

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 28 October 2004

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 28 October 2004

[The PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:31*]

Housing

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S2M-1898, in the name of Malcolm Chisholm, on improving the quality and availability of Scotland's housing, and three amendments to the motion.

09:31

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): A quality home for everyone has long been a central aim of the Executive, not just because a quality home should be a right rather than an aspiration, but because the aim goes straight to the heart of quality-of-life issues. Good-quality housing is central to supporting families in all their diversity and is vital for health, regeneration and economic growth.

We have come a long way since I last took up the reins as minister responsible for housing in May 1997. Then, public rented housing was in decline, fuel poverty was extensive and rough sleeping was widespread. There were high mortgage rates, repossession and increasing child and family poverty. That has all been turned around and we are now in the middle of a bold and exciting period of housing progress.

We have introduced the Scottish housing quality standard, which is a very ambitious target to ensure that warm, dry and decent homes become the norm in Scotland in the 21st century. Alongside that, we have put in place a new framework of options for councils to raise the funding that is required to deliver the new quality standard by 2015, be it through prudential borrowing, the use of receipts or transfer to community ownership.

Transfer to community ownership is one of the most effective means of achieving the standard. We have already transferred nearly 100,000 houses to community ownership. That alone is expected to deliver nearly £2 billion of housing investment over the next 10 years. I remain firmly committed to supporting further stock transfers under the new community ownership programme and we aim to transfer a further 70,000 houses by 2006.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I am happy to welcome the improvements

in housing quality that are mentioned in the minister's motion. However, does he agree that such improvements could also be possible if councils' debts were paid off in order to allow them to retain housing in that particular form of community ownership and thus improve the quality of their stock?

Malcolm Chisholm: Obviously, we have diversified the funding options through the prudential borrowing regime, but it is clear that what Elaine Smith proposes, irrespective of the other benefits of community ownership through tenant participation, would cost a great deal more in public expenditure terms. That would obviously have an effect on housing and other budgets.

To tackle fuel poverty, we introduced the warm deal home insulation programme and the central heating programme. Through those programmes, more than 200,000 homes have been insulated and more than 40,000 heating systems have been installed. By 2006, all pensioners and social tenants will have central heating. Recent research on the first year of the central heating programme showed that of the people who were fuel poor, nearly nine out of 10 were lifted out of fuel poverty after benefiting from the programme. In addition, the central heating programme and the warm deal are saving people money on their fuel bills and helping to reduce carbon emissions.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Does the minister agree that, as a result of the rises in fuel prices, more people will go into fuel poverty and that the figures that he quotes are now out of date?

Malcolm Chisholm: The rises in fuel prices are entirely regrettable and we shall certainly look at the action that we can take, particularly to protect those people who are most affected by the rises.

We legislated through the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 for a strong single regulatory framework and established Communities Scotland, whose role includes driving up standards in housing quality and housing and homelessness services. Registered social landlords and local authorities are now working to a common set of performance standards so that tenants can expect the same high standards of service, regardless of who their landlord is.

The 2001 act is a landmark act in other ways, too. Through it, we introduced a modernised single tenancy in the social rented sector and gave tenants greater rights in respect of succession, joint tenancies and exchanges. We also introduced a statutory framework for effective tenant participation and backed that with a team of tenant participation development officers and £4 million to support landlords throughout the country to put tenant participation strategies in place.

As I said to Elaine Smith a moment ago, tenant participation also goes hand in hand with transfer of housing stock to community ownership by giving tenants a greater say in the management of their homes. For councils that are looking to transfer, tenant involvement will be a key criterion for registration. I was keen to emphasise that when I spoke at the Tenant Participation Advisory Service conference in Dundee on Sunday.

For home owners, we have introduced the mortgage-to-rent scheme and supported the Mortgage Rights (Scotland) Act 2001 to give families that are at risk of repossession a breathing space to sort out their affairs. We have also introduced the private sector housing grant to support investment in private sector housing. As a result, investment now is 30 per cent higher.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: I must make progress, as I have already taken two interventions. I will take the member's intervention in a few minutes.

Measures such as the better regulation of shared houses, the registration of private landlords, the provisions of the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 and tenant participation have aimed not to middle-manage our housing system, but to get us closer to our vision. We want to ensure good-quality, warm, sustainable and affordable housing for all.

Before I take John Swinney's intervention, I want to make progress on the issue of affordable housing. This year, we carried out a wide-ranging review of affordable housing. We analysed the Scottish housing market, considered its impact on affordability and assessed requirements throughout the country for affordable housing. We also consulted widely and listened carefully.

We concluded that the long-term house price trend in Scotland does not point to a chronic problem with overall housing supply, but the review has provided strong intelligence on the very real affordability and supply problems in particular localities and the problems of housing market failure and surplus houses in other localities. Those problems range across private housing, subsidised low-cost ownership and social rented homes. The review has informed our investment plans to 2008 and the wider measures that we will take in future.

Over the next three years, we will spend a massive £1.2 billion on affordable homes for those who need them most. By 2008, our investment in new housing will be 46 per cent above this year's level, which is an annual increase in real terms of more than 10 per cent. That will tackle the acute demands for affordable housing in pressured

areas and replace and refurbish housing in poor-quality neighbourhoods.

We have raised our sights to a new three-year target for the supply of affordable homes—up from 18,000 to 21,500—to ensure that people have the choices that meet their needs and to support economic growth. We will fund more than 16,500 social rented homes over the next three years—the biggest social rented programme for many years. It will take hundreds of homeless people out of temporary accommodation into a permanent home, move us towards giving all homeless people the entitlement to a permanent home by 2012 and give people on housing waiting lists a far better chance of getting the house that they want.

Mr Swinney: I welcome what the minister says about affordable housing. However, does he accept that one of the practical issues facing any development of affordable housing in my constituency is the chronic lack of capacity in the water and sewerage infrastructure to deliver such developments? In the interests of joined-up government, does the minister have anything to say about representations that he has made to his ministerial colleague, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, and Scottish Water about expanding capacity to cope with the welcome plans that he is announcing?

Malcolm Chisholm: In my first three weeks, I have certainly become aware of the issue that the member raises. Last week, I had a meeting with Shelter Scotland and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, which raised that point. Of course I am taking up the issue with Ross Finnie.

Our plans include nearly 5,000 homes for low-cost home ownership by 2008 to help to meet the aspirations of hard-working families and essential workers who aspire to own a home of their own. Traditionally, those people would have been first-time buyers, but they currently find themselves priced out of particular areas of the market and cannot pursue their ideal job because of a lack of affordable housing.

The expansion of affordable homes will see the introduction of an innovative new programme and a range of initiatives to help people to get started on the property ladder, all based round the idea of shared equity, which will help people to enter the property market by buying a part share in a property that would otherwise be unaffordable. Communities Scotland will launch shortly proposals on the detailed application of the shared equity programme.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): As the minister has spoken about privately owned homes, which we all agree are an important part of our housing stock, will he say what percentage of housing stock he would like to see in private

ownership? Does he think that we should aspire to 100 per cent home ownership or is a lower target sustainable and viable in the long term?

Malcolm Chisholm: We have to be guided by the needs and aspirations of the communities that we serve. I do not have an ideal figure in the way that Patrick Harvie suggests.

How long do I have left, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: About another six or seven minutes.

Malcolm Chisholm: Thank you.

Our partners are crucial to realising our plans and our investment sets challenges for them. We will be looking to lenders in the private sector to boost public funds for affordable housing with more than £500 million of private finance, and private finance generated by the community ownership programme will further raise that sum.

We expect local authorities to complement our investment with additional income raised by local authorities from reduced council tax discounts on second homes.

Murray Tosh (West of Scotland) (Con): Will the minister clarify whether the Executive has accepted the recent Glen Bramley research exercise and, if so, will he clarify whether the Executive accepts Bramley's analysis of housing need by housing market areas or by a council-by-council breakdown? The minister will appreciate that a significant statistical difference is posed depending on that choice.

Malcolm Chisholm: I will say something about housing market areas in the next section of my speech, but certainly Bramley was fundamental to the conclusions that we came to in our affordable housing review.

The investment of £1.2 billion in affordable housing is a massive programme. It is vital that we allocate those resources in the optimum way across pressured markets and regeneration areas in both urban and rural contexts. It is also vital that we manage and deliver the programme in ways that secure maximum impact and efficiency. We are therefore consulting the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and housing providers on improved arrangements for making investment decisions and managing our funding programmes.

We are looking at possible options that include a re-examination of the current policy on the transfer of the management of development funding and the potential of housing market area boards as a vehicle for giving local authorities greater influence in strategic decisions on investment priorities across housing market areas. We aim to complete that consultation for the new year.

The measures that we have taken and the huge boost in housing investment to 2008 demonstrate that we are serious about improving the quality and supply of affordable housing in Scotland.

Looking ahead, delivery of our homelessness agenda and the supporting people programme remain key priorities. We have already put in place the most progressive homelessness legislation in Europe to ensure that every homeless person is entitled to temporary accommodation at least. That explains the increasing figures that the Scottish National Party highlights in its amendment—we want the hidden homeless to come forward and to have rights.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Malcolm Chisholm: I have already taken five interventions. I will take the member's intervention if I have time, but I will probably test the Presiding Officer's patience if I take any more.

It is our aim that, by 2012, every homeless person will have the right to a permanent home. We have invested in tackling the most extreme forms of homelessness. We are working to tackle rough sleeping and to close the large, outdated hostels in Glasgow. Every local authority has a homelessness strategy and every national health service board has a health and homelessness action plan in place. I was pleased to be able to drive forward those strategies over the past two years.

We will continue to deliver the full range of homelessness task force recommendations and implement the legislation at a steady but manageable pace. This year, we have been working with local authorities, COSLA, the homelessness monitoring group and organisations such as Shelter to ensure that families with children are provided with suitable temporary accommodation. We are now in a position to legislate with an order that will come into force in December. That is an important development and, although it affects small numbers of people, it is essential that, where families are housed in temporary accommodation, the accommodation meets appropriate standards for the care and security of children.

Many members want to hear about the supporting people programme, which is a key programme for vulnerable people. It enables frail, older people or those with physical or learning difficulties to live independently in their own homes and communities. It helps people to deal with a range of difficult personal problems from domestic abuse to homelessness to drug and alcohol rehabilitation and it supports them through crucial transition periods in their lives to help them to achieve a better quality of life.

The Scottish Executive is investing significant resources in that vital programme—£1.2 billion over three years to help at least 80,000 people a year. Funding per capita will be double that in England and we should also remember that the new funding is double what it was two years ago. Funding needs to be better tied to need throughout Scotland. The old funding arrangements, based on transitional housing benefit, created huge anomalies with funding that varied from £235 per capita in one local authority area to only £19 per capita in another.

The allocations announced by Margaret Curran on 1 October reflected the need to get better value for money for the taxpayer and to provide a fairer distribution of those crucial resources throughout Scotland. The funding package announced included £16 million of transitional support for those most affected by the redistribution process. The desire to improve value for money and to provide a fairer distribution of resources over time stands. However, I am in discussions with COSLA and others about the pace of change to ensure that it is more manageable locally. Several different options are on the table and I hope shortly to make an announcement on the matter that will satisfy most parties.

My time is up now so I will draw to a conclusion. Today I have outlined our progress since devolution and set out the direction for housing policy in Scotland: a continuing drive to improve the quality of the housing stock across all tenures; a major boost for investment in social housing with a clear focus on the needs of homeless people, those on housing waiting lists and the support required for those who are most in need; a step change in support to help essential workers, families and other first-time buyers to own their own homes; and wider measures to enable the housing system as a whole to respond to Scotland's needs. Taken together, those measures are a major step towards the aim of having a housing system that delivers an adequate supply of good-quality, affordable housing for all. They are another major example of devolution working for Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament endorses the Scottish Executive's commitment to a 30% increase in affordable housing provision by 2007-08 in order to increase the availability of social rented accommodation for homeless people, reduce pressure on waiting lists and help first-time buyers on to the housing ladder; welcomes the introduction of the Housing Quality Standard and the improvements in housing quality that are resulting from substantial community ownership and fuel poverty programmes; recognises the major achievements flowing from devolution for housing in Scotland, such as a modernised and single tenancy in the social rented sector, progressive homelessness legislation and the development of tenant participation and rights, and looks forward to the forthcoming Housing Bill which will

raise standards in the private housing sector and strengthen the rights of private sector tenants.

09:47

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the minister's return to this portfolio. As I look around the chamber this morning, I feel rather anxious to see to the back, the right and the left of me people who have a great deal of housing experience. I feel like the swimmer at the shallow end of the swimming pool with rather a lot of water wings and rubber rings holding me up. However, I intend not to sink but to learn to swim very quickly and to go straight into the deep end of the debate.

To that end, I thought that I would familiarise myself with some housing issues by referring to a debate from 13 January 2000 to see what the coalition parties were saying at that time and to compare that with where we are five years later. One finds some interesting nuggets in that debate. At that time, Wendy Alexander was the Minister for Communities and had responsibility for housing. During the debate, she said:

"Change is needed. The old ways have failed."

She went on to say:

"We will confront homelessness. People sleeping on our streets was the enduring symbol of so much that was wrong about the social and economic priorities of the Tory years. Young people curled up in sleeping bags gave the lie to trickle-down economics."

She then spoke the crucial words:

"The partnership promises that no one should need to sleep rough in Scotland by 2003."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol 4, c 66.]

I do not think that that has happened.

Further on in the same debate, Wendy Alexander said:

"There should be no second-class tenants in the new Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 13 January; Vol 4, c 69.]

There are lots of second-class tenants, many of whom are in the private sector. They have little protection, they find that their housing is inadequate, but they are frightened to speak up because they think that they will lose their tenancy.

There are second-class tenants who think that they are tenants but who are not tenants—they are the sofa surfers, who stay on friends' couches. If the friend were to say to them tomorrow, "Get off my couch and get out the door", they would have to go because they have no legal right to be there. They are and continue to be the hidden homeless.

Elaine Smith: Does the member not agree that the Executive has introduced one of the most

radical housing policies ever? I refer to the homelessness legislation, which will entitle everyone to a home. Does she not recognise that, in the short term, of course there will be a rise in the homelessness figures, but that in the long term, there should be a decrease in those figures? Will she not congratulate the Executive on taking that action?

Christine Grahame: I have no problem with people taking actions if they are effective and funded. The problem is that, in the five years since the statements that I have just repeated were made, the level of homelessness has gone up. I do not want to litter my speech with statistics—I will come to the figures later—but a vast number of young people and people in their mid-30s do not even have a tenancy; they live on sofas in shared accommodation. Indeed, they live the life of students into their 30s, which has a huge impact on their lives, the economy and so on.

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

Christine Grahame: I will make a bit of progress and then let the member in.

In the January 2000 debate on housing, the Executive promised to build each year

“7,000 new and improved homes”—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol 4, c 71.]

At the time, Fiona Hyslop pointed out that the difference between SNP and Labour is that

“we believe that, in a single social tenancy environment, the right to rent is imperative”—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol 4, c 76.]

We have lost the right to rent because the amount of social rented accommodation has been driven down. I will deal with that when I address the issue of the right to buy. Although a notional right to rent might exist, the properties are just not available for renting. Simply to have somewhere to live, young people and people in their 30s are having to take out mortgages that are four or five times their joint income with the result that homes are being repossessed, couples are deferring having families and so on.

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): Will the member give way?

Christine Grahame: I will give way soon if I can make some progress.

In the January 2000 debate, Robert Brown made an interesting comment about rough sleeping. He said:

“The commitment that no one should have to sleep rough by 2003 is important and challenging. ... Indeed, it is not too much to say that the reputation of the minister and of the Executive depends on it.”—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol 4, c 86.]

It was good of Robert Brown to make that comment; he might not feel the same way now that I have quoted it. If he does, perhaps he will call the Executive to account, given that some people are still sleeping rough in Scotland's cities and countryside.

In the same debate, Robert Brown also said:

“I must say to the minister that the right to buy is not a housing strategy. There are a variety of reasons to support it, ranging from populism to fears of social engineering and dislike of socially rented housing.”

In fact, I would say that there is a stigma attached to such housing.

Robert Brown went on to say:

“Right to buy involves a transfer of assets—provided by public investment—from the public to a smaller group of individuals at the expense of the community at large.”—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol 4, c 90.]

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

Christine Grahame: I hope that I will get time for taking all these interventions. I do not know who wanted to come in first.

Tommy Sheridan: I very much appreciate Christine Grahame's commitment in the Parliament and do not want to put her on the spot. However, the other day I noticed that she said that we should end the right to buy to protect housing stock. Does she support that policy?

Christine Grahame: Yes, absolutely. However, I should point out that we feel that those who already have the right to buy should retain it. After all, retrospective legislation is an anathema. As for new builds, members on this side of the chamber have absolutely no problem in supporting the stance that Mr Sheridan has outlined. If people retain the right to buy, investment in housing by housing associations or local authorities would be like putting the taps on full blast and leaving the plug out. They simply will not make that investment because they will lose their stock.

Mr Monteith: Will the member give way?

Christine Grahame: Okay.

Mr Monteith: I seek some clarification from Christine Grahame about her response to Tommy Sheridan's intervention. She said that there should be no right to buy for people in new builds. Would she extend that to new tenancies in existing builds?

Christine Grahame: Absolutely. I thought that I had made that clear in my response. It would be a victory for common sense in the chamber if that policy were accepted. There is no doubt that the right to buy has decimated socially rented housing and has driven many other economic factors in this country.

I am only halfway through my speech, so I will need to time things better. At this point, I want to quote some statistics that highlight areas in which there has been no movement. In 1999, 19,400 new private sector dwellings were completed and the figure was about the same in 2003. However, over the same period, the number of new housing association dwellings fell from 4,911 to just under 4,000. The amount of new public sector housing is, of course, negligible; only 81 new dwellings were built in 1999 and 59 in 2003.

There are now 2,031 households with children in temporary accommodation, which is a rise of 52 per cent since 2002. Members will have seen from the Shelter briefing that such a situation impacts on those children's education, health and so on. In fact, it affects their whole life. They are born to fail and the Liberal-Labour Government in Scotland has failed and continues to fail them. It is no wonder that one in five children continues to live in poverty.

I should also point out that 192,320 applicants are either on the waiting list or the transfer list for housing. That is an enormous number of people. The impact of the Executive's measures will be a drop in the bucket and will not change what is happening.

I think that I have a few minutes left.

The Presiding Officer: You have three minutes.

Christine Grahame: Oh, grand.

Almost 4,000 children are in bed-and-breakfast or temporary accommodation. I should also point out to Elaine Smith that there has been a record number of applications from homeless people to local councils; indeed, there has been an almost 20 per cent increase on the 1999 figures. Everyone would support any effort to reduce homelessness; however, the measures that have been introduced over the past five years have simply not worked.

I want very briefly to examine the budget's impact on this matter. As I have been making my way through the shallow end of the swimming pool, I have looked very carefully at what has been happening. When the Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland considered the Executive's announcement on funding additional affordable housing, it said:

"Today's announcement will not help the Scottish Executive to address the backlog of housing need in Scotland. In 2003 there were over a quarter of a million households on local authority and housing association waiting lists who cannot get a home because of a shortage ... An investment programme of an average 5,500 houses per year will do little to help them.

It is also looking like the Scottish Executive will not meet its current target of delivering 18,000 new and improved

homes by 2006. We estimate that it will miss ... by well over 2,000 homes ...

It will not be able to give all homeless people the entitlement to a permanent home by 2012—one of their flagship policy"

initiatives.

Shelter has pointed out that the overall housing budget is being cut by 1.3 per cent in real terms while the Scottish budget generally is rising by more than 10 per cent through to 2008. It concludes that the extra £100 million pledged for affordable housing must be the result of cuts elsewhere in housing.

I am out of time. We might quote figures and statistics; however, we all know that we are talking about individuals who are suffering. Children are being deprived in a rich country simply because they do not have warm, secure and affordable housing. Quite frankly, in the five years that Labour and the Liberals have been in power, they have not changed a thing.

I move amendment S2M-1898.1, to leave out from "endorses" to end and insert:

"recognises that it is a basic human right to have the comfort, security and stability of a warm affordable home and that decent suitable housing is crucial to the individual's quality of life, whether young or old, and crucial to healthy, thriving communities and the economy at large; notes that, after five years of the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition, homelessness has increased substantially and that the right to buy has seriously damaged the socially rented sector; therefore calls on the Scottish Executive to revisit its right to buy policy, to utilise the proposed planning and housing legislation to facilitate the provision of affordable housing and to ensure that Scotland's people have access to the homes they deserve across tenures and that the scourge of rooflessness, bed and breakfast and "sofa surfing" is consigned to history."

09:58

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I, too, welcome the minister to his new remit. I am sure that he and our communities spokesman, Mary Scanlon, will have a most enjoyable and constructive time debating with each other in the months ahead. Mary is not here today because she is the principal speaker at a conference.

Although we have before us another Executive motion—another welter of self-congratulatory words—there has been an absence of any real progress since the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 was passed. Let us be clear: Scotland does not face a housing crisis of the kind that faces south-east England, where there is a very real difficulty in providing homes for everyone who wants them. Indeed, the last time I looked, there were more public sector houses available in Scotland than there were people who wanted a home. Of course, there are several reasons for that situation.

However, I make it clear at the start that we would prefer the private sector to provide housing.

Although we have high aspirations in that regard, we acknowledge that there are perfectly justifiable reasons why everyone cannot own their home, and when people are reliant on the public sector, it is essential that good-quality and economically reasonable housing is provided. The Conservatives have always followed that policy in this Parliament. To be fair, I should say that a number of provisions in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 will make a significant difference to public sector tenants, but progress has been desperately and disappointingly slow.

We welcome the transfer of Glasgow City Council's housing stock to the Glasgow Housing Association. One of the most pleasing aspects of post-war Scottish housing has been the success of the housing association movement. Although the odd association has gone belly up, there can be no doubt that, when given a greater degree of responsibility for their housing conditions, tenants respond positively and responsibly. There are many examples—in Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland—of how associations have worked to the benefit of all concerned.

Linda Fabiani: Does Mr Aitken accept that that level of involvement, control, responsibility and rights can also be achieved within council ownership—for example, through the co-operative model that Glasgow City Council used some years ago?

Bill Aitken: I will discuss such issues later in my speech, but the fact is that council housing failed council tenants over many years. The Executive eventually recognised that.

If people are given responsibility for their own living conditions, they will respond positively. Over the years, the dead hand of Glasgow City Council's housing department has impinged adversely on the lives of hundreds of thousands of council tenants in Glasgow.

Patrick Harvie: Does the member agree that people taking responsibility for and being involved in the homes in which they live can be achieved at a community level—through housing associations, for example—and not only at an individual level?

Bill Aitken: Absolutely—that is the point that I am making. I am full of praise for the way in which the housing association movement has succeeded. I am sure that he already knows them, but I could show Patrick Harvie many classic examples of housing associations in quite poor areas of Glasgow that have worked tremendously well and have made a real difference to the housing conditions of their tenants.

If the dead hand of Glasgow City Council's housing department is to continue impinging on the operation of the GHA—and many of the same people are still involved—we will not progress as quickly and effectively as we would like to. We have to break down the large monolithic housing blocks into small, more manageable, locally accountable units. If we do not do that, much worthwhile momentum will be lost.

The main difference between ourselves and the left-wing parties in this chamber is that we are prepared to trust people. There is always reluctance—especially on the part of the Executive—to let people really stand on their own feet. The new minister should ensure that the umbilical cord is cut as quickly as possible and that Glasgow, for example, has a significant number of small, manageable and accountable housing associations in place by the end of next year.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The member talks about trusting the people and he castigates Glasgow City Council for its handling of its housing stock; so will he congratulate Aberdeenshire Council on its handling of its housing stock? The council tenants of Aberdeenshire voted to remain within local authority housing.

Bill Aitken: That, of course, is their democratic right; I would not question that in any way. I do not think that such a course would have been the way forward for Glasgow, but different conditions might well apply elsewhere. That is what giving people responsibility is all about. The experiment in Glasgow—which I am convinced will work—has not been emulated elsewhere to any great extent. If progress is to be made, we have to give more power to the people.

Unfortunately, housing providers are being disadvantaged in a number of ways. The problem of antisocial behaviour has always bedevilled public sector housing. The vast majority of tenants seek only to lead reasonable lives. The provision in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 for housing providers to be forced to rehouse antisocial tenants—who, in some cases, have been evicted by other providers before—for wilful fire-raising and for drug dealing is causing considerable concern in some communities in Scotland. A much more robust approach is required. I have said it before and I make no apology for saying it again: if people are not prepared to live in a civilised manner and are prepared to make life hell for their neighbours, they must be taken out of mainstream housing altogether until they can demonstrate that they are fit to live with those whose lives they have consistently and persistently made a misery.

The Executive is to introduce a housing bill and we await its proposals with interest. However, we

serve notice now that, if the Executive is not prepared to take action against the antisocial minority, we will seek to amend the bill in order that it does so.

I turn now to the private sector. There is general concern about the way in which property prices have escalated in recent years, prejudicing the young buyer and the first-time buyer. We must see what can be done and we must certainly encourage more use of brownfield, inner-city sites in vacant land, much of which has lain derelict and unused for decades. I understand that some 10,846 hectares of derelict urban vacant land were recorded in 2003. We must acknowledge the miserable failure of the post-war peripheral scheme solution to bad housing; and we must seek to build inner-city communities that are close to employment opportunities, shopping and recreation. I am interested in what the minister said about equity sharing and co-ownership. Such plans could be a way forward and we will certainly consider any concrete proposals.

It is depressing that 42 per cent of rural derelict land has been lying unused since 1981. That land is crying out for development, although much of it cannot be developed for the reasons that John Swinney articulated—namely, that Scottish Water has manifestly failed to get its act together. Until the minister and his colleagues are prepared to take appropriate action in that respect, we will not make much progress towards ending the depopulation of some of our country areas. We will certainly raise the matter forcefully with the minister's colleague, Ross Finnie, in the months ahead.

I agree that progress has been made, but that progress has been largely as a result of the implementation of Conservative policy. Who would have thought that the provisions of the Tenants Rights etc (Scotland) Act 1980 would have been built upon by Labour? Who in their wildest dreams would have thought that the Conservative policy of transferring council homes to housing associations would be implemented by Labour? It is to the Executive's credit that it has recognised the abysmal failure of its colleagues in Labour-controlled councils.

We will create more homes in Scotland once we simplify the planning regulations and speed up the process and we look forward with interest to what the Executive will do in that respect. Needless to say, if the Executive requires any advice or assistance on housing or planning matters, I and my colleagues—particularly Mary Scanlon—will be delighted to provide it with draft policy proposals. In accordance with its usual practice, the Executive will initially deny those proposals, and then implement them.

I move amendment S2M-1898.2, to leave out from "endorses" to end and insert:

"recognises that housing stock transfer to community-based housing associations, a policy introduced by the Conservatives, gives tenants greater rights, responsibilities and input into the way their housing is run; believes that, to improve the standard of public housing for everyone, it is necessary to step up the process of devolving control of housing from local authorities to local community groups; further believes that, to improve the standard and supply of private housing for rent or purchase, a review and modernisation of the Scottish planning system is required to simplify and speed up the development process, and notes with concern the restraint on new housing construction currently imposed in Scotland by the inadequacies of Scottish Water's sewerage network."

10:07

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): Scottish Green MSPs welcome this important debate on housing; we also welcome the minister to this important portfolio. If he makes the right decisions in communities, he will have a major impact on health and justice for the people of Scotland.

Our amendment acknowledges the notable efforts in housing by the Scottish Executive since devolution and we have welcomed recent Executive commitments to improve the quality and availability of Scotland's housing. However, our message to the minister is clear: the housing agenda has come far, but not far enough.

Many challenges lie ahead and Scottish Greens call on the Executive to extend its effort in two key areas. We note the Executive's commitment to increase the provision of affordable homes from around 6,000 this year to 8,000 in 2007-08; but what does the Executive have to say about ending the right to buy? The housing market is out of balance because of real shortages of good-quality and affordable rented housing. Although the Executive will provide new affordable homes on the one hand, around 18,000 homes a year are lost through the right to buy.

Elaine Smith: I agree with Shiona Baird in that I, too, want to see the right to buy go. However, does she acknowledge that the Executive has reduced the discounts on right to buy?

Shiona Baird: We seek to extend policies to deal with the issue, which is fundamental to the problem that the Executive faces. The Executive must acknowledge that its attempts to increase the provision of affordable homes will continue to be undermined by the loss of houses through the right to buy.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): How are those houses lost? If people buy them, they continue to live in them. The houses might not be being rented, but they are not lost—people

are still living in them. The roofs over people's heads are not lost. The point is that the right to buy is one of a number of tools in a toolbox of housing measures. When the Social Justice Committee considered the Housing (Scotland) Bill, we radically changed the provisions on right to buy, to limit its take-up but to allow it to continue where it provides a solution.

Shiona Baird: The fundamental issue is that if the right to buy is affecting people's right to have a roof over their heads, something is out of balance.

Karen Whitefield: It is not affecting that right.

Shiona Baird: It patently is, because if that were not the case, there would not be a housing need and we would not be having this debate; everything would be worked out. We need to debate that fundamental issue.

In a recent poll by Shelter, 93 per cent of respondents thought that it would be more difficult for the next generation to find housing and 84 per cent of them thought that more affordable housing was needed in their area. That begs the question whether MSPs are listening. What does the Executive have to say to those people?

If the Executive is serious about addressing the backlog of housing need in Scotland, it will agree with me that the right to buy's time is up. We hope that the review of the right to buy in 2006 will be informed by an open and comprehensive consultation on future options, including the abolition or restriction of the right to buy. I stress that the Executive must listen carefully to calls from many housing agencies to abolish the right to buy for new homes.

Mike Rumbles: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Shiona Baird: I think that I have taken enough interventions.

It is vital that the review of the right to buy takes place.

Mike Rumbles: I have a point of clarification.

Shiona Baird: I will carry on.

The Presiding Officer: You have about two and a half minutes.

Shiona Baird: Oh flip!

Between 1994 and 2000, the average number of winter deaths each year in Scotland was 4,000. That rate is worse than that of the coldest European countries. The winter 2002 rate was higher than the normal rate by about 2,500 deaths.

Our homes not only have a direct impact on our health and well-being, but are a major contributor to global environmental problems such as climate

change. Our energy inefficient homes are losing heat and losing their occupants money.

Last week's publication of WWF's "Living Planet Report 2004" showed that Scotland has a disproportionately large ecological footprint: it consumes resources at three times the rate at which the planet can renew them. We support WWF's call for the provision of 10,000 new or refurbished sustainable homes by 2012. Rising oil prices will adversely affect improvements in fuel poverty figures. I believe that we can bring people out of, and—most important—keep them out of, fuel poverty only if we address energy efficiency in a serious and concerted way, but that is not happening. There is no national target for energy efficiency in Scotland.

The Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 required local authorities to make substantial improvements in domestic energy efficiency, which could have meant a 30 per cent improvement in such efficiency over 10 years. However, in Scotland some local authorities have managed to negotiate that target down to levels as low as 9 per cent. The act must be amended to include mandatory local authority energy efficiency targets, to ensure that local authorities provide sufficient resources to meet them. The resources are there; all that is necessary is a bit of joined-up thinking. Warm homes dramatically reduce winter hospital admissions, which cost millions of pounds.

Scotland is facing a housing crisis because of poor housing conditions and a lack of affordable new homes. The Executive has achieved some successes, but there is a long way to go before all the people of Scotland secure the quality and choice of housing that they deserve. I hope that the minister can assure us that the Executive will report, at appropriate intervals, its progress on meeting the challenge of satisfying the basic human right to a well-insulated, affordable home.

I move amendment S2M-1898.4, to leave out from "endorses" to end and insert:

"acknowledges the Scottish Executive's commitment to increase affordable housing provision and the beneficial consequences that this will have for a range of people in Scotland; notes that the welcome increases in the provision of new affordable housing may be offset by a loss of affordable housing stock through the right to buy; requests that the Executive's review of right to buy in 2006 under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 is informed by an open and comprehensive consultation on future options for right to buy; recognises the Executive's efforts to improve standards in housing quality, especially with the introduction of the housing quality standard, fuel poverty programmes and the forthcoming Housing Bill; further recognises the contribution that poor quality housing and lack of environmental awareness in housing design make to Scotland's disproportionate ecological footprint and number of winter deaths; supports WWF Scotland in its call for the Executive to set a target for 10,000 new or

refurbished sustainable homes by 2012; believes, therefore, that whilst there have been notable achievements flowing from devolution for housing in Scotland, many challenges lie ahead, and calls on the Executive to report at appropriate intervals on its progress on improving the quality and availability of housing."

10:15

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I, too, welcome the new team of communities ministers. I have dealt with Malcolm Chisholm and Johann Lamont with satisfaction—if not always with agreement—in different contexts. I also pay tribute to the members of the previous team, who did a good job and with whom I worked happily.

The motion is one of the Executive's better motions: it is not too self-congratulatory, it touches on many of the varied aspects of housing and it reflects the greater priority that has been given to housing since devolution. For many years, housing languished down the political scale. It is now more of a priority and more money is being promised for the building of new houses. Although it must be admitted that that increase will start from a low base, it is a step in the right direction.

It is encouraging that all the amendments say a few things that are worth saying. In other words, there is quite a lot of common ground in our efforts to deal with the remaining issues in housing. The exploration of different ways of providing housing, whether through community housing associations, co-ownership or different methods of funding, is welcome. We should also consider tenants' co-operatives, on which I wrote a pamphlet about 30 years ago. Times have moved on, but the co-operative philosophy is still relevant to housing and to other matters.

Planning and sewerage problems will be dealt with in the proposed planning bill. It is vital that the Executive and the Parliament get the right balance between promoting new development and allowing communities to have more say about what development goes ahead. I know that Ross Finnie will deal vigorously with the issue of sewerage—*[Interruption.]* Not personally, I hasten to add. The last time that the Executive held a consultation on such matters, the emphasis was on clean drinking water, beaches and so on. No one mentioned sewerage, which we must deal with. That shows that issues can arise quickly in politics.

