Scout Association told me that it takes almost 17 weeks from when an application is made to clear an individual. I respectfully ask the ministers to examine that situation to see whether we can do something about it. People's work with youth is all-important, so I am sure that many people—young people and those who want to get into supporting them, alike—would be very grateful if there were some way of speeding the process up.

Another point hit me when Robin Harper spoke about rock climbing. It would be a brave teacher indeed who took youngsters rock climbing these days. That brings us back to the problems that we

face in relation to the rush to legislation and court protection in many instances with regard to the responsibilities that are taken on board by individuals in those circumstances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left, Mr Gallie.

Phil Gallie: The time seems to have gone so quickly.

I would like to pick up on something that Mike Rumbles said—I would hate to miss him out. He said that he felt that there should be independence within partnerships—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gallie, please turn round and speak into your microphone.

Phil Gallie: Mike Rumbles said that he demonstrated such independence at times.

I have to tell Patrick Harvie that I reckon that I beat him by 30 years on newspaper collections. Way back in my scouting days, I recall going round the doors to collect newspapers, then passing them to the private sector and earning some funds for the scouts.

There is much more that I would have liked to say. However, there is one final group, which I have not mentioned, although I believe I must. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution, above all organisations, is a truly voluntary organisation. It has to earn every penny that it puts into providing its equipment and services. It is a magnificent fourth emergency service, and I believe that the RNLI stands out above all others to be commended.

16:42

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): This has been an excellent debate. Members have spoken about their experiences of volunteering and about organisations in their constituencies. I am sure that our local newspapers are all looking forward to the rash of press releases that will follow the debate. Christine Grahame tells me that hers is already sent. Why does that not surprise me?

I would like to pick up on some of the points in the debate. Ted Brocklebank provided an interesting spin on Margaret Thatcher's speech, which was given in this very place, in which she said that there was no such thing as society. His other comments have been well dealt with by other members, particularly by Karen Whitefield, so I shall, as a fellow Fifer, spare him my comments this time.

Nora Radcliffe raised an important point about the role that women, particularly married women, have always played in volunteering, and about

how impossible it is becoming these days—because of financial and other pressures—for them to give the kind of commitment that they gave in the past. Like Nora Radcliffe, I believe that there is a new generation of women for whom time constraints are making it impossible to volunteer.

Johann Lamont made a fine speech, in which she made a valuable point about how we can ensure that money goes to the more informal voluntary organisations and not just to the bigger and more formal organisations, which have plenty of folk to assist with filling in forms for lottery and Executive funding. When people volunteer, they are actually doing jobs and do not have time for form filling. Such organisations are losing out on funding, but perhaps they need it most.

Phil Gallie: Given her kind comments about Johann Lamont, will Tricia Marwick tell us whether she considers her to be middle class?

Tricia Marwick: We are what we are, and we should recognise what we all are.

At this stage in the debate, the huge benefits that volunteering brings to our society have been well documented. Many members have talked about that, but it does not hurt to mention some of those benefits again, not least to ensure that everybody recognises that the debate is about an important subject. It is not a filler at the end of a parliamentary term—debates such as this show Parliament in its best light because there is a commitment throughout the chamber to volunteering and to celebrating people who volunteer. Although I believe that the debate shows our Parliament in the best light, it is a pity that there is—as usual—nobody from the media to hear the debate.

More than a million Scots do voluntary work every year. That is a fantastic figure, of which we as a nation should be proud. Socially, volunteering can provide people from the young to the elderly with a range of skills. That means that volunteers get something out of it. A key point is that it is not always about what we do for other people; rather, it may be about what a person gains from helping and supporting other people—in particular those who are in difficulties.

It is right that we take the opportunity to celebrate the value of volunteering and to recognise the positive impact that it has on the lives millions of people throughout the country.

Mike Watson confuses genuine SNP concern about getting the balance right between Government support and central control with opposition to what the Executive is trying to do. We must all consider the issue of getting the balance right. No one has a monopoly on being right—that includes ministers—and Mike Watson should not interpret constructive comments from

the SNP as being an expression of opposition to what the Executive is trying to do. That is not the case.

We must not be complacent about volunteering in Scotland. I welcome the research that has been done and I welcome especially the recognition that demographic changes will have an impact on the supply of volunteers in that young people and people from urban backgrounds are less likely to get formally involved. There are a number of reasons for that. Such people feel that they might not be welcome and, unfortunately, there is a traditional image of volunteering as being middle-class. The situation is not helped when Mr Brocklebank—I am sorry, but I cannot resist the temptation—continues to perpetuate that myth.

Research does not reflect accurately the numbers of informal volunteers: people who babysit; people who look after the neighbours; people who go for messages; and people who run football clubs and the like. There is a gap in the research in that it does not reflect accurately the communities about which members have all spoken, nor does it reflect the people in those communities who are doing their best to help.

