

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 12 January 2006

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 12 January 2006

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:15*]

Local Government Finance

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item of business this morning is a debate on motion S2M-3795, in the name of John Swinney, on local government finance.

09:15

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to debate with the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business on these great occasions. I assume that the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform is away recalculating the local government finance settlement to ensure that a better solution is brought forward. That would justify his absence.

The debate on local government finance is an annual event of considerable significance for the council tax payers of Scotland, for the people who use and depend on our public services and for the many voluntary organisations that rely on funding from local authorities to deliver essential services. The debate is normally characterised by disputes between the Scottish Executive, which says that local authorities are adequately funded to deliver services, and the local authorities, which say that they are not adequately funded. This year has been no different; the debate has raged on since the publication of the Government's budget and the announcement of the local government settlement.

In the next year, the Government is offering local authorities a real-terms increase in aggregate external finance of 0.2 per cent and, by the following year, a real-terms cut of 0.1 per cent. The Government expects local authorities to make £58 million of efficiency savings, which it has already deducted from the baseline calculations of support for local authorities. That all comes at a time when we, in Parliament, are passing legislation that will increase local authorities' responsibilities for service delivery across a range of areas, not the least of which is the expansion of support for people who have special educational needs. Basically, in the next two years Government financial support for local authorities will, at best, flatline and, at worst, will fall because of the added responsibilities that are being passed to local authorities.

Within the present settlement, the First Minister

and the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform demand that council tax increases be limited to 2.5 per cent. The likelihood of there being only a 2.5 per cent council tax increase was put in context by a Labour Party member who aspires to membership of the Scottish Parliament—Councillor Donald Anderson, the leader of the City of Edinburgh Council, who said:

"It is fanciful to say that we can keep any increase to 2.5%. It is going to be extremely challenging to even keep any increase to four per cent."

Of course, 4 per cent is the level of council tax increase that the deputy minister told the Local Government Committee that he realistically expects.

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): Does John Swinney recall from what I said to that committee that his quotation is selective? I said that the initial indications from councils were that some of them were thinking of setting council taxes above 4 per cent and that it would not be until we got full information that we would know what the council tax increase would be.

Mr Swinney: Can I assume that that means that we have a guarantee from the deputy minister that council tax increases will be no higher than 2.5 per cent? That is the question that arises from the supposed clarification that has come from the deputy minister today. A quotation is a quotation.

The latest part of the debate came shortly after Christmas, on 28 December, when the Government issued a press release to show that local authorities had, according to the local government Improvement Service—yet another quango that has been established by this Administration—made £122 million of savings in the current financial year. The inference from that statement is that, if greater efficiency has been delivered, there is no need for any change to the level of funding for local authorities. It is interesting that, despite many inquiries, members have been unable to get hold of the Improvement Service's report. However, I was able to get a copy from the Scottish Parliament information centre this morning. From a cursory glance at it—I got the report only at 10 past 9 this morning—I think that the assumptions on which the figure of £122 million is based are somewhat shaky.

In the executive summary of the report, the Government says that local authorities have saved £122 million on the basis of six case studies across Scotland. It goes on to say:

"We believe that many councils are struggling to effectively measure the performance impact of efficiency gains. ... The information gathered as part of this study indicates that many councils are still struggling to define

efficiency in terms of service improvement, focusing largely on the 'savings' element of more efficient working."

Our point is proved. Many of the supposed savings by local authorities are nothing more than the traditional budget cuts to which we have always been accustomed. They are not the service transformation that the minister has promised.

George Lyon: On a point of information, Mr Swinney claims that that information is based on six case studies. In fact, it is based on six case studies and 15 returns from other councils. I congratulate him on his sleuth work this morning in discovering that the report was sitting in SPICe. He is obviously doing a very good job.

Mr Swinney: We have been asking for the report since Monday and it was apparently published on 28 December. We were told yesterday that it was going to be published in two parts. I presume that the first half must be better or more convenient than the second half. The executive summary of the report states:

"Our analysis involved working closely with six case study councils".

If the minister is saying that those gains have been made, there must now be absolutely no reason for a council tax increase that is greater than 2.5 per cent. If, as the Government says, local authorities have made savings of that scale, it must be irrefutable that there should be no council tax increase beyond 2.5 per cent. However, I am afraid that I am sceptical about that.

On the same day that the figure of £122 million came out, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities published figures that suggest that there will be a black hole of £400 million in local authority budgets in the next year. The question that members of the public will ask is which side of the argument they should believe—the Scottish Executive's or COSLA's. It would be wise to believe neither of them. The Executive's amendment rests heavily on that figure of £122 million. I am sure that the deputy minister's argument will be that local authorities have made such gains that there will be no need for the additional resources that the Scottish National Party motion calls for.

Amid the clamour and counter-claims of the Executive and COSLA, Parliament should look for good quality and dispassionate information not from COSLA or the Executive, but from the analysis and findings of its own Finance Committee. Just before Christmas, the Finance Committee published a report that examined in detail the local government settlement and the contribution of local authorities to the efficient government programme. After thorough analysis,

the committee stated, in paragraph 93 of its report, that

"The Minister has acknowledged that new funding pressures are impacting on local authorities and promised to revisit this next year. That is a positive commitment. However, the Committee remains very concerned that to meet the 2.5% council tax target, the Executive's target for spending leaves a shortfall which the Committee calculates as £84.9m over and above the £58.5m efficiency savings target."

The all-party Finance Committee calculates that, to get to the Government's stated target of a 2.5 per cent council tax increase, £84.9 million in new money must be made available to local authorities. That is the position that we seek to confirm this morning.

George Lyon: I have a quick point of clarification for Mr Swinney. Even if we accepted the £84.9 million funding gap figure that is quoted in the Finance Committee's report—which we do not necessarily accept—we do not accept the report's claim that it would take a 6.6 per cent increase in council tax to fill that gap. Last year, £2 billion was collected in council tax, but 6.6 per cent of that is not £84.9 million.

Mr Swinney: According to the Finance Committee, the funding gap is £84.9 million. If the minister is going to question the figures in the committee's report, he should tell Parliament and the committee exactly what the funding gap will be.

Unless Parliament takes action to press the Government to close the funding gap, local authorities will face the familiar choice between cutting local authority services and—once again—increasing council tax levels beyond inflation. What does that choice mean for the people of Scotland? For council tax payers, an above-inflation increase will add to the 55 per cent increase in council tax since 1997. Council tax payers have taken enough punishment from this Administration and unless action is taken to expand local authority budgets there will be another above-inflation increase for council tax payers in Scotland this year.

Alternatively, just as they had to do under the Tories' dreadful local authority settlements—which were normally condemned by Labour and the Liberals—councils could try to cut their budgets and thereby start to undermine some of the valuable local services that our communities depend on.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): If an independent body—not COSLA or the Scottish Executive but, say, Audit Scotland—found that councils that were threatening to cut front-line services had considerable reserves of £1.6 billion, would John Swinney attack them?

Mr Swinney: Local authorities have to make prudent judgments on the level of their reserves and provision in the same way that the Scottish Executive has to make judgments about its reserves. I point out to Mr Purvis again that the Scottish Executive has reserves of £1.5 billion sitting in Her Majesty's Treasury. The Executive parties should not lecture local authorities when they have not got their own house in order.

The Executive prides itself on working in communities, closing the opportunity gap, giving dignity to older people and providing the best start for our children. However, as we all know, people in our constituencies fear the damage that might be done if the valuable services that deliver those Government objectives are subjected to cuts. Unless the settlement is improved, some of the Government's valuable aims for our communities will be undermined.

The Government must take action if it is to remain consistent on the objectives in its 2006-07 budget document, which makes it clear that one of the objectives of the local authority settlement is to provide "protection for all services" that are currently provided. If that is a Government objective, it cannot be delivered within the current settlement.

There are two parts to the SNP's proposal on the forthcoming year's local government settlement. The Finance Committee has identified a funding gap of £84.9 million between the current settlement and the Government target of keeping council tax increases to 2.5 per cent. If we want to deliver a real-terms freeze in the council tax, we must go slightly further than that. First, we want to make available to local authorities £93.2 million of new investment to close the funding gap and to give authorities the resources that are required to deliver a real-terms freeze in council tax. That money would be available if we were to allow local authorities to retain the £58.5 million in efficiency savings that they are expected to deliver and that the Executive has already removed from baseline local authority budgets. The remaining £34.7 million should be provided from the £49 million that the pre-budget report has allocated to Scotland over three years. The new investment fund that would be created by such an approach would address the Finance Committee's concerns.

However, the second part of our proposal is that the Executive should offer that money only on the condition that it is used to deliver a real-terms freeze in the council tax. Instead of engaging in its current foghorn diplomacy with local authorities, the Executive should be trying to secure their acceptance of that offer.

Our proposal can be paid for from two sources: the £49 million that has been set out in the pre-budget report, and the balances that the Scottish

Executive holds at the Treasury, the unallocated element of which is, as the minister confirmed, close to £500 million. Instead of hoarding taxpayers' money to lavish on its election commitments, the Government should now give short-term relief to Scotland's council tax payers.

If members doubt that the budget contains enough room for manoeuvre to pay for that commitment, I ask them to remember two points. First, on Tuesday, the Deputy First Minister—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry. I meant the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business—heaven help us if he ever became the Deputy First Minister. On Tuesday, he asked the Finance Committee to approve £120 million of new spending on Government projects. When we asked where that money came from, we were told that it came from the central reserve.

Secondly, £70 million of the £120 million of new spending that we approved on Tuesday is being spent on the quangos of Scotland. What does it say about this Government if it can find an extra £70 million to boost the budgets of Scotland's quangos, but cannot find the money to support democratically controlled local authority services and protect ordinary council tax payers from big council tax increases?

Our proposals, which I hope Parliament will support, are designed to provide a short-term fix to the council tax problem that local authorities will face in the coming financial year. However, we also need a long-term solution that will lift the punitive burden that is the council tax and will bring in a system that is fair to everyone in Scotland. That is why the SNP—and, apparently, some members on the Executive parties' benches—support a local income tax that is based on people's ability to pay. Such a system is based on the principle of fairness, which is the essential characteristic of taxation. The poorest people in our society pay a greater share of their income in council tax than the wealthiest people pay. That is unfair. It is also unfair that the income and savings of people on fixed incomes, particularly pensioners, have been hit hard by significant council tax increases over the past eight years.

We also face the prospect of an increase in the council tax burden as a result of revaluation of properties. The Labour Party's submission to the independent review of taxation makes a case for a more regular review of property prices through revaluation. Such regular revaluations will mean that, under Labour, greater council tax burdens will be on the cards for the people of Scotland. I am sure that that will make a great election message in 2007.

We need to rectify that injustice by establishing a system that is based on the ability to pay. The

attractions and benefits of a local income tax are clear: pensioners and other people on low incomes would be spared the burden and complexity of the council tax and council tax relief systems and, if we were to retain current national personal taxation allowances, people whose incomes are deemed to be too low to allow them to pay tax would be automatically exempt from paying local income tax.

Much of the debate on the local government settlement rests on the impact of the efficient government programme. Our position is very clear: we support that programme but we feel that it should go further. It is ludicrous that local authorities have been called upon to find efficiency savings to cover 3.4 per cent of their expenditure while central Government departments have been given much lower targets. For example, the target for enterprise and lifelong learning is 0.22 per cent; for environment and rural development, 0.63 per cent; for tourism, culture and sport, 0.86 per cent; for communities, 1.09 per cent; and for transport, 1.44 per cent. It is also ludicrous that the various departments and divisions are able to retain savings to spend on other projects, while savings that are made in local government and the health service are redirected elsewhere. The initiative was supposed to boost—not cut—front-line services.

I support an efficient government programme that works across the board. I want a major assault on the burgeoning number of quangos in Scotland, I want Government departments to be subjected to the rigour that local authorities have been subjected to and I want the Government to start putting protection of council tax payers before protection of its own departments. Such an approach would command support from the SNP.

This debate provides Parliament with the opportunity to press the Government into action, to acknowledge that there is a problem with the funding of local authority services in the next financial year, and to recognise that we have a chance to protect the council tax payers of Scotland from yet another above-inflation increase. I hope that Parliament will seize that opportunity.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the widespread concern over the inadequacy of the local government finance settlement for 2006-07 and 2007-08; notes the recommendations of the Finance Committee that the Scottish Executive should reconsider the settlement; welcomes the moves to make government more efficient but calls for this process to be applied equitably across national and local government and conducted with greater rigour; calls on the Executive to restore the £58.5 million in efficiency savings to local government baselines and to make available to local authorities £34.7 million from the pre-Budget report consequentials on condition that this is used to deliver a real-terms freeze in council tax, and recognises that these

are short-term improvements to the unfair council tax that will only be resolved when the system is abolished and replaced by a local income tax based on the ability to pay.

09:33

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): I welcome the debate; indeed, given that councils currently spend about £17 billion a year on delivering many of our public services, the subject is very important and worthy of debate.

That £17 billion is financed from council tax, fees and charges, non-domestic rates, councils' own reserves, efficiency savings and grants that are provided directly by Executive departments. This year, the Executive's funding for local government will account for more than a third of its budget. In particular, since 1999-2000, the amount of core funding has increased steeply by £2.6 billion or 47 per cent. By 2007-08, the increase will be 55 per cent.

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give way?

George Lyon: That stands in stark contrast to the "dreadful" settlements that Mr Swinney referred to in his opening speech.

Mr Davidson: Will the minister give way?

George Lyon: Yes.

Mr Davidson: I am sorry, Presiding Officer—either my voice is not carrying very far or the minister has not had his ears cleaned this morning.

The minister has just referred to additional core funding. If all that extra money has gone in, why has council tax increased by 55 per cent since the Executive came to power?

George Lyon: Such decisions are made by locally elected councillors. Our track record over that time shows a 55 per cent increase in direct support from the Executive, which I have to tell Mr Davidson is in stark contrast to his party's record in respect of the council tax increases that came about as a result of underfunding when the Conservatives were in power.

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): I would be interested in the minister's comments on paragraph 77 of the Finance Committee report, which states:

"The Committee also noted that the Aggregate External Finance (AEF) ... was only planned to increase by 10% over the current Spending Review cycle, compared with 21% for the Scottish DEL."

How does that square with what he has just said?

George Lyon: I point out to Mr Ballard that, on top of AEF, we have the direct grants from Executive departments to local government. We also have prudential borrowing and supported borrowing, so the subject must be considered in the round. As I said, we have increased our support to local government by 47 per cent since devolution. By 2007-08 the increase will be 55 per cent. Any independent commentator would acknowledge that we have supported local government very well over the period.

I turn to the motion—I will deal with the last part of it first. We all await the report of the special committee under the chairmanship of Sir Peter Burt, which was set up by the coalition Government to investigate the financing of local government. I will not speculate on what that committee might recommend.

On local government finance, let me make it quite clear that, as Scotland's devolved Government, we are committed to excellence in our public services. We have provided, and will continue to provide, local government with the resources that it needs to provide world-class services. Those resources have been used to deliver more and better services, new schools, extra teachers and record numbers of police officers. Those are just some of the outcomes that are delivering real benefits to the people of Scotland.

On 23 November, we announced to Parliament provisional core funding for local government of £8.3 billion in 2006-07 and £8.5 billion in 2007-08, which represents a year-on-year increase of 3.2 per cent in the first year and 2.3 per cent in the second year—a cumulative increase of 5.6 per cent. We also said that, following discussions with COSLA, final figures will shortly be presented to Parliament.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

George Lyon: I would like to make a little progress, if Mr Adam does not mind.

In addition, councils have other resources at their disposal. This year, for example, the Executive is providing £1.3 billion in specific revenue grants over and above the core settlement, and £827 million in capital support. In total, Executive support over the three years from 2005-06 to 2007-08 totals £30.8 billion. I do not think that we can be accused of failing to support local government, given the amount of support that is being offered to local authorities over the period. Councils will also get more than £2 billion in council tax and income from fees and charges, and they now also have access to more funds through the prudential borrowing regime, which we made available to them on 1 April 2004.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): The minister has talked about the allocation of specific funds and about the funds that are available to local authorities. Will he tell us specifically how much the Executive is making available for equal pay restructuring?

George Lyon: As we have said many times in answer to that question, that is a deal that was negotiated and agreed between the local government representative body, COSLA, and the trade unions. We expect local authorities to have made provision over the years to meet their obligations through prudent management of their finances.

Regardless of where the funding comes from, we expect councils to deliver best value for the taxpayer and for communities, which is why we were pleased to announce last month that the Improvement Service had reported that councils are on course to deliver at least £122 million in efficiency savings in 2005-06. They are to be congratulated on that achievement, which is well above the target that we set and shows that the target was both realistic and achievable. We expect councils to achieve further savings in the future. Those savings will, of course, be available for reinvestment to boost front-line services.

Mr Swinney: Will the minister clarify two points? First, if further savings are going to be available for reinvestment by local authorities, why has the first tranche of savings—£58 million—not been available for local authorities to reinvest? Secondly, if local authorities are doing so well, why are Government departments being let off the hook?

George Lyon: In answer to the first question, the original money that was deducted at source may well have been reinvested in council support, but we have not put in place the bureaucracy for which the SNP constantly calls to measure all that. That money was available to meet the needs of the Scottish Executive budget.

Mr Swinney: Ah!

George Lyon: A third of the Executive budget goes to local government, so that money could have gone to local government.

Mr Swinney: It could not.

George Lyon: It could so. Councils have taken advantage of the generous financial settlements in previous years to build substantial balances.

Mr Swinney: The minister must substantiate his claim that that money has been reinvested in local authorities. It is a central—

George Lyon: I did not say that.

Mr Swinney: The minister is now telling me that he did not say that. He had better get on his feet

and clarify what he did say, because it is a fundamental point in the debate. If that money has been reinvested in local authorities, the Executive must be able to prove how that has been done. If it cannot prove that, it has not been done.

George Lyon: The point that I made to Mr Swinney was that that efficiency money was freed up and could have been reinvested in a range of things across the Executive's budget, of which local government accounts for a third. The allegation that that money was taken away and reinvested elsewhere does not stand up, but that is the allegation that Mr Swinney has constantly made.

Mr Swinney: The minister cannot substantiate that.

George Lyon: Mr Swinney cannot substantiate his point.

The level of grant that we have announced, together with all their other income, provides councils with substantial funds. Councils have taken advantage of generous financial settlements in previous years to build substantial balances, some of which are required as a sensible financial precaution against unforeseen circumstances.

Mr Swinney: Such as equal pay.

George Lyon: Some of that money could now be made available to meet such on-going pressures and, as my colleague Mr Purvis rightly pointed out, the Accounts Commission published figures showing that £1.6 billion of balances were held by local government last year.

We recognise, however, that circumstances can change and that councils are facing a range of emerging pressures that, although they were foreseen at the last spending review, could not be forecast with certainty. In November, the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform met a cross-party group from COSLA to discuss those financial pressures, and another meeting is planned for later this month. It would be premature to anticipate the outcome of that meeting, but I remind members that the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform has already said, in his statement to Parliament on 23 November, that he would be prepared to consider the case for further additional resources for 2007-08, provided that local government shows that it is making significant progress towards the efficient government targets. That has always been the Executive's position; it remains our position today.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): If the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform is talking about reconsidering grant aid to local authorities, I would like to impress upon him the need to give the City of Edinburgh Council capital status as regards its financing. Because of the

peculiar nature of the services that are provided by the City of Edinburgh Council, it would be only fair to put Edinburgh on a par with the City of Westminster and to allocate £6.5 million to service Edinburgh's particular role in promoting Scotland and in acting as a gateway to Scotland as well as being the capital city.

The Presiding Officer: You have about two minutes, Mr Lyon.

George Lyon: I am sure that that issue will be at the forefront of the discussions between COSLA and the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform.

As well as engaging with COSLA, we will of course continue to push forward our reform agenda, which will include ways of streamlining bureaucracy to free up more resources that local government will be able to redirect to front-line services. I am in no doubt that councils will have within their grasp the resources to exert downward pressure on council tax rises in 2006-07 if they meet their efficiency targets and take other sensible measures to maximise their income and restrict unnecessary spending. Those measures include further improvements in council tax collection rates, which still lag behind the levels in England.

In conclusion, the funding that we are making available to local government in 2006-07 and 2007-08 builds on historically high levels of investment in local government finance. That record investment is helping to improve the quality of life of the members of our communities, to enhance our children's education through new schools and extra teachers and to provide greater support to pensioners through free personal care and concessionary travel. We remain committed to those goals, which offer stability and security to everyone who lives and works in Scotland.

As I have said, the Executive's position is that we are willing to engage in constructive discussions with COSLA on the continuing pressures that its members face. We have already made it clear that we are willing to consider the provision of some extra resources for 2007-08 and we will report to Parliament on the outcome of our discussions as soon as we can.

I move amendment S2M-3795.4, to leave out from "widespread concern" to end and insert:

"record levels of finance provided to local government by the Scottish Executive which mean that by 2007-08 core funding will have increased by over £3 billion or 55% compared with 1999-2000; welcomes the report from the Local Government Improvement Service which confirms that councils are on course to achieve at least £122 million in efficiency savings in 2005-06; notes that the Executive has given a commitment to consider some further additional resources for 2007-08 subject to local government delivering on their efficiency targets and that

the Executive is engaged in an ongoing discussion with local government about the financial pressures councils are facing and the steps local government can take to maintain downward pressure on council tax, and looks forward to the report of the independent committee on local government taxation, which is due later this year."

09:46

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): I apologise if my voice is not as loud as it usually is.

Members will see from my amendment that I have not sought to remove the first part of John Swinney's motion because it is simply a regurgitation of the recommendations of the Finance Committee's report on stage 2 of the budget process, to which all parties—including the Executive parties—signed up. I will leave it to the Conservative member of the Finance Committee to deal with that report in detail. I simply note that it is interesting that, even though all parties signed up to the report, the minister seems to be trying to put it down. The decent thing for him to do would be to make himself available for another session with the Finance Committee so that he could convince its members where they are wrong and why he thinks that they are wrong. If he thinks that they are right, he should have the decency to accept that.

George Lyon: The Executive will respond to the committee's report. We have already indicated that we are willing to engage constructively with the committee and to respond to some of the recommendations that it has made. When we respond to the report, we will set down in writing the query that we had, which relates to the £84.9 million funding gap that is identified in one of the tables. The paragraph below that table suggests that a 6.6 per cent increase in council tax would be required to meet that shortfall, but those figures do not add up—6.6 per cent of £2 billion does not come to £84.9 million.

Mr Davidson: The minister should go before the committee to convince it.

Over the past few years, Conservative councillors have consistently pursued a real-terms freeze in council tax rises.

John Swinney and I agree on some of the problems that councils face and I am sure that many decent members would agree with us. Although councils differ in matters such as style and management, they broadly agree on the difficulties that they face. It is highly frustrating that once again I could not get the minister to tell us why the 55 per cent increase in funding for local government has had to be matched by a 55 per cent increase in council tax bills. Maybe one day he will come back with an answer on that.

Three ministers are involved in this sorry saga. First, the First Minister says with great faith that the maximum rise in council tax will be 2.5 per cent. That is fair enough, given that inflation is around 2.4 per cent, and leads us to think that at last the First Minister has caught up with what is going on. Next the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business tells Parliament and its committees that the increases will probably be 4 per cent or higher. Then the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform refuses to tell Parliament what he thinks the rises might be, even though he is the person who makes all the assumptions about where the efficiencies will come from and what councils will be able to do.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): The minister said that local authorities were doing better than had been anticipated on efficiency savings. If we follow that logic, we should expect council tax rises to be much less than 2.5 per cent.

Mr Davidson: Absolutely—our parties agree on that. Perhaps the difference is that some of us have been members of the Finance Committee and can occasionally count.

It is sad when ministers start to talk about assumptions. As the man in charge, the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform must take a view on where he thinks that efficiency savings in councils will come from. When I asked him about that, there was no answer—the silence was awesome. Even people in COSLA were surprised that he had no notion about where councils would make savings. He is supposed to be giving leadership and guidance.

The usual ministerial answer is that councils are free to set their own levels of council tax and that, as they have been given the money, the rises are all their fault and are nothing to do with the Executive, even though it is piling burden upon burden on local authorities. The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform's assumption is that the efficiency savings will help to pay for the delivery of what the new burdens require. I am not sure where the deputy minister is coming from when he says that the efficiency savings might be used to improve services. It is his and his team's assumption that those savings will fund the provision of the additional services that are being forced—especially through ring fencing—on councils in Scotland.

I must be extremely naive, but according to the manifestos of the Executive parties at the last election, the coalition itself claimed to be the improvement service for Scotland. Another Improvement Service has now been created, but the Executive does not seem to know what it is saying. I am not quite sure what it is supposed to do, but I always thought that the Government had

to take things on the chin. If there is a major problem with a third of the budget, the Government has a responsibility to sort it out by dealing with the right people and coming up with good suggestions.

It appears that no assumptions have been made about what the Government should be doing on efficiency. John Swinney mentioned quangos, but we all know about the situation in the departments. Another case has arisen this week. Have civil servants from the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department gone to work at the new transport agency? I do not think so. What will the civil servants who have departmental responsibility for transport do now that Transport Scotland has been set up? It seems that there is one rule for the Executive and another rule for everyone else in Scotland. As usual, it is the councils and the council tax payers who will pay.

The ministers claim that more money than ever is spent on local government, but they should listen to what people on the street say. They want to know where the improvement in service is. The wheelie bin roll-out in south Aberdeenshire is a nonsense. I have received numerous letters and e-mails from people telling me that although their council tax has gone up, they get only half the number of collections that they got in the past. Is that service improvement?

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD) *rose—*

George Lyon *rose—*

Mr Davidson: I will give way to the minister.

George Lyon: The latest statistics show that our extra investment means that there are 3,500 more teachers and 3,900 more policemen on the beat.

Mr Davidson: The man in the street does not see it that way—perhaps because the bobbies are not actually on the beat.

Several years ago, at the beginning of the first parliamentary debate on local government finance, I said that before we put in place a funding process, we should hold a review of what we want local government to do. We have not done that. We cannot continue to have a system in which accountable councils are not accountable because all that they are doing is acting as agencies to deliver the services that ministers demand. That does not represent local design or local freedom. There is certainly no devolution in that regard.

We cannot support the Scottish National Party's motion for one simple reason—we do not believe that a local income tax is the answer. Roughly 80 per cent of council funding comes from general taxation. That is regressive and in fact represents a form of redistribution; the same is true of council tax benefit. However, we agree that the council tax

system will have to be tweaked. It is fair, in that property owners can see the evidence on which it is based, but the bands need to be revalued regularly. That has certainly not happened in the past.

As far as council tax benefit is concerned, it is quite unfairly distributed in Scotland. However, if we were to have a local income tax, we would lose the benefit of that benefit, which would mean that rates would have to go up. So far, we have had no answer to that point.

Ministers have accepted the fact that councils have to do better at collecting council tax. There is no argument whatever on that issue. If councils in Scotland were to collect at the same rate as councils in England collect, another £50 million would come into the system.

No member has said yet how we can cut council tax rates. As we go through and past the Burt committee response, I hope that we can move on to debate realistic methods by which we can cut the council tax that our long-suffering council tax payers in Scotland have to pay.

I move amendment S2M-3795.3 to leave out from “and recognises” to end and insert:

“as many in Scotland are suffering as a result of the 55% rise in council tax since the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition came to power; believes that a proposed new system of local income tax would be over-complicated, expensive to collect, would remove accountability and transparency from local government and adversely penalise young working households, and notes that the real problem in Scotland is the high level of council taxes charged, not the tax itself.”

09:56

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): Two issues are up for debate today: the current council tax settlement; and the future of the council tax. Although I agree with the SNP on the former, I disagree with them on the latter.

Having sat on the Finance Committee for the past few months, I have come to believe that the situation with respect to council funding is clear. Councils are being asked to do more, but with an almost standstill grant. As David Davidson said, the Finance Committee report was agreed to by the entire committee, even with its Executive majority.

Paragraph 83 of the Finance Committee's report says:

“The Executive is still assuming that this 2.1% growth in spending can be funded through a 0.5% growth in AEF; a 2.5% growth in council tax ... and £58.5m of efficiency savings”.

As the committee goes on to point out in paragraph 85, a total funding shortfall of £84.9 million remains.

In his speech, George Lyon argued that some of the £58.5 million in efficiency savings could—I think that that was the word he used—come back to the local authorities. Again, paragraph 85 of the report shows the additional aggregate external finance at only £38.7 million. Given that the Executive's projected total efficiency savings are £58.5 million, I can see why the minister uses the word "could". There is no way that the total efficiency savings can be realised in that way, given that they are greater than the projected 0.5 per cent increase in AEF. According to page 162 of the draft budget, this miserly 0.5 per cent is enough to deliver

"protection for all services already being provided."

George Lyon: The increase in direct support for this coming year is 3.5 per cent. The member seems to misunderstand the financial figures that he has in front of him.

Mark Ballard: I wonder whether the minister has included inflation in that figure. According to the figures in the Finance Committee report, the additional AEF is effectively 0.5 per cent. We are looking at an additional spending provision of £178.1 million.

Mr Swinney: Has Mr Ballard reflected on paragraph 62 of the Finance Committee's report, which says:

"The Executive also reported to the Committee that it could not specify to where the ... savings were reallocated".

What does that tell us about the process in which we are engaged?

Mark Ballard: It tells us that when the minister says "could" he is speculating wildly. The truth is that we are looking at an effective cut for local authorities. There are two ways in which they can deal with that, the first of which is to increase council tax. According to the independent calculations that were presented to the Finance Committee, if all the shortfall were to be passed on in council tax, we could be looking at increases of up to 6.6 per cent. The Finance Committee recognises that that is not what will happen; instead, we will see less substantial increases but real cuts in services.

George Lyon: The member referred earlier to a £84.9 million gap. How did he work out that 6.6 per cent of the £2 billion that was collected in council tax last year comes to that figure? I cannot figure out how he came to it.

Mark Ballard: I rely on the independent evidence that Professor Arthur Midwinter gives to the Finance Committee. He is one of—I think—three people who understand the way in which the Scottish Executive budget works. I defer to Professor Midwinter on the matter. Perhaps the minister would do well to do so, too.

We should not believe for a minute the flim-flam that we are getting from the Executive on efficiency savings. The Finance Committee heard evidence from Aberdeen City Council that the £58.5 million savings that it is already expected to make are greater than its expenditure on back-office staff. In order to achieve the savings, the council will have to make cuts in front-line services. We are talking about greater efficiency savings and greater cuts.

We can guess which services will be cut, particularly when the minister talks about the need to "restrict unnecessary spending". We know that that means soft targets such as community education, youth work and support for voluntary organisations, which are the sectors in which cash is so desperately needed. In the long term, the effect of cuts in those sectors will mean that, instead of investing in that preventive work, the rest of society and the rest of government will have to pay much more to clear up the problems.

I agree with what John Swinney says in his motion: local authorities are being treated very differently to other government departments. I also agree with a lot of Tommy Sheridan's amendment and the problems that have resulted from the forced reliance on public-private partnership schemes. Local authorities have had effectively to mortgage their future spending with multinationals as a result of being tied into 30-year contracts. I also agree with what the SNP says on the short-term way in which the Executive is dealing with this funding crisis. I further agree that, in the longer term, we need to replace the council tax. The question is: what with?

The Scottish Green Party's policy on the issue is well known. We have made representations along these lines to the independent review of local government finance. We favour the replacement of the council tax and business rates with a form of land value taxation. In common with the present system, LVT is a property tax, but one that is based on land values and not on notional banded property values.

I want to take the opportunity to restate some of the advantages of LVT in support of the amendment in my name.

The Presiding Officer: You will have to be brief, Mr Ballard.

Mark Ballard: Briefly, we have heard a lot about the problems caused by the council tax, but we need to recognise that there are problems with income tax. By definition, income tax hits those who are income rich but asset poor, in much the same way as Mr Swinney described the council tax as hitting those on fixed incomes, some of whom will be extremely asset rich. Any income tax

is a tax on working. I think that that is a good thing and that we should see more of it.

Land is an untaxed factor of production that cannot be created or destroyed. Taxing land cannot distort the economy in the way that income tax can do. Too great a dependence on income tax risks placing all our financial eggs in one basket. We need to widen our tax base; not narrow it—

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You should be winding up now, Mr Ballard.

Mark Ballard: I apologise to the member.

The Scottish Executive must support councils properly in the short term, but it must also ensure that it puts in place a sustainable and progressive future for them in the long term. I believe that that would best be done through a single system of land value taxation. That is why I will move the amendment in my name, which keeps the body of the SNP motion on the current crisis and proposes a sustainable solution for local authorities in the long term.

I move amendment S2M-3795.1 to leave out from “local income tax” to end and insert:

“system of land value taxation that recognises that ability to pay is not determined solely by income.”

10:04

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): My amendment to the SNP motion is in a number of parts. I look forward to the SNP member who sums up indicating whether the SNP is willing to accept it. I believe that my amendment does not detract from the SNP motion but adds to it.

Today's debate is about the double whammy that faces local authorities across Scotland. Not only is the Executive imposing greater efficiency savings on local authorities compared with those facing other public service departments, but it wishes to decrease the level of funding for local authorities relative to that for other public service departments. In other words, it is looking for more savings from local authorities, but providing less in real and relative terms for local authorities to provide local government jobs and essential services throughout the country.