Another issue that we must deal with is how to be fair to those people who are on the housing waiting list. It is right that we have produced good legislation for tackling homelessness. Tenants' right to buy has good and bad points, which we must balance out. I have received representations from councils, both during meetings and in writing, about the great difficulty that they experience in finding houses for people who are on the waiting

list, because of the priority that is given—rightly—to people who are genuinely homeless and because of the right to buy. I agree with my colleagues who say that the right to buy does not mean that the house disappears and that it is still a valuable asset, but—

Linda Fabiani: Does the member believe that houses that are bought under the right to buy are still valuable assets to the community when they are owned en bloc by private landlords or when family members have bought them for holiday homes, for example?

Donald Gorrie: Second homes are a thorny issue, but the Executive is tackling it—rather too slowly, to my mind—by having a fairer tax system on second homes, which will provide more money for housing.

The right to buy is a thorny issue. We must address carefully how to provide the right houses for homeless people while still being fair to people who are on an ordinary waiting list. I welcome the fact that the Executive is putting in more money to help councils and housing associations to build more houses for social renting, but I suggest that it, the Parliament, COSLA—many councils feel strongly on the issue—and the bodies that provide housing should discuss and determine whether it is possible to create the proverbial level playing field and to give slightly more support to people who are on the ordinary housing waiting list. That might mean reducing the right to buy or changing it in some way, such as removing it from new houses. We should at least have a genuine discussion about the matter. In the chamber, we have a sort of yah-boo argument; if we could get in a room and have a sensible argument, we might come to a reasonable solution. It is a difficult matter, and we will not make everyone happy overnight.

We have a two-stage objective: to provide decent-quality, well-heated homes for everyone—the Executive has been doing good work on that; and to provide people with homes under whatever system of ownership they would like, whether joint ownership, tenancing or something else. The latter is a longer-term objective, and we must keep it in mind, but in the first place we must provide more homes so that people of all sorts can have homes. That would be a step in the right direction. The Executive is moving in that direction, but I suggest that it should discuss with local authorities and others how to deliver all that as well as possible.

10:22

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Like other members who have spoken, I welcome the two ministers to their new roles.

Since the Parliament's inception in 1999, I have taken part in numerous debates on housing and, as a member of the Social Justice Committee, I was also involved in the passing of the two key pieces of housing legislation that the Parliament has produced: the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. Those, and other housing-related pieces of legislation, such as the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004, demonstrate that housing has been a key priority for the Parliament.

It is entirely right and proper that housing should have been such a priority for the Parliament during its first few years, and it is also proper that it should continue to be a key priority of the Parliament and the Executive. Housing is as basic a human need as they come. Everyone should be entitled to live in a secure, warm and comfortable home, but there are still too many people in Scotland who live in poor housing conditions and who find it difficult to obtain decent social rented accommodation. There is also a growing number of people who find it increasingly difficult to get on to the first rung of the property ladder.

That is why I welcome the recent investment announcement that is contained within the comprehensive spending review. The three-year plan aims to provide almost 22,000 affordable new homes, comprising more than 16,000 homes for social renting and around 5,000 for low-cost home ownership, which says something about the Executive's commitment to the social rented sector. The provision of those additional homes is vital if we are to fulfil our aspiration to provide decent affordable homes to all who need them and is a crucial part of the effective implementation of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. We can move people out of temporary accommodation only if we have sufficient houses available and, similarly, housing lists can be reduced only if there are sufficient numbers of good-quality houses for rent in the locations in which people want them. However, the notion that simply abolishing the right to buy will solve all Scotland's housing problems is complete nonsense. Before we had the right to buy, when people such as my parents got married and started to look for a home, the reality was that they had to continue to live with their own parents or go into the private rented sector.

Linda Fabiani: I do not think that Karen Whitefield's parents are much younger than mine were, and I am old enough to remember a generation that aspired to a council house in a decent area and got a decent council house in a good area. That is what the right to buy erodes, because the good houses in the best areas have been bought up under the right to buy, in some cases by the grandchildren of those who lived there for years on end. The picture that Karen

Whitefield paints is certainly not the way that I remember things being.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You are making an intervention, not a speech.

Linda Fabiani: I am terribly sorry, Presiding Officer.

Does Karen Whitefield agree that decent council housing was much more available to generations before ours?

Karen Whitefield: It was not available to my parents. Many people want to live in the social rented sector, which is what many of my constituents do. For example, 68 per cent of those who live in the social rented sector in North Lanarkshire live in council housing, while many more live in housing association houses and are happy to do so. My point is that simply abolishing the right to buy will not solve all our problems. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 attempted to address the problems of the wide-scale right to buy by reducing the levels of discount available, increasing the cost floor rules so that tenants had to wait much longer before they were entitled to use their right to buy and allowing the right to buy in pressured areas to be suspended where appropriate. Those measures, not trying to pretend that things will be all right if we abolish the right to buy, will make the difference.

I also welcome the plans to introduce a housing bill to improve the quality of housing in the private sector. Having improved the rights of tenants in the social rented sector through the provisions of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, we must ensure that those who rent from the private sector enjoy similar levels of protection. The forthcoming bill will build on the housing improvement task force's recommendations and attempt to address the problems of poor-quality housing in the private sector. I certainly look forward to working with my colleagues in the Communities Committee during the process of developing and scrutinising that bill.

The introduction of the prudential borrowing regime has opened up further investment opportunities to those councils that have manageable housing debt levels. I am pleased that, in North Lanarkshire, many of my constituents will benefit from receiving new kitchens and new bathrooms. Indeed, all council stock will benefit from that investment over the next few years and, in line with the Executive's commitment to tenant participation, North Lanarkshire Council is giving the tenants an opportunity to choose their own kitchen and bathroom styles.

Also, in Petersburn in my constituency, Link Housing Association Ltd has totally transformed

an area of what was once some of the worst housing I have ever seen. Many of the tenants there have lived there for more than 30 years, renting from the council and a housing association, and now show off their houses with great pride. I say to Christine Grahame that they believe that there is no stigma to renting from a housing association.

Christine Grahame: I never said that there was.

Karen Whitefield: Christine Grahame did say that.

Christine Grahame: Will Karen Whitefield give way?

Karen Whitefield: No, I am sorry, but I am nearly finished.

Since its inception, the Parliament has done much to address the major housing issue in Scotland, but there can be no denying that problems still exist and that existing legislation is not sufficient to address them. That is why we must push on with increased investment and reform and ensure that the planning framework enables local housing need to be met. We must also ensure that the housing supply complements local and national economic development and that the complex problems that are faced in the private housing sector are addressed effectively. I am sure that the Parliament looks forward to meeting that challenge.

10:29

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Apparently, in days gone by, there was an aptitude test for secret service entrants that involved a problem with a toilet flooding due to gushing taps. The entrants were asked to deal with that problem. Some reached for the mop and bucket, which is what the Executive does, and others turned off the taps.

The Executive's inability to deal with the very serious crisis in housing supply is clearly illustrated by the fact that we are losing far too many more houses than we are building. That is the central problem that must be confronted. More than 50 per cent of local authority council homes have been lost since 1979. We have figures showing that, in 1999, 81 new council houses were built. Last year, 59 new council houses were built. The gap caused by the loss of several hundred thousand homes cannot be plugged by building 81 or 59 new ones.

That is why the misnamed right to buy has to be ditched. It is unfortunate that none of the amendments before us call for that, as my amendment was not accepted for debate. In 1999, we campaigned for the right to buy to be ditched. In 2003, we campaigned for it to be ditched. We

will continue to campaign for the right to buy to be ditched, because there should be no right to privatise public housing. That is what the right to buy means.

Instead of the right to buy, why not have a right-to-rent discount? Why do we not reward tenants in that way? If we are prepared to reward tenants by giving them a discount to buy their homes, why do we not reward them with a discount to rent their homes after a 10-year rental period? What would the difference be? The difference would be that, if a tenant lived in a property for more than 25 years, they could have a rent-free existence in that property. When they move or when they die, that property would return to the public pool, and would return to being a public asset.

A home that was a public home remains a home for the person who buys it, and no one should blame anybody who takes the opportunity to buy their home—they are staring a gift horse in the mouth. They are getting a home worth several thousand pounds more than they have to pay for it, so we should not blame the individual for taking up the opportunity. The point that Karen Whitefield fails to grasp is that that home, which used to be there for the public, is now a private home. That is the difference. The Parliament should not be providing public subsidies and building public homes for them to be sold to private individuals who then make a profit either renting them out—as is happening now, particularly with grandparents' homes—or selling them on quickly, generating a tidy profit.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I find the concept of a "public home" rather curious, as if anybody could walk into the thing. Could Tommy Sheridan give us an indication of his vision for the balance—in terms of numbers, percentages or whatever—between different forms of tenure in Scotland? That is what underlies the debate, but he has failed to recognise that in his speech.

Tommy Sheridan: First, let me discount Robert Brown's stupid comment: he knows what I mean by a public home, as does everybody else. A public home is a home built by public money for public provision. That is what council houses and housing association homes are, and it is those homes that are being sold off through the right to buy. There should be no right to buy. If we are to introduce any right, it should be a right-to-rent discount to reward tenants. That would be imaginative and radical, and it would provide stability in the housing market.

On Robert Brown's point about the balance, every single individual should of course have the right to purchase a home. That is why private house builders build homes. Whatever balance is arrived at, that is the one that we will live with. The problem is that the balance is being skewed

towards private ownership, instead of towards public ownership. That is the difficulty. We are artificially skewing the housing market towards private ownership by removing public homes. Those individuals who want to get on to the property ladder should be able to purchase a private home, not one that was built with public money.

Karen Whitefield says that that will not solve the problems. Of course it will not solve the problems but, like turning off the tap in the flooding toilet, it will certainly help. Allied to that, we need a massive investment programme. The Executive's ambition in this regard is woefully inadequate. The Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland and the Scottish Council for Single Homeless point out that 12,000 new social rented homes a year is the absolute minimum that is required. Today, the Executive is announcing that it might increase its target from 6,000 to 8,000. However, not all those homes will be for social rent. That is woefully inadequate.

If we are going to have any housing strategy that will tackle the lengthening of waiting lists, the rise in the number of homeless people and the inability of the public sector to provide good-quality, affordable rented homes, then we have to ditch the right to buy and replace it with a right-to-rent discount scheme to reward tenants, and we will have to increase massively expenditure on the provision of social rented homes.

10:36

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): In the Perth and Kinross Council area, there is currently a combined waiting list of 4,639 applicants. That follows a rigorous review and, even if the 700 to 800 who are seeking a housing transfer are stripped out, there are still about 3,800 new applicants on that waiting list. I know that the figures might well be higher in other parts of Scotland, but housing need is experienced individually, not collectively. Every one of those 3,800 households is in need right now, with precious little likelihood of that need being met. There is virtually no chance now of somebody getting a council house unless they are actually homeless. I think that that is what Donald Gorrie might have been referring to in some of his comments. In Perth and Kinross there have been 1,500 applications from homeless people this year alone. It would be very helpful if, in her closing remarks, the deputy minister could give some indication of how the global spending figures will break down.

The Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland is already concerned that the Government's intentions to build just 5,500 affordable houses per year will result in a continuing shortfall. The figure

of 5,500 suggests an average of only 75 houses per constituency per year. Even if every constituency got those 75 houses, it would take about 25 years to clear the current waiting list in Perth and Kinross. The population in our area is growing, so the figures are likely to go up. The assumption is also made that we can find the land to build those houses on.

I make no apologies for repeating in the chamber what I, my colleague John Swinney and others have already said about the new player in the housing game: Scottish Water. It does not matter that it is not Scottish Water's role to be a player in housing and it does not matter that it does not want that role. The fact is that, right now, Scottish Water is having as great an impact on housing in Scotland—if not greater—as anything that the Minister for Communities might wish to do. Embargoes on development are in place all around the country. Huge swathes of Scotland are blocked for any kind of house building, because of sewerage and drainage constraints.

A written answer made by one of the minister's predecessors in August indicated that, of the capacity to accommodate 230,000 houses, which is currently a theoretical figure in local authority plans, half the sites that have been identified are affected by water or drainage constraints. In theory, we could build 230,000 houses in Scotland; in fact, 115,000 of those are blocked because of the problem with Scottish Water. It is a colossal problem, which needs to be dealt with. For a short while, there was a complete development embargo for the whole city of Perth. Luckily, that has now been lifted, but there is still a problem in my constituency and in others.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): That is a serious issue, and the Finance Committee has taken an active interest in it. Does the member recognise, however, that the £47 million a month run rate of investment is tackling that issue? Does she agree that any new entrants from the private sector who wish to be connected to the water supply should contribute to that?

Roseanna Cunningham: There are many different ways in which it could be tackled. I would like to see evidence of concrete results for the investment that is being made. By concrete results I literally mean houses that can now be built that could not be built before. That is an important issue that needs continually to be brought to the chamber.

Current drainage constraints have blocked development of more than 1,200 potential open-market housing sites in Perth and Kinross; worse, that includes more than 250 sites that would have been earmarked for the development of affordable housing. We need to remember that the lack of

affordable housing can be particularly detrimental in rural areas, where transport and distance issues are a far greater problem than in the cities. I need to hear far more detail about how the minister hopes to counter the negative effect of sewerage and drainage constraints on housebuilding.

My second concern is one that has been reiterated today, which is the impact that the tackling of right to buy is having on the situation in Scotland. Karen Whitefield's logic is bizarre. Unless we undertake a wholesale review of the way in which housing is provided, we have to accept that the right to buy has not only contributed to the problem in the past and present but will contribute to it in future. In *The Herald* yesterday, Alastair Cameron of the cross-denominational group, Scottish Churches Housing Action, described the extension of the right to buy as being like

"filling a bath without putting a plug in".

I could not put it better myself.

The right to buy needs to be tackled. We must remove it from new tenancies and from new build, and we need to put the plug back in, at least until the situation in Scotland is resolved. We will have to move on the issue soon. It is not helpful of the Tories to introduce some new concept of "mainstream housing". I am curious about what non-mainstream housing would be in the Tories' world view. In truth, people will have to be housed somewhere, regardless of their situation. The lack of affordable housing in the public rented sector and in the owner-occupied sector is starting to have a serious negative effect on development in huge areas of the country. Let us not wait until someone decides to make an updated version of "Cathy Come Home" before we move on this.

10:42

Murray Tosh (West of Scotland) (Con): Mainstream housing is a well-known term in the affordable housing sector. It means housing that is not special needs housing.

I begin my speech, as Donald Gorrie began his, by reflecting on the contribution to the debate of the previous ministerial team, which did a lot to move housing issues up the agenda. Much of that was reflected in Malcolm Chisholm's speech—I welcome him back to this brief. I would like to refer particularly to the points that he made about the supply of affordable housing. I listened closely to what he said and I welcome the recent increase in funding for affordable housing, which, unusually, was more significant than the Executive spin-doctors made out at the time. That increase in funding has been widely welcomed.

The context in which we need to assess that, however, is the very high standard that has been explicitly set by the Executive and by the Parliament in passing the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, in which there is a target of 2012 as the date by which we would expect everyone in Scotland to be properly and adequately housed. That is a target that I am happy to endorse, and I very much hope that we can achieve it. The question, though, is whether we have put in place a regime that is adequate to achieve that objective.

Earlier, I asked Malcolm Chisholm about the role that the Bramley research had played in guiding the Executive to its current level of resource commitment in that area. While I do not think that he answered the question that I put to him—I will read the speech carefully later, but I think that there is still a bit of information that I want—he did confirm that the Bramley research was central to the Executive's decision about what resources to allocate in the current three-year period. That is an interesting point, because it begs quite a significant question, which is the purpose of the 32 local housing strategies that were submitted this year by Scotland's local authorities. A central part of those strategies was to quantify the outstanding need for social housing spatially throughout 32 council areas.

Unlike the Governments in Wales and England, the Scottish Executive has not laid down a template for rigorous measurement of need through a local housing strategy—essentially a variety of strategies have been allowed—and that is probably reflected in the varying quality and rigour of the analysis that has come back from the local authorities. I suggest that, if we are to achieve our targets, and if we are to lift our game further, one of the things that we must do in this governance unit in the United Kingdom—this devolved Scotland—is to consider the next round of local housing strategy and ensure that councils are sufficiently guided to come up with findings that are robust and rigorous.

We should then consider the match between planning guidance and housing legislation—both of which fall within the minister's remit. The current guidance suggests that local authorities should use their local plans to inform their local housing strategies and vice versa and we must ensure that that guidance is strengthened so that the local plans follow the local housing strategies. If Perth and Kinross Council identifies a need for 2,500 new houses—or whatever the target might be in the forward five to 10 year period—the local plan must allocate land for that, and the infrastructure, including the resource level, must be there to ensure that those houses can be built.

The resource level provided by the Executive is extremely important. There is ambiguity about what it means when it says it accepts the Bramley findings. Bramley conducted his research to identify a need from household formation. All the figures that he projects are in addition to the regeneration requirements. The Executive's response does not make that differentiation. Its targets include rebuilding houses and new houses, but Bramley was talking about the net need for new houses. On that basis alone, Bramley is pointing at higher targets than the Executive is accepting.

The choice of which version of Bramley to operate on raises a fundamentally important point relating to the volume of housing and the spatial distribution of the new units. If we accept that housing should be provided on the basis of private sector housing market areas, which is one of the Bramley options, the projected need is very much lower than it would be if we accept the other Bramley option, which is to assess the need on a council-by-council basis. There is a risk for the Executive in going for the housing market area approach. The attraction is that if the Executive builds 4,000 to 5,000 new houses, it will be able to say, "Look, we have committed the resource to that. We have met the bottom line provided by Bramley." However, the risk is that the Executive will not meet local needs. If the Executive goes for housing market areas it is effectively saying that people who need to be housed in St Andrews do not count because there is supply available in Lochgelly, and that people who need housing in East Renfrewshire do not count because there is a surplus of housing—derelict and boarded up, perhaps—in South Nitshill.

In the private sector, there is a commitment in planning guidance to driving down research into settlement strategies to ensure that each settlement is analysed and that local needs are met. Mobile allowance is then made to allow for the fact that people who can buy housing can choose from a variety of places. If there is to be equity in the treatment of that section of our community that is unable to afford the market sector and requires one form or another of rented housing, there must be a commitment to try to provide housing in the communities where they live and have grown up, and work or are seeking work. I am afraid that the objectives set by the Executive in the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 are not capable of being realised until there is a rigorous approach to the assessment of need, and the meeting of that need in land release and infrastructure terms. Although I welcome the increased resources—as Donald Gorrie said, it is a step in the right direction—we would be fooling ourselves if we believed that it was an adequate step to meet the 2012 targets, which we should all share and strive to achieve.

10:49

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): I welcome the Executive's approach to improving the quality and availability of housing. It is probably the biggest challenge to the Executive's programme, and the Executive has done a great deal across the board.

I do not agree with Christine Grahame that there is a stigma attached to public sector housing—Karen Whitefield is correct on that point. I realise that public sector housing is usually chosen by those on the lowest incomes, but I also recognise—as the Executive has recognised in the past—that the vast majority aspire to become home owners at some point in the future.

Malcolm Chisholm was right to say, in response to Patrick Harvie's question, that the balance of private housing and public housing depends on the aspirations of the people whom we represent. I particularly welcome the targets to reduce the pressure on waiting lists, so that targets are not just about tackling homelessness. It is important to consider what the Executive is achieving across the board.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: Very briefly.

Patrick Harvie: Does the member accept that those aspirations are, to a large extent, the result of what is available? If people see that social rented housing does not meet their aspirations, they will naturally drift towards a desire for home ownership, but we could have a different formulation.

Pauline McNeill: I will move on to the issue of choice and availability in a moment, because it is important. I believe that most people would like to have that choice at some point. Perhaps that was not the case for my parents, but now people like to think that they have the choice to be property owners even though they might choose to remain in the rented sector.

Like Karen Whitefield, I recognise that, as we stand here and discuss the matter, there are tangible results of housing stock transfer in Glasgow: kitchens and bathrooms are being installed now in places in my community. I have been present when people have chosen their kitchens and bathrooms and the fact that they are able to do that is a completely new concept to them. It is important to recognise that progress is being made.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: Very briefly, because I have a lot to say.

Ms White: The member mentioned kitchens and bathrooms in accommodation. Does she agree that because of the GHA stock transfer many more thousands of people are sitting in abject poverty in houses that have not been improved?

Pauline McNeill: Well, okay. If the member wants to play that game, she can play that game. I say to her that the point of the strategy is that we want to improve the quality of housing across the board.

In response to Bill Aitken's speech, I point out that there is tangible progress—I have seen it. I have some criticisms, and I ask ministers to consider that there is unfinished business in relation to the housing stock transfer. As an elected member, I think that it is part of my job to oversee some of the policies that go into community ownership. For example, we are moving to second-stage transfer faster than we were told when we debated it. I just want to be kept informed on that. One of my communities is going to ballot in May and I was not informed about that. If ministers want to carry us all along with the discussions that we are still to have with the GHA and the local housing organisations, they should keep elected members informed—that includes local councillors too. We are the primary people in the matter.

The Bank of Scotland survey showed last year that the average age of first-time buyers is 36 and the average deposit is £11,000. We can see that there are vast changes in the pattern of living. A declining population with a dramatic increase in the number of households is the key trend and it poses a massive challenge to the Executive. It is a sad fact that many of my constituents who were born in the west end of Glasgow, which is known for being an affluent area where houses have a high market value, cannot afford to buy property and are stuck because there is a shortage of public-sector housing. That is why the reduction in waiting lists is important to me. I have constituents who are waiting for three, four or five-bedroom apartments for as long as seven, eight or nine years with no hope of moving on because of the non-availability of public-sector housing: the variety of sizes that is required does not exist. I do not oppose the right to buy, but—Tommy Sheridan raised the issue in part—there has to be proper supply and assessments in particular areas of whether we have the proper requirement of public-sector housing. It is a question of supply.

Housing associations in my area are concerned about what will happen when the 10-year prescription period kicks in—the SNP does not seem to understand that that will not happen for 10 years. Pressured area status has not worked and it is not being used. I ask the minister to consider whether the planning legislation should

include a duty on strategic housing bodies to ensure that there is a mix of housing tenure in an area—that would certainly help the area that I represent. Quotas should be attached to developers when they build new houses. Some authorities are already doing that, with quotas of 10 or 20 per cent. We must debate what is realistic, but in my book it is no longer acceptable for 2,500 houses to be built on the harbour in my constituency with not a single public-sector house or even some kind of alternative. We are working on that important principle.

I think that I have about 30 seconds left. I want to mention houses in multiple occupation because such accommodation is an important aspect of the private rented sector. We have good, tough legislation on HMOs. I have asked for a meeting with the Deputy Minister for Communities and I hope that she will agree to meet me. I know that she shares my concern about HMOs, having worked on the report with the Communities Committee. Glasgow City Council has been quite successful, with 70 prosecutions, but it says that in some cases the fine is so small that it is less than a month's rent and it has no power to close properties that repeatedly fall below the standards. Good landlords are frustrated about the £1,700 registration fee that they have to pay, as they think that that figure is too high, and there are still 900 landlords in Glasgow who have not registered at all. There are distortions as a result of the legislation; when there are four students in a property they have to lie because three is the level at which landlords have to apply for a licence. The legislation is good, but I hope that ministers will agree that with a bit of adjustment it could be more effective.

10:56

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I am sorry that the new SNP spokesman is not in her seat because I wanted to commend her for her candid confession that she does not have expertise in housing matters. If any members doubted that at the beginning of her speech, there was certainly no doubt at the end of it. I do not want to belittle any member's commitment to housing or the seriousness of the issues that we as a Parliament face. I have consistently raised housing issues in the chamber since I was elected last May, as it is the single biggest issue in my constituency mailbag. I am grateful for this further opportunity to raise issues that are important not only to the sector as a whole in Scotland but to my constituents.

I will focus my remarks on two principal areas—first, the need to ensure that we have a sustainable supply of social housing, particularly for new entrants, and affordable housing for home

buyers. Local young people seek stable, affordable rented homes as starters as they begin family life and they may have an aspiration to buy. Secondly, I will focus on how we move ahead with environmentally sustainable housing, where there are new builds in the public sector, and the need to ensure that we spend money in a way that is as environmentally sustainable as possible. In particular, we should ensure that such builds are sustainable and economically efficient and that, ultimately, there are lower bills in the social sector, particularly to reduce the scourge of fuel poverty for elderly tenants.

The minister is also not in the chamber—my reputation obviously precedes me—but I welcome him and the deputy minister to their new portfolio. I am sure that in his brief he will be as diligent and as committed to providing solutions to the myriad issues that face housing in Scotland as his predecessor, with whom I enjoyed a good working relationship. At my invitation she visited the Borders and met the local housing association, the council and others who have an interest in taking forward the housing debate in my area. It was a productive meeting and I extend an invitation to the new ministerial team to visit the Borders and discuss with the local agencies and tenants how well partnership working is taking forward the local housing strategy and what support we need from the Executive to address some of the problems.

Murray Tosh: I am sure that the member is aware of the detailed tables in the Bramley research, which is central to the Executive's planning. He will be aware that both tables show that the Scottish Borders has, according to the research, a substantial surplus of housing. Does he agree that that demonstrates the need to assess and measure housing need on a settlement-by-settlement basis?

Jeremy Purvis: I agree, and I will expand on that in a moment.

One depressing fact that we told the former minister when she visited the Borders, and which we followed up with evidence, is the impact of land price inflation on the ability of housing unit building in the social sector to keep pace. During the past five years, the housing association grant for the Borders has grown steadily from less than £4 million to just over £4 million, but the number of homes that it has been possible to build has halved. I represent the area with the highest proportion of rented accommodation. The Borders is an area of major land price inflation: in certain areas of my constituency, and Euan Robson's constituency, inflation has nearly doubled in one year.

An indicator of cost appeared in a report that the Bank of Scotland gave me in the summer. It showed that the average house price in my

constituency in June 2004 was £139,000. That represented a one-year change of 44 per cent and a five-year change of 94 per cent. Of course, those figures do not mean an equivalent growth in the wages of my constituents, who earn on average slightly more than the national average income, or an equivalent growth in construction industry costs, although those are a factor. The major driver in the change to unit cost is land price inflation. It is difficult to determine the precise proportion of the change that that forms, but the increase is without doubt present. I have had meetings locally with housing associations and members of the construction industry. At the latest meeting, which took place just last week, I was told that land price inflation is the major driver.

It is inevitable that that situation has a major social impact. First, it increases the age of the average first-time buyer. The age in my constituency was 27 in 1998; it is now 30. I am that tender age, but I bought my first house locally when I was 28, so I did not exactly reduce the average.

The second impact, which I mentioned at the opening of my speech, is the reduction in the number of housing units for social housing, even when the budget has grown and will grow considerably, as the minister said. I commend the former Minister for Communities for reacting positively to the situation by announcing an initial £1.5 million for housing in the Borders and a commitment to support land banking.

I agree absolutely with Mr Tosh that where we use public sector investment, how flexible it is and how local we can be are crucial. For example, the £1.5 million of additional expenditure will allow land banking by Eildon Housing Association on behalf of all the housing associations to focus on areas with the greatest need, such as Peebles, which is in my constituency, and not necessarily Selkirk, because Peebles has had the biggest land-banking difficulties.

All Executive departments need to give greater consideration to sustainable housing. Barriers are preventing investment in environmentally sustainable measures and we must tackle all such matters. My area has an abundant supply of energy from wind power, whether it is from a wind farm or from local small-scale turbines. The use of such energy and of combined heat and power can reduce the scourge of fuel poverty for many people in the social sector. I would like a much greater proportion of new investment and more original ideas as we develop the agenda to focus on sustainable and environmental good practice in our new social housing build.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that they have six minutes, not six minutes and 20 or 40 seconds, for their speeches.

11:03

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I will do my best to stick to the six minutes.

Mr Purvis protests too much. Perhaps having a majority of only 500 in the Borders makes him a wee bit feart of Christine Grahame, who I am sure can stick up for herself, as he no doubt knows.

I draw attention to the motion's title, which is "Improving the Quality and Availability of Scotland's Housing". That is a worthy aim and I congratulate the Executive on producing a worthy title. The motion is also worthy. It talks about increasing the availability of social housing, including rented accommodation for homeless people, and about community ownership and fuel poverty. In her summing-up speech, perhaps the minister could say whether the central heating programme, which the Eaga Partnership is providing, will be extended to people of all ages who have partial central heating.

When I looked closely at the motion, nowhere did I see a single mention of the flagship policy of the Tories and the Executive: housing stock transfer. I acknowledge that the minister said that stock transfer was marvellous, but the motion does not mention how wonderful it is. As we know, stock transfer has been undertaken in Glasgow and is being rolled out throughout the country.

Mr Monteith: If the member cared to read our amendment, she would see that it contains the words "stock transfer". Bill Aitken talked about that in his speech.

Ms White: I referred not to the Tories' amendment but to the Executive's motion. I said that the Tories and the Executive were as one on stock transfer. I made it clear that they agree on wholesale stock transfer.

We have all mentioned the serious effects of bad housing on the Scottish people. Dampness affects seriously the health of our people and of our children in particular. We have pledged to protect and nurture children, but some of them live in the worst housing conditions. As we all know, children who live in damp conditions and in bad housing develop bronchitis and asthma and have long-term illnesses in later years. We have not managed to eradicate such conditions.

The motion raises issues of temporary homelessness and temporary accommodation, which are created by the lack of secure rented tenure, which other members have mentioned. I acknowledge the commitment in the motion to increase the provision of rented accommodation by 2008, but that is four years away. In the past two years, the number of children who live in rented accommodation for homeless people has risen from 263 to 539. That is unacceptable in this

day and age. I think that Linda Fabiani mentioned in an intervention the effect on those kids of being shunted from place to place and of having no permanent home. That is worrying. I acknowledge the commitment in the motion, but four years is too long. The aim must be achieved more quickly.

As for GHA and stock transfer, if the Executive had embarked on a plan of care and repair and of new build, instead of demolition in some areas, we would not lack affordable housing or have a shortage of public rented housing.

Wholesale housing stock transfer has taken place in Glasgow. I do not apologise for raising that, although I have mentioned it time and again. I go out and meet tenants and I attend public meetings. My postbag is full of mail from people who are concerned about GHA and the way in which matters are developing. I admit that some tenants have benefited from investment because of the stock transfer, as has been said.

Tommy Sheridan: Does Sandra White agree that the level of investment in Glasgow since stock transfer has shown no marked increase from the level that would have existed if the council had retained the stock?

Ms White: If the council had retained the stock and the debt had been written off, the level of investment would probably have been higher.

We are leaving some people in limbo. GHA is conducting an option appraisal, which in layman's terms means a decision on whether somebody's house will be demolished. The people who are involved do not know what will happen. While they are under the threat of option appraisal, which could take six months to a year, they live with houses that will have no improvement, houses that are lying empty and houses that are boarded up. Communities are scattered throughout such areas. That is not good enough for the people of Glasgow. We need only go to places such as Sighthill and Scotstoun—I think that Pauline McNeill mentioned flats there—to see evidence of wholesale deprivation as a result of stock transfer.

I will ask the minister several questions about stock transfer. Will he confirm for me and the people of Sighthill and other areas that meetings have taken place between a firm called LPG Living and GHA with a view to selling the high-rise flats in Sighthill, Ibroxholm Oval and the Gorbals? That firm has bought council houses in Manchester and Leeds and sold each as private housing for between £60,000 and £100,000. I have been told in good faith that those meetings have happened and I would like the minister to say whether that is true and to tell tenants what is happening.

Will the minister also tell me about the timescale for secondary stock transfer to local housing organisations, which has been mentioned? That

has not happened. A flagship policy of GHA was new build, which has not happened much either. What is the timescale for new-build proposals?

I do not want gentrification of Glasgow, but that is happening through the housing stock transfer. We have had wholesale housing stock transfer and we are now experiencing the wholesale transfer of citizens out of the city. That is no way to improve lives or housing in the city. I would like the minister to answer my questions in her summing-up speech.

11:09

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Like other members, I welcome Malcolm Chisholm and Johann Lamont to their new positions. I wish them all the best and look forward to working with them.

I am proud of the Labour-led Scottish Executive's record on housing and I am pleased to have had the opportunity to serve on the committee that was charged with scrutinising what became the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. The legislative changes that we have made and the difference that the legislation is making on the ground have led to the Scottish Parliament being rightly recognised as one of the most progressive institutions in Europe on the issue. It was about time that the changes were made. As Malcolm Chisholm highlighted, when Labour came to power in 1997, housing had practically fallen off the political agenda. The Tories' housing legacy in Scotland and throughout the UK was one of neglect, underinvestment and disrepair. It has taken a huge investment from the Scottish Executive to turn that round.

One of the immediate priorities in the first session of the Scottish Parliament was homelessness. We have made vast progress on homelessness and people now have many more rights. They are aware of those rights and are presenting to housing authorities in greater numbers. The difference is that they are now being counted in the statistics instead of being ignored and forgotten, and their needs are being taken into account and met. It will, of course, take a long time to address all the problems and provide the housing that is required, but we are on the right track and have in place fair legislation that will make a difference to individuals and families throughout Scotland.

Members of the Scottish Parliament are forward thinking enough to realise that, in matters of basic housing requirements, we should not be satisfied with the idea of everyone having a roof over their head. Every Scot should be entitled to a warm, dry and secure home. It is not acceptable that the

health of children who have asthma is put at further risk by damp housing, that the elderly should be afraid to turn on their heating for fear of the bill at the end of the month, or that older children do not have decent accommodation in an environment in which they can study. It is also not right that families have to stay in private rented accommodation with no guarantee of tenure beyond a short-term lease. I know that the Labour-led Executive agrees with me, which is why it has introduced the warm deal and the central heating programme and why it has pledged a £1 billion investment to ensure that 21,000-odd new affordable homes are built over the next three years. It is important that we keep to that target.