I welcome project Scotland and the Scottish Executive's support for volunteers, which has already been highlighted. However, there is concern—not only from the SNP, but from Dr Davis Smith of the Institute for Volunteering Research—that the state should not be involved to the extent that volunteers are no longer independent. That perception of volunteering is not helped by Government's insistence that those who receive jobseeker's allowance be called in and given the choice of jobs, training or volunteering. Such coercion means that people will in the future be less likely to embrace volunteering than they would otherwise have been.

It has been my pleasure to award certificates for millennium volunteers in Fife to young people who help people who have disabilities. Their commitment is total and many opportunities are now open to the volunteers because of the skills that they have developed.

Christine May, who has sat through the debate, will know about the fantastic work that has been done over the years by the Auchmuty tenants association in Glenrothes. It runs Christmas parties and, more important, it is a contact point for the community.

The Drug and Alcohol Project Levenmouth is a leader in providing help for people who have addictions. The success of the project lies in the fact that its counsellors are volunteers who come from the communities that they seek to help.

Scott Barrie and I were recently present when Fife Council celebrated children's panel members

in Fife. We sometimes forget that they are volunteers who get very little out of their work apart from the satisfaction of knowing that they have helped others. The Deputy Presiding officer is telling me to stop, so I will.

16:49

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Mrs Mary Mulligan): The debate has been worthwhile and informative. I have listened to the speeches; as we have heard, people volunteer for all sorts of reasons.

As everyone else seemed to give a little anecdote about the time that they have spent volunteering or about the volunteering that goes on in their communities, I will start with an anecdote. I have spent the past two weekends attending gala days in Armadale, Blackridge and Whitburn. Stewart Stevenson will understand the importance of each of those events. It was clear that a large number of people willingly give of their time to arrange community events that are important in engendering community spirit.

I am sure that every member of Parliament could give examples of why people throughout Scotland volunteer. We have heard about many of the reasons this afternoon. Some people do it to help others, some do it to help themselves by developing new skills or social networks and some do it because they are interested in particular issues or activities. Whatever their motivation, tens of thousands of people throughout Scotland volunteer every day. Their involvement strengthens Scotland as a nation by helping to connect people with each other and with their communities.

Volunteering is for everyone. Everyone can benefit from volunteering and everyone can contribute through volunteering. I have listened to the various assertions that have been made about what the profile of volunteers might be. The Executive is committed to investigating what obstacles might be in the way of people who seek to volunteer and who find it difficult to do so. We have a genuine belief that everyone should be able to take advantage of that opportunity.

It is because of the need to encourage our young people that our volunteering strategy has a particular focus on young people, the aim of which is to provide clear opportunities and to create a culture of volunteering for the long term. That approach will mean that volunteering will truly become an integral part of Scotland's culture. Young people who grow up in Scotland should be aware of the benefits that can be gained from volunteering, and of what can be achieved.

The Executive has given a commitment to support project Scotland, which will provide the

opportunity to harness the energy, enthusiasm and potential of the young people of Scotland. The Executive aims to ensure that the first project Scotland volunteers come on board during 2005. To allow project Scotland to set itself up, we are providing initial funding of £1.9 million this year and a further £7 million over the following two years. On the back of that, the process of setting up project Scotland has already started. The next steps will be the production of a project Scotland business plan and the development of volunteer programmes with partner agencies in the voluntary, public and private sectors.

Phil Gallie: Will the minister give way?

Mrs Mulligan: I was just coming to the question of young volunteers and benefits. I will be grateful if Phil Gallie will let me do that.

Our aim is to ensure that no young person who is on benefits will be worse off as a result of their participation in voluntary work. Although that will be the case for the vast majority of young people, there might be a few cases in which there is an outstanding issue. We are continuing to discuss with our colleagues at Westminster how such matters can be resolved.

Would the member like to follow that up?

Phil Gallie: No, I am happy with that response.

Mrs Mulligan: I am always pleased to make Phil Gallie happy. Today has been a very strange day.

At United Kingdom level, we will continue to talk to our colleagues and to develop ways of working to ensure that we can support those young people.

As Margaret Curran said, if we are to sustain volunteering, we need to sustain the voluntary sector, which is in close touch with the parts of Scottish society that are traditionally hard to reach. The sector is well placed to identify and respond to changing needs and is therefore in the unique position of being able to help to meet many of the challenging targets that the Executive has set. As we have heard this afternoon, the sector is already a major provider and innovator in housing, child care and community care, for example.

We want the sector to input fully into policy development and the delivery of services. Working in partnership is the only way to meet the challenges that the Executive has set itself on improving the quality of the lives of every individual in Scotland.

Funding is always an issue, so the Executive is carrying out a wider strategic review of funding. As part of that work, we will consider how public funding meets the needs of the voluntary sector and whether it is possible for funders to work together to ensure that they operate in a way that meets their own needs and those of the sector.

That work includes discussion of funding and resource issues such as the recognition of full cost recovery and the need to ensure that funding decisions are joined up. Let us be clear, however: we are talking not just about money. We are also committed to developing our relationship with the voluntary and volunteering sectors, and to working in partnership.