That double whammy results in COSLA telling us that there is a £400 million gap between what the Executive believes is capable of being achieved in the local authority sector and what the local authorities say that they can deliver. Even if we accept that there will be marginal adjustments to what COSLA is suggesting, there is absolutely no doubt that there is still a huge funding gap in

relation to what the Executive says about local authorities defending and expanding service provision while keeping council tax rises down to 2.5 per cent. That is complete tommy-rot; it is impossible for local authorities to work that equation.

We are talking about a double whammy not just for local authorities but for Scottish citizens, who are going to experience a reduction in the level of service that they receive. It is not often that I agree with David Davidson, but the fact remains that ordinary people throughout Scotland believe that they are paying more for local services through council tax but are receiving less from those services. That perception is widespread, because it is close to reality.

Scottish citizens face receiving less from council services while paying more for them, with local authorities talking about average increases of 4 to 6 per cent in council tax, adding to the 55 per cent increase that we have had since the Executive was elected.

If the Executive is so accurate and so honest about the funding packages, and if it has been so generous to local authorities, we have to ask ourselves why local authorities have had to increase council tax by 55 per cent since 1999. The reality is that the Executive has demanded more from local government but provided less in real terms.

The problems do not end there. Another section of Scottish citizens is going to suffer—local authority workers themselves. The detail of the settlement shows that the Executive is allowing for 2.2 per cent inflation, despite the fact that the Treasury estimate is of 2.7 per cent inflation. In other words, not only are there going to be fewer services and higher council tax, but local authority workers are going to experience a standstill situation or reductions in their living standards. If the Executive thinks that that is a good deal, it is living on a different planet. The reality is that the money provided to local authorities for the extra responsibilities that the Executive continually imposes on them is inadequate.

The suggestion that local authorities are a mass of inefficient government is simply not true. If we ask what is really inefficient, the answer is that it is the imposition on local authorities of private finance deals that mean that they sometimes pay four or five times more for schools and other facilities than they would if they were allowed to use traditional public procurement methods. It is completely hypocritical for the Executive to talk about efficient government when it imposes inefficient funding mechanisms on local authorities for the delivery of facilities. That has to be addressed.

My colleague Carolyn Leckie will elaborate on another point that we must address. The Executive talks about the need for equal pay restructuring and justice for thousands of workers who have been underpaid for years and who deserve their back pay, yet it is not prepared to dig into its pocket and pay for that restructuring. It talks a good game, but it is not prepared to pay, which is unacceptable. Part of our amendment addresses that situation.

Finally, our amendment keeps the statement in the SNP motion about the need to replace council tax. On 1 February—three weeks from today—every member who believes that it is time to abolish the council tax and replace it with an income-based alternative will have the opportunity to vote for that. Those who refuse to vote for it will be exposed as the political phoney and fraudsters that they are—I look towards the Liberal Democrat benches in particular. I look forward to seeing on 1 February the voting record on the Council Tax Abolition and Service Tax Introduction (Scotland) Bill, which provides for the replacement of the council tax with an income-based alternative. It is open to others to amend it to provide for different forms of collection, but the general principle on which we will vote on 1 February will be the replacement of the council tax with an income-based alternative. I look forward to that debate with relish. We will see who says one thing before elections and does the opposite after them.

10:11

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): I will address most of my remarks to John Swinney's motion, but I want first to address two issues relating to what Mr Sheridan said. First, I note that Mr Sheridan directs his main criticism at the Liberal Democrats and how they will vote on 1 February. That intrigues me. Does it mean that he has a promise from his sister nationalist party, the SNP, that it will support his bill on 1 February? I look forward to clarification on that.

Secondly, Tommy Sheridan is proposing that local authorities should be fully funded to meet the equal pay obligations. I absolutely agree that they should meet those obligations, but the hypocrisy in his position is that his bill proposes to write off outstanding council tax debt owed to local authorities, which would hamper their ability to give equal pay to those low-paid workers. I hope that his comrade, who will speak later, will address that issue.

The SNP motion can be split into three parts: the local government settlement; the efficiency targets; and local income tax, which Mr Swinney touched on for all of a minute and a half at the end of his speech.

I turn first to the local government settlement, which it would be short-sighted of us to consider without first considering what preceded it. Since the Parliament was established in 1999, funding for local government services has risen by £2.6 billion, or 47 per cent. The increase will be £3 billion by the end of the current spending period.

Many of those additional resources have been allocated to specific priorities of the Parliament, which are often shared by local government, and there have been additional payroll costs. However, the recent period of growth in the local government budget represents a substantial increase in the resources available to local government, which I imagine that most local authorities would not have dared to hope for when the Parliament was established in 1999. The other point that should be made is that that level of sustained additional funding has been possible only through the success of the United Kingdom Labour Government in managing the UK economy.

Of course, nobody would expect the sustained level of increase to continue forever. The levels of increase over the next two years are tighter than they have been in previous years. We have to consider the overall settlement in the context of the increased budget in the past six years.

That brings me on to the efficiency savings. It is unreasonable for any large organisation to say that it cannot re-examine the way in which it delivers its services or manufactures its products.

Mr Swinney: If it is acceptable for all organisations to consider the way in which they deliver public services, can the member explain why local authorities have been required to find 3.4 per cent of their expenditure in efficiency savings, yet most Scottish Executive departments have to find less than 1 per cent? Where is the equity in that?

Bristow Muldoon: Mr Swinney's argument has some validity. The Scottish Executive should examine its departments in that regard and I believe that there probably are departments that should be examining their performance in order to reach higher efficiency targets than have been set. However, I am addressing the specific issue of local government efficiency targets, which I do not believe are unreasonable.

As I was saying, every large organisation in the world, whether in the public or the private sector, should continually examine the efficiency with which it delivers the services that it exists to deliver.

It is not the case that local authorities have been left to meet the efficiency targets on their own. The Scottish Executive has been supporting local authorities through the modernising government

fund, which has been in place for many years. Further, as the minister outlined earlier, additional resources are available for local authorities to invest in modernising services through the prudential borrowing regime and many other funding sources.

Brian Adam: Will the member give way?

Bristow Muldoon: No, I wish to make progress.

The further opportunities to deliver services are not all about cuts. There are many ways in which local authorities can enhance the way in which they deliver services and at the same time deliver them more efficiently. For example, in my area, West Lothian Council, in partnership with the national health service in the Lothians, has developed a community health partnership that delivers care services to elderly and disabled people in West Lothian through a joint organisation that provides a better and more efficient service to people who are in receipt of those services. Many such examples exist.

The final issue that I want to deal with is that of the nationalists' local income tax plans. It is illuminating that John Swinney chose to spend so little time on the policy in an 18-minute speech, particularly when, just before he gave up his position as SNP leader, he said:

"The poll tax finished off the Tories and I'm very confident that the council tax will finish off the Labour party."

If the SNP's policy on this issue is as popular as Mr Swinney thinks it is, I do not know why he did not give it prime billing in his speech this morning. However, the reality is that, when the SNP claim popularity for their policy, it is on the basis of their axe the tax campaign, not on the basis of the higher income tax campaign that hides behind it.

It is hardly surprising that the SNP wants no great scrutiny of its local income tax plans, because its policy paper on the issue is a deeply flawed piece of work. First, the plans assume that, in the calculation of the additional income tax that people in Scotland would pay, existing council tax payment would be transferred to local government. However, at the same time, the SNP completely ignores the issue of council tax benefit in its analysis of who would be a winner or a loser in its income tax bands. It is misleading for the policy document to ignore the fact that more than 400,000 households already receive full council tax benefit and, therefore, pay no council tax and that a further 120,000 households pay only partial council tax.

The second part of the SNP's proposals that misleads is the fact that five out of the eight households that are used as examples of those that would gain or lose are in bands D, F or H. Clearly, that is an attempt to show the policy in the

best possible light. However, 64 per cent of Scots live in houses that are in bands A, B and C. If the SNP were honest about the analysis of its policy, it would base its analysis on the real spread of properties that exists in Scotland.

The third flaw in the proposals is that, even by the SNP's estimates, Glasgow would pay the highest income tax rates in the UK. On the SNP's own estimates, the rate would be 4.8 per cent higher than the rate in comparable cities in England. I doubt the SNP's figures—I think that they will be even higher than that—but, even on that basis, we can see that the SNP is proposing a policy that would result in more middle and higher-income earners leaving Glasgow at a time when the city is trying to attract more of them to move to the city.

The SNP's local income tax proposals are deeply flawed. I am not surprised that it does not draw much attention to them and I look forward to the party campaigning with the policy as its number 1 priority in the Scottish Parliament elections, as I am sure that that will result in an even heavier defeat for the party than it has been used to in recent years.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. I point out that I have already had to inform four members that they will not be called, so I will keep members to extremely tight six-minute speeches.

10:19

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): The SNP has begun this year by addressing an issue that is of concern to a great number of people in Scotland: the burden that the council tax places on many people in our society, not least our senior citizens and those on fixed incomes.

We know that the council tax has risen substantially since it was introduced by the Tories. The Conservatives increased it substantially and the Labour Government has increased it even more. The impact of that is that, in all but five local authorities in Scotland, the average council tax band—band D—now exceeds £1,000 a year. If we are honest and can leave the political party trenches for a moment, we all know in our heart of hearts that the burden that that places on a huge number of our citizens is, simply, unfair.

In what I thought was a robust and coherent performance this morning, John Swinney focused on the immediate priority of what we would do about the current local government settlement if we were in Government just now. He identified—using figures that have been approved by the Finance Committee—a method by which we can freeze council tax figures now. That is something

that people such as Bristow Muldoon should give some credence to.

Bristow Muldoon: Will the member give way?

Fergus Ewing: Bristow Muldoon has had his say.

That is what people in Scotland seek from this Parliament and the Scottish Government. More than 10 years ago, Nicky Fairbairn said that Scotland was fortunate not to have a Government. Looking at the performance of the Government that we have, I can begin to understand what he meant.

Margo MacDonald: Will the member give way?

Fergus Ewing: Certainly not.

John Swinney also recognised that, although local authorities are required to make savings of more than 3 per cent, the same requirement does not apply to the Executive. In his response to that point, the minister showed all the poise and assurance of a man overboard floundering in the sea, so I will throw him a lifebelt. Transport Scotland has just been created, which is a new quango. We do not know exactly how many employees it will have but a figure of around 200 has been mentioned—perhaps the minister could give us an accurate figure. Plainly, it is a huge and potentially valuable resource. However, I have a question for the minister. If around 200 or more civil service jobs have been created, how many fewer civil servants will there be in the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department of the Scottish Executive? I safely predict that the minister does not know, although he should do, because he is the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business.

Rather than recognising the reality, which is that the council tax is a huge burden on our senior citizens and those on low and fixed incomes and has increased by 55 per cent, the Executive's amendment talks about the steps that local government can take to "maintain downward pressure". If what we have seen—a 55 per cent increase—is downward pressure, goodness knows what it would be like if there were even higher increases.

I was interested to note that, in response to the crucial question of the £85 million gap that the Finance Committee identified, the minister said that he did not necessarily accept the figure. I think that we deserve better from a minister in response to a considered piece of work by a committee of this Parliament that has received advice from Professor Midwinter, which shows that there is a gap of £85 million. Instead, what does the minister say? Does he say, "Yes, there is a gap," or "No, there is no gap"? No. He says: "It

ain't necessarily so." Ira Gershwin is a good songwriter, but he should not be writing the script for the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business in the Scottish Executive.

When a minister with responsibility for finance comes before this Parliament, he should be able to tell us where the money has gone. It was Deep Throat, in the film, "All the President's Men", who gave Woodward and Bernstein the excellent advice: "Follow the money." We should expect George Lyon to realise that that is advice that it is incumbent on him to take. However, he does not know where the money has gone.

It is awfully sad that we have not heard an acknowledgement that the local income tax policy is a coherent alternative. I know that the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business perhaps supports the local income tax policy, as do his Liberal Democrat colleagues, because they tell us so—and we have to take that at face value. However, it remains to be seen whether the support that the Liberal Democrats give to the local income tax policy is as enthusiastic as the support that they give to their leadership. The good news is that we will not have long to wait. Mr Kennedy may have been unfairly voted off in the first round of the political version of the Anne Robinson show, "The Weakest Link". Perhaps, minister, "You are the weakest link."

10:26

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):

It would take some kind of twisted genius to devise a method of taxation that was worse than the council tax, which is a basically flawed system of taxation. It is people, not houses, who use services.

On average, since the council tax's inception, a staggering 7.5 per cent of council tax has gone uncollected. How can 150,000 houses be lost like that? It is beyond me. That is the equivalent of losing East Kilbride, Cumbernauld and one or two other places. The authorities cannot find their own houses, yet ministers have the temerity to talk about efficient government initiatives. Let us get back to something a bit more democratic than initiatives of that sort. In Scotland, 40 per cent of people bear the burden of paying for council services, while 60 per cent do not contribute one penny towards them.

Many among that 40 per cent are senior citizens. If the load was spread more evenly across the 100 per cent, current senior citizen band F council tax payers would have a payment of £40 a week reduced to £16 a week and the people who are not currently paying tax would be contributing a fair share. That is called basic

democracy. We have been dancing on the head of a financial pin for the past couple of hours and getting nowhere, bandying figures about that half the people in the chamber do not even understand—and that includes some ministers, I might add. The whole basis is totally flawed.

Ministers are reluctant to change the system because at the next election they do not want to offend 60 per cent of the electorate—who might think that they will have to put their hands in their pockets and contribute to local taxation—and they would not wish to do that, whatever else they do. Of course, they could always approach number 10, where they would probably be advised to establish a council tax tsar, as we have tsars for everything in this country nowadays.

I will give an example to illustrate the reality of the situation. A pensioner approached me yesterday to discuss the fact that she had been pursued for non-payment of council tax by South Lanarkshire Council. That was quite right—the council must chase people up. She panicked—she was in a bit of a state. It is not nice for people who have been in the habit of paying all their bills timeously to get threatened with legal action for non-payment of council tax. She checked out her receipts and went to the council's office. It turned out that she owed £8, which she paid immediately. What a victory that was for South Lanarkshire Council's legal department and for the people who chase up council tax payments.

Has no one here ever heard of joined-up government? We have a very efficient method of taxation collection in this country. It is called pay as you earn, and the Inland Revenue does it for us. Bill Aitken is always going on about the fact that 50 per cent of fines imposed in courts are never collected. Why do the courts not just get the PAYE people to adjust the criminals' code number and reimburse the country by the amount of the fine? Why is the very same thing not done with the council tax? If we were to do away with council tax and had a fairer local income tax, we would have a much better system.

It is well documented that 80 per cent of local authority income is centrally funded and that the other 20 per cent comes from council tax. In effect, authorities lose houses all over the place and cannot collect all of the tax. If we went to a system of collection through income tax, and if the whole 100 per cent of council expenditure was centrally funded, the electorate would judge local authorities' accountability not on how they raise their funds but on the efficiency with which they use them.

The accountability argument that is sometimes made can rest on claims like, "Look how low we're keeping the council tax," but let me give members some facts—and they are frightening to see. It is a

fact that, in 1993, a pensioner in a band F house in South Lanarkshire had to pay £782 in council tax, with water charges of £108. It is a fact that, in 2005, the council tax charge for the same house had risen to £1,502. That is a 91.9 per cent increase. It is a fact that the water charges for that house had risen to £502, which is a 363 per cent increase. It is a fact that the combined council tax and water rates over that 12-year period rose from £891 to £2,005, which is an increase of 124 per cent.

I only wish to God that pensions had risen by a commensurate amount. Sadly, pensions have not been increased by anything like that amount. Senior citizens, as well as others on fixed incomes, are continuing to have their living standards eroded. We must have change and we must have democracy. We must get rid of the council tax and adopt a fairer local income tax. Ministers must stop playing at being politicians. They need to look after the people. They should look after the elderly, and they should get their act together.

10:32

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): This is an annual event in the Scottish Parliament. We discuss the local government settlement, and it is as predictable as the Burns dinner in January or February every year. The hypocrisy from the SNP is also pretty predictable. I remind SNP members that if they introduced a local income tax, we would not have these debates in future, because the decisions would be taken centrally and local government would not be involved in them. We would not hear from COSLA or council leaders about the local government settlement, because the Parliament would decide the local income tax. SNP members might seek to portray themselves as representing councils throughout Scotland, but I remind them that they would not represent them but would take the decisions under the SNP's proposals.

I will respond to the points that David Davidson made about the man in the street. In the spirit of David Cameron's new style, will David Davidson ask him to apologise to the man in the street in Glasgow for the council tax increases that occurred during the Tory years? I remind him that, in 1996-97, there was a 21.9 per cent increase. Will he apologise for the increase in 1998-99 of 9.3 per cent?

I congratulate my new colleague, Charlie Gordon, on what he delivered for Glasgow in 2000. After the Scottish Parliament was formed, there was a 0 per cent increase in council tax. In every year following that, there have been only inflationary increases.

Alasdair Morgan: I am a bit puzzled by the member's reference to a local income tax. I presume that he was not referring to the socialists' service tax. The whole point about a local income tax is that the rate is set locally, not nationally.

Paul Martin: From looking on the SNP's website for details about the process for setting the local income tax, I think that much work has to be done. I give Tommy Sheridan credit for making his proposal to Parliament and allowing us to interrogate it. That cannot be said of the SNP's proposal, which was set out only in a manifesto. If the SNP introduces a bill, we will scrutinise its proposals for collecting a local income tax.

The Parliament has on many occasions shown great pity for those who live in deprived areas. We talk about league tables. Our civil servants are obsessed with presenting in glossy documents and on websites the terrible statistics on what faces Glasgow. We spend a lifetime on providing league tables that show the educational attainment challenges that face Glasgow and we talk about the health statistics that face Glasgow and many other local authority areas. However, we do not talk about how the local government settlement should attack those deprivation figures, so I call on COSLA's leader, who I know is considering the matter, to examine the proposals that Charlie Gordon made to COSLA in his former capacity with Glasgow City Council and the case that other local authorities have made for deprivation figures to be taken into account in the allocation of local government funding. The challenges that face not only Glasgow City Council, but other local authorities, should be considered at the same time.

Of course, tackling deprivation costs money. If we are serious about tackling educational attainment figures in Glasgow that are not at the levels that they should be, we need money. That is why I am willing to consider whether efficiency savings, if they can be recovered, should be redirected to deal with deprivation. We might not allocate such funds through the local government settlement, but we might be able to tackle deprivation in other ways by using the budget that is available to the Scottish Executive. I would commend the Executive if it used the efficiency savings from local government to tackle deprivation in other ways. We talk about siphoning off funds, but I would commend the Executive for redirecting funds to tackle deprivation. I would also commend local government leaders throughout Scotland if they were willing to make efficiency savings to tackle deprivation.

Tommy Sheridan's amendment refers to "uneconomic public private partnership deals".

We talk about the man in the street, whom David Davidson mentioned. All five secondary schools in my constituency have been rebuilt or refurbished under PPP schemes. Not one teacher, constituent or pupil has complained about a public-private partnership. Every head teacher involved in a partnership has commended the programme. Time will tell whether the partnerships have been economic, but the man in the street supports the proposals and commends us for the improvements in schools as a result of public-private partnerships.

10:38

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): There is a "Groundhog Day" inevitability to debates such as today's, but in one respect the debate has been different, because it is unprecedented in the Parliament's history for a committee and a minister to be at such variance, not on policy—that is to be accepted and expected—but on the basic facts and the basic arithmetic.

Having gone into considerable detail, the Finance Committee estimates an £84.9 million shortfall in the proposed funding for local government expenditure. I listened to George Lyon—I accept that the fault is not his, as he came on to the park somewhat late—and I found his arguments less than convincing. However, I give him credit for at least turning up. Three Labour members of the Finance Committee—Des McNulty, Wendy Alexander and Frank McAveety, all of whom we know are assiduous members—have not turned up. The clear reason for that is that they are not prepared to attempt to explain away the situation. Andrew Arbuckle is present and I look forward to hearing whether he helps George Lyon out of a hole that I admit is not of his making.

Mark Ballard *rose—*

Bill Aitken: I will give way after pursuing my point.

We have three viewpoints: what the First Minister has said, what the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform has said and what George Lyon has said. However, what cannot be gainsaid is the fact that the minister's figures are completely wrong—for example, he says that inflation is 2.2 per cent, but it is 2.7 per cent. The figure of £84.9 million simply cannot be disputed.

I give way to Mr Ballard.

George Lyon: The point in question—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, it is Mark Ballard who has been called.

Mark Ballard: Is Bill Aitken aware that, in addition to the Finance Committee report that the

additional AEF is 0.5 per cent in real terms, the minister contradicts page 5 of the SPICe briefing, which says that the change in revenue support grant is 0.6 per cent? The minister contradicts not just the Finance Committee and the members who are present, but SPICe.

Bill Aitken: The minister is in splendid and insecure isolation. The suggestion is that everybody but our George is out of step, but we are not swallowing that.

George Lyon: I have made two points. First, I said to Mr Ballard that the increase was 3.2 per cent in cash terms; I accept that it is 0.5 per cent in real terms. Secondly, I questioned the assumptions that the committee used to calculate the £84.9 million gap. We do not recognise the committee's figure of 6.6 per cent to fill that gap and we do not understand how that calculation can be made when £2.2 billion is collected in council tax.

Bill Aitken: The minister's problem is that he does not recognise economic figures when he sees them—that has been behind the dispute this morning.

The SNP's proposal is unacceptable. Do SNP members want an average family of, for example, one of the invisible police officers and a nurse, who respectively earn £27,191 and £22,038 and who live in a band D house, to pay £428 extra a year? That is basically what the SNP is saying. Its argument in favour of its proposal is one of fairness. I listened with interest to John Swinburne, but he and the SNP fail to recognise that a high proportion of households—and 40 per cent of pensioner households—receive council tax benefit. The pensioner take-up of that benefit would be much higher if the Labour Government had not made the forms that must be completed more or less incomprehensible; people require a Philadelphia lawyer's skills to understand them.

John Swinburne: That would make the number of people who do not pay council tax much higher than the 60 per cent that I talked about. The number who pay, which is 40 per cent, would be lower, and more freeloading on those who pay would occur.

Bill Aitken: Pensioners who are not in acute poverty would certainly be very much worse off.

It is interesting that Fergus Ewing has left the chamber. If the SNP's proposal were implemented, what would be the result of the lost income from second homes in the Highlands? That has not been apparent. What would be the impact on affordable housing? People would be unable to afford homes.

I must refer to a point that Paul Martin made. David Cameron has no intention of apologising for

the fact that, in their last years in office, Paul Martin's colleagues in Strathclyde Regional Council budgeted for a deficit. Neither David Cameron nor any Conservative MSP requires to apologise for the fact that Glasgow City Council implemented cash limits that Gordon Brown set in the Labour Government's first two years.

Frankly, the SNP's proposal is not workable. I have no doubt that it will be debated again.

10:44

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): As the only member with current experience of local government, I know that councils are undergoing a major exercise to try to get the two ends of the 2006-07 budget to meet. The minister is correct to state that record levels of funding have gone into local government in the past six years. The year-on-year increase even in this year—in which there are issues about how councils will cope—is 3.2 per cent. It is important to point out that if the SNP's proposals were agreed to, there would be a 4.2 per cent rise in funding for local councils. So much for claims of SNP financial prudence.

Some people in local government and some members believe that councils were harshly dealt with in this year's Executive settlement, but many in the private sector would be quite happy with an above-inflation settlement. The next 24 months in local government will be extremely challenging. In that period, deals will be struck on equal pay so that years of inequality are cancelled out, and millions of pounds will be added to the expenditure side of local authority budgets.

We expect local authorities to come up with single-status agreements, which would not only insert long-needed fairness into employment, but would add big pressures on councils' budgets. The business cliché that such financial pressures will help to produce innovative solutions is appropriate. I know many people who work in local government who would like to be free of management shackles that may have been appropriate in the early years of the previous century.

In my council area, financial controls are tight and council tax collection rates are in the top bracket. Auditors have rightly praised Fife Council's financial control. However, there can still be improvement in some areas. We have, for example, little positive management of our physical assets. Last year, our balance sheet showed surplus assets of £30 million. Many local authorities face such situations.

I agree with five words of Tommy Sheridan's amendment. Too much has been spent on

"the use of expensive consultants".

That is a problem for a number of local authorities. With a tightening economic situation, it is likely that the exercise that is currently being carried out to set council tax levels will provide long-term benefits only if it introduces better and tighter management.

The SNP's proposals are wrong on a number of counts. Does the SNP mean to spread the additional cash among all local authorities? Some local authorities' plans for the coming year are now well progressed. If they receive additional cash now, should they revert to the status quo and divert themselves away from the radical thinking that now goes on in local authorities?

Proposals have been made in my area that could lead to different structures for some services and to questioning whether some inherited parts of council work are still appropriate and still needed in the first decade of the 21st century. Front-line services need not be affected, but radical changes behind the scenes are required.

Back in December, I spoke to a prominent member of an SNP council on the east coast. He admitted to me that the settlement was challenging and was causing major rethinks in his authority, but he believed that aims could be achieved without front-line services being affected. Where does that leave the SNP's motion?

Much of the pressure in today's debate has been directed at central Government's contribution to local authorities' funding.

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): Will the member taken an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Any intervention should be brief because time is tight. The member is in his final minute.

Mr Welsh: I have never heard anybody more out of touch with local government than the member is. Any cash that is freed up will be diverted to save core services. That was the only reason for the council tax being increased. From personal experience in one of the most efficient councils, I know—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You were supposed to make your intervention brief, Mr Welsh.

Mr Arbuckle: Andrew Welsh claims proximity to local government, but I am still in local government and know what is happening.

In my final minute, I was going to point out that the council tax system is wrong and that it is time to consider a better local taxation system. In

particular, the Liberal Democrats await the findings of the Burt committee, which I am sure will propose that a local income tax would meet most of the requirements for local taxation—namely, that such taxation should be fair and based on the ability to pay, and that there should be accountability and transparency. Therefore, we may look forward to a better system in the future. I am sure that the SNP will agree that the introduction of a local income tax would remove many of the current problems. I also hoped that it would have converted the Greens to its local income tax ideas after their festive love-in.

When he put forward his tax proposals, Tommy Sheridan questioned the Liberal Democrats' position.

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

Mr Arbuckle: I want to respond to what Tommy Sheridan said. He went over the time that he was allowed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would like you to finish now.

Mr Arbuckle: I simply point out that Tommy Sheridan's proposed tax would involve no local accountability and would cost councils many millions of pounds.

10:50

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I will confine my remarks to the unfairness of the council tax system and the benefits of a local income tax. What I will say follows on from what the member who spoke prior to me said.

It is trite but true to say that taxation should be fair and collectable, but council tax fails on both principles. Council tax is difficult to collect and is not based on the ability to pay. The elderly and the vulnerable—those on low pay—are most disadvantaged by the system. That is not only my view but the view of pensioners throughout Scotland and the view of Citizens Advice Scotland, which has said:

"Scotland's system of local government taxation causes significant hardship."

It has pointed out that bureaux in Scotland dealt with 14,000 new cases relating to council tax benefit last year and that a further 3,500 cases concerned council tax debt. We are talking about very vulnerable people.

As has been said, council tax has risen by 55 per cent since 1997. As John Swinburne rightly said, pensions have not kept pace with the increases. If we consider also rising fuel costs—people cannot restrict such costs, unless they sit in cold homes—we see that the vulnerable and

poor are being squeezed. Although it is difficult for us to do anything about fuel costs, there is something that we can do: we can substitute a local income tax for the unjust council tax.

The council tax benefit system is a nightmare. Forget the complexities of the pension tax credit system, which I remember demonstrating in the chamber when I brought in a 68-page form and asked somebody to complete it during the debate. Doing so was impossible. The council tax benefit system is equally complex. I have looked at the Help the Aged website, which has pages on collecting council tax benefits. The website mentions the alternative maximum council tax benefit, which I had not even heard of. Working examples are given.

There are administration costs and costs in human lives. In fact, 48 per cent of pensioners who are entitled to claim council tax benefit do not claim it. One in four of those on low incomes does not claim it because the system is so nightmarish.

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I agree that the council tax benefit system is overbureaucratic and difficult, but will the SNP tell us how it would fill the gap that would be left by the entire removal of that system from the economy with the introduction of a local income tax?

Christine Grahame: We would simply not need such a system because people would pay for their local services according to their ability to pay. Such a system would be clean and clear. Everybody would understand it. Nobody likes paying tax, but people understand income tax. Twelve of the countries in the European Union have a local income tax system. Such a system is already being used—there are models throughout Europe. I am thankful that the Liberal Democrats support such a reasonable system, which everybody understands. The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business would support such a system.

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson) rose—

Christine Grahame: I want to make progress. I will let the minister in later if I have enough time to do so.

Other members have dealt with the figures, but what is happening on the ground? We all know what is happening. There are case studies in members' in-trays. There are cuts in the laudable care in the community programme. There are no social workers or district nurses to go out and there is no support. Aids and adaptations are delayed because there is no local authority funding to provide them. The knock-on effect is that people stay in hospital. They are assessed for discharge but cannot come out of hospital

because the support system does not exist because there is no money for it. They are institutionalised, they decline and they are reassessed. There is a mess that need not exist and that would not exist if there was appropriate funding. Members have laudable principles relating to care in the community and to residential homes for people who need to be fully supported, but there is not enough money for such homes and they are therefore closing.

I will take a simple example from the Borders: shopping. People used to have somebody to take them out to do their shopping once a week or to get their shopping for them, but such services have been cut in order to save peanuts. That is what local authorities are doing. They are impinging on people's human dignity and independence at a basic level.

There is not even enough funding to allow schools to meet the presumption that children with special needs will be educated in mainstream schooling. Small rural schools are closing in order to save money and so that the properties can be sold off.

Those are the cases in my in-tray. The elderly, people on low incomes and the disadvantaged, who have to pay council tax although they cannot afford to do so, are the very people whose services are being cut. They are also the very people who cannot afford to pay for their fuel and are sitting in cold homes. Yet the deputy minister stands there and defends the council tax system. He defends cuts at the basic level. He should be ashamed of himself, but I have a feeling that he will not be in the job for much longer.

10:55

Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): To a greater or lesser extent, each of the Opposition parties in the debate claims that it wants enough money for local councils, partially or wholly funded by a new and more popular type of local taxation. I have news for them: there is never enough money and people never like paying taxes. Those are just two of the lessons that I have learned during years of trying to make sense of the byzantine complexity of local government finance.

For me, the learning curve has been steep and long. Alas, like some here I could mention, I cannot claim to have run away from the circus as a boy to join a firm of chartered accountants. On being elected to Strathclyde Regional Council in 1987, I found finance dry and boring. I found service issues such as transport and education to be sexier. When I became Strathclyde's transport convener in 1994, it was quite a shock to have to fight to retain my £0.5 billion budget in a tough,

competitive, corporate budget round. The first lesson that I learned was that all services, sexy or otherwise, have to be paid for from a balanced budget.

However, I suspect that most politicians do not like to talk about finance. Many do not like to think about it and too many still do not understand it. I know that I did not feel confident in 1997 as deputy leader of Glasgow City Council, when my leader, Frank McAveety, asked me to take control of Glasgow's £2 billion budget. I sent for the director of finance—the legendary Jimmy Andrews, who gave 50 years of service to Glasgow. I pointed at a pile of budget papers on my desk that was too heavy to lift and I asked a technical question: "Jimmy, what's the answer to this dead hard sum?" "What answer would you like, councillor?" he replied. I felt a great weight lift from my shoulders. I was not alone. Budgeting was not a science, but an art. That was another lesson learned.

Years ago in the United States of America, a persistent bank robber was serving his last and longest jail term when he was visited by a young sociologist—I see that Des McNulty has left, which is a pity because he is a sociologist—for a research interview. The first question was, "Why do you rob banks?" The answer came, "Because that is where the money is."

Behind such obscure jargon as aggregate external finance and revenue support grant, it is all about money. That is a fact for me and every other member, for councils, for the Executive and for the Government. If we had more money, we could do more things with it. If the money is under the control of elected councillors, they are directly accountable to their electorate for the services they specify and the taxes that they levy.

John Swinney's motion calls for the national taxpayers of Scotland to give an extra £93.2 million to local councils on the condition that there is a real-terms freeze in council tax. Let us leave to one side the plain fact that to the man on the Sauchiehall Street omnibus, a council tax freeze means a zero increase, which the SNP's obfuscation would not deliver. Let us explore the SNP's condition or, as it is called in the jargon, ring fencing. Imposing that condition is wrong in practice because it removes the choices that having more money could bring to councils. It is also wrong in principle because it usurps the role of elected councillors. Perhaps John Swinney is a centraliser by inclination; it is a species that is represented in every part of the chamber after all. If so, I wonder what he would do if councillors used the cash for other things and ignored his condition. Would he make the cap fit, so to speak?

In 1996, the Tories' botched reorganisation of local government removed £400 million from

Scotland and £50 million from Glasgow. In the three years after that, Glasgow's council tax rose by 50.5 per cent but, in the seven subsequent budgets, there were no above-inflation increases. Glasgow's gross tax increase in the past five years has been 10.9 per cent against a Scottish average of 23.5 per cent.

The SNP has a brass neck today because it has resisted every one of Glasgow's attempts to reform the local finance system.

Time is short in the debate, so this speech will have to be foreshortened. Obviously, the Burt committee has its work cut out. We need reform not abolition of the council tax. Also, if we reform the grant system, we had better remember that it is a zero-sum game and there will be winners and losers. Burt and his colleagues have much straining to do; let us hope that their straining produces more than a mouse.

