

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 9 February 2006

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 9 February 2006

[THE DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:19*]

Business Motion

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Good morning. The first item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-3934, in the name of Margaret Curran, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for stage 3 consideration of the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, during Stage 3 of the Budget (Scotland) (No.3) Bill, debate on amendments shall, subject to Rule 9.8.4A, be brought to a conclusion no later than 15 minutes after the Stage begins (excluding any periods when other business is under consideration or when the meeting of the Parliament is suspended, other than a suspension following the first division in the Stage being called, or otherwise not in progress).—[*Ms Margaret Curran.*]

Motion agreed to.

Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill: Stage 3

09:19

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill. I will make the usual announcement about the procedures that we will follow. First, we will deal with amendments to the bill. Then, we will move on to the debate on the motion to pass the bill. For the first part, members should have in front of them the bill, the marshalled list of amendments and the groupings. The division bell will sound and proceedings will be suspended for five minutes for the first division. The period of voting for that and any other division will be 30 seconds.

Schedule 1

THE SCOTTISH ADMINISTRATION

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The one group of amendments consists of consequential amendments arising from previous budget revisions and other technical amendments. Amendment 1, in the name of the minister, is grouped with amendments 2 to 13.

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): The amendments are all minor, technical adjustments to bring the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill into line with changes that we propose to make to the Budget (Scotland) Act 2005 through two budget revisions. One of those was approved by the Finance Committee on 10 January and then by the Parliament on 1 February. The other was laid in draft on 26 January and is due to be considered by the Finance Committee on 21 February.

In the past, we would not include anything in the current year's bill that appeared in the prior year's revision order, unless that order had been made. In this case, we feel that it is better for the text of the bill to reflect the most up-to-date position. As we still have an opportunity to amend the bill, we think that we should make the changes now. The alternative would be to wait until after the bill has been passed and to make the changes by way of a revision order in the autumn. By taking the opportunity to amend the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill, we ensure that, when it is passed, it will give us as accurate a picture of the current position as is possible. Importantly, there are no amendments to any of the figures that are contained in the bill.

I move amendment 1.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendments 2 to 7 moved—[Mr Tom McCabe]—and agreed to.

Schedule 2

ACCRUING RESOURCES OF THE SCOTTISH ADMINISTRATION
WHICH MAY BE USED WITHOUT INDIVIDUAL LIMIT

Amendments 8 to 12 moved—[Mr Tom McCabe]—and agreed to.

Schedule 3

DIRECT-FUNDED BODIES

Amendment 13 moved—[Mr Tom McCabe]—and agreed to.

Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S2M-3909, in the name of Tom McCabe, that the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill be passed.

09:23

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): This debate marks the final stage of this year's budget process. I know that sometimes the process can be repetitive and something of an endurance test, particularly for our colleagues on the Opposition benches, as they hear the Executive produce yet another successful budget. Perhaps that is not the case for our colleagues in the Scottish National Party—they enjoy talking Scotland down, and they enjoy talking down success. However, none of that should detract from the importance of the process and of the work that we do.

In recent years, we have done our best to establish a more open and transparent process that allows us to consult as many people as possible. The success of that process is due by no means solely to the Executive; it is also due to the diligence of the Finance Committee and other committees of the Parliament. Once again, I record our genuine thanks to the Parliament's committees for their diligence and for the constructive way in which they have approached the budget process. That is genuinely appreciated. In the past, I have mentioned that I think that the process can be further improved. We will work with the Parliament's committees to do that in the interests of transparency and greater understanding on the part of the people of Scotland.

Much of the debate around the budget has already taken place and I will do my best to be as concise as possible. Members have already heard more than 30 minutes of contributions from me and the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business—some members may view that as a benefit; I am sure that others do not. Nevertheless, it is worth summarising what the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill will achieve for Scotland.

The budget continues to tackle the years of underinvestment and neglect that left our school buildings in decline, damaged our public transport service and held back our economic competitiveness. The plans set out how we will continue to meet our four linked objectives, which contribute to our partnership goal of a better Scotland. They set out how we plan to encourage economic growth, to deliver high-quality public

services, to build stronger, safer communities and to create a confident democratic Scotland.

The budget will increase our spending from £25.7 billion this year to £28.8 billion next year. That equates to an increase of 9.3 per cent after adjustment for inflation. The budget plans will help us to create the conditions for improved economic growth. As all members are aware, growing the economy is our top priority for the current spending review period. Growing the economy is about education at all levels, transport infrastructure and enterprise. It is not simply about growing business, but about providing people with the necessary up-to-date skills to take up the job opportunities that are available.

We are committing record funds—£1.56 billion—to support higher and further education. That will give the next generation the opportunity to continue to grow our economy. Next year's budget includes an increase of £172 million to upgrade and modernise our colleges and universities throughout Scotland. That will provide better facilities that are more able to meet the demands for more flexible accommodation and for efficient and effective teaching practices.

Our investment in transport will also help to grow the economy, by providing the infrastructure and transport networks that are needed for business and for the public. We will increase our spending on transport from £1.5 billion this year to almost £2.2 billion next year. That is a rise of about 47 per cent to deliver our 10-year transport plan.

The budget is for all Scotland. For children and young people, we are investing in education by increasing the number of teachers, reducing class sizes and modernising schools. For older people, we are continuing our commitment to a national concessionary travel fares scheme. For everyone, we are striving to achieve health improvements and stronger, safer communities that will lead to a better quality of life.

The budget is careful in its approach but ambitious in its aims. It will improve the quality of life of the people of Scotland. The budget takes the next steps to building a better Scotland. It is a budget for more enterprise, more opportunity and more fairness. It will ensure that no one is held back in modern Scotland. It is a budget for the long term, a brave budget and a budget for the next generation and for Scotland's future.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No.3) Bill be passed.

09:27

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Here we are at another stage 3 debate. We have

evidence of the winner's curse, because the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform must finalise his expenditure-only budget, which underpins his true role as the annual allocator of cash, largely to the same beneficiaries. He passes cash to many worthwhile projects that invest in people and in infrastructure, which we applaud. However, in many cases, he reinforces dependence, conflict and contention, as we have seen recently. He leaves Scotland with the same exacerbating problems—and don't you just know it?

The minister repeats many mistakes of the past, because the system fails the test of any effective system, which is that it should have quantifiable and worthy overarching goals that everyone accepts and cohesion and buy-in from all stakeholders. The process should be completed with statistical and accounting control. The best evidence of the system's failure is the debacle of the efficient government initiative. Savings have not been properly netted off against attributable costs and we have no baseline on outcomes, so we have no evidence that the people of Scotland will receive anything extra for the money that is supposedly being reallocated to front-line services.

In essence, the budget process shows great parallels with the Shirley McKie case. Because of that case, the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Criminal Record Office are becoming worldwide laughing stocks and have brought fingerprint evidence into disrepute. On its own, the Scottish Executive is bringing its brand of national financial management and Scotland into disrepute. It is letting Scotland down by not having the necessary powers to attain the economic growth that it tells us it wants.

Our role is to tell the world and the people of Scotland that there are people here who aspire to a better way—who aspire to what works and to a prosperous and generous nation that moves forward at a proper rate. We are the ones who talk Scotland up.