We are committed to modernising the financial framework for the sector. I listened to the comments about annuality and how we should address it, and about how we should develop the relationship between the voluntary sector and local authorities. That is why the principles and commitments that guide our relationship with the voluntary and volunteering sectors are set out in the Scottish compact, which outlines the commitment of the Executive, its agencies and the non-departmental public bodies to partnership working. That commitment includes NHS Scotland. The revised Scottish compact and the compact implementation strategy will allow us to strengthen and develop that relationship so that we can take it to the next level.

I listened to the concerns that were expressed about over-regulation and over-guidance and increased administration. We seek to work with the sector to ensure that its administration is made easier. It is clear from members' speeches that volunteering and the voluntary sector make a significant contribution to Scottish society. From the eighth Airdrie Chapelhall scout group in Karen Whitefield's constituency, to the lifeboat operators around the country to whom Phil Gallie and Jamie McGrigor referred, to the carers throughout the whole of Scotland—that includes recognition of young carers, too—there are many examples of people who contribute to the life of Scotland.

The voluntary sector contributes to growth in the economy. It develops policy, delivers excellence in public services and supports strong and safe communities. Volunteering is vital to our shared social justice agenda and to the engagement of people in society and the expression of active citizenship.

Volunteers are the life-blood of essential services the length and breadth of Scotland. Volunteers get people back on their feet and they tackle poverty. Volunteering improves our environment and our communities and it offers potential benefits to those who volunteer, including improved self-esteem, development of skills for employment and for life and the ability to make contacts and develop networks, all of which are central to our vision of an ambitious and confident Scotland.

It is for those reasons that the Executive places great emphasis on the importance of its relationship with the voluntary and volunteering

sectors. I know that that relationship is also valued by the Scottish Parliament. Again, it is for those reasons that I want to ensure that the voluntary and volunteering sectors meet their full potential in contributing to Scotland's communities. We have an ambitious vision for those sectors and we have made a firm commitment to back up that vision by active support. That is why the new volunteering strategy and project Scotland are so important.

I conclude by putting on record my appreciation, and that of my ministerial colleagues, to volunteers for the hard work, commitment and energy that they bring to our lives and our communities. The benefits that volunteering brings are tremendous. Without volunteers, the world would be a very different place.

Business Motion

16:59

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-1549, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 7 September 2004

9.30 am Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Business

2.30 pm Executive Business

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 8 September 2004

9.30 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Executive Business

12 noon First Minister's Question Time

2.00 pm Question Time—
Enterprise, Lifelong Learning and
Transport;
Justice and Law Officers;
General Questions

3.00 pm Executive Business

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

(b) that consideration of the School Education (Ministerial Powers and Independent Schools) (Scotland) Bill at Stage 2 be completed by 24 September 2004; and

(c) that the period for lodging questions for First Minister's Question Time on 8 September 2004 should end at 2.00 pm on Friday 3 September.—[*Tavish Scott.*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Tavish Scott to move motion S2M-1546, on the designation of a lead committee, motion S2M-1547, on membership of a committee, and motion S2M-1550, on the designation of a lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 2 Committee be designated as lead committee in consideration of the Fire (Scotland) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that Mr Mark Ruskell be appointed to replace Eleanor Scott on the Environment and Rural Development Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 2 Committee be designated as lead committee in consideration of the Advice and Assistance (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 2004 Amendment Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/305).—[*Tavish Scott.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The questions on those motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S2M-1546, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 2 Committee be designated as lead committee in consideration of the Fire (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S2M-1547, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on membership of a committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Mr Mark Ruskell be appointed to replace Eleanor Scott on the Environment and Rural Development Committee.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S2M-1550, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 2 Committee be designated as lead committee in consideration of the Advice and Assistance (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 2004 Amendment Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/305).

Hepatitis C

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S2M-1481, in the name of Keith Raffan, on the urgent need to tackle hepatitis C, public health crisis. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the launch of the UK Hepatitis C Resource Centre for Scotland; recognises the urgent need to raise awareness of what the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh described in their UK Hepatitis C Consensus Statement of April 2004 as a "public health crisis" which affects between 45,000 and 65,000 people in Scotland, and believes that the Scottish Executive should acknowledge that, as with HIV/AIDS, this epidemic can only be effectively tackled through central, ring-fenced funding for both treatment and prevention.

17:02

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I am glad to have the opportunity to open this debate, which in my view is the most important in which I have ever spoken in this Parliament. The hepatitis C epidemic is a public health crisis. That was the opening key message of the final consensus statement that was produced at the end of the conference on hepatitis C that was held by the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in April.

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that affects more than 200 million people worldwide. Dr C Everett Koop, who as surgeon general of the United States under President Reagan first had to meet the challenge of HIV/AIDS, has described hepatitis C as

"an even greater threat to our public health".

In the United States, HCV—as the hepatitis C virus is known medically—already infects three times more people than AIDS does. It is responsible for more than one third of all liver transplants, and it already kills more people than AIDS each year.