11:00

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): We have certainly heard a lot of talk about efficiency today. The people to whom we should look for lessons on being efficient are local authority workers, who go above and beyond every single day. They certainly work beyond the salaries that they receive. If we need to learn any lessons on efficiency, we should look to them; the Government does not make it easy for them.

George Lyon talks about efficiency but, as Fergus Ewing pointed out, he cannot even produce the figures to tell us where the money has gone that local authorities have saved through those efficiencies. Paul Martin lectures us about efficiency, but he sticks up for the private finance initiative, which is the most inefficient way on the planet of financing anything. It is not PFI or public-private partnership—or whatever euphemism we want to use—that people support. People support schools, but they do not support the long-term consequences for future generations and the cuts in services that PPP and PFI indubitably lead to.

I will concentrate on equal pay. The Deputy Minister for Communities, Johann Lamont, has described the failure of employers to implement equal pay as inefficient. That means that the local government finance settlement is inefficient and the Executive's response to resolving the problem of equal pay is inefficient. This is a moral question not just a financial one. There should be no need for any choices to have to be made about women's right to equal pay, which was long fought for and has been enshrined in legislation for almost 40 years. There should not be a choice between jobs and services and the cutting or freezing of council tax. That is an immoral choice that is being forced on councils by the Executive's

failure to put its money where its mouth is. It talks about equal pay, but it does not deliver the money.

That is why we have to consider the whole system of local authority taxation and why we need the Executive to look at the legacy of the failure to implement equal pay. The Executive is quite happy to set aside a slush fund, which is exactly what is sitting there in Westminster. It talks about releasing some of that money in 2007 and 2008. Could that be anything to do with a Scottish Parliament election in 2007? That is a cynical manipulation of money when the consequences of the failure to implement equal pay are hitting our local authorities and communities now. This is not an abstract discussion.

At the moment, Glasgow City Council is consulting on redundancies and cuts in core services that make a difference to people's lives. Falkirk Council is considering charging for special uplift for refuse collection and it is preparing to cut emergency home care. The cuts in Glasgow involve the closure of at least two children's homes and a home for the elderly, cuts to home support services as well as swingeing cuts in the education budget. This is not abstract; it is real and it is happening now. The Executive should hang its head in shame because it is prepared to save up money for an election and put political expediency ahead of saving services and jobs and delivering on equal pay.

We should look at the Executive's commitment to equal pay. I believe that Malcolm Chisholm, the Minister for Communities, is committed to achieving equal pay. However, the £150,000 that has been spent on the close the gap initiative between 2001 and 2005 is absolutely nothing—it is a spit in the puddle in comparison with the money that is needed to deliver equal pay and to compensate women for subsidising public services for years through their low pay. It is estimated that it may cost up to £700 million to plug the gap of the pay that women have not received. That is not silly money and this is not an abstract discussion—it is very real.

Is the Executive prepared to say to local authorities that it will back them up? It says that it is prepared to meet local authorities to discuss the issue. It is ignorant of the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business—the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform is not even here—to carry on a discussion when I am putting direct questions to him, to which I hope he will be able to respond in his speech. The deputy minister says that he will consider approaches from COSLA, but how much money will be made available? Will he force local authorities to choose between the principle of equal pay, jobs and services and the level of council tax? Why does he not act now, before

redundancies and cuts in service plans by Glasgow City Council, for example, proceed? It is right that he should do so. Why does he not put what is right ahead of what he considers to be in his political interest? Is it not the case that the deputy minister is happy with the perks of achieving ministerial status but is not prepared to take responsibility or to put his money where his mouth is in order to achieve equal pay?

I want to refer to the SNP motion, because this is a serious discussion. It is estimated that £700 million will be needed to achieve justice for the underpayment of women over many years. If they take equal pay claims to employment tribunals—which they are entitled to do—their cases are almost 100 per cent watertight. Would the SNP fund a settlement? How does the SNP propose that equal pay be paid for and delivered? The motion refers only to the Finance Committee's recommendations for plugging the gap, which do not plug the gap on equal pay. Would the SNP deliver equal pay?

I ask members to support our amendment. Not to support it is to agree with and to perpetuate inequality for women.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

We are considerably behind the clock. I ask members to keep within the time limits.

11:07

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Mark Ballard's opening speech reflected on the dual nature of the debate. There is a debate about the current settlement and the circumstances in which local government finds itself. There is also a debate about the longer-term future of local government finance.

I will try to address my remarks to both crucial issues. I begin by acknowledging the impressive performance of John Swinney in his opening speech, in which he urged the Executive to seize the opportunity to address both issues. Not only did he highlight the current situation and the possibility of substantial council tax increases in the short term, but he argued clearly and strongly for replacement of the council tax. Mr Swinney's exchange with George Lyon was an absolute joy to behold. Some observers may have been taken aback by some of Mr Lyon's attempts at verbal gymnastics, even if he wobbled off the mat once or twice, but Mr Swinney cut through that and exposed clearly the inadequacy of the list of could-haves and might-have-beens that we heard.

As a stranger to finance debates in the chamber, I am happy to admit freely that the blizzard of statistics one way and the other holds little attraction for me. However, there have been moments of clarity between those exchanges. It

seems clear that, over recent years, more resources have been made available to local authorities, but that those have not been sufficient to take account of the dramatic rise in the number of duties and the increased workload that we are placing on local authorities. They are also not enough to prevent the dramatic rises in council tax that many members anticipate.

David Davidson's remarks were largely a defence of the council tax system, which he would like to continue, albeit with a few tweaks. However, many members have addressed the substantial injustice that is associated with the existing system. Tommy Sheridan spoke about the constraints on local authorities—not only the new duties that they must carry out but the pressure to make cuts and efficiency savings, to restrain council tax and to use systems such as the dire PPP funding arrangements. I have no doubt that, in the long run, PPP will be judged a wildly expensive folly. It is very sad that the Executive remains wedded to it.

Fergus Ewing's contribution was entertaining. He quoted from a range of sources such as Ira Gershwin, Deep Throat and Anne Robinson. However, he used his quotes from Mr Lyon most effectively. He made it clear, as Mr Swinney did, that a could-have-been—even a should-have-been—is not enough to satisfy us that money saved through efficiency savings has been available to local authority budgets and has been spent on more and better services.

Bristow Muldoon devoted many of his remarks to the virtues of efficiency. On one level, I agree with his repeated assertion that there is no organisation in the world that cannot improve what it does and the way in which it does that by becoming more efficient and saving money. However, he acknowledged implicitly that the reality will involve some cuts in services. When he said that efficiency saving is not all about cuts, he sounded a little defensive.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member get round to commenting on his colleague's amendment and Green party policy? If he does so, will he be able to tell the chamber whether some of the poorest people in my constituency—tenant farmers in the valleys, who would be penalised by a system of land value taxation—would be excluded from that system or whether they would be taxed on both their properties and the land on which they work?

Patrick Harvie: I do not have time to provide a full explanation, but I will come on to Mark Ballard's speech and LVT in a moment.

Andrew Arbuckle suggested that the dialogue between the SNP and the Greens—which at this stage I would call enjoyable flirting rather than a full-blown “love-in”—might have led to our

adopting the SNP's policy, but I draw his attention to Alex Neil's very favourable remarks on LVT in the chamber yesterday. I also draw Andrew Arbuckle's attention to his colleague Donald Gorrie's recent pamphlet on planning, which endorsed LVT. I suggest that the marriage bed of Labour and the Liberal Democrats may be experiencing something of a seven-year itch and that Andrew Arbuckle should not throw around terms such as “love-in” at this point.

Finally, I turn to Mark Ballard's speech. There are good reasons for continuing to tax wealth, not just income. Land cannot be taken abroad and land value tax cannot be avoided. However, there are mechanisms that we can introduce to ensure that that happens in a socially just way that does not impose unfair burdens on those who are least able to pay. I encourage Andrew Arbuckle to speak to the many Liberal Democrats who still accept that position.

11:13

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): A few weeks ago, I was discussing the issue of the council tax with a pensioners group in my constituency. As I expected, clear problems with the current system were highlighted. However, what amazed me was one of the answers that I received when I asked what members of the group thought should be done to address those problems and what better system could be introduced to replace the council tax. One pensioner proclaimed loudly that he favoured the poll tax. I was stunned by that and asked him why. He said that he favoured the poll tax because it had been abolished.

We would all like to pay our taxes with a smile but, unfortunately, we have to pay them with cash. No one likes to pay taxes, but everyone knows that they are a necessary evil. For that reason, politicians should never attempt to con the public into believing that they have a simple solution to the problems of taxation. Crude slogans such as “axe the tax” merely hide the reality of what is proposed—that one unpopular system should be replaced with another. It ill behoves the Scottish Socialist Party to lecture anyone on coming up with money for local authorities to fund equal pay legislation. SSP members are the people who said, “Don't pay your taxes. Don't give local authorities the money that they need to meet their expenses.” The SSP created a culture of non-payment that has produced a black hole of £1.2 billion, which would easily meet the bills for which those members ask.

Tommy Sheridan: From the SSP point of view, the non-payment of poll tax was 100 per cent correct. Does the member agree that overpaid politicians such as he and I should pay more for

local services so that low-paid workers and pensioners pay less?

Michael McMahon: Tommy Sheridan is wrong on the first point and right on the second.

The SNP has said nothing this morning about having a coherent solution for local government taxation, although it evidently admires the problem. SNP members spent little time attempting to outline tax reform and they have not suggested a single coherent proposal for spending reform.

No one in the debate has attempted to hide the fact that there are concerns about local government finance. However, it is not enough for SNP members to say that more money should be found without saying where it would come from; to say that efficiency savings are good things without offering an incentive to produce them; or to say that local income tax should replace the council tax without explaining why they would turn a loophole into a noose.

According to its own figures, the SNP proposals are to increase income tax by 4.3p in the pound. I doubt whether that would be the true level of increase because of the increased bureaucracy involved and I have no doubt that its proposals would hit ordinary working families the hardest. Will SNP members tell ordinary working people what the true cost would be? In the 18-minute speech that Mr Swinney made, he spent less than one minute speaking about that. If his party makes a proposal of such magnitude, that is not good enough.

Why does Mr Swinney not tell double-income families that they would be the biggest losers? Why does he not tell nurses in training and students who supplement their income that they would lose out if they went over the threshold? Why does he not tell single people living alone that they would lose their current discount?

The fact is that the proposed local income tax would be more complex and expensive to collect than the current council tax and it would be less stable than property-based tax because the yield from income tax is less predictable. Income tax is paid by only about 60 per cent of people, so almost one third of adults would make no direct payment towards the cost of local services.

The SNP and others do not want to axe the tax; they want to extend the tax and introduce punitive levels of local income tax. Far from offering tax cuts, the net effect of an income-related change is that those on average incomes would pay more. Two individuals who earn average incomes would be unaffected but, if they lived together, their combined income would be well above the threshold laid down by the SNP, and indeed that proposed by the Liberals. Therefore, it is true to

say that hard-working families would pay more under that scheme.

What about the SNP's proposed freeze on council tax? That would result in £89 million of lost income for local authorities this year alone. Continuing that freeze would cost a further £141 million and £196 million respectively in the following two years, totalling £426 million over the three years of the spending review period without any commitment from the SNP that it would deliver on services. Who would cover that shortfall, or does the SNP even realise that it is arguing for cuts in services elsewhere? We are left to assume that a freeze on council tax would shift the burden of funding local services from council tax payers to general taxpayers to cover that shortfall. The Executive would have to cover the shortfall and that would mean cuts to health, education and transport. It does not matter how the SNP dresses it up, the money has to be taken from somewhere to be given to local authorities.

The council tax can be redesigned to be fairer and more representative. We need to and can have a fairer council tax banding system that is more representative of house values in Scotland and we need to extend the range of upper council tax bands in particular.

The SNP's proposals would do nothing for local authorities. They would do nothing to aid the drive for efficiency and they would mislead taxpayers about the way forward. For those reasons, they do not deserve the support of the Parliament today.

11:19

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): We have heard many interesting points today. We should all bear in mind the comments from many Labour members about the unpopularity of any system of local government finance.

As we have heard, the level of council tax in Scotland has increased by 55 per cent since 1997. However, that masks the huge range in increases throughout the country and many areas have suffered much more significant increases than the headline figure would suggest.

The problem is the level of council tax, which is a huge concern to people throughout the country, and there is no sign of improvement. The SNP motion talks about a "real-terms freeze". That would only contain the problem, not solve it, yet that proposal is being portrayed as ambitious. We need to be realistic and to get a grip on the overall level of council tax.

Ministers cannot pretend that the problem has nothing to do with them. As long as the Executive provides more than 80 per cent of councils'

finances, it will have a huge impact on the level of council tax that is set.

The Executive amendment talks about

“record levels of finance provided to local government”.

That is correct. However, to match the record levels of finance and council tax, we also have record levels of spending. That the Executive has increased its absolute level of funding is almost irrelevant, because of the additional commitments that are being loaded on to councils. Unless the Executive can tell us how much those burdens are for each council we will not have proper accountability. Council tax payers in individual areas do not know whether council tax rises are due to inefficient councils, the Executive squeezing councils or because new services are provided or mandated. Knowing that is crucial.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member clarify whether it is the position of the Conservatives that overall public spending in Scotland should be reduced in total? That is what every Conservative spokesman says when they stand up in this chamber. If that is the case, there would be a reduction in both central and local services.

Derek Brownlee: I notice that the member did not refer to the reduction in Executive support for the supporting people fund, which hits local councils, including that in his constituency. We will address the level of proposed public spending in Scotland during the election, as will all parties, including the member's own.

There is nothing inherently wrong with councils being forced to provide services by the Executive, if they are fully resourced. However, local accountability is an important concern. We have to be clear about the role of local government and whether people expect it to be merely the local agent of the Executive, or to provide a genuinely local service.

John Swinney made the valid point that we should be wary of placing too much weight on either the Executive's or COSLA's figures for local government. Unsurprisingly, he commended the Finance Committee's report. Unsurprisingly, as a fellow member of that committee, I agree with that.

The minister said that he does not necessarily accept the figures in the Finance Committee's report. The £85 million shortfall is based on only four figures in the table in paragraph 85 of the report. Perhaps the minister will tell us which of the figures he does not accept? There are only four of them that he has to get his head round. Does he not accept the Executive's figure of £178 million for new spending? Does he not accept the Executive's figure of £38.7 million for aggregate external finance? Does he not accept the Executive's figure for efficiency savings or its

figure for inflation? If he accepts all those, he cannot possibly dispute the Finance Committee's report. Perhaps he will tell us. Or Mr Swinney will tell us.

Mr Swinney: In the absence of an intervention from the minister to correct Mr Brownlee—I have no wish to correct him—I will answer one of the minister's earlier questions. He could not understand how we calculated that a 6.6 per cent increase in council tax was required. If we add £84.9 million to the £52 million that the Government expects to raise from a 2.5 per cent increase in council tax, Mr Brownlee will not be surprised to realise that that total equates to 6.6 per cent.

Derek Brownlee: And he is not even a deputy minister. I thank Mr Swinney for his explanation.

The minister seemed to suggest that if councils were feeling under pressure they should borrow more money or raid their reserves. Perhaps he will tell us the appropriate share of council spending that that reserve should form for every council. Perhaps he will give us some guidance on what his proposals might be to mandate an adequate level of reserve, because that is another vital part of the financial settlement.

I am sure that everyone here welcomes efficiency in local government. The minister talks about improving collection rates for the council tax, and those rates could indeed be improved, but the pattern is not the same in all council areas. To assume that all councils can make the same improvement would be naive; some councils have a lot more scope for improvement than others—and we are all aware of the councils that are performing poorly.

We have heard about some alternatives to the council tax but we will not be supporting the SNP on local income tax. That will come as no great surprise to anyone. We have real concerns about the burdens that a local income tax could place not only on taxpayers but on employers. We will not support that, although we support much of what Mr Swinney said.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call George Lyon to close for the Executive. Minister, I can give you only six minutes.

11:25

George Lyon: We have had an extensive debate with informed and considered speeches on this important subject. I do not doubt that there are concerns on all sides of the chamber about the level of funding that is available to local government. We want excellence in our public services and, to achieve that, we have invested record amounts in local government to ensure that

we can deliver excellent services throughout Scotland. We remain committed to further improvements in public services delivered by local government.

Local government is now spending almost £17 billion each year and, by the end of the current spending review period in 2007-08, core funding from the Executive will have increased by more than £3 billion. That is up by almost 55 per cent on the figure for 1999-2000. There can be no doubt that local government has experienced an unprecedented rise in funding since this devolved Government came to power in 1999. As Mr Swinney pointed out, that is in stark contrast to the year-on-year cuts that local government experienced in the 1990s under the Tory Government. We want to ensure that local government spends its resources to greatest effect. That aim underlies our best-value reforms and our efficient government programme, as well as the further reforms that we are developing to modernise the public sector as a whole.

Some have argued that local government is being asked to make a disproportionate contribution to our efficient government programme. However, although local government accounts for more than a third of the total Scottish Executive spend, it has been asked to make less than a quarter of our efficiency savings. Local government is not only on track to meet our targets for this year but is likely to go substantially beyond them—as is highlighted in the report from the local government improvement service. That report is endorsed by the Institute of Public Finance and it uses statistical methods to provide a robust estimate of total efficiency savings. That is very important.

Mr Swinney: I notice that the report from the local government improvement service is not endorsed by Audit Scotland, which is the statutory body with responsibility for guaranteeing these points. On further reading of the executive summary this morning, I noticed that the report says that many councils are looking for efficiencies in order to close funding gaps and not in order to reinvest in front-line services. Does that not reinforce the point that we have been making, and does it not contradict the Government's argument that its initiatives invest in front-line services?

George Lyon: I do not think that it does. Our initiatives free up resources. If Mr Swinney reads the report in detail he will see the huge range of achievements of individual councils. As they implement the reform agenda, I believe that they will free up not only the resources that have already been identified but further resources too. We will get full reports from every council.

Let me turn briefly to some of the issues raised this morning. Mr Davidson seemed to believe that

the Parliament should be responsible for wheelie bins, and it was a bit rich for the Conservatives to criticise the Executive for underfunding local councils, given the contribution of his party's Government to the underfunding of councils while it was in power.

Paul Martin made a very important point: five new schools have been built under public-private partnerships in his constituency, and no parent, teacher or constituent has come to Paul to complain about the new schools. They certainly do not want to go back to the old school system. PPP is delivering substantial improvements to public services throughout Scotland.

Tommy Sheridan: Will the minister take an intervention on that point?

George Lyon: I want to make some progress because we are short of time.

I turn to the SNP motion. After endless years of making spending pledges, the SNP has decided that it did not mean them and would prefer tax cuts. Perhaps that is because Mr Swinney has become the party's finance spokesman. The real gap that we should discuss is the credibility gap in the SNP's promises. Adam Ingram promised £1 billion for child care; Tricia Marwick promised extra police; and Kenny MacAskill promised a special ring-fenced fund for road maintenance. They were the last of the big spenders; all those promises have been forgotten.

The SNP wants a council tax freeze instead. Its motion says that the provision of extra money would be on condition that councils limit council tax rises. That opens up a dramatic new policy for the SNP, does it not? As Charlie Gordon rightly pointed out, the SNP will adopt centralised and nationalised control of council tax. Agreeing to the SNP's motion would disfranchise the 1,200 local councillors who decide the levels of council tax in their areas. By giving money to the councils that are proposing the highest tax increases, the SNP would punish the prudent. The SNP is proposing the sort of authoritarian national control that we last saw under the Conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s. Even the Tories have abandoned that policy.

In conclusion, we are providing record funding to local government—a fact that everyone recognises. However, we recognise the pressures that councils face. We said to COSLA last year that if councils delivered on the targets that we set them, we would consider what more might be provided for the 2007-08 financial year. That is still our position. The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform is in on-going discussions with COSLA on that very issue, and he intends to meet COSLA again in the near future. The accusation that this devolved Government is failing to support

councils does not stand up to scrutiny, given the record sums of money that we have made available to them.

The SNP motion asks us to centralise and nationalise council tax decisions, thereby undermining the role of locally elected councillors and punishing prudent councils. We reject that approach and I call on Parliament to do the same by supporting the amendment in my name.

11:32

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I agree with Charlie Gordon: people do not like paying taxes. But what they like even less—and with good reason—is paying a tax that increases by 55 per cent over eight years when inflation increased by only 13 per cent.

The Executive would have us believe that the problem is nothing to do with the council tax—or with the Executive, for that matter—but is all down to the local authorities. The Executive says that local authorities have proved that they can save money and are now just scaremongering and that if local authorities do not succeed it is because they are not trying hard enough.

We are asked to suspend our disbelief and to ignore the lessons of the past few years—or the lessons of as many years as we care to go back. This year, apparently, is going to be different. This year the council tax rise will not be much greater than inflation. Services will not be cut, they will just be delivered more efficiently. So, let us just ignore what the all-party Finance Committee of the Parliament says; let us ignore what COSLA says; and let us ignore what every local authority in the country says, whether it is run by Labour, the SNP, the independents, the Liberals or even the Tories. There is a local authority that is being run by the Tories, for a short while. The message from everyone is the same, and it is a lesson that comes from the experience of all council tax payers: the council tax will go up by more than inflation this year and, into the bargain, services will suffer.

As John Swinney said, successive burdens have been placed on councils as a result of primary or secondary legislation from this Parliament and elsewhere. One has only to look at the financial memorandums that come to the Finance Committee to see that the new burdens are not fully funded.

Revaluation and rebanding have been mentioned several times in the debate; they are part of Labour's submission to the current review and David Davidson for the Tories said that they were needed. They are presented as a way of solving the problems with council tax. With the council tax, revaluations are logically necessary.

For example, we cannot keep on—as we do just now—valuing new houses at what they would have been worth had they been built in 1991. However, revaluation and rebanding could be of assistance to people who are hard pressed—and we agree that many people are—only if there were a strong link between the value of their property and their ability to pay the tax. The hard fact is that there is not necessarily a sufficient connection between the two.

I am sorry that Michael McMahon did not get a chance to tell us how the revaluation and rebanding that he proposes would exempt the hard-working families that he is so concerned about. In fact, revaluation may exacerbate unfairness if the current value of a house bears no relation to a person's ability to pay. The changes in property values that lead to a revaluation have absolutely nothing to do with a person's income level, particularly if they have been living in a property for some time.

Tommy Sheridan: Does Alasdair Morgan agree that revaluation in Wales created more losers than winners? Perhaps that is why Michael McMahon did not spend much time explaining his proposals.

Alasdair Morgan: Twenty-five per cent of properties in Wales went up by one band and five per cent went up by two bands. The message of that exercise is that it would be very sensible not to live on a fixed income, not to live on an income that increases only by inflation and not to continue to live in one's family home if it happens to be in an area in which house prices are increasing by more than the average. The message is that it would be a good idea to sell up and move to a smaller house in an area in which house prices are lower. The message to pensioners is, "We are sorry if you have come to like the family home that you have lived in all your life and which you have spent your money furnishing and decorating, but continuing to live there does not fit in with the Government's view of how local government finance should work. You'd better move on."

I turn to the Executive—

Jeremy Purvis *rose*—

Alasdair Morgan: I am sorry, Mr Purvis, but I cannot take your intervention.

I turn to the Executive amendment, which has two parts. The first part trots out—as the minister did in his opening speech—the usual figures on how much the Executive is spending and how much it is saving. However, it is not really saving money; it is just spending it somewhere else. The Executive ignores the problem of the levels of council tax, which is a problem that everyone seems to recognise, including the chancellor—when electoral calculations loom before him. It was interesting to hear the minister say that the

2007-08 settlement for local authorities will be revisited. It has not escaped anyone's attention that next year is an election year. Everyone in the chamber knows that, some time in the next year, the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform will say to the chamber, "The local authorities have done very well on the efficiency front, so I have managed to find some extra money for them to make next year's council tax rise acceptable." That decision will not be driven by the precise measurement, or any measurement, of efficiency—Mr Lyon is the expert on that—it will be driven by political expediency.

George Lyon: Will Alasdair Morgan clarify how much of the figures in the SNP motion he intends to hand out in year 1?

Alasdair Morgan: The figures in our motion are the year 1 figures. I wish that George Lyon had read the motion—although perhaps he should read his own documents first, as he clearly does not understand them either.

I will speak briefly about the other amendments. I was very interested in the Conservatives' amendment because, as far as I can see, it failed to address the problem, which is the structure of the council tax. Perhaps they intend to visit on us the solution that their former colleague, Mr Monteith, puts forward in a magazine that arrived on my desk today—a sales tax. Perhaps that was a secret weapon that they were going to release on us later, had Mr Monteith not blown the gaff.

It is now time for action. We cannot continue to postpone decisions on these matters. The Liberal Democrats do not believe in the council tax, so they should stop using the excuse of a review that will report at some time and which might be decided on at some time and which might result in something happening at some time. If they believe that, they might believe that pigs can fly. They should stop using that excuse to paper over the cracks in the coalition. Surely this is one subject on which even the Liberals cannot face in two directions at the same time.

I say to the Labour Party that if Gordon Brown thought that the council tax was a problem in England last year, the same logic means that it is a problem in Scotland this year. People have real problems paying for council services and with the level of service that they receive. Our motion offers a solution to those problems, and I urge the chamber to support it.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Human Rights (Advice)

1. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to ensure that individual citizens can access specialist advice regarding their human rights. (S2O-8653)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): Parliament is currently considering legislation that was introduced by the Executive to create a Scottish commissioner for human rights. Although the commissioner will not be empowered to investigate individual cases under the proposals, he or she will be able to provide independent advice and guidance on human rights to any person or organisation. The commissioner will also have the power to investigate and report on generic or sectoral human rights issues.

Patrick Harvie: I commend the Executive for its proposals to create a commissioner for human rights. However, given that the commissioner will not—as the deputy minister made clear—be able to undertake individual casework, and that the Scottish Human Rights Centre, which provided at least a limited service in that area, has had to close, will the Executive undertake to examine other options for funding organisations that take on the important work of human rights advice?

Robert Brown: I am more than happy to talk to Patrick Harvie about the details of the issue in his capacity as convener of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on human rights. I very much regret the closure of the Scottish Human Rights Centre; it did extremely valuable work over several years. Unfortunately it was, for financial reasons, unable to continue its work.

However, the Executive gives support in a variety of directions to individual cases; for instance, it gives advice and support on immigration, and its legal aid role supports existing legal services. There are also a number of experiments in in-house court pilot projects to support people.

The Executive is involved in a range of human rights advice activities and is more than happy to consider what can be done to supplement those activities, although the Executive's support would

be for the broader legal service rather than for individual cases.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Can the minister reassure Parliament that the legal advice that is available on human rights will be available in all parts of Scotland and not just, as is the case at present, substantially in law centres in the central belt? Some of my constituents have had difficulty in accessing human rights advice.

Robert Brown: Solicitors across Scotland provide legal advice, so there should not be too much difficulty generally in getting advice from them. I accept that there are issues concerning the human rights specialism that is available in some parts of the country. Nevertheless, it should be possible to plug into legal firms, and the bar has expertise in that area.

There is potential for looking more broadly at those matters, and the debate on the forthcoming legal assistance and legal profession bill, which is to be introduced in February and which my colleague Cathy Jamieson can talk about more substantially, will look at how reform can make publicly funded legal assistance more accessible across the country. The justice committees will have an opportunity to consider those matters in the context of the proposed bill.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): In relation to question 2, I remind members that they should not ask questions that impact on issues that are currently before the courts.

Fingerprint Procedures

2. Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I thank the Presiding Officer for that warning; I shall, of course, heed it.

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will make a statement on the introduction of new fingerprint procedures, as reported in *The Herald* on 4 January 2006. (S2O-8616)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): The Scottish fingerprint service and the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland are planning for the introduction of a non-numeric standard for fingerprint evidence. No decision has yet been made on timing.

Alex Neil: Why has there been such a delay in introducing the new fingerprinting service and identification system? Is it because of the shambles in the fingerprinting bureau of the Scottish Criminal Record Office? Will the minister, with the introduction of the new procedures, overhaul that bureau and end the shambles that has existed there for five or six years?

Cathy Jamieson: I do not accept that nothing has been done to deal with some of the problems that have been evident in the fingerprint bureau. It

is not helpful consistently to call the bureau a "shambles", as Mr Neil does. It is not helpful to the staff who do their best to provide information that allows the administration of justice in our courts.

However, it is important that the Lord Advocate be satisfied that the fingerprint evidence that will be presented using the new standard will be appropriate before he approves the continuation of such procedures. It is also the case that staff in the fingerprint service need to be fully trained. There is no undue delay; it is simply a case of ensuring that the correct procedures are in place.

Civic Scotland

3. Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what proposals it has to enable the organisations previously helped by the Scottish Civic Forum to continue to take an active part in the work of civic Scotland and the Parliament. (S2O-8683)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Ms Margaret Curran): The Executive is fully committed to encouraging individuals, organisations and interest groups to take an active interest in civic Scotland and the work of Parliament. We are currently considering how we might generate greater interest in civic participation. I will make proposals shortly.

Donald Gorrie: Many large voluntary and charitable organisations and commercial organisations are skilled at lobbying Parliament and they are staffed and geared up to do that. Whatever reasons the Executive had for disliking the Scottish Civic Forum in the past, it was an important vehicle for enabling smaller community-based organisations and other organisations to contact Parliament or the Executive, and its removal leaves a gap. What, in addition to what the minister has just said, will the Executive do to help to fill that gap?

Ms Curran: I reassure Donald Gorrie that we have paid some attention to that matter and that we are considering detailed work on it. I make it clear at the outset that I am responsible for the Executive's work on civic participation. Parliament itself has a role in participation, and it is the Presiding Officer's responsibility to ensure that Parliament opens itself up to participation as much as possible. I want to ensure that the Executive does that, too.

I accept Donald Gorrie's point that many large organisations have sophisticated approaches to gaining access to people of influence—I assume that that includes Parliament and the Executive—but we need to ensure that we reach beyond those and the other usual suspects who are well versed in participating in Parliament's work. I am very keen to do that, which is why we are spending

time ensuring that we get right our participation strategies. I am particularly keen to ensure that we reach out to young people, to people who do not traditionally participate and to people from different ethnic minorities. It is vital that we do that.

I am happy to talk to Donald Gorrie about that work and to keep him briefed on the work that we are about to announce shortly.

Class-size Reductions (Resources)

4. Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the resources being made available for class-size reductions are being top-sliced and, if so, why. (S2O-8645)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): Funding for new teachers is not being top sliced. The sums are fully additional to the spending review figures that were announced for local authorities in autumn 2004 and are being distributed through the national priorities action fund in addition to current allocations.

Mrs Mulligan: I am pleased to hear the minister's answer and I hope that he will ensure that local authorities are fully aware that resources for extra teachers will be allocated according to the need that is generated by increasing numbers of pupils. However, will the minister go further and agree that additional resources for the few authorities that have increasing pupil populations must be made available timeously if those local authorities and their schools are to hit the class-size reduction targets?

Peter Peacock: Mary Mulligan and I have discussed before in Parliament the fact that an area's school pupil roll is growing means that its grant will grow in due course, but there is a short time lag between the growth in population and the grant's arrival. However, we are making extra money available to local authorities for extra teachers now; it is being distributed on the basis of grant-aided expenditure with an extra element for deprivation and a small element for sparsity of population to help to ensure that we have the right distribution of cash. That cash is available now and it will help in West Lothian, for example, to recruit more than 40 extra teachers in the near future. That is very good news for the young people of that area.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): If the resources are not being top sliced and are available now, will the minister explain why since 2003—when the Government came belatedly to the class-size reduction agenda—vacancies for English teachers have tripled and those for maths teachers have doubled? How on earth can he achieve his class-size reduction targets for 2007?

Peter Peacock: It might be a new year, but it appears that we have the same old moaning

Scottish National Party. We ought to be celebrating what is happening in Scottish education and the increased number of teachers. There have been dramatic increases in the recruitment of maths teachers and English teachers, and teachers from other parts of the world and other parts of the United Kingdom are applying to come and teach in Scotland because of the reforms that we are making and because of our commitment to education. We are absolutely confident that we will achieve the class-size reduction targets that we have set ourselves. One of the means by which we will do that is the extra cash that we are putting into the system over the coming two years to allow the extra teachers whom we are training and recruiting to be employed by the local authorities.

Special Educational Needs (Young Adults)

5. Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to support young adults with special educational needs when they leave school. (S2O-8626)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): Young adults with additional support needs should, as far as is possible, when they leave school have the same opportunities as other young people to access training, further education and employment. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 puts duties on education authorities and others to achieve that. In addition, we have consulted recently on options for improving the opportunities that are available in further education to such young people. We will shortly publish our response to that consultation.

Karen Gillon: There is growing concern among families such as the Russell family in my constituency that young adults who have extremely complex special needs are not getting the provision that they should be getting and that they do not have equality of access to educational provision with their able-bodied counterparts because of financial constraints on local authorities. Will the minister meet me to discuss how we can begin to improve equality of distribution for such young adults, so that we can ensure that they get the most appropriate placements for their needs, and not just the placements that best reflect the local authority's financial needs?

Allan Wilson: I would be pleased to meet Karen Gillon to discuss in detail her constituent's situation and the general issues that it raises. The document "supporting children's learning: code of practice" states:

"the transition process may be helped by the involvement of a key worker. This might be a teacher, careers adviser,

social worker, community education worker or someone from another agency.”

There are clearly resource implications for a number of public agencies in ensuring that such children have appropriate support.