Murray Tosh: Is Cathie Craigie aware that the Executive's research shows that North Lanarkshire Council has a surplus of housing and that, following the logic of that research, it would not provide any more money for new housing? Does she agree that it is important that we look at the housing needs of individual settlements and look at all the areas where there is a shortfall in housing and aggregate them?

Cathie Craigie: Murray Tosh is right to point that out. It is important that we meet the housing needs of every local area. I am sure that the Executive will take that into account.

I want to see homeless people getting out of temporary accommodation, more people getting off waiting lists and into secure housing, and more first-time buyers and essential workers being given a leg-up on to the first rung of the property ladder. I also want to see more purpose-built housing for elderly people, especially those with disabilities. The Executive has to be challenged to set aside some of the money that it has announced over recent weeks to ensure that people with specific housing needs have their needs addressed and that the unsuitable conditions in which they live are dealt with.

SNP members think that our housing problems are easy to tackle. Judging by some of the comments that we have heard today and the timescales in which they think that we can achieve our aims, I think it must be Lego houses that they would build. Most of us know that it is not easy to tackle housing problems, which mean many things to different people. Some people think of homelessness or problems with damp or heating; for others, it is about the problems of their community or the fact that they live in a communal building that is falling into disrepair. That is why it is vital to tackle all those areas. The Parliament has recognised that by passing not only the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, but the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 and the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004. Like others, I

anticipate the improvements that can be made in the private sector when the proposed private sector housing bill is introduced.

Housing is about much more than people having a roof over their heads; it is about their having a home in which to live in comfort and without fear—a place in relation to which they know their rights, whether they are tenants or owners, and a place where they can live in peace with their neighbours, free from fear of what is going on outside. We require our local planning authorities to look strategically at the housing needs of their communities—Murray Tosh's comments about that were well made. Local authorities are looking at the needs of their communities at the moment and are preparing their plans to comply with the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.

However, what people want is not just the provision of housing in one tenure; they want good-quality, affordable housing and a choice that will suit them, whether that is in the rented sector or the private sector. They want housing that is not only affordable, in respect of the level of their mortgage, but energy efficient, easily maintained, affordable to run and situated in a pleasant environment.

I thank you, Presiding Officer, for allowing me to run a few seconds over my time. In short, we want to work with the Executive to ensure that we meet the challenges ahead and provide affordable housing for the people of Scotland.

11:16

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the minister to his new portfolio of housing. I wish to make some specific suggestions that I believe could tackle the chronic shortage of affordable housing in many parts of rural Scotland—not least in my constituency. In many parts of my constituency, such as Badenoch, there is a complete blockage of development because of the lack of access to water and, especially, sewerage. As John Swinney pointed out in an intervention, that problem will not be solved for around three years or, in many areas, possibly a decade.

I recently read the published reports of Scottish Water Solutions, which showed that the company is ahead of target by, I think, 170 per cent. It follows logically that one solution that the minister will investigate—he has said that he is speaking to Mr Finnie about this—is to accelerate the programme, which is currently set under quality and standards II, and to bring forward Q and S III. Unless that happens, the shortages in places such as Newtonmore simply will not be addressed—they cannot be.

Murray Tosh: I wonder whether Mr Ewing is aware that, in many areas, private developers and

housing associations have been willing to fund private sewerage solutions—septic tanks, reed beds and so on—but have found that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency will not provide the discharge consents. Does he feel that the minister should look, in a cross-cutting way, across the range of the Executive's activities to address that aspect of the problem?

Fergus Ewing: I always thought that Presiding Officers must be mind-readers—that was precisely the point that I was about to make. It has been made so well by Mr Tosh that there is no point in my repeating it. Housing officials in my constituency have told me privately that septic tanks and small-scale sewerage works can be used to solve the problem. I invite the minister, in response to a point that has now been made by two parties, to intervene to ensure that smaller-scale sewerage works, which can work, will be part of the solution that we all want to the chronic shortage of affordable housing. The problem in rural Scotland is not the fact that there are too many second homes; it is the fact that there are not enough first homes at affordable prices.

I invite the minister to read the report that was produced in the Parliament's first session by the Rural Development Committee under the excellent convenership of Alex Fergusson. The report made specific recommendations on how farm buildings and unused buildings on private estates might be brought into the housing market. In addition, it recommended a total rethink of our approach to planning in rural Scotland. Frankly, the romantic idea that the vast acres must be left as a wilderness belongs to a century other than the current one. Without a sea change in our approach to housing in rural Scotland, we will be simply unable to tackle the problem.

I also urge the Minister for Communities to work closely with his colleague who has responsibility for forestry to encourage the use of wood in construction. Scottish building companies have taken a lead on that, but much more needs to be done.

Before my five minutes are up, let me read from a letter that I received last month from an English couple—the gentleman is a bricklayer—who wrote:

"We are a married couple with a child coming up to 3 years old. We heard on Westminster Hour on Radio 4 last year that the Minister for Scotland said he wanted people to move to the Highlands. Having worked in the area, we thought, as there are no work opportunities for us ... in Doncaster that moving to Inverness seemed a good opportunity."

It seemed a good opportunity for them to make a new life. The SNP welcomes new citizens to Scotland, including those who come here from England. However, people are currently unable to

move here because of our chronic shortage of affordable housing. There is a will across the parties to tackle the problem, but we need to provide specific solutions, some of which I hope I have outlined in this speech.

11:21

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I join others in welcoming the new ministerial team to its new role. I also applaud the efforts of the outgoing team, and those of its predecessors since 1999, for making tremendous progress on a wide range of aspects of housing policy.

Today's debate has confirmed that the shortage of affordable housing is, without question, one of our nation's biggest challenges, which many of us face profoundly at a local level. I take the opportunity to congratulate all those who have pushed the issue up the political agenda, especially the cross-party group on affordable housing and its conveners, Sylvia Jackson and Murray Tosh. Sylvia Jackson has asked me to record her regrets at being unable to attend today's debate due to a funeral.

My constituency of Edinburgh East and Musselburgh epitomises the nature and extent of the problem that exists in Edinburgh and the Lothians. On the one hand, it is virtually impossible to move for the new build that is taking place. As soon as an old school is demolished or an old garage disappears, developers move in to start constructing flats. However, those flats are inaccessible for the people who come to my office and tell me with frightening regularity how they are required to live in conditions that would not have been necessary in this area even just a few years ago. Elderly, disabled and sick people can be marooned upstairs for want of a ground-floor flat. There are situations of overcrowding, as teenage boys and girls are required to share bedrooms. Sometimes their parents sleep in Z-beds to avoid that, but both those situations can also occur. Victims of domestic abuse can live in bed and breakfast accommodation for months on end.

One thing that I particularly notice in my constituency is that, whereas people would have refused until recently even to contemplate moving into certain areas, they now say, "Please give me anything anywhere—you must surely have accommodation available in this street or in that block of flats." That would never have occurred even a couple of years ago.

The situation has changed rapidly for a range of reasons, so it is a gross distortion to suggest—as some do for party-political ends—that it is due to action or inaction on the part of Government. Several factors have changed very quickly,

including three that I will focus on that are specific to Edinburgh and the Lothians. First, the population growth in Edinburgh and the Lothians makes the area quite distinctive. Over the past 10 years, the city's population has risen by 7 per cent. Over the next 10 years, Scottish Executive figures project a 10 per cent rise in the number of households in Edinburgh. That is a significant issue, which is at variance with the position in most other parts of the country.

Secondly, house price inflation is particularly profound in Edinburgh and has been higher here than in any other part of the United Kingdom. At the beginning of the debate, Bill Aitken said that the situation in Scotland was different from that in the south-east of England. Arguably, Edinburgh is the one area where there are extreme similarities with the south-east of England. Between 2000 and 2003, house prices in the city increased by 55 per cent. The average house price in Edinburgh is now £150,000, but average earnings in the city are only £25,000 a year. Indeed, a bus driver earns around £17,500, while a staff-grade nurse who is on the mid-point of her scale earns around £19,500. It does not take a mathematical genius to work out that, even when lending is allowed at a rate of three or even four times a person's salary, there are huge swathes of citizens for whom virtually any house on the property ladder is inaccessible. The social consequences of that situation are obvious, but it also has potentially dramatic and worrying economic consequences—which I will return to—for the Edinburgh and Lothians economy.

The third thing that distinguishes Edinburgh's situation from that of the rest of Scotland is that land is at a premium. At around £2 million an acre in some cases, land is simply not available and accessible to registered social landlords. The City of Edinburgh Council's affordable housing policy has had some success in its attempt to tackle the problem through the planning process. However, the evidence is clear that additional subsidy is required if land is to be attained to meet social housing need. I ask the minister to consider urgently whether the distribution formula that Communities Scotland uses in its investment programme could be adjusted to include a weighting for the undersupply of affordable housing.

If we fail to tackle those issues in Edinburgh and the Lothians, we will be unable to tackle homelessness in Scotland's capital, to meet the social and medical needs of a large number of our citizens or to recruit and retain key workers for many important sectors within the city. The consequences of such a failure could threaten not only the economic success of Edinburgh and the Lothians but by extension—given the significance of the area's economic contribution—that of

Scotland as well. I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of tackling the issues that face us in this part of the country, although I acknowledge that many other issues elsewhere must also be addressed.

In the first parliamentary session, it was right that one of the Executive's most ambitious and boldest efforts was to tackle Glasgow's profound housing needs. I make a genuine plea that, in the second session, we should now tackle Edinburgh's housing needs.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We move to wind-up speeches. As we are about three minutes over our time, I ask members to keep their speeches tight and to save a little bit. I will allow each speaker about five and a half minutes.

11:28

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I will do my best to remain within my time, Presiding Officer.

I thank members for an interesting debate. I add my voice to that of others in welcoming the new minister and deputy minister to the communities portfolio. I am sure that we will have some interesting exchanges.

Malcolm Chisholm's speech contained a list of the Executive's past achievements and aspirations for the future, many of which we can warmly welcome. We can endorse the minister's comments on community ownership, but we agree with Elaine Smith that transfers should be proposed without strings attached. In general, there is much to be proud of in the Executive's record on housing, but big problems nonetheless remain. Fuel poverty is decreasing, but it is subject to the whims of fuel prices due to the lack of progress on reducing the need for energy consumption though increased energy efficiency. Targets are being set for the supply of new affordable homes, but there remains a steady drain on homes for social rent through right to buy, and home ownership is still promoted as a social aspiration in a way that does not happen in every other European country. As a result, the right to rent is being steadily lost.

As WWF Scotland has made clear, and as my colleague Shiona Baird highlighted, housing contributes to the problem of Scotland's ecological footprint, which is appallingly high; I argue that the social footprint is also too high. Homes that are below tolerable standard are still in use and development is skewed towards the luxury end of the market. I could give many examples of that from Glasgow, but I am afraid that I do not have time. The overall situation in Scotland is one of rising levels of home ownership and rising property prices, but there has been a loss of rented stock and a consequent loss of expectation

that anything other than home ownership can meet most people's aspirations.

I welcome what Christine Grahame said in her speech and can support, in general, what is contained in the SNP's amendment. Christine Grahame was the first to mention the right to rent in this debate. The right to rent cannot exist as a mere principle; the homes have to be there and they should not be only the most basic homes but ones that people want to live in. Without that availability, the principle is meaningless. Earlier this year, I became a first-time buyer when—due to the quite comfortable salary that I have acquired—I moved from a tiny, freezing-cold room-and-kitchen into a comfortable, centrally heated flat. However, the home was what I wanted, not the tenure; I wanted a place to live, not mortgages and solicitors' fees. I suspect that many people of my generation want the same as me and would be happy—as I would be—to rent that flat from a social landlord or a similar source.

Linda Fabiani: Does Patrick Harvie agree that, regardless of all the talk about the right to buy being about choice, people in his position have ended up having no choice except to become home owners?

Patrick Harvie: Absolutely. I am sorry that Pauline McNeill is not here, because I would have liked to point out to her that choice does not mean only the right to choose what is commonly agreed to be the best option, whether that means home ownership or anything else. Something similar applies to the right to choose public transport. If public transport is dirty, grim, expensive or unreliable, people will choose to travel by private car. We should offer them real choice.

Johann Lamont: The situation is a bit more complex than that. In Glasgow, people can choose to take rented accommodation but they do not want to because that accommodation requires investment. That is an important aspect. It is wrong simply to say that there are no houses.

Patrick Harvie: I am sorry, but, if someone in my situation applied for a social rented house, they would have quite some time to wait.

Bill Aitken said some supportive words about housing associations, with which I can agree, but he implied repeatedly that social rented housing is the option of last resort and that home ownership is the ideal state. If any policy has shown that home ownership is not always the best option for everyone, it is the right to buy. Bill Aitken's call for ever-more evictions from mainstream housing flies in the face of the reality, which is that the experience of repeated eviction and rehousing makes problems such as antisocial behaviour worse in the long run.

I do not have enough time to respond to all the members to whom I would like to respond, but I

want to mention Tommy Sheridan's speech. I am sorry that our amendment is not as explicit as he would like, but it is in the nature of this Parliament to consult widely on major changes and that is what our amendment calls for. I hope that Tommy Sheridan will support the amendment, because if the proposed change is put out to consultation, he and I and many housing experts will be calling for much the same thing. Tommy Sheridan pointed out, rightly, that the right to buy has depleted the stock of public assets and that many homes that were previously available for social rent are now being rented privately at three times the price.

Only the Green amendment—and I am sorry that this is the case—mentions the ecological issues of this policy area. It is not only transport, industry, energy generation and food production that contribute to our appallingly large ecological footprint; housing does so as well. We want to have a balanced housing stock and to ensure that the sustainability of our housing stock is at the forefront of our thinking.

We wish the minister well in resolving the contradiction, which I spoke about in the debate on the legislative programme, between the housing renaissance that the First Minister identified and the housing crisis that his back benchers identified.

11:33

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I join others in welcoming the new ministerial team and congratulating its predecessors on their achievements. I knew Johann Lamont when she was a mere convener of a committee and it is nice to see her in a high ministerial office.

It is highly appropriate that one of the first debates since the recess should be about the question of housing, which was long neglected under previous Governments. The major, significant and lasting housing reforms of the first session of the Scottish Parliament have been hailed, rightly, as giving Scotland the most progressive housing legislation in western Europe, as a number of members have said today. Although the process has been led by a succession of able Executive ministers, the legislation is also the product of the effective input of civic Scotland—through the housing improvement and homelessness task forces in particular—and of the Parliament's Social Justice Committee, which did a good job in the previous session of scrutinising and moulding the legislation and administering the work involved.

The Social Justice Committee made a great difference in the realm of the right-to-buy policy, in that it turned what could have been a damaging and backward move and extended it into

something that resulted in a genuine instrument of social policy. One of the concessions that ministers had to make at that time was to agree that there should be an evidence-based review in 2006 of the effects of the right-to-buy policy; that concession was made in response to an amendment that I lodged. Amazingly, we are now only two years away from 2006 and I urge the minister to take the opportunity that will be presented by the review to consider the issue broadly.

I do not subscribe to the extreme view that says that the right-to-buy policy is all bad. The policy has helped to rebalance housing tenure patterns to a more sensible European level of ownership. I do not accept the rather ludicrous argument that houses are lost through the right-to-buy policy. The houses are not empty and are not surplus to requirements. They are occupied, for the most part, by lower-income families and are helping to meet housing need.

Patrick Harvie: Does Robert Brown accept that those lower-income families might well be paying far more because they are renting their houses from a private landlord who bought them rather than from a council or a housing association?

Robert Brown: There are such instances, but that is not the normal pattern.

There are many areas in which the right to buy has long been increasingly damaging. I think that Pauline McNeill talked about that in connection with the west end of Glasgow. In all areas—not least in pressured and popular parts of cities and in rural areas—we need to ensure that there are enough affordable houses for rent to meet the demand. Families young and old have the right to be housed in their own areas if they want to be. That is what the local housing strategies, which were an important part of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, require and support. Murray Tosh said, quite rightly, that the local housing strategies were an important driver in that area.

The 2001 act allows a natural end to the right-to-buy policy in areas such as the west end of Glasgow and rural Aberdeenshire. The minister must not be afraid to recognise that reality and to embrace it as an opportunity. It would be outrageous if innovative housing developments such as the Crown Street redevelopment project in Glasgow, which was designed with a balance of tenures, should be at risk of yuppification and the loss of opportunity for social rented housing applicants because of an insensitive and damaging extension of the right-to-buy policy that threatens to arise some years down the line.

Shiona Baird touched on the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995. I welcome her support for the efforts that I have been making to try to make

that a more prominent issue for the Executive. The act has operated in an understated way in Scotland. It is important to ensure that, as well as reducing fuel poverty, we reduce the ecological footprint of housing. It is important that the Executive considers mandatory targets in that area. However, it was difficult even to get the Executive to publish the individual council figures for the first part of the process.

I remind the chamber that this debate is about the quality of life of individuals and communities. Bricks and mortar are vital to that, of course, but other issues too are important, such as ensuring that there is a balance of facilities in an area and that leisure space, such as parks and green areas, is protected. I urge the minister to keep that in mind when he considers issues such as the reform of land-supply regulations, the planning system and other matters that he will have to grapple with in his new portfolio. The loss of leisure facilities and green areas is becoming a serious problem in some of our cities. The minister must deal with that when he deals with important issues such as identifying land-supply facilities, which Susan Deacon talked about.

I support the motion, but I remind the chamber that there are a number of issues that we have to deal with along the line.

11:39

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This has been a low-key and, perhaps, disappointing debate during which many political prejudices have been aired rather than constructive speeches made.

The minister made a fair fist of his speech, but it told us nothing that we did not already know; as a result, the nature of the debate changed. Of course, there have been some achievements and the Conservative party welcomes them, where they are genuine. It must be remembered that many of those achievements have come about because Conservative policies have been continued with, which refutes Cathie Craigie's accusation that Labour inherited a bad Tory record.

Because there was nothing new in the debate, we quickly descended into an empty parade of socialist dogma, which was mostly targeted on the right to buy, although I noticed that pejorative mention was also made of owning second homes. There were one or two exceptions. Murray Tosh, as ever, was thinking constructively ahead; Fergus Ewing tried to pick up on some of the difficulties in local areas; and Susan Deacon brought out the difficulties that are faced in a city such as Edinburgh, which I have to say are not dissimilar to the difficulties in areas such as Dunblane,

which, because of its proximity to Glasgow and Edinburgh, faces the same problems with the high cost of housing.

Although those members tried to debate the difficulties, there has been a lot of talk about the shortcomings of right to buy. When I started to study architecture in 1976, 33 per cent of Scottish housing was owned. Nothing would have changed had it not been for the halting of devolution in 1979; it is clear, from listening to members speak today, that if we had had devolution in 1979 the right-to-buy legislation would not have been passed and 360,000 tenants would still be renting, instead of owning, their property. We must recognise that the nature of housing in Scotland has changed. There are problems, but they are different problems from those that were faced 25 years ago.

Fergus Ewing: Will the member give way?

Mr Monteith: No. I must make progress, because my time has already been cut. I will see whether I can let members in later.

Roseanna Cunningham asked what the point of running a bath is if the plughole is left open. Any physics teacher could show us that it is entirely possible to run a bath and fill it up with the plughole out, so long as the flow of water that is going in is greater than that which is going out. The issue on housing is clearly that the build needs to be greater than the sell. It is possible for us to debate that matter.

We have had on display the old think of Tommy Sheridan, Christine Grahame and Roseanna Cunningham, but we have also heard the new think from Pauline McNeill, Robert Brown and Susan Deacon. That is welcome if we are to have a genuine hope of solving Scotland's housing problems. We also had the doublethink—or should I say the double-speak—of Jeremy Purvis, who belittled Christine Grahame's contribution after saying that he did not seek to do so; if ever there was an example of the Liberal Democrats' double standards, that was it.

Christine Grahame: That young man never fails to disappoint me.

Mr Monteith: The key to making housing affordable at any level is to remove the burdens that drive up the costs. We must look at how we can stop land prices rising so quickly and at how planning restrictions and delays put up the value of land, which forces up the value and cost of housing. We must consider the restrictions that Scottish Water is placing on development, which make housing either unaffordable or impossible, and the restrictions that SEPA is placing on development. We must also consider the transport infrastructure, so that houses can be built in areas where jobs can be accessed; it is not possible to

keep on building only in Edinburgh or in city centres. Of course we must find solutions and the Conservatives will support the Executive if it produces constructive suggestions. However, we will not turn back the clock and fight the wars of 25 years ago.

11:44

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): I declare an interest as a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Housing.

There have been three main themes in the debate: homelessness; the right to buy; and new builds and infrastructure.

First, I will refer to the minister's speech. There is a commitment to increase the provision of affordable houses, amounting to 21,500 houses over the next three years, but 5,000 of those houses are for ownership. In Scotland, where ownership levels are rising higher than they are anywhere else in western Europe, we keep on going down the ownership route. At one point—it seems like many years ago—Wendy Alexander declared a housing ownership target for Scotland. Is that one of the few targets that the Executive has not abolished in the past few weeks?

I understand that there are people who want to own their own homes and I understand that that choice should exist. There is a need for low-cost home ownership initiatives, but I would like to see an initiative to ensure that low-cost home ownership properties would remain in perpetuity as low-cost home ownership properties, rather than the initial subsidy being lost and those houses ending up being sold at full market value. That can be done if the will exists. I look forward to seeing the fine detail of the minister's shared equity plans.

What finer example is there of the initial subsidy being lost than right to buy. That policy has been with us for some time and the provision of 5,500 affordable rented homes a year must be set against the on-going loss of 18,000 homes a year through right to buy. I find it interesting that Labour members are proud of the fact that they decreased the discounts for right to buy. That was quite good, but those members are the same people who extended the right to buy to take in post-1989 housing association tenants. The landlords that successive studies have shown house the most vulnerable people have their stock reduced, so waiting lists rise and affordable housing stock for rent reduces: 5,500 houses have been built, but 18,000 have been lost.

Murray Tosh: Does Linda Fabiani accept that, at least in the community where I live, second-hand council homes are a major source of supply for families who have modest incomes and that

such properties are one of the principal ways of keeping people off council house waiting lists? The houses are not lost; they are in the system.

Linda Fabiani: Does Murray Tosh accept that, in the area where I live, ex-right-to-buy houses are owned by private landlords who charge rents of above full housing benefit levels, while people are told that they have no chance of getting a council house for 15 years?

For housing associations there is, of course, a 10-year delay and there are pressured areas. There is also a rush of housing associations applying for exemption through charitable status. It would have been far easier not to have extended the right to buy in the first place.

Given that there are fewer decent affordable rented houses, it is obvious that there will be increased homelessness. I welcomed the Executive's legislation on homelessness because it has admirable intentions, which I think we all agree with. However, giving someone the right is not the same as giving them a house. Such aspirational rights must be resourced and I do not believe that that is happening adequately. Members have mentioned examples of that.

Two planks of Executive housing policy have an implementation date of 2012—that is eight years away. First, under the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, every unintentionally homeless household will be eligible for permanent accommodation. Secondly, housing association tenants who did not previously have the right to buy will be given that right. I am concerned about the impact of those policy planks on the supply of affordable housing in Scotland in the long term. Is on-going research providing any steer on that? Is the target date of 2012 in the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 likely to be met? After all, there are still families with children in bed and breakfast accommodation even though the previous Minister for Communities pledged regulation to end such use of B and Bs by the end of this year. Is that pledge on target?

Many members have discussed the infrastructure difficulties—and whether they are real or imposed—that are a strategic element of housing provision. I agree with Murray Tosh's view on the importance of housing market areas rather than reliance on local authority areas. We can all give examples of little pockets in those wider areas where the problems are huge.

Murray Tosh and Fergus Ewing raised the issue of funding infrastructure provision. They are right to say that we require strategic direction on that, as well as on the planning system in general. Although, as Murray Tosh said, housing associations and developers may sometimes fund, for example, sewerage provision beyond the

needs of their own project, that should not be taken into account in the unit cost because it would have a direct impact on rents, which would rise very steeply to meet the costs of that infrastructure. I ask the minister to give full consideration to all those matters.

We are pushed for time, so I quickly mention the amendments. We cannot support the Conservative amendment, which talks about housing association tenants having "greater rights"; that is a basic error, because housing association tenants do not have greater rights. The Conservatives seem to be calling for an end to council housing and a full-scale stock transfer. We cannot cope with the current speed of transfers, let alone an acceleration.

We like most of the content of the Green amendment. We are a wee bit concerned about the amount of encouragement and praise that the Greens are piling on the Executive, but we agree with the broad thrust and ecological element of their amendment and we are minded to support it. I ask members to support the SNP amendment.

11:51

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): Members might notice that although I am delighted to wind up the debate in my new position as Deputy Minister for Communities, I am growling at them more than usual because I have a problem with my throat. The minister has agreed to take over if my voice goes altogether—I think that that would be the first recorded occasion in history on which I allowed a man to speak on my behalf.

The housing debate is an interesting debate. When we reflect on our lives, housing tells a story about our families, histories and priorities at different stages. As members know, I come from a crofting family and I was brought up in the west end of Glasgow when it was still Anderston. My family was not allowed a council house because my father was at sea, so we lived in the private rented sector, which was not a comfortable place to be. People in such circumstances have a better chance of securing good housing now than they did in those days, although a great deal more remains to be done.

The communities portfolio understands that we must consider access to mainstream services. Just as we understand that education is not just about providing schools and that it is difficult for some young people to access education, we know that the same thing is true in housing. Some people regard housing as a simple matter of supply and demand. I think that all members welcome the Executive's commitment following its review of affordable housing. A number of points

have been raised about that and I cannot go into much detail. However, significant money has been spent in rural areas to deal with the problem of affordable housing and there is significant understanding of the way in which the housing market has developed in different places. Susan Deacon and Pauline McNeill highlighted that point.

Fergus Ewing: Will the minister give way?

Johann Lamont: I want to make progress.

Pauline McNeill made an important point about the possibility of using the planning legislation to set quotas for affordable housing. We can draw on our research and learn from the approach in Ireland and we will bring forward the matter at a later stage.

Murray Tosh: Will the minister give way?

Johann Lamont: I want to progress a little more.

Housing is not simply about bricks and mortar. Those of us who attended a Scottish Women's Aid event yesterday understand that housing need in certain circumstances is about far more than the provision of a home. Women's organisations made that point in the past when they discussed refuges with local authorities and argued that women should be provided not just with a place to stay, but with other support. Safe, warm, desirable homes are not just about putting bricks on bricks. In my own city, we know that it is not just about investment. Historically, there were cycles of investment in Glasgow that did not stick.

One of the elements of the Executive's housing policy of which I am most proud is that the Executive understands what people in communities understand: if people are given power over their lives in relation to housing, they make decisions that make a real difference. I did not recognise Sandra White's description of the GHA. One of my first engagements as Deputy Minister for Communities was an event last week. The room was packed with 200 tenants, who were talking about what they would do in their communities as part of local housing organisations. As a famous person once said, there was a buzz about the place that suggested that we were transforming housing in that area.

I want to talk about the debate on the impact of the right-to-buy policy on homelessness. There is no simple correlation between the two. Two thirds of homelessness applications are made in areas where there is surplus housing, so the situation is more complex. Shelter Scotland and others have persuaded us that as we legislate we must support people, rather than just offer them a home. There is a clear commitment to review the right-to-buy policy and we will do so. However, we must be clear. The brass neck of the Tories never

astounds me too much. We all know that in the context of Tory cuts, underfunding, rises in rents and repairs problems, people were driven by economic logic to buy their homes. However, we must also be honest and recognise that there was no golden age of council housing. Not only did people in some circumstances feel forced to buy their own homes, but people voted with their feet out of a sector that did not match their aspirations.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the minister give way?

Johann Lamont: The member has made his contribution.

The problems of the social rented sector are not simply about the right-to-buy policy. However, the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 recognised that the right to buy must be restricted. Because of the right-to-buy policy, the reality in some localised areas might be that there is no opportunity to rent housing and people cannot move from one area to another. The review of the policy can address such matters. It is equally true that, in other areas, the right-to-buy policy has not caused such problems and offers opportunities for communities to enjoy more stability through a positive process, because people are buying into communities for the first time, rather than being sent to those areas because there are no good houses left.

Ms White: Will the minister give way?

Murray Tosh: Will the minister give way?

Johann Lamont: The idea that the right-to-buy policy causes homelessness is simplistic in the extreme. As I indicated, the majority of homelessness applications are made in areas in which there is surplus housing. That is why investment in making communities safer is as important as straightforward housing investment. It is why action on antisocial behaviour is so important. It is outrageous that the Tories talk about problems with public sector tenants in the face of clear and mounting evidence that there is a significant problem in the private sector. Landlords who have no regard for tenants or their neighbours are moving into potentially fragile communities and destroying those communities. Despite evidence of such activity, the Tories refuse to support any legislation that would attempt to regulate that sector.

Murray Tosh: Will the minister give way?

Johann Lamont: Linda Fabiani talked about people's aspiration to move into good housing in good areas. So, by implication, there must be bad areas.

Linda Fabiani rose—

Johann Lamont: That is why it was so important that cities such as Glasgow drove investment into all areas so that people would

have a say in decisions. People did not have to move to get a good house; they could find one in their own area. That sent a strong signal to people that, as Patrick Harvie said, the public social rented sector is a reasonable housing choice. We are investing in that sector, rather than destroying it.

I notice a significant change in the Scottish Socialist Party's approach. In the debate around stock transfer, the SSP told us that that would represent privatisation, but now when we talk about the balance between the public and private sector the SSP tells us that housing associations are part of the public sector. Of course housing associations are part of the public sector; the idea that they have anything to do with what happens in the private sector is bizarre.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the minister give way?

Johann Lamont: We want to ensure that the social rented sector is reasonable—

Tommy Sheridan: Will the minister give way? This is just a lecture.

The Presiding Officer: Order, Mr Sheridan.

Johann Lamont: It is bizarre that Tommy Sheridan wants to give anyone a lecture about debating in this chamber.

I want to mention a number of points. Pauline McNeill mentioned HMOs. I would be delighted to meet her and people from her area, because one of the big issues that we need to discuss is the law of good intentions and the consequences of laws that might not achieve what we want them to achieve.

We need to discuss issues around homelessness. I find it odd that members who argued for tenants' rights complain when those rights become reality. The Scottish National Party's approach is precisely the one to take if we want to encourage Government to be timorous and not to be radical. The SNP says that we should give people rights, but when people, naturally, want to exercise those rights, the SNP kicks the Government that gave them those rights. The reality is that major activity is going on. The homelessness monitoring group, on which Shelter Scotland, the SFHA, COSLA and the Scottish Council for Single Homeless are represented, agrees that making homelessness more visible is a key indicator of success.

The Scottish Executive strategy, taken as a whole, understands the complexities and recognises the importance of investing significant amounts of money in addressing how housing problems develop throughout Scotland. The power of the Scottish Parliament is that it can discuss how housing issues are expressed differently in different places, without calling for a one-size-fits-

all policy on housing. I urge members to support the motion in Malcolm Chisholm's name.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Prime Minister (Meetings)

1. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): On behalf of—I think—most members, I wish John Kerry every success in his attempt next week to remove the warmonger from the White House.

I ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues will be discussed. (S2F-1144)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We may enjoy quoting that comment back at Nicola Sturgeon during the next four years, should Mr Kerry win next week.

I have no immediate plans to meet the Prime Minister.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am sure that George Bush will take great heart from the First Minister's support.

A letter that the First Minister sent to me yesterday states that a woman who spent 11 hours on a hospital trolley and then 12 hours in an assessment unit before being moved to a general ward, all in a hospital that is 30 miles from her home and her three disabled children—to which she would never have had to go if his Government had not allowed the emergency surgery unit at her local hospital to be closed—was

"probably looked after as well as any other patient".

The First Minister might think that that is acceptable, but I do not.

When will the First Minister stop spinning like a top and start listening to and acting on the real-life experiences of patients such as Marion Kyle?

The First Minister: Earlier this year, I made a big mistake in deciding not to accept an invitation to the D day commemorative ceremonies in Normandy. On that occasion, I was big enough to change my mind and apologise within 24 hours. The issue that Nicola Sturgeon raises is very serious. In a letter that is not from me, any other politician or Lothian NHS Board, but from the three key medical consultants and other staff who were involved in the provision of services to Marion Kyle, those staff, on behalf of all health care staff at the royal infirmary of Edinburgh, ask Miss Sturgeon to apologise for the unfounded, and—to use their word—disgraceful statements that she made in the Parliament three weeks ago. I realise that Nicola Sturgeon is still new in her job, but is she prepared to accept that, on this occasion, she was wrong and should apologise to Parliament

and, more important, to the health care staff of the royal infirmary of Edinburgh?

Nicola Sturgeon: It is the First Minister who should apologise—to Marion Kyle.

For the First Minister's benefit, I will repeat what I said on 7 October: national health service staff do their level best and I pay tribute to them. The pressures under which they work and the experiences of patients such as Marion Kyle are caused by one and the same thing: the failure of his Government to get to grips with the NHS. I am criticising the First Minister, not NHS staff, and I will not stop criticising him until he stops failing patients and the staff who look after them.

The chair of NHS Lothian told me that when any patient feels that they have had as bad an experience in the health service as Marion Kyle feels that she had, the health board has lessons to learn. If the chair of the health board accepts that lessons can be learned, why will the First Minister not accept that?

The First Minister: I have said before that if genuine cases are brought to me, in the chamber or outwith it—as are brought to me by members from all parties—I take them seriously, even when they are exaggerated by the politicians. I believe that people deserve the best possible care from the health service and that they should be supported accordingly by the Government.

The request for an apology has come not from me or from the chamber, but from the staff of the hospital, and it is important to state clearly what they have said for the *Official Report*. Contrary to what was said in the chamber three weeks ago, they say that Mrs Kyle did not request any pain-killers during her first 24 hours in hospital, despite being prescribed the pain-killers that Nicola Sturgeon said that she was denied. They say that Mrs Kyle was not on a trolley, but on a state-of-the-art mobile bed—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Order.

The First Minister: I will quote what the consultant surgeon and the consultant physician said. They said that she was on a mobile bed

“to enable easy access to diagnostics with as little disruption to patients as possible.”