There is plenty of light at the end of the tunnel. Week by week, plenty of evidence confirms that we are right. This week, there was the Federation of Small Businesses' index of success which, although it is based on really dodgy data with which we have great difficulty, shows that Scotland is in a parlous state. Further corroboration was provided by Jeremy Peat, the former chief economist at the Royal Bank of Scotland, who called for an objective assessment of more powers. In that call he joined people such as Lord Vallance and Sir Iain Noble, who has even written to the First Minister about that proposition but has not received a reply. Plenty is happening.

Then of course there is the oil. I say to Mr Purvis that I mention it this time because his colleague

Tavish Scott raised it in the stage 3 debate on last year's Budget (Scotland) (No 2) Bill. We owe him a vote of thanks, because he triggered our freedom of information activity, which has given us absolute proof of the value, importance and ownership of oil and its long-term implications for Scotland.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Will the member give way?

Jim Mather: I cannot take an intervention in the tiny amount of time that is left.

I look forward to an era in which a real finance minister stalks the land and manages our national wealth properly, with quantified overarching targets, such as a genuine number for economic growth, a genuine number for the population and a genuine number for closing the gap between our life expectancy and that elsewhere. Those targets should have buy-in from everyone and should allow us to ask our health service, our local government and our education services what they are doing to achieve economic growth and to receive proper answers.

In the meantime, we sit out of control with no baseline data on efficient government, which is yet another badge of shame—along with “Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland” et al—and Scotland is repeatedly talked down. For goodness' sake, minister—we need to remove the wooden stake from the heart and have a proper budget that allows us to manage Scotland as a complete entity that is the equivalent of any member of the FSB that controls its entire profit-and-loss account—not just its expenditure, but its revenue—and the balance sheet. Scotland should be run as a cohesive entity, which would make everyone here genuinely better off. We look at the debate, shake our heads and move on.

09:32

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): This is the first budget process in which I have been involved—

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): It is all the better for that.

Derek Brownlee: Thank you. I thank all those who have guided me through the process, which has sometimes been tortuous.

The minister said that the process was like an endurance test, but I am not sure that I agree. The budget is a very important matter for the Parliament and I think that all of us agree that scrutinising it is one of our most important functions.

We know that public spending in Scotland is increasing significantly, as the minister said. We

are heading rapidly towards a budget of £30 billion per year. I make no comment on the absolute amount, but we are certainly experiencing a period of rapid growth in public spending, so we need detailed scrutiny.

I suspect that whatever we say in the chamber today will be reported and noticed much less than the council tax rises that are to be announced. That is the problem in a nutshell: although the budget is important, it attracts less public attention than it deserves.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Precisely how do the Conservatives propose to address that shortcoming of the budget process?

Derek Brownlee: The minister said that he and his deputy had spoken for 30 minutes on the budget process. Perhaps ministers and civil servants could spend more time being scrutinised as part of the process. I admit that we consider the budget for a significant time already, but extending that time would be all to the good. Perhaps the nationalists will agree with me.

I did not necessarily agree with Jim Mather when he talked about having a finance minister who stalked the land. I admit that his comment rather went over my head—I could not grasp what erudite point he was trying to make. However, he made a serious point about economic growth. The minister has rightly said that economic growth is the Executive's top priority and has talked about spending additional money to contribute to it, but if there is no target or benchmark against which to measure it, how on earth is anyone supposed to know whether Executive spending is contributing meaningfully to it? In recent weeks, Unison has said that public spending contributes to economic growth, but the Reform think tank has said that it does not. There is disagreement out there, so a target or baseline that enables us to measure the Executive's progress would be helpful.

Alasdair Morgan: Is not part of the Executive's problem its not having any levers with which to influence economic growth significantly, which is why it does not want to set precise targets? Will Mr Brownlee campaign for more levers to be given to the Scottish Parliament?

Derek Brownlee: The Executive may not have as many levers as Mr Morgan would like it to have, but that does not mean that it has no influence over economic growth or that it should be let off the hook by not having targets against which to measure its success. The debate on whether other levers might properly come to the Parliament—

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): Will the member give way?

Derek Brownlee: I do not think that I have enough time to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You may have time if you want it.

Derek Brownlee: Thank you, but I will move on and not take an intervention from Mr Swinburne.

There are ways in which the Executive can influence economic growth. It could put much greater pressure on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to reduce the burden of business taxation, for example. According to a parliamentary answer, the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning has done so, but we have not seen evidence of that. The supplementary corporate tax charge on oil companies has been doubled, which I presume the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning did not advocate.

We hear a lot in the Parliament about how good the budget scrutiny process is. Perhaps it has improved in recent years, and I am grateful for the minister's assurances that if the process can be improved further, the Executive will help to do so. However, I wonder how robust it is. In last year's budget debate, Des McNulty said that part of the explanation for why there was less interest in the budget process was that spending had expanded rapidly and so difficult spending decisions were not as prevalent as they might have been. I wonder how sustainable the current process is and whether it can survive a change of Administration in Scotland or at Westminster if we move towards a lower rate of growth in funding. To some extent, the process is predicated on a reasonably good understanding between the two tiers of Government. I invite the Executive to reflect on whether the process is as robust as we sometimes hear that it is.

As Jim Mather said, all members can agree that money is being well spent in parts of the budget, but we might take a different view on other parts of it. We cannot pick and mix in the process to the extent that other Opposition members might like to.

John Swinburne: Will the member enlighten us about which part of the Conservatives' flip-flop policy he is in favour of? Is he for or against fiscal autonomy being transferred to Scotland?

Derek Brownlee: I am not entirely sure that the Conservative party has flip-flopped at all, or that what the member has said is relevant to the debate.

We can reflect on the process and whether it can be better and we can agree that some of the budget is worth while and some is not. If the Executive is going to keep to its stated objective and push for improvements in the process, we will support it. However, I hope that during the rest of the day and next year, when we may move into a more overtly party-political mode—

Alasdair Morgan: Surely not.

Derek Brownlee: That may happen, although it might disappoint the member.

I hope that we will cling to the better parts of the process.

We are content to accept parts of the budget, but we do not support all of it. The minister would be well advised to address the point that Mr Mather made about economic growth.

09:40

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I say to Mr Mather that we do not need a fingerprint reader to see the SNP's alternative budget; in the context of this debate, a palm reader would be more appropriate. I agree with Mr Brownlee that, in our constituents' minds, the debate will largely be overshadowed by the setting of council tax rates. In my constituency in the Borders, the Tory-led administration has proposed a 4.4 per cent council tax increase. That is not all—it has proposed cutting 10 secondary teacher posts, cutting classroom assistants and eating into most other public service areas. It is also tapping into the handsome reserves that it has stashed away over the past 18 months. There is an underspend across the administration of nearly £5 million this year. If we want to see an example of bad administration and financial mismanagement, we need look no further than at what the Conservatives have done in the Borders.

Derek Brownlee: I assume that Mr Purvis has received the same briefing from the same finance officers at Scottish Borders Council as I have received. Does he dispute the council's claim that the additional funding from the Scottish Executive is around £10 million short of the additional spending requirements that have been imposed on it? Will he clarify how much of Scottish Borders Council's reserves should be retained for any equal pay settlement?