That document also states:

“The key worker can then assist the child or young person to make a smooth transition to employment, training, further or higher education”,

which is the outcome that Karen Gillon’s constituent and, indeed, all members, wish for.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): I welcome the minister’s reply to Karen Gillon, but I ask him to say what action the Executive will take to rectify the situation that Skill Scotland identifies in the consultation document “Finding Practical Solutions to Complex Needs: Consultation on Arrangements for Supported Further Education Places and Funding for Students with Complex Needs”, namely:

“Skill Scotland has regular contact from learners with additional needs who cannot access further education in Scotland, and yet they cannot get funding to access appropriate further education elsewhere.”

Does the minister agree that it would be a matter of grave concern if such people were unfairly excluded from further education because of their needs and will he consider the matter sympathetically?

Allan Wilson: We received 48 responses to the consultation, including one from Dr and Mrs Russell. Those responses are being analysed and the findings summarised, so I do not wish to pre-empt the outcome of that exercise. There are complex issues to be addressed around areas such as provision of financial support to meet needs—which Karen Gillon mentioned—provision of services, particularly those that are provided elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and improving services in Scotland. I have said that our guiding principle, which I am sure Lord James will support, is that we will, at the conclusion of the exercise, offer all our young people equality of opportunity as far as is sensible and practical, irrespective of their individual needs.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): There is a genuine problem with the transition from school to post-school life. Local education authorities know that young adults with special needs are entering that transition, but they often leave it until the very last minute to do something. Would the minister consider issuing guidance to local authorities, so that they address such issues six or even 12 months before such young people are due to leave school?

Allan Wilson: I agree fundamentally. That is, in part, why we launched the consultation on

practical solutions to what I am sure the member agrees are complex needs. We wanted to learn more about the practices of local authorities, to which Mr Rumbles referred, and to understand more about the support needs in question. We are now, having accumulated that information, analysing and summarising it, and we hope to come up with proposals—which may or may not include advice such as Mr Rumbles seeks—to address needs better and to provide the equality of opportunity that I referred to.

Class-size Targets

6. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Executive how many secondary 1 and S2 English and mathematics classes are (a) over and (b) under the maximum class-size targets set by the Executive for 2007. (S2O-8608)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): Individual class-size data are not routinely collected. However, in order to estimate the number of teachers that will be required to meet our commitments, data were collected in 2003 and will be collected again in 2007 to confirm that our targets have been met. The 2003 data showed that 16 per cent of maths and English classes were already below our planned target. Since then, the Executive has supported the recruitment of many additional maths and English teachers and we are well on the way to meeting in full our targets for 2007.

Dennis Canavan: If the minister still honestly believes that those classes will be reduced to a maximum of 20 pupils by next year, why is he afraid to provide more up-to-date statistics than those for 2003, which would enable us all to see what progress is being made? Is the minister aware of local authorities’ concern that the Executive’s commitment to reducing class sizes has not been fully funded? Is not it a fact that the minister has failed to provide up-to-date statistics because such statistics would reveal the embarrassing truth that he has not a snowball’s chance in hell of reaching the targets by next year?

Peter Peacock: Well—where to start?

Members: Tell us.

Peter Peacock: If members wait, they will get what they want.

The funding is fully in place to fund all the extra teachers. Indeed, in Dennis Canavan’s local authority area of Falkirk an extra £1.6 million has been allocated, which will allow Falkirk Council to employ an extra 37 teachers.

If Dennis Canavan is looking for statistics, I will give him statistics. The maths intake into our teacher training colleges was up by 85 per cent in

2004 over the 2003 figure. In 2005, the figure was 75 per cent up on the 2003 figure. There were 500 extra maths teachers in training in 2004-05. In English, intake was up 52 per cent in 2004 and up 100 per cent in 2005 on the figure in 2003. There were 647 extra English teachers in training in 2004-05. External recruitment into secondary teaching was also up 82 per cent in Scotland. Maths external recruitment was up 100 per cent and English external recruitment was up 118 per cent.

If Mr Canavan wants statistics, I can give him oodles of them, all of which show that we are going to meet our targets.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): As a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland, I have a keen interest in the subject. Will the minister confirm that the money that the Executive is investing, and will invest in the future, will ensure an increase in numbers to reach the targets for maths and English teachers and, more widely, the target of having 53,000 teachers by 2007? Will the Executive ensure that the targets are also met in areas where there is a growing population, such as my and Mary Mulligan's constituencies?

Peter Peacock: Just before Christmas, we announced an extra £18 million for the coming financial year and a further £44 million for the year thereafter on top of the normal settlement for local government, in terms of past teaching numbers. We also exempted teaching costs from the efficiency savings in the spending review specifically because we are trying to grow the extra teacher numbers to improve the quality of education throughout Scotland. I confirm that all that extra cash and the measures that we are taking will allow all our targets—including our target of 53,000 teachers and our specific class-size commitments at primary 1 and at secondary 1 and 2 for maths and English—to be met in full by 2007.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I wish the First Minister a happy new year and ask him what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-2038)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The Cabinet will discuss issues of importance to Scotland. I return Ms Sturgeon's greetings, and wish all other members a happy new year.

On a sadder note, I wish to record the death of Rachel Squire MP, who, in her nearly 20 years in the House of Commons, was a constant supporter of devolution. Her constituency, and Scotland, is a sadder place as a result of her passing away.

It is also right to record that, in his time as leader of the Liberal Democrat Party, Charles Kennedy was a strong supporter of this Parliament in advance of its creation and while it has existed. We should record our thanks to him for the role that, until last weekend, he had played for many years in that job. *[Applause.]*

Nicola Sturgeon: I echo the First Minister's comments about Charlie Kennedy and, in particular, about Rachel Squire, who, as an MP, was well respected across the political spectrum in Scotland.

I assure the First Minister that the issue that I am about to raise is not party political. It is an issue of public concern, and I know that it will concern him as greatly as it concerns me. He will be aware that, south of the border, there are concerns about the possibility that people on the sex offenders register are being employed to work with children. Will he assure us that there is no possibility that anyone on the sex offenders register in Scotland will be employed to work with children in any capacity?

The First Minister: Our position—which I believe is shared by all parties—is that no one in Scotland who would be a danger to children should be employed to work with them. The systems that we have established and the planned improvements to them are designed to ensure that we meet that objective.

A number of systems are in place in Scotland. First, there is the sex offenders register that Ms Sturgeon mentioned. Secondly, there is the list of people who are disqualified from working with children, and it is an offence for someone to employ a person on that list to work with children. Thirdly, we have the system of disclosure and the absolute necessity not only for local authorities

and the General Teaching Council for Scotland, but for other public bodies to ensure that full disclosure is made of past offences and convictions before anyone is employed to work with children.

I hope that, with all those different systems in place, no one will get through the net. However, we cannot guarantee that no employers or employees in Scotland are breaking the system or the law. The systems should deliver what we seek to achieve, and I hope that all public authorities in Scotland are adhering to them and to the law to ensure that that is the case.

Nicola Sturgeon: The First Minister referred to the disqualified from working with children list, which lists all the people in Scotland who are, by law, banned from working with children. Is he aware that, according to a written parliamentary answer on 21 December 2005, 56 people are currently on that list? However, there are more than 2,800 people on the sex offenders register in Scotland. Does the First Minister share my concern that there may be—I put it no more strongly than that—the potential for someone who is on the sex offenders register but not on the disqualified from working with children list to slip through the child protection net? Is he prepared to review the law to ensure that such a risk is minimised?

The First Minister: Sir Michael Bichard himself said that the systems in Scotland were vastly superior to those south of the border. However, we feel that, as a result of his report, there are further changes that we should implement. We intend to bring our further plans to Parliament and go out to consultation on them this year.

I believe that the number of people on the disqualified from working with children list, which was established last January, has risen from the 56 that was mentioned in the parliamentary answer to 63. The list is important, and it is important that the Parliament introduced it. After all, it is absolutely right that, in Scotland, it is a criminal offence for someone to employ a person on the list to work with children or, indeed, for someone on the list to apply for a job that involves working with children.

It is also important that, when authorities obtain the enhanced disclosure that they must obtain, they have information about those who are on the sex offenders register—and, indeed, about those who are not on the register but who have other convictions, such as convictions for serious drugs offences—and that they ensure that that information is taken into account in advance of any decision about recruitment.

I believe that those systems should be robust and that information about the sex offenders

register, which is available to all authorities in Scotland, should stop the employment of anybody who is unsuitable to work with children. I cannot guarantee that someone will not get through the net. If they do so, those who have allowed that to happen should be held accountable for it. However, I believe that those systems, which can lead to further improvement, have been rightly established by this Parliament and can be implemented effectively by authorities in Scotland.

Nicola Sturgeon: Does the First Minister agree that the gap between 56 or 63 people—or whatever the figure is at present—and almost 3,000 people is far too wide, and that for as long as it remains that big we cannot guarantee that people on the sex offenders register, perhaps with convictions relating to child sex offences, will not end up working with children in Scotland? Does he agree that that is unacceptable? Does he agree with yesterday's comments by Sir Michael Bichard, who said that we want to move rapidly to a situation in which, if someone is on the sex offenders register, they should not work with children? Will the First Minister guarantee that the Scottish Executive will change the law to incorporate the sex offenders register into the disqualified from working with children list and that it will do so immediately?

The First Minister: As I said, we are preparing plans to implement the Bichard recommendations further. Those plans will be published this year and we hope to legislate at an early opportunity in order to implement any of the outstanding Bichard recommendations that are required to ensure not only that systems north and south of the border work together properly, but that systems in Scotland are as effective as they can be. I want to be absolutely clear about that.

I do not want to give the impression—and I am sure that Nicola Sturgeon does not want to give the impression—that anyone who is on the sex offenders register can be employed to work with children, or in any other inappropriate situation, without the authorities being able to check that in advance and stop it happening. That is the case in Scotland. It is not possible to employ someone to work with children in Scotland without that enhanced disclosure and without that information being available. Parliament set up the additional list—the list of those who are specifically disqualified from working with children—because we wanted a further safeguard to be in place in Scotland. That list has been operational since last January and I think that it will be important in the future. However, I believe that the relationship between the sex offenders register and the systems relating to working with children in Scotland requires further attention, and that is why it is being given that attention.

I am absolutely certain that no authority in Scotland should be employing anyone to work with children who is inappropriate for that work. This Parliament should demand, on a cross-party basis, that systems are put in place to ensure that that is put into practice. At the end of the day, if anyone breaks through the net and breaks that line, they must be held accountable for doing so.

Nicola Sturgeon: Does the First Minister acknowledge that there is currently a gap, in that someone's inclusion on the sex offenders register will be disclosed to a prospective employer but, unless that person is also on the disqualified from working with children list, that will not bar them from working with children, because it is left to the employer's discretion? I asked the First Minister a specific question, and I shall ask him it again. Will he give an assurance that future changes to the law will bar everyone on the sex offenders register from working with children in the future—yes or no?

The First Minister: When this Parliament established the disqualified from working with children list last year, it decided not to make that list retrospective. If Parliament wanted to change that position, additional legislation would be needed. That would be a requirement if we were to implement Ms Sturgeon's suggestion. In the meantime, the position is absolutely clear. No authority in Scotland can employ someone to work with children without getting disclosures of previous convictions or of inclusion on the sex offenders register. We should be absolutely clear that authorities in Scotland should not be employing anyone who is a danger to children because they are on that register or because they pose a danger from any other perspective.

Nicola Sturgeon: They can slip through the net.

The First Minister: I think that the position has to be clear. The Parliament voted for the disqualified from working with children list not to be retrospective. If members believe that the list should be retrospective, a proposal to change the legislation should be brought to the Parliament. I would not want to give the impression—we should not give the impression—that the existing legislation allows people to get through the net and to be employed by local authorities to work with children if they are a danger to children. All the systems that are in place in Scotland, which have been praised by Bichard, are in place to stop that happening. We cannot guarantee that someone will not get through the net, but if they ever do so, the people who are responsible for employing someone in such a situation should be held accountable, whether they work for a local authority or any other public agency.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues they will discuss. (S2F-2039)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I have no immediate plans to meet the Prime Minister, but I have plans to speak to him and I will obviously wish him a happy new year.

Miss Goldie: I am sure that that will comfort him greatly.

I am certain that the public in Scotland will be as mystified and, indeed, horrified as the rest of us about yesterday's collapse of a trial for attempted murder in the High Court in Edinburgh because of bureaucratic error. Does the First Minister accept that we urgently need a speedy inquiry into that fiasco to establish exactly what went wrong?

The First Minister: I do not think that we need a wholesale inquiry. In such circumstances, the right thing to do is to ask the Lord Advocate to examine the matter and the steps that he can take. He is doing that today.

Miss Goldie: I am comforted to some extent by that response, but there is another issue lurking. What is alarming is the suspicion that the case is a symptom of a wider problem in the system and a demonstration of judicial frustration that an accused who was being held in a Scottish prison could not be located by the Crown Office. If that individual had been in Castle Huntly prison, he could have been anywhere but, as it happens, he was in Barlinnie.

When the First Minister asks the Lord Advocate to investigate the case, will he ask him to consider how we might improve communications between the different parts of the justice system to ensure that any person who is locked up in jail can be transported to the appropriate court on the due date to face trial?

The First Minister: I do not think that that is an accurate representation of what has happened, but I am extremely concerned about what has been reported today on the impact of what appears to have been human error in providing the wrong information to the wrong people.

From the very brief indication that the Lord Advocate has just provided—members will have noticed his giving it—I understand that the proceedings in question may still be live, so it would be inappropriate for me to comment in detail on the case today. However, I give the Parliament an absolute assurance that the commitment that we have given over recent years to legislate and to take administrative action to improve our justice system so that our courts operate more efficiently, more cases are brought to them timeously and

more resources are provided to obtain more accurate evidence and thus ensure that there are more convictions of course applies today and will apply again in the future. If things go wrong in individual cases—as appears to have happened in the case that Annabel Goldie raises—they should be investigated properly by the Lord Advocate and he should take the appropriate action.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Final question.

Miss Goldie: I do not know whether it is reassuring or discomfiting to see the Lord Advocate scurrying round the Parliament to brief the First Minister. To put the public mind at ease and to disabuse it of any perception of complacency on the part of the First Minister, will he confirm to me—I understand that he may want to do so in writing—on how many occasions since 1999 court proceedings have been disrupted or abandoned because an accused person who was being held in custody was not brought to the right court on the right day at the right time?

The First Minister: We should wait and see what the position is with the case in question once accurate information has been obtained and proceedings have concluded.

There is an absolute guarantee that I can give to Annabel Goldie. In 2003, we gave a commitment to have a root-and-branch review of our justice system that would ensure that our court proceedings were more effective and would waste less time for victims, witnesses and police officers. I am certain that that will be the case by the end of the current parliamentary session. We also gave a commitment that the information in the system would be pulled together more coherently, communicated to the right people and used more effectively and that there would be less time wasting in that process, too.

We have given a commitment to ensuring that sentencing is more consistent. Our other commitments have been to the better resourcing of the courts, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and the police. All those different commitments and actions will have improved the situation far beyond where it was back in 1999. That is one of the great benefits of devolution and of the Scottish Parliament. We are delivering on it.

The Presiding Officer: There are two current constituency questions.

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): The First Minister will be aware of the recent textiles industry redundancies in Hawick in my constituency. Will he consider further targeted investments in specific overseas marketing initiatives to win orders in an increasingly competitive market? Does he agree that there are advantages to the local enterprise network leading

national initiatives for specific industries, as Scottish Enterprise Borders does at the moment for textiles?

The First Minister: First, although I express regret at the announcements to which Euan Robson refers, I want to make it clear that parts of the Scottish textiles industry are doing very well. We should praise and support them in all that they are doing at home and abroad. I do not want to give the impression—neither, I am sure, does Euan Robson—that the industry is in some form of permanent crisis. Companies in the industry have innovated and invested and are succeeding as a result.

At the same time, it is important to say that, both in Scotland and abroad, the focus of Scottish Enterprise and its different arms is to boost and grow Scottish companies and employment and to ensure that other markets around the world are made well aware of the high quality of goods that are produced in Scotland. There is a role in that for the local enterprise companies in the Borders and elsewhere. Scottish Enterprise has recently implemented a huge increase in its overseas staff. I am certain that that will make a difference for Scottish companies in the years to come.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): My question is on the antisocial behaviour dispersal order that was made in the community of Mid Calder. Is the First Minister aware of the comments of Superintendent Harry Watters of Lothian and Borders police, who said:

“The dispersal order has had exactly the impact we had hoped for with no significant incidents of disorder, a significant reduction in calls and a community truly heartened by the improvement”?

Will the First Minister take that as an affirmation that the dispersal order is an important tool for communities and the police in tackling antisocial behaviour?

The First Minister: Clearly, there has been a huge impact in Mid Calder as a result of the dispersal order. We should congratulate those who were responsible for pursuing it in the first place and those who have ensured that it has been well implemented over the past month. It is important for us to recognise that dispersal orders were designed for precisely such situations. They act as a short-term measure to break up a problem that has existed for far too long.

The original scare stories about dispersal orders portrayed them as some sort of permanent curfew that would damage communities for all time. They have been proven to be wrong. Dispersal orders work as a short-term, sharp measure to break up a long-term problem. The people of Mid Calder are obviously enjoying the benefits of that just now. I hope that others in Scotland will follow.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

3. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues he intends to discuss. (S2F-2043)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I meet the Secretary of State for Scotland regularly and we discuss a wide range of issues.

Robin Harper: Yesterday, the Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development said:

"One thing that we can all accept is that every one of us ... must play our part in delivering a sustainable Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2005; c 22211-22212.]

What will the First Minister's personal contribution to sustainability be?

The First Minister: Where do I start with a question like that?

I have two contributions to make, the first of which is to provide leadership in the Executive and the Parliament in order to ensure, as we have done over the years, that the environment and sustainable development are taken more seriously by us all collectively, as a Government and a Parliament. For example, when I took over as First Minister back in late 2001, Scotland's record on the recycling of waste was among the most shameful and shocking in the world. Today, there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of our waste that is recycled. We continue to invest in waste plans and the education that goes with them. That is making a difference in Scotland and will make a difference to sustainable development. On a personal level, I make my own contribution to that every week.

Robin Harper: Table 8 on page 18 of the Executive's environmental performance annual report tells us that the figure for all departmental Executive car miles increased from 1.9 million to 2.9 million between 2001 and 2005. The same report sets out the Executive's current target for a 5 per cent reduction in business car vehicle mileage, but goes on to suggest that rather than action being taken to enable that target to be met, the target should be abandoned. Is that sustainable? How can the First Minister justify the increase and the extraordinary decision to do nothing about it?

The First Minister: Last night, after the television had gone off—with the red light off, I hope—I was not sitting reading page 18 of the Executive's environmental performance report. Perhaps I should have been, but I was not.

Robin Harper raises a serious issue. All organisations, public and private, should consider the extent of car use by their staff and the way in which their organisations' systems incentivise

such car use or a reduction in it. I am happy to consider the issue in more detail as a result of the question.

Rail Fares

4. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive is concerned about the recent increase in rail fares. (S2F-2052)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Ministers believe that the rail companies must set fares at levels that balance affordability, investment and the need to encourage more travellers to choose the improved train services that we are providing.

Pauline McNeill: I am sure that the First Minister will understand the reaction of ordinary passengers to this year's above-inflation increase in rail fares, given that they might not be aware of the planned investment in the rail network. Will the Executive use its new powers with Network Rail to ensure that investment is made in rail infrastructure to improve punctuality and tackle delays? Will the First Minister assure me that he will work with Network Rail and all those responsible for the railways to ensure that we continue to plan for increased capacity, without which we cannot get more passengers on to rail? Scottish passengers and the general public might then feel that they are getting better value for money.

The First Minister: I am pleased that Pauline McNeill welcomes the additional investment and wants to see things progressing as soon as possible. Before Christmas, it was a great pleasure to reopen the line from Larkhall to Milngavie—the Larkhall to Glasgow route—which is the first new branch railway in Scotland for a very long time. There are, of course, more to come. We have a long-term programme of investment in the Airdrie to Bathgate line, the Borders line and the airport rail links, as well as other investments. In each of those areas it is important that Network Rail co-operates with us, where it is obliged to. It is also important that we move forward speedily so that passengers in Scotland have an improved service on which to assess the current level of fares, whether they are going up, remaining static or going down.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Does the First Minister agree that the primary reason for our having high rail fares in Scotland is the high cost of running the rail network? Does he recall the evidence of the Office of the Rail Regulator to the Parliament a year ago that Network Rail currently operates at 31 per cent inefficiency? Does he agree that we should accept the critique of Janette Anderson, the chief executive of First Engineering, who said that the

necessary process of improvements, which Pauline McNeill mentioned, was “unbelievably slow and cumbersome”? Does he accept that that critique, far from being idiocy, was spot on?

The First Minister: There have been discussions since then about the way in which that process operates. The new powers that we have in relation to rail infrastructure give us the opportunity to ensure that there is greater efficiency and better co-ordination between those who are responsible for the infrastructure and those who are responsible for the services. That is a good thing, which is a benefit to Scotland; it gives us a chance to improve not only the capacity of our rail network, but the quality of service on it.

The Parliament has a responsibility to modernise its procedures to ensure that speedier decisions are taken on the new lines that are required. We also have a responsibility to ensure that the budget commitments are there to deliver those new lines and support those new services. We will adhere to that commitment.

Older People (Care)

5. Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what strategy has been adopted by the Scottish Executive to maintain and develop an appropriate range of care homes and day centres for older people across Scotland. (S2F-2050)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): It is important that the service that is provided to older people is of high quality and appropriate to their needs. Ministers have increased our community care support for local authorities to £1.6 billion in the current year to help achieve that. It is for individual local authorities to determine their community care needs and to secure appropriate services, such as care homes and day centres.

Rob Gibson: Does the First Minister recognise the special circumstances and extra costs of caring for dependent older people in scattered communities such as Lochinver, Tain, Fort William and many of our islands? Does he understand that the extra cost of meeting the care commission's standards and inspections is shrinking the availability of respite care places in particular and that that is directly and adversely affected by an inadequate local government settlement, about which Highland Council and many other local authorities are openly expressing concern?

Will the First Minister uphold the cornerstone of social justice that is the principle that older people should be cared for in their own communities and in an appropriate facility that is properly financed rather than being shipped off to larger settlements far from family support?

The First Minister: I am not saying that this is the case across the board, but I think that there is an element of what Rob Gibson is saying that might slightly misrepresent what is happening in the Highland area. As I understand it, many of the changes that are taking place in care homes are designed to ensure that people can stay in houses in their local communities rather than transferring to other care homes. If that is indeed the case, it is something that we should support. Most elderly people in Scotland want to stay in their own home if they can, and they want adequate support in their own home to allow them to do that. I would want to encourage and continue that trend, in Highland and elsewhere. However, there is a need for a wide range of services for elderly people, some of whom will require the support of a care home environment while others will require support in their own homes. Of course, many will require no support at all. However, the funding settlement that we have outlined, which has increased dramatically over the years, is designed to achieve that range of options for elderly people.

I counsel all members of the Parliament against deciding to vote later this afternoon for a council tax freeze, which would reduce the amount of money that is available to councils for care homes and, therefore, reduce the support for elderly people.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Does the First Minister share my concern about Highland Council's proposal to sell a number of care homes to the private sector? That will not guarantee the appropriate provision and long-term existence of care for the elderly. With the potential reduction in the provision of care for the elderly through those closures, what initiatives will the Executive introduce to address that social problem?

The First Minister: My understanding is that Highland Council is considering a range of options. It would be inappropriate for me to intervene in that consultation and debate at this stage. However, I believe that the first preference of elderly people who require care would be that they should receive that care in their own home. That should be in the front of the minds of those who are having the discussions that need to take place in Scotland.

Clearly, however, if people cannot be looked after in their own homes, adequate care home provision is needed. Making such provision is difficult when we have an increased aging population, but we have allocated significant funds to doing that. Ultimately, such decisions have to be made by individual local authorities, but I hope that, when they make those decisions, they will have the needs and the welfare of elderly people at the front of their minds.

Taser Guns

6. Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive supports operational police officers being routinely equipped with Taser guns. (S2F-2051)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Police officers in Scotland will not be routinely equipped with Taser guns. Tasers will be issued only to authorised firearms officers who have successfully completed an approved training course in the use of the device. Ministers support the use of Tasers provided that certain criteria are met, including adherence to the “Manual of Guidance on Police Use of Firearms”, which was drawn up by the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland. Decisions to deploy firearms in individual situations are, correctly, a matter for chief constables.

Jeremy Purvis: I warmly welcome the First Minister's response. As is the case with plastic bullet rounds, which were first used in Scotland in my constituency just before Christmas, Taser guns are to be given a cautious welcome as an additional, less lethal, alternative to the police using firearms. In addition to the assurances that he has given, will the First Minister ensure that, under the regulatory regime for the appropriate use of Taser guns—by firearms officers who have received the proper training—Tasers will be deployed only under the oversight of very senior police officers; that any use of Taser guns will be thoroughly scrutinised by a police officer from another force; and that the Scottish Executive will not allow the routine deployment of Tasers by police officers, which would itself put police officers and communities at risk? In his consideration of the use of Taser guns, will he take into account the health risks to people who are shot with them?

The First Minister: There were some detailed questions there, on which I am sure the Minister for Justice would be happy to write to the member. I reiterate what I have already said: police officers in Scotland will not be routinely equipped with Taser guns. Only approved officers will have access to them, and only in operational circumstances that are determined by the chief constable in each area. That is the right way for us to conduct ourselves.

At all times, we need to remember that, although Taser guns are a less lethal alternative—they are an attractive option for that reason—their use is important in situations where it might help to control difficult circumstances, including those of their first use in Scotland, which I believe was in a very dangerous incident close to my constituency,

and in which I believe their use to have been extremely effective.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions to the First Minister. I remind members that they should be back in the chamber at the earlier time of 2 pm for the election of a member to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

12:32

Meeting suspended until 14:00.

14:00

On resuming—

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We now proceed to the election of a member of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. I have received two valid nominations for appointment. In alphabetical order, the nominations are: Kenny MacAskill and Margo MacDonald.

A copy of the guidance explaining the voting procedure that will be followed this afternoon has been placed on each member's desk. I will ask members to cast their vote for their preferred candidate. A separate vote will be called for each candidate. I remind members that they may vote only once and may use only their yes button when voting. The votes of a member who casts more than one vote will be treated as spoiled, in which case none of those votes will count. Any member who wishes to record an abstention will have an opportunity to do so at the end of voting for the candidates.

Once all the voting has been completed, there will be a short delay of a few minutes while the result is verified. I shall then announce the number of votes cast, the number of votes for each of the candidates and the number of abstentions. A candidate will be elected if an overall majority is obtained.

We proceed now to short speeches of three minutes from each of the candidates, in alphabetical order.

14:01

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): At the outset, I pay tribute to my colleague, Andrew Welsh, who is standing down from the SPCB. Since the re-establishment of our Parliament, he has served as a member of the SPCB, which was an unglamorous position in difficult times. We owe a debt of gratitude to him and to all those who serve or have served on that body.

Such service has always been viewed as non-party political. As a creature of statute, the SPCB is a vital part of the functioning and administration of this institution. Like others, Andrew Welsh forsook party loyalty and divisions when acting in that role; I will do likewise. The SPCB's purpose is to serve not party or sectional interests but those of the Scottish Parliament and the people it serves. Members have my assurance that, if elected, I will act without fear of or favour for individuals or party.

I do not know what particular skills I bring, but I offer commitment, diligence, approachability and integrity. I have always considered it an honour and privilege to serve in this Parliament. Whatever views I may hold about Scotland's future constitutional arrangements, I view it as essential to uphold the integrity of this institution and to seek to nurture and cherish it.

The role is about serving not just members but those who work here and those whom we are here to serve. In asking for members' support, I reaffirm my commitment to be diligent, accountable and approachable. I will serve the institution and all its members irrespective of any party affiliations and I will do so without fear or favour.

14:03

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): Electing the Parliament's corporate body is a duty incumbent on the 129 MSPs who comprise the Parliament. The SPCB acts in the name of that electorate to preserve and promote the Parliament's good name and the ethos that is enshrined in our mace. The SPCB should be guided by those four principles in managing the Parliament's affairs—other than Executive business and the opposition to that from our other political parties and representatives—but it is not, nor should it be, one of the Parliament's party-political forums.

When I expressed that view to colleagues in all parties and in none yesterday, the vast majority agreed with me—perhaps some were only being nice—but some people ventured the opinion that, as in the case of the Subordinate Legislation Committee, an SPCB member who is a willing volunteer will be better than one who is a pressed man or woman. However, a few colleagues thought that the SPCB should comprise members of the four biggest parties. I respect those colleagues as politicians and I even like them as people, but I fail to see why only their parties' representatives can take decisions of a non-partisan nature on behalf of the whole Parliament.

Most decisions and votes in the Parliament will be taken along party-political lines. Those will be based sometimes on ideology but more often on manifesto commitments. That is the nature of our parliamentary democracy and I take no issue with it. Business needs to be organised in an orderly manner and the electorate's wishes should be respected.

However, the Parliament as an institution is not the preserve of whichever party wins the election; it has to be cherished, protected and allowed to evolve and develop in sympathy with the people who send us here and trust us to strive to organise our business, unhindered—as far as possible—by

the different priorities and concerns of competing political parties. We should take some decisions as parliamentarians rather than as MSPs who represent political parties, and this is one such decision.

The Scotland Act 1998 currently binds us to having only four elected members of the SPCB. That is one of the matters that we might expect to be changed when the act is amended to meet more sensitively the needs of the Parliament. However, I do not consider that a priority because I believe that even within the current statutory framework there are ways open to us through which we could improve the level of ownership of the SPCB by all MSPs.

The lines of communication between the SPCB and MSPs and, subsequently, the quality of the SPCB's stewardship of parliamentary affairs could be improved. At present, the only formal communication between the corporate body and the back benches occurs in infrequent question-and-answer sessions in the chamber. I propose a more continuous flow of information both ways—particularly when decisions have to be taken that will reverberate outside the Parliament and for which, theoretically and certainly in the eyes of the public, we are all responsible. The decision on the provision of a smoking facility is one example that springs to mind. If the SPCB had invited MSPs to attend its meetings on an observer or advisory basis, depending on the issues under discussion, perhaps there might have been more accurate and sensitive reporting of Scottish Green Party members' expenses.

I have a number of other ideas for improving the transparency and communication of the work undertaken in our name by the SPCB. I will discuss those with colleagues if I am elected. However, I assure them that if I am elected, I will ask for a recount.

The Presiding Officer: We will proceed to the vote.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. If the corporate body is a non-party-political body, would it not threaten to bring it into disrepute if party whips tried to instruct their members how to vote on the matter?

The Presiding Officer: That is, of course, a matter for members, individually and collectively. As I said, we will proceed to the vote.

The first vote is for members who wish to support Mr MacAskill. Members who wish to vote for Mr MacAskill should vote yes now.

Members voted.

The Presiding Officer: We now proceed to the vote for Margo MacDonald. Members who wish to vote for Margo MacDonald should vote yes now.

Members voted.

The Presiding Officer: Voting for the candidates has concluded, but there is of course a third vote. Any member who has not voted for a candidate and who wishes to register an abstention should press their button now.

Members voted.

The Presiding Officer: I now have the verified results of the election of a member of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. The total number of votes cast was 115. I declare the result as follows: Mr Kenny MacAskill 94, Margo MacDonald 20, Abstentions 1. There were no spoiled papers.

VOTES FOR MR KENNY MACASKILL

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 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)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (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)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)

Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 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)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

VOTES FOR MARGO MACDONALD

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballance, Chris (South of Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

ABSTENTIONS

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: As the result is valid, and as Kenny MacAskill has received more votes than the total number of votes for the other candidate, I declare that Kenny MacAskill is selected for appointment to the SPCB.

As a member has now been selected for appointment to the SPCB, the election process is complete. I offer my congratulations to Mr MacAskill on his election.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Environment and Rural Development

14:19

European Fisheries Council

1. Mr Jim Wallace (Orkney) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what its assessment is of the effect on the Scottish fishing industry of the outcome of the December 2005 meeting of the European Union fisheries council. (S2O-8684)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): I believe that, at the December fisheries council, we secured a satisfactory outcome for Scotland's fishing industry. We negotiated a substantial increase in Scotland's nephrops quota and successfully reduced the cuts in the haddock quota from the original 41 per cent to 13 per cent and in white-fish days at sea from 15 per cent to, in effect, 1.1 per cent. The precise impact of the settlement will depend on the circumstances of individual fishermen. However, it is clear that we achieved our overall aim of a settlement that promotes sustainable fisheries and ensures a fair deal for Scotland's fishing communities.

Mr Wallace: I thank the minister for his efforts at the fisheries council. However, does he accept that, despite those efforts, the cumulative effect over recent years of reduced haddock quota and reduced days at sea is estimated to have cost the Orkney white-fish fleet some £0.25 million simply to stay still, if skippers choose to buy or lease in additional quota or days? What plans does he have to rethink haddock management in the North sea? Does he accept that the scope that he—or indeed any minister—had to negotiate a better deal on haddock was limited by the outcome of the EU-Norway talks that took place before the council, at which no minister was present and which was dealt with by officials? Will he, before this year's talks, try to ensure that there is ministerial representation at the EU-Norway negotiations, which are fundamental to the ultimate outcome of the council? [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): Order.