The same letter from the consultants—that letter was not written by me or by any politician, but by the health staff who were involved—states:

“She was in the assessment unit because this is the way that modern 21st century healthcare is delivered.

They state that the assessment unit is now being

“copied as a model by other hospitals throughout the UK”

and beyond, that the allegations are

“entirely unfounded and disgraceful”

and that

“It is outrageous that these allegations have been made in such a public way, which are completely misleading and unresearched.”

They state:

“We certainly expect an apology to all healthcare staff at The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh who provided Mrs Kyle and the other patients in the combined assessment unit with the very best care possible.”

Will Nicola Sturgeon apologise today not to us, but to those staff?

Nicola Sturgeon: I say to the First Minister that Marion Kyle's experience—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Nicola Sturgeon: Marion Kyle's experience for 11 hours on her mobile bed felt pretty genuine to her. If I were the First Minister, I would think twice before suggesting that he knows more than she does about the pain that she was in. I suggest to him that Marion Kyle is not alone and that there are patients out there who feel as aggrieved about their experience of the health service as she does. The First Minister has a cheek to try to lecture anyone else about the health service in a week in which it has been revealed that there are health boards in massive debt and in which doctors—the people who work in the NHS—are warning of disaster ahead because the First Minister is not recruiting enough staff. I know that he is rattled, but I suggest that he takes a few deep breaths, calms down and gets on with his job of delivering a health service that patients and staff can be proud of.

The First Minister: I will not quote the consultants this time; I will quote Nicola Sturgeon. In her most important and significant speech on health since she was elected to the chamber back in 1999, she said:

“It is a fact of life that, from time to time, things will go wrong in the health service. When they do, what is important is not to apportion blame but to make sure that complaints are dealt with quickly.”

The difference between such a set of circumstances and what has been described to us by the consultants who are involved in this case is that, in their view, things did not go wrong. Even in a situation in which things have not gone wrong, is the choice being made not to recognise the hard work of the staff, but instead to try to politicise the issue?

The issue is straightforward. Regardless of what the consultants might now say, I accept that if Marion Kyle thought that her treatment in Edinburgh royal infirmary required lessons to be learned, the system should be able to deal with that, and there are ways and proper procedures

for dealing with such matters. The truth is that the circumstances of her case were exaggerated in this chamber for political ends. That is not my view and it is not the view of the other members who heard Nicola Sturgeon that day; it is the view of the medical staff at Edinburgh royal infirmary.

Medical staff at Edinburgh royal infirmary will be watching First Minister's questions today. What they want to know is whether Nicola Sturgeon is big enough to admit that she got it wrong on that one occasion. Is she big enough to put those staff ahead of party politics? Is she big enough to apologise and say that the medical staff at Edinburgh royal infirmary did an excellent job in the circumstances of modern health care and that they deserve to be praised rather than condemned?

Nicola Sturgeon: I will tell the First Minister who else is watching today—Marion Kyle. It is her view that, in the First Minister's so-called patient-focused health service, something went badly wrong in her case. What she—the patient—asks the First Minister to do is to admit and take responsibility for that failing, and to say sorry to her.

The First Minister: I reiterate my one very simple point: it is not this chamber, or me as First Minister, that demands an apology from Nicola Sturgeon; it is the staff at the hospital, who have described the allegations that were made about them as unfounded, misleading and disgraceful. They deserve an apology, they should have got one and I hope that, in the years to come, Nicola Sturgeon will learn to give one more readily than she has today.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Having spent almost seven hours as a patient in Edinburgh royal infirmary yesterday, I echo Ms Sturgeon's comments and ask the First Minister to listen to the voices of patients. My experience was very different from that of the patient quoted by Ms Sturgeon, but I caution the First Minister against condemning or congratulating an entire system on the experience of one patient, even if, as was the case, I experienced the care of the same nursing staff and the same consultant physicians and surgeons as Mrs Kyle. I ask him to ensure that, in future, the staff of the Edinburgh royal understand the difference between politics and the genuine and excellent work that they do.

The First Minister: As I said in earlier answers, which I hope Margo MacDonald heard in full, I take seriously not just the cases that come to me in my local constituency, but the cases that come to me from throughout Scotland. I take those cases seriously, I am prepared to see them investigated, I am prepared to act where lessons need to be learned and I insist that health boards and local health management do that, too.

We should all in this chamber be committed to improving the quality of our national health service locally and nationally. It is unfortunate that, sometimes, party politics gets in the way of serious discussion of the issues. I hope that today we have seen the potential for a turning point, to avoid that happening again.

Cabinet (Meetings)

2. David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-1145)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Among the many issues that we will discuss next Wednesday will be our plans for reducing reoffending in Scotland and our plans to refresh our successful strategy for a smart, successful Scotland.

David McLetchie: One thing that the Cabinet might also like to discuss is the concerns that the First Minister has expressed publicly about the proposed merger and abolition of Scotland's six historic regiments. Given the concern that he has expressed publicly about the matter, will the First Minister tell us today what representations he has made to his colleagues at Westminster to prevent those Labour cuts from going ahead? Has he now written to the Secretary of State for Defence, Mr Geoff Hoon, as his spokesman indicated yesterday and, if so, will he publish that letter?

The First Minister: It is not normal practice for us to publish all ministerial correspondence between Edinburgh and Whitehall, but I will check the arrangements that we have to see whether that would be possible. However, I believe that the majority of the text from the letter has already been put on the public record. Not only have I written to Mr Hoon, but the Deputy First Minister wrote to him in the summer when the review was first announced. We believe strongly that whatever arrangements are put in place for the management and organisation of the British Army to ensure that we have a modern force for a modern world, the identities of the six Scottish regiments should be preserved, because they are important for Scotland and for local communities throughout Scotland.

David McLetchie: I thank the First Minister for his answer. We certainly look forward to reading his correspondence, if he can make it available to us. However, is not all this discussion of identities simply playing with words? The key question that has to be answered is straightforward: does the First Minister—or indeed the Deputy First Minister—support the retention of the six separate Scottish regiments? In other words, is he in favour of having six real regiments or is he in favour of

simply having a collection of cap badges within a single regiment? Which is it?

The First Minister: I would not want to speak for the Deputy First Minister about military organisation, because our parties might take different approaches to the matter nationally. Indeed, we might have different personal opinions on it in Scotland. Of course, these are reserved matters that are determined elsewhere. That said, we in Scotland must state clearly and with a unified voice that we wish to be involved in any discussions with the Ministry of Defence about its review, in the widest sense, and about its implications for employment and Scotland's communities; and that not just the regiments' identity but the identity of Scotland that they contribute to is important for this devolved Government and the Scottish Parliament. We will defend those identities strongly. We ask the Ministry of Defence and others who make these decisions to take that point of view on board.

David McLetchie: Yes, the First Minister will defend the regiments' identities, but the simple question is: will he defend their existence? Could we please have a straightforward answer?

The First Minister: I think that I gave Mr McLetchie a straightforward answer at the very beginning of my first response. Although it is right and proper for the management of the UK armed forces to consider the structure of the modern Army in order to meet the challenges that it faces, an important point of principle for us in Scotland is to preserve, defend and fight for the identities of the six existing Scottish regiments. I believe that those identities can be accommodated in whatever structure is agreed to be most appropriate and to allow our armed forces to be most effective in the modern world, no matter whether that means retaining the six regiments or amalgamations, which might be involved in finding more effective ways of dealing with the challenges of the modern world.

The Presiding Officer: I will take one urgent constituency question from Paul Martin.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): Does the First Minister support the call for an inquiry into the circumstances of the tragic murder of Mark Cummings by child sex offender Stuart Leggate? Does he also recognise that there is a need for a wide-ranging review of how we deal with convicted child sex offenders and does he think that such a review should examine whether people such as Stuart Leggate should have been housed alongside young families such as Mark Cummings's family?

The First Minister: All of us who have been or who are parents and everyone else in this chamber share Paul Martin's concerns about this

case and about any case in recent years that might be described as similar. One of the reasons why the Parliament has taken its devolved responsibilities with respect to sex offenders seriously and has made a number of significant changes to improve the legal framework and the management of offenders in and out of custody is to ensure that Scotland's communities are safer. However, Scottish ministers—and I am sure members of all parties—certainly share a continuing community concern. As a result, we must ensure that the current arrangements are continually reviewed to improve them further if possible. I will certainly ask the Minister for Justice to discuss with Paul Martin how he might take forward some of his ideas in relation to this matter.

Iraq (Demonstration)

3. Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): To ask the First Minister whether he will accept the invitation from Rose Gentle, the mother of Gordon Gentle, killed in Basra on 28 June 2004, to attend the demonstration on 30 October in support of British soldiers being brought home from Iraq. (S2F-1159)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Clearly, I want first to take the opportunity to express once again my condolences to the Gentle family on Gordon's death, but I will not be attending the rally on Saturday.

Tommy Sheridan: I would like the Parliament to welcome Rose Gentle to today's proceedings.

On several occasions last year, the First Minister argued in Parliament in favour of sending troops such as young Gordon to Iraq. Tragically, he and 67 other soldiers, and 19,000 Iraqi citizens, are dead. What in the First Minister's diary is so important that it prevents him from coming to Pollok on Saturday to justify his position?

The First Minister: I echo Tommy Sheridan's remarks in relation to Rose Gentle. I do not think that any of us in the chamber can imagine the level of grief that she has experienced. My own son is of a very similar age to Gordon Gentle, and I would think that all of us feel deep sympathy for the family at this time.

That said, as elected politicians, we have a duty and a responsibility to take these matters, in the widest policy sense, very seriously indeed. The work of the Black Watch and other British soldiers in Iraq should be supported by everybody in this Parliament and by all parties; I hope that some day that will be possible. It is important that we recognise that the work that the soldiers are carrying out is in extremely difficult circumstances, up against terrorists and those who were associated with the appalling regime that existed in Iraq. The people of Iraq want to have

democratic elections in January next year and if soldiers from Scotland and the rest of Britain can help to ensure that democratic elections take place in January, they deserve the full support of those of us in this democratically elected Parliament.

Tommy Sheridan: I asked the First Minister what he was doing on Saturday that was so important that it would prevent him from coming to Pollok. The letter inviting me to attend Saturday's march and rally asked me to come and either support the call for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq now—a call that I support—or explain why I do not support the call. Does the First Minister not agree that it is the duty of politicians to have the courage to stand up for their views, instead of being like Mr Blair and having the courage only to fight until the last drop of somebody else's blood? Is it not about time that politicians came to working-class communities such as Pollok and explained why the sons and daughters of the working class should be sacrificed for illegal wars and illegal invasions?

The First Minister: I have already said that I cannot attend the rally on Saturday. I deeply respect the work of those soldiers from Scotland and elsewhere who currently face difficult circumstances in Iraq but are defending what I believe are the interests of the people of Iraq in ensuring that there are democratic and free elections in January. I passionately do not believe that it would be in the interests of the people of Iraq or of the democratic elections in January for British troops to pull out of Iraq at this time. I have defended that position on many occasions, as Mr Sheridan knows.

I only wish that, in our debates on these issues, Mr Sheridan would show as much passion in condemning the terrorists and those who blow up not only British soldiers but their own Iraqi policemen and soldiers as he shows in condemning the elected Government of Britain.

Knife Crime (Strathclyde)

4. Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action is being considered to address concerns surrounding the increase in knife crime in Scotland and, particularly, in the Strathclyde region. (S2F-1137)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): We are deeply concerned about the incidence of knife crime and its contribution to violent crime more generally. We are examining how the current laws on the sale and carrying of knives can be strengthened further and are considering what form of tougher licensing system to restrict the sale of non-domestic knives could be feasible and effective. We are also looking at how police powers to deal with these issues might be

strengthened and we will legislate as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Mr McAveety: The First Minister will be aware of the serious concerns about the tragedy two weekends ago of four murders in my constituency. One of the key problems is that people are able to carry knives or to make knives of their own. I have here a copy of a document showing how people can put knives together using broom handles and scissors. We need a deterrent. I would like the Sentencing Commission for Scotland, which is in the east end of Glasgow today, to consider how it can strengthen sentences. Does the First Minister agree that we must consider how to strengthen sentences to address the difficult problem of people being prepared to use such lethal weapons?

The First Minister: I share Frank McAveety's concerns. It is important for us to act as quickly as we can to improve the deterrents that are available in the system. To do that, it would be wrong to hand the matter over to the Sentencing Commission because, given its work programme, it would almost certainly take longer to act on the sentences and the other provisions on knife crime than the Parliament would expect. That would certainly take longer than our devolved Government would expect, so Scottish ministers will take action as quickly as we can, without taking advice from the Sentencing Commission. The Minister for Justice is considering the provisions that might be available to us in progressing the issue.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Is the minister aware that, in the past year, 7,500 people in Glasgow and the west of Scotland have been victims of knife crime? Will he give to members and the people of Glasgow and the west of Scotland a commitment that he will meet Strathclyde police, instigate an urgent investigation into the causes of knife crime and tell Strathclyde police to put more police officers on the beat?

The First Minister: We are putting considerably more police officers on the beat throughout Scotland. In Strathclyde, the change in prisoner escort arrangements, for example, has already put well over 100 members of the police force back on other operational duties. That measure was opposed by the Scottish National Party on some sort of ideological ground.

There need to be improvements not only in the legislation that tackles knife crime, but in the operational effectiveness of our police forces across Scotland. There also needs to be a change in the culture, which is one of the reasons why I am delighted that today we are bringing into force the important provisions in the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004. As well as

helping to change the culture in communities throughout Scotland, they will allow the police to act properly. Those important measures will help us to change the culture, to bring respect back into communities and to deal with matters that are significantly more serious, such as knife crime.

Casinos

5. Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what role the Scottish Executive will play in decisions about how many more casinos there should be in Scotland. (S2F-1153)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Whatever the United Kingdom regulatory framework might be, the position of this devolved Government is clear. Any new casinos in Scotland will be agreed to only if they are licensed by Scottish licensing boards and regulated by conditions that are set by Scottish ministers.

Fergus Ewing: But the Prime Minister has expressed the clear view that he wants around 40 more Las Vegas-style casinos to be established as a form of economic regeneration. Does the First Minister share that view? Does he have a vision of the Scotland of the future as a sort of Nevada of the north with one regiment but umpteen casinos? Does he share the concerns that have been expressed by the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, which are highlighted in today's *Scottish Daily Mail*, that supply will create demand and that casinos will become part of everyday life?

The First Minister: I have great sympathy with the view of the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland and I believe that the position that it has taken—which is that we have a strong regulatory system in Scotland that should be maintained regardless of whatever new arrangements are put in place by the UK Government—is valid. If the UK Government decides to go in the direction that has been proposed, we will insist not just on the retention of the current strong system in Scotland, but on its improvement.

My view on the way in which we promote Scotland is clear and is different from Mr Ewing's. I do not want this country to be an insular, negative little country that hides from the rest of the world, does not accept its international responsibilities and cuts itself off from the rest of Britain, including the British Army, which Mr Ewing, through his amazing ability to deal with issues in two different directions at once, on the one hand seems to support, but on the other hand wants to break up. My view of Scotland is as a country that advertises itself, promotes itself and regenerates itself on the basis of our clean, healthy environment, our fantastic landscape, our wonderful cities, the

character of our people and the quality of our education system, rather than on the basis of any nasty culture that might be encouraged by those people who are in favour of more gambling.

NHS Argyll and Clyde

6. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive is satisfied with the adequacy of funding provided to NHS Argyll and Clyde. (S2F-1160)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): By 2007-08, health spending in Scotland will have doubled since devolution. That funding is equitably distributed, by formula, across all health boards.

Miss Goldie: I am sure that the First Minister is aware that the Auditor General for Scotland has issued a section 22 certificate in respect of the 2003-04 accounts for Argyll and Clyde NHS Board under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000, because of a projected deficit of £100 million in the board's accounts by 2007-08. The Auditor General has withheld qualification of the accounts because of an assurance from the Scottish Executive that the health board will have access to cash to meet its liabilities during that period as and when they fall due. For the avoidance of doubt, will the First Minister clarify that, in that period, Argyll and Clyde NHS Board will not be required to cut any services through lack of finance and that such sums as the Executive makes available to retrieve the deficit will constitute a write-off of debt, not a loan that obliges the health board to deal with repayment in future years?

The First Minister: I will make three things clear. First, in any decisions that are made on the matter, the interests of patients will be primary. Secondly, no public organisation gets a blank cheque from the Executive to spend on whatever it likes; public organisations must manage their finances, and Argyll and Clyde NHS Board is no different from any other in that respect. Thirdly, the worst possible thing that could happen for the patients of Argyll and Clyde in the next 12 months is not a report from the Auditor General for Scotland, but the election of a Conservative Government that would cut the health budget of Scotland and put patients in an even more precarious position. I give an absolute guarantee that the levels of spending that we have set out will be adhered to, that the interests of patients will come first and that we will insist that the management of Argyll and Clyde NHS Board, just like that of any other public organisation in Scotland, must look after its finances.

12:32

Meeting suspended until 14:00.

14:00

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Environment and Rural Development

Sewage Sludge

1. Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what investigation it has carried out into the spreading of sewage sludge on land and the environmental implications of such operations. (S2O-3744)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Lewis Macdonald): The Scottish Environment Protection Agency will register activities involving the spreading of sewage sludge on land only if it is satisfied that doing so will not harm either the environment or human health.

Linda Fabiani: I thank the minister for that answer. To preface my next question, I note that I recently visited such an operation in Breich and was pleasantly surprised at how successful it was. However, juxtaposing that with all the publicity that there was about Blairingone, does the minister agree that one of the main problems is that people do not understand the distinctions, are not being told about them, are worried about planning consents and have a suspicion about health? Would it not be better if SEPA, the Scottish Executive and councils were much more proactive in letting people know the differences between schemes and what exactly is going to be put into their area?

Lewis Macdonald: Anyone who makes proposals has a responsibility to do that themselves. SEPA's responsibility is to grant an exemption only if it is satisfied that there is no implication of harm. In the cases of which I am aware, I believe that that has been done.

It is a pleasure to begin my stint as a minister responsible for the environment by answering a question on a subject that addresses recycling as well as other matters.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Does the deputy minister remember the question that I asked of Mr Finnie on 30 September with reference to sludge dumping? At that time, the minister advised me that dumping had not gone ahead on the Beoch site because of SEPA's diligence. Does the deputy minister now accept that, at that very moment, dumping was proceeding? Will he now advise what tests have

been done on the sludge that is being dumped at Beoch and whether those tests cover bacteria and viruses as well as metals?

Lewis Macdonald: I am not familiar with all the details of the Beoch case, but I am familiar with the current testing of land, which involves taking core samples to test for metals in the soil. Before it grants an exemption from the application of regulations, SEPA will satisfy itself that there is no threat either to human health or the environment. I have no doubt that SEPA will follow that procedure in the case to which the member refers.

Greenhouse Gases

2. Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it has in place to reduce greenhouse gases, in particular by reducing energy consumption. (S2O-3699)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Executive has a number of measures in place to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, including energy efficiency, as detailed in our Scottish climate change programme. We are reviewing the programme and will consult on that soon. We will publish a revised programme in the first half of 2005.

Sarah Boyack: In reviewing the climate change programme, I ask the minister to emphasise the importance of energy efficiency and to put in place a comprehensive energy efficiency strategy to help Scottish businesses, the public sector and individuals. What part will the £20 million that he has allocated to energy efficiency play in that process?

Ross Finnie: I am grateful to Sarah Boyack for that question. We are promoting a number of schemes across the Executive. The public sector energy efficiency initiative is a fund available to all Scottish local authorities and health boards, Scottish Water and others to allow them to implement capital investment and other measures. Loan action Scotland provides interest-free loans to small and medium-sized enterprises, and the regional business manager network provides local access to support business resource efficiency.

Measures are in place but, as I indicated in my first answer, we are reviewing those measures in the context of the climate change programme for the United Kingdom, which will require Scotland to make further revisions.

On the moneys that we recently allocated, I do not wish to make commitments in advance of revising the strategy. I assure Sarah Boyack that energy efficiency will play a large part in the programme's revision.

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): Many people in Scotland who believe that we need increased energy efficiency are calling for green heating targets and energy consumption figures for Scotland so that we know where we are starting from. The absence of such figures and targets seems to be a huge gulf in the Government's strategy. Does the Executive have any plans to produce them?

Ross Finnie: In the context of the review of our climate change programme, I am conscious of the wide debate on how to measure the targets and figures to which Mr Lochhead referred. I am also conscious that although a large number of environmental non-governmental organisations wish us to have specific Scottish targets, others recognise that the point at which one measures energy emission is the transmission of energy rather than usage. Scotland is a net exporter of electricity, so difficult calculations are involved in assessing energy efficiency. However, I certainly have an open mind on the issue as it might be better—or easier—to say precisely where we are trying to get to. I emphasise that I have cited only one example of the complications of getting the figures, but I am certainly considering the matter as part of the review.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): Does the minister agree that the best long-term way of cutting greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland is to develop further the nuclear power industry? Will he join me in welcoming the positive comments this week from the MP for Edinburgh Central—the Secretary of State for Scotland—on the potential for future development of nuclear power in Scotland?

Ross Finnie: The Executive has made its position clear on the subject. We are keen to develop renewable sources, particularly in relation to wind, wave and tidal power. To that end, as the member knows, we have made considerable investment in research stations in Orkney and in the intermediary technology institute for energy in Aberdeen. We do not necessarily agree with Mr Mundell's point, because the issue of the cost of nuclear power must come into play. We must balance the cost of production with the costs at the end of a nuclear power station's life. We must view that not only in economic terms but in environmental terms.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The minister will be aware that the Prime Minister has clearly stated that he wants the G8 summit in Scotland next year to focus on climate change, which he—not me—describes as

"a challenge so far-reaching in its impact and irreversible in its destructive power, that it alters radically human existence."

The minister might regard that as more green rhetoric, but will he give us an assurance that the Executive's review of its climate change policy will be completed before the G8 countries gather in Scotland in June next year to discuss climate change? Does he agree that it would be a national embarrassment if the G8 summit were held in a country that did not have its own target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions?

Ross Finnie: No, I do not necessarily agree with Mr Ruskell that that would be an embarrassment. As I explained in my response to Richard Lochhead, it is not easy to define the United Kingdom targets. I have indicated clearly, not just today but previously, that I am keen to have targets if I can see a means of calculating them. On the timing of the review, I am anxious that the Scottish review, which will place significance on the impact of Scottish elements in the climate change review, should be available before the G8 summit. I certainly agree that that would be preferable and helpful in the context of that international debate. However, there is a huge amount of work to be done in putting the review together and we will try to do it in a co-ordinated way with the UK Government. I take Mr Ruskell's point—I, too, would like the review to be completed before the G8 summit.

Fishing

3. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive when it plans to meet fishing industry representatives in advance of the December meeting of the European Union agriculture and fisheries council. (S2O-3736)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The Executive maintains close contact with fishing industry representatives throughout the year. We expect to meet regularly in the run-up to the December council and we have planned a dedicated stakeholder conference for 15 November.

Iain Smith: I thank Ross Finnie for his answer and I welcome the proposed stakeholder conference. I know that he is well aware of the specific concerns of the smaller fishing communities, such as Pittenweem in my constituency, which have been caught up for years in quota regimes designed to solve a problem that is not of their making. Given that the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea report has identified very healthy stocks of haddock and sustainable stocks of east coast nephrops, what assurances can he give the fishermen of the east neuk of Fife that they will not be penalised by any regime to protect cod stocks in 2005? What further progress does he hope to make on the regional and local management of fisheries as part of the reform of the common fisheries policy?

Ross Finnie: In any of the scientific evidence that has been adduced in the matter of mixed fisheries and the possibility of protecting cod stocks—the only stock that is seriously under threat, as reiterated in the ICES report—it is not the mixed nephrops and haddock fishery that is at issue but the mixed nephrops and cod fishery. In the past few years, we have successfully pointed out to the Commission that its concerns on that matter were overstated, and I think that we managed last year to get a nephrops quota for the east coast of Scotland that more properly reflected the scientific view and also allowed fishermen to prosecute that fishery.

I can give absolutely no assurances. All that I can say is that I am anxious that we are able to push forward some of the key principles that we established last year on the decoupling of the direct relationships not only between nephrops and cod but between cod and haddock. That will allow us to come up with proposals that will facilitate the fishermen in prosecuting the fishing of the haddock and nephrops stock in ways that do not also threaten the cod stock.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Does the minister recall the real difficulties that arose after some of the decisions that were made at last December's fisheries council in relation to the boundaries that were drawn up without fishing input? If he were asked to do so by fishing interests, would he be prepared to engage a practising fisherman as one of his advisers for the duration of the council? If that is not possible, will he at least give a commitment that any proposals that are developed at the council are put before practising fishermen before a final position is taken and decisions arrived at?

Ross Finnie: I have to say to Stewart Stevenson that I have tried very hard this year to start the consultation process on how we propose to deal with any potential situation much earlier. The engagement between myself and the industry and between my officials and the industry began just after the summer term. In those meetings, we have tried to postulate a range of possibilities. We did not have the ICES advice when we started the process. We have been trying to suggest to the industry what our reaction would be to scenario A, scenario B or scenario C and what kind of proposition we would be prepared to consider to try to meet those difficulties. We have been engaging with the industry on the potential for those negotiations. We have been considering what the boundaries would be and what would delineate areas if such situations were to emerge, even if that is not the option that the industry would have preferred.

We intend to carry on that process. We now have the ICES advice and we must now wait for

the scientific and socioeconomic committees of the Commission to review the scientific advice and come forward with a proposal. As they do that work, I will continue to engage with our industry. We shall continue to have members of the industry with us through to the council meeting. Whether we can consult the industry on the precise timing of the meeting itself is a question about which I cannot give an undertaking. I have tried hard in recent years to meet the fishermen at all hours of the day and night. Indeed, I met Mr Lochhead at a very unseemly hour last year, when both of us might have been better in our beds, but in the interests of Scottish fishing we remained alive and alert. I cannot give an undertaking on the timing of the meeting, because it would be most unfortunate if ministers were not in the room when the decision was being taken because they were anxiously seeking to do something else.

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the minister's reassurances about the regular meetings that he has held with the fishing organisations. Can he explain why he has had no meeting so far with the Fishermen's Association Ltd? FAL wrote to him on 30 August, but a meeting has yet to take place. Will FAL be invited to the meeting that he plans to hold on 15 October? How many times has he met FAL during the five years that he has been in office?

Ross Finnie: In response to the final question, off the top of my head, I cannot recall the number. In any industry, organisations put themselves forward to Government as being what might be called "the" organisation that represents the vast majority of the industry. That is what the Scottish Fishermen's Federation does on behalf of the Scottish fishing industry. Although Mr Brocklebank might suggest that that is an inaccurate representation, I have no reason to doubt the validity of the SFF's claim to represent the overwhelming number of fishing interests. I have therefore thought it fit and proper to deal in the main through its offices. That is not to say, however, that I have not met many other organisations: I have met the Cod Crusaders and various other organisations that have a specific interest in a constituency or area.

Land Management Contract

4. Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress it is making in working out the details of the land management contract. (S2O-3707)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): We are currently in discussion with the European Commission on the detailed measures that are to be included in the land management contract menu scheme. I hope very soon to be in a position to make an announcement.

Alex Johnstone: Can the minister give an undertaking that the range of options that will be made available in the menu are adequate to attract the interest of the vast majority of farmers? Furthermore, can he confirm that adequate funding will be made available over time to make the scheme attractive and to encourage farmers to believe that the money that has been taken from them in modulation is being returned to them so that they take the actions that the Government wishes to prescribe?

Ross Finnie: If Alex Johnstone had read the initial consultation document, he would have realised that we have made great strides in trying to extend the range of options. Indeed, following representations that were made during the consultation process, we extended the menu to broaden the overall range of the measures.

Essentially, as Mr Johnstone is aware, the funding comes from modulation. That said, in respect of our own state modulation—as opposed to compulsory modulation—pound-for-pound additionality was granted through the Treasury and the Executive. The rate of modulation has to be progressive in order to allow people to adjust.

Although we start from a poor base, I hope that, over time, we will get more adequate funding. Compared to the settlements that were granted elsewhere, the 2000 settlement for the United Kingdom, and therefore for Scotland, was disproportionate, but I think that it will improve. The range of options in the LMC menu means that a broader range of farmers will be able to participate in the scheme.

Water Charges

5. Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will abolish the discount on water charges for single-adult households. (S2O-3750)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Lewis Macdonald): The consultation on future charges and discounts for Scottish Water's customers closed on 12 October. We expect to announce our conclusions early in the new year.

Mr Maxwell: One of the guiding principles of the Executive's consultation document "Paying for Water Services 2006-2010" was:

"All charges should be set on a harmonised basis, so that customers in the same group and using the same services should pay for these services at the same rate".

Given that principle, will the minister explain why big companies are the recipients of special deals from Scottish Water?

I asked Scottish Water about its special non-published tariffs for large companies. In its reply,

Scottish Water confirmed that those deals saved large companies £8.6 million in 2002-03 and a further £3.3 million in 2003-04.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Question.

Mr Maxwell: Does the minister agree that charities, the disadvantaged and single-person households are more deserving of special deals on their water charges than are large, profitable companies that can well afford to pay the proper rate for the water they use?

Lewis Macdonald: Mr Maxwell has clear views on the matter and I am sure that he will have made his response to the consultation process in good time. It would be a shame if he has not done so, but if that is the case, I am sure that we will take his comments into account when we consider the wider responses to the consultation process.

On Mr Maxwell's question on single-person households, we should examine not a stand-alone proposition within the context of the consultation paper, but the need to consider whether a discount system for low-income households should be introduced. Looking at single-person households as if they stand in isolation, or as if they relate to big industrial users, is perhaps missing the point, because they relate to low-income households. The way in which domestic and non-domestic customers are charged will be considered when we examine the principles for future charging. I am sure that we will address the issues equitably and on a level playing field.

Water Infrastructure (Development Constraints)

6. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to ensure that Scottish Water's capital investment plans address the issue of development constraints on rural housing projects caused by lack of water or sewage infrastructure. (S2O-3724)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Lewis Macdonald): During the current investment period, £200 million will secure positive benefits in addressing current constraints and an additional £41 million will address development constraints and first-time connections in rural areas. We recently consulted on what Scottish Water's future investment priorities should be. We will issue our response to that consultation early in the new year, when we will outline the objectives that we wish Scottish Water to address in the next regulatory period.

John Farquhar Munro: I thank the minister for that encouraging response, but he will be aware that in a number of Highland communities, much needed small developments of affordable housing

have been blocked because of shortcomings in the water and drainage infrastructure. Can he assure me that when the next phase of capital spending goes ahead, small rural communities will not be overlooked?

Lewis Macdonald: I am happy to give that assurance. We are conscious of the development constraints that have arisen during the current investment period and we are keen to do what we can to ensure that similar constraints do not continue into the next investment period, particularly with reference to the challenges that face small rural communities.

Health and Community Care

Flu Vaccine

1. Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to ensure that there are adequate supplies of flu vaccine available this winter. (S2O-3741)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): Members will be aware that production problems were experienced by one of our major suppliers of the flu vaccine. As a result, the Executive took immediate steps to ensure that alternative supplies from other manufacturers were made available. Those supplies are coming progressively on stream. The situation is being kept under close review, in collaboration with the Scottish Pharmaceutical General Council and the British Medical Association, to ensure that the immunisation programme proceeds as smoothly as possible and that any delays are minimised.

Donald Gorrie: That is encouraging. Anecdotally, widespread concerns have been expressed that people have been asked not to attend appointments for flu jabs. Will the minister ensure that the best possible public information is provided on the measures that are being taken to sort out the issue, which he encouragingly tells us is being sorted out? The public information aspect is important.

Mr Kerr: I assure all those who are eligible for the vaccine that 166,000 doses were received this week, 200,000 doses will be available next week and the outstanding doses will be available by 8 November.

A judgment had to be made about our promotional campaign on the flu bug. We are confident that a wise decision was taken to continue with the campaign, albeit that we understood that there would be local supply difficulties. However, boards, general practitioners, community pharmacists, public health officials, immunisation co-ordinators and NHS 24 have been kept apprised of the situation with the distribution of the vaccine. While there are some

delays, they are being kept to the absolute minimum.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Is the minister aware that many of my constituents in Falkirk East have not had access to the flu vaccine? Is he aware of a particular problem in Forth valley? When will the situation be resolved?

Mr Kerr: I am not aware of particular problems in particular localities, because the situation with the supplies affected the whole of Scotland and each area was under pressure. However, we have sought to resolve that through having immediate access to further supplies, which I mentioned, and I am happy to look into the Forth valley situation.

It is reassuring that the Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health has not reported any cases of flu, and flu-type illnesses are below the level that we have experienced in past years. All the indicators are okay. I accept that the situation is not perfect, but I assure everyone that the vaccines will be available and that we are dealing with this matter as best we can.

Dental Services

2. Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when a further round of measures to improve the availability of national health service dental services will be announced. (S2O-3714)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Rhona Brankin): Our forthcoming response to the consultation document "Modernising NHS Dental Services in Scotland" will include further measures to support NHS dental services in Scotland.

Richard Lochhead: I welcome the minister to her new portfolio. Her predecessor spent a lot of time engaging with the problems in NHS Grampian with NHS dental services. I draw to her attention the front page of *The Press and Journal* from 12 October, which carries the headline "Revealed: Scandal of our Dental Care Crisis", which refers to a dangerous new dimension to the problem. Because fewer parents register with local NHS dentists than used to be the case, they are not taking their children to the dentist and as a result the level of child dental decay is rising rapidly. A community dentist has said that one in three children who visit him have to have an extensive number of teeth removed. Will the minister investigate this worrying trend, which has arisen from the lack of NHS dentists, and bring forward urgent measures to address it?

Rhona Brankin: We acknowledge that we need to take a longer view in areas such as Grampian. We are considering an analysis of the consultation that we undertook earlier in the year, which closed

in April, and we will make information on that available.