Here in Scotland, at the beginning of the last parliamentary session the then Minister for Health and Community Care, Susan Deacon, commissioned a SNAP—or Scottish needs assessment programme—report on HCV. Published in 2000, that report estimated that 35,000 people were infected with HCV in Scotland. Last week, at the launch in Edinburgh of the United Kingdom hepatitis C resource centre, the chief medical officer Dr Mac Armstrong raised that estimate to 45,000. The resource centre itself estimates that the figure could be as high as 60,000 to 65,000.

The truth is that we simply do not know how many people in Scotland are infected with HCV. What we do know, according to the latest figures published by the Scottish centre for infection and environmental health today, is that up to 31 December 2003 18,109 people in Scotland had been reported to be hepatitis C antibody-positive, that intravenous drug users comprise the vast majority of cases, and that our rate of infection is approaching three times that of England and Wales.

We also know that although between 20 and 25 per cent of those who are infected clear the virus naturally, between 60 and 80 per cent become chronically infected. The majority of those people develop liver inflammation, which may eventually lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer. Up to 1,000 people who are infected with HCV in Scotland have already developed liver failure, and that is just the figure to date. If we do not make treatment more widely available, the number of people who develop liver failure will escalate by 60 to 70 cases a year, rising to 150 a year by 2020.

The treatment of HCV involves a combination therapy of pegylated interferon and ribavirin, a course of which costs between £7,000 and £9,000 per patient. It is therefore unsurprising that a former chief executive of one of the health boards in the region that I represent has described hepatitis C as

"a financial time bomb under the NHS in Scotland."

Quite simply, HCV is a grave threat to public health. The health boards cannot be left to carry the burden on their own, or waiting times for treatment will continue to be up to three or four years in certain areas. Just as happened for HIV/AIDS for more than 10 years, central ring-fenced funding must be provided to counter the disease. That is the only way in which we can meet the huge challenge that HCV represents.

We need urgently to introduce priority screening for former intravenous drug users who are over 35. I pay tribute to Professor David Goldberg of the Scottish centre for infection and environmental health for the help that he has given me in preparing this speech, although any mistakes and all opinions are my own. As Professor Goldberg wrote in the paper that he presented with Dr Eleanor Anderson to the hepatitis C conference, the great majority of those former IDUs

"would have been infected for a period, sufficient for progression to moderate, but insufficient for progression to severe, disease."

In other words, the group of over-35 former IDUs is the one that is most likely to benefit from combination therapy. To target those people, we must identify them through general practitioners, through posters and leaflets in health care waiting

areas and in prisons, where more than 1,000 people have already tested positive for HCV antibodies.

I have spoken of treatment and screening, which are part of secondary prevention, but what of primary prevention? What do we need to do to help intravenous drug users avoid contracting HCV? During the 1980s, 80 to 90 per cent of drug injectors became infected with HCV in the first year of their injecting career. By the mid-1990s, thanks to harm-reduction measures and needle and syringe exchanges, the figure had decreased to between 20 to 30 per cent of drug injectors. Sadly, since then, there has been an increase in needle sharing, despite the fact that in 2003 the Lord Advocate raised the limit on the number of needles and syringes that could be distributed to each drug injector from 15 a day to 60 a day and 120 at weekends. The Lord Advocate also permitted the distribution of drug paraphernalia, such as spoons and filters—which can cause infection—but only four health boards have funded that and one of them is about to stop doing so.

The Executive must commission research urgently to find out why there has been an increase in needle sharing; to evaluate the harm-reduction measures that are in place and the effect of the lifting of restrictions on needles and syringes; and to monitor how effective health boards have been in needle exchange. There is a worryingly large gap between the 2 million to 2.5 million needles that are distributed to drug injectors each year and the estimated 18 million injections that they give themselves.

"Services are already struggling to cope with the burden of infection and disease.

Significant resources must urgently be directed at improving prevention and delivery of care.

High priority for case finding should be given to former injecting drug users."

Those are not my words, but further key messages from the consensus statement with which I opened my speech. The Executive must act now; if it does not, the hepatitis C epidemic will develop into an epidemic of cirrhosis and liver cancer, the number of deaths will far exceed that from the AIDS epidemic at its height in this country, and the national health service in Scotland will be put under unprecedented strain, which many of those who work within it believe it will not be able to withstand. The situation is a public health crisis that demands a comprehensive response from the Government of Scotland, and it demands that response now.

17:09

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Keith Raffan on securing the

debate. We discussed his motion at the launch of the UK hepatitis C resource centre for Scotland, from where much of my information came.

Keith Raffan rightly made considerable reference to the "Consensus" conference statement from the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, which makes chilling reading. I will address one or two points, only some of which Keith Raffan addressed. He reckoned that there might be between 45,000 and 65,000 hep C sufferers in Scotland but, of those, only 18,000 are identified. That is a chilling statistic. Those sufferers will, at some point, enter the NHS, which cannot cope now, let alone cope with that time bomb, which is ready to explode.

As the minister is aware, I have lodged 10 parliamentary questions that focus on issues that are raised in the consensus statement. I look forward to detailed and specific answers, such as we always receive in the Scottish Parliament. I certainly hope that I will not receive the answer, "That information is not held centrally."