Ross Finnie: I shall take the latter point first. As Jim Wallace well knows, the EU-Norway discussions have always taken place in that way, and they affect a range of member states. The negotiators for the EU-Norway talks require a slightly more specific mandate. As he suggests, those talks would be improved by having

ministerial representation, although we would have to cover the position of a large number of member states and other coastal states that take part in those talks.

I am pleased that the EU-Norway haddock management plan comes up for renewal this year. We have had preliminary discussions with our scientists, and I will be convening a meeting soon with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, our scientists and other stakeholders. Given the importance of the haddock stock to the Scottish fishing fleet, Scotland should be on the front foot in suggesting amendments to the existing plan, not just to take account of the diminishing state of the year class of 1999 but to be clear about how we are going to manage what appears to be a successful recruitment in 2005.

Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister acknowledge that not only Jim Wallace but his ministerial and party colleague Tavish Scott do not accept that the deal in December was a good one for Scotland? Indeed, Tavish Scott's comments attracted the headline "Scott urges better deal for Shetland fishermen" in *The Press and Journal* last week.

Does the minister himself accept that the deal was not a good deal for Scotland? Will he publish an action plan indicating how he intends to take forward many of the issues raised by other members, including members of the Scottish National Party? Those issues include tackling the rising fuel costs faced by the fleet, which would help fishermen to achieve increased profitability; access to quota held by retired fishermen, so that active fishermen can enjoy the benefits of the quota that is given to Scotland; and improving the haddock and monkfish quota? Will he publish a clear and concise action plan and tell our fishing communities how he intends to take those issues forward in the near future?

Ross Finnie: As one would expect, Mr Lochhead has paid more attention to a headline written by a sub-editor of a newspaper than the substance of what Mr Scott said.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): What is the story?

Ross Finnie: The story is quite simple. The story as told by the SNP is that all we have to do is declare independence and suddenly there will be more cod in the North sea. That is the story that the SNP continues to peddle. The management of fisheries stocks in the North sea is an extraordinarily serious issue that requires careful attention. We take seriously the science that supports the management of haddock and cod; we take seriously the management of all white fish and the position of the white-fish fleet. As I said in my answer to Jim Wallace, if we are going to

make progress we must put ourselves on the front foot in the review of the haddock management plan that is due this year. There is also a requirement for us to review the cod recovery plan, on which we intend to take exactly the same position. We will engage with our fishermen, our scientists and other stakeholders to ensure that the proposals and propositions that are put forward by Scotland are at the forefront.

On monkfish, we already have an agreement whereby we are required to put scientific evidence to the Commission by the first quarter of this year. The Commission is bound by the December agreement to act on that evidence in revising the monkfish quota. I intend to make clear to the industry and others precisely how we intend to take forward the settlement that we secured in December.

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will adopt my best consensual mode and say that it would be churlish not to welcome the minister's efforts to secure increased quotas of nephrops. I particularly welcome the news that the Pittenweem non-sector and under-10m prawn fishermen are to have enhanced quotas as a result. However, will the minister confirm that the quotas will be carried over on a month-to-month basis if inclement weather or any other factor makes it impossible for the fishermen to catch the quota in any single month?

Ross Finnie: That is a matter that will require further discussion between ourselves and the producer organisations. I certainly would not want us to impale ourselves on a particular allocation as opposed to the annual allocation. I am happy to look into the matter further if the member has the impression that the overall annual allocation might be impaired.

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab): I begin by warmly congratulating Ross Finnie on the significant and pivotal role that he played in the United Kingdom team that so successfully argued for such a significant uplift in prawn quota on the west coast of Scotland—a 39 per cent increase. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Mr Morrison: Will the minister explain the role that new scientific methods played in helping him to make the case for the substantial uplift in prawn quota? Will he assure me that the plans for a regional management committee for the Western Isles are proceeding as planned?

Ross Finnie: This year, we benefited enormously from taking advantage of the enhanced photographic evidence. It took some time to persuade not only our own scientists, who played a part in that, but other scientists who study the North sea that the evidence is substantive and

robust enough to enable them to make a stock assessment. The evidence was hugely helpful in establishing that approach. We propose to work with the scientists to continue to develop the technology because it is helpful to us in Scotland if we have data that can be updated quickly and reliably, as is the case with the data on nephrops.

I confirm that we will continue to ensure that the management plan and the management arrangements are implemented as soon as possible.

Scottish Environment Protection Agency

2. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it is satisfied with the performance of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. (S2O-8662)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): The annual report that SEPA published in October 2005 explains how the agency performed in 2004-05 against the key objectives that were agreed with the Scottish Executive. Although SEPA recorded a number of encouraging successes, there are some areas for the agency to improve on.

Derek Brownlee: One of those areas might be the contribution that SEPA makes to the efficient government initiative. What specific plans does the Executive have to force that agenda on?

Rhona Brankin: SEPA is delivering efficiency savings. It is delivering cash-releasing savings by reducing expenditure on a wide range of supply costs, by reducing staff in a number of business areas and by realising benefits from the introduction of a national laboratory system. It is delivering time-releasing savings by making more efficient use of office space, by improving the efficiency of its finance processes and support services and by absorbing additional work in the existing workforce. Those steps are helping SEPA to meet the costs of an increasing workload.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I give the minister an illustrative case study of a person who is building a house in an area in which a main sewer exists. He has been refused permission to access the sewer because the sewage system is at capacity. SEPA says that it will allow a temporary septic tank to be installed if a definite date can be given for its removal. Scottish Water says that it cannot give a definite date by which capacity will have been upgraded—at which time the tank could be removed—so SEPA says that it will not give permission for the temporary septic tank, which would have been allowable otherwise. Does the minister think that that is justifiable?

Rhona Brankin: I do not want to comment on particular cases, but we have advised that constraints should be removed where possible. If the member wants to write to me with specific information, I am more than happy to respond.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 was not lodged.

Sustainable Development Strategy

4. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how the sustainable development strategy will be put into practice. (S2O-8647)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): Putting the sustainable development strategy into practice will require action from portfolios across the Executive, including the eight main delivery programmes that are specifically identified in paragraph 4.14 of the strategy. Action will also be required from a wide range of other organisations.

The Executive will develop an implementation plan by spring 2006 in conjunction with partner organisations and key stakeholders. That will provide the basis for driving delivery. Performance will be monitored by the Cabinet sub-committee on sustainable Scotland and publicly reported on the basis of quarterly reports on progress against the strategy's actions and indicators.

Irene Oldfather: Does the minister agree that a commitment to local environmental justice is crucial to that implementation plan? Will he give an assurance that he will work in partnership with stakeholders and local communities so that they feel that they have a voice and can contribute to and participate in the sustainable development of their areas?

Ross Finnie: The importance of the well-being of the individual and how that plays into the sustainable development agenda was widely acknowledged in yesterday's debate on the sustainable development strategy. I am grateful to Irene Oldfather for emphasising that point. Delivering environmental justice and engaging with local communities to establish the delivery programme to which I referred will involve engagement with stakeholders and local communities.

Odour Emissions (Commercial Premises)

5. Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has sufficient powers to deal with odour emissions from commercial premises. (S2O-8639)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): In Scotland, local authorities are generally

responsible for regulating odour emissions from commercial premises.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has powers to regulate odours from certain industrial plants and waste management facilities. It achieves that by setting strict conditions on site operators when issuing licences and permits. I am satisfied that SEPA has sufficient powers to enforce those conditions.

Michael McMahon: I am surprised at the minister's response. My colleague Karen Whitefield, our constituents and I have complained about the noxious odours that emanate from the rendering plant in Newarthill—which is in my constituency—that is operated by William Forrest & Son (Paisley) Ltd. Those odours directly affect us. SEPA deals ineffectively with the complaints and a great deal of buck passing goes on between Scottish Water, the local authority and SEPA. That is part of the problem. May I advise the minister that, in spite of constant complaints from myself—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you perhaps ask the minister a question?

Michael McMahon: I was doing that, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, you were advising her—I think that that is what you said.

Michael McMahon: Is it a lack of effective powers or a lack of resources for SEPA that allows that intolerable situation to blight the lives of the people of Newarthill, Clelland and Salsburgh?

Rhona Brankin: I am aware that the Forrest Newarthill plant has a history of complaints relating to odour. The member is quite right in saying that it is SEPA's responsibility to take enforcement action to address breaches of the environmental authorisations. I understand that SEPA has already sent a report to the procurator fiscal concerning odour-related problems at the plant and is considering a separate report following further investigations.

I am sure that the member will have been in regular contact with SEPA on the matter, but if he believes that SEPA is taking insufficient steps, I am more than happy to discuss this very serious issue with him.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Is the minister aware that Michael McMahon and I will meet SEPA representatives on 27 January? Can she assure us that she will discuss our concerns about the failure of William Forrest & Son to comply with its operating conditions prior to that meeting? Will the minister give a commitment to examine the resources that SEPA has at its disposal to monitor and police the operating conditions of such plants effectively?

Rhona Brankin: I am absolutely convinced that we need to ensure that such plants operate satisfactorily and that local communities are not subject to completely unacceptable odour. I am more than happy to keep a close eye on the situation as it develops and to work closely with the members concerned in view of the seriousness of the case.

Scottish Water (Development Constraints)

6. Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the quality and standards III investment programme for Scottish Water will address the water and sewerage needs of housing developments in the Highlands and Islands. (S2O-8634)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): The Executive recognises the important role played by Scottish Water in economic and other development. In the next investment programme, ministers have set Scottish Water the objective of providing sufficient strategic capacity to meet the needs of all estimated new development throughout Scotland. Where current infrastructure constraints are preventing the provision of an adequate housing supply, we are determined that they should be overcome.

Maureen Macmillan: Neither Scottish Water nor Highland Council seems to be acting as if it is aware that that is the case. Is the minister aware that almost 50 communities in the Highland Council area alone are presently experiencing development constraints for both private and social housing, for larger developments as well as for single houses, and that particular concerns have been expressed in the Cairngorms national park area and in Skye and Lochalsh, where it is felt that Scottish Water's response has not fully addressed the reality of those concerns? People there have found it difficult to engage Scottish Water in discussion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you come quickly to the point?

Maureen Macmillan: Will the minister give a strong signal to Scottish Water to begin discussions with those communities on their needs in the light of the coming into effect of Q and S III in March?

Rhona Brankin: I understand that Scottish Water has already been in dialogue with Highland Council. Its representatives met a delegation late last year to discuss the need for investment in water supplies and waste water treatment in the Highland Council area. Working within the framework that Scottish ministers have set out, it is for Scottish Water to work directly with local

authority partners and others to identify need and to improve the planning and delivery of new capacity. I am happy to ask Scottish Water to reply to the member about the specific issues that she raises.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): The minister has said that she has set the objective. Scottish Water says that the cost of the investment programme will be £3.3 billion, while the Water Industry Commission for Scotland says that the figure will be £2.1 billion. Obviously, both of them cannot be right. Is it not the case that the Executive has sat on the sidelines, leaving matters entirely to the regulator? If the sums are wrong, as I believe they are, will not that have momentous consequences for the next seven years, because there will be insufficient money to achieve the Executive's objective and areas such as Badenoch and Strathspey will have no new houses whatever, with the catastrophic consequences that that will bring about?

Rhona Brankin: As Fergus Ewing well knows, the Scottish Parliament voted almost unanimously for a system with an independently regulated and publicly owned and controlled water industry. The Water Industry Commission set out the amount of money and investment that would be required to meet ministers' objectives. Scottish Water has until the end of January to decide whether it can meet the objectives or whether it will need to go to the Competition Commission. That is the position that the Scottish Parliament set out and agreed to.

I reiterate that Scottish Water has been set the specific objective of meeting the strategic capacity requirements of all estimated new developments during the next investment period. The WIC has said what amount of money will be required to do that.

Health and Community Care

Elderly People (West of Scotland)

1. Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to maintain the health and well-being of elderly people in the west of Scotland. (S2O-8670)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): We have introduced a range of policies that are designed to assist older people to live healthy and independent lives. When we launched "Delivering for Health" on 27 October, we emphasised the importance of strengthening and enhancing primary care services; of anticipatory care and management of long-term conditions; and of investing additional resources in disadvantaged areas to address health inequalities.

We have also undertaken a range of initiatives to encourage people of all ages to take action to improve their health and well-being by stopping smoking, drinking sensibly, eating a healthy diet and taking appropriate physical exercise.

Mr Maxwell: I am happy to support many of the measures that the minister outlined.

Is the minister aware of the threat to close Craig-en-Ros, which is the last remaining care home on the island of Cumbrae? Does he agree that the loss of that home would do nothing to maintain the health and well-being of elderly residents and that moving them to the mainland against their will would have a detrimental impact on them and their families? Will he do everything in his power to prevent the closure of Craig-en-Ros and to encourage North Ayrshire Council to enter into meaningful dialogue with its owners to seek a solution? That could involve using the spare capacity in the home for respite care, so that the last care home on the island is maintained and people do not have to go to the mainland, to which their relatives would have to travel to see them.

Lewis Macdonald: I am aware of the matter that Mr Maxwell raises. He will recognise that it is properly a matter for North Ayrshire Council to determine. We have set a clear policy direction, which is that people should be supported to stay in their own homes, when that is possible, and to stay in supported care homes when that is the next best alternative. It would be inappropriate for central Government to dictate to local authorities how best they should secure that provision.

Obesity

2. Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action is being taken to improve lifestyles and diet in an effort to reduce obesity across all age groups. (S2O-8636)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): Our health improvement programme focuses strongly on improving diet and raising physical activity levels for all age groups—an approach that has been endorsed by the World Health Organisation and other key stakeholders.

We have put in place a wide range of measures in schools, workplaces, homes and communities to increase opportunities for physical activity and to improve access to healthy food, including the highly acclaimed hungry for success school meals programme. All those measures will contribute to tackling obesity. It is important to keep public awareness high and we will continue to use the healthy living campaign to achieve that.

Christine May: I commend the minister and the Executive for what has been done. Recent statistics highlighted the scale of obesity in Scotland's young people. The British Heart

Foundation's food 4 thought campaign and the Executive's hungry for success programme are aimed at changing young people's eating habits. As a former catering professional, I welcome that. How is the minister monitoring and evaluating the success of those programmes? Is he aware of the innovative work that is being done in Fife schools, particularly to show street traders how they can profit from selling healthy foods? I invite him to see what is being done when that programme is rolled out in my constituency.

Mr Kerr: I am happy to continue to see the innovative work in Fife, where I recently had the pleasure of visiting a community neighbourhood shop. The initiative that we are supporting with traders allows community shops to present healthy choices at the front of the shop, which makes such choices easier for consumers.

As for monitoring, the Scottish health survey and individual clinical outcome indicator reports allow us to monitor and track obesity. Obesity is a huge challenge. It is multidimensional and involves not just the health service. As others throughout the world have recognised, including the World Health Organisation, Scotland is setting key best practice for the world to follow in relation to access to food, exercise and diet and through the recently announced counterweight initiative, which involves focusing the health service's efforts on key individuals who need support to change their diet and thereby to reduce obesity.

Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP): Is it right that, every time someone pays to visit a council-run leisure facility to improve their lifestyle, Gordon Brown takes 17.5 per cent of the charge in VAT? Is that not just a tax on health? Would not it be sensible for such facilities to be tax exempt, to help to keep charges down or to prevent councils such as Dundee City Council from having to hand over their leisure facilities to a charitable trust to avoid paying tax? Will the minister make representations to that effect to the Chancellor of the Exchequer?

Mr Kerr: The member has closer contacts with individuals who can deal with that matter than I have. Perhaps she might want to engage in that conversation.

The widely recognised hungry for success programme—which involves £67 million-worth of investment—comes from the very taxes that are making the key difference in turning around Scotland's record on ill health. As the chief medical officer's report recognised only last year, we are turning the corner from being the sick men and women of Europe.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): The minister will no doubt be aware of the positive endorsement, which is detailed in the

recent evaluation, that the Executive's free fruit in schools initiative has received from schools and local authorities. What plans does he have to pursue the recommendation that that initiative should be expanded to include children in more age groups? Does he agree that the success of the measure exemplifies the potential of the universal provision of healthy food to improve children's diets, health and well-being?

Mr Kerr: We should not forget the member's contribution—I refer, of course, to the Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act 2005, which clearly makes a contribution towards addressing the key question of obesity.

We should recognise that the Executive-supported scheme that Elaine Smith asks about is working effectively and that many local authorities have expanded the scheme dramatically. We are constantly considering ways of improving our schoolchildren's health and well-being. We may consider putting the school meals initiative, the physical activity task force co-ordinators and the play@home and hungry for success schemes into our nurseries. We are beginning to develop and expand the best practice that has been adopted in Scotland. Currently, the Executive's key focus is on nutritional standards not only in nurseries and primary schools, but in secondary schools, but we should also recognise that many local authorities—although not all of them—do exactly what the member wants them to do in delivering free fruit and water throughout the school year.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): The minister emphasises diet. I accept his arguments, but he also mentioned physical activity. As the Minister for Health and Community Care, what concerns does he have about the apparent loss of playing fields throughout Scotland? Should not such a trend be reversed?

Mr Kerr: I do not agree that there is an overall loss of playing fields. The matter is closely monitored by organisations that are independent of the Executive, which ensure that when one playing field has to close, another one will replace it. That is done frequently throughout Scotland.

Let us become a bit more modern about this. Our young people are not saying to us that they want to run about on muddy playing fields. The Executive supports initiatives such as the why dance? initiative, which aims to get young people involved in dance, as well as other activities and sports. We support people walking to school and other activities relating to schools to ensure that our children undertake more physical activity. Playing fields are not the only issue, and the Executive supports a broad approach. I accept that it is important that children should be able to run around on playing fields, but they can play badminton, dance and go down other routes. We

are embarking on serious projects, turning round our young people and getting them involved in exercise through innovative schemes. The issue is not only about playing fields—we should be encouraging a wide diversity of activities.

Specialist Nurses (Parkinson's Disease)

3. Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to recruit and train specialist nurses to work in the community with sufferers of chronic conditions, such as Parkinson's disease. (S2O-8610)

I declare an interest: I have Parkinson's disease.

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): Individual national health service boards have primary responsibility for workforce planning. That responsibility includes the recruitment and training of specialist nurses who work with sufferers of long-term conditions such as Parkinson's disease. However, we have initiated a Scotland-wide review of community nursing, which will set the direction for creating a modern, redesigned community nursing service. The review is intended to contribute to the reduction of hospital admissions, improve the management of patients with long-term conditions such as Parkinson's disease, facilitate hospital discharges and support the care and treatment of patients in their homes and community settings.

Margo MacDonald: I pay tribute to the work that the Minister for Health and Community Care, Andy Kerr, has done on long-term conditions and draw to his attention the work of the expert group that is currently producing a Parkinson's disease plan for Lothian and the Borders, which may act as a prototype. The expert assessment is that six to eight nurses are required, but there is currently only one nurse. Therefore, there are obvious resource implications, as there are with lymphoedema nurses. I know from a successful meeting that I had with the minister that there is an on-going review and ask the Executive not to shy away from providing the additional resources that will be required, because the service will be much enhanced if the current plans are properly seen through.

Lewis Macdonald: We recognise the importance of the areas of specialism to which Margo MacDonald refers. We will take into careful consideration the findings of the reviews to which I and Margo MacDonald referred and will make decisions based on the evidence.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Is the minister aware of the excellent work being done at a day clinic at Borders general hospital? I know that the minister has visited it. It specialises in clients who have Parkinson's and

treats them clinically and holistically. I recently met 100 of those clients. Could I suggest that, as part of the review, either the minister or the deputy minister goes to that day clinic, meets the professionals and clients and learns from them about how they deal with such a dreadful and debilitating disease while keeping up their morale and staying in the best health possible?

Lewis Macdonald: I certainly want to ensure that when our officials carry out the review, they take evidence from those with first-hand experience of what is required. I will, of course, pay due heed to the advice that they give me.

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I remind the minister that key generic issues for specialist nurses or those who aspire to become so are time and resources for training and professional development, and support for the establishment of such posts. An additional key problem has been the patchy and ad hoc development of such posts across the country. In that context, what is the Executive doing specifically to support the development of clinical nurse specialist posts in NHS Scotland in general?

Lewis Macdonald: All national health service organisations have a duty to ensure that all staff have personal development plans, which includes identifying the specific training needs of members of staff. They also have a responsibility for nursing and midwifery post-registration education and for working in partnership with staff to ensure that they are supported and encouraged to maintain and develop their skills.

Under the facing the future banner, we have committed more than £10 million to several nursing and midwifery initiatives during the past three financial years, because we recognise the importance of maintaining training opportunities in order to enable greater specialism in the future.

Smoke-free Policies

4. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how it is promoting smoke-free policies to local authorities. (S2O-8682)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): Local authorities, like all other employers, will require to comply with the smoke-free law that will come into effect on 26 March. Recently, we issued guidance to local authorities, national health service organisations and other care service providers to help them to do so. The guidance also provided advice on how organisations might work towards comprehensive smoke-free policies for the benefit of staff and those who use their services.

Iain Smith: Will the minister please confirm that the scare stories about a total ban on smoking in places outside are just that—scare stories? Does

he agree that we should encourage best practice such as that of public bodies in Lithuania, where smoking on school and health premises is prohibited by local regulations; in New Zealand, where the buildings and grounds of schools and early childhood centres became smoke-free in January 2004; in Sweden, where smoking is prohibited in schoolyards and other outdoor areas; or even in Texas, where smoking is prohibited within 15ft of the entrance of any public building? Will the minister encourage local authorities and health boards to follow such good practice to protect our children and to stop us having to run the gauntlet of smokers as we enter public buildings?

Mr Kerr: I share many of those views and it is useful to have the opportunity to clarify the situation given the article with the headline, "Scotland extends smoking ban to the great outdoors". It was made clear to the journalist concerned before publication that that was simply not true. Therefore, I confirm that our legislation is about substantially enclosed public spaces. Of course, the powers that the member is asking about are given in the guidance. Several of our local authorities already—sensibly, in my view—ban smoking in children's playgrounds. That seems to be a sensible precautionary policy that our local authorities should use to protect our children. All the possibilities that the member mentioned are available under the guidance but, as he quite rightly said, they should be matters for local discussion, decision and implementation.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am glad that the minister has taken the opportunity to clarify the situation. As he well knows, Irene Oldfather lodged stage 3 amendments to the bill that sought to extend the ban to outside areas. I spoke against those amendments. Indeed, the minister said:

"The bill reflects the Executive's intention to protect members of the public in wholly or substantially enclosed premises ... It is extremely important that the legislation is consistent, fair and easily enforceable by proprietors of establishments and environmental health officers. Any legislation for outdoor areas would need to be carefully defined to provide the same clarity. The bill does not provide for that."—[*Official Report*, 30 June 2005; c 18634.]

Does the minister agree that new legislation would be needed to allow for an extension of the no-smoking policy to public open spaces? Does he accept that, if the Smoking, Health and Social Care (Scotland) Act 2005 is seen to be used to introduce a ban on smoking in public open spaces, that will undermine all the good will that there has been towards the legislation so far?

Mr Kerr: The member is falling into a trap that should not be there. A journalist inquired whether the Executive intends to extend the ban on smoking to public open spaces and we said no;

yet we read a headline in a paper that states, "Scotland extends smoking ban to the great outdoors". That headline has set off the debate. The point is not that I need to make clear in the chamber now that the ban will not be extended. I made that clear before the journalist wrote the story and all the nonsense that followed from it. The article is bad reporting and is bad for the Scottish people. It threatens to undermine the well-supported legislation that we have passed. The Scottish Executive has no intention of extending the ban in the manner that the member described. As I made clear when we debated Irene Oldfather's amendments, doing so would require further legislation.

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):

I declare an interest: I am a director of Motherwell Football Club.

Will the minister consider approaching the Scottish Football Association about following up on the excellent scheme that has been initiated at Hampden, Ibrox and Parkhead of having a no-smoking zone at football matches? Will he purchase the centre circle at all 42 senior football grounds for use to advertise the logo of the no-smoking campaign, which would bring home to every football fan the tremendous policy that he is pursuing? Already this season, 2 million people have attended matches in the Scottish Premier League, so such advertising would be very cost-effective.

Mr Kerr: I am always interested in innovative ideas. The member's idea is a good one and I am happy to consider it. I would have liked to have one at Clyde's ground last Sunday, but that is another matter entirely. The idea will receive good support from the First Minister. We need to innovate in how we try to enable the public to understand what we are doing. In the run-up to the introduction of the ban, that will involve a letter drop and a leaflet to every household in Scotland. I am very interested in the member's suggestion.

I welcome what has been done at Ibrox, Celtic Park and Hampden. We want to encourage that and I am happy to further my dialogue with the football authorities, to ensure that we continue to encourage sports stadia to follow the good lead that has been shown.

Audiology Services (Improvements)

5. Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what specific improvements in service, including reductions in waiting times, have been experienced by patients as a result of the Executive's modernisation plans and extra investment in audiology services. (S2O-8624)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): Waiting times have been reduced in the majority of NHS boards. An important part of the modernisation agenda focuses on monitoring and encouraging the reduction in waiting times and providing support to boards, where required. Boards that have not yet met waiting time targets will be supported to do so.

Improvements have also been made across Scotland in audiology accommodation, information technology, equipment, staffing, training and the patient journey. We expect to meet our partnership agreement commitment that by March this year the NHS will be in a position to offer digital hearing aids in all cases in which they represent the most clinically effective option.

Susan Deacon: I welcome the progress that has been made. Does the minister share my concern that, despite substantial additional investment and numerous reports, plans and other work, improvement in many areas has been disappointingly slow? Here in Lothians, patients can still wait a year for an initial assessment. Does the minister acknowledge that the pace of progress must be sped up? Does he also acknowledge that getting the necessary workforce in place is critical? For instance, I understand that in Lothians the service has around half of the qualified staff who are needed. Specifically, I ask the minister to ensure that the important new BSc audiology degree at Queen Margaret University College, which is welcome, is properly supported, developed and put on an equal footing with other allied health profession courses in both Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole.

Lewis Macdonald: I do indeed recognise Susan Deacon's concerns about the position in Lothian. We have recognised the particular challenges there and have asked NHS Lothian to produce a clear and robust action plan in the course of this financial year to indicate how it will make further progress to meet the targets that have been set for it.

Susan Deacon is right to highlight the importance of workforce and staffing issues. The Executive has provided funding support for the course at Queen Margaret University College to which she referred. That will involve a four-year bachelor of science course as well as a two-year fast-track conversion course for existing science graduates. We want to ensure that the course is a success in the way that the member describes. I will certainly ensure that our department pays close attention to ensuring that that happens.

Skills and Training

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S2M-3806, in the name of Allan Wilson, on skills and training for a modern Scotland.

15:01

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson):

I am certainly pleased, as I hope are other members, to have this opportunity to discuss a critical issue for the prosperity and well-being of Scotland: how we develop and grow our workforce to provide more opportunities for individuals to flourish in work and for growing businesses and our economy more generally to prosper. Indeed, the Executive has embarked on an historic mission to secure full employment and to eliminate poverty within a generation.

Over the past year, we have consulted extensively. We have sought the views of many experts, practitioners and—crucially—employers with the enthusiasm and commitment to move more people into successful and rewarding work. Their input has been invaluable.

It has taken time, but we must remember that in excess of £500 million is spent in Scotland every year to help people into work. That does not include our investment in young people. We need to be sure that any changes we make are appropriate. It is right that before we publish our plans, members have the opportunity to discuss the issues and contribute their views this afternoon. The Enterprise and Culture Committee will also have the opportunity to contribute later this year.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Once the debate has taken place, will the minister be in a position to tell us when the employability strategy and the not in education, employment or training strategy will be published?

Allan Wilson: We hope to publish both documents in the very near future. I would have thought that Scottish National Party members would welcome the opportunity to have the debate in advance of publication so that they can make useful contributions and influence the future direction of the strategies.

I emphasise that we work closely with the United Kingdom Government on this agenda, as members can imagine. We are working with the Department for Work and Pensions on its plans for welfare reform, which will be published shortly, and have shared with the DWP our work over the past year. We share its aspiration to move towards an 80 per cent employment rate in the UK over the

next 20 years. It is important that we co-ordinate our workforce development activity with its operation of the benefits and welfare-to-work systems.

As my subsequent remarks will show, Scotland can be proud of its record on increasing employment and investing in skills in recent years. We have good foundations for further success, but we face significant challenges in helping more people into work.

Employers are key to the agenda. My colleague Nicol Stephen will expand on that if time allows. We need to broaden the labour pool from which employers can recruit for successful businesses and, equally, we need employers to play their part in providing the opportunities for increased employment.

The importance that we attach to growing and developing the workforce is clear in our published documents. In the partnership agreement, we set out our vision to encourage and stimulate economic growth and to tackle poverty and disadvantage. Enterprise can flourish only where the opportunity for people to contribute to enterprise and the economy exists for all and where no one is left behind. It is about providing young people with the skills for work; helping people of all ages to develop their skills while in work; and encouraging more economically inactive people to move into employment.

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

What concrete methods does the minister have in place to measure outcomes, with a baseline now that will allow progress to be measured into the future?

Allan Wilson: We measure our progress using international comparators. I hope that the debate will not turn into a sterile exchange of statistics, but we have the best youth employment figures of anywhere in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Mr Mather's amendment is wrong in what it says about young people who are not in education, employment or training, but I accept that these issues are challenging. As I have said, our objective is to reach a position where no young person is left without the opportunity for education, employment or training.

It is important to emphasise that we are living through the longest continuous period of economic growth in a generation. To keep growing, we need to build skills and qualifications levels among our workforce. We are making real progress on that. Since 1993, the proportion of the working-age population without qualifications has dropped from 26 per cent to 16 per cent. Around half of our young people undertake higher education. In the academic year up to 2004, nearly 500,000 people

enrolled in our further education colleges. As everybody here will know, we currently have more than 34,000 people working towards a modern apprenticeship, with a further 9,000 on skillseekers programmes.

All that progress is reflected throughout the labour market. Youth unemployment has fallen by 30 per cent while the overall claimant-count unemployment rate has fallen by 40 per cent. Meanwhile, the employment rate has increased from 71.3 per cent to 75.2 per cent—an increase of almost 4 percentage points. That means that 159,000 more people are in work. For the first time in a generation, our employment rate is above the United Kingdom average.

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): I wonder whether I may take the minister back a sentence or two, to when he was talking about measurements. What definitions does he use? Does he consider how long a person is in a job? For example, what about somebody who takes a job but leaves it a week later? Is that person counted, or is a period of time—three months or six months—required?

Allan Wilson: For employment and unemployment, we use measurements that are recognised by the International Labour Organisation. We currently have one of the highest employment rates in Europe—75 per cent—as well as the highest employment rate since records began. We also have the lowest unemployment rate for a generation—3.2 per cent. That is how we measure and those are the results.

However, I would not want anyone to think that we were complacent. There are still some areas of concentrated high unemployment and there are many people who face multiple obstacles to entering and progressing in the labour market. We know that many of those individuals want to work, given the right opportunities and appropriate support. Between August and October 2005, the number of economically inactive people in Scotland stood at 526,000. Of those, 198,000 said that they wanted to work.

A substantial number of those people have no qualifications—

Jim Mather: Will the minister take an intervention?

Allan Wilson: I have already taken three interventions and I have to think of my time.

The people who are economically inactive include people with no qualifications, who represent 35 per cent of workless people; people with health problems, including people with mental health problems, who represent more than 40 per cent of claimants of incapacity benefit; and lone parents and others with caring responsibilities—

although we have made great progress in that regard, with the employment rate for lone parents increasing from 41.6 per cent in 1977 to 54.9 per cent in 2004.

Ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected by unemployment, as are people with substance abuse problems, the homeless, and ex-offenders. As I have said, we also face a particular challenge with some of Scotland's young people who are not in education, employment or training. Specifically for them, we have invested £22.4 million since the Beattie report was published in 1999. A further £86 million has been invested in the determined to succeed strategy. Educational maintenance allowances now offer financial support of up to £1,500 a year to encourage young people from low-income households to remain in post-compulsory education.

We need to support people whose health prevents them from getting employment. We recognise the links between employment, poverty and health. That was why we established the Scottish centre for healthy working lives. The UK Government pathways to work programme offers support to help those who are claiming incapacity benefit to move back into employment. The programme will be operating successfully across a third of Scotland by April in targeting the areas of very high benefit dependency.

We need to keep working in the important area of people with low or no skills to raise the skills of people who are in low-paid jobs as well as those of the unemployed.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Will the minister comment on the role and development of the sector skills councils and on their importance for those who are in work?

Allan Wilson: The sector skills councils are an employer-led approach to tackling skills shortages or gaps. It is vital that there is employer buy-in to the wider employability strategy and to tackling skills gaps and shortages so that our investment is targeted at the areas and the sectors of our economy that need it most. We are investing record sums in further education: £620 million by 2007-08. ILA Scotland and the Scottish union learning fund are contributing to the raising of skills level for those in employment and those closer to the labour market.

Many of those who are out of work or who have low levels of skills or qualifications live in our most deprived areas. In addition to the investment that I have already talked about, we need to focus our community funding to ensure better outcomes in those areas. To achieve that, £318 million—in addition to other moneys—is being invested in the community regeneration fund. Nearly £50 million of that funding will go to support the national

priority of helping more people into work. From 2004 to 2008, £50 million pounds will be invested in the working for families fund to remove childcare barriers to work for 15,000 families. There is no shortage of resources being directed at those areas.