I am more than happy to meet the member to discuss the issue in relation to Grampian in particular. Additional money has been made available to the NHS and it is up to NHS Grampian to deliver the adequate number of dentists.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I ask the minister to note that I sent her predecessor scores of letters and a petition, which I also sent to the chief executive of NHS Fife. Will she note that my constituency does not have a single NHS dental place left? Will she meet me to discuss that matter? My constituency is probably the poorest and most disadvantaged constituency in the whole of Fife, and we all know that dental, and general, ill health always affects the most disadvantaged people most.

Rhona Brankin: I would be delighted to meet the member, but it is important to note that we have already introduced a significant number of measures and are taking a longer-term look at the future of NHS dentistry in Scotland. In March we announced £3 million for dental practice improvements and there was £10.3 million for such improvements in the four previous financial years. On 22 March we announced that the general dental practice allowance would be increased by 50 per cent. We have introduced a number of measures, such as golden hellos, to encourage retention and recruitment, but we acknowledge that we have to take a longer-term view. I am aware that there are still problems in parts of Scotland and I repeat that I am more than happy to meet the member to discuss the particular problems in her area.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): It is essential to train new dentists for the long term. How many more dentists are undergoing training in Scotland and when will the commitment in the partnership agreement to consult on the need to develop the outreach centre in Aberdeen into a full dental school be met?

Rhona Brankin: There are 15 per cent more dentists undergoing training. Mike Rumbles will probably know this, but funding has been provided to draw up a business case for the outreach training centre in Aberdeen and officials are in discussions with NHS Grampian to progress that development. I am more than happy to meet Mike Rumbles to consider possible further developments.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): The minister will be aware that a number of members raised this issue with her predecessor Tom McCabe and that he announced a number of useful initiatives. Does she share my concern that

the situation seems to be getting worse still? We are now in a position where 2.5 million Scots are not registered with NHS dental practices—that is more than half the adult population and more than one third of the children in Scotland, which is a worrying state of affairs. What steps can she take to restore access to NHS dental services, particularly in small towns in rural areas throughout Scotland?

Rhona Brankin: Steps have already been taken to improve access to dental services through the introduction in April 2000 of a scheme to reward financially the commitment of dentists to the NHS. That accounts for approximately £3 million per annum, which is available for improvements to NHS dental services and for the dentists' remote areas allowance, which doubled to £6,000 from 1 April. There is also the £1 million golden hello package. We recognise, however, that we still have a long way to go. A major package of reforms will be brought to the Parliament as soon as possible.

Perth Royal Infirmary (Acute Services)

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

To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has for the development of acute services at Perth royal infirmary. (S2O-3676)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): NHS Tayside is responsible for planning and providing health services for the people of Tayside. As part of its acute balance of care programme, Tayside NHS Board intends to invest well over £25 million in developing acute services. Most of that resource has been earmarked to enhance acute and other services at Perth royal infirmary.

Mr Swinney: As part of the announcement of the acute balance of care proposals by NHS Tayside, a commitment was given, in recompense for the removal of children's and women's health services at Perth royal infirmary. There was to be an increase of 3,675 patients in in-patient and day-case activity and of 10,260 patients in out-patient activity, across a wide range of specialties. Will the minister take this opportunity to confirm that those targets remain valid for the acute balance of care review? How many more cases have been treated as a result of the steps that have been taken and the changes that have been made?

Mr Kerr: Mr Swinney asks some very detailed questions, on which I will come back to him in detail. I know that the losses that occurred at PRI were the subject of substantial public campaigning, particularly the closure of the consultant-led obstetrics facilities. Those have now turned into a midwife-driven maternity service which, I understand, is working extremely well.

If Mr Swinney is referring to the additional work that will take place, the lion's share of the investment not only relieves pressure on Ninewells hospital; I would argue that it substantially reinforces our and the NHS board's commitment to PRI by way of an increase in the number of critical care beds, improvements in kidney dialysis, new oncology and haematology facilities, new gastrointestinal endoscopy facilities, enhanced laboratories, a new gamma camera, the ultrasound room, the upgrade of two operating theatres and 12 new beds. All that would suggest to anyone who is interested in the health service that substantial investment is taking place. Fewer people are travelling from Mr Swinney's constituency to go elsewhere for treatment. That is good news for the patients, which is what we seek to bring through all our objectives.

Home Care (Older People)

4. Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made in providing older people with home care services. (S2O-3694)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Rhona Brankin): All the evidence is that older people want to stay in their own homes as long as they can. We are working closely with local authorities to deliver that. The proportion of older people receiving intensive home care has risen over the past three years and now stands at 26 per cent of all those who are receiving long-term care. In the spending review, we announced our target of increasing that to 30 per cent by 2008.

Sarah Boyack: I welcome that increase in support for older people staying in their homes for longer. What work is the minister doing to ensure that we have enough qualified staff to provide an enhanced level of service throughout Scotland, particularly in places such as Edinburgh, where there are severe employment pressures on the national health service?

Rhona Brankin: I very much agree with Sarah Boyack that the work-force issue is important. Many among the home care work force are in the 40-to-60 age group, and their retirement is a key issue for providers. As she says, in places such as Edinburgh, where there is a competitive economic environment, councils can find it hard to recruit some care staff. It is important that we work closely with representatives of the work force. The national work-force group, which I chair, is leading on developments across the sector as it examines work-force issues.

Air Ambulance Service (Highlands)

5. Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it can provide reassurance to

people in the Highlands that the proposals for the provision of air ambulance cover from spring 2005 will not lead to any reduction in service levels. (S2O-3722)

The Minister for Health and Community Care

(Mr Andy Kerr): The Scottish Ambulance Service is currently consulting on the proposed service provision for air ambulance services, which would be effective from 1 April 2006. The proposals would represent an overall improvement on the current level of service, and the helicopter provision in the Highlands would remain the same. There is an air ambulance helicopter base in Inverness, which would be supported by dedicated fixed-wing aircraft based in Aberdeen.

Mr Stone: I thank the minister for that encouraging answer. I will describe a scenario for the minister. If—perish the thought—NHS Highland were to downgrade the 24-hour, consultant-led maternity service in Caithness and if, as happens every winter, the A9 were to be blocked by snow, would that not further stretch the Ambulance Service? Surely the minister would agree that that would be thoroughly undesirable.

Mr Kerr: In reviewing the delivery of any of our services, we ensure that we involve the whole of the NHS family in discussions. I fully expect that the Scottish Ambulance Service would be an integral part of discussions on changes to any service that it was required to provide. The standards of service that the service is required to provide, and we continue to consult on, are very severe. In categories A and B, 95 per cent of flights require to be airborne within two minutes, 90 per cent to be on site within 30 minutes and 95 per cent to return to the hospital within 45 minutes.

The purpose-built, pressurised, fixed-wing aircraft will enhance the service, as they will be able to fly above the weather and get to locations more speedily. I would argue, from what I have seen, and while consultations are continuing, that not only will we retain current service levels but those levels will increase. Any service change that occurs at a local level will be required, through contract, to be delivered safely. The Scottish Ambulance Service will be involved in that discussion.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

In the interests of safety and economy, is the minister satisfied that there are consistent procedures in place before clinicians can call for air ambulance cover to be given?

Mr Kerr: From my understanding of how the service works, I am satisfied that that is the case. In the proposed new service there will be dedicated personnel within each call centre to ensure that matters are handled appropriately. In my book, the provision of purpose-built,

pressurised, fixed-wing aircraft suggests that we will have a much safer method of ensuring that passengers get the high quality of care that they deserve as part of their treatment, while they are in the air and at the appropriate location.

Ear, Nose and Throat Appointments (Waiting Times)

6. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to improve waiting times for ear, nose and throat appointments. (S2O-3685)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): We are committed to ensuring that no patient waits more than 26 weeks for a first out-patient appointment with a consultant, following general practitioner referral, from December 2005. Earlier this year, the centre for change and innovation launched a £3.5 million national redesign initiative that is targeted at ENT out-patient services. That will support NHS Scotland in reducing waiting times and progressing towards sustainable delivery of the 26-week target through locally owned and initiated solutions. Participating NHS boards will test new ways of delivering out-patient services and I expect that that successful and innovative practice will be shared across all NHS boards in due course. In NHS Lothian for example, patient-focused booking is being implemented at a cost of £117,000. Together with nurse-led ENT services, that should have a very positive impact on the waiting list.

Mike Pringle: I raise the matter after a constituent of mine was told that she would have to wait 83 weeks—more than a year and a half—for treatment. She was told that she could be treated more quickly if her condition deteriorated. We should be aiming to treat conditions earlier, not carry out more complex treatments when conditions deteriorate. Will the minister look into the situation in the ENT department of NHS Lothian's university hospitals division and address the issue of the recruitment of staff? New locums are just not good enough.

Mr Kerr: I share the member's frustration on behalf of his constituent. However, the resources that are required for the delivery of modernisation initiatives will change the patient flow and improve the service for the individual patient. The two locum consultants who have been working in Lothian are reducing some of the pressure on the waiting list and someone is being recruited for the substantive consultant post. Nurse practitioners are in position, assistant technical officers are doing the job that consultants used to do and we are using the NHS family in an effective way in an attempt to reduce waiting times and waiting lists. I am not satisfied with the situation and I will happily

consider the individual's situation. In its correspondence with me, the board acknowledges that it is not satisfied with the service either.

NHS Waiting Lists

7. Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive in what circumstances a patient on a national health service waiting list would be given a financial inducement to use private health care. (S2O-3745)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): I am not aware of any such circumstances. NHS Scotland is committed to meeting our national maximum waiting time guarantees. Individual NHS boards may make use of the independent health care sector, when necessary, to ensure that those guarantees are delivered and sustained for the benefit of NHS patients throughout Scotland.

Linda Fabiani: I know that the minister is aware that Lanarkshire NHS Board has offered such an inducement in at least one case for a condition that could have been treated easily and cheaply in Scotland if the clinical procedure had been approved here as it has been approved in England. The main thrust of my point is that in such cases people have been offered a certain amount of money—a few thousand pounds—towards the cost of treatment, depending on their funding the rest, and—

The Presiding Officer: Question.

Linda Fabiani: They have to pay out the money and then claim it back. Does that promote equal access to health care for all?

Mr Kerr: Given the performance of the SNP leader, I have to look closely at such assertions regarding these matters. Again, I am happy to look into the individual case to which the member refers. It is not the practice of the national health service to give cash to an individual to go away for a service. It is the board's job to find a suitable location for the delivery of that service and any payments would be made direct from the board to the individual private contractor who provides the service. I am happy to receive correspondence on the matter from the member. I restate our position that it would be very unusual for such a situation to occur.

General Questions

Road Tolls (Edinburgh)

1. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what the economic impact on Fife would be of Edinburgh introducing road tolls. (S2O-3749)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): The City of Edinburgh Council has not yet finalised its draft charging order or submitted it to ministers. Due to the Scottish ministers' statutory role in relation to the order, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further at this time.

Murdo Fraser: I will try to tease something out of the minister. Is he aware that many people who live in Fife commute in daily to make a valuable contribution to the Edinburgh economy and that for many of them public transport is not a suitable alternative? Does he consider it acceptable that under Edinburgh's proposals people who live in North Queensferry will have to pay a toll to enter the city while people who live in South Queensferry—who cause every bit as much congestion—will get off scot free? Will the minister make the strongest representation to the City of Edinburgh Council that that discrimination against Fifers is completely unacceptable?

Nicol Stephen: I am aware of the views of Fife Council, for example, on the issue and I am aware of the work that has been done to analyse the impact that a road user charge would have on businesses in Fife. All that I can do at this stage is assure Murdo Fraser that if a road user charging scheme is submitted in due course to Scottish ministers the views of businesses and local communities in Fife will be taken into consideration when Scottish ministers reach a view on the proposal.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): My views on the unfairness of the detail of Edinburgh's tolling proposals are well known. In the context of the possible economic impact on Fife, does the minister agree that there might be an opportunity to attract businesses to locate or relocate north of the Forth, where charges would not apply? That might have the twin benefits of decreasing unemployment rates in Fife and cutting down commuter traffic on the Forth road bridge.

Nicol Stephen: I agree that all those issues need to be carefully considered. That includes the issue that Scott Barrie fairly raised and the interaction between the toll on the Forth road bridge and any road user toll. Ministers will consider those issues in due course, but we have made it clear that under the powers for road user charging in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, if a local authority wishes to propose such a scheme,

Scottish ministers will be willing to consent if the scheme is reasonable and appropriate and there is clear evidence of local support for it. We must examine this particular scheme in due course; our options are to reject it, to approve it or to amend it and we have powers to do any of those things.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I hope that today the minister will at least confirm that he is aware of the deep hostility that exists in Fife, particularly among businesses, because of the impact on the Fife economy. Is he aware that businesses in Fife are screaming about the drain on their bottom line that is the daily nightmare of travel across the Forth estuary? Is the minister planning a new bridge, the introduction of new ferry services or additional park-and-ride facilities? People in Fife simply want to know whether the Scottish Government has the vision and courage to start making decisions. Fife businesses can wait no longer for decisions to be made. For instance, building a new bridge will take 10 to 15 years.

The Presiding Officer: Question.

Bruce Crawford: When will the minister act? When will he tell the people of Fife what is planned?

The Presiding Officer: That was pretty wide of tolls, but Mr Stephen may answer as he will.

Nicol Stephen: We are anxious about congestion levels throughout Scotland. As members know, most of the transport budget used to be spent on roads, but the budget was small—it was just over £300 million per year in 1999, when the Parliament was established. The transport budget is now somewhere over £900 million a year and will rise to £1.4 billion a year by 2007-08. A considerable amount of that budget will be spent on public transport initiatives. The simple answer is that I want better public transport, better park-and-ride schemes and better rail connections throughout Scotland. The Executive is investing in exactly that.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Does the minister agree that we must tackle congestion, in part through congestion charging? Congestion has a twin negative impact on the quality of life and the economy for people in Fife and the Lothians. Will he rule out a second Forth road bridge, which would only add to congestion in Fife and the Lothians while gobbling up all the Executive's transport budget, which needs to be spent on public transport alternatives to take people out of the traffic jams that are causing a lot of damage to our economy and quality of life?

Nicol Stephen: We must tackle congestion, which is an increasing problem in Scotland. It has a major impact on people and communities and

has a significant impact on business. One issue on which business lobbies all ministers is the need for transport infrastructure improvements, which I am determined to deliver. To get rid of congestion, improve the situation and make transport connections flow, I rule out no approach. It is important to examine all the options.

Teachers

2. Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive what effect a shortage of teachers is having on fully implementing reductions in class contact time in primary schools in line with the McCrone agreement. (S2O-3661)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): None. The reductions have been implemented.

Ms Byrne: Is the minister aware of the problems in the Glasgow area, which has a shortage of teachers to cover the extra hours in which primary teachers are to be out of class? The Educational Institute of Scotland has told its members that if they have not had their cover on a Friday afternoon, they should remove themselves from their school. What will the minister do to resolve the problem?

Peter Peacock: As I said, the reductions in class contact time have been put in place. Glasgow had 90 vacancies at the beginning of the school term, but Glasgow City Council has now recruited more than 100 additional staff. Matters are well on the way to resolution in all respects.

The member asked about the EIS and a suggestion about how staff might behave on a Friday afternoon. I am conscious that the EIS has formal arrangements in place and has advised its members that they should stay in the classroom, record a protest about what is happening and subsequently follow a grievance procedure if necessary. I expect teachers to behave professionally in relation to the teaching of the kids in their classes.

RAF Kinloss

3. Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what representations it will make to Her Majesty's Government in respect of the impact of closure of the Royal Air Force base at Kinloss on the economy of the Moray firth area. (S2O-3746)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): The Scottish Executive is in regular contact with the United Kingdom Government on a wide range of issues, including the review of defence airfields.

Mrs Ewing: Is the minister aware that, even as we speak, Moray Council representatives are

meeting the minister of state from the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall to discuss the matters that I raise? Has the Scottish Executive received a similar invitation to discussions? How would it respond to such an invitation? The subject is vital to the whole Moray firth area. The uncertainty is already having an impact on local businesses throughout the Moray constituency and beyond.

Allan Wilson: I would be pleased to meet Moray Council and the member, as I recognise the genuine constituency concern that exists. It is not for me to tell the local campaign how best it should go about its business to secure the retention of the airfield, but I would wish to work with the local authority, the enterprise agencies and all other concerned parties to ensure that any potential economic impact is addressed. However, I stress that this review is part of a review of 50 airfields throughout the UK and that no decision has yet been made. It is up to those who are campaigning for the airfield's retention to make their case in all the forums, and I would be pleased to meet them.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Given that council rents in Moray are among the lowest in Scotland, that the average wage there is the lowest in Scotland and that there may be a surplus of MOD property, will Moray be placed at the top of the list for the next dispersal of jobs from Edinburgh or elsewhere in Scotland?

Allan Wilson: I am not the minister with responsibility for jobs dispersal—more is the pity, it might be said—but I am sure that the case for Moray will be made in the appropriate forums. I am genuinely concerned, as are the constituents in that area, about the prospective economic impact of any defence review and its impact on civilian and service jobs in the area. I genuinely wish to hold discussions with all the relevant agencies to ensure that their interests are put to the MOD at the highest level.

Nursery Service (National Review)

4. Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made towards the initiation of a national review of the nursery service. (S2O-3662)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Euan Robson): We announced the national review of the early-years and children's work force on 9 June. A steering group made up of representatives from trade unions as well as the public, private and voluntary sectors met on 2 July to agree how to take the review forward. The group is scheduled to meet again on 26 November. The steering group's working group on roles and responsibilities has met three times. I am pleased to report that work is progressing well and that the steering group will provide a report to ministers next summer.

Elaine Smith: I am pleased to hear that the review is progressing, given the commitment that was given by the Executive earlier this year during my members' business debate. I note from the Executive's press release at the announcement of the review that the review aims to consider

"the potential implications ... for pay and conditions."

Can the minister inform me whether workers can genuinely expect to see a material improvement in their pay and conditions as a result of the review, especially given the gender issue?

Euan Robson: Pay and conditions are matters for employers. We will need to wait for the outcome of the review. However, the review will consider the potential implications of its work on pay and conditions.

Schools (PPP Funding)

5. Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what proportion of the draw-down of public-private partnership funding for schools indicated in its budget equates to capital spend. (S2O-3735)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): All the Executive's support for school PPP projects is targeted on capital spend, for example, on the building costs and capitalised interest.

Fiona Hyslop: I refer the minister to pages 6 and 39 of the draft budget document, which indicate a low capital investment proportion of the costs of the private finance scheme. In 2005-06, the figure is £35 million out of £100 million. Does he agree that that reflects a high degree of service bundling in the contracts, which is likely to accelerate over time, and that that will seriously inhibit future budgets and the provision of direct services to pupils, as most of the money will be spent on servicing the revenue costs of PPP and not on capital spend on buildings?

Peter Peacock: No, I do not agree at all. The draft budget document carries forward figures that are our best estimate at this time of the actual cash flow that we require to bring about a colossal improvement in our school estate. I know that the SNP would seek to scrap our school estate strategy, but we intend to move forward with it.

It is entirely wrong to suggest that the PPP programme in some way provides less value for money than previous forms of procurement of capital spending. The great advantage of PPP is that it brings the whole-life cost of a building up front and makes provision for a mortgage on the building and for all the maintenance of the building over a 25 to 30-year period. A project will proceed only if it is perceived to provide value for money. More than that, PPP transfers the risk of things

going wrong with the building to the private sector, which has to pay for that—something that never happened in the past. I am aware that, for ideological reasons, the SNP would cancel such contracts, but we will press on so that we can ensure that young people are given the best environment in which to learn.

Prisons

6. Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take on the recommendations that are contained in the annual report of Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons for Scotland. (S2O-3719)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): I take the chief inspector's annual report and the recommendations in his individual inspection reports very seriously. The Scottish Prison Service recently agreed with the chief inspector that responses to recommendations in individual reports will be published on the SPS website. We will continue to take action to improve the prison estate and to reduce reoffending.

Colin Fox: In his report, Dr McLellan once again expresses the frustration that many of us feel at the lack of sufficient progress in combating what he calls the three vices of the Scottish Prison Service. There has been insufficient progress on eradicating the degrading practice of slopping out, on reducing chronic overcrowding and on increasing access to rehabilitation programmes. Will the minister explain what grounds there are for optimism that the targets and timescales that have been set will be met, given that so little progress has been made and given that cuts are planned in the service's operational budget for the coming year?

Cathy Jamieson: On slopping out, the Executive and the SPS are investing the equivalent of approximately £1.5 million per week in the prison estate to provide fit-for-purpose accommodation. I have pointed out the need for that time and again in the chamber, so I hope that Opposition members, including Colin Fox, will welcome that. New house blocks have already been completed ahead of schedule and within budget at Edinburgh prison and at Polmont young offenders institution. Construction of further house blocks is already under way at Glenochil and at Edinburgh and additional construction work is ongoing at Perth and at Polmont. We are also dealing with the problems of women in prison through the time-out centre.

On the so-called cuts that Colin Fox mentioned, I have met the chief inspector to discuss the issue that he raised in his report. Under the efficient management scheme, there is a requirement on the SPS to try to achieve savings of 5 per cent across the prison estate. However, we are clear

that those savings are not cuts but efficiencies that will be reinvested into the prison system to ensure that we have prisons that are fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): Does the minister agree that staffing levels are crucial to the Prison Service's effectiveness and to security? What guarantees can she give to local residents at Castle Huntly prison that the proposed increase of 141 prisoners will be matched by an increase in staffing?

Cathy Jamieson: I recognise that the member has a constituency interest in the matter, which he has written to me about.

If we are to tackle the problems of slopping out and overcrowding, we require to increase the availability of prison places. We need the two new-build prisons, but we also need to provide additional places within the existing estate. Of course staffing is critical for the better transitions that we want to see between the open estate and the community and for the improvements that we desire in the quality of programmes in the open estate. I recognise the local issues that face Andrew Welsh, but I hope that he will welcome those additional spaces, which are a key part of the prison modernisation process that is required to deal with the problems in our prisons.

Energy Efficiency

7. Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is boosting energy efficiency. (S2O-3740)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): The Scottish Executive is committed to encouraging improved energy efficiency across the public, private and domestic sectors. For example, the Executive is providing £20 million in new funding over the next two years to improve energy efficiency in all local authorities and health boards and in Scottish Water. The initiative is expected to save the public sector £70 million and to reduce carbon emissions by 500,000 tonnes over the next five years. In addition, the Executive funds the work of the Carbon Trust and the Energy Saving Trust in Scotland. Last year, the free energy audits that were provided to business identified potential savings of over 200,000 tonnes of carbon.

Nora Radcliffe: I thank the minister for that positive answer and for those very large figures.

Is the Scottish Executive on track to implement by January 2006 the European Union directive on the energy performance of buildings, which will require that prospective buyers, owners or tenants of a property should be provided with an energy performance certificate? Is the Executive considering whether it might be sensible to link the

implementation of the directive with primary legislation on seller surveys?

Allan Wilson: Yes. We intend to implement the European directive on the energy performance of buildings by January. Several options are being considered but the recent Executive consultation on the proposed private sector housing bill, "Maintaining Houses—Preserving Homes", gives consideration to linking the energy performance certification aspect of the directive with the single survey proposition.

Forests

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is a debate on motion S2M-1899, in the name of Lewis Macdonald, on making the most of Scotland's forests, and two amendments to that motion.

15:01

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Lewis Macdonald): It gives me great pleasure to open this debate about Scotland's forests. Scotland's forestry and primary wood-processing sector contributes more than £800 million to the economy, provides more than 10,000 jobs and attracts a further £160 million in forest-related expenditure by tourists. Forestry can also play an important part in meeting social and environmental objectives.

Forestry policy is delivered through the regulation of and support for the private forestry sector and through the national forest estate, which is run by Forestry Commission Scotland and represents 8.5 per cent of Scotland's land area. The private and public sectors of the industry combined account for 17 per cent of Scotland. Forestry is a significant industry and both sectors should play a role in it.

Prior to devolution, the Forestry Commission was unique in that although it was a Westminster department that operated across Britain, the Secretary of State for Scotland was the lead minister. With the passage of the Scotland Act 1998, forestry was devolved and became the responsibility of the Scottish ministers, to whom the Forestry Commission became accountable in relation to its work in Scotland.

We recognised that the structure of the commission had to change to reflect the devolved arrangement. In April 2003, following a review of the operation of the Forestry Commission, we established Forestry Commission Scotland to strengthen the commission's accountability to the Scottish Parliament. We have also made the management of the national forests estate more accountable, by setting up Forest Enterprise Scotland, which is an agency of Forestry Commission Scotland and manages the estate in accordance with performance measures that were agreed with ministers. These changes have ensured that the development and delivery of forestry policy are integrated effectively with our wider rural development objectives.

The public forest estate should be an exemplar of sustainable forest management. In August last year, we arranged a review of the long-term role of the national forest estate. We received more than

400 written responses to a public consultation and are grateful to those who contributed.

I am delighted to have been able to announce earlier today that we have accepted all the recommendations of the review group. In doing so, we endorse the vision that

"Scotland's national forests will benefit everyone in Scotland, promoting vibrant and healthy communities; enriching natural environments and our cultural heritage; and creating wide-ranging opportunities for economic development."

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): The minister can correct me if I am wrong, but am I right in saying that the report of the review group was published only this morning? If it was, would it not have been more helpful for there to have been a gap between publication of the report and this debate, so that we also could have had full knowledge of the review group's conclusions?

Lewis Macdonald: I am glad to see that members in the chamber have copies of the report. It is, of course, available in the Scottish Parliament information centre. I would be pleased to return to the matter on any future occasion when members want to pursue issues that have been raised in the review.

The review group recommends increased opportunities for communities to take a greater stake; closer working ties between the forestry and tourism sectors, to make the most from the nation's forests and to take a more strategic approach to economic development; more large-scale landscape and native woodland restoration; and increased opportunities to enhance wildlife habitats near towns and villages.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): There is an imaginative proposal in my constituency and that of my colleague Roseanna Cunningham for the use of wood fuel to fuel the new secondary schools that are being built in the community. There are some difficulties and issues about grant application processes. Will the minister take an interest in those issues and remove some of the obstacles to ensure that we can use the enormous potential of the forestry in the Breadalbane area to rebuild and fuel Breadalbane Academy?

Lewis Macdonald: I will be happy to take an interest in the matter. Mr Swinney will know that biomass and renewable energy generally were formerly my responsibility. In our previous roles, Mr Wilson and I worked together closely on the matter Mr Swinney has raised, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I wrote to Lewis Macdonald and to Allan Wilson several months ago, requesting a meeting with me and Perth and Kinross Council to discuss

the issues that John Swinney has raised. Would it be possible for us now to have that meeting? Public-private partnership schools are being built without biomass heating, which is a wasted opportunity.

Lewis Macdonald: I understand that Mr Wilson has replied to Mr Ruskell's letter today. When Mr Ruskell receives Mr Wilson's response he will no doubt be able to take forward with him the issues that he has raised.

We are looking to take forward the national forests estate. We want to ensure that the public funds that we invest in the national forests estate continue to deliver a wide range of public benefits. We will adopt a more flexible approach to the size and distribution of the estate by giving Forestry Commission Scotland more latitude to buy and sell land at the margins. We can use money that is raised from sales of land and forests that do not contribute significantly to our objectives to develop other parts of the estate where greater public benefits can be generated, with at least some of the proceeds being invested in worthwhile projects locally.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Bearing in mind that 8.5 per cent of Scotland's land area is owned by Forestry Commission Scotland, will the minister encourage community buyouts of forestry land?

Lewis Macdonald: One of the things that we want to take forward is to find ways to make it easier for communities—crofting communities as well as other communities—to take ownership of forests on their land. That is one of the matters on which there is room for further development.

We will also continue to support the forestry sector as a whole. Private woodland owners, growers, those involved in harvesting, the hauliers and the wood processors are all working in a very competitive climate. We want to give them appropriate support.

We designed the new Scottish forestry grants scheme, which was opened last year, to deliver more closely the objectives and priorities of our forestry and agriculture strategies on land outwith the national forests estate.

Although so much that is positive has been going on, we have also been aware of the economic pressures on the industry. We have made the grants as attractive as we can and we recognise that the reform of the common agricultural policy has caused some people to delay in making choices about whether to plant trees. Forestry Commission Scotland and the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department have been working hard within the strictures of the scheme to ensure that the conditions are as favourable as possible for

farmers who are considering planting. We look to that process to be completed quickly.

Everyone with an interest in the agriculture side of the policy will recognise that some of the uncertainties around single farm payments will be resolved in the relatively near future. I think that we will then witness an increase in planting by those in the agriculture sector.

Timber production is forecast to double over 15 years and we have been working with the Scottish forest industries cluster and Scottish Enterprise to identify the best way of taking advantage of that opportunity.

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): The minister referred to the forecast increase in production over the next 15 years. What measures will the Government take in relation to its own buildings and the heating of those buildings to increase demand for that timber?

Lewis Macdonald: The greening government strategy that is in place involves improving the use of sustainable products of one kind or another. In general terms, we are working hard with the construction sector to develop opportunities to make use of timber and wood fuel. The Building (Scotland) Act 2003, which will come into force in May 2005, is supportive in that regard. We certainly expect such matters to be developed in relation to our estate and more generally. Under the able chairmanship of Mr Wilson, the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland will in the near future carry forward work on many issues to do with the use of wood fuel and biomass.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Lewis Macdonald: I am conscious of time and must make progress.

We listened to the case that a number of parties made about how to address some of the economic challenges that the industry faces and we agreed to establish the timber transport fund, with support of £13 million over a three-year period. Given the forecast doubling of timber production over 15 years, transport infrastructure was recognised as a priority in the forestry strategy. By working with all the relevant parties, we have developed innovative solutions in many parts of Scotland to allow matters to go forward.

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Will the minister give way?

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): Will the minister give way?

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Lewis Macdonald: I think that Eleanor Scott intervened first.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The minister can take only a very brief intervention, because he is in his final minute.

Eleanor Scott: The minister mentioned the transport infrastructure that is opening up forests. Will the minister undertake to implement fully the recommendation in the review group's report, which I was able to glance at briefly, that Forestry Commission Scotland and SEERAD should be instructed to discuss ways of instituting forest crofts?

Lewis Macdonald: Yes. As I mentioned in my reply to Mr McGrigor, we seek to facilitate croft forestry.

We also seek to support and carry forward the woods in and around towns initiative. We have announced additional funding—£2 million in 2005-06 and £4 million in 2006-07—to enable more people to enjoy woods close to their homes and to play a part in contributing to human health and well-being. Last December we announced a proposal that Communities Scotland and Forestry Commission Scotland should consider the potential for releasing land to increase the supply of affordable housing in the Forestry Commission Scotland estate. Forestry Commission Scotland has encouraged the identification of appropriate sites and 40 sites on which social housing can go forward have already been identified.

We are working with partners on a range of social issues such as access to forests and the use of forest land for housing; economic issues, which I have described; and environmental issues such as encouragement of the growth of native woodlands through the Scottish forestry grant scheme and other measures. The report, which was published today and which we have accepted in full, recognises the social, economic and environmental aspects and potential of Scottish forestry. We will carry work forward to allow forestry to play an even greater role in Scotland's society, economy and environment in the years ahead.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the significant contribution which Scotland's forestry and primary wood processing sector makes to the economy, tourism and jobs; recognises the environmental benefits of the creation and restoration of more than 8,600 hectares of native woodland in the last two years; believes that Scotland's forests can contribute to the achievement of the Scottish Executive's renewable energy targets; welcomes the contribution made to delivering greater benefits to communities through 70 partnership agreements between Forestry Commission Scotland and communities and through the setting up of the regional forestry forums and the Strategic Timber Transport Fund, and believes that all stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors should continue to work

together to maximise the value of forestry to the economy, the environment and the people of Scotland.

15:14

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the minister in his first debate as Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development.

As I stand at my French sycamore desk in our spectacular new Parliament building, which features French and German oak throughout, the challenges that face the Scottish forestry industry are brought home to me. I am, however, glad that the spectacular chamber well is made from Scottish oak and that although not all the wood in the Parliament is Scottish, all the manufacturing was done in Musselburgh.

This is the first debate in the new Parliament building on one of our key primary industries. Although the motion is entitled "Making the Most of Scotland's Forests" the Scottish National Party does not believe that Scotland is making the most of its forests—a point that I will allude to throughout my speech.

The SNP hopes sincerely that we can bring forestry in from the cold and place it at the heart of our economic, environmental, health and energy policies. We all know that forestry can have economic, social and environmental benefits and we all accept nowadays that forests are multipurpose, but we must balance those objectives. We must ensure that the national forest for which the minister is responsible provides public benefits, which means economic as well as recreational and environmental benefits.

The industry has a vibrant private sector, including farmers and crofters, that sustains 10,000 jobs directly and 40,000 jobs overall, but it faces short, medium and long-term challenges. As the minister said, timber production will double in the next 10 to 15 years. That will create opportunities and challenges. We must ensure that Scotland's processing capacity matches the increase in production and that markets are available so that the industry can stay profitable, because it must be profitable. That means finding new markets and developing new products.

It is not right that, although Scotland is a largely rural country, the United Kingdom imports 80 per cent of its wood from the Baltic and Scandinavian states, which offer cheaper commodity wood products. A couple of weeks ago, the BBC's "Landward" programme featured forestry issues. The presenter highlighted the fact that, at present, every lorry load of timber that is produced in Scotland makes a loss.

In the longer term, we must ensure that we have continuity of supply and quality wood products.

According to the Forestry Commission's figures on woodland grants, which I read this morning, new planting has decreased by 62 per cent in the past five years. If we are looking ahead to the next 30 or 40 years, we must address that issue now. We need a beyond-2020 strategy right away, not later. The Government has a target of ensuring that forestry cover in Scotland amounts to 25 per cent of our land mass by 2050, but I understand from the industry that that has become an aspiration rather than a firm commitment. We must ensure that it is a firm commitment and that the figure is a minimum—after all, 17 per cent of our landmass is already covered by forestry. Given that the European Union average is 36 per cent, we are once again playing catch-up with many other small countries in Europe.