Keith Raffan referred to needle exchanges. With regard to the distribution of needles and syringes in Glasgow, the January 2004 issue of the Scottish Drugs Forum bulletin states:

"But while almost one million needles and syringes were distributed locally, between seven and 12 million were needed to cope with the estimated number of injecting episodes".

That answers in part Keith Raffan's question about why people are sharing needles: there are not enough to exchange. That information

"comes as the latest figures show that 259 new cases of HIV"—

not hep C, but HIV—

"were recorded across Scotland in 2003—their highest annual numbers since the mid-1980s."

Some very simple steps can be taken. For example, the Executive must increase needle exchanges. I refer to the Scottish Drugs Forum report of February 2004, "A Brief Survey on Drug Paraphernalia Distribution following Amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971)". The SDF sent out a questionnaire to various pharmacies, its member organisations and other voluntary sector organisations. Thirty-nine questionnaires were returned, and some of the responses were extremely interesting. The report states:

"Almost two thirds *would like* to supply sterile water and acidifiers, and half *would like* to supply stericups and filters.

It continues:

"17 responses cited financial barriers—uncertainty that monies would be available, and additional costs had not been anticipated. One respondent estimated an extra £120,000 would be required annually, within their region."

That is not a lot of money when we consider the latent costs that the NHS will incur in due course.

I return to the Scottish Drugs Forum bulletin for a comment on funding, on which I would like the minister to respond, because I do not know where we are with regard to the point that is made. The bulletin states:

"Meanwhile, Scottish councils have also been advised that the £6.8 million granted yearly for local authority rehabilitation services will continue—although it will be built into the mainstream revenue grant system permanently and not ring-fenced."

Keith Raffan talked about the availability of national money, but not even the money that is available to the Scottish councils is ring fenced. Obviously, fears are growing that that money will be used to alleviate other pressures within the council system.

I will finish with a quotation from the Royal College of Physicians, which is not known for being melodramatic in its use of language:

"What is certain is that, if we do not invest adequately now, we will not be able to afford the consequences of failing to tackle this epidemic."

Those are serious words indeed, minister.

17:13

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I, too, congratulate Keith Raffan on securing the debate, which clearly concerns a matter of serious proportions.

Irrespective of a certain vagueness in the figures, there is no doubt that hepatitis C has the capacity to cause grave problems for the national health service's infrastructure and a significant proportion of the Scottish population. Keith Raffan is correct to highlight those problems and suggest how the matter may be resolved.

In most cases, hepatitis C is a tragic by-product of the history of drug abuse that we have witnessed over the past 20 to 25 years. Irrespective of the actions of successive Governments, drug abuse has still not been overcome in our society in Scotland or elsewhere. Until such time as we are able to do something about the cause of the problem, we are unlikely to come up with sufficient answers for the effect. We should seek some way of cutting the degree and extent of drug abuse. That is no easy question to pose and I will be the first to admit that I do not have the answers. Education is a very important factor, both education to avoid the use of drugs and education about the nature of hepatitis C, its consequences and how it might be avoided.

I was disturbed to learn from Keith Raffan's discourse that needle exchange is not providing the answers that so many of us hoped that it

would. The minister must carry out some research to find out why the needle-exchange scheme is not working as we had all hoped and why it is failing to make the appropriate impact by way of a reduction in the incidence of hepatitis C.

A drugs clampdown in education and a resolution of the problems with needle sharing might not provide the complete answer. A question of personal responsibility comes into it. Sometimes, that is forgotten. We must work on the assumption that a small proportion of society is not prepared to assume that personal responsibility. How do we cope with that?

Christine Grahame: Will the member take an intervention?

Mr Raffan: Will the member take an intervention?

Bill Aitken: I will give way to Mr Raffan, as it is his debate.

Mr Raffan: I am a little bit worried about the direction in which Mr Aitken is going. I hope that he can assure the Parliament that he is not suggesting that those who, sadly, suffer from an addiction—drug addiction is a disease—should in any way be victimised for that disease, any more than alcoholics or those who smoke cigarettes, whose addiction is harder to kick and probably causes the greatest burden on the national health service.

Bill Aitken: The bottom line is that we are left with a proportion of the population who are, as Keith Raffan said, addicted. I am not for one moment saying that they should be cast adrift to meet whatever fate awaits them. It is obviously our responsibility to do something to ensure that they can be helped in the parlous situation in which many of them find themselves.

What is the answer? I am not attracted to the idea of ring fencing funding for any aspect of the national health service.

Mr Raffan: But the Tory Government did that for ages.

Bill Aitken: That is as may be. However, the fact is that, inevitably, that would lead to competing priorities for funding, which is never desirable.

The first thing that we must do is address the question of needle sharing, which Mr Raffan was totally correct to raise. Why is needle exchange not working? If it is a question of resources, we would happily explore that route.

17:18

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I tender the apologies of my colleague

Patrick Harvie, who had hoped to take part in the debate, but who is unable to be here. He wishes to inform the Parliament, however, that he will be jumping off a large building in Glasgow later this week in the cause of hepatitis C charities and that his sponsorship is still open and may be added to.