I want to get the important message across that the Executive is making a considerable range of support and investment available to develop the employability of our current and future workforce in Scotland. We must recognise that there has been much progress. The message that we have taken from our consultation to date is that the considerable funding and support on offer need to be co-ordinated in the interests of individuals and employers. That is an important message, and there is scope to design and deliver new sorts of services. We have made much progress and we have much progress to look forward to. We will publish a new strategy for young people who are not in education, employment or training in the next few weeks.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that developing the current and future workforce of Scotland is key to ending poverty and sustaining economic growth; recognises the very good progress that is being made in reducing unemployment through investment in skills and training, and welcomes the Scottish Executive's intention to work with the United Kingdom Government, employers and employer organisations, universities, colleges, training organisations and other public agencies to drive forward opportunities for workforce development to strengthen the economy and improve the employability and skills of individuals across Scotland, in particular those furthest from employment and those in lower paid, low skilled jobs.

15:13

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The Scottish National Party has important reservations about the Executive's management of the skills agenda and about its motion. We believe that the motion attempts to paper over the cracks in a poor track record. That is implicitly admitted in the text of the motion, the words of which glare out at us: "poverty", "growth", "unemployment", "employability" and

"lower paid, low skill jobs".

The minister mentioned growth, but the claims that he made were UK claims. Scotland has been in recession in recent memory and has had lower growth than the UK for 30 years.

Allan Wilson: Will the member not accept that since the Executive made growing the economy its top priority, the economy has grown in every quarter since the present Government was elected?

Jim Mather: In very recent memory—2001—that was not the case and, in essence, the gap

between Scotland and the rest of the UK continues perennially. Those are facts, and facts are chieftains that winna ding. The Executive also has a poor track record in the net results achieved through the skills programme, to which I will come in a moment. It is what I call the John Bradley syndrome. John Bradley gave a Fraser of Allander lecture in which he said that Scotland has wonderful task forces, consultations—although I note that there has been a very low contribution from real businesspeople to some of our consultations—advisory groups and glossy documents. Although all those are better here than they are in Ireland, when it comes to the bit, Scotland produces results that Ireland would repudiate. We will grow about 1.8 per cent this year: Ireland is growing at 5 per cent. There is a fatal flaw: we are running a branch economy. That means that much of the benefit that will accrue from the skills strategy is liable to leak away into other economies.

Let us examine the effect of the Executive's management of the economic and skills agenda. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report "Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Scotland 2005", which was published last month punctures the Executive's complacency about employment. It tells us that one third of working people in Scotland earn less than £6.50 an hour. That means that, in total, 41.47 per cent of the working-age population—let me spell that out: 1.162 million people—in Scotland earn less than £6.50 an hour, receive social security benefits, are in receipt of an early pension or are unwaged. That is more than two out of five working-age Scots.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Will Jim Mather tell me the Scottish National Party's policy for increasing the minimum wage and what it would increase to?

Jim Mather: Our aspirations for income in Scotland are without ceiling. We want living standards in Scotland to converge on those of other countries, not to be marooned in the bottom, where the Labour Party has put us.

The record is one of 30 years of stalling and failing progress. The true extent of maladministration is disguised because many of the talented people who have moved out of Scotland have improved the figures. Meanwhile, we have had consultations that do not address the users' needs and, always, the dead hand of Government and Scottish Enterprise falling short on delivering what employers and individuals genuinely value. What is my evidence? It is the lack of any quality assurance programme to test fitness for purpose and produce an evidence-led feedback loop. It is the fact that vocational qualifications are obviously of dubious market

value, given that they are rarely asked for in job adverts. I also point to Investors in People, the head counting of those in skillseekers programmes and the tendency to force young businesses into business plan production.

All that demeans and devalues Government agencies and their ability to contribute. Not only are the processes not valued, but employers and individuals increasingly regard VQs and Investors in People as internal, institutional measurement units. They are not valued in the real world. The Government must face the fact that they look to hard-nosed businesspeople and hard-pressed employees like the production of counterfeit currency and the practice of false accounting—making up numbers that do not contribute to the real world.

We welcome any move to improve, given the Executive's track record, but we are honour bound to remain sceptical about its effectiveness. History and others' experience tell us that the Executive's worthy objectives self-evidently cannot be met until Scotland couples relevant, valued and constantly improving training with the full range of economic powers. That is the only way that anybody on the planet has ever gained a competitive edge. It is the only way that we will create levels of employment opportunity and sustainable income improvement that will attract talented people to, and retain them in, Scotland. Let us face it: nothing else works.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will Mr Mather tell us which of the interesting economic policies that he espouses on the SNP's behalf have been signed off by his party's new friends in the Scottish Green Party?

Jim Mather: I advise Mr Fraser to read a wonderful book called "The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth", by Benjamin Friedman, which makes the case—which my friends in the Greens will understand—that a strong economy creates a better ecology and a better custodianship of the environment. I believe that the Greens will sign up to that and move on with us.

However, I am in confident mood. I am confident that we will get a better solution because, after all, Scotland is one year closer to full powers, the Executive is one year less credible and the people of Scotland are one year more indignant. That is especially the case for a goodly proportion of the 41.47 per cent whom I mentioned. One third of our working people on less than £6.50 an hour represents 820,000 people, which is a large number of people. The unemployed are a further 144,000 and the economically inactive who would like to work are, as the minister mentioned, 198,000. The total is 1.162 million people—and

they have families. They are a major constituency that the Government continually fails to address.

I agree that the skills gap is a concern. I also record my concern about the Bank of Scotland's labour market report that shows skills shortages in certain sectors, as that is not reflective of what is really happening in Scotland. The bank would probably claim that that is a sign that things are successful, but it is a sign to me that people are moving out and leaving. However, the bank is now in a state of grace after its chief executive, Jim Crosby, turned Queen's evidence yesterday. Talking about the bank's entry into Ireland, he said:

"We like Ireland because it's got great economic prospects, substantially better and sustainably better than the UK".

We want that same growth here in Scotland, but we will not get that by sticking to half-baked policies that treat only the symptoms and do not go the full road.

Eventually, the minister will share our conclusion that, after another day at the office, he now has more stuff on the record with which history will condemn him. Well done.

I move amendment S2M-3806.1, to leave out from "recognises" to end and insert:

"but regrets the continuing delay in the publication of the Scottish Executive's employability strategy and the lack of any new measures to tackle the unacceptably high number of 16 to 19-year-olds who are neither in employment, education or training in Scotland and recognises that the Executive's worthy objectives self-evidently can only be met comprehensively when Scotland couples relevant, valued and constantly improving training with the full range of economic powers that can credibly and tangibly improve competitiveness and create the levels of employment opportunity and sustainable income improvement for all which, in turn, will retain and attract talented people to Scotland."

15:20

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We welcome the opportunity to discuss the important subject of workforce development. We agree with the part of the Executive's motion that says:

"developing the current and future workforce of Scotland is key to ending poverty and sustaining economic growth".

I accept that there has been some good news on the development of skills and training. The modern apprenticeship scheme, which was introduced by the previous Conservative Government in 1994, has been a tremendous success, as it has enabled thousands of young people to access work-based training.

We welcome the proposal that services that are currently provided by the new futures fund will be

devolved from Scottish Enterprise to local community planning partnerships. It makes sense for projects to be delivered at a local level with local input. Perhaps that approach could be mirrored elsewhere within Scottish Enterprise, which is currently pursuing a centralising agenda by seeking to scrap the existing local enterprise company boards.

Notwithstanding that good news, we still face serious challenges. Scotland has a particular problem with its rate of young people who are not in education, employment or training, which is higher than the rate in any other country in Europe or in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. It is estimated that, between March 2004 and February 2005, the number of Scottish 16 to 19-year-olds who were classified as NEET was around 35,000. That accounts for 13.1 per cent of females and 13.9 per cent of males—approximately one in seven—in that age group. For Glasgow, the rate was as high as 23 per cent. Despite the substantial Executive investment that has been aimed at supporting young people, the sad fact is that that proportion has remained relatively static.

The impact of being NEET can be devastating. An investigation by the NEET working group showed that, for a young man, the effect of being NEET is that, by the time he is 21, he is four times more likely to be unemployed, three times more likely to have depression or mental health problems, five times more likely to have a criminal record and six times less likely to have any qualifications.

Allan Wilson: I had not wanted to get into a situation in which we simply bandy statistics, but does the member accept that, in the international comparisons to which he referred, the proportion of young people between the ages of 15 to 19 who are in employment is higher in Scotland than in the rest of the UK and Europe and that our rate is also higher than that of the rest of the OECD put together?

Murdo Fraser: How quickly the minister changes his tune, given that he said a few minutes ago that he did not want to bandy statistics. The figures that I quoted are recognised OECD statistics. We could have a battle of statistics if he wants, but let me move on.

A more important issue is what can be done. The working group found evidence to suggest that the two principal factors that determine whether a young person becomes NEET are disadvantage—the person comes from a disadvantaged family or deprived community—and educational disaffection. Often, NEETs have been persistent truants or have had low attainment levels. Clearly, Scotland has a particular problem, which is having both a long-term effect on our economic

opportunities and a dismal impact on the life prospects and opportunities of tens of thousands of young Scots.

The problem is not getting much better, so what is the Executive doing? To be fair, the Executive is developing an employability framework for Scotland to examine ways of helping people into work. In June last year, we were told that the recommendations from the working groups were being fed into a draft framework that would be completed by the autumn. Last month, we were told that the framework was still under development, but it has still not seen the light of day. Surely it is about time that such an important document was produced so that we might see how the Executive proposes to tackle those serious issues. In his opening remarks, the minister said that he wanted to have today's debate first, to allow input. I will take him at his word by giving him some positive ideas that I believe should be incorporated into his framework, which I look forward to seeing in due course.

We think that policy should be developed in two areas. The first relates directly to education. We know that many youngsters are disengaged from academic study in schools throughout Scotland. If they had access to vocationally focused training in further education colleges, they might leave school with qualifications and skills that would equip them for the workforce. That would be good not only for the wider economy but for themselves as individuals.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Is the member aware of the Education Committee's inquiry into the matter? The school-college review showed that the most advantage from vocational training at age 14 could be gained not through focusing such training on the disaffected or on those who lack motivation but through making it available generally. Perhaps the member's point is misplaced.

Murdo Fraser: I am aware of the work that has been done. As ever, it is those who are most motivated who benefit most from programmes. That goes to show that more needs to be done to help those who are currently disengaged from education to access vocational training.

Secondly, we must look to expand the role of community-based charitable institutions. Many such bodies throughout Scotland help NEETs. I recently visited the Fairbridge project in Dundee, which is targeted at youngsters who are not in employment, education or training. It was clear from the youngsters to whom I spoke that they are benefiting hugely from the support that is on offer from that voluntary organisation. That is one example of the many different groups throughout the country that provide targeted, hands-on, one-to-one support for youngsters from some of our

most disadvantaged communities and from difficult backgrounds.

As it develops the strategy, the Executive should consider policies to increase the voluntary sector's independence and to end the excessive bureaucracy that stifles such organisations. Of course, all bodies that are in receipt of public money should have to account properly for it, but all too often those groups find that an undue proportion of their time is taken up with form filling and ticking boxes when they need to get on with much more important tasks. It is time for a new partnership between the public sector and the voluntary sector that recognises the voluntary sector's strengths and frees up those involved to get on with the important tasks in hand. I trust that the minister will, if he is genuine in saying that he wants to hear our views on drawing up the framework, take on board what I have said this afternoon.

I move amendment S2M-3806.2, to leave out from "recognises" to end and insert:

"notes the outstanding success of modern apprenticeships in helping thousands of young people into work and training since 1994; welcomes the devolution of workforce services currently provided by the New Futures Fund from Scottish Enterprise to local community partnerships; notes with concern that Scotland has more young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) than any other OECD country or UK region; is disappointed at the delay in the Scottish Executive publishing its long-awaited Employability Framework; notes the findings of the NEET working group set up by the Executive that young people who are NEET are generally characterised by low educational attainment, truancy and/or disadvantaged backgrounds, and calls on the Executive to extend the vocational opportunities available at further education colleges from the age of 14 and to expand the role of community-based voluntary programmes which play a crucial role in combating deprivation."

15:27

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The debate is an excellent opportunity to evaluate our progress on helping Scottish people to reach their potential and deliver our primary goal for Scotland of economic growth.

Scotland has made progress under this Government. More people of working age are becoming better qualified and fewer people are completely unqualified. We have increased the number of graduates in our workforce by abolishing fees and employers are spending more on training and developing their staff. Those results indicate how our workforce is developing to meet the challenges of being a modern growing economy.

I welcome that progress, but today I will speak about opportunities that could give Scotland's young people—particularly young people from the

Highlands—a further edge. We must equip our young people with the tools to work in the emerging global marketplace that is being created by an enlarging Europe and emerging countries such as India and China. A key to the success of Scots and Scottish businesses in the new environment is their ability to speak and work in languages other than English. Equipping young people with another language might open many doors for their future. Not having that skill is a barrier—economically, socially and culturally—while having another language could provide an opportunity for our young people.

France, Germany and Italy make up three of Scotland's top five export markets. French and German are the languages that are most required by Scottish business. Those countries teach foreign languages to their children from the age of five. In Scotland, our young people can now learn a language, but not until they are 11. I hope that the Executive's review of the school curriculum will propose more opportunities for younger children to learn languages—including the languages of the emerging economies that I mentioned. That could give our young people a tangible advantage in the global marketplace.

I will now turn from the global to the local. In my area, the Highlands, young people are—as we know—keen to stay and work there. That is to be applauded and supported. The modern apprenticeship scheme helps to encourage and promote that. The scheme has much potential to develop people and grow businesses in Scotland. The fact that any business of any size can access the scheme is an important part of its appeal in rural areas. However, I have concerns about how modern apprenticeships work in practice. I hope that when the minister sums up, he will address the problems that businesses in my constituency have found with the scheme, notwithstanding the good work that is being done.

I put on record that Highlands and Islands Enterprise has made welcome advances in modern apprenticeships by removing the local and age-related discrepancies in its funding to create a simple funding package to help businesses to recruit apprentices. However—this a big however—a significant problem appears to remain. The Highlands and Islands face a disadvantage in getting businesses to recruit apprentices. The funding for an apprentice working in the HIE area is significantly less than that for an apprentice in the Scottish Enterprise area. Indeed, in sectors such as engineering, the gap is as much as £3,000 and it appears set to rise. Local businesses tell me that they feel that there is a postcode lottery in support for training. Sadly, a Caithness apprentice appears to be of less worth than a Clydebank one. Businesses tell

me clearly that they want a level playing field in that respect.

Surely the worth of an apprentice should not be determined by geography. I appreciate that the issue is not straightforward, but we must acknowledge that businesses that work and seek apprentices in the Highlands must not lose out against businesses in different local enterprise areas across Scotland. Apprentices may also lose out by having less support coming to them and so be discouraged from living and working in and developing the economy of the Highlands. I hope that the minister will be willing to look at this important issue, which is extremely important in my part of Scotland. The skills of Scotland's people are Scotland's strength and they provide the only way to lift people out of poverty and deliver opportunity. They are also a source of excellence.

I was most pleased to hear that the UK has put itself forward to host the WorldSkills competition for 2007, which is known by some as the skills Olympics. I hope that the minister will contribute to the bid and ensure that young Scots have the opportunity to be part of the UK team, wherever the event is hosted, to show that Scotland has talented young people with exceptional skills in many vocations, from traditional craft engineering to modern engineering and design.

We have made progress, which I welcome and am proud of. I believe that that would not have been possible had it not been for my own party's contribution to the government of this country. I would welcome the minister's comments on the points that I have made and I will have great pleasure in supporting the motion in his name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): We now move to the open debate. I call Fiona Hyslop, who will be followed by Duncan McNeil. Speeches will be six minutes.

15:33

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Much of the skills debate tends to concentrate on enterprise, the economy and employer-led initiatives. The Government often claims that its role and responsibility is to co-ordinate employer-led activity. I think that the hard-nosed businessmen to whom Jim Mather referred are capable of adding the skills and training themselves and look to the Government to take care of its own back yard by developing the workforce for which it is responsible. Indeed, this debate was first called workforce development.

I look forward to the Government confessing to the problems it has faced in developing the public service workforce for which it is responsible. For example, with regard to teachers, we know that

there are great challenges and constraints in reducing class sizes. We also know that many young people are vulnerable because of the need for more social workers. And that we need more doctors and nurses. The Government has in the past been unable to anticipate and plan for changes such as the coming European working time directive for doctors and for issues to do with nursing and the changing age profile of the workforce. Employers expect the Government to look to the development of its own workforce.

There are huge challenges. The NEET figures are very stark indeed and we must address them. Taking the minister at his word—that he will listen to what members have to say—I point out that 50 per cent of Scottish Enterprise's budget is addressed to Careers Scotland. I raised that issue with Nicol Stephen when we did the budget scrutiny. Is it appropriate that most of the attention is concentrated on remedial action in the post-school environment? If we want to tackle the issue seriously, perhaps the intervention should be earlier, before youngsters get into the NEET category.

I want to pursue the theme of early intervention. I also want to reflect concerns that businesses have about the Government's initiatives, particularly in teaching and education. We know that the Government faces big challenges in meeting its targets for class-size reductions. To meet the target for the number of teachers it requires, it would have had to double, if not treble, the number of English and mathematics teachers in initial teacher training—the places in initial teacher training would have had to be taken primarily by English and maths teachers.

Because the Executive has started work on reaching its target too late, it will have problems. It is increasing the number of teachers in English and maths, but what about language and science teachers? The immediate priority has started to exclude the recruitment of teachers of other subjects. As Jamie Stone said, if we want to meet the challenges of the future, we must have language teachers to teach pupils, particularly in early years and particularly if we want to have the secondary-into-primary use of McCrone time to allow such intervention.

When employers talk about the skills gap, they are often talking about soft skills. Yesterday evening, I read an interesting and telling report by John McLaren—not somebody whom I would ordinarily quote—entitled "Soft Skills & Early Years", which was produced for Scottish Enterprise. He comments:

"The best evaluations relate to Early Years Intervention and indicate, for some programmes, very high rates of return. This suggests that 'soft' skills might be best

encouraged at an early age, when habits are less set and minds more plastic."

Members who attended the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration presentation at lunch time will know about its appeal for a joined-up approach. We know that criminality and offending often occur among people who have suffered from being in care or under protection at an early age. In the United States, people such as James Heckman are considering at which point in the journey interventions should be made if we want to invest in soft skills and human capital.

Our country must sign up to a national mission in relation to children in their early years, by which I mean those who are zero to three, never mind those who are three to five and at nursery school. We must reach those children if we want to make a huge shift, break the cycle of dependency and provide energetic, creative people for our future workforce. That mission is the Government's job. Given our aging population, the figure that Jim Mather mentioned—that one in seven young people are not in education or training—is acutely sensitive for the employment market.

Allan Wilson: I follow the logic of the member's argument and I agree entirely with the point about early intervention, but does the member accept that there is another priority? If circa 75 per cent of the workforce of 2020 is currently in employment, surely that demands attention and investment now to ensure that workforce development takes place.

Fiona Hyslop: I agree, but the big challenge for the Parliament and the Executive is whether we micromanage year to year or engage in a strategic debate about where we want to be in 2020. Do we have only the one role that the minister mentioned? My concern is that lifelong learning tends to be about continuing education for adults and not about what happens in the early years. The Executive is going backwards in relation to early intervention. In 1999, we started work on social justice and early intervention, but, unfortunately, all the signals are that the work is slowing down. For example, Glasgow City Council is taking away nursery teachers and schools.

A strong economic case can be made for early intervention. The minister is right that we must consider the size and age profile of the population in 2020, but we must do so strategically. The people of Scotland look to the Parliament to give a strategic vision, rather than to examine statistics and micromanage activities day to day or year to year. We can have a national mission that addresses the needs of the economy and that provides firm foundations for the young people who will carry us into the future.

15:38

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): The motion states:

"the Parliament agrees that developing the current and future workforce of Scotland is key to ending poverty and sustaining economic growth".

Who could disagree with that? It is skills that pay the bills.

I cannot take part in the debate without mentioning the recent lay-offs in the electronics manufacturing industry, one of the casualties being Sanmina-SCI's personal computer division in Greenock, which is to close with the loss of 370 core jobs, which will move to Hungary. One difference between the closures now and the past closures of shipyards is that we now recognise the need to invest not just in attracting companies to come and stay here, but in people, so that they are better equipped to move from one company to another.

Life is more complicated now than it was many years ago, when people did their apprenticeship and then got a watch after 30 years. We all now recognise that we need to equip people for the changed environment. I have been in talks in the past couple of weeks, and this morning with the Deputy First Minister, to see how we can move the people at Sanmina-SCI from their difficult situation to continuing employment. There is an array of help that we can give: not rhetoric, not headlines, not taking on companies and globalisation, but real, practical initiatives.

For example, there is the partnership action for continuing employment—or PACE—framework, which could put people in that factory in Greenock today to analyse the existing skills of the employees there. There are the job-match schemes that can match those people and their existing skills with jobs. There is the transport fund, which can make the wider labour market more available for them. There is training for work. All those initiatives are in place. They are all practical responses to help people get on.

In addition, there is the massive public expenditure that will create jobs and infrastructure: in the classroom, classroom assistants; on building sites, the construction of new schools. All that goes beyond rhetoric and makes the right to work more a reality than a slogan.

Jim Mather: I applaud the fact that those seemingly moves are being made, but will the member tell me why he thinks that level of micromanagement does not happen in countries such as Ireland, Norway or even the Czech Republic?

Mr McNeil: Ireland, a country that has benefited greatly from inward investment and low-cost

manufacturing, will face the same problems as us. That is inevitable. Jim Mather knows that. Everyone else knows that.

The Sanmina-SCI situation sums up the problem with the labour market in parts of Scotland. It reminds us that Scotland cannot—and indeed should not—compete with low-wage economies on the basis of cost. We cannot sustain those jobs. The only way to build the economies of areas with higher than average unemployment—on which I am pleased the framework will concentrate—is on a sound foundation of high-skilled, high-paid jobs that cannot be shipped overseas because someone else can do it more cheaply.

However, that means attracting the right sort of companies to an area and it will require a concentrated effort from all sides to ensure that communities such as Inverclyde offer, for example, prime development opportunities and a highly skilled workforce. To succeed, the employability framework must map out how that is to be achieved.

It is easy to go on about the need for people to hone their skills and continuously learn new ones throughout their working lives, but we cannot ignore the practicalities. How can we help, say, the working parents whose daily routine comprises getting up, dropping the kids off at school, going to work, picking the kids up from their granny's, making the tea and then ferrying various family members to and from the brownies, football training and so on? How can we help such hard-working parents to fit in the time to get to the local college or to study distance learning materials?

Solutions to those practical barriers need serious consideration. For example, can we give employers responsibility for building training into the working day? Can we increase the rights of individuals to training and education throughout their lives? If we remove the barriers, should we also consider the responsibility of the workforce to use those rights? Should they take responsibility for ensuring that they have today's skills and will be able to learn tomorrow's? After all, why should only certain professionals, such as lawyers, accountants and doctors, be required to undertake continuous professional development?

Enhancing the employability of the whole work force will, as has been acknowledged in the debate, require a concerted effort throughout the Government, including the United Kingdom. If the heart of the framework is rights and responsibilities, opportunities to use and exercise them must be its four corners. Whether that can be achieved will determine whether those plans—and communities such as the ones I represent—rise or fall.

15:45

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): In his opening speech, the minister suggested that this afternoon's debate is an opportunity for members to contribute to the development of the workforce development strategy. Sadly, given the contributions of the two opening speakers from the main Opposition parties, that seems to be a forlorn hope. They had the opportunity to raise some major points, but their contributions were somewhat disappointing.

In Scotland, we have an economy that has moved significantly during the past 30 years. During my adult life, we have seen—

Jim Mather: Will the member take an intervention?

Iain Smith: It is a little early, but I will take the intervention.

Jim Mather: The member made a comment about the past 30 years. During that time, Scotland has grown at an average of 1.6 per cent per annum while the United Kingdom has grown at 2.1 per cent, Europe has grown at 2.5 per cent and Ireland has grown at 5 per cent. Will he repeat his comment?

Iain Smith: The member should have waited to hear what I was going to say.

When I came out of school 30 years ago, we had traditional industries such as mining and shipbuilding and a fishing industry that employed significantly more people than it employs now. Those industries have declined, and so have newer industries such as computing and even the call centre industry. We have had to compete, to change, to modernise and to move on to new industries, many of which are in the service sector.

More than 70 per cent of employment is now in the service sector, rather than in manufacturing. There has been a significant change in our economy and that is the primary reason why Scotland has not grown at the same rate as Ireland, which did not have traditional industries to go into decline. Scotland has had to compete with decline to make growth. Jim Mather is shaking his head, but that is the reality of the situation. The traditional industries that employed so many people have gone and many communities have still not recovered from their decline. That is one of the issues that we have to address.

I agree with a number of the points that Fiona Hyslop made. It is important to address the matter from the roots by engaging not just with adults but with everyone, from the age of zero up. The problem of the 13 per cent who are not in education, employment or training goes back to that core fact. Murdo Fraser's amendment identifies the problems of that group, but we will

not address them overnight. We cannot wave a magic wand and suddenly stop deprivation in those communities. We have to work from the grass roots, from early-years education and throughout the school process.

One of the big things the Government is doing is examining how schools operate and developing the enterprise agenda. "Determined to Succeed: Enterprise in Education" is an important initiative that will bring significant benefits. Futureskills Scotland has done a number of case studies of people who are going into their first job. I think that it studied about 26 employers and it studied people's awareness of work. It found that some people were well prepared for work—they were usually the people who had taken part-time work when they were at school, so they knew about the work environment—but it found that many were unprepared. Although people's information technology skills were usually good, some of their core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, were still a problem. Jamie Stone was right to raise the issue of modern languages. We need to address those things and ensure that "Determined to Succeed: Enterprise in Education" gets into schools so that children learn about the skills that they will need in the adult workplace.

The big failure of Murdo Fraser's amendment is that he seems to have forgotten about the publication last May of "Lifelong Partners", which is the Executive's strategy for partnership between schools and colleges. It seeks to ensure that every pupil in S3 and above has the opportunity to participate in programmes in the further education sector and the vocational sector. That is an important step in ensuring that we develop our young people and prepare them for the work environment.

There are other things that we need to do. We need to look at the parts of our training industry that are still slightly luddite. I have had discussions with colleges about the problems that were caused by the restrictions the Construction Industry Training Board imposed. For example, if a double-glazing company wants people who can fit windows, they cannot find a college training programme for such people and have to get fully apprenticed joiners. It makes no sense for those companies—or for the economy—that they cannot get people with the necessary skills quickly.

Our education system takes a modular approach that can build on existing qualifications. Someone could start by learning to fit windows and take other modules to become a fully qualified joiner later. We need to address how we approach training and education.

Employers also have an important role to play. We sometimes think that the Government has to do everything. It does not; there should be a

partnership between the Government, employers, local government, schools and those who wish to be trained. Perhaps, over many generations, employers in this country have not invested enough in skills training or in equipment.

We in this country are doing well in many areas. The Scottish Liberal Democrat and Labour coalition has addressed the issue. We are delivering opportunities by investing in and increasing the skills of Scotland's workforce. For example, we have abolished student fees and delivered genuine lifelong learning, and community schools have benefited not just their pupils but all local people. We have also created an all-age career service and supported business creation and entrepreneurship. I support the motion.

15:51

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con):

Everyone in the chamber has shown by their amendments and opening comments that they agree on developing the workforce. That has always been the case: development is the key to individual and national economic well-being.

When one looks at some of the evidence, particularly the NEET working group's report, one has to have concerns. I identify with Fiona Hyslop's comments about the problems that affect young people who go into the workplace. She referred to the soft skills of oral communication, problem solving and teamwork, and personal relations skills.

My experience as an employer and comments from today's employers tell me that we must be concerned about young people's attitudes to timekeeping and commitment. Perhaps they are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge structural authority. As Fiona Hyslop suggested, those issues go back to the time people spend in schools, before they go to work.

Professor MacRae of Lloyds TSB suggested that

"employers' priorities were not computer literacy, numeracy and literacy but the social skills, group working and human-type skills".—[*Official Report, Enterprise and Culture Committee*, 12 April 2005; c 1726.]

I do not entirely agree with him about numeracy and literacy, but we must recognise modern technology and the use of word processing and electronic calculators, which have, perhaps, overtaken what my age group used to help us understand the importance of literacy and numeracy.

We must look at the performance of primary and secondary schools. Primary schools do a good job: they instil discipline and respect in children

but, somewhere along the line, when children reach secondary level, that psychology is somehow removed. Perhaps it is part of the growing-up process; I am not sure. At the end of the day, that puts a heck of a burden on teachers.

Secondary level teachers must give a good example to their pupils. They must show discipline and have a reasonable dress sense that will be an example for children when they move into the business sector once they leave school. However, teachers must also be protected, because we all acknowledge that there is a discipline and abuse problem in secondary schools.

Perhaps the Government should be addressing those problems. The Tory amendment positively addresses some of the problems, particularly with respect to further education. I am delighted about modern apprenticeships. I have long supported them and I feel that they have a major part to play in our economic development.

Alex Neil: I agree with Phil Gallie about the concept of modern apprenticeships, but does he agree that there is now a need to develop them and make them more flexible so that older people in particular can benefit from them much more than was the case in the past?

Phil Gallie: I agree. There are also issues around traditional apprenticeships. Not only should we be looking to extend modern apprenticeships to older people; perhaps we should bring the age band back to cover 14-year-olds at school level and involve those who might have the interest but who do not have the potential for academic development that others might have.

I will pick up on a point that Duncan McNeil made about traditional apprenticeships and the individuals who pursued the skills they chose. Those who took up traditional apprenticeships were originally known as journeymen. Duncan will not like this, but his speech perhaps smacked a little bit of Lord Tebbit's remarks about getting on your bike. However, I will not advance that particular argument.

Thinking about my own trade as an electrical fitter in the 1960s, it is perhaps not so necessary now to have apprenticeships in the traditional form for all trades, but it is necessary in the construction trades. By that I include bricklaying, welding—to a degree—and plastering. We are losing skills in those trades. They do not come from academic achievement; they come from practice, grinding away at the work year after year and perfecting the traditions of old.

The minister mentioned deprived areas. Over recent years, many of us have spoken about areas of deprivation. Much has been done for them, such as the creation of priority treatment areas by the previous Government. Many millions of

pounds have been put into them, but I wonder what benefits we have got. I suggest to the minister that he might wish to take up Jim Mather's advice on the quality assurance aspects and analyse the results that we have got for the money that we have spent in deprived areas. How many of them have advanced from having a need for priority treatment to being self-sustaining? Only a few. The minister would do well to consider that.

15:58

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): We really have come a long way: if we were holding this debate 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago, the discussion would be very different. It is worth reminding ourselves how different the world now is from the backdrop of mass unemployment and the damage it did to our people, communities and families. For many of us, that time is etched on our memories.

It is great, in some respects, that we are currently debating the problem of finding people for jobs rather than jobs for people. I welcome it, but I do not for a moment underestimate the challenge to enterprise bodies and so on—and at a societal level—of dealing with some of the conditions that result in a small but significant proportion of the population finding it difficult, or impossible, for various reasons, to enter the labour market.

I will make a few comments about the oft-referred-to employability framework. It is not a term that warms the cockles of my heart, but there we go.

Various references have been made to how long it has taken to produce the framework. To be honest, I think ministers should put their hands up and say that it has taken too long. It often takes far too long for not only the Executive, but the Parliament, to produce policies. Day in, day out and week in, week out, individuals live in situations that we all consider to be intolerable and that employers need them to get out of to do jobs. We need to get on with the task of matching those needs much more quickly.

We can be too preoccupied with waiting for a strategy before we get on with discussing and doing what needs to be done. We should recognise that a hell of a lot of work is being done throughout the country to address such situations. We probably all have good examples and experiences of that on our doorsteps. Schools have been mentioned. In Craigmillar in my community, I have seen fantastic work done by Castlebrae Community High School, including work with youngsters from chaotic backgrounds for whom it is difficult to achieve the structure and discipline to hold down a job. The school is doing

huge amounts of work with youngsters to ensure that they can work and be active citizens. That is just one example. Similarly, national organisations such as Scottish Business in the Community are doing great work.

It is important to get on with supporting, encouraging and expanding the work that is being done and not to be preoccupied with the framework, although we also need a policy document that sets the direction of travel.

I make a plea to ministers to get away from the sanitised and sterile technospeak that some of the debate has been in and much of the documentation is in. In preparation for the debate last night, I spent some time looking at the Executive's website and the reports on work leading up to the employability framework. Frankly, some of those documents are impenetrable.

There is no such thing as a NEET and we should stop talking about people being NEETs. The term is convenient and provides a way to recognise and deal with a category of individuals statistically, but Murdo Fraser talked about an organisation that works with NEETs. No: that organisation works with people—with individuals who have needs. We should talk about people and in terms that people understand. We should talk about the human and social situations that we know create the conditions that cause the difficulty. I have no problem with the direction of travel of policy, but I want it to be decoded, debated and implemented in ways that real people—particularly those in such a situation—can understand.

I will touch on a couple of wider aspects of the agenda. One issue is flexibility in the workplace. If we are serious about ensuring that individuals can play as full a part as possible in the labour market—and in so doing also be fulfilled as human beings—and about ensuring that we have a healthy society and healthy communities, we must have much more flexibility in the workplace throughout the UK. Some countries have made much more progress on that. We must have flexibility to enable people to combine the different needs and demands in their lives.