One big issue on which the minister can help is transport. I know that he has been working on that in the past few months. We must improve the transport infrastructure if timber, at the new production levels, is to get to the markets and be accessible. At present, 150,000 forestry lorry journeys are made every year on fragile rural roads. That situation is unacceptable and we must address it by establishing more railheads and piers. It is imperative that the Government gives maximum support to achieve that. To cut down further on transport, we must also ensure that more local processing facilities exist, which means creating local markets to allow those facilities to feed into them.

The SNP supports the increase in community forests, particularly native woodlands, which have benefits for biodiversity and local wildlife as well as recreational benefits, particularly when they are located next to urban communities. Such woodlands bring the countryside to urban communities. They provide an example of how we can get other benefits, such as health benefits, from woodlands and forests. People can escape their stressful everyday lives and improve their physical and mental well-being. Our forests are increasingly used for sports such as mountain biking. The mountain bike world championships at Fort William have direct economic benefits for the local population, as does the development of Glentworth forest near Peebles.

Another demand that we can make on forests relates to environmental policy. I am glad that Ross Finnie is here. To play our part in tackling CO₂ emissions and given that trees store and recycle carbon, we should expand forest cover in Scotland. It is imperative that we put forestry at the heart of our environmental policy.

Eleanor Scott: Will the member take an intervention?

Richard Lochhead: Very briefly.

Eleanor Scott: Although the point that the member makes is true up to a point, the carbon in trees is part of the carbon cycle and will return to the atmosphere when the tree decomposes or is burned, whereas the carbon that is added to the carbon cycle from fossil fuels was sequestered hundreds of millions of years ago and is an addition that cannot be mopped up by trees, never to return to the atmosphere. Although there are lots of reasons to plant trees—and that is one—it is scientifically misleading to say that it will help to solve the problem of global warming.

Richard Lochhead: I was so hoping for a brief intervention.

I appreciate that there are many complex issues, but there is general agreement that expanding our forestry cover can help to tackle the problem of carbon dioxide emissions in Scotland and worldwide.

Another demand we could make on our forestry resources that would make them more profitable is through energy policy. On biomass, we again find ourselves playing catch-up with other small countries. We should be ensuring that biomass is a new market for our forestry. The Government has to play its full role. There are no companies in Scotland that make wood pellets, although some are setting up to make woodchips so that local communities can use them for wood fuels.

The Government put 23 action points into its 2000 strategy, but there was no mention of renewable energy contributing anything to forestry. That attitude has to change—there have been some more hopeful signs during the past few weeks that that will happen. Again we are playing catch-up with other countries throughout Europe.

Timber-framed housing in Scotland is another way in which we can raise demand for wood and make more of a call on our forestry resources. It is sustainable. If we could set up communities where the new housing is timber framed and heated by biomass, those communities would be sustainable and that could lead to sustainability throughout Scotland. The Government should set an example by ensuring that public spending on buildings involves indigenous wood resources and biomass heating. That is the future for sustainability in Scotland. It would help to create new markets for our forestry sector and it would help it to thrive.

We want to make Scotland's forests work for Scotland. For far too long we have been playing catch-up with other countries on renewable energy and in the forestry sector, which are interlinked. It is about time we went ahead of other countries and they were having to catch up with us.

I move amendment S2M-1899.1, to insert at end

“; further believes that increased emphasis should be placed on the principal economic concerns of the industry;

calls on the Scottish Executive to introduce a specific target to promote the use of forestry for biomass; believes in the objective of a greater mix of public, community and private ownership of forestry, and urges ministers to take further steps to promote the use of timber in the construction industry."

15:22

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): It will be noted that, in common with Richard Lochhead, I have not sought to delete any of the Executive's motion. How could I possibly do that? I acknowledge that the minister is relatively new to his brief and I take this opportunity to warmly welcome him to it.

The motion does three things: it ignores the real concerns in the forestry industry; it pays no heed to the vital role the private sector of the industry has to play; and it leaves me completely dumbfounded as to why we had to wait until 5 o'clock on Tuesday evening to be informed of the wording of what I can only describe as a somewhat vacuous motion. That is compounded by the point Alasdair Morgan made about the report being published on the same day as this debate, which is almost a discourtesy to the chamber.

I am not surprised at the motion's wording: it simply reflects the consultation on the review of land managed by Forestry Commission Scotland, about which I noted that one major respondent said:

"It has been difficult to respond entirely constructively to each question due to the leading nature of many and the alluring yet vague language of much of the text."

As with the consultation exercise, so it is with the motion before us this afternoon.

Since devolution, the industry has been stuttering along on a stop-start basis, which has sapped much of the confidence that it richly deserves. Despite that, major investment has continued, particularly in the processing sector, which is just as well for the economy of rural Scotland and the many thousands of people the industry employs directly and indirectly. Investment will continue of course, because the industry is not able to uproot—if members will pardon the pun—and move to another country as other industries can and do.

The first major post-devolution event to affect the industry was the suspension of the farm woodland premium scheme. That came without any warning whatsoever and led to a virtual six-month cessation of new planting schemes. Once it was reintroduced, the industry—along with many others—suffered from the effective moratorium that foot-and-mouth disease imposed on all rural activity.

Just as the industry was picking itself up from that, the woodland grant scheme was suspended prior to the introduction of the Scottish forestry grant scheme. Again, that introduction inexplicably took four months to put in place, which was another period of enforced inactivity. Now, in the wake of common agricultural policy reform, the industry is again in a period of complete uncertainty.

Members do not have to take my word for it; the figures speak for themselves. As Richard Lochhead said, in 2000 10,400 hectares of new plantings was undertaken, all within the private sector. In 2004, that figure reduced to 6,700 hectares. Not only that, but restocking levels had been level-pegging at 12,000 to 13,000 hectares per annum for years, despite an ever-increasing hectareage of mature timber being harvested.

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): Mr Fergusson has listed a number of Government measures. Does he agree that by far and away the biggest effect on the forestry industry was caused by the dumping of timber on the market by the Baltic states? It caused a collapse in prices.

Alex Fergusson: I agree. I have no difficulty accepting that. In fact, I was just about to refer to it. However, I do not believe that that affects what I am saying.

We must ask ourselves why forestry matters. In the much-vaunted Scottish forestry strategy, Parliament endorsed the objective of having a strong, expanding and profitable forestry sector. Indeed, the Executive committed to a target of 25 per cent woodland coverage by 2050. That aim requires annual afforestation of 14,000 hectares, but we currently plant less than half that.

Why? I suggest two reasons. First, the new grant structure administered by Forestry Commission Scotland appears hugely cumbersome and grossly bureaucratic. It has slowed down the process so much that not only are the commission's resources stretched to the limit, there is a less-than-complete update of the available grant funding. Secondly, we have CAP reform. Some months ago, in Ireland, it was announced that following the introduction of the single farm payment, land managers would be able to reduce their agricultural holdings by up to 50 per cent and not only retain 100 per cent of their single farm premiums but receive full forestry grant aid on the rest of the holding.

In Ireland, everyone knows where they stand and everyone is deciding and acting accordingly. Here, in stark contrast, the Executive promised a stated position in early October, but we are almost in November and we still have no clarification. I am delighted that the minister said that clarification

is coming shortly, but I suggest that it is well overdue.

The industry is certainly not expanding and neither is it profitable, given the points to which the minister alluded. In 1995, the standing price of coniferous timber was over £100 a tonne, but now it is less than £50. Despite the fine words and noble rhetoric of the forestry strategy, the Executive has failed to deliver its objectives. Therefore, the question is how it can do so. We believe that the answer lies to an extent within the private forestry sector, which must operate, let us remember, without the £80 million a year subsidy that the state equivalent receives.

Calculations from Forestry Commission data show unequivocally that the cost to the taxpayer of forest management, excluding new plantings, is some £38 per hectare for Forestry Commission Scotland's estate. That compares with £4 a hectare for the private estate, which suggests strongly that the state sector has many lessons to learn from the private sector when it comes to management. In the short time that we have had to look at the review, it seems that few such lessons appear in it.

In the management of the trunk roads network, the Executive turned to the private sector for reasons of efficiency and economy. I suggest that it is time to do the same with the management of the state-owned forest estate. The benefits of private sector management of the nation's forest estate could be immense. I hope that the minister will seriously consider the possibility of establishing a pilot scheme to explore the potential benefits.

We must not overlook the multifunctional nature of the industry in considering ways to support it. It is a clean and environmentally friendly industry, but it receives no recompense for that. Out-of-the-box thinking is required. I commend the Forestry and Timber Association's manifesto, "A Level Playing Field for Forestry", for providing innovative thinking. More of the same should not be an option. The industry continues to invest, despite the disadvantages it faces. For that, it deserves the Parliament's fullest encouragement and not just a fairly meaningless motion once every few years. I commend the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S2M-1899.2, to insert at end:

"notes, however, that new planting is at an all-time low, that Forestry Commission Scotland and Forest Enterprise Scotland are budgeted to receive £80 million in the next financial year from the taxpayer with the consequential competitive disadvantage to the private sector and that the promised Executive statement on the link between the agricultural and forestry industries following the introduction of the single farm payment has still not been made, and believes that these factors demonstrate that the Executive

betrays a lack of understanding of the importance of the private sector to Scotland's forestry industry."

15:29

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Trees take up carbon dioxide, store carbon and release oxygen. Without trees, the earth's systems would operate in a completely different way. Sustainable forestry and maintaining global tree cover are fundamentally important to the human race. Fortunately, in the debate, we have to think about trees only in the context of Scotland. However, it is important to recognise that forestry industries operate and compete in a global market.

The debate is welcome, given the importance of forestry to Scotland. For a start, forestry has a significant impact on the landscape: it covers 16 per cent of the land area of Scotland. On the economic front, according to the Scottish forestry industries cluster the industry contributes £1.3 billion to the Scottish economy from sales and supports 44,000 jobs.

Woodland, particularly native woodland, delivers great biodiversity, and forests and woodlands offer a variety of recreational opportunities. They are just as important to townies as to country dwellers. We know intuitively that trees contribute to our health and well-being, and interesting and useful work has been done by the University of Newcastle's centre for research in environmental appraisal and management to quantify the social and environmental benefits of our forests in monetary terms.

Having taken on board the importance of forestry and forests, what are the questions that we should be addressing? There are fundamental questions that we should resolve at the outset. What is the state forest for? Is the concept of a strategic timber supply outdated? Depending on how we answer those questions, does the remit of the Forestry Commission have to change?

On a practical note, as members have said, timber production was 4 million m³ in 1999 and is expected to be 6 million m³ in 2006 and 8 million m³ by 2013. How do we absorb that increase on to the market? How do we make best use of that resource? Do we, and how do we, and where do we, replace all those trees? There are a lot of questions and there is a lot riding on getting the correct answers. There is consensus about the fact that the direction in which those answers should be taking us is one where forests and woodlands should be evaluated on their contribution to all three strands: the economy, the environment and social benefit. There will be some very big answers and lots of very small answers which, cumulatively, will be just as important.

One of the big questions, which has been floating about for some time, is whether making the major investment—the mega-investment—to site a large pulp mill in Scotland is a good idea. Whichever way the decision goes, it will affect both how the current timber supply is used and the future composition of our forest resource. That is such a big chunk of the whole equation that we should decide either to go for it or to nail it once and for all.

Fergus Ewing: What is the answer?

Nora Radcliffe: I am asking the question.

Fergus Ewing: But what is the answer?

Nora Radcliffe: As I said, the answers are important. We have got to get the right answers and there is a lot riding on them. I would need to look into the matter in much more detail to give Mr Ewing an answer. We need to look into it in detail and make the decision, and then it is done and dusted.

If we go to the other extreme, one of the sets of little answers concerns local biomass schemes. On the face of it, such schemes should be springing up all over the place, and I believe it would be fruitful to investigate why that is not happening. In Inch, a lot of work was done over several years to set up a biomass scheme, but it foundered. Why? In a community with a willing, indigenous and already successful entrepreneur, a copious local supply of brash and small round wood, a convenient cluster of public buildings and a supportive local authority, there has to be a reason for its failure and there must be an answer in there somewhere.

With the timber bulge over the next few years, what are we and the Scottish Executive doing to lead by example and to create and stabilise new markets for wood? How many new public buildings are timber buildings, showing the potential of utilising timber in construction? What are we doing to promote wood fuel, which can minimise waste by using the bits and pieces? We are rightly proud of our achievements in renewing the schools estate, but how many new schools or other public buildings are being heated by wood-fuel boilers or by combined heat and power plants?

At this point, I PAWS to pose yet another question, on planted ancient woodland sites. Many ancient woodland sites were overplanted with commercial conifers. As those trees mature and are felled, the opportunity is presented to allow regeneration or replanting with native species. The Forestry Commission is utilising those opportunities in certain sites. The question is about the basis on which those sites should be selected. Should we be looking for the best sites or the worst sites? There is an argument that the worst sites should be prioritised because they are

the ones where the regenerative capacity will certainly be wiped out if action is not taken. Or should we just let them go and save the best?

On the review of Forestry Commission holdings, I should quickly point out that any disposal of assets should be done with safeguards built in, to ensure sustainable use under new ownership and management. I would have liked to say something about maximising pockets of wildlife habitat by creating corridors between them, and about the potential of land management contracts, but in a short speech on a wide topic one cannot cover everything.

I will close by addressing how we enthuse the general public about forestry, woods and wood products. I also want to highlight the good work that is being done on my own patch by the north-east forest industries group through its stands at events such as the Turriff show and the annual Treefest. The group also uses the excellence in education through business links programme to provide teacher secondments that have led to the production of classroom material for the five-to-14 curriculum. The group also has its own initiative, the wood tour, which is a hands-on woodworking experience for primary children.

Although Forestry Commission Scotland is an excellent and worthy body, I am not sure that the average person sees it as particularly relevant. We could boost a sense of ownership of the national forestry asset that is run for us by the commission by calling it “The Scottish Forest” and using those words on forestry signage across the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I want to call all the back benchers who wish to speak. I ask members to stick to six minutes, by which I mean six minutes and not six minutes and 20 seconds or six minutes and 30 seconds. I will stop each member when they reach their six-minute deadline.

15:36

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I will start by echoing what has been said about the unfortunate coincidence in the timing of the debate, which is taking place on the day that Forestry Commission Scotland’s report is published. I was able to see the report briefly at lunch time, online. I would make more of a fuss about the timing had it not been for the fact that I am very pleased with what I saw in the report. I was gratified to note that much of what is in the report was contained in the amendment that I lodged, but which was not selected for debate. I am even more gratified to have heard the minister indicate that the Executive is looking to implement the report’s recommendations.

It is true that we have not made the most of our forests. Too much of our tree cover is poor-quality, single-species conifer that has little or no market, conservation or amenity value. Our forest cover stands at 17 per cent, which compares badly with figures of 29 per cent in Norway, 66 per cent in Sweden and the European average of 36 per cent. The picture worsens when we consider that four fifths of our forest resource is commercial conifer plantations—although we should use the term “commercial” with a bit of care, as a combination of poor quality, inaccessibility and low prices means that much of the softwood that is ready for harvesting would cost more to extract than it would command at market. Worse still, our ancient woodlands, which should be the pinnacles of our native biodiversity and landscape, nowadays cover only 1 per cent of our land. Those woodlands should have 100 per cent protection.

Limited though our current forest resources are, they offer huge potential for the fuel wood that is required for heating at the domestic and community scale. Other members have spoken on this subject. To some extent, this is happening already in the Highland area. For example, Scottish Natural Heritage has recently installed a woodchip boiler in its Aviemore office. There are also proposals for district heating schemes using waste wood in other areas.

Estimates based on our existing forest resource suggest that wood fuel could provide between 1,500 and 2,000 sustainable rural jobs. Again, on the subject of making the most of our forest resource, we should be looking at how to use our low-quality wood for heating at the domestic or neighbourhood scale instead of seeking to use it for the generation of electricity.

I believe that we should also look at capital grants for wood-fuel heating systems. We should do so because of the fact that we are way behind the rest of the United Kingdom, and in particular Wales, on that issue.

Although I have noted that Scotland's forest cover is amongst the lowest in Europe at some 17 per cent, we should remember that Forestry Commission Scotland's estate amounts to some 10 per cent of Scotland's land mass. We should also remind ourselves of what the forestry strategy says. Our objective should be to increase Scotland's forests and woodlands to one quarter of our land area by the middle of this century. The quality of our woodlands and timber will be at least as important to future generations as our forest area will be. Although we have been making progress in extending forest cover, at current rates it could take us closer to a century to achieve that 25 per cent goal.

We should praise Scottish forestry for being a world leader in some ways, not least because of

Forest Stewardship Council certification, ecological restoration and community forestry. However, the UK as a whole imports 80 per cent of its forest products. Our overseas forest footprint is massive and highly destructive. We need to do more to ensure that our future built heritage features fine Scottish hard and softwoods. We need to ensure that planning guidance is issued, architectural awards are made for timber buildings, funding for training is found, awareness is raised in the construction industry about the use of wood, and so on.

I welcome the 70 partnership agreements with communities that are mentioned in the motion. We should remember that the Forestry Commission Scotland's estate accounts for some 10 per cent of Scotland's land mass. As the commission proceeds with its disposal programme, community ownership becomes ever more important. Currently, communities can register an interest in ownership, but can only buy if land becomes available on the disposal list, which can, in effect, mean that it is the poorest land. The commission has made land available for affordable housing, which is a welcome step, but we need to think more about housing in forests, rather than housing or forests.

The strategic timber transport fund, which was mentioned earlier, offers a good opportunity to tie in infrastructure developments, which typically will mean forest roads, to opening up land for crofting. We are still awaiting the crofting reform bill, which will allow new crofts to be created. Some of them should be forest crofts. I am glad that the minister appeared to be sympathetic to that. That could provide a new and appealing opportunity for living and working. The Executive should also consider forest crofts as an opportunity for making more of Forestry Commission land outwith the crofting counties.

Community owned and managed forests are hugely important, and for far more reasons than the community benefiting from products such as wood fuel. In Assynt, the community-run Culag wood is used as a placement for people on community service orders. In Abriachan, in Inverness-shire, the award-winning community wood is seeking funding to set up a forest school, and it already provides a valuable learning environment for nursery pupils. The social benefits of community woodlands are immense. I agree with the Community Woodlands Association that all new forestry developments should have a set of underpinning principles on local community economic development and involvement. I hope that that principle will be accepted by the Executive.

Members would be disappointed if a Green made a speech in this chamber without

mentioning climate change. Climate change is associated with extreme weather events, such as flooding, but so is poor land management. Sensitive afforestation can do a lot to reduce flood risk, which is yet another of the multiple benefits that arises out of making the most of our forests.

I do not have enough time to go into the carbon cycle again, but much has been made of carbon sequestration. The jury is still out on whether it can be of any benefit. What is certain is that we cannot afford to plant a few trees then go about business as usual with fossil-fuel emissions. Reducing pollution is better than trying to sequester it. Burning wood for domestic or community-scale heating offers one ideal fossil fuel-free and efficient way of using the resource.

15:42

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I am happy to join the ranks of the tree huggers this afternoon, and talk about forestry, in particular with reference to my constituency in Dumfries and Galloway. Forestry is an extremely important industry, as others have said and I expect will say in the debate. I want to talk about the benefits to the region, some of the potential, and also one or two concerns and how they are being addressed.

Forests cover more than 25 per cent of the region's land, the region produces 27 per cent of Scotland's output of sawn wood, and the industry generates sales outside Dumfries and Galloway in excess of £80 million, according to Scottish Enterprise Dumfries and Galloway. The industry also directly employs 1,500 people, or 2.3 per cent of the work force in the region.

Forestry is becoming an increasingly important means of diversification for farmers. One of my constituents still farms, but he has also diversified not just into livery stables, but into forestry, and he is running an extremely successful business from his farm.

We are lucky in Dumfries and Galloway to have a centre of excellence in training at Barony College at Parkgate in Dumfriesshire. Its trainees are able to use computer simulation to learn how to drive around forest tracks and use some of the equipment, but they are also trained in the operation and maintenance of large-scale specialist equipment. Obviously, they have to be trained in maintenance as well as operation, because many of them work remotely, and if their equipment breaks down they will not be able to call out the forestry equivalent of the Automobile Association to fix their machinery for them. Having a centre of excellence in training is of great benefit to the region.

The SNP amendment mentions the importance of biomass, with which I agree, although I do not

agree that we have to have a specific target, because it comes within the target for renewable energy generation.

Fergus Ewing: If that is the case, why does the individual on the forestry cluster recommend that there should be a target?

Dr Murray: People have different points of view. We do not have targets for other sources of renewable energy generation, so it is not necessary to have one for biomass. However, I recognise that biomass is extremely important, which is one reason why I was pleased that Dumfries and Galloway Council gave approval to Powergen to build a 40MW wood-burning power station at Lockerbie, which will create jobs and provide energy from renewable resources in the constituency.

I am also pleased that in the discussions around the closure of Chapelcross power station, which has already stopped producing energy—it was supposed to do so next year—one of the matters that is being considered is the possibility of using some of the plant as a green co-firing power station. That would enable some of the work force there to regain employment and, hopefully, enable some of the contractors who are reliant on Chapelcross to have further work once it starts being decommissioned.

Forestry is also important for leisure and tourism. The Forestry Commission lists two walking nature trails, both of which are in Mr Fergusson's constituency, at Dalbeattie and Mabie, and there are many less well-documented trails. There are six forest cycle tracks and 10 forest horse-riding locations, so clearly forestry plays an important part in leisure pursuits in the region. A forest has been well developed as a tourism and leisure centre area. It is one of the locations for the United Kingdom sled-dog racing events. I found it rather strange to think of Siberian huskies racing through the forests of Dumfries and Galloway—and they make one heck of a noise—but it has become a regular part of the cycle of those events. We also have quad bike events and mountain bike events and the world logging championships were held outside Lockerbie in September 2002, which brought visitors into the region from all over the world and were extremely successful.

Wildlife tourism has been mentioned. Dumfries and Galloway is of course one of the few areas where we still have red squirrels, so it is an important area for the conservation of that species. I was rather concerned to hear just yesterday from my colleague John Home Robertson that SNH is considering not reappointing the red squirrel officer and I will take that up in the context of the protection of the species.

As I said, there are concerns, one of which is timber transport. If we have trees, we somehow have to get them out and get them somewhere. There is no point in saying, "Get the timber lorries off the roads," because if we are going to use the resource we have to find a way to transport it. Eskdalemuir village in my constituency has had significant problems over the years with increasing numbers of timber lorries coming through the village.

Alasdair Morgan: Will the member take an intervention?

Dr Murray: No. Sorry, I do not have much time left.

There was a serious and unpleasant accident not very long ago in which a house was semi-demolished by a lorry. The Dumfries and Galloway timber transport group involves Dumfries and Galloway Council working in partnership with the enterprise company, the police, the Forestry Commission, landowners and private companies to agree timber transport routes and ways of maintaining and improving them to resolve or avoid timber transport problems. Dumfries and Galloway Council deserves a lot of credit for the development of the strategic timber transport fund, which Alistair Speedie from the council in particular has been proposing for a number of years. He lobbied me—I am sure that he lobbied Mr Fergusson and Mr Morgan too—and I am sure that we all took forward some of his ideas. I was particularly pleased that £13 million over three years has been allocated to that fund. I was also pleased that the annual timber transport forum conference took place in Dumfries yesterday, partly in recognition of the council's role in developing the timber strategy and proposing the introduction of the strategic timber transport fund.

I will close with a small concern about Ae forest. Given all the leisure and tourism activities that take place there, it is not the best location for 96 450ft wind turbines. The minister knows that I am in favour of renewable energy sources, including wind, but where there is conflict between wind energy and the potential for tourism and wildlife, I hope that ministers will take that into consideration.

15:48

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): In my constituency, forestry and the forest industry in relation to the paper, panel and construction sectors as well as the sawmilling sector is of fundamental importance. The debate should focus on the controversy of the Executive's failure to focus on the serious economic concerns of the forestry industry.

Richard Lochhead and Alex Fergusson have already alluded to some of the serious problems.

In politics we must be able to distinguish between what is important and what is essential. Leisure, tourism and environment interests are important, but unless we have proper planning and the correct approach to the needs of the industry we will neglect the essential aspects of forestry policy.

Eleanor Scott: Will the member give way?

Fergus Ewing: Not at the moment.

We acknowledge that the Forestry Commission plays a role in ensuring that there have been long-term contracts to ensure what is essential for the sawmilling sector—namely continuity of wood supply. If a sawmill does not have a reliable supply of high-quality saw logs, it cannot survive. That is where the Forestry Commission has played a role, with secure, long-term contracts at difficult times such as a couple of years ago, when, as Mr Finnie indicated, the economics made it unviable to take the trees from the forest. Things have improved since then, but the important aspect of the debate lies in recognising the long-term nature of this vital, proud Scottish industry. There are some serious criticisms that I really hope the minister—whom I welcome to his new role—takes on board. Richard Lochhead has alluded to the failure of the Forestry Commission to maintain proper plantation levels. How will it fill gaps in the future if the private sector is simply not able to supply the sawmills?

It is my information—from some pretty reliable sources in the Highlands—that thinning has been ceased and that the supply of fertiliser has been massively reduced. Unless proper silvicultural practice is followed, Sitka spruce will become of an unusable quality. That is a major concern, and other members have referred to it. If the wood is unusable, it is useless. Why is the Forestry Commission not following proper silvicultural practice, especially if the figures to which Alex Fergusson referred—the cost of forest management being £38 per hectare in the public sector but only £4 a hectare in the private sector—are anywhere near correct. How can it be the case that so much money is being spent while proper practice is being neglected?

The Liberal Democrat speech contained a record number of questions asked without a single answer being provided. One question was whether there should be a new large-scale sawmill or a new second line, as was proposed for the sawmill near Irvine. I think that that proposal was shelved, and that the investment went instead to China. At the moment, the answer to that question is no. If there were a massive new mill in Scotland, that would jeopardise the supply of saw logs to

Brownlee and Co, John Gordon and Son, Walkers, Howie Forest Products and all the other proud, successful Scottish businesses, almost all of which have been around for more than a century. They do not need lessons from people with degrees in forestry about how to run their business; they need a proper focus on the needs of the industry.

Forestry is a successful industry. It is viewed as a heavy, dirty industry. James Jones and Sons invested £18 million just a few weeks ago. Now, it is a high-tech, high-quality industry. The clusters group has done some good work although, frankly, we are still waiting for the conclusions on some of the topics that have been discussed in conferences and seminars and that have featured in consultants' reports over the past four years, in particular on e-commerce, plastic wood, chemical derivatives and the use of spruce in joinery. The establishment of the centre for timber engineering at Napier University—the CTE—is welcome, despite the abrupt departure of Professor Choo. All in all, we must focus on the real needs of the industry.

The £13.5 million transport fund is welcome. However, it is no use simply having new ways to transport timber by sea. That is happening already at places such as Lochaline. It is no use unless there is also assistance with freight facilities grants for the provision of loading equipment. We cannot just create a pier and take the timber off without loading equipment. It costs about £250,000 for a crane. Ferguson Transport (Spean Bridge), based in my constituency, is the only such operator in the Highlands. It was turned down recently. Why? How does that help? Unless help is to be provided with loading equipment, how can timber be taken away by sea?

There will be 400,000 lorry trips to sawmills each year in five to 10 years' time. That is my estimate, based on statistics referred to by Allan Wilson from David Howat's booklet. That is twice as many trips as at present. We welcome that £13.5 million, but will it really tackle the problem? In any event, nothing will happen for a year yet, despite the fact that I, Alex Fergusson and others had a debate about the matter in Aberdeen, and have been pressing for measures on timber transport since the Parliament was formed.

We need a level playing field. That is crucial, and that is what we must focus on. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, is creaming off billions of pounds of taxation on fuel, with a rate of 75 per cent—he is creaming off extra billions every year. The cost that the tax on fuel poses to the industry is absolutely colossal. It would be very encouraging indeed if the minister, in his winding-up speech, could speak for Scotland and say enough and no more—there must be no more

increases in tax on fuel. The rate of tax on fuel is already about the highest in Europe, and there must be a freeze on it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must finish now.

Fergus Ewing: Finally, I hope that the minister will explain why "The Review of Land Managed by Forestry Commission Scotland" was withheld until today.

15:55

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As a native of Argyll, I am acutely aware of the contribution that Scotland's forestry has made, and continues to make, to the economy. However, many changes have been made in the forestry sector in the past 40 years, some of which have been good and some of which have been not so good.

I well remember when the villages of Eredine and Dalavich, which were built specifically for forestry on Loch Awe in Argyll, were populated almost entirely by local people working for the Forestry Commission. There was pride, spirit and a strong sense of community. Those villages, along with many others, were built when modern forestry in Scotland was in its infancy and they certainly contributed to the employment of local people in remote areas. The situation now is completely different. Hardly any forestry workers live in those villages; a primary source of local employment has gone.

However, the news is not all bad, because over the past 10 years Forestry Commission Scotland has become more receptive to community engagement and to sourcing jobs within the forestry industry and locally. That employment factor is vital now, given that the value of the product is hardly economic. West Argyll forest district produces 400,000m³ of timber, which supports some 300 jobs between Southend and Kilmelford.

The timber transport group network has made progress on linking up forestry roads to carry heavy lorries that would otherwise damage public roads. In future, such roads may well be used as forest drives, which will stimulate the tourism sector by attracting motorists and the increasing number of cyclists and mountain bikers. They are a very good way of opening up more of Scotland's splendid scenery to the general public. However, I have heard concerns from forestry groups that the funding for the strategic timber transport fund that Fergus Ewing mentioned, which will receive £13 million over three years, is simply not enough. Although that funding is welcome, it may not be enough to prevent trees from being landlocked in the future.

There is also concern that the Executive's cutback in funding for public roads has meant that forestry producers are not being allowed to use many of the roads that they would have expected to use, which has added enormous cost to the industry.

Lewis Macdonald: What cutback in funding for public roads is the member referring to?

Mr McGrigor: I am referring to the cutback from the original Conservative programme, which I think is a cutback of 100 per cent.

The carriage of timber by sea has been another plus point as regards getting heavy lorries off the road network. Both the piers at Campbeltown and Ardrishaig are being used; indeed, Ardrishaig is bursting at the seams and cannot cope with extra tonnage. On that note, I ask the Executive to consider redeveloping more piers on the west coast, such as the pier at Furnace and the piers on islands such as Mull, Skye and Jura, which hold an enormous amount of timber.

Rail transport should be further used for timber, but I am told that forestry groups are finding it hard to motivate English Welsh & Scottish Railway to facilitate timber transport by rail. The Executive must help with getting more timber carried by rail.

The biggest problem that forestry faces is undoubtedly the price of timber, which is about half of what it was seven years ago; even then the price was thought to be bad. I understand some of the reasons for that, which are to do with imports and exchange rates, but it would seem sensible to extract as much added value as possible and to source more markets in local areas that are close to the site of timber production. A glaringly obvious way of extracting benefit would be the use of biomass to obtain light and heat, a subject on which I have questioned the Executive on several occasions over the past five years. Much of Europe has made use of biomass on a large scale, but all that the Executive seems to do is talk about it.

There have been significant biomass projects in Argyll, at Whitegates housing complex and the Lochgilphead swimming pool and through the efforts of Torren Energy, but it is essential that any major biomass project is thought through carefully and that there is supply to fulfil the demand. Biomass is certainly cost effective in comparison with most fuel systems, except possibly mains gas, but people will not invest in wood boilers if there is no ready supply of the fuel close at hand. Therefore, it would be advantageous if Forestry Commission Scotland encouraged more outlets such as the Auchencorvie sawmills at Campbeltown to make biomass fuel. That would be a good way of making the most of our forests.

George Lyon: The member is obviously slightly out of touch with what is happening in Argyll. He

will know that Torren Energy—the company that supplied the boilers to Whitegates—went bust. Now, a local sawmill in Campbeltown supplies biomass for the system at Whitegates, for the new system that is being built in Campbeltown and also for the new one that will be put in at the community swimming pool in Campbeltown.

Mr McGrigor: I thank the member, but I think I mentioned that just before he got up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are in your last minute.

Mr McGrigor: I have already spoken about the tourism aspect and I congratulate the Forestry Commission on the work that it does to promote walking tracks. It is worth mentioning the Dalriada project, in which the Forestry Commission has linked with British Waterways Scotland on the Crinan canal and worked with Kilmartin House Museum and SNH to encourage exploitation of the culture and natural biodiversity of that area of west Argyll.

Good forest management can help freshwater fisheries by making sure that burns are not canopied by trees, blocked by log dams or filled with silt. The Forestry Commission has been helpful to fishery bodies. I wish that I could say the same about its policy on red deer, which of late has involved all-year-round indiscriminate slaughter rather than discriminate seasonal culling. In the past, the Forestry Commission earned valuable income from deer hunters from both the UK and abroad. The forests produce notable heavy stags that provided a good source of lean, healthy meat, which was supplied by local game dealers. It is important for red deer to be seen as an asset of Scotland's forests rather than as vermin. If young trees are planted in an area—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must finish now, Mr McGrigor.

Mr McGrigor: —they will act as a honeypot, so it is necessary for areas of young trees to be properly deer fenced. Any practical forester will confirm that.

16:01

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): The Forestry Commission was the first public body to establish the concept of job creation and one of the first, if not the very first, to establish affordable housing for its workers. That helped to retain people in our countryside and created many viable communities. There is no doubt that the forestry industry continues to be one of only a few rural enterprises that still employs significant numbers of people in rural Scotland. It is estimated that 10,000 people are directly employed by the forestry industry and

a further 40,000 are dependent on its activities. In Skye, in my constituency, the Forestry Commission employs 12.5 full-time man-hour equivalents: eight forest workers, two foresters and 2.5 administrative staff. In addition, it employs 11 full-time man-year equivalents on a contract basis: seven in forest management and four for harvesting. With annual timber production expected to double by 2020, even with changes in the world economic climate, the number of people employed in forestry will hopefully increase.