Jeremy Purvis: It was remiss of the administration not to have planned for an equal pay settlement for my constituents in the Borders who deserve one. The administration in the Borders should pay a settlement in full and the reserves should be brought back down to a reasonable level of between 2 per cent and 3 per cent, rather than nearly 5 per cent. I have received briefings from the administration in the Borders, but not from either finance portfolio holder, both of whom are Conservative councillors. The council will penalise my constituents with a whopping council tax increase and stash away their money in almost £18 million-worth of reserves.

Why are such a council tax increase and such levels of reserves bad management for my

constituents? There are high proportions of older people on low fixed incomes in Penicuik, which is under Labour local government control, and the Borders, which is under Conservative and independent control. The tax rise will bite them much harder than it will bite me. It is regrettable that last year the Conservatives defeated a motion in the council to make a submission to the independent review of local government finance in support of a system of local taxation that is based on the ability to pay. I hope that the independent commission will conclude that a fairer system is required.

Alasdair Morgan: When are we going to move on from a debate on Scottish Borders Council to a debate on the national budget?

Jeremy Purvis: The budget that we are debating is delivering real benefits for Scotland and my constituents. The Executive's investment is unprecedented and, by and large, is funded from progressive and proportionate national taxation. However, there is little breakdown of the level at which services are delivered, which I will speak about in a moment. The revenue that pays for the vast majority of services that are delivered by local government is national revenue, and so local accountability is reduced. I will return to the argument for better local democratic and fiscal accountability—Mr Mather and I frequently debate that issue.

The Executive is spending record amounts on transport investment in the Borders. There are proposals to introduce new rail services in the Borders and Midlothian and there is record investment of £1.2 million from the Executive in Borders bus services—I was at the launch of a new bus service in Galashiels on Monday. The Executive has made available funding for three new high schools in the Borders. That is only a snapshot of the restorative investment that is being made available as a result of Liberal Democrat influence on the Labour-led Executive.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Jeremy Purvis: No. I want to make progress.

Certain parties have espoused untruths in the chamber in the past three weeks. First, I refer to the Scottish Socialist Party's siren calls for a national income tax to shape the budget in Scotland. I connect Mr Sheridan's speech last week, in which he said that there must be a national tax, with the speech that he gave yesterday, in which he called for more funding for Glasgow. His service tax would raise money in the affluent areas of Scotland, such as Glasgow and the cities, and keep it there, because he proposes to use a discredited population and deprivation index-based formula that skews grant-aid funding

to such areas. That is an issue for the Scottish Executive budget. My area, which has lower wages than those in Glasgow, a more fragile economy and a higher proportion of pensioners, would have a considerably lower revenue yield per capita unless there is fair distribution from the cities to rural areas such as the Borders.

I would give the SSP more credit for its proposals if it were more honest and said that they would herald considerable cuts in public services in the Borders.

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): Does the member accept that the low-paid workers and pensioners whom he just mentioned would be the biggest beneficiaries of the Scottish service tax that the Scottish Socialist Party proposed last week? Will he explain why the Liberal Democrats are in favour of scrapping the council tax yet voted against our proposals last week?

Jeremy Purvis: Mr Fox did not deny that the revenue yield for my constituents would mean that there would be less money to pay for public services. If he acknowledged that, his party's proposals would gain more credit in the rural and poorer areas of Scotland, such as the area that I represent.

The second untruth that is relevant to today's budget debate comes from the Conservatives. They repeatedly call for public spending in Scotland to be reduced as a proportion of all spending—the bloated public sector, they call it.

Alex Johnstone: Yes.

Jeremy Purvis: Mr Johnstone says yes. Over the past two weeks, I have asked the Conservatives' two finance spokespeople, Mr Brownlee and Mr Davidson, to be a bit more precise. Mr Brownlee said to me in the chamber recently that we would have to wait until the election to hear the Conservatives' view. Mr Davidson said yesterday that the issue was semantic. It is simply wrong for them to keep saying that they want to reduce public expenditure and the scope of the budget and then get all coy when they are asked to give more detail on the consequences for public services.

Our budget is not sufficient for the SNP. Yesterday, it repeated its calls for more funding for local government—it claims that the funding gap in respect of efficiency savings is £93.2 million. The SNP says that the money should be given to local government on condition that it is spent to keep council tax bills down. How does the official Opposition seek to ensure that that happens? When I asked Mr Morgan yesterday, he said that there was only one way of distributing money to local government—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should finish now, Mr Purvis.

Jeremy Purvis: It would be through the existing grant-aided expenditure mechanism. That mechanism, which uses the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities formula, has no correlation to the efficiency of local authorities or to the tax rate that the SNP proposes to set. So, there would be no ability—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, you must finish now, Mr Purvis.

Jeremy Purvis: The SNP policy could not keep council tax down. A bit more honesty from SNP front benchers would be welcome, but that is a vain hope.

09:48

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): In this debate on the Scottish Parliament's £28.9 billion budget for next year, it is important to examine how much the Scottish Executive does to combat the scourge of poverty in Scotland today.

Lest we be in any doubt about the extent of the problem, I have some facts and figures to remind members. One in three children in Scotland continues to live in poverty; according to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry down south, this week's gas price rises might endanger the ability of as many as 100,000 Scots to pay for their heating this winter; and the chronic poor health and diet of the people of Scotland continues to blight us. Those features are all poverty related, yet they are reflected far too little in the Executive's top financial and budgetary priorities. Indeed, the minister offered us once again the Executive's top four priorities of economic growth, better public services, safer communities and a confident Scotland. He made no reference to the scourge of poverty in Scotland today and the need to eradicate it

What is brought into sharp relief by a debate on the budget is not the lack of resources with which poverty and inequality could be eradicated, since the budget figures that were presented by the minister amply showed that, if the will exists, there is enough money—£28.9 billion next year. There is also the money that the Scottish Executive has not spent in previous years. In the 2000 budget, the underspend was £435 million; in 2001, the figure was £718 million; in 2002, it was £643 million; in 2003, it was £441 million; and in the following year, it was £600 million. On top of that, we learn that the Treasury down south is keeping accounts for the Scottish Executive of £1.5 billion, of which £500 million is as yet unallocated.

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform could easily have come to the Parliament

to make his budget presentation and said, "Yes, the money exists to abolish national health service prescription charges"—the cost would be £45 million—but he did not. He could have come to the Parliament and said, "Yes, the money exists to introduce free, healthy school meals for all Scotland's pupils"—at a cost of £188 million—but he did not.

The money exists to abolish fuel poverty in Scotland, which, according to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—and to our eternal shame—will result in tens of thousands of senior citizens in Scotland dying of cold-related illnesses, but the minister did not mention that either.

The minister could have said that he intends to fund equal pay settlements to allow working-class women the dignity of knowing that they are paid the same rate as men for doing jobs of equal value in our public services, but he did not do that.

John Swinburne: Does the member agree that it is ludicrous that councils should try to bring about equal pay now, when the relevant legislation has been on the statute book since the early 1970s? The burden of paying for the proposed change will fall on senior citizens through increases in council tax. The situation is ludicrous.