I did not quite like some of Duncan McNeil's stereotypes, but he has a real point about the lives that many of us lead. Some face greater challenges than others in combining work and a family life. And it is not just about looking after children; caring for elderly relatives while working will increasingly be involved. If individuals are to participate fully in the workplace, flexible working options at different ages and stages of life are vital. I want us to do much more to achieve that. In the chamber, in the Enterprise and Culture Committee and elsewhere, I would like us to

debate more that wider, vibrant and real debate in the 21st century about how people balance work and life.

Finally, I will discuss a point that is given insufficient attention. If we are to have workplaces that can do all that we have talked about, we need good leadership and good management in them. Much good activity goes on in management development in Scotland. I have worked in the area, I have seen much of the work at close quarters and I am still in contact with much of it. We could do much better in developing the managers and leaders of the future. I would like greater attention to be paid to that matter.

I welcome the Executive's commitment and the direction in which it is going, but I would like it to accelerate the rate of progress and the pace of change. I would like there to be a greater focus on action and I would certainly like us to dispense with some of the processes and technospeak so that the focus is on people, who are and always will be our greatest asset.

16:05

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): The motion proposes that the Parliament should welcome the Executive's

"intention to work with the United Kingdom Government".

We must welcome that intention at the moment because Westminster holds the macroeconomic and benefits system purse-strings and is the greater force in getting people back into work. I hope that in any meeting, the minister will mention the benefit trap in which many people find themselves and its debilitating effect on people who are trying to get into work. That is important and must be raised time and again. One way of getting people back into work is through an overhaul of the benefits system.

In his opening remarks, the minister said that opportunities should exist for all and that no one should be left behind. We must ensure that that happens. I endorse everything that the minister said. There was a tiny mention of ethnic minorities in his speech, but he did not mention disabled people or people with impairments, although I am sure that that was not deliberate. He may shake his hands, but disabled people and people with impairments are important. The minister did not mention refugees either. If he is serious about not leaving anyone behind, he should agree that such people should be actively targeted in order to get them back into work; they provide a great pool of talent. Such people want to work, although they cannot do so at certain times. That is not only the result of the benefits system, but because they are least likely to get good training and a good education. Access to employment is difficult for

them and when they get back into work, they are sometimes actively discriminated against.

What prevents disabled people and people with impairments getting into work? People want to work, and there is a huge amount of untapped talent out there. As a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee I participated in its disability inquiry. During that inquiry, the issue of the benefits system was constantly raised. The second issue that was raised is the lack of information. If there is information, people do not know how to access it. There is a lack of training for people and an inability to get into work. In that context, I wondered whether the minister would consider a one-stop shop or a national strategy.

Allan Wilson: I will clarify the position for the member. I did not mention every disadvantaged group, but I did not mean to exclude anyone. Obviously, there are multiple obstacles to employment for many people. The strategy that we seek to develop will indeed address the matter of individually tailored solutions for tackling all the obstacles that individuals face, including those who are physically disabled.

Ms White: I am sure that the minister did not mean not to mention certain people, but I wanted to mention disability because I and other people continually raise it. The big problem is that there may be good access to work and education in certain parts of the country, but no such access in others. I wonder whether the minister will take on board the idea that there should be a national strategy throughout Scotland that would take into account such matters.

As I said, the minister touched on ethnic minorities. There is a 21 per cent gap between the employment of white women and women from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. I wonder how the Government in Scotland will measure and tackle such inequalities. The Government set itself a target date of 2013 to eradicate such inequalities, but how will it do so? I certainly have not received any answers to the questions that I have sent Malcolm Chisholm.

In June 2005, the Government committed itself to setting up a strategy group, which was to meet in October and to report back to the Parliament in March 2006. However, as far as I know, that group has not even been set up yet and so has not met. Malcolm Chisholm said in answer to a parliamentary question of mine:

"the main task of the strategic group will be to produce an action plan to address the current inequalities that exist".—*[Official Report, Written Answers, 3 October 2005; S2W-19177.]*

I could continue, but I want to know whether the minister can give me an answer today. I have heard that the group has not been set up to

consider inequalities, but research. I would like the minister to clarify matters. Perhaps that is unfair, as the minister is not the Minister for Communities—Malcolm Chisholm is—but I would like clarification. Is the group just for research? Obviously ethnic minority groups are fed up with being constantly researched—they want some action.

Allan Wilson: We are establishing a task force—I cannot announce the chairmanship in advance—and it will not look just at research into why ethnic minorities seem to be more disadvantaged in the labour market than others, it will consider solutions.

Ms White: I thank the minister for that answer because I was worried that the group would look only at research and that it would not come up with a strategy. I did not want another group to be set up and us not to know what is happening with it. I welcome the information from the minister and I look forward to finding out who is on the task force and who will be the chairperson.

In conclusion, I want to mention refugees. We must congratulate the refugees into teaching project at the University of Strathclyde and the University of Paisley, among others, which has won a prestigious award from the Home Office. It has achieved the highest status. We should mention that to show what can happen with refugees and asylum seekers. I ask every minister why the fresh talent initiative cannot be broadened out to include some of those projects that have received such a high rating from the Home Office. Why can we not act in conjunction with the fresh talent initiative and some of those projects and give opportunities to the refugees and asylum seekers who bring so many skills to this country? Why can we not open out this area?

That brings me back to the SNP's amendment. Unless this Parliament has the powers I am afraid that we cannot fully access the benefits of the fresh talent initiative and other projects. I know that the UK Government is considering having a fresh talent initiative—I would not like to use the word "nick"—so perhaps the minister could ask the UK ministers why we cannot expand the fresh talent initiative to include refugees and asylum seekers. After all, this is a multicultural country and it would give those people the opportunity to show that they can and want to work.

16:12

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): The minister began by saying that he was open to suggestions. I teased him by suggesting that he might be willing to consider a rewrite. We have heard some speeches about statistics as well as a large number of speeches offering

common sense and experience that can be modified, reused or recycled. The debate has been positive and I am heartened by the contributions from many in all parties. No one knows everything, and we in this Parliament have to learn that.

After many years of employing many people and running many training schemes in my organisation, I became the chairman of a public training company where I came up against people who had been disadvantaged for a range of reasons. It might have been because of their behavioural patterns or because they kept bad company or had chaotic lifestyles, or because their families were disadvantaged. Perhaps they had not had leadership at primary school, or they refused to take it. Some of those people came via the courts, some of their own volition, and some came through youth groups. I was fascinated by how the professionals who were working in that organisation listened to the public and private sector people who sat on the board, took their ideas, and modelled them into something understandable that people could work with. As Susan Deacon said, we need to make things simpler for people to understand.

I have always believed that all young people deserve a training or education that is appropriate to their ability. I whole-heartedly support the Conservative policy, which has been around for some years, of linking further education colleges with schools and the advantages that that brings. There are people who would benefit from that. Twenty-odd years ago, a friend of mine was head of science at Wythenshawe high school, which was the largest comprehensive school in Britain. He had academic students—he was a chemist—but along with a physics teacher, he had pupils who worked with hydraulics and pumped air. It was practical stuff—posh Meccano with machines. People left and went into apprenticeships in car production. They became plumbers and learned skills that they could take with them—they became employable. I do not think that all the lessons from that experience have been learned.

I turn to the skills shortages that we seem to have in some sectors. In the oil industry in my area, there is a desperate shortage of skills in the younger age groups. The age of people in the industry, especially offshore, is going up. There will be a real skills shortage. How do we get people involved? What is the Government's view on that?

Other members have spoken about soft skills. It is not all about youngsters learning soft skills and how to deal with people—it is about people of all ages who interface with the public. That is particularly true in the health service. There are still doctors who need to learn how to deal with

individuals. We should start in schools to teach people how to do that.

There are good signs in the FE sector, which is linking up with higher education. However, that must be done on the basis of universities and further education colleges agreeing that there should be a smooth transition from higher national diplomas to subsequent qualifications, if that is possible. It is not always possible. Equally, we must ensure that there are smooth links between training colleges and schools and between senior schools and primary schools. Even from late primary school, children should have to learn all about employment and training opportunities. They should grow up in that culture, which must be reinforced by parents.

I turn to the issue of rural FE colleges. Over the past few weeks, I have lodged several questions, which have not been reached in the chamber, about funding for further education colleges. I did that on the basis of an approach from the association of rural FE colleges, which feel that they are disadvantaged. They do not have the critical mass of other bodies, but they still have to deal with the high costs of provision. They also have multisited facilities, to make them accessible, because often students cannot reach colleges by public transport.

I hope that the first division minister will wind up at the end of the debate, as he will direct what happens. That is no reflection on the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, who opened the debate, but the ultimate decision maker and leader must be the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, who is sitting nearer to me. Is he prepared to have a proper discussion with the rural colleges group about whether they have a real case to be answered, because they feel that they are disadvantaged? If they are, everyone who lives in a rural area is disadvantaged. It costs more to provide a skill base in rural areas. We need to take education to the student or the apprentice.

In the workplace, people are not given enough time for continuous professional development. The health service is a prime example of that. Why are nurses not allowed more time in which to improve their skills than they settled for in a recent deal? If they improve their skills, they can progress. Equally, that enables us to meet some of our public service staffing needs.

Competition is coming from Europe. Many people from eastern Europe are coming here with a lot of skills and are taking jobs. We must ensure that our young people are not disadvantaged in comparison with people from other parts of Europe when they try to access the workplace here.

Businesses are no longer chasing more support for modern apprenticeships, but there is a real issue of how well the Government, colleges, trainers and so on are working together. No one who has spoken today has said that co-ordination does not need to be improved.

As other members have said, we need to slim down the bureaucracy. As other members have also said, we must make schemes understandable. We need to engage with employers and trainers. We really need to start in primary schools, because that is the beginning of everyone's chance in life.

16:19

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): The Executive's debate today centres on developing our current and future workforce. It certainly seems that much work is to be done. We only have to look at the disproportionate numbers of women, disabled people and black and ethnic minority groups who are in low-paid jobs and living in income poverty to realise that.

Although the minister highlighted many good initiatives, far too many people still face significant barriers to accessing work, particularly disabled people. I endorse everything that Sandra White said in her speech.

As a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee, it was a real eye opener for me when we looked at barriers to work. We saw the sheer frustration of the many disabled people who wanted to contribute and get into work, but who were being prevented by barriers created not by their disability, but by employers. We need to address that genuine problem.

Getting people into work might be part of the picture in tackling poverty, but it is certainly not the holy grail of anti-poverty measures. Work might reduce the risk of being in poverty, but it does not eliminate it. Two fifths of people in working-age households in Scotland who are in income poverty now have someone in their household who is in paid work. Workforce development is not just about providing jobs; it is about providing quality jobs that give people a decent and fair wage.

Women in particular are often locked into living in poverty even if they are in employment because of the scandalous gender pay gap that still exists. A third of all employees in Scotland earn less than £6.50 an hour; half of all part-time workers earn less than £6.50 an hour and most of them are women.

Taking full-time and part-time jobs together, two thirds of all low-paid workers are women. I briefly refer members to the Equal Opportunities Commission payslip campaign, which highlights

the difference between men and women who work full time. The average wage difference per month is £559. That is quite unacceptable.

The Executive is not developing Scotland's workforce evenly and fairly and seems to be doing too little to help the considerable numbers of women who live on a low income in poverty and in employment. Simply moving people off the unemployment register is no guarantee that they will move out of poverty. Issues about pay levels, job quality and sustainability are crucial to using work as a route out of poverty.

The smart, successful Scotland sought by the Executive cannot be achieved without tackling gender inequalities. The Executive acknowledges the importance of education, skills and learning opportunities, but makes no specific reference to the importance of taking action to achieve gender equality in access to education, learning, training and work.

We need only to look at the modern apprenticeship scheme to see that gender segregation remains in today's labour market. In that scheme, total female participation stands at 35 per cent, and some might say that that represents modest progress. However, participation is severely segregated by gender. For example, of all the people who participate in the scheme, only 1 per cent in plumbing are women; fewer than 3 per cent in engineering are women; and fewer than 2 per cent of participants in child care are men.

Recent studies have shown that women who participate in the modern apprenticeship scheme are also concentrated in low-paid occupations. On the one hand, the Executive promotes the scheme as a means of achieving a highly skilled workforce, but on the other, it fails to recognise the dramatic under-representation of women and men in particular sectors in the scheme.

Allan Wilson: Does the member concede that there is no integral discrimination in the scheme that would preclude women from participating in greater numbers, but that there are wider cultural and social problems in the labour market more generally that militate against progress?

Shiona Baird: There needs to be more focus on removing that gender inequality from the modern apprenticeship scheme. Unless action is taken to address that under-representation in particular sectors, the Executive will contribute to continued gender inequality in the wider labour market. That is not the kind of workforce that I envisage for a modern Scotland. I will quote Rowena Arshad, the Equal Opportunities Commission Scotland commissioner:

"Both men and women should be represented equally at senior levels in politics, business and public sector, not only

because it is fairer, but also because it makes good political and commercial sense. Scotland is losing out on valuable talent, and it is in everyone's interests for politicians and employers to do their part to remove age-old barriers, transform the workplace and politics and deliver real and lasting change. A new approach is needed."

Achieving economic growth that is based on inequity and injustice is not sustainable. Scotland will not realise its economic or social potential if it fails to tackle the barriers that face men and women, as well as other groups, in pursuing the employment of their choice. If the minister wants to promote skills and training for all in a modern Scotland, he must consider how to tackle such issues. I hope that he will take these points on board as he develops the employability framework.

16:26

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): This has been an interesting debate and, by and large, consensual. I hope that, in listening to the points that have been made and in later studying the *Official Report*, the minister and his officials—who I am sure are sitting at the back of the chamber—will take on board some of the ideas and thoughts that have been shared this afternoon.

There is a great deal of consensus on the nature of the problems that we face and on the issues that require to be tackled. I welcome the fact that most speakers accepted that a considerable amount of work has been done. The minister highlighted the investment that has gone in, what it has achieved and the very good results that we have had. I am pleased that he did not shy away from the issues that face us and those who are not in education, employment or training. In all our constituencies there are individuals, perhaps third-generation unemployed, for whom life holds no ambition and too often, unfortunately, no hope. Now that those who can be employed have, by and large, been taken off the unemployment register and into jobs, we need to find out what can be done for those in this much more difficult sector. We must now concentrate on those people. The minister highlighted the numerous schemes in this area, from those that support employers in developing existing workforces to schemes—which Duncan McNeil also highlighted—that help people whose jobs are moved to other parts of the European Union and other places, such as the partnership action for continuing employment initiative.

Work is also being done with the United Kingdom Government. For those who do not know it, I will describe the example of Thomson House in Methil in my constituency, which does training for work programmes and offers individual mentoring programmes. The work is done in collaboration between Lauder College, the

employment services, the local enterprise company and local businesses, all of whom have bought into the centre. Its record of getting people into work and helping to sustain them in the important first few months, which is the time when many people who have been long-term unemployed experience real difficulties, is extremely good.

David Davidson gave us the welcome benefit of his experience. What he said on the translation of ideas into programmes that are tailored to individual needs—which is work that I have seen in my constituency—struck a chord with me, as I am sure it did with other members.

Many members spoke about the need to start this work when children are at a very young age—nought to five years—and of the need to work with parents. Although the evaluation of the sure start programme pointed out some flaws, nevertheless the results bear out what members have said in the debate, which is that nought to five is the time to start this work. Unfortunately, I suspect that I will be gone from active politics by the time the real results of the intensive work for nought-to-five-year olds comes to fruition. If evidence from New Zealand and other countries is to be believed, we are on the right track, but we are in it for the long haul and we need to stick with it.

Jim Mather: Will the member tell me what the defining difference is between Scotland and New Zealand? New Zealand is redefining its competitive advantage. What is the difference?

Christine May: I am not sure that I would say that there is a defining difference between Scotland and New Zealand. Since the Labour Government came to power in Westminster and since the coalition Government came to power in the Scottish Parliament, we have looked at what needed to be done. It is a matter of great regret to me and to others that opportunities that other countries pursued through the 1980s and 1990s could not, for various reasons, be pursued here to what would have been the much earlier benefit of the Scottish economy.

Among the issues that have been raised is the importance of anticipating needs when recruiting trainee teachers and I am sure that the minister will take that on board. Susan Deacon made the point that we must not just wait for a strategy. To be fair, most folk have recognised that we have not just waited for a strategy, but that, in developing the employability framework, we have initiated quite a number of programmes, some of which, certainly judging by the early results, appear to be doing very well.

I have to highlight Jim Mather's unfortunate accusation that the minister was making up numbers. However, when Duncan McNeil asked

him what the SNP's minimum wage might be, Jim Mather could not even make up a number. I may be wrong—if I am I will check—but I think that he said that the SNP's aspiration was for a minimum wage without ceiling. I hope that Scotland's employers are listening to that exposition of SNP policy and that they are worrying about it: I would be worried about the potential impact of such a minimum wage.

It is important that we have the framework and that it takes account, as many members said, of the issues that the Equal Opportunities Committee has been looking at and of those who are significantly disadvantaged. The framework must also take account of the needs of areas of significant deprivation. Those areas are not just to be found in the inner cities; there is evidence of deprivation from the coalfields, for example. I hope that the minister, in considering the future of the enterprise network, will look at that aspect of economic development and ensure that it is taken into account and adequately resourced when a final structure is agreed.

Sandra White and Shiona Baird spoke about refugees, but nobody mentioned migrant workers and the needs of the families that they often bring with them. I ask the minister to deal with that in his response. I support the Executive's motion.

16:33

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): The debate has been interesting and constructive. There is an appreciation in the chamber that skills and training is a fairly urgent matter, for a number of reasons. The first is that, with European Union enlargement and the general mobility of labour, which some members mentioned, it is apparent that if Scotland is to retain its competitiveness it must ensure that it has a properly skilled and trained workforce.

I do not accuse the minister of complacency; he realises that there are difficulties. For our part, the Conservatives appreciate that it is not entirely a bad news story. We frankly and freely acknowledge that. Although statistics were not bandied about during the debate to any great extent, some of them are of concern.

I draw attention to the soft skills study, to which Fiona Hyslop referred. When people were asked to report on the difficulty of recruiting suitable staff, 27 per cent of those in the manufacturing industries reported increasing difficulties in recruiting skilled manual labour. In the construction industry, which is an important part of our economy, 39 per cent reported similar difficulties.

There is clearly cause for concern. Much reference has been made to the fairly high proportion of people—particularly young people—

who are not in full-time education, training or employment. Although the figure might not be all that bad compared with figures in other countries, within the UK, it is highly unsatisfactory, as Scotland has a much higher percentage of NEETs than any similar region in the United Kingdom—something like 14.6 per cent as opposed to a UK average of 9.7 per cent. It is clear that some action is necessary.

In the course of the debate, there were quite a number of interesting speeches. Jim Mather identified the problem correctly but, unfortunately, the solutions that he came up with are not terribly workable. "Full economic powers" is the SNP mantra at the moment, as it is with their new best friends in the Scottish Green Party.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): It is just a flirtation.

Bill Aitken: If it is merely a flirtation, it will be interesting to see where it takes us in the months ahead, during which I suspect that it will, like most relationships, wither on the vine.

Full economic powers for the Scottish Parliament with a Scottish Parliament run by the SNP is an interesting concept. A number of SNP members surround Jim Mather: Alex Neil, Sandra White, Christine Grahame and Fiona Hyslop. That is a typical cross-section of those members of the SNP whose Pavlovian response to any difficulty is to throw more public money at it and spend up to the hilt. If the SNP spends up to the hilt, we will get an economically uncompetitive Scotland that is unable to sustain any skills, training or education, and economic chaos will ensue.

Jim Mather: I ask Bill Aitken to concede that all SNP members are committed to growth. The reason for that commitment is that we have 30 years' experience of closures of firms such as Compaq, Hewlett-Packard, Digital and now Sanmina-SCI UK and Inventec. Does he concede that the strategy of foreign direct inward investment with limited research and development was always doomed to failure and is no substitute for economic powers?

Bill Aitken: No, I do not accept that concept at all. I accept that there are problems—of course there are problems—and Jim Mather is correct to point them out. However, they would not be eased by the package of policies that any future SNP Administration—heaven forbid—would impose on the people of Scotland. It simply would not work.

Alex Neil: Does Bill Aitken disagree with Struan Stevenson, who advocates a Tory-SNP alliance?

Bill Aitken: Struan Stevenson is a man of considerable intellect and erudition but, on that occasion, showed perhaps a scintilla of a lack of

judgment. Mr Neil can rest assured that I totally disagree with Struan Stevenson on that point.

Phil Gallie: In an earlier intervention, Jim Mather mentioned that we have had 30 years of companies such as Hewlett-Packard and Compaq. Is it not the case that, in those 30 years, the brilliance of Conservative Governments in looking after Scotland induced those companies to set up in Scotland?

Bill Aitken: I am obliged to Mr Gallie for reminding me of that fact. It is an inalienable fact and cannot be denied.

Other interesting points were made in the debate. Jamie Stone made a valid point about the teaching of modern languages. I think that we all agree that that issue needs to be examined, as the current position puts us at a competitive disadvantage. I hope that the Executive will consider how children might be taught modern language skills at a younger age.

Of course it is all very well to ask for more modern language teaching, but we have a difficulty, given that the soft skills study revealed that 52 per cent of those in the NEET category—I see that Susan Deacon has returned—cannot communicate orally to the extent that is necessary if they are to make themselves viable in the employment market.

This has been an interesting debate, in which a number of aspects have been discussed in a constructive way. We will no doubt return to the debate in future, so I look forward to crossing swords once again with the gentlemen on the SNP benches.

16:41

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): That speech from Bill Aitken was perhaps the most amusing speech on skills that I have heard in the chamber or anywhere else.

The minister began by asking for input and ideas, so I draw to his attention the discussion paper that I produced in October last year. My paper is a serious contribution that makes a number of recommendations for the employability strategy, and I hope that they are given serious consideration. I believe that we face six major skills challenges, so let me dwell on two or three of them in this closing speech.

The first key issue that the employability and NEET strategies will need to address is access to skills and education. The McGoldrick report that the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council published two or three months ago emphasised that, despite all the initiatives that various Governments have introduced with good intentions, the proportion of people entering higher

education who come from deprived areas and lower income groups is more or less the same as it was 20 or 30 years ago. Therefore, we have not cracked the major problem of access to education and training for that group of people.

The situation was well summed up in a report by the Labour peer, Dame Helena Kennedy. Basically, the way in which parts of our education and skills system work means that

"If at first you don't succeed ... you don't succeed".

The situation was also summed up by Linda McTavish, who was the principal of Anniesland College. In her evidence to our lifelong learning inquiry three years ago, she pointed out that young people in our country can be characterised as a triangle. The bottom layer of the triangle comprises the vast bulk of people who are unlikely to succeed, do not succeed at present and will not succeed unless they are given a substantial leg up. In the middle layer are those who are being given a leg up and can succeed with small amounts of help. The top layer of the triangle consists of those who, thanks to their personal resources and background, will succeed no matter what.

However, the triangle is almost inverted in relation to the resources that are allocated to each of those three groups. In terms of resources per head, the vast bulk of resources goes to those at the tip of the triangle, who are the small number who will succeed anyway. The second-largest allocation of resources goes to the middle group, who will succeed with only a small leg up but who nonetheless receive a fair amount of the resources. However, relatively speaking, very few resources go to the large numbers of people who need the most help.

One of the biggest challenges that we as politicians face is the need to ensure that, over the piece, we skew investment and resources—it is easier to do this if investment is growing—much more in favour of those who need a more substantial leg up to succeed. We can do that in a number of ways, but let us consider the categories of people—I will mention just two or three—who need help the most.

We have heard about the 16 to 19-year-olds who are commonly referred to as NEETs—young people who are not in education, employment or training. Clearly, they must be a priority group, for all the reasons that have been highlighted during the debate.

The second priority group is part-time students. Duncan McNeil referred to the practical problems and financial barriers that face many people who want to return to training as a prerequisite to returning at some point to the labour market. People face major barriers to returning to training

and education, which means in turn that they face a major barrier to returning to the labour market. I hope that the employability strategy will address the particular needs of that group of people.

The third group is middle-aged people who have perhaps been made redundant or for some reason have been out of the labour force for some time and require training or retraining to gain opportunities in the labour market.

I hope that the employability strategy will address those three priority groups as well as some of the groups that Sandra White mentioned.

Allan Wilson: I do not dispute anything that the member says, but I wonder whether he agrees that many other groups in society are priorities. Does he agree that, in addition to those who are furthest from the labour market and those who are closer to it, one of the important groups consists of those who are in employment but who may be in low-paid jobs or jobs with low prospects? It is important that we develop the workforce in a way that gives those people greater opportunity.

Alex Neil: Absolutely, although I point out that, of the OECD's top 13 performance indicators, the one area in which we have been consistently in the upper quartile in the past 10 years has been the number of people who are in employment and also receive training. We are doing well in that field, but a great deal more must be done.

Access is the number 1 challenge. The second challenge is what I call the knowledge life-cycle revolution. Previously, when someone went to university or was given training, the knowledge and training that they received did them for a lifetime of work. That is no longer the case. For example, people who trained to be shipbuilders trained in an industry that is still with us, but whose peak lasted for 150 years. The peak in the electronics industry in Scotland, which also started up in Duncan McNeil's constituency, has lasted for 50 years. The next generation of new industries will probably have a life-cycle of only 20 or 25 years. It has been estimated that during a typical lifetime of work in the 21st century, people may need to be trained and retrained up to 10 times. That means that a tremendous challenge is in front of us, in both the private sector and the public sector. When the strategy is published, it must take that into account.

The third issue that I will emphasise relates to the productivity and skills challenge. All the research done by the Department of Trade and Industry, the EU, the World Bank and the OECD points out that the major problem in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom is the level of intermediate skills. We must skew investment towards the expansion of intermediate skills and use the latent workforce of NEETs and others to

whom we have referred to match the supply to the demand.

I will mention the final three challenges without saying anything about them: the population changes that are taking place; the benefits trap, to which Sandra White referred and which I hope will be dealt with in the white paper that is due later this month or next month; and the resources issue. As Lord Sandy Leitch pointed out in his interim report at the pre-budget stage in November, if we are to tackle the problem we must recognise that a very substantial investment will have to be made so that we really develop the skills that are required for a modern Scotland.

16:49

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Nicol Stephen): I emphasise the importance of the issue that we are debating this afternoon and the work that the Executive is doing to develop both the employability framework and the strategy on young people who are not in employment, education or training.

I will come on to the issues that Susan Deacon raised, but Allan Wilson and I agree with the point that she and others made, in that the title of our employability framework will be changed. The language that we use in relation to this subject can get too complex, too technical and too confusing, not necessarily just for the young people whom we are trying to help, but for employers, who need to understand and support the employability strategy.

The strategy, which is important, will be here in the next few weeks. It will be influenced by members' remarks in this debate, but employers will have a central and crucial role to play. We must ensure that employers support the strategy, and we have done a lot to ensure that that happens. We must also do a lot to ensure that they are with us in the strategy's implementation.

We are dealing with a wide range of problems and challenges. It is not just one simple area that needs to be addressed or one public sector body that needs to be involved—a range of skills and bodies needs to be involved. We are dealing with people who often face multiple challenges, such as invalidity, disability, drug and alcohol abuse and complex and difficult family backgrounds, as well as a lack of qualifications, skills and, often, confidence and experience.

It is also important to emphasise that there are skills shortages in Scotland. People sometimes challenge that view, but I believe that it is a fact and that we must do more to support young people in Scotland to gain those skills.

Jim Mather made an interesting speech. His aspirations may be limitless, but his policies are clueless, including the idea that all that is needed is independence and then every day will be the first day of spring. Compulsory, Government-set high wages for all was what we seemed to be told about this afternoon, with limitless public expenditure to match them.

Jim Mather: Is the minister telling me that he is happy that 41.47 per cent of working-age people in Scotland who are in work earn less than £6.50 an hour, receive benefits, are on an early pension or are unwaged? Is the minister happy with that? I am not.

Nicol Stephen: The route to tackling that is to give not only young people but everyone in Scotland more skills and opportunity. *[Interruption.]* The route is not through a contribution from Jim Mather that, in my view, becomes increasingly agitated, tetchy and aggressive. He is in grave danger of making Alex Neil look statesmanlike in the chamber.

Murdo Fraser, strangely, gave us a new consensus spirit. I wonder where that comes from.

Murdo Fraser: We are all liberals now.

Nicol Stephen: It is the new, moderate, more liberal Murdo Fraser. I agreed with much in his speech, including his concern about young people who are not in education, employment or training. I inform him that we are not the worst in the OECD in that respect. However, there is a real problem and that is why the debate is so important. I agree with him on the importance of the voluntary sector's contribution and I welcome his comments on the Fairbridge project in Dundee. We need more targeted support and we must involve the voluntary sector better. His comments will be taken on board.

Jamie Stone emphasised many of the positives, but he also highlighted the new skills that will be necessary if we are to compete in the new global markets. Some of those new skills are in areas such as computing, engineering and science. We face challenges to ensure that the skills that are delivered in our schools, colleges and universities are relevant, up-to-date skills in computing and engineering and that they are fun, interesting and engaging to learn. I would be greatly alarmed if young people in Scotland were to drift away from those subjects. I also agree with his point about the learning of foreign languages such as French, German and Italian. However, why not also include Mandarin and other languages that are emerging as important in the global economy?

I will take up with Highlands and Islands Enterprise and others the problem in modern apprenticeships that Jamie Stone raised. A similar point about the lack of a level playing field

between Scotland and England has been made to me. It is important to me that employers are treated fairly.

Fiona Hyslop mentioned the big role that the public sector can play. We should address that, because all parts of the public sector, including the health service, can make a contribution by taking on new staff and ensuring that they have the appropriate skills. That is also important at the higher end. The introduction of continuing professional development in the teaching profession through the McCrone deal was an important change that will reap rewards as the years pass and as the initiative develops.

I agree with Fiona Hyslop and Christine May about the need for early intervention. I will come to the point that Alex Neil made about that, but it is exactly right that early support is vital. If a problem is emerging, it should be tackled and something should be done about it.

Duncan McNeil mentioned the recent redundancies in his constituency, with jobs at Sanmina-SCI moving to Hungary. These are concerning times for the workforce there and our sympathy goes to them. He is absolutely right that we need to fight back and invest in those people. We must do everything possible through the PACE initiative, Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International to assist the people and families that are affected. Our future is about investing in such people and their skills, passion and determination. Increasingly, the future is not about the might of machinery, but about the intellect and skills of individuals. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): Minister, I am reluctant to break in, but the background noise is now reaching an intolerable level. I ask members to allow the minister to complete the debate.

Nicol Stephen: Iain Smith highlighted the dramatic changes that have taken place in Scotland over the past few decades. He talked about the low base from which Ireland started, which is an issue that must be highlighted, as Ireland received a lot of European Union and other aid because of it. As Ireland has strengthened in the past few decades, we have at times seen a significant decline in our traditional industries. I remember those Conservative years—few members cannot remember them—of high unemployment, constant closures and the collapse of many of our industries.

Jim Mather: Does the minister agree with Jean-Philippe Côté of the OECD, who has said that a failure to converge on the likes of Ireland is a failure to learn?

Nicol Stephen: It is important that Scotland learns every lesson that it possibly can. Scotland

learns from Ireland, but it also often competes with Ireland. I am determined that, in the same way as, during the Conservative years, we won many inward investments that Ireland also wished to achieve, we should be able to strengthen our economy and deliver new jobs in Scotland over the coming decade, as Ireland has done.

That is important to me, but it must be done through a strategy that does not focus solely on inward investment or multinational companies. That is why, as Iain Smith mentioned, the determined to succeed initiative is of absolutely central importance. I was involved as the chairman of the group that worked on that initiative—getting that project right is one of the most important issues with which I have been involved in my political career. We must ensure that, in every school in Scotland, we make the determined to succeed programme work. The links between colleges and schools are also vital and we are making significant progress in that area. I agree with Iain Smith's point about the construction industry training boards. We must encourage change in them, which will be in the best interests of the employers that they represent.

Phil Gallie started to mention people getting on their bikes. That is the fundamental difference between our approach and the Conservative approach. The issue is not simply about people getting on their bikes; it is about skilling people for new jobs and preparing them for the future.

Susan Deacon gave what was possibly the best speech of the afternoon, until Bill Aitken got on his feet. She was absolutely right to highlight how dramatically the situation has improved in recent years. I have mentioned already that we will respond to her challenge to us to change the name and language of the employability framework. I thank her for those comments.

I agree with perhaps the most important thing that Susan Deacon mentioned: the need to develop the managers, leaders and entrepreneurs of tomorrow. If there is one big difference between the whole of Europe—I was going to say the United Kingdom—and the United States, it is not at the worker or employee level; it is at the level of business leaders. New entrepreneurs create new services and new products, drive new markets and deliver new wealth, new profits and new jobs. We need to see more of that in the future.

I am out of time. I have responded previously to David Davidson's point about colleges in rural areas. Unfortunately, I do not have time to do so again; however, I will write to him on that issue.

Alex Neil quoted Helena Kennedy. I have considerable sympathy with her, but the response is that we should try, try and try again to get the issue right. We should do more in this area. Our

skills must remain the best, as that is what will give Scotland its edge in the future. That must be the case at every level of the pyramid or triangle. To remain world class, we must also invest more at the top end because the world is not standing still; it is developing fast. In Scotland, we must improve at every level. If members support that idea, I urge them to support the Executive's motion.