The motion that we are debating covers a wide range of issues, including the benefits of the increase in community-owned woodlands in Scotland, but I would like to concentrate on the problems that are faced in timber extraction and transportation. There is no doubt that the projected increase in forestry production during the next two decades will cause increasing problems on our vastly underdeveloped road system. Roads in the Highlands have been badly damaged during the past half century by heavy vehicles carrying timber and products for the aquaculture industry. Statistics indicate that 95 per cent of timber is carried by road, with only 3 per cent being taken by sea and 2 per cent by rail.

Like other speakers, I welcome the Executive's investment of £13 million to pay for timber transport infrastructure projects. I would like that money to be targeted particularly at the development of harbours and new railheads to handle timber. In 1991, the Forestry Commission carried out a project to transport timber from the Isle of Raasay to Kilmallie near Fort William. The experiment came about because of the problems that the commission had experienced when winter gales left a trail of damage on plantations throughout the area. Some 400 tons of timber were taken by workers to the pier on Raasay and loaded onto a barge that was then towed by tug to Kyle and on to the mill at Kilmallie. There is no reason why such a project cannot be considered as an example of how timber transport can be taken off the road, except that it costs a large amount of money. The experience that was gained from that initial exercise encouraged that forestry enterprise to extract 70,000 tonnes of timber from north-west Skye. That was ship-loaded at the site and transported directly to mills. That initiative alone removed some 3,500 lorry loads from our road system and is to be welcomed and encouraged. The more we see of it, the better.

Kyle of Lochalsh harbour in my constituency has undertaken several relevant exercises. It has excellent road and rail links and has ample water depth at all states of the tide. It is restricted because the pier facility and the berthing arrangement are more than 100 years old and are hardly what we would expect in the 21st century. We must ensure that some of the additional

funding that is available is directed quickly to upgrade and improve that marine infrastructure, which I hope will encourage more use of our excellent marine resource and help to protect our fragile rural roads.

16:06

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands)

(Lab): I welcome the minister's statement and the publication of the review, which I read easily at lunch time. I hope that land on forest margins can be used for affordable housing, but I ask the minister to find ways to ensure that, if affordable housing is built in those places, it does not pass into second-home ownership.

The last time that I spoke in a forestry debate, I described a visit to Migdale woods in Sutherland, which form a wonderful native woodland that is managed by the Woodland Trust and much used by walkers. I will mention two other forestry projects that illustrate the contribution that forestry makes to biodiversity and the potential for Forestry Commission Scotland to work in partnership with other agencies to deliver significant tourism and job opportunities, which are essential for the rural economy in the Highlands.

In early summer, I took part in a guided visit to what may be a unique forest. It is at the top of the Black Isle and is not the kind of forest of which Fergus Ewing would approve. The visit was sponsored by Highland Council during a conference on biodiversity. I remember the forest in that part of the Black Isle in the past. It used to be closely planted with non-native conifers and the bogland on which they grew had been partly drained to promote better tree growth and was probably fertilised, too. There were and are peat banks in the forest clearings where we used to cut peat. I now recognise and regret that that was an act of vandalism in that environmentally sensitive area.

The bogland is being restored and inappropriate tree species are being removed. We now have a wonderful and unique wetland forest at the top of the Black Isle that supports diverse wildlife, including nesting ospreys. Paradoxically, the wetland's inability to support the growth of dense and tall trees promotes diversity and encourages the osprey, which prefers to nest in trees with stunted tops.

The other project to which I will refer is only in its infancy and was briefly mentioned by Jamie McGrigor. The Dalriada project in mid-Argyll is promoted by the Forestry Commission, but the partnership involves many other agencies, such as Argyll and Bute Council, Argyll and the Islands Enterprise, British Waterways Scotland, the local tourist board, SNH and Historic Scotland. Hardly a public body is not connected with the project.

Mid-Argyll is famous for its forests and woodlands, an increasing amount of which contain native species and not just the blanket-introduced conifers. It is also famous for the Crinan canal, which yachtsmen use to access west coast waters, but which could support many more forest-related tourism projects along its banks. It is famous, too, for the important bronze age monuments in Kilmartin glen and for the safe anchorages in Ardfarn, for example.

Mid-Argyll offers tremendous potential for agencies to work together to develop sustainable environmental and activity tourism. Visitors can combine sailing with woodland walking or a visit to the excellent Kilmartin House museum. However, there is a need for investment to realise those aspirations, especially along the Crinan canal. I look forward to lobbying ministers fairly intensively in due course so that the aspirations in the review that was published today can be realised in mid-Argyll.

Forestry is not just about tourism and leisure; there is a timber product, which often in the past has not been used imaginatively enough. There has been a perception that home-produced timber is of an inferior quality for building purposes, especially for timber-framed houses. However, that myth was laid to rest at the recent conference of rural housing associations, at Nethy Bridge, which some members here attended. We were shown samples of timber produced in Scotland, which can compare in quality with what is produced in Europe. It enters the market, but timber wholesalers do not distinguish the Scottish product, so it is difficult for someone who wants to build a house as sustainably as possible to identify and access local timber. Can we please have some way of identifying Scottish timber when we go to B&Q or Jewson to look for wood?

In the planning system, except in Shetland, there seems to be an aversion to timber-faced housing. Even houses that are faced with locally grown timber are refused planning permission because they are somehow foreign. That is obviously nonsense. I fail to understand why such decisions are being perpetuated year on year. It would give a boost to our timber industry if we could have more timber-faced houses. I grew up in a timber-faced house that was beautifully warm and well insulated, and I would like to see more of them in the countryside.

The brash from forestry and sawmills now also has a commercial value as a source of individual or district heating and as a source of power. The first of those uses is becoming fairly well established, although I would like it to be the automatic first choice for public-private partnership school projects as well as in new housing developments, as others have said. In the housing

development in Strathspey, which is to be a mixture of executive and affordable houses, although the housing association wishes to use a woodchip biomass district heating scheme, the private developer refuses, meaning that the private buyers will not benefit from renewable energy and that the housing association's costs will be higher than envisaged. That is the kind of grass-roots problem that we must sort out through our planning systems, otherwise unsustainable heating will be perpetuated. We have not yet used biomass to generate power. I believe that there are proposals in the pipeline, but they will need considerable support from the Executive, which I hope will be forthcoming.

At home, we ordered a lorry load of woodchip from our local sawmill to put down as garden mulch. Unfortunately, we did not realise that the sawmill owner had bought a very much bigger lorry than he had before. If anybody would like a bag of woodchip, they should see me later.

16:13

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I agree with Alex Fergusson, who said that the motion was vacuous. Its vacuity is matched only by its length although, to be fair, I would have to say that about the amendments as well. The only contribution that the motion makes to the forestry industry is in the amount of paper that it uses.

I am not going to apologise for returning to the subject of biomass, as the Enterprise and Culture Committee's report on renewable energy, which was published when I was the convener of that committee, cited the potential benefits of the use of biomass. Biomass is clean to use because it involves no net CO₂ emissions and because of the high fixation of CO₂ that we get from young trees. As well as biomass not contributing to the production of CO₂, virtually none is produced in its transportation from its place of production to its place of use, which is an important consideration. However, as other members have said, the mechanisms—grants, and so on—are not yet in place to encourage the use of biomass sufficiently.

Even in rural areas, in the middle of all the trees, we often find it difficult to get wood used where it should be. John Swinney raised the issue in relation to my old school, Breadalbane Academy, which is trying to get a wood-fuel boiler. It is a sad comment on the passage of time that the new school that is being planned replaces a school that was not even built when I was at school—but there we go. It is an area in which the public sector should be setting an example; yet, how many such projects do we have? We still have rural projects importing polluting fuels that are brought over vast distances. Surely, that is nonsense.

The public sector must also be more proactive in the use of timber in buildings, as Maureen Macmillan pointed out. Scotland does far better than the rest of the United Kingdom in the number of timber-framed buildings that we erect, but we could do better. The industry is keen to produce the correct product and it is capable of doing so, but the demand needs to be stimulated. Environmentally, we are in a win-win situation. Compared with other products, timber has high insulation properties, so it can reduce the amount of CO₂ that goes into the atmosphere. In addition, when the building is eventually knocked down, the material can be recycled or, at worst, used as fuel. The same cannot be said of other building materials.

Another issue on which the Government needs to do a selling job is improving the forestry industry's image among the public. As Fergus Ewing pointed out, the industry is often thought to be a dirty industry. Certainly, one sawmill operator recently told me that the industry is encountering increasing difficulty in finding machine operators for the forestry part of the operation and in recruiting operatives for the sawmills. He speculated that the industry's image might be a contributory factor in that difficulty. Of course, the reality is that the equipment that is used both in the forests and in the sawmills is highly mechanised and very sophisticated. We need to get the message over that forestry is a high-tech industry, because I am not sure that that is appreciated by many of our youngsters when they are considering their career.

From the briefings that we received in advance of yesterday's meeting of the embryonic cross-party group on forestry, it is clear that different sectors of the industry have different priorities. One briefing from the industry stated:

"Some would question the apparent over-emphasis on native species in general and native broadleaves in particular."

On the other hand, the Woodland Trust submission clearly emphasised the reinstatement of native woodland. With due deference to my colleague Fergus Ewing, I do not think that those positions are contradictory or—

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Mutually exclusive?

Alasdair Morgan: That is exactly the phrase that I was looking for. They are not mutually exclusive. For the sake of tourism and the environment, we need native woodland, which has the biodiversity that attracts the increasingly selective tourists that we need. On the other hand, we need cycle tracks for the sake of recreation and we need a healthy industrial sector to provide jobs in fragile rural areas. We can fulfil both those objectives at the same time, but much more

encouragement is needed than simply the fine words that the industry currently receives.

I return briefly to the subject of the environment. We have seen many Government initiatives to reduce CO₂ emissions, such as fuel taxation and the fuel escalator. Incidentally, on that subject, the cost of diesel is one factor that currently prohibits the timber industry's development. The industry is not even allowed to use red diesel on all the extra mileage that it is encouraged to run on forest tracks, which are off the public roads that the taxation is meant to pay for.

Although the Government has introduced other fuel taxes such as the climate change levy, those have been essentially negative measures. Investment has been made in renewables but, in comparison with the alternatives, one of the cheapest ways of achieving an improvement in our CO₂ emissions would be simply to grow more trees. It strikes me as strange that only £20 million is made available in woodland grants. That figure compares poorly with the £0.5 billion that we give to agriculture.

Investment in forestry is a good proposition because it invests in the environment and in the natural world. Although it is a commercial industry, it is not mobile and it will remain here: once they have been planted, the trees will not move out of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rosemary Byrne to speak, after which I will give John Swinney five minutes.

16:19

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): Forestry is a big issue in Scotland, not only in rural areas but in urban areas, where woods act as the green lungs of communities. Although I recognise and agree with much of what is contained in the motion, there are many issues about our management of Scotland's forestry that need to be addressed. I want to concentrate on three main issues.

First, the Scottish forestry strategy must ensure that the case for community involvement in forestry is strengthened. I welcome what the minister said about that. At present, the Forestry Commission has limited powers to implement the existing strategy or any new, strengthened strategy. A good example of that is Forestry Commission Scotland's ability to distribute funds through the Scottish forestry grant scheme and the partnership fund, which is distributed locally through conservators. Those mechanisms are restrictive and leave no room for the funding of national initiatives.

We must bring forestry to the people. There has been a commendable effort to open up woodlands

to public access, but the concept of woodland communities is far from the reality. That is of particular relevance to people in urban communities, who are lucky if they are able to access woodlands for recreational purposes, let alone live and work in woodlands. We should use the opportunity to return much more of our woodlands to communities, which would benefit health, education, social well-being and the basic democratic right of communities to own their own land.

Approximately 16 per cent of Scotland's land area is covered by trees, with high levels of the timber resource situated in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders. It is estimated that, by 2016, the supply of softwood in Scotland will exceed 8.4 million m³. That constitutes a doubling of the existing harvest. The potential for fuel wood from that crop to provide a form of renewable energy needs to be promoted at a local level. We must have a range of renewable energy sources, and fuel wood could play an important part in that. Community-scale installations such as Bettyhill swimming pool in Caithness and Kinlochleven community centre—supplying heat, not power—are showing that the use of fuel wood can be a success.

If we can develop our domestic markets for fuel wood, construction timber and so on, imports could be reduced, which would benefit Scotland financially and in terms of employment possibilities. We can ill afford to ignore jobs in the forestry industry.

Forestry is a resource for health, social well-being and jobs, as well as being of benefit to the environment. The upcoming Scottish forestry strategy must be predicated on that and we must take the opportunity to ensure that our forests are returned to the control of the people for the benefit of the people.

Fergus Ewing: Will the member take an intervention?

Ms Byrne: I am sorry, but I want to talk about planning.

While forest cover in Scotland is expanding and native species are more in evidence, the majority of planting is still of non-native species that will produce poor-quality timber. As a consequence, the timber industry is still geared towards finding large-scale uses for a poor-quality resource. Support for small businesses to develop markets for high-quality products made from hardwoods is just not there. We need to consider that closely as we should be supporting the industry, which, as I have said, provides jobs that we can ill afford to do without.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: John Swinney can have six minutes after all.

16:23

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I am grateful for that generous additional allocation of time.

The forestry industry is of enormous significance to my North Tayside constituency, particularly the highland Perthshire area. It is important that we establish sensible and positive policies for the forestry industry and use forestry activities to provide benefits at a local level.

In politics, people look to us to come up with commonsense solutions to the issues that confront us. An issue that I have raised with the minister and others on previous occasions is the importance of a project that has been developed by Perth and Kinross Council to ensure that the newly constructed Crieff High School and Breadalbane Academy in my constituency are fuelled by wood. That is an eminently sensible idea. Trees are available in abundance, transportation issues would be diminished by the proposal and the public would see that we are doing something for the environment. It is all common sense. Unfortunately, the financial logistics of making it happen are complex.

On a number of occasions, I have discussed with Perth and Kinross Council the importance of ministers engaging in the debate to try to find a way of ensuring that those new schools in the heart of the forestry industry area in Perthshire can be fuelled by wood and that we get over some of the mechanistic difficulties with grant systems that are stopping that happening. I hope that we can make progress on the matter.

Mr Ruskell: Earlier in the debate, I asked the minister whether he would meet me, John Swinney and Perth and Kinross Council to discuss the difficulties and complexities that John Swinney talks about. The minister said that he had responded with a letter, but the letter does not agree to a meeting with him; it agrees to a meeting with an official. I have phoned the official during the course of the debate and he knows nothing about such a meeting. Is that not a case of the Executive brushing off the issue? It does not care what Perth and Kinross Council thinks and it does not care what we think either.

Mr Swinney: I had only a brief look at the letter that Mark Ruskell is talking about. From Lewis Macdonald's response to my intervention earlier in the debate, I got the sense that he was prepared to take a personal interest in ensuring that the project can go ahead, which it could do if the obstacles could be cleared out of the way. I am certainly prepared to engage in discussion with the minister after the debate to ensure that that happens. We must come up with sensible uses of forestry production to guarantee the economic

prospects of rural Scotland and the investment in public services that is important in rural Scotland.

The second point that I will make is about transportation. A large part of the highland Perthshire area of my constituency is forested by commercial forestry. Forestry Commission Scotland has been working for years to minimise the amount of transportation by road and to re-establish what we think would be the commonsense solution of a rail development on the Rannoch line at the western edge of the Rannoch forest. It has been from one pillar to one post to another pillar to another post to try to get Railtrack and Network Rail engaged in the process. At long last we seem to be getting somewhere, but the project is yet again delayed.

I hope that the timber transportation fund that has been announced today can have a positive impact on ensuring that practical solutions can be found to address the transportation issues that concern my constituents across highland Perthshire. I hope that those transportation issues, which lead to the use of lots of fuel and cause damage to the environment, can be addressed by getting the timber hauled out by rail. It is a practical and sensible solution, but the Forestry Commission has been thwarted at every turn in trying to make progress on the issue. That shows the lack of cohesion and the lack of joined-up government in relation to some of the issues. I hope that the minister will take a good look at the scheme.

My final point concerns tourism, which my colleague Alasdair Morgan mentioned in his speech. We are fortunate that the forestry industry is applied to the tourism sector in Perthshire and Angus—the areas that I represent—in many respects. There is currently a fabulous temporary visitor attraction at the Hermitage in Dunkeld, arranged by Forestry Commission Scotland, called Enchanted Forest. It is a great celebration of our natural history, music and the use of light in our community that attracts thousands of essential visitors into rural parts of Scotland. If some of the imagination and innovation that I see in various forestry projects in my constituency were applied in the general approach to economic development in rural Scotland, perhaps we would begin to see an increase in employment and in the opportunities for people to live in rural Scotland.

One of the difficulties that we will undoubtedly be confronted with is where people who work and operate in rural Scotland can find houses to live in, because many of the Forestry Commission houses that were always there in the past have been sold off and rented stock is not available. Some imagination of the type that I talked about in relation to the projects in my constituency needs to be applied to tackle some of those issues, so that

we can have a vibrant forestry industry that contributes to a vibrant rural economy. However, the Government must play its part in making those things happen.

16:29

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): This has been a good and constructive debate. I will deal with a couple of themes that came through in most members' speeches.

My own interest in the issue is the fact that Argyll produces 20 per cent of the total Scottish timber output. Timber is a major contributor to the Argyll economy; it provides many jobs in felling and planting and also a substantial number in the haulage industry. Unfortunately—I suspect that this is true for many other areas—the majority of the timber leaves Argyll with no value added in the local area; the timber is all transported out as a raw commodity. The statistics are disappointing, and I will return to them.

The two key points that have been mentioned many times in the debate are, first, the transportation of timber from where it is produced to the major production facilities and, secondly, how the public agencies might facilitate the use and development of biomass.

Timber production is forecast to rise to 10 million tonnes by 2020, so transport is a key challenge for the Scottish industry. There is no doubt that the Scottish Executive has made excellent progress on shifting timber from road to sea, through freight facilities grants. Daily, thousands of tonnes of timber that would previously have been hauled out by articulated lorries on the main trunk routes are loaded on to ships at Ardrishaig, Portavadie, Ardyne and Campbeltown and shipped out of my constituency by sea. However, although we have succeeded in removing heavy timber traffic from major trunk roads, we have not succeeded in removing traffic from B-roads and single-track roads throughout the constituency. The timber might be taken out by sea, but it must still be transported from the woods in the hills down to the nearby ports. Daily, the small back roads are being pounded into oblivion, but that has not yet been recognised as a serious problem that the Executive must address.

In some landlocked areas of afforestation in my constituency, timber cannot be removed because of the poor state of the roads, and there is no prospect of the timber being harvested and transported out in the foreseeable future. I am pleased that the minister recently announced that a new strategic timber transport fund will be set up to tackle such issues. I would have liked the fund to have been substantially bigger, but £13 million represents at least a significant step forward.

When the minister winds up, will he elaborate on how the fund will be used and on how it will sit alongside the freight facilities grants? Will the funds be complementary? Will the strategic timber transport fund be used specifically for developments for sea and rail, or can it be used to upgrade some minor roads, which are vital arteries in bringing harvested timber from the hills to sea level?

Alex Fergusson: Will the member give way?

George Lyon: I will give way, as long as I get some extra time.

Alex Fergusson: I understand from what the minister said today that the strategic timber transport fund will be administered solely by Forestry Commission Scotland. Does the member share my concern that there is a need for local authority input into the administration of the fund?

George Lyon: That is clear, because the local authorities are the owners of the roads that will have to withstand the extra tonnage if production doubles over the next few years.

I want to consider how we develop biomass energy heating systems. Substantial progress has been made in my constituency. Fyne Homes Ltd, the local housing association, has led the way in developing such systems, but not without encountering sometimes substantial difficulties. The housing association recently developed 52 houses at Whitegates in Lochgilphead, which are heated by a Swedish boiler. Unfortunately the company that supplied the boiler, Torren Energy, went bust and the development was left without anyone to service the boiler. Worse, Torren was responsible for supplying the wood to fuel the system. Thankfully, Fyne Homes has managed to rescue the situation by securing a local supplier of woodchips from a small sawmill in Campbeltown and finding engineers to service the plant.

Fyne Homes will install a similar heating system in a new development, and the local authority is building a major swimming pool project in Campbeltown that will use the same type of system. In Oban, West Highland Housing Association is building a major housing development that will have a biomass energy system. However, what most worries me is that all those projects are procuring boilers from different sources and we will have a different kind of boiler in each development. The great worry is that we will lose the catalyst and the tremendous opportunity to build up local expertise and knowledge on servicing the equipment that is used in the schemes.

The systems will benefit local suppliers of woodchips, which exist ad nauseam throughout the constituency. We can create a virtuous circle by getting everyone to co-operate in the

development of the industry and by using local timber and building up local expertise. I ask the minister to ensure that public agencies that are involved co-operate more fully in the future.

16:35

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

The debate is one of those that does not happen very often in the Parliament—the subject of forestry seems to inspire good will from all parties. As well as supporting the Conservative amendment, we are happy to support the Executive motion. We will even support the SNP amendment, as on this occasion that party has seen fit not to include the independence clause that usually makes it impossible for us to support SNP amendments. However, I have one or two qualifications, which I may come to later.

The forestry industry inspires good will. A number of members have mentioned points on which there have been developments since we last debated the subject. The industry has progressed to the extent that the amount of timber that is produced in Scotland is significantly higher than it has been at any time in the past, yet sadly, the price that we get for timber is, in real terms, one of the lowest ever prices. The effect is that the industry is run on the basis of public subsidy and, in some cases, good will. The public forestry industry in Scotland keeps the industry alive, but the private forestry industry, which the motion and all the amendments support in principle, is struggling to compete in a system in which production at a loss has become the norm. Therefore, it is important that we ensure that the price of timber, or its realisable value, goes up over time.

Several members have mentioned the opportunities to use timber as fuel. Wood is a good fuel. Much has been said about the technology that is involved, but we should remember that, although until relatively recently the burning of logs in a fireplace was as advanced as the technology got, it was one of the most common ways of providing heat in large areas of Scotland. We heard from Eleanor Wood—

Alex Fergusson: Eleanor Scott.

Alex Johnstone: Sorry—that was a Freudian slip.

We heard from Eleanor Scott that the use of wood as a fuel does not achieve a great deal environmentally, but we should value the fact that it involves rotational carbon and displaces the use of fossil fuels, even if it takes the carbon out of the system only temporarily. If the use of wood prevents the alternative of burning fossil fuels, it is worth while. I am in the process of throwing out an oil-fired central heating system and replacing it

with a wood-fired system. It is getting very cold at home because I am having difficulty finding a plumber, but that is a different matter.

We can increase the value and quality of timber production in Scotland by ensuring that, when we cut trees, we use the best-quality timber for building purposes and the poorer-quality timber for other jobs. If using that poorer-quality timber for firewood—in one way or another—is the best way in which to recover value, we should do that. However, one problem is that there may be a question as to whether that use will be acceptable under the system of renewables obligation certificates in the future.

I have corresponded with ministers on that subject and I would like guarantees, either today from the minister or in the future, that Scotland will not be disadvantaged by the fact that while grant aid is available for the provision of short-rotation coppicing south of the border, no additional grant aid is available for such schemes in Scotland. The argument is that we have a great deal of surplus timber. Scottish Coal has raised with me its concerns that it might find it difficult to compete in the future if it is not allowed to use surplus timber from Scottish forests in the provision of combined fuel that its competitors in the south are providing using short-rotation coppice material that is heavily subsidised by the Westminster Government.

Nora Radcliffe pointed out that our forests have an environmental, economic and social benefit to deliver to us. I am concerned that, in certain quarters, the social benefit might get too much attention. I am aware of the social benefits of Scotland's forests, but we must consider the long-term economic benefit as one of the highest priorities.

Looking at the budget proposals that have been made available to the Environment and Rural Development Committee in recent weeks, I am concerned to see that it is not planned to increase over time the amount of money that is set aside for new planting. I am aware that it is normal practice for the replanting of forest areas to be a condition of a felling licence, but I am concerned that in the north-east, huge areas of forest are currently being clear felled. The resources should be available in the long term to ensure that those forests are replaced.

We heard about the impact of carbon dioxide emissions on climate, but I am more concerned about the flooding that is caused by the run-off from clear-felled areas and the ability of clear felling to affect microclimates in specific areas. I therefore commend the Conservative amendment, will support the SNP amendment and will support the principles that are set out in the Executive's motion.

16:41

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

There is strong consensus in the chamber that we should find a way to put the forests closer to the heart of the people's idea that forests should be something from which this nation can benefit. After all, Caledonia, which means wooded heights, was the name that the Romans gave to Scotland. Forests sustained the ancient population as well as offering them protection. However, over the centuries, that relationship has been severed.

In T C Smout's 2003 book "People and Woods in Scotland", Alexander Mather concluded:

"in recent times, people have been separated from the forest, geographically, environmentally and managerially."

That is the reality of Scottish forest ownership and management today. For example, crofters were given the right to grow and harvest trees only in 1991, as were tenant farmers. However, it does not have to be so. Consider Hordaland in west Norway. It has similar geographic features and climate to the Highlands, but its forests are mainly native Scots pine and broadleaves whereas Scotland's are mainly sitka spruce. There is also a marked difference in how the forests are used and in who owns them. As Nora Radcliffe suggested, perhaps we ought to consider whether the strategic aims of Forestry Commission Scotland should be changed.

In west Norway, 87 per cent of the forest is owned by individuals—50 per cent of whom are farmers—and 95 per cent of that forest is privately owned. In Norway as a whole, the forest owners federation numbers 56,000 members, who grow 60 per cent of the productive forests in the nation. Those members negotiate timber prices with the Government and they control 75 per cent of the timber market. That suggests to me that as the SNP amendment talks about having a greater mix of public, community and private ownership of forests, we ought to consider successful models such as that in Norway. Compare those figures with the Scottish forests. The largest Scottish landowner is the Forestry Commission, along with a few hundred private owners, whereas there are 125,000 owners in Norway. Terry Wogan used to own a forest in Caithness. Need we ask who needs a better system?

Far too little of our timber is grown or used for construction, yet locally produced Douglas fir, larch and oak could make frames, cladding and high-quality fittings for energy-efficient, low-cost housing as happens in Norway. The artist Lotte Glob's house, which is made of larch post and beam with European oak cladding, and which is sited beside Loch Eriboll in Sutherland, was short-listed for today's Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland award finals. That shows that homes made of wood could go main stream, because that

house cost only £70,000 to build. The house was pipped at the post, but did well in the competition. We could have many more houses like that.

Local materials can create homes that are fit for our people. Expanding locally controlled forestry is at the heart of the community trust movement. The north Sutherland community forest trust in Borgie is a good example of that. The trust wants to turn some Forestry Commission land into woodland crofts and recreational land. Negotiations have been tortuous, but the trust could transform the chances of a small north-coast community housing the people who want to stay there. Many members throughout the chamber have urged the minister to ensure not only that forests can provide land for people to live on, but that people can live in the forests themselves and have access to them.

The community forest movement is dynamic, but its funding is crucial. The Government boasts of 70 partnership agreements between the Forestry Commission and communities, but there should be hundreds of such partnerships and energy must be put into achieving that. Given the potential for biomass, it would surely be possible to have many more partnerships between the commission and local communities that would focus specifically on that target. We ask the minister to respond to that possibility. It is a pity that the report on the Forestry Commission's efforts and the minister's take on them was made available only at lunch time, or we might have had more detail on those efforts.

The SNP believes that having far more forest owners could transform forestry prospects. The Assynt crofters trust has planted hundreds of thousands of trees in the past 10 years. However, the nearby Vestey shooting estate, which is now on the market, has planted only a couple of trial plots to measure exposure. People and the forest go together and Scotland should aspire to having more people live on forest land, based on forestry industries.

In the past, our forests protected us from invading armies; for the future, we must let the people reclaim the forests to safeguard their future. Geographically, environmentally and managerially a much tougher forestry policy for Scotland is called for. My case has outlined why; the SNP's amendment outlines how. We ask the minister to respond speedily.

16:47

Lewis Macdonald: It has been a good debate, which has covered a range of issues. There is agreement on some issues and disagreement on others. However, the debate has reflected the significance that all parties in the chamber give to our forestry sector. Members have recognised that

growers and processors face a continuing climate of challenge and change. It is clear that we need the public and private sectors to continue to work together to make the most of Scotland's forests.

As has been said, forestry is a long-term business, which is precisely why we have embarked on developing a future forest resource that is rich in diversity. I was interested in the different views of a number of members—sometimes from the same side of the chamber—on the correct balance in that regard. However, we are clear that we want an increasingly diverse national forest and forest cover, whether in the public or in the private sector, that develops the natural resource to increase not only the supply of paper, wood and other forest products, but the environmental and social benefits that were touched on in the debate.

That is why, as well as investing in the public sector, we have invested, through the Scottish forestry grant scheme, in work in the private sector. I hope that members will agree that it is right to seek to deliver even more against those wider objectives. That is the purpose of the review and recommendations that were published today. The developments in the woods in and around towns initiative, for example, should be widely welcomed because organisations and individuals are working together to make a real difference in areas around our towns that have been neglected for too long.

In time, the new woods that are planted under that initiative today will make a significant difference to the health and well-being of the next generation in our towns and cities. Woods can provide the links by which people reach the wider countryside, providing opportunities for enjoying outdoor recreation. As I said at the outset, they also provide significant assistance to our tourism industry. Whether it is through forest recreation and tourism, walking, watching wildlife, cycling or horse-riding, or whether it is through small businesses hiring out mountain bikes or providing other related services, those activities are not peripheral to our priorities, as some have said. Those activities are a critical part of what forestry policy is all about.

The economic issues are of great importance, and I am pleased about the broad welcome that there has been today for the timber transport fund. That is a key challenge for the industry in delivering its product to market. The subject of freight facilities grants was raised, and members should be aware that a number of such grants have been used in the past to improve marine infrastructure such as the piers at Portavadie and Lochaline. The timber transport fund that we have now established will seek to connect forests to both marine and rail facilities, and we are keen to

work with partners in the timber transport forum on how to promote more rail and sea transport of timber to market.

Alex Fergusson: Will the minister address the point that George Lyon raised and state whether some of that money will be available for local authorities to use on roads?

Lewis Macdonald: That is a significant point. To answer the point that George Lyon raised, and the question that Alex Fergusson asked in his own speech, the fund will be administered by Forestry Commission Scotland, which will work with local authorities and other stakeholders through the timber transport forum to address not only the rail and sea issues that have been mentioned today, but how to remove the pressures on local roads in the way that George Lyon highlighted. That will be done in part by making better use of forest roads and by investing in and building on that network, but the Forestry Commission will also seek to develop an alternative transport network, such as was approved in Argyll last year, to take those vehicles off the public roads.

There have been a number of areas of consensus on which members have welcomed the things that we have done.

Richard Lochhead: One issue that many members have raised is the decline in new planting in recent years. Will the minister introduce any measures to reverse that decline?

Lewis Macdonald: We shall quickly bring about a resolution of the issue relating to the reform of the common agricultural policy and the single farm payment, which has been raised by members of several parties and which we believe is key in many respects to restoring the level of private sector planting. I shall say a little more about that in a moment.

Alex Fergusson kept what I thought was the most interesting part of his position on the issue to the end of his speech. He made a new proposal for putting Forestry Commission management in the private sector, which is novel but perhaps not unsurprising. It is also interesting that he asserted, in his speech and in the Conservative amendment, that Forestry Commission Scotland was somehow soaking up public subsidy while the private sector suffered from neglect, and he used the figure of the £80 million budget line for the Forestry Commission.

It is important to make it clear that the funding that goes in cash terms from this Parliament to the Forestry Commission is in the order of £46.6 million and that the majority of that money—£28 million of it—goes to support private sector growers and industry generally. That happens, for example, through the woodland grant scheme, which is public money devoted to the private

sector and to what it is able to contribute. Alex Fergusson mentioned an additional sum of around £7 million, which is provided through the farm woodland premium scheme for farmers to plant woodland.

The private sector, which has an important role to play, receives significant support from the Scottish Executive and will continue to do so. However, the debate has made it clear that there are good reasons why we continue to look to Forestry Commission Scotland as the public agency that should lead on forest policy and should drive forward forest policy, in the economic sphere and in social and environmental terms. That is the direction in which we wish to travel and that is the key message of the review report that was published today. Indeed, that is the underlying theme of our strategy and of the policy that we have followed until now.

I welcome the broad support that the chamber has given for biomass and for the wide application of that form of energy. Unfortunately, I cannot accept the proposal that is contained in Richard Lochhead's amendment that we should set

"a specific target to promote the use of forestry for biomass",

not because targets are unimportant or because they might not have a role to play, but because, as was mentioned in the debate, we recently asked an expert group under the umbrella of the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland to report to FREDS and ministers on how best to grow the biomass sector in Scotland. At this stage, we do not want to instruct the group on the conclusions that its members should reach or the recommendations that they should make.

Mr Swinney: Notwithstanding the minister's determination not to set a target at this stage, does he accept the Government's responsibility to intensify the timescale for the development of biomass projects? Does he agree that any practical obstacles in the way of such projects should be removed?

Lewis Macdonald: I absolutely accept the role of Government in this area, which is why Scottish ministers have taken a lead through FREDS to seek to develop the biomass strategy. I am certain that my colleague Allan Wilson, who now has responsibility for this area, will want to return to the subject. I am sure that he will do so when the expert group makes its report available to him.

Other renewables issues were raised, including short-rotation coppicing, which Alex Johnstone mentioned. I confirm that short-rotation coppicing is grant aided under the Scottish forestry grant scheme. I am aware of the issues involved and assure the chamber that the Executive is happy to address those issues if required to do so.

There was a wide expression of support for the greater use of Scottish timber in housing, particularly for external cladding. Forestry Commission Scotland, which is working closely with the industry on that subject, is supporting a research project to explore the use of Scottish timber in cladding and the opportunities that that presents. That is the right direction in which to go.