I very much welcome this debate on what Keith Raffan rightly called a public health crisis. In the public eye, there are almost two categories of hepatitis C sufferers. There are those who contracted hepatitis C from infected blood products before the current safety measures were in place. That applies, in particular, to people with haemophilia. There is widespread public sympathy for that group of patients and there is a feeling that the system has not treated them well at all.

There is a stigma attached to the other group, on whom we have been focusing tonight. That leads to a particular problem, on which I would like to focus by quoting from the final "Consensus" conference statement from the Royal College of Physicians. It is about case finding among groups that are at risk. The statement says:

"A high priority for case finding should be given to former injecting drug users".

Those are people who have been drug injectors in the past, but who have stopped injecting and who are, hopefully, living a much healthier lifestyle now, getting on with their lives and looking forward to the future. They might not be aware that they are infected with the virus but, if they were identified, they could be treated. The statement goes on to say that priority should be given especially to

"those over 40, who are likely to have a stage of disease which would benefit from treatment. Cost-effective methods of identifying this group, through public awareness initiatives, primary care, drug treatment services and prisons, should be established."

That group should probably be chased up. The issue of stigma might come into play, in that some people might not want to come forward and might feel that they have put that part of their life behind them. However, the matter is important because, as the document says,

"It must be faced that identifying more patients will mean increased demands and costs."

That is certainly true in the short term. In the long term these patients, if they are not treated at an earlier stage, will present with much more significant, expensive and devastating illnesses. It would be appropriate to do a serious case-finding exercise on former drug injectors to see whether we can catch them at a stage at which the disease is treatable. It is better to pay the cost up front now as that will save for the future—that is one of the most important considerations.

17:20

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): Keith Raffan and I are members of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on drug and alcohol misuse and this debate is near to our hearts.

The statistics that Keith Raffan read out alert us to a growing problem that is a big fear for all of us. I must admit that the figures came as a bit of a shock as they are three times the figures for England and Wales. Although most people regard the matter as a problem, it has to some extent drifted to the back of our minds. Perhaps the issues that Keith Raffan has raised today need to be brought to the front of people's minds so that they are more aware of them. Anything that we can do to achieve that is well worth doing, including education and the provision of information in general practitioners' surgeries. We see many issues on news broadcasts and it is all too easy to forget about hepatitis C.

Bill Aitken mentioned the problem in relation to expenditure in the NHS. That is an important issue, particularly given the effects of hepatitis C on the liver. As Keith Raffan mentioned, the drugs concerned cost £6,000 to £9,000 per patient and the problem will be a financial time bomb if it continues to increase at the current rate.

Mr Raffan: I hesitate to say, although I am afraid that I have to say, that the problem is a financial time bomb whatever happens. It is expensive to treat people with combination therapy, which costs £7,000 to £9,000 for a course of treatment but, if we do not do that, we will have an epidemic of cirrhosis and liver cancer further down the line. There will be bedblocking the like of which we have never seen and a huge strain on the NHS.

Dr Jackson: I thank the member for outlining that point.

Christine Grahame mentioned how important it is for us to identify hepatitis C sufferers. Keith Raffan said that one way to do that is through GPs, but another issue that we have discussed in depth at the cross-party group is how we can get people who come out of prison into effective treatment. At today's lunchtime meeting we were given startling figures about people who leave prison with drug problems. If such people are not treated, the chance of death in the first few weeks is high; the statistics are alarming.

When the probability of hepatitis C has been identified, screening comes into play. I will be interested to hear the minister state what work we are doing on identifying the problem and on screening, but the bigger issue, which has been mentioned by everyone who has spoken today, is needle exchange. What is the position of the various health boards on greater availability of free

needles to deal with the problem of shared needles, which pass on this dreadful disease?

This is one of the most important debates that we have had and I hope that we will move forward and raise awareness of the matter rather than letting it drift away to the back of our minds.

17:25

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I support Keith Raffan's motion on this important issue. Hepatitis C was one of the main issues that the Health and Community Care Committee considered in the previous session; indeed, the committee was key in ensuring that the Executive took action on compensation payments for those infected through contact with NHS blood products. The current Health Committee followed that up to ensure that the action that the minister promised was taken.

I am pleased that, after some unfortunate delay, the Skipton fund, which is being set up to manage the United Kingdom-wide ex gratia payments for people infected with hepatitis C from blood products, will go live in just five days' time. In itself, that is a major achievement. Although the process was slow, that is undoubtedly a major advance. It certainly is the case that developments in the Scottish Parliament have made the United Kingdom Parliament sit up and pay attention, hence the UK-wide initiative.

The motion is not about compensation for victims of hepatitis C, however; it is about taking effective action in treating and preventing the disease. The motion calls on the Executive to recognise the fact that the major public health crisis can be tackled effectively only through ring-fenced funding for treatment and preventive action. I believe that Keith Raffan made the case for urgent action absolutely clear. Investment now will—to some extent—save the NHS from the impending financial time bomb.