Point of Order

17:01

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. We are about to come to decision time, when members will be asked to vote on amendment S2M-3795.3, in the name of Mr David Davidson, on local government finance. I am concerned that that amendment contains a significant factual error. It states:

“many in Scotland are suffering as a result of the 55% rise in council tax since the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition came to power”.

In May 1999, when the Liberal Democrat-Labour partnership Government first took office, the average band D council tax in Scotland stood at £849. Today, it stands at £1,094—an increase of just 28.9 per cent and nowhere near the 55 per cent increase that the Conservative amendment claims. I think that the figure in the amendment refers to the increase since 1997, which is 55 per cent if we include the—

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Sorry, what is your point of order?

Iain Smith: Who has responsibility for ensuring factual accuracy in motions and amendments? Is it the chamber desk, which accepts the motions and amendments, or is it the members who submit them? If it is the members, do they have a responsibility, under standing orders and the code of conduct for members of the Scottish Parliament, to ensure factual accuracy in their motions and amendments?

The Presiding Officer: The criteria for the admissibility of motions and amendments for the chamber desk are set out clearly in the standing orders. Beyond that, the accuracy of information in them is entirely a matter for the members in whose names they are lodged. Thereafter, I would have thought, it is a matter for free debate across the floor of the chamber.

Decision Time

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): There are eight questions to be put as a result of today's business. In relation to this morning's debate on local government finance, if the amendment in the name of George Lyon is agreed to, the amendments in the names of David Davidson, Mark Ballard and Tommy Sheridan fall. The first question is, that amendment S2M-3795.4, in the name of George Lyon, which seeks to amend motion S2M-3795, in the name of John Swinney, on local government finance, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (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, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (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)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (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)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

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)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 65, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendments in the names of David Davidson, Mark Ballard and Tommy Sheridan therefore fall.

The second question is, that motion S2M-3795, in the name of John Swinney, on local government finance, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (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, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (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)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)

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)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (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)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

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)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Ewing, Mrs Margaret (Moray) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 65, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament notes the record levels of finance provided to local government by the Scottish Executive which mean that by 2007-08 core funding will have increased by over £3 billion or 55% compared with 1999-2000; welcomes the report from the Local Government Improvement Service which confirms that councils are on course to achieve at least £122 million in efficiency savings in 2005-06; notes that the Executive has given a commitment to consider some further additional resources for 2007-08 subject to local government delivering on their efficiency targets and that the Executive is engaged in an ongoing discussion with local government about the financial pressures councils are facing and the steps local government can take to maintain downward pressure on council tax, and looks forward to the report of the independent committee on local government taxation, which is due later this year

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that amendment S2M-3806.1, in the name of Jim Mather, which seeks to amend motion S2M-3806, in the name of Allan Wilson, on skills and training for a modern Scotland, 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)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (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)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 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)
 Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (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)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 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)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (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)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 34, Against 81, Abstentions 6.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that amendment S2M-3806.2, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S2M-3806, in the name of Allan Wilson, on skills and training for a modern Scotland, 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)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Ewing, 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)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 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, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (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)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 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, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (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)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 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)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 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)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 47, Against 72, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S2M-3806, in the name of Allan Wilson, on skills and training for a modern Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West) (Ind)
 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, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)

Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (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)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 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)
 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)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (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)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Ind)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)

Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (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)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 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 75, Against 22, Abstentions 23.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that developing the current and future workforce of Scotland is key to ending poverty and sustaining economic growth; recognises the very good progress that is being made in reducing unemployment through investment in skills and training, and welcomes the Scottish Executive's intention to work with the United Kingdom Government, employers and employer organisations, universities, colleges, training organisations and other public agencies to drive forward opportunities for workforce development to strengthen the economy and improve the employability and skills of individuals across Scotland, in particular those furthest from employment and those in lower paid, low skilled jobs.

Tayside Project

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S2M-3558, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Tayside project. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament commends Marie Curie Cancer Care for joining forces with NHS Tayside, Dundee City Council, Perth and Kinross and Angus Councils and the Scottish Ambulance Service to deliver the first Scottish project of the Delivering Choice Programme in Tayside, which aims to look at the problems in palliative care provision in the region before developing a strategy to deliver the best possible palliative care and end-of-life care for patients in the area, allowing them to be cared for in the place of their choice; notes that Tayside has specific problems in this area, with 75% of the admissions to the cancer centre in Ninewells Hospital being for palliative care, and that over the three-year project issues like this will be tackled, and believes that the findings of the project should be utilised in other areas of Scotland to inform palliative care policy so that everyone in Scotland can benefit from this ground-breaking project.

17:11

Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP): I thank those members who have stayed for the debate and I pay tribute to Marie Curie Cancer Care for providing members with important information for the debate about its crucial work in developing the first Scottish project of the delivering choice programme in Tayside. The project aims to look at the problems in the provision of palliative care in the region, before developing a strategy to improve end-of-life care for patients in that area and, it is hoped, across Scotland.

Nothing is more certain than the fact that each of us, one day, will come to the end of our lives. Although that is inevitable, we in Scotland do not like to talk about it much. The 2003 Scottish partnership for palliative care study showed that 70 per cent of people thought that there was not enough discussion in our society about death and dying. I agree.

Today's debate is about how we can ensure that, where possible, people can exercise some control over their death, particularly over where it occurs. Research has shown clearly that three quarters of us would choose to die at home, with 90 per cent supporting the dying person's wishes. However, in Tayside at present, 75 per cent of admissions to the cancer centre at Ninewells hospital are for palliative care, much of which could be given in the person's home given the right back-up and resources. Yet we know that the difficulties that are associated with supporting our dying loved one at home can be immense.

Moreover, research has shown that the vast majority of us do not believe that we will be able to cope with providing the care for that person so that he or she can exercise their choice. Today, around only 25 per cent of people with a terminal illness are able to exercise their choice to die at home; in Dundee, that figure is just over 21 per cent. Too many people are denied that choice and end their lives in a hospital bed in a busy ward. Although hospital staff try to be as sensitive as they can be to the needs of the terminally ill, hospital wards are not designed to be places of peace and tranquillity where terminally ill people and their families can spend quiet, quality time together.

Despite those figures, Dundee and Tayside are fortunate with the services that are available to support people in the choice to spend their last days at home with their loved ones. In fact, the people of Dundee and Tayside are more fortunate than people in many other areas of Scotland. We have the specialist palliative care unit at the Royal Victoria hospital, and several beds in the community hospitals are designed for palliative care. In the near future, units will open in Perth and Forfar to provide palliative care services. There are also several day-care units in Dundee, Perth and Stracathro, along with the highly regarded symptoms control clinic. Moreover, we are well supported by Marie Curie and Macmillan nurses, who are able to support the primary care team in meeting the complex needs of dying patients and their families throughout the area.

Dundee and Tayside have excellent resources, but more must be done to ensure that all those who would like to end their days at home are able to do so. Achieving that will require a number of changes. Services need better integration; doctors and nurses need to know more about the palliative care services that are available in the community; and, importantly, flexible services need to be available when and where people require them. In particular, 24-hour access to nursing care in the person's home is extremely important to prevent carer crisis or late-night admission to hospital due to lack of symptom or pain control. Carers must be assured that services are available, otherwise many of them will not take the risk of being left unable to cope at home with a terminally ill person in distress.

I will quote from a real-life case study. Eilidh and John went through the process of John dying at home. Eilidh said:

"During his illness John spent ten days in a hospital setting. These ten days were the worst of his illness. All he wanted was to be at home. I wanted to have John at home but only if I knew I would have the right support."

That is the key for many carers—they have to be reassured that the support will be available.

Additional resources might be required to ensure that services are established, and the outcome of the Tayside project will be crucial in determining the level of resources that might be required. In the long run, things might balance out, given that, as research by Marie Curie shows, every £1 that is invested in palliative care at home saves £2 in acute services.

The debate should not be driven by money. It should be about what is best for the terminally ill person and their family. I quote Eilidh again:

"Being able to have John at home provided a sense of normality to an otherwise totally abnormal situation. Our children could come and go and see their Dad for short periods of time at regular intervals during the day. John was much more secure and orientated in his own surroundings and I could sleep when he did rather than sit in a chair by a hospital bed."

Perhaps that says everything that needs to be said about the benefits of someone getting their choice. As has been stated previously, the majority of patients have expressed a clear preference to remain at home, properly supported, for as long as possible towards the end of their life. If we were all to exercise our preferred choice, that would entail a threefold increase in demand for services, from 25 per cent to 75 per cent. Despite the level of service that is available in Dundee and Tayside, that target would be very difficult to achieve in the short term. Nevertheless, the target is worth while and achievable and the Tayside project will go a long way towards helping us meet it.

The Tayside project, which is the first of its kind in Scotland, was launched just last month by the Minister for Health and Community Care. Its aim is to develop service models that meet the needs of, and ensure the best possible care for, palliative care patients and which improve equity of access to services. The project will be subject to an independent academic evaluation, which will include the economic impact on health care services of more patients receiving palliative care at home as opposed to in hospital. Once the project findings have been evaluated, it is intended that they will be disseminated to other health and social care providers, thus sharing best practice throughout Scotland.

I would like some assurance from the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care that, should a need for additional resources be evidenced by the Tayside project, those resources will be forthcoming so that the necessary changes to services can be delivered, not just in Tayside but throughout Scotland.

The Tayside project provides a great opportunity for us to show that, with the proper support and information, people throughout Scotland can have confidence in their abilities to look after their

nearest and dearest in their final days, weeks and months. I am delighted to welcome the project, and I am confident that it will enhance the services that are available to people with a terminal illness, better enabling them to exercise their right to choose how they spend their final days.

17:18

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Shona Robison for bringing this subject to the chamber. It gives us all a chance to promote and support the excellent work that is undertaken by the Marie Curie Foundation, which provides high-quality nursing totally free, giving terminally ill people the choice of dying at home, supported by their families.

Cancer is the United Kingdom's biggest killer, claiming the lives of more than 150,000 people every year. At any one time, a further 1 million people are living with the disease. I doubt whether there is anyone who does not have a family member or friend who has suffered, or is suffering, from some form of cancer. The key question must be how we support the sufferers.

Marie Curie Cancer Care's chosen emblem—that welcome burst of the springtime yellow daffodil—exemplifies the spirit of hope and renewal that is so much part of its work. Its slogan, "Devoted to Life", highlights the positive nature of its work.

The Tayside project, which is the first of its kind in Scotland, goes to the heart of the matter—the choice of available palliative care. Research has shown, and my conversations with friends and family confirm, that most people would prefer to die in dignity at home, surrounded by familiar faces. To offer that choice, with the necessary provision of the most up-to-date palliative care, is the aim of that worthwhile project.

The choice of Tayside, with its mix of urban and large rural areas, highlights some of the problems that face patients, families and friends, such as the enormous costs of making the necessary visits to treatment centres. Families often have to make huge sacrifices of time and money—albeit willingly—to support patients by accompanying them for treatment and visiting them if they become in-patients. Those costs were highlighted recently. They are often much more than travel costs, as family members must sometimes give up full-time employment to be free to accompany or care for the patient. The centralising of specialist services means that those costs can be beyond the means of some, so spiralling debt becomes the overriding legacy.

This welcome project can help to alleviate some of the extra unwelcome worries at such a difficult time in a family. It has a part to play in reducing

extra stress for families, which has a consequent benefit to the patient that goes beyond the medical support that is given.

I was struck by the comments of Marie Curie director Susan Munroe, who spoke at the project's launch in December about the need to treat terminally ill patients as individuals and not as people who are fitted into a system. Such dignity at the end must be available for all terminally ill patients, but flexibility of choice must also include the choice of a change of mind if circumstances dictate, for whatever reason. At the end, hospital may be a necessity, so real choice, without any pressure from hospitals or staff, is paramount.

I congratulate all the partners in the project and hope that the resources will be available to match the vision and compassion that are at the heart of the initiative.

17:22

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland)

(Con): I am pleased that Shona Robison secured the debate, because it is important to raise awareness of this innovative project, which the Marie Curie Cancer Care charity has spearheaded. I was involved in the launch last year of the Scotland supporting the choice to die at home campaign, but I confess that until I picked up on Shona's motion, I knew little about the delivering choice programme in Lincolnshire or Tayside. The project is extremely important and could make an enormous difference to the terminal care of many people if and when it is rolled out throughout the country.

As Shona Robison said, death is an inescapable part of life. It is just as important to give people the best possible care through the process of dying as it is through the rest of their lives. By relieving pain and suffering and giving the terminally ill a sense of worth and well-being, good palliative care not only helps the patient to face up to the inevitability of death without fear, but helps relatives and carers to cope with the impending loss of a loved one and to be comforted in their eventual bereavement by knowing that death was made as comfortable as possible. If death can occur in the setting of the dying person's choice, that is of even greater comfort to those who are involved and looking on.

Before speaking to Susan Munroe of Marie Curie last summer, I confess that I had not realised that a very high percentage of people wish to die at home or that few of them achieve their wish. If the work that is under way results in many more people being granted their dying wish, that will be a wonderful outcome.

By aiming to develop round-the-clock models of patient-focused service that satisfies local needs

and gives patients and their carers the best possible care and support, and by providing a choice of place of death and good co-ordination of the agencies that are involved in terminal care, the delivering choice programme could become a role model that has an enormous impact on terminal care services and, in time, leads to patients fearing much less the process of dying, which I hope would allow the population to become less afraid of talking about death. Again, I agree with Shona Robison that we do not discuss the issue often enough.

The thought that has gone into organising the project's three phases is impressive. The development of models of service and their incorporation into local provision following a proper assessment of local needs and of the current state of services and then the testing and evaluating of those before the project is handed over and the findings are disseminated should contribute in a unique way to palliative care throughout Scotland and, in due course, should benefit people throughout the country.

I have seen at first hand the wonderful work that is being done in Dundee's Roxburghe House, Aberdeen's Roxburghe House and the children's hospice in Kinross. Those hospices and the other existing and planned palliative care services in Tayside can only benefit from the collaborative work that is being undertaken by Marie Curie Cancer Care, NHS Tayside, the Scottish Ambulance Service and the Tayside councils.

Marie Curie Cancer Care is to be congratulated on its innovative approach to improving the well-being of the terminally ill and their carers. I look forward to hearing about the success of the project in due course and—I hope—of its roll-out not only to my home area of Grampian, but throughout the country. I thank Shona Robison for bringing the Tayside project to the Parliament's attention and wish the project every success.

17:26

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Shona Robison on securing an important debate in the Parliament.

It was my pleasure to attend the launch of the delivering choice programme in Perth in December. I record my appreciation of the Minister for Health and Community Care's attendance at the event and of his enthusiastic support for the programme.

At the launch, the minister commented that if there was a part of the country in which he would have expected a dynamic initiative to deliver such a new programme, it might have been Tayside. Tayside now has the good fortune to have a health board that is much more engaged with our

communities' priorities and that goes to considerable expense to serve and support the people of the area. I record in the *Official Report* the appreciation of many of us of the work of Peter Bates, the chairman of NHS Tayside, who was recently honoured in the new year's honours list for his service to NHS Tayside. Despite his own health challenges, he has made a formidable contribution to transforming Tayside's health care services.

The minister said that the board, the Tayside area and the partnerships that exist with the local authorities—Dundee City Council, Angus Council and Perth and Kinross Council—that work with organisations such as Marie Curie Cancer Care are determined to bring innovative services into place. That is how I would characterise the significant contribution that has been made.

At the launch, I was struck by the sheer undiluted enthusiasm of the clinicians and nursing staff for ensuring that the programme is successful and by their delight in having the opportunity to contribute to improving the quality of life and—conversely—the quality of death of the people whom we have the privilege to represent in the Parliament.

On one of the minister's previous visits to my constituency, we attended an event to unveil the new Lippen Care hospice in the Whitehills health and community care centre in Forfar. That hospice has been created by the voluntary fundraising efforts of a range of different individuals under the Lippen Care umbrella. Through talking to patients in the hospice, who appreciated their surroundings and circumstances, the Minister for Health and Community Care and I were given an understanding of the tremendous service improvement that has been made for every individual who has the opportunity to benefit from the service.

At the launch of the project, I was struck also by the commitment of the nursing staff to take the hospital service and the hospice service directly into the homes of the individuals concerned. It does not matter whether a household is in the centre of the city of Perth, adjacent to where the launch took place, or in the most isolated farmhouse in the most rural part of my constituency in highland Perthshire or the Angus glens. The same service and support—and the same dignity—can be offered to each individual in their own household, because the nursing staff are so motivated to make a contribution to the circumstances and conditions of the individuals who require the service.

The introduction of this programme, the evaluation that will take place in due course and the impact that the programme will have on the constituents that I am privileged to represent in

this Parliament will be a model service and should be rolled out to everyone else in Scotland, so that the same range and quality of care that are available to my constituents are available to people in every other part of Scotland.

17:30

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I thank Shona Robison for bringing the debate to the chamber. Like John Swinney, I attended the official launch of the project last month, and it was good to be at the start of such an innovative and inspiring project.

The subject matter is delicate, but anyone who has been in close contact with someone who is dying from cancer will respect the wishes of those who want to leave this world and help them to do so in their own homes, surrounded by their relations, neighbours and belongings. Both my parents died in institutions; I wish that that had not been the case. At present, only a small percentage of the population is able to choose where they spend their final hours, which is unsatisfactory. That makes the Marie Curie Cancer Care project admirable in producing a scheme for which there is a demand.

It is of secondary importance, but I am pleased that the project should be financially effective. As Shona Robison mentioned, a report by Professor David Taylor estimates that in the medium to long term every £1 invested in the appropriate provision of care at home will release £2 in hospital services.

Normally when something new comes along it is accompanied by some negative aspects, but that does not seem to be the case with this project. It will, however, place a hefty burden on the staff of Marie Curie Cancer Care. People who require palliative care are often very demanding in their needs, and those who provide that care will also have to travel to deliver it.

I particularly welcome the fact that the project covers areas where transport to hospitals often leaves a lot to be desired. If someone lives out in the proverbial sticks, it can be difficult for their friends and relations to visit regularly. The project will allow visitors to continue to take their well-travelled routes without having to make major expeditions to major hospitals. As a local councillor who is used to dealing with complaints about public transport to hospitals, I am aware that that is a big plus.

Another plus is that the project should mean that there is parity of support throughout the area regardless of whether someone lives in the back of beyond or the centre of a major city. That will remove any allegations that there are favoured and neglected areas. In fact, I fear that the only

complaints that might come my way will be ones from other parts of the country that will not benefit from the proposed coverage.

I wish the project well and I hope that when it proves to be successful it will be used as a template to be rolled out throughout Scotland.

17:33

Dr Jean Turner (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

(Ind): I congratulate Shona Baird on bringing the subject to the Parliament to debate. I also congratulate Marie Curie Cancer Care, with which I had a long association during my previous job as a general practitioner—my practice was about half a mile down the road from Marie Curie Hunters Hill. Most of the patients in our health centre had the choice of dying at home, and we had a wonderful team-working relationship with Marie Curie and the local hospital. We could get people into hospital when they required to be there, and get them out again as quickly as possible to keep them at home.

If district nurses, general practitioners, health visitors and many members of the family are involved, I assure members that it is quite an enjoyable experience to look after someone who is dying at home. It fills the heart with pleasure when things are right. It is not as miserable as one might expect when visiting someone who is dying if they are in the heart of their home with their family around them and their family can go back and forward to visit. When my sister-in-law died, she was able to be at home with her nine-year-old daughter. We were all with her.

I have undying respect for Macmillan nurses and general practitioners, who are so often forgotten.

We do not need to have a pilot to demonstrate that palliative care is not available in certain places. We know that it is provided well in certain places, but that provision is patchy. The aim should be to ensure not only that we get patients into the community, but that there is a free flow for patients between the community and their home. I had experience of one patient who was dying at home but for whom the situation was getting out of hand. Neither the patient nor his relatives were able to cope. For the few hours that he had left, Marie Curie Cancer Care took him into hospital and the day was saved. The fear went out of the patient when they got him into hospital. The ambulance came as fast as possible, he was admitted and the few hours that he had in the peace of the Marie Curie hospital were wonderful. It reminded me of my early days in hospital, when I was a newly trained doctor, but hospitals have changed and have become very busy places.

When we think about palliative care, we should remember that people working in primary care with

patients at home are not the only ones who need to learn about how to look after pain relief. It is important that people working in accident and emergency departments are also taught about pain relief. Patients who suffer from cancer have to go into hospital for other emergency procedures, but somehow that message does not seem to be picked up. Patients hang about in casualty departments for longer than we would imagine—sometimes for a few hours—before they get the comfort that they deserve. Let us face it—life is precious to all of us. Our last few days are more precious than anything, and we want to spend them in comfort.

Another area of concern is nursing homes. Often the workforce in nursing homes includes such a low number of qualified people that the homes become scared when people reach their dying hours, so they want to shift them back into hospital. It is important that Marie Curie Cancer Care manages to incorporate nursing homes into community provision.

The extended family benefit exceedingly from the provision of palliative care. We have mentioned the cost of that provision, which is great. Sometimes people have to give up their job in order to be at home, which has an enormous impact on the family. We should help people to work out their finances and make things easier for them. The situation is especially difficult for people who live in places such as Kinloch Rannoch. Although we had problems—the Macmillan nurses were always keen to help out, but sometimes there were not enough of them to do night work—it was relatively easy for us. How do people in very remote areas manage? Kinloch Rannoch is an excellent area of Tayside in which to figure out how everything will work.

I will tell the chamber about one experience that I had. About four months before she died, my sister-in-law had to be admitted acutely to one of our hospitals. Although we did not know it, she had a very virulent form of breast cancer. We were up all night, and she was taken in at about 5 or 6 in the morning. At 7 o'clock, when I went to visit her, I was appalled to find that she did not have a special mattress or appropriate pain relief. That was in a prominent hospital in the city. I asked the nurses, who were standing around the nursing station, whether she could have a special mattress. They said that they were sorry, but that it was in the store and they did not have the key. There are pockets of sadness when we see that no one in their busy life has thought fit to do a simple thing such as getting a proper mattress for someone who cannot move a millimetre one way or the other because they have spinal secondary tumours. We had to ask for my sister-in-law to be reassessed by a doctor.

When my sister-in-law came to die a few months later, we had a fortnight of absolute magic, thanks to a very attentive general practitioner who came in twice a day, Macmillan nurses, district nurses and others. The whole family were there, and I would not have missed it for all the world. Perfect palliative care is worth its weight in gold, as it allows people to have special time—sometimes the special last hours—with their loved one. We must remember that patients are in and out of a world of their own and that sometimes they have only a very small amount of time to spend with their family, which is precious.

I thank Shona Robison for lodging her motion and wish the project well.

17:39

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): I congratulate Jean Turner on that moving speech.

It is excellent that Shona Robison has put this subject on the Parliament's agenda. I congratulate Marie Curie Cancer Care on forcing society to discuss the subject while it is well. It is unfortunate that the subject is a bit of a taboo—it should not be. It is important that we discuss palliative care before we need the services; we do not want to have to start lobbying when it is not the most appropriate time to do so.

My expertise is not in palliative care. As a midwife, I represent a profession that is present at the start, rather than the end, of life. However, some of the cultural issues around choice are common in birth and death and there is commonality when it comes to addressing the overmedicalisation of both. We need to have a discussion about the normality of birth and death in society, so that we can deal with them in a mature way.

I have long been a campaigner for choice in birth and I support the right for choice in death. Again, in common with birth, there has to be genuine choice in death. That choice should not be made by accident, through lack of resources or as a result of either cultural or institutional pressure. We have an awful long way to go before we get genuine choice.

There are fears that because of the funding structures in some areas, pressure might be applied when authorities see a chance to divest health and community services of responsibility for resources. The worst possible scenario is of a patient dying at home, among family and carers but without the appropriate resources and with all the stress, worry and fear that that entails.

I support the Tayside project, but it must be undertaken in tandem with the allocation of appropriate resources. I am delighted that there

have been developments in Tayside. I would like the programme to be rolled out and I would like to find out what the impact is and how satisfied the relatives, carers and patients feel.

When Susan Munroe came to see me about the Tayside project, I accidentally expressed a personal worry about lack of resources. We must address the fears of not just the relatives and carers, but the patient. The patient might want to choose to die at home in an ideal world, but they might fear the burden that that would place on their carers and relatives if the necessary resources were not there, particularly if there was a crisis during the night and no 24-hour nursing support. In that situation, and in the absence of adequate resources, I would be very worried about placing such a burden on my relatives. We need to provide the security and the confidence for people to be able to make a genuine choice.

Palliative care services should not have to rely on charitable funding. The work of Marie Curie and Macmillan is absolutely wonderful, but should we live in a society in which that kind of care and provision of dignity in death rely on the rattling of cans? We should be ashamed of that. We need a massive shift in society and Government, so that society takes collective responsibility for ensuring genuine choice at birth and death. Rather than the burden being placed on patients at the end of their lives, on relatives, and on carers, we should all share it proportionately. Usually those relatives and carers are out rattling the cans thereafter, as a result of their experience. That is not acceptable.

I welcome the debate, which must continue. I am glad that Shona Robison has brought the subject to the chamber and I am sure that today's debate will not be the end of it.

17:44

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): As Carolyn Leckie said, the debate is about providing choice for people when they are at their most vulnerable. I have long been an advocate of increasing the choices that are available to citizens in all aspects of their lives. I support this initiative, which allows freedom of choice on where and how people will spend the final days of their lives.

Every person should have the right to die with the dignity and respect that human beings deserve. They should be able to do so with the people whom they love around them and in the place where they feel most comfortable. The initiative will provide positive assistance to people at the end of their lives. I thank NHS Tayside and Marie Curie Cancer Care for their work in pioneering this service in Angus and Tayside.

I like the co-operation and teamwork that are inherent in the proposal, which combines the

skills, infrastructure and experience of three councils, Marie Curie Cancer Care and the ambulance and health services in Tayside; it uses their combined resources and personnel to create a 24-hour service care model at the local level.

The Tayside project has been established to address specific problems. The proposal in no way detracts from existing provision but complements and adds to existing services. From personal experience, I know about the tremendous work that is done by the staff of Roxburghe House in creating a caring, friendly and comforting environment and providing the highest quality of care. However, Roxburghe House is based in Dundee, not Angus, as is most of the specialist care that is available in the area. Although Lippen Care in Forfar, Stracathro hospital, Cancercare, the Tayside primary health care team, palliative care networks and community hospitals provide valuable services, the simple fact of the matter is that people in Angus have to leave their homes and local communities to get this kind of care.

It naturally follows that family members have to travel to where their loved ones are being treated in order to be with them. Such transportation difficulties only add to the emotional strain involved. Although those journeys may not seem much of an issue to the healthy, young and fit, for the senior citizens in Angus who are probably most impacted by these issues, the Tayside project is a major breakthrough. Elderly partners who have to travel from a village in Angus or Perthshire to Dundee find those journeys not as easy as they sound. The project will make a great difference in enabling them to spend as much time as possible with their loved ones.

Angus Council predicts that the number of people aged 75 and over will increase to almost 17 per cent of the population between 2000 and 2016. It also says that the numbers of people aged 60 to 74 will increase by nearly 24 per cent during the same period. That is a huge increase in the number of people who could, in the future, benefit from the pioneering service that we are debating tonight.

Under a successful Tayside project, many of the terminally ill would no longer have to leave their homes and communities, nor would friends and families be forced to travel far to be with them in their final days. In the familiar surroundings of their own homes, people will benefit and gain comfort from high-quality palliative care.

This pioneering three-year project is good for individuals, good for families and good for communities. I thank my parliamentary colleague Shona Robison for securing the debate and pay due tribute to all the organisations involved. I welcome the delivering choice programme and wish it every success.

17:48

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): I congratulate Shona Robison on securing the debate. I also thank all the members who contributed in such a positive way to the debate on this important topic. Andy Kerr's involvement in the launch of the Tayside project is a mark of the Executive's recognition of the value of the approach that the project is taking and the work that it is doing.

Palliative care as a concept was pioneered through the voluntary sector, which is still heavily involved in the provision and development of such care, particularly for patients with cancer. That is entirely appropriate; it allows us to mobilise in support of health care the compassion and experience of health service professionals and of the families and others who have a knowledge of the patient's experience.

Marie Curie Cancer Care is one of the oldest and best-known of the organisations that work in this field. I understand that it opened its first hospice at Hill of Tarvit near Cupar in Fife in 1952. Therefore, it is fitting that Marie Curie Cancer Care, in its UK-wide campaign to assist more people to be able to end their days at home, has chosen Tayside as the site of one of its pilot projects.

As members have said, Marie Curie Cancer Care has signed up an impressive list of partners, including Tayside NHS Board, the three local authorities—Dundee City Council, Perth and Kinross Council and Angus Council—as well as the Scottish Ambulance Service. That coalition of interests fits very well with the principles of palliative care, which are to address the physical, spiritual, social and psychological needs of patients, their families and their carers and to do so through partnership.

The project has an interesting focus on increasing the opportunity for people to spend their last days at home. I accept that some people who would choose to die at home are not able to do so. However, the reasons for that are complex. Making support available around the clock will be a big help, but it is not the whole story. It is important that I say in response to some of the points that were made in the debate that resources should not be the key in this matter. We should recognise that being able to provide patients with choice is important.

I will not respond to Shona Robison's request to sign blank cheques, but we will consider the conclusions of the Tayside project very carefully indeed.

Shona Robison: I agree with the minister that resources are not the key driver in the issue.

However, there may be a need to invest to save. An upfront investment in areas of Scotland that do not have well-developed palliative care services may be required if we are to shift the balance in relation to where services are provided.

Lewis Macdonald: Marie Curie Cancer Care makes the interesting proposition that one of the benefits of the Tayside project is that it could be cost-neutral because of the invest-to-save aspect to which Shona Robison refers. That will be a feature of the project at which we will look very closely indeed in our final assessment.

We heard several very moving speeches about people who are reaching the end of their lives, and the project is about how services can be provided to individuals who are in that position. The responsibility of health care providers is to ensure that those services join up. We try to do that in all parts of the public sector, but the sensitivities of cases in this area are self-evident.

It is also self-evident that it is easier to join up services when they are provided in a hospital or on a similar site, because the journey from patient to patient is shorter. Therefore, it will be harder to provide such services at home. It is important that when we carry forward such home projects we take on board the logistical challenges involved and realise that they are different from those involved in providing care in a hospital.

Many of us may want to spend our last days at home, but we must recognise the position of families—that point was made in the debate. Families will not always know what the final journey will look like; they may not always know to whom to turn or when. In such circumstances, a Marie Curie nurse can make a real difference by reassuring families and by knowing whom to contact and what to say if further support is required.

While recognising the innovative nature of the Tayside project, it is important also to recognise that palliative support already exists in various parts of Scotland. For example, there is a managed clinical network for palliative care in Forth valley. In many parts of Scotland, hospices provide support for out-patients and in-patients. We have made it clear to NHS boards that they must provide 50 per cent of hospices' agreed costs by April of this year. However, it is important to stress that hospices want to retain their independent status. The 50 per cent funding will be provided in a way that allows us to respect the wishes of those who are involved in providing hospice services.

NHS 24 offers out-of-hours support and has developed arrangements to get access to special patients' notes so that it can deal quickly and effectively with terminally ill patients. However, I

am happy to acknowledge that the provision of dedicated Marie Curie nurses takes the service a step further. With the project, people in Tayside will know that, if they choose to die at home, they will be able to call on direct support when they need it. We should be proud of the ability of voluntary organisations to innovate and expand the frontiers of health care in such a way.

It is also worth saying that such a project fits well with the principles that are set out in "Delivering for Health", which we published a few weeks ago, to make health care available as locally as possible at whatever stage in a patient's life and to respond to patients' needs on their terms. If the project is successful, it could transform the options available to people when they choose where to see out their last days.

However, we must leave the door open to people to change their minds. By definition, the process of dying is often not easy and is not always what patients and their families expect. A patient may decide to die at home but find that they or their family simply cannot cope. Even with the best support from Marie Curie nurses, that can happen, and a patient or their family may decide that they need the support and back-up services that are provided in hospitals or hospices. As Shiona Baird said, we must ensure that, if patients change their minds, that decision is not considered a failure of care or of the family. We must also ensure that no stigma is attached and that the health service is able to respond quickly.

We have rightly focused on cancer, but it is important to say that we must also make sure that we address the needs of terminally-ill people who do not have cancer. In palliative care, they can sometimes be overlooked, partly for clinical reasons—it is less easy to predict the course of death—but partly for cultural reasons, in that we tend to pay a good deal of attention to the situation of cancer patients and not realise that palliative care goes beyond that. I hope that the Tayside project will help us to take those aspects on board and broaden out beyond the care of cancer patients to the whole range of palliative care.

I also look forward to hearing about the findings of Marie Curie projects elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Tayside has urban and rural areas and therefore the project will be instructive for us all, but I suspect that there will also be lessons to be learned from elsewhere, and I look forward to them. Whatever the outcome, I have no doubt that we will be able to take away important messages that will improve the quality of care that is available in Scotland.

As I said a few minutes ago, it would not be appropriate to talk at this stage about future roll-out throughout Scotland. We need to let the three-year project run its course, prove the value of its

work and give us results on which we can make balanced judgments. However, the prospects are good. I give one final assurance that, should obvious and early lessons emerge from the project in the course of its three years, we will expect health boards to take those emerging findings on board and act on them.

In the meantime, like other members, I take the opportunity to wish Marie Curie Cancer Care every success with the development of the project in Tayside.

Meeting closed at 17:59.

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