Alasdair Morgan raised the important issue of the contribution that the Executive makes to industry training. Having until recently had responsibility for lifelong learning, I am conscious of the relevance of the issue. Indeed, Forestry Commission Scotland is working with the Forestry Contracting Association to support a number of projects that the association has under way. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry to interrupt, minister, but I must ask members to refrain from their conversations. The persistent hum of conversation is making it difficult to follow the debate.

Lewis Macdonald: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Forestry Commission Scotland is working with universities and colleges to ensure that this important industry has a skilled and trained work force.

Fergus Ewing: Will the minister address the private sector concerns that I raised in my speech about the fact that good silvicultural practice in respect of thinning and fertilisation is not being followed? There are concerns that the production of high-quality saw logs is being jeopardised.

Lewis Macdonald: I intended to address that point and I am happy to do so now. I know that Mr Ewing described the source as being “pretty reliable”. My sources tell me that it is not very reliable and that there is no truth in the statement that Mr Ewing reported. However, it is important to keep an eye on such matters. Forestry Commission Scotland tells me that it is doing all that it can to maintain thinning populations where it is reasonable to do so. The commission recognises the long-term benefits that that practice provides.

Clearly, forestry is an important employer in rural areas. It brings economic benefits. As members described, it also contributes to the rural economy in a number of other ways. I am thinking of imaginative projects such as treefest, the musical trees tour, the woodland bus tour and the tree trunk online. Various efforts are being made to increase awareness of our forests and woodlands and to promote the contribution that they make. We do not want to lose sight of the cultural aspects of our woodlands.

As several members said, forestry plays a central role in sustainable development and in the contributions that it makes to global and natural systems. The more that we hear of and understand climate change, the more we recognise the importance of forestry in that respect.

Our strategy for Scotland’s forestry was put in place some four years ago. We are keen to ensure that that strategy is fully up to date, so next month, through the forestry forum, we will begin to examine the current strategy and look at putting in place the groundwork for the next strategy. The five regional forestry forums that we have established, which have been critical to ensuring that stakeholders have a say in the way that we develop our forest policy, will inform that process. We will continue to take such an approach. We look forward to working with all parties in the chamber on those areas on which we agree in the future months and years.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-1891, in the name of Margaret Curran, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) that consideration of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1 be completed by 14 January 2005;

(b) that consideration of the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Bill at Stage 2 be completed by 3 December 2004;

(c) that the Justice 1 Committee reports to the Justice 2 Committee by 28 October 2004 on the Victim Notification (Prescribed Offences) (Scotland) Order 2004 (SSI 2004/411); and

(d) that the Justice 2 Committee reports to the Justice 1 Committee by the 12 November 2004 on the International Criminal Court (Enforcement of Fines, Forfeiture and Reparation Orders) (Scotland) (Revocation) Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/437).—[*Ms Margaret Curran.*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Margaret Curran to move motions S2M-1905 and S2M-1906, on the membership of committees, S2M-1907, on the substitute membership of a committee, and S2M-1908, on the membership of a committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Mr Frank McAveety be appointed to replace Rhona Brankin on the Education Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Mrs Mary Mulligan be appointed to replace Rhona Brankin on the Audit Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Margaret Jamieson be appointed to replace Rhona Brankin as the Labour Party substitute on the Enterprise and Culture Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Mr Frank McAveety be appointed to replace Kate Maclean on the Finance Committee.—[*Ms Margaret Curran.*]

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Ms Margaret Curran): Presiding Officer, I am grateful for the opportunity to provide you and other members with a brief report on the outcome of my investigation into the circumstances surrounding yesterday's introduction of the Transport (Scotland) Bill.

As you said in your remarks yesterday, Presiding Officer, it is normal practice for the Executive to wait until bills have been printed before any public comment is made. However, due to a communication error between officials, the important distinction between the day of introduction and the day of publication was overlooked on this occasion. As a result, my colleague the Minister for Transport was advised that it would be acceptable for there to be some form of publicity on the day of introduction.

I stress to you and to all members that no discourtesy was intended to the Parliament and the I have instructed officials to put in place robust mechanisms that will avoid any similar situation arising in the future. You have my assurance on that.

The Presiding Officer: I am grateful to you for that statement, Ms Curran, and I am sure that the whole Parliament is grateful too.

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):

There are 11 questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is that amendment S2M-1898.1, in the name of Christine Grahame, which seeks to amend motion S2M-1898, in the name of Malcolm Chisholm, on improving the quality and availability of Scotland's housing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)

Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 36, Against 79, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-1898.2, in the name of Bill Aitken, which seeks to amend motion S2M-1898, in the name of Malcolm Chisholm, on improving the quality and availability of Scotland's housing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)

Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 16, Against 98, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that amendment S2M-1898.4, in the name of Patrick Harvie, which seeks to amend motion

S2M-1898, in the name of Malcolm Chisholm, on improving the quality and availability of Scotland's housing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)

Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 37, Against 79, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S2M-1898, in the name of Malcolm Chisholm, on improving the quality and availability of Scotland's housing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 66, Against 20, Abstentions 30.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament endorses the Scottish Executive's commitment to a 30% increase in affordable housing provision by 2007-08 in order to increase the availability of social rented accommodation for homeless people, reduce pressure on waiting lists and help first-time buyers on to the housing ladder; welcomes the introduction of the Housing Quality Standard and the improvements in housing quality that are resulting from substantial community ownership and fuel poverty programmes; recognises the major achievements flowing from devolution for housing in Scotland, such as a modernised and single tenancy in the social rented sector, progressive homelessness legislation and the development of tenant participation and rights, and

looks forward to the forthcoming Housing Bill which will raise standards in the private housing sector and strengthen the rights of private sector tenants.

The Presiding Officer: The fifth question is, that amendment S2M-1899.1, in the name of Richard Lochhead, which seeks to amend motion S2M-1899, in the name of Lewis Macdonald, on making the most of Scotland's forests, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

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

Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 48, Against 67, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The sixth question is, that amendment S2M-1899.2, in the name of Alex

Fergusson, which seeks to amend motion S2M-1899, in the name of Lewis Macdonald, on making the most of Scotland's forests, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

AGAINST

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)

McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Mr Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 17, Against 71, Abstentions 28.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The seventh question is, that motion S2M-1899, in the name of Lewis Macdonald, on making the most of Scotland's forest, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises the significant contribution which Scotland's forestry and primary wood processing sector makes to the economy, tourism and jobs; recognises the environmental benefits of the creation and restoration of more than 8,600 hectares of native woodland in the last two years; believes that Scotland's forests can contribute to the achievement of the Scottish Executive's renewable energy targets; welcomes the contribution made to delivering greater benefits to communities through 70 partnership agreements between Forestry Commission Scotland and communities and through the setting up of the regional forestry forums and the Strategic Timber Transport Fund, and believes that all stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors should continue to work together to maximise the value of forestry to the economy, the environment and the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The eighth question is, that motion S2M-1905, in the name of Margaret Curran, on the membership of a committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Mr Frank McAveety be appointed to replace Rhona Brankin on the Education Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The ninth question is, that motion S2M-1906, in the name of Margaret Curran, on the membership of a committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Mrs Mary Mulligan be appointed to replace Rhona Brankin on the Audit Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The 10th question is, that motion S2M-1907, in the name of Margaret Curran, on the substitute membership of a committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Margaret Jamieson be appointed to replace Rhona Brankin as the Labour Party substitute on the Enterprise and Culture Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The 11th and final question is, that motion S2M-1908, in the name of Margaret Curran, on the membership of a committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Mr Frank McAveety be appointed to replace Kate Maclean on the Finance Committee.

National Construction Week

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-1807, in the name of Marilyn Livingstone, on national construction week, 6 to 13 October 2004.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament supports National Construction Week from 6 to 13 October 2004 and recognises the many economic advantages for Scotland that an expanding construction industry will bring, notably in employment preservation and creation, training, skills and provision of the built environment; acknowledges the continuing work of the Cross Party Group on Construction which considers and debates all appropriate issues concerning the structure and operation of the construction industry in Scotland as they may affect all relevant stakeholders; supports the industry's schemes to register construction firms through the Construction Licensing Executive and workers through approved registration schemes, thereby protecting the public by eradicating rogue traders, enhancing the industry's image and improving the skills base and health and safety practices, and acknowledges that the Scottish Executive, local authorities and other government bodies can assist by supporting registration schemes by insisting that all public works contractors are committed to them, supporting the education and training infrastructure so that it meets Scotland's construction requirements, acting as an enlightened client by ensuring, where possible, that there are advance programmes of work on which the industry can plan its skills requirements and provide its workforce with security of employment and ensuring that public works contracts are fair, open, effective and straightforward to administer and deliver.

17:12

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I am delighted to have the opportunity to debate a motion in my name on the construction industry. As convener of the cross-party group on construction, I wish to thank all those who have supported me in the group's work over the past year. Many of them are in the public gallery today, and I welcome them all to the Parliament. I particularly thank Alex Neil, vice-convener of the group, who stepped in when I was in hospital earlier this year, as well as Alan Watt and Sid Patten, who have offered us both tremendous support and encouragement.

The construction industry generates around £6.5 billion in Scotland in sales and turnover, and it employs around 120,000 people in 12,000 registered firms, according to figures from 2002. Increasingly, turnover is divided equally between new build and repair and maintenance. I do not need to convince anyone here, either in the chamber or in the gallery, of the significant impact that the construction industry exerts on the social and economic well-being of Scotland.

It was for that reason, and because the industry felt that it had suffered over many years from

fragmented representation, that the cross-party group on construction was formed. Alex Neil and I have attempted to bridge that gap. The group is a forum in which we can contribute constructively to this significant, important agenda. The group includes representatives from the professions, contractors, subcontractors, trade unions, training bodies, educational establishments, statutory bodies and suppliers.

The group was formed on 8 October 2003, and we agreed to examine several areas. The first was the relationship between the Parliament and the construction industry. A considerable element of public spending, as the minister will acknowledge, goes on the construction industry. That influences key policy areas such as economic development, housing and urban regeneration. A robust relationship is an absolute necessity if we are to maximise opportunities in all those sectors—as well as in other sectors that I do not have time to mention.

We are also very concerned about the health and safety agenda. We hear far too often about the serious injuries, and indeed deaths, that occur in the construction industry. Furthermore, the Parliament needs to work with the industry to eradicate rogue traders. That is vital, as the issue comes up continually in the cross-party group's meetings.

It is also necessary to have a focused education and training policy to meet the industry's need for skills. We have all heard about the skills gaps that exist. We believe that attractive career prospects and long-term employment opportunities must be provided to meet the industry's needs and to attract minority groups into the industry. That is a challenge for us all.

That agenda is extensive and wide ranging. During its first year, the cross-party group has concentrated on two key areas—procurement and work load, and skills and training—with a view to identifying achievable outcomes that we can progress towards together. That work is not yet complete, but a report will be published later this year. On behalf of the group, I will take the opportunity to highlight its likely key recommendations.

The first is that the information that is required for pre-qualification and tendering should be rationalised and a database that both public sector clients and the construction industry can use identified. Constructionline is an example of such a resource.

Secondly, we will probably ask the Executive to produce a comprehensive public sector construction programme for Scotland, which would allow a meaningful matching of demand with industry capacity. I have already discussed that

with the minister. In addition, all public sector clients should be able to use three-year budgets and to roll over overspend or underspend from one financial year to the next, thus avoiding annuality. We put on record our support for the work that the Executive has undertaken in that area, but we would like it to go a bit further.

We believe that the whole industry would benefit from the production of a single procurement best practice document and from the provision of training for public sector procurement officers. We also think that the strategic promotion of the industry in all primary and secondary schools is a key requirement for the future success and development of the industry.

Public sector contracts should specify employment practices to deal with issues such as the bogus self-employed and to support companies that recruit, train and develop their staff throughout their period of employment. It is critical that consideration be given to the registration of firms and employees. The establishment of a matrix of educational and development providers that takes into account geography and individuals' differing development routes and needs is also required.

Supporting the development of construction-related skills should be high on the agenda of the Executive and the Parliament. It is vital that college-funded courses, modern apprenticeships and skillseekers receive increased budgets if we are successfully to address the skills gap. We also want the industry's attractiveness as a good career provider to be emphasised more widely. I believe that a campaign to improve uptake in construction trades would help. It was publicised recently that only 1 per cent of employees in the construction industry are women. That is very worrying—the number of female employees is obviously not high enough. Drastic action and a co-ordinated approach are necessary to ensure that the industry is seen as a career option for women and for minority groups.

The cross-party group uses as its baseline the report "Achieving Construction Innovation and Excellence in Scotland", following the publication of which the Scottish construction forum was formed. We believe that it is now appropriate and, indeed, necessary for the forum to work more closely with the cross-party group. We have invited Graeme Millar, who is a member of the forum, to meet us and we would like to have the minister's support in progressing that agenda.

We will be forwarding our first full year's report to the minister later this year—perhaps by the end of November. I invite him to meet the cross-party group after that, to discuss the way forward.

I look forward to the rest of the debate and to hearing the minister's reply. In seven minutes, I

have not been able to make all the points that I would have liked to make, but I hope that other members will take the opportunity to do so. I also extend an invitation to all members who are present to attend the meeting of our cross-party group in committee room 4, which follows the debate.

17:19

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Marilyn Livingstone on securing the debate. As we know, the construction industry forms a vital part of the Scottish economy and it is right that there is a cross-party group in the Parliament that works in partnership with all parts of the industry to promote the construction industry in Scotland.

In the four minutes that are available to me, I should like first to underline the diversity of the construction sector. In the gallery are representatives of painters and decorators, heating and ventilation contractors, brickies, joiners and many other sectors of the industry. The construction industry accounts for about 12 per cent of Scottish gross domestic product, and if we add in building materials and associated industries, we have a substantial chunk of the Scottish economy. Today's announcement on housing, and particularly the substantial increase in investment in social housing, emphasises some of the challenges that the industry will have to meet in the next few years if it is to provide the new houses, the new roads and all the other projects that are in the pipeline.

I will emphasise the three or four key challenges that face the industry, the Parliament and the Executive in trying to ensure that we have the capacity to realise our targets for housing, roads and the other projects. The first issue, which Marilyn Livingstone mentioned, is skills and the skills shortages in different parts of the construction industry. During the next few years, we will need to recruit some 27,000 people into the building industry in Scotland—half of that is due to natural wastage and the other half is due to the new investment that is coming on stream.

However, we are nowhere near meeting that target. Despite the great efforts of the Construction Industry Training Board, the 5,000 modern apprenticeships that relate to construction and the sector skills council for the construction industry, we still need to do more to ensure that people with the right skills come on board in the years ahead so that we meet our investment targets. I hope that the minister will examine skills in the construction sector in particular, because as the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning he is in a unique position to take action on that front.

The second issue is procurement. One of the major problems that the construction industry faces is that we have a bit of a bust-and-boom situation—perhaps less than in the past, because in recent years there has been more of a continuous boom. However, as Marilyn Livingstone mentioned, it is essential to have a predictable continuum of work for a period of years and not months if we are to ensure that our indigenous construction industry can not only compete effectively here in Scotland but chase work elsewhere in the United Kingdom and in Europe.

My final point, in the last of my four minutes, is on the availability of land and the planning issues that need to be addressed. In relation to water alone, it is reckoned that some £500 million of development is being held up because of the problems in the water industry in Scotland. By concentrating on construction and related industries we have the opportunity to give a major boost to economic growth in Scotland; members in all parts of the chamber agree that economic growth is our number 1 target. The construction industry can not only contribute to economic growth but help further to reduce unemployment in Scotland.

I ask the minister to take on those issues on behalf of the industry—that will be of benefit not only to the Parliament and the construction industry but to the Scottish economy as a whole.

17:24

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I, too, thank Marilyn Livingstone and congratulate her on obtaining the debate, which has been worth while. I agree with just about everything that she and Alex Neil had to say.

It is not always recognised that the construction industry is one of Scotland's largest industries, in terms of investment, employment, subcontracts to other suppliers and trades, diversity—as Alex Neil rightly said—and the sheer change in Scotland's environment that is brought about by the industry. I have different figures from Alex Neil's. I thought that the industry accounted for about 10 per cent of gross domestic product, but that depends on what is added into the figure. The industry is certainly big; it has a turnover of about £10 billion. It is not too much to say that the construction industry's health is essential to the Scottish economy's health. I might say slightly fatuously that the Parliament has through this building contributed significantly to the construction industry, but perhaps we will pass over that.

The industry faces several challenges. The first is the need for a steady flow of orders, which has been touched on. That is essential to any business

but is vital in construction, which relies heavily on the public sector directly for orders or indirectly, as Alex Neil said, for an adequate planning system and the availability of water, sewerage and other infrastructure. The offshoots of that were brought home to me recently when I visited a company that operates in the railway industry and which cannot take on its usual number of modern apprentices, because of a temporary dip in the number of orders that are coming on stream, which results from the up and down way in which contracts appear. If business dips, staff and suppliers experience all sorts of effects such as that. One objective of Government policy must be to help to avoid such problems.

The second challenge is the growth of the black economy. That will always be a feature of the industry to an extent, but the answer to part of the problem is to have approved and recognised standard certification that the public know and trust. I very much welcome the work of the Construction Licensing Executive on that. For the customer, I am sure that there have traditionally been too many crests, emblems and certificates, most of which mean next to nothing to most people. The exception is registration with the Council for Registered Gas Installers, which is well recognised and about which the public know.

Public authorities that offer construction contracts should ensure that the companies that they deal with are suitably certificated. The support that is promised in the partnership agreement for owner-occupier associations should also provide a mechanism for supporting high standards in housing repair work.

The third challenge is skill shortages, which have been touched on. I hear different accounts from different people about the extent of such shortages. The work of the cross-party group on construction has recognised the need to change the image of construction among young people and to provide more work experience and more apprenticeship opportunities. However, not all young people with a possible interest are ready to commit themselves when they leave school. More must be done to allow older people to encounter fewer obstacles to entering the industry. Employers seem reluctant to take on such people, because they cost more, but that is a bottleneck that we could do without. Partnership between the industry and the Scottish Executive, and probably a different funding level, will be needed.

In any event, the prevalence of labour-only subcontractors is excessive, not only because such firms do not pay the construction industry training levy of 2.5 per cent of the wage bill, which should go towards industry training, but because of other, more general, reasons.

Public procurement is another challenge. Making that as straightforward as possible and

devising mechanisms to enable smaller companies to operate on a level playing field are key issues.

I urge Parliament to remember the value and significance of the construction industry and to support it through a steady and planned flow of public sector contracts. That is not easy to achieve, but the benefits for skills training and planning, the ability to invest in improved standards and value for public money will be significant. What I say applies not least to labour-only subcontractors. A steadier flow of business to the industry, which we have not always had, could reduce that problem. I very much support the motion.

17:28

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I commend Marilyn Livingstone for securing the debate on this important topic. I am starting to feel a bit concerned, because I have hardly disagreed with a word that anybody has said. As members will appreciate, that is an unusual position for me, but never mind.

Robert Brown said in passing that he would not say too much about this building, but it is appropriate that an early members' business debate here is on construction. In my experience, people in the construction industry love and loathe the building in equal measure. They love it because, whatever one thinks of its aesthetics, it is a remarkable building. The quality of some of the work that has been put into it is evident for all to see. However, some loathe the building because the cost overruns were not a good advertisement for cost controls in Scottish construction. I dare say that we will get over that in time and that this building will become a monument to what is good about Scottish construction, once the costs have been forgotten.

National construction week was about two weeks ago. It was one of the most successful yet, with more than 1,600 events taking place during the week throughout the UK. Thousands of young people had the opportunity to get involved and visit architectural practices and engineering consultancies as well as to try out traditional crafts such as painting and decorating, joinery, roofing, bricklaying and plastering. A number of events took place throughout Scotland, including some in my area. One such event took place in Rosyth on 11 October. It was an Army resettlement day, at which a presentation was given that outlined the career options in construction that were available to men and women who were leaving the armed forces. Given the current uncertainty over the future of the Scottish regiments, some might say that there is something to be read into that, but that is a matter for debate on another occasion.

Members have drawn attention to several key issues in the industry, and I would like to add a little to the points that have been made. First, there is the issue of the shortage of skills and labour. Sixty-nine per cent of existing vacancies are hard to fill, and there is no doubt that that causes difficulties for the industry. It is a particular problem for smaller businesses that employ 10 or fewer workers, which account for 96 per cent of the construction sector. There is a role for agencies to try to encourage more young people into construction. Some of us were present at a seminar that was given at lunch time by Careers Scotland, at which the question was raised of how we can encourage more young people into trades such as construction and engineering, as simply not enough people are going down that road at present. Agencies need to address that matter.

Secondly, there is the question of continuity of work, which both Robert Brown and Alex Neil raised. We have a major issue with development constraints. There are numerous communities throughout Scotland where building projects could and should take place, both in housebuilding and in commercial and economic development, but where they cannot take place because the water infrastructure is not there and Scottish Water is not making the necessary investment to allow construction to progress. That bottleneck could be dealt with if the political will existed. I urge the minister to take account of that when he responds to the debate.

I refer briefly to construction licensing. There is a problem with rogue traders and firms that do not account properly for value added tax, national insurance and other statutory requirements. There is also a problem with rogue traders that rip off elderly people who live by themselves. However, we must be careful. There is a case for attracting new entrants to the building industry, and we should not build the barriers so high that we deter people who are genuinely trying to enter the industry, set up new enterprises and drive things forward.

There are great opportunities for the Scottish construction industry. I hope that the minister is listening to the debate. With a few policy changes, the future will be even brighter.

17:33

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):

I thank Marilyn Livingstone for bringing the debate to Parliament. The construction industry needs a boost. It is obviously essential to increase the number of affordable houses for rent and purchase. The minister stated this morning that his overall plan commits £1.2 billion towards that worthy cause. One of the major stumbling blocks to improving the quality and availability of

Scotland's housing is the shocking lack of skilled artisans and tradesmen. Why not experiment in one of Scotland's 32 regions along the following lines and, if the scheme succeeds, expand it across the whole country?

Scotland has large numbers of retired tradesmen in disciplines such as plumbing, joinery, painting, bricklaying, electrical engineering, plastering and slating. Many of those retired tradesmen have a lifetime of acquired skills—and let us face it, people are generally living longer. A great many of those tradesmen would relish the opportunity once again to lift up the tools of their trade, possibly on a part-time basis. Many of them opted for early retirement and regret taking that step. Also, probably due to blatant ageism, 40 per cent of Scots between the ages of 60 and 65—many of whom are construction workers—are not in employment.

Why can we not be innovative? We could use a tiny proportion of the £1.2 billion that has been committed, initially on an experimental basis, to finance one local authority direct labour organisation to build 10 detached bungalows. The council could recruit, either on a part-time or a full-time basis, some of the master tradesmen who are currently languishing in retirement. In parallel with that, teenagers could be recruited as apprentices who would be trained in the most practical manner by building an initial batch of homes from the foundations up. The group of tradesmen and apprentices would be responsible for the on-going completion of the 10 homes. All the work would be carried out by the trainees under the quality guidance of senior citizen tradesmen who, in turn, would be guided by the managers in the works department.

We would have a win-win situation. First, we would finish up with 10 soundly built houses. Secondly, good-quality senior tradesmen would be given the opportunity to augment their pitiful pensions. Thirdly, the area would find that, in a few short years, it had an influx of highly skilled young tradesmen, who would provide a huge boost to the construction industry. Finally, the council would have 10 soundly built affordable quality homes. Of those, 50 per cent could be rented and the other 50 per cent could be sold to first-time buyers to finance the building of the next batch of 10 homes. That would provide an innovative approach to a vexed problem.

Should the pilot scheme prove a success, it could be extended to all 32 councils in Scotland. If each council were given a target of providing 100 homes in its area, that would result in 3,200 new-build affordable social houses being completed. The houses could be built to an acceptable, easily built architectural standard. Scotland's construction industry needs all the help that it can

get. If the aforementioned scheme was adopted, it would provide a huge boost to the construction industry and it would help with the provision of much-needed social housing and of the skilled workers of the future.

17:37

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): I am grateful to Marilyn Livingstone for initiating tonight's debate on an important topic for Scotland's economy.

My constituency of Central Fife is perhaps a microcosm of the Scottish economy, given that it includes the high-tech industries of Glenrothes and the mining, engineering and shipbuilding industries of the coastal strip of Leven, Methil and Buckhaven. Just as the area has seen its fortunes rise and fall in line with the state of the Scottish economy, the fortunes of the construction industry in my constituency, like those of the industry elsewhere in Scotland, have risen and fallen.

Today, in Central Fife and in the rest of Scotland, we see encouraging signs in both the public sector and the private sector that things are looking up. The job losses in high-tech industries such as engineering and fabrication seem to have bottomed out and demand for construction is rising. To put it crudely, the continued existence of firms such as Donaldson Timber Engineering Ltd, which makes roof trusses, and Lomond Homes Ltd, which builds houses and industrial units, depends on that strength of demand and on a pool of qualified and trained labour coming through from which the firms can draw.

Many members will know of my long involvement in objective 3 European structural funding under the old European social fund. A major requirement for such funding was that projects should promote skills development and what was known in the jargon as mainstreaming the horizontal themes. That meant that equality and sustainability had to be built in as core themes in any ESF-funded project. I suggest that the construction industry is ideally placed to apply those themes both in its recruitment and training and in its delivery.

The industry could apply those themes in recruitment and training by promoting the development of skills, especially by increasing the number of women and minority ethnic workers in the industry. At the moment, those groups are under-represented, but their numbers are rising. I congratulate the training agencies and the industry on that, but more must be done.

On building practices, we need buildings that are green, environmentally friendly and energy efficient. There is a message there not only for the industry but for local authority planners and

development control committees, those who design and let public-private partnership contracts, the construction companies, the college trainers, the architects and the engineers. The lesson is that, if we are to implement those horizontal themes—those major elements of European economic policy—to build social justice and an environmentally sustainable economy, the cheapest and most traditional approach is not always best. It is time to start looking at those elements that will last the pace and are environmentally sustainable. That will ensure that the buildings and the trades that have built them are there for generations to come.

I am pleased to have been able to speak in the debate. I thank Marilyn Livingstone, Alex Neil and those who have supported them for their work on the cross-party group. I hope that everyone in the chamber, including the minister, will be able to support the message in the motion.

17:41

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I join others in congratulating Marilyn Livingstone on securing the debate. I know that she has worked hard on the matter over the past two or three years. Before I start, I apologise for the fact that I have to be at a meeting in Glasgow later and will have to get a taxi at 6 o'clock.

I echo everything that other members have said about the advantages to be gained from working in the construction industry. Much has been said about the benefits to Scotland's economy, which is absolutely correct, but it is important to remember the benefit that people get from the feeling that they have real and lasting employment. The skills and training that people in the sector receive have been overlooked for far too long by Government and education authorities, which appear to have thought of the sector as being beneath them. I am glad that the skills involved in the construction industry are being recognised. I pay tribute to Alex Neil, Marilyn Livingstone and everyone in the industry who has pushed hard not to glamorise the industry but to ensure that it is an industry that young people—and even old people, as John Swinburne suggested—might want to become involved in.

Marilyn Livingstone and Christine May have spoken about ethnic minorities and women. I agree that it is crucial that we encourage more ethnic minorities and women into the industry. There must be a better gender balance in the industry. It is true that more women have been entering the industry but not enough have done so. We should be trying to ensure that schools assist in that. I know that some schools have day-visit schemes, apprenticeship schemes and that type of thing. The fact that we do not have a

gender balance in the construction industry causes me great concern.

Another area of concern that all the members who have spoken have raised are the rogue traders in the industry. I believe that, in 2002, the Construction Licensing Executive was created to restore confidence to the consumer and make regulation of the industry easier.

Another on-going area of concern relates to accidents at work. From speaking to Sid Patten—I am sorry to hear that he is ill—and others, I gather that health and safety measures are being examined in collaboration with Glasgow Caledonian University. Perhaps the minister could give us an update on that. The study is examining how factors such as climate, daylight hours and so on affect accidents in the industry.

The security industry as it relates to the construction industry is another area of concern. I have written to the Minister for Justice on many occasions to ask when we are going to regulate the security industry in Scotland. The answer that I have had back is basically that we will have to wait until the Queen's speech, which I think is on 3 November, to find out whether the matter will be covered in United Kingdom legislation on the security industry. I have written and have not found out whether the matter will be included in the Queen's speech. I ask the minister whether he can give us an update on that. If the matter will not be included in the Queen's speech, could we please have security industry legislation for Scotland? The problems in the security industry are bringing the construction industry into disrepute and bringing Scotland into disrepute. The firms are really fronts for drug runners and we need to examine the issue thoroughly. I ask Allan Wilson to take that point on board and perhaps pass it on to Cathy Jamieson if he cannot answer it.

The construction industry employs more than 132,000 people directly and is worth £10 billion in sales and turnover. That is positive and the industry is on the up. It is up to the Parliament to ensure that we join the construction industry and give it the positive legislation that it deserves to enable it to move forward. I thank Marilyn Livingstone for enabling me to speak in a debate on the subject.

17:45

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): I join other members in thanking Marilyn Livingstone and the cross-party group on construction, including its vice-convenor, Alex Neil, for all the work that they have done and for giving us the opportunity to debate the construction industry in Scotland. As a

former construction worker—I suspect that that is something that is not commonly known—who is now helping, I hope, to construct sound economic foundations upon which we can build a vibrant industry here in Scotland, I want to set out what the Executive is doing to help build the competitive industry that we all want. There has been a great deal of consensus in the chamber tonight.

We all agree that the construction industry plays a vital role in our economy, in our built heritage and in our environment. The industry accounts, according to the figures that I have, for around 5 to 6 per cent of our GDP—that is another figure to add to those that have been bandied about. In preparing for the debate, I checked the figures—as members would expect me to do—and I note that in the first quarter of 2004 the Scottish construction industry's GDP increased by 1.2 per cent on the fourth quarter of 2003 and output also increased by 8 per cent in a year-on-year comparison. By anybody's standards that is a substantial contribution. We can all agree on the figure that has been referred to, which is that the industry has a turnover of approximately £10 billion. That makes it one of the largest sectors in our economy. Whichever figure we use, Alex Neil's point is ultimately the correct one: the industry makes a major contribution to our economy more generally.

Consequently, we are supporting the industry in a number of ways. We want to work with it to address construction issues. We have established a Scottish construction forum, which comprises industry representatives—including construction unions—and the enterprise networks, to explore options for a construction innovation and excellence centre.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): With regard to helping the industry, does the minister agree that the fact that the expense of tendering processes for major public-private partnership projects such as road works is a huge deterrent to medium-sized companies in quoting for such work? Is he prepared to examine the tendering process to see whether duplication of effort could be avoided, which in turn would allow more medium-sized companies to compete for such work?

Allan Wilson: I will come to procurement, which was raised by Murdo Fraser, Alex Neil and other members; it is obviously a critical consideration.

I hope to take all the points that members have raised in the debate to the forum, so that we can have a serious discussion. We will then come back to the cross-party group, as requested by Marilyn Livingstone, and continue that discussion. The ability of our small, indigenous companies to participate in the process and to get the maximum benefit from the vast sums of money—now public money in a large part—that are being expended

on new construction projects, is an issue that I particularly want to take a personal interest in. I am happy to give John Scott that assurance.

The forum meets regularly throughout Scotland. It is now working to address five key themes. Those are: to raise consumer awareness and address client education; to counter the incidence of bogus self employment; to ensure that contracts require full health-and-safety-trained work forces; to encourage modern work-force-centred management styles in the industry; and, finally, to address work-force development. I look forward to discussing those matters with the forum.

In a way, our approach to work-force development embodies who I am and where I come from. We want to promote skills and training development and we are helping to raise standards in the construction industry. We are also investing in modern apprenticeships, increasing the vocational options in the school curriculum and investing record levels in the further education sector. I think that I have said in the chamber—not in this building but in the previous chamber—that my five brothers-in-law are all engineers who worked in the shipyards in Clydebank at various times and moved on from that basic skills training to develop careers throughout the world. Many of them—probably all of them—earn more than I do, because of the foundation of skills and learning that they gleaned all those years ago in the Clydebank shipyards. Like the members who have spoken in the debate, I want to promote more modern apprenticeships, particularly in engineering and the construction trades, because for people who acquire those basic skills, economic and employment opportunities surely follow, as night follows day. The benefits to individuals and the economy cannot be overstressed.

We have heard concerns about rogue traders in the industry. That issue needs to be tackled. The Executive supports the aims of the Construction Licensing Executive. The building trade associations are working with the Scottish Consumer Council and Citizens Advice Scotland to develop a self-regulation scheme that will combat rogue traders and improve consumer protection in the domestic market.

On 1 November we will launch the Scottish building standards agency. One of the ways in which the agency will modernise the building standards system will be by introducing approved certifiers of design and construction, which should improve compliance with building regulations and minimise delays in the issuing of warrants. Scottish Enterprise Glasgow, in partnership with the sector skills council, CITB-ConstructionSkills, is also playing a vital role in supporting more than 4,500 young people and adults to obtain the skills

that the industry needs if it is to thrive. On roughly the first day of my new post, it was a personal pleasure for me to appoint a long-standing friend and colleague, Alan Ritchie, to the board. I know that he will make a valuable contribution to developing the skills agenda.

The Executive attaches great importance to its responsibilities as a procurer of services from the construction industry. Our procurement guidance for construction works—the client pack—is available on our website and is, I think, an exemplar of best practice. We also recognise the importance of acting as an enlightened client—Murdo Fraser referred to that—and we are acting to provide the industry with advance information on our plans for investment in infrastructure services.

Murdo Fraser will forgive me if I do not comment on water tonight. Time will not permit me to do so. However, the member must be aware of the ongoing consultation on quality and standards III, which is designed to consider development issues—“constraints” is not always the correct word.

I was going to refer to the issue that John Swinburne mentioned, but he is away. We are happy to take all the issues that have been raised to the Scottish construction forum for a round-table discussion. We will seek the advice of experts in the industry and thereafter meet members of the cross-party group on construction, including Marilyn Livingstone. I hope that all the issues can be discussed and addressed in the spirit of consensus that has been evident in the chamber during the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:54.

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