Colin Fox: I agree that the burden of the settlement will be passed on to council tax payers. That is indeed iniquitous and the Government should have faced up to its responsibilities towards working-class women a long time ago.

The money exists to undertake all the initiatives that I mentioned, but the point for the Parliament to consider is that the Executive appears not to consider them priorities. That is not just a missed opportunity; it exposes the fact that although the Scottish Executive likes to talk a lot about poverty and social exclusion to ease its conscience, when it comes to action and resources its record is poor, its excuses are many and its future commitments are nowhere to be seen.

09:52

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): We reach the final stage of the budget process, which the minister has described as a repetitive endurance process. The chamber has already heard my concerns about the substance of the efficiency savings; the local government settlement; the lack of clarity about the meaning of the cross-cutting themes, including sustainable development, that are laid out in the budget; and, in particular, how those cross-cutting themes impact on real spending decisions.

In the stage 1 debate, I expressed my concerns about what we heard in the autumn budget revisions for this year's budget and I wondered

whether the funds that had been transferred from rail to road would be switched back again next year. I also wondered whether the funding that went unclaimed from the strategic waste fund would be claimed and reintroduced into the budget next year.

I will not reiterate those concerns. Instead, I make the point that Derek Brownlee seemed to circle around: when we have a budget that deals with taxing and spending, like a local authority has, there will be genuine interest in the budget process. That is what local authorities do and that is why so much attention will be paid to their council tax decisions. I look forward to the day when this Parliament takes decisions on taxing and spending.

I started with the point about the budget process being repetitive. Will the Minister for Parliamentary Business and the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform think about how the process can be improved? We treat budget bills very differently from all other bills. As we saw this morning, nobody but a minister can lodge an amendment to the budget bill. Rule 9.16.3 of standing orders states that the budget bill will be

"referred immediately to the Parliament for consideration of its general principles"

and that no committee report will be required. In that situation, stage 1 of the budget bill process, in which the Parliament discusses the bill's general principles, becomes a debate on whether we want Scotland and the Scottish Executive to have a budget at all. Given that we obviously want the Executive to have a budget, there is little point in having a stage 1 debate of that kind.

However, given that we also debate the Finance Committee's report on the budget, I propose that the Minister for Parliamentary Business, the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform and the Parliamentary Bureau think seriously about combining the two aspects in a full afternoon's debate on the Finance Committee's report. That would allow us to examine all the issues that the Finance Committee and the other parliamentary committees have raised about the budget process. At the end of that debate, the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform could move the motion that the Parliament agrees the general principles of the budget bill and that there should be a budget process. I doubt that anyone would argue over whether we should have a budget.

That much clearer process would give us more time to debate the Finance Committee's report properly. John Swinburne and others have expressed concern that they did not have the chance to participate in the debate. The motion to agree the budget bill's general principles should

be moved formally, but we should not try to stretch out a debate about whether we want the Scottish Executive to have a budget at all. Such an approach would assist the parliamentary process and would perhaps free up a bit more time in which the Minister for Parliamentary Business could schedule debates on these and other matters.

09:56

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie)

(Lab): As this is the final stage of the budget process, I thank the clerks to and members of the Finance Committee, our adviser and the members and staff of the other subject committees that contributed to this year's budget scrutiny. I believe that we all did a thorough job. I also thank the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform and the staff in the Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department for responding to our questions and addressing the issues that we have raised. The process is improving year by year. That said, we could consider proposals that Mark Ballard and others have made to streamline the process, because there is an overlap between our scrutiny of the budget and the budget bill process itself.

However, I want to focus not on that matter but on the substance of the budget. Tom McCabe was absolutely right to point out that the budget contains very substantial increases in expenditure in areas such as education, health and transport. Those increases are the product of manifesto commitments that were agreed at the very start of the process by the two parties in the partnership Government and which have been rolled out and implemented. No matter whether the money is being targeted at children, at transport users or at hospitals and primary care services, it will have a significant impact on everyone in Scotland. Indeed, people in every community throughout the country are benefiting from that investment.

People should stand back and remember how, in 1996 and 1997, the schools and hospitals were dilapidated and services were poor. That situation has been transformed.

Alex Johnstone: I am sure that Des McNulty is well aware that his friends in the Executive have traded handsomely on the hospital building programme that the terrible Conservative Government introduced.

Des McNulty: I think that the Conservatives are still pretty terrible. I remember being told in Strathclyde Regional Council that every school building had an expected life of 400 years, such was the rate of replacement. The situation has been transformed since then by the significant investment in schools.

The programme of additional investment in hospitals is also being rolled out. For example, I am very much looking forward to the investment that will be made in Glasgow hospitals; indeed, the process has begun with new builds at Stobhill hospital and Victoria hospital. Throughout every community in Scotland, service delivery is being transformed and the services themselves are improving. We need think only of this week's announcement of improvements in social work services. The current situation is predicated on the United Kingdom Government's prudence and the way in which the Executive has been able to channel resources usefully.

Of course, we acknowledge that tensions and contradictions exist; that choices have to be made; and that, to be honest, the speed at which resources are increasing is slowing rapidly. That means that, in the future, the budget process will have to take on a new intensity. However, that will happen only if people are prepared to engage with the real choices that are before us and to make practical proposals. Jim Mather speaks in a very rarefied way about growth, benchmarking and so on. I respect his point of view but I know, as someone who has been involved in practical politics for a long time now, that in making budgetary choices one often has to choose between two different goods, each of which has a valid argument against it. The art of politics rests in having the ability to make a better choice in such circumstances. Of course, that choice will not necessarily be the optimum one, because such a choice might not exist.

John Swinburne: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just finishing.

Des McNulty: We should all follow the minister's lead in trying to turn people's attention in that direction and forcing them to recognise that hard choices have to be made. We might disagree with what the minister says or different political parties might disagree with this or that approach, but no one in the Parliament should avoid the reality of the choices that have to be made. Tom McCabe is doing an excellent job in that respect.

10:01

Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): We might reasonably describe the local government settlement as tight, but the additional £1.1 billion on top of the £8.3 billion core settlement will give councils more flexibility. After all, more cash always gives more flexibility—as long as it is not hypothecated.

For the first time in many years, I do not know exactly what will happen in Glasgow City Chambers in George Square today. However,

Glasgow City Council knows more than most how to manage on a tight settlement. For the past seven years, the council has achieved annual efficiency savings averaging £15 million, which have in turn helped to stabilise seven successive council tax rises at the level of inflation. I hope that, today, Glasgow's council can sustain that level of efficiency and council tax stability. However, despite the council's proven efficiency, too tight a settlement might well punish Glasgow.

Despite what COSLA says, structural financial reform is needed. It cannot be right that, with 25 per cent of Scotland's special needs children, Glasgow gets 12 per cent of the grant; it cannot be right that, with 25 per cent of Scotland's drug addicts, Glasgow gets 12 per cent of the grant; and it cannot be right that a lightly trafficked rural road gets the same pound for pound in grant as Glasgow's Union Street, which is pounded daily by 14,000 cars and 3,000 buses.

The reform that Glasgow seeks has been opposed by the SNP and has been stalled by COSLA. The Burt committee must give Glasgow a level financial playing field.