The Executive is rightly proud of its policy of devolving decision making on many health matters to the health boards. However, surely there is a need to ensure that, on issues such as hepatitis C, effective action is taken on a Scotland-wide basis.

Bill Aitken said that he was wary of the idea of ring fencing the funding. I am not often accused of praising Conservative Administrations, but I have to say that it is to the credit of the previous Conservative UK Government that it recognised the importance of ring fencing funding specifically to tackle the HIV/AIDS crisis and, responsibly, took action in that regard. That is an example of what Keith Raffan's motion says must be done to tackle the impending hepatitis C crisis. I support Keith Raffan's call and believe that that is

precisely the action that is required to avoid an even larger public health crisis in the future.

17:27

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I congratulate Keith Raffan on securing this important debate. Watching the minister scurrying to his advisers at the back of the chamber throughout the debate, we can tell that a wide range of issues has been raised that he is committed to responding to.

One of the issues that we should return to is that of hepatitis C in our society and the way in which we view people who suffer from the disease. Of course, as other members have said, one of the immediate problems is that we do not know all the people who suffer from the disease, which, in its early stages, is relatively hidden—a silent killer. Some people have contracted hepatitis C through their lifestyles but, of course, addicts rarely choose their lifestyles—virtually no one is an addict through choice. Other people have inadvertently become infected with hepatitis C.

It is interesting that a social stigma is attached to hepatitis C. We do not speak about methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus victims in hospitals in the same way, yet in a sense people can become infected by hepatitis C just as innocently as they can fall victim to MRSA.

If we stigmatise people who suffer from HCV, we will make it harder to find out who they are and to provide support to them. That is a moral issue, but there is also a practical issue about not stigmatising hepatitis C sufferers. If we do not support them, they are more likely to pass the disease to others. Therefore, besides the moral case for being non-judgmental, self-interest is involved.

From the various documents on the subject, it is perfectly clear that the means of transmission of the disease are imperfectly understood. There are clear paths through which transmission of the disease is understood to happen—in particular, in relation to injecting drug users who share their gear—but we must remember that there are other ways of transmission. Whether mother-to-baby infection can take place to any significant extent and to what extent the disease can be passed on through sexual contact or through sharing shaving instruments, for example, is not clear.

Addicts are victims, but everyone who is a victim of the disease is not an addict. There is a high incidence of the disease among prisoners because the chaotic lifestyles of injecting drug users throughout Scotland often lead those people into criminality. Therefore, we must address the continuing scandal of inadequate throughcare from prison to reintegration into normal life. Of

course, that is partly a financial issue, but it is also an issue of priorities. We must recognise that supporting prisoners should not be at the bottom of our pile of priorities; we should treat that matter seriously if prisoners are not to be a reservoir of infection for others.

I close by highlighting one fact from the statement issued on 22 April by the "Consensus" conference on hepatitis C. The statement says:

"Only half of those referred attend clinics".

We need more people in the community to make non-judgmental contact with people who are infected by the disease. It is in all our interests, and not only in the interests of those who are infected, that we step up the action.

17:32

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): I congratulate Keith Raffan on securing the debate. Hepatitis C, which is sometimes called "the silent epidemic", is one of the most serious and significant public health risks of our generation.

As Keith Raffan said, there are 18,109 reported cases, but the latest estimate from the Scottish centre for infection and environmental health suggests that a total of between 40,000 and 50,000 people in Scotland have hepatitis C. The reality is that, however we describe the present situation—whether as a crisis, an epidemic or a threat—we are faced with a public health risk of significant and increasing proportions.

In recognition of that emerging threat, the Scottish needs assessment programme was commissioned in 1999 to carry out a needs assessment of hepatitis C in Scotland. The resultant report, which was published in August 2000, set the framework for the Executive's response to addressing the key challenges that are posed by hepatitis C.

I emphasise this point because it may not be widely appreciated that the Executive has been active on this front for a number of years, has already set in train a spectrum of measures and has committed substantial resources to tackling the threat from the disease. I will give some flavour of what we have already done, although I realise, of course, that more must be done.

In order to bring further coherence and impetus to the programme of activity in Scotland, we have in hand the preparation of an updated action plan that will set out the action that is in progress and the additional measures that we propose to take. Some key issues have been raised by members today. Eleanor Scott talked about the importance of following up former drug users. We entirely agree that former drug users must be a targeted

group and a focus for screening and wider attention.

Christine Grahame talked about the need for more needle exchanges. That matter will certainly be dealt with in the action plan, of which I will say more in the context of current activity.

Keith Raffan and Bill Aitken mentioned more research, which is also important. I point to two studies that are being done—an examination of the injecting practices of injecting drug users and an evaluation of the impact of changes in the Lord Advocate's guidance on needle exchange, which several members called for. Therefore, some work that has been called for is in hand. Obviously, we will have to make decisions about other work in the light of the debate.

Mr Raffan: I welcome the minister's announcement of an updated action plan and additional measures. When will that plan be published, what resources will be made available to back it up and will it include a specific screening plan and further harm-reduction measures?