10:03

Derek Brownlee: I did not think that this morning's debate would generate a great deal of light. I have been blinded by the sun, but I do not think that any great new insight into the budget process or the content of the budget document has emerged in the foregoing hour.

I very much hope that Des McNulty is right to say that the budget process will take on a new intensity, and I would welcome greater engagement within and outwith the Parliament on how we can make the budget process more effective and ensure that public spending is better managed throughout Scotland.

Mark Ballard made an interesting point about the scheduling of debates. I have no doubt that that will be considered in time.

There has been a lot of talk about issues that are not covered directly in the budget document. Given what else is happening today, members' focus on local government is understandable, but we are talking about £30 billion of public spending and the scrutiny that is being applied to local government is not necessarily being applied across the piece to the rest of Government spending.

We hear the ritual calls for alternative budgets to be produced by everyone and their dog every year. If civil servants were made available every year to all the Opposition parties, we would be delighted to produce our own budget. However, I suspect that the minister might have a view about

whether that would be the most effective use of public money.

We do not even have a Liberal Democrat or a Labour budget; we have an Executive budget, which is—presumably—a compromise between the two. It is interesting to note that Des McNulty was fulsome in his praise of the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform; I forget just how fulsome, but he was very fulsome indeed. Jeremy Purvis almost forgot that he was a member of an Executive party, apart from some closing remarks.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): It must be because the whips are here.

Derek Brownlee: I am glad to see that Margaret Smith is here.

It was interesting to hear that everything good in the Borders comes from the Executive and that everything bad comes from the council. What a change that is from two or three years ago, when the situation might have been rather different.

The debate could have been more constructive and useful. I suspect that the timing of the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election has not helped us to add much clarity to the process. I hope that the next budget that we embark on will involve greater scrutiny and I hope that the minister will stick firmly to his commitment to make process improvements where possible. Despite remarks that have been made this morning, we should be in no doubt that setting the budget is probably the most fundamental task that the Parliament undertakes. We should not undertake it lightly.

10:07

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The debate has been interesting, even if we have not got down to the nitty-gritty and detail. My colleague Mr Mather painted a picture of a finance minister stalking the land. I could not help but picture the normally extremely elegantly dressed Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform in his deerstalker and plus fours, seeking efficiency savings here, there and everywhere. In the light of his recent comments on the local government settlement, perhaps the minister might also be harking back to the days in South Lanarkshire when he was a little more publicly accountable for what he did, because he also set the tax rate. Perhaps the comments of both the First Minister and the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform hark back to their days in local government, when they were responsible for both sides of the budget.

That lack of public accountability is an important weakness in our budget process. It is time for us

to move on: the Parliament has been in existence for close on seven years. It is time for us to look seriously at where we want to go with the budget process so that we can use more than the minor levers that are available to us. When Mr Kerr sat where Mr McCabe is sitting now, he pointed out, rightly, that the Scottish Parliament does not have the major levers; perhaps, in his view, those levers are better trusted to Gordon Brown. However, even he has been frustrated by the changes; he has made statements in the past few days about what should happen here, but he does not have the power to make those things happen.

I am delighted that the Conservatives are thinking about making changes to their position on the budget process. However, despite being invited by Mr Morgan, Mr Swinburne—I see that he is no longer with us—and me to clarify their position on additional financial powers, the Tories have not done so. I see that Mr Swinburne has returned.

This year, there has been considerable focus—rightly so—on the local government settlement. However, when it comes to extracting savings, I am not sure that the same scrutiny has been applied to Government quangos and departments, whose budgets have not been put under the same pressure. We will always have a dichotomy of local government having its own franchise—rightly, it defends its independence. However, it would be helpful for us to make progress on how settlements are arrived at. The mysterious processes of negotiation with COSLA do not shed much light on the subject.

Mr Purvis made the usual special pleading on behalf of Scottish Borders Council, while attacking his political opponents; Mr Gordon did the same on behalf of Glasgow City Council, while also attacking his political opponents. Those gentlemen are entitled to stand up for the areas that they represent. We all are. Mr Ballard made a good point about the mechanics of the budget process that will have the SNP's support. I am delighted that Mr McNulty is at least willing to consider our looking at the mechanics of the budget in order to have a better debate. I point out to Mr Purvis and Mr Gordon that there are various pots of money, although sometimes it is not clear from how the money in them is applied what the outcomes will be.

We do not just want to get money to spend; we want to change people's lives. I am not convinced that the budget contains the clarity to tell us what the outcomes will be. There is a series of special funds to which the minister referred at various stages of the budget process, but we are not clear what the outcomes of spending the money in those funds will be. That is particularly true of Glasgow, which is a significant beneficiary of

many of those funds. The statistics that Mr Gordon focused on today may be perfectly valid, but we have to look at the situation nationally. Life expectancy in Glasgow is much lower than it is elsewhere, but we need to ensure that when health funds and others are being spent, we are making a difference rather than just spending money. I do not know that our processes are sufficiently robust to deliver the information that will allow us to make the real decisions and choices to which Des McNulty referred. We need further sophistication in our budget process to enable us to reach that position.

10:12

Mr McCabe: Members have used the debate to raise issues that concern them; that is understandable. I will try to deal with some of the more substantive points and will conclude by reminding people once again of what exactly the budget is designed to deliver.

We should prepare better for Mr Mather's speeches, as we risk an outbreak of mass depression every time we listen to them. If only we could broadcast Mr Mather's speeches at the border, we could turn back the flu. They are so off-putting. I am sure, however, that the people of Scotland who experience the uplift in their services and see this country starting to blossom will pay no attention to Mr Mather's outpourings.

Colin Fox talked about poverty, but he demonstrated his poverty of ideas and his absolute inability to see the link between economic growth and its effect on poverty. Economic growth lifts out of exclusion people who for too long have been deprived of the benefits of a prosperous Scottish society. He completely ignored the £51 million for closing the opportunity gap that is contained in the communities section of the budget. He completely ignored initiatives such as the central heating scheme, which is bringing relief to thousands of pensioners throughout Scotland. He completely ignored the Scottish deprivation index, which is designed to ensure that resources are targeted at those who need them most. Economic growth—not the poverty of ideas that we hear all too often from the Scottish Socialist Party—will pull people in Scotland out of poverty.

Colin Fox *rose—*

Brian Adam *rose—*

John Swinburne *rose—*

Mr McCabe: I will not take interventions; I need to make progress.

Mark Ballard commented on the procedures that are employed in the budget process; he is entitled to express his view on that matter. In essence, that is a matter for the Parliament, but the

Executive is more than happy to discuss its arrangements with the Finance Committee. If they so wish, members are perfectly entitled to raise concerns with the Procedures Committee about how the Executive deals with budget matters.

Des McNulty made a speech that was truly excellent in many respects, not least because it managed to prick Alex Johnstone's conscience. Through his intervention on Des McNulty, Alex Johnstone revealed that he was still concerned about the terrible things that the Conservatives wreaked on Scotland over a long period. I congratulate Des McNulty on once again showing us that the Conservatives know in their heart of hearts that they did terrible damage and that no one in Scotland has forgotten that.