Malcolm Chisholm: The issue of screening will be dealt with and the plan should be ready later in the year. We will be able to say something about resources when it is published. I will talk about resources in a moment, although I am alarmed to see that three minutes of my time have gone already.

In the light of the recommendation from the HIV health promotion strategy review group in 2001, we extended the earmarked HIV prevention funding that is given annually to NHS boards to cover other blood-borne viruses, including hepatitis C. To enhance the scope for such prevention activity, we increased the available funds from £6.1 million to £8.1 million per annum. Boards use those resources in a variety of ways, including the funding of awareness-raising initiatives and needle exchange schemes. I stress that resources are already earmarked specifically for the prevention of blood-borne viruses such as hepatitis C.

Also in 2002, the Executive issued new information materials that aimed to give health professionals and patients as much information as possible about hepatitis C. As members have said, the predominant source of transmission is through injecting drug misuse and a range of information materials have been issued to drug services and prisons throughout Scotland to highlight the risks from injecting, including the risk of contracting hepatitis C. Over the past three years, we have invested an additional £34 million to expand and improve treatment and rehabilitation services for drug misusers. The money that goes to NHS boards for that is ring fenced. We also issued revised guidance on increasing the limits on the

number of needles and syringes to be made available. That has already been discussed, so I will say no more about it.

Good treatment and care are of the essence, and decisions about the suitability of patients for treatment are essentially for individual clinicians to make.

Dr Jean Turner (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind): Will the minister give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: I have only two minutes left.

The guidelines that were issued earlier this year by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and NHS Quality Improvement Scotland give advice on the use of combination therapy with pegylated interferon alpha and ribavirin. We are also giving a grant for the United Kingdom hepatitis resource centre in Scotland, which offers support and advice on testing and treatment to those who are affected by hepatitis C.

On the treatment side, we are funding the establishment of a national clinical database of patients who have been diagnosed with hepatitis C, with the aim of identifying treatments that patients have received and evaluating how effective those have been against the disease as it affects them. That will help in planning the organisation and resourcing of treatment services and will inform funding decisions. The Executive has also been discussing with clinicians the potential for setting up a managed clinical network—or networks—for hepatitis C, and funding has been earmarked for the appointment of a network manager. Networks of that sort will help to ensure that the considerable expertise that is available in Scotland can be accessed and utilised for the benefit of all patients. In addition, a Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guideline is being developed that will address all aspects of the management of hepatitis C and will be a useful and practical tool for clinicians and others.

Dr Turner: Will the minister give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: I do not have time. I have only one minute. If a motion is passed to extend the debate, I can take an intervention—otherwise, I cannot.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will allow the intervention, if the minister wishes.

Dr Turner: It is very good to have an increase in the number of needles that are available. However, in dealing with addicts, it is important to ensure that the needle exchanges are near where people stay. The money has to go towards making it possible for needle exchanges to be very close to where addicts are. If addicts cannot get their needles quickly where they stay, they will not

bother getting them and they will share needles. Has money been allocated to bring the needle exchanges closer to where addicts stay?

Malcolm Chisholm: I agree entirely with Jean Turner and thank her for making that point. The £8.1 million to which I have referred is for that, along with other things.

The issue of ring fencing funding for treatment has been at the heart of the debate. Dedicated funds are not given now for the treatment of HIV/AIDS. Such an approach was discontinued some years ago on the ground that boards were best placed to allocate resources for treatment on the basis of local assessment of need. Such decisions are always hard and I am called on to ring fence money for a great many things in the health service. I will reflect on what members have said, but there is always a tension between local decision making and national determination on such matters. It is not the norm to allocate resources for the treatment of specific illnesses.

That said, I acknowledge the pressure on services, perhaps particularly in Lothian. I am pleased that Lothian NHS Board has identified recurrent funding this year to support further capacity for the treatment of patients with hepatitis C. We shall certainly be monitoring that through the chief medical officer's group. The CMO is already working with Lothian NHS Board on that matter.

In my final minute, I will talk about the future. Resources for prevention, treatment and care will continue to be paramount, but we have to be sure that we focus on the right issues and that our planning and initiatives are soundly based. To that end, we have commissioned SCIEH to carry out work to provide robust estimates of the total number of persons who are living with hepatitis C, diagnosed and undiagnosed, including estimates of the distribution of cases by region and disease stage. In addition, SCIEH is undertaking work to estimate the future burden, including cost, of hepatitis C during the next two decades. Preliminary results from that work should be available shortly and will inform the development of prevention initiatives and the development of the assessment of care and treatment needs.

The Executive's effective interventions unit is also currently funding a substantial programme of research, totalling some £300,000 since 2002, to find better and more creative ways of changing the behaviour of injecting drugs misusers.

Members will understand that I have been struggling to get across all the initiatives that are under way. That is not to say that more does not have to be done. Hepatitis C is a priority that we have acknowledged during the past two or three years and we will reflect on all the points that were

made in the debate as we finalise our updated
action plan.

Meeting closed at 17:41.

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