It is worth re-emphasising that the budget is important because of the impact that it will have on people's lives. It will allow us to deliver our ambitious plans for 2006-07, to grow our economy, to invest in our transport system and to support the development of entrepreneurial skills. We will strive to deliver excellent public services by ensuring that the budget meets the service needs of individual people. Through the budget, we will ensure that, when necessary, our investment is matched by reform so that the necessary returns are delivered.

The budget will support strong communities; that is important in Scotland. It will tackle poverty and disadvantage and will empower people who have been excluded from opportunity for too long. As well as being ambitious, our financial plans for 2006-07 are responsible in that, through them, we will do our best to pull people away from disadvantage and to take them out of poverty.

John Swinburne: Despite the minister's excellent budget and all his excellent projections, members of my generation and others who live on fixed incomes are frustrated that ScottishPower and Scottish Gas are imposing poverty on them by increasing the price of their products. That is outwith the minister's control. Those companies were once controlled because they were nationalised, but that is no longer the case. Does the minister share my frustration at the situation?

Mr McCabe: It is clear that the elderly people in this country, who have served us well, face a number of challenges. The Executive is resolute in its determination to ensure that we do all that we can to acknowledge the contribution that those people have made to our society over a number of years.

In increasing our expenditure by £3 billion to £28.8 billion, the financial plans that we lay before Parliament today will help us to deliver an ambitious programme. Those enormous sums will bring real benefit to people in Scotland. Although

the debate marks the final stage of the budget process, it is simply the beginning of another stage in our determination to provide public services of the highest order. We will continue to monitor those services and to ensure that they are effective and efficient, and we will work tirelessly with our colleagues across the public sector to maximise the benefits of the budget.

The budget will deliver value for money for Scotland and will ensure that people's money is allocated to meet their priorities. The partnership Government is investing in the long term: by investing in business growth, it is investing in the future of Scotland. I warmly commend the budget to Parliament.

Volunteering

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is a debate on volunteering.

10:19

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): Over the past year, I have met many volunteers. Most recently, on Monday I met young people in Aberdeen and Peterhead. I start by paying tribute to everything that volunteers—the young and the not so young—do day in, day out throughout Scotland.

Volunteering is strong in Scotland, and the position that we enjoy on the domestic, European and world stages is positive. In the United Kingdom, Scotland has had three firsts: it was the first country to produce a strategy for volunteering, the first country to fund a national network of volunteer centres and the first to establish a national programme of full-time and part-time volunteering for our young people through ProjectScotland and the millennium volunteers programme.

Scotland is leading the way and has much to be proud of in relation to implementation of the Russell commission recommendation to develop a national framework for youth action and engagement, but we are far from complacent. We will continue to build on that strong position by developing and sharing best practice, by supporting young volunteers through schools and further and higher education institutions, by encouraging and supporting volunteering in the public sector, by making volunteering an important element of our strategy for an aging population, and through our continuing support for the millennium volunteer youth development workers, ProjectScotland, Volunteer Development Scotland and the network of volunteer centres.

Just before Christmas, we published our vision for the next phase of development of our relationship with the voluntary sector. Our aim is to unlock the potential of voluntary and community action so that the sector is regarded as an equal partner with the public and private sectors and its broad contribution to communities and to Scotland is fully recognised. The sector's strength lies in its independence, its values, its diversity, its connection to communities and—crucially—its volunteer base.

Volunteers have a particular contribution to make to building strong communities and in acting as agents of change in society. As well as being instrumental in transforming how things are done for the better, they have a role to play in building confidence in people's abilities and outlook, and

they can change how society thinks about and responds to issues. Our volunteering strategy is one way in which we will work to achieve that vision. The strategy acknowledges the need to offer high-quality volunteering opportunities and to make the volunteer welcomed and valued. Volunteers should be gainers as well as givers—they should receive guidance, training and support.

A focus of the strategy is our determination to create more opportunities for people who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, such as unemployed people, the long-term sick, the poor and those in society who lack formal qualifications. Members might have seen, or heard on the radio, the recent “You won’t believe what you can do!” volunteering adverts, which are part of our campaign to raise awareness of volunteering and of how to get involved, which builds on the activities that were undertaken during the year of the volunteer in 2005 and directly supports implementation of our volunteering strategy. The campaign has directly resulted in a 100 per cent increase in the number of visits that have been made to the world-class Volunteer Scotland website, which holds information on volunteering opportunities throughout Scotland.

A significant element of the campaign has been work with Jobcentre Plus to ensure that everyone who wants to volunteer has the opportunity to do so. Research has shown clearly that individuals who come from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to volunteer, even though they are not less willing to do so. That situation must change and I am pleased that volunteer centres are entering formal partnership agreements with Jobcentre Plus and are considering doing the same with Careers Scotland. The key to realising the vision and achieving the aims of the volunteering strategy is to ensure that volunteering becomes an integral part of Scotland’s culture.

Central to that are recent initiatives such as ProjectScotland. I met people who work on ProjectScotland a month or so ago and am pleased about the progress that has been made in harnessing the energy, talents and enthusiasm of our 16 to 25-year-olds and in giving them the opportunity to develop their full potential. More and more young people are benefiting from a sustained period of volunteering, but we know that many young people still find it hard to volunteer. ProjectScotland targets that group in an effort to give them the chance to learn new skills and to enjoy new experiences. Through volunteering, young Scots can make the most of their lives while giving something back to their communities and their country.

ProjectScotland is already working. To date, young people from all walks of life have made

more than 6,500 enquiries to ProjectScotland, which have led to more than 1,100 applications being made and more than 320 volunteers being given placements. ProjectScotland is making a difference for our young people by letting them experience success and by building their confidence. It is also working for our communities, which benefit from the enormous contribution that the new generation of volunteers is making.

Let us look at examples: there is the volunteer who is placed with the National Trust for Scotland, who lives in a bothy and provides educational activities for young people; the person who is involved in organising activities for the Edinburgh festival fringe; and the man who developed confidence and a sense of purpose by volunteering straight from prison, which helped him to decide on a career in youth work.

ProjectScotland is helping more and more young people to feel connected to their communities, to use their skills, interests and talents to help others and to gain self-confidence, self-reliance and new skills. Those people will be better equipped to move on in life, whether that means going into employment or training, starting their own businesses, or going on to more volunteering. We are right to be proud of ProjectScotland and of how it is taking volunteering into the 21st century.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am in my last minute, so I cannot take any interventions.

I want to pay tribute to the tremendous contribution that older people make. We have only to consider the 15 per cent of people aged over 75 who actively volunteer. Older people are a fundamental element of the Scottish voluntary sector, from being active on boards and community councils, to helping out at the local primary school or hospital. I applaud Liz Burns and the people on the retired and senior volunteers programme for their work on the strategy for older volunteering in Scotland—the hidden resource. Their work has involved consultation with older people, and the strategy sets out the benefits and impacts of older volunteering.

Older people tell of the satisfaction of being able to give something back. I have no time to go through the examples on my list, but I will mention one of my recent engagements. A week or so ago, I met people from the paths to health project. The project has trained more than 1,400 volunteer walk leaders across Scotland, the vast majority of whom are in the 50-plus age bracket. Through helping others, they themselves benefit as well.

The contribution of older people to society—whether that contribution is voluntary or paid, personal or professional—is immense. We are

developing the strategy for an aging population and at its heart will be valuing, supporting, recognising and encouraging the contribution that older people make. Of course, we will also ensure that they receive the services that they need, when they need them.

With initiatives such as ProjectScotland, I firmly believe that Scotland is at the forefront of volunteering. The potential is almost limitless. Over the next 15 years, thousands of volunteers will help people throughout across the country. Thousands of lives will be touched and thousands of lives will change. This is only the beginning—the real prize is to move from a culture of disengagement to a culture of participation. Volunteering can, and will, help us to achieve that prize.

10:27

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I have three preliminary points. Members on this side of the chamber also commend all the people who work in the voluntary sector—especially the unpaid, the young and the old—from the person who serves in the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals shop in their local high street, to the people who work in the big beasts of the voluntary sector such as Age Concern, Help the Aged and Citizens Advice Scotland, which provide us with so much data in briefings that are essential to our work as MSPs. There are also the people who care for neighbours and friends and who might not realise that they are seen as being part of the voluntary sector, although they are. The quality of life of those neighbours and friends would be much lower without their volunteer carers.

My second preliminary point is that I am not a fan of this kind of debate. It has no focus, so one wonders what its point is. The last thing we need is another volunteering debate that is all motherhood and apple pie. In May last year, the Deputy Minister for Communities said:

“The challenge of the debate on the voluntary sector is that it poses a question for us all: How do we debate the voluntary sector without being cosy, precious or patronising ... ?”—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2005; c 17075.]

Well, I was waiting for some meat from the minister—an announcement of some kind—but it did not come. Last night, I read the *Official Report* of the debate from May last year; parts of the minister's speech this morning were a rehash that could have been cut and pasted from that debate.

My third preliminary point is about parliamentary time. In the Shirley McKie case there has been a £750,000 settlement, but the Minister for Justice cannot come to the chamber to make a statement. There was a slot available this morning. Worthy

though the voluntary sector is, we could have debated it at another time.

I now want to move to the real meat of the debate, as raised by the minister last year. The main issue then was funding. Donald Gorrie, I and others pointed out the problems that were arising when projects did not receive continuous funding. The minister acknowledged our points and said:

“We want to make it easier for voluntary organisations to do what they do best by focusing on service delivery. The Executive is committed to providing a rolling programme of three-year funding.”—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2005; c 17115.]

We therefore look to the strategic funding review. Where is it? It was announced in November 2000 but it has still not delivered. Five years on, charitable organisations, which are delivering more and more front-line services, still do not have secure funding.

The Borders young carers service in my constituency supports 180 young people and has another 300 on its waiting list. Despite that, the service has had to scramble around for funding to keep its essential work going. More and more often, because of cuts in local government funding, the need to provide front-line services for vulnerable people is landing in the laps of voluntary organisations, but the funding streams of those organisations are insecure—not only the stream that comes directly from the coalition Government but the stream that comes from local authorities. No wonder, therefore, that I am aggrieved and cross about the way we are talking about the voluntary sector.

Everything the minister said was true. The voluntary sector, as well as providing something altruistic for people to do, is a gateway that can help young people to improve their employment prospects. The voluntary sector also allows elderly people to contribute and to be valued, but we all know that. Let us talk about the nitty-gritty. The supporting people fund is at a standstill and in some areas it has been cut, which affects vulnerable people who may now have to rely on the voluntary sector—but the minister did not talk about that.

Some things have improved. Following the Bichard report, the Minister for Education and Young People announced changes in respect of disclosure, which has been a huge burden on the voluntary sector; at last it has been acknowledged that the forms are too complicated. Many forms were being returned because people had put the wrong thing in a box, or had done it in the wrong colour of ink, or because there were multiple applications. What nonsense. Fathers who wanted to volunteer to help the local school with rugby training had to get disclosure forms. At last, it has been acknowledged that the disclosure form is

valid only on the day on which it is issued. Those are crucial issues that should be debated in Parliament. The minister is a good man at heart, but let us have a debate on the voluntary sector that touches on funding, Disclosure Scotland, and how the voluntary sector is being relied on more and more to deliver front-line services that social workers and allied professionals in the health service used to deliver. Let us debate those issues for a change.

10:32

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I had thought that today would offer an opportunity for us to hear an update on the volunteering strategy and the national youth volunteering programme, which would have helped us to make progress in the debate. I welcome, nonetheless, any debate on volunteering and any opportunity to thank all the people who give so much of their time to their communities in order to help and benefit others. I am pleased to hear the minister say that he is not complacent, because we cannot be complacent about volunteering.

More than 90 per cent of the people who are involved in citizens advice bureaux are volunteers. They help people in a wide range of areas; for example, by managing their debts or by offering them advice on welfare benefits. A person's debt cannot be managed through one visit to the CAB. I have been a volunteer so I know that it often takes months or even years before we are able to help people back to financial stability. It is disappointing that Citizens Advice Scotland has constantly to penny-pinch. In the Highlands, it has faced cuts year on year, despite the excellent service that it provides.

When we think of volunteers, we probably do not think of mountain rescue teams. On Saturday, I met the Cairngorm mountain rescue team, which is led by John Allan and is highly trained and professional. They take to the Cairngorm mountains in all weathers, at all times of the day or night and in all months of the year to rescue walkers and climbers. All the mountain rescue teams in Scotland are highly trained, dedicated and undoubtedly fit for their purpose in every sense. So why—I ask the minister—is it that they must worry where next year's funding is coming from? The previous three-year settlement is almost at an end and uncertainty is creeping in. I ask the deputy minister to commit, when she sums up, to looking into that.

A total of £400 million is directed at the voluntary sector, and millions more is directed to the national health service and local councils. However, I find it difficult to advise people when they come to my surgery and say, "My daughter has a heroin problem and my sister is killing

herself with alcohol. Where do I go?" I have to stop and think. People are passed from pillar to post. They go round in circles.

It is incredible that so much money is provided for drug and alcohol rehabilitation in the voluntary sector, but that no one-stop shop—a gateway—is provided to advise families and addicts on the best sources of help. Although I am not criticising the minister about the money that is provided for such projects, as an MSP I have found it difficult to help families that are in such circumstances. It is not just down to patient confidentiality. It is an area where the Executive's departments must work together to address the problem.

It is also incredible that this year the Highland Council will give no uplift in funding to the voluntary sector. That is equivalent to another cutback that will severely affect smaller voluntary organisations.

I am pleased that David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative party, has placed volunteering high on his political agenda. I am also pleased that his initiative was endorsed by the chief executive of ProjectScotland, who said that she is pleased that the power and impact of the voluntary sector are acknowledged across the UK. Although the details of the Conservative party's policy have yet to be defined, we welcome the consultation.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member take an intervention?

Mary Scanlon: No. I have only a few seconds left.

Possible solutions that are being considered in Mr Cameron's policy review at Westminster include offering longer-term contracts for provision of services, such as those I have mentioned, which will allow the voluntary sector to grow. A relaxing of the rules in the tax and benefits system to reward voluntary work is also being considered. It will be for the Scottish Conservatives to decide on our policy for Scotland, but we welcome the priority and focus that have been given by Mr Cameron.

The two main problems that are faced by the voluntary sector are the lack of financial stability and the growing lack of volunteers. I listened carefully to the minister on inclusion in volunteering as an integral part of Scotland's culture. I want to highlight several points that are made in the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing notes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are now quite over your time.

Mary Scanlon: In that case, I will conclude.

Volunteering is a route into employment for many people, including people who have mental

health problems and people who are recovering drug and alcohol addicts. It can help to build confidence, particularly in older volunteers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We do have some time in hand.

Mary Scanlon: Well—thanks for that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mrs Scanlon, you have had the extra time. The notified time for speeches in the debate is four minutes. However, if members speak to five minutes we should be relatively comfortable.

10:38

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): The minister made a good speech; his heart is genuinely in this work. However, I have some suggestions as to how he can deliver better.

Christine Grahame also made a particularly good speech. Although it does not always help to have her on one's side of an argument, I hope that the minister will attend to the points that she made.

The Liberal Democrats strongly support volunteering. Today, many of my colleagues have volunteered to improve Dunfermline's social and community life rather than attend the debate. Their hearts are with us while their legs wander Dunfermline.

Although the Executive has developed some good schemes for encouraging volunteering, the structures are still not satisfactory. One needs organisations with which one can volunteer. If I decide to give up this Parliament rubbish to become a youth club leader, but no clubs exist in my area, I cannot volunteer. Support for existing organisations is vital. A leading light in the youth work voluntary sector informed me that she was concerned that shiny and new is considered good, while tried and tested is considered bad. The Executive puts money into projects such as ProjectScotland which, the minister assures us, does good work. However, if a small amount of its funding were put into securing the position of national youth organisations, more good would be done.

Support for national and local organisations is needed from Government and councils. Far too much project funding is not sustained. Projects die off after three years because no funding is given to old projects. The idea is that a shiny new project can receive funding for three years, but must somehow at the end of that period magically secure funding from elsewhere. The Executive, charitable trusts and the national lottery will not provide funding for existing projects—they need something new. The desire for newness is a curse on and disaster for the voluntary sector. I do not

care whether it is called core funding or investment: existing organisations must receive continuing funding to keep good projects going, rather than there being constant invention of new projects.

Funding must be made available for volunteers. Yesterday, we debated council budgets. Whatever the rights and wrongs of it, as Mary Scanlon said, this year all councils will cut their budgets to the voluntary sector. The Executive must keep an eye on that because many good local organisations could go down the tubes. Yesterday, a good announcement was made about disclosure. For years, many of us have highlighted how bad the system has been. At last that has been recognised and a good system seems to have been put in place.

Community enterprises—another part of the voluntary sector—use many volunteers and are commercial and flourish in the market place. They do good work in their communities; they offer opportunities for people to enter various careers and to become small entrepreneurs. Many of them use volunteers to help paid people in recycling and reducing waste. In many cases, however, those enterprises are disadvantaged by purchasing policy. The ministers must support them as well as they can. I hope that ministers will put their good intentions to practical effect and crack this business of inadequate and inconsistent funding of voluntary organisations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We go now to the open debate and, as I said, speeches of five minutes.

10:43

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak on volunteering and the important contribution volunteers make to Scottish society. It is right that Parliament is considering the issue because, without our army of volunteers, we would not be able to function as a civilised society. Without the hundreds of thousands of carers, who give up their time and effort to care for friends and family, the NHS would grind to a halt. Without the tens of thousands of uniformed youth leaders, Scotland would be a less attractive place for our young people to live in. Without the vast fundraising that is done by volunteers daily, our charities would simply not function. Volunteering is the lifeblood of our society, which is why it is vital that we do everything we can to support people who give freely of their time to help others.

The extent of volunteering within all communities means that there are always new stories to tell about how it makes a positive difference. It is not about being shiny and new—it is about

communities being innovative and meeting the new challenges that they face. For example, many of the communities that I represent benefit from the services that are provided by their local credit union. Credit unions, such as Newmains Credit Union Ltd, provide their members with local access to low-cost savings and loans facilities. They help to build the habits of regular saving and responsible borrowing. In addition, they provide a high level of training for their volunteers by developing their skills in money handling, accountancy and project management, to name but a few areas. That wide range of skills helps to make credit union volunteers highly employable.

I also highlight the excellent work that the volunteer centre in North Lanarkshire does. One exciting project that it has just launched is the help into trade—HIT—squad. The project has been part-funded by money from the European social fund and aims to help young people gain an insight into working in the traditional trades. It is particularly for young people who would not normally volunteer. On Monday, 11 young people aged between 16 and 25 started at the project. They will have the opportunity to attend local colleges for taster training sessions on trades such as painting and decorating, joinery and gardening. After that, the volunteer centre will place them in work with local voluntary groups, which might include gardening for a local care home or painting and decorating for a local voluntary project. It is an excellent example of how volunteering can be a win-win activity: local voluntary groups gain much-needed assistance and the young people gain experience that may help them to decide to pursue a career in the trades or, at least, make them more employable in the future.

In fact, from talking to staff at a volunteer centre, it is clear to me that the benefits of volunteering to the individual volunteer are becoming increasingly relevant. Volunteering can be a good way back into work for those who have been unemployed for some time or who are recovering from an illness. In addition, volunteering is good for communities and for society at large. Community involvement and participation help to strengthen the social bonds between people and build stronger communities, which has a positive knock-on effect on other important areas such as health and crime.

I am sure that, over the past few months, many members have been invited to a large number of pensioners events, whether Christmas dinners or Burns suppers. All those groups are run by volunteers—the committee members, fund raisers and organisers—whose efforts help to ensure that our senior citizens, many of whom have lost their partners or family and now live alone, do not become isolated in their communities. Pensioners groups help to build strong social connections at

precisely the time when such connections are most needed and the pensioners are most vulnerable. They also demonstrate clearly that people neither need nor want always to rely on the state for the provision of services, but want the state, whether through local or national government, to support their activities rather than hinder them.

It is important that we celebrate the work of volunteers throughout Scotland. It is also important that we take positive steps to encourage and support people—in particular, young people—to volunteer in their communities. I welcome the steps that the Executive has already taken towards that goal and I urge the minister to continue the drive to make Scotland one of the volunteering centres of Europe.

10:48

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): Like Christine Grahame, I was a bit worried about having another subject debate on volunteering. I had hoped that I would hear some announcements about the strategic funding review or full cost recovery or that futurebuilders Scotland was more successful than when we last debated it, when it was running behind schedule, but I heard nothing of the sort. We are in danger of becoming a bit patronising by patting people in the voluntary sector on the back every now and then. It is a wonderful sector in which people do wonderful things, but how long can the Executive come up with task forces and strategies without coming up with the goods that make the sector work better?

The latest strategy is “A Vision for the Voluntary Sector: The Next Phase of Our Relationship”, which Malcolm Chisholm launched in December 2005 and which I read through again last night. It does not say anything with which I disagree, but it certainly says some things that I do not quite understand—we must have such documents in language that is easier to understand; the Plain English Campaign comes to mind.

The vision outlines some of the elements of Executive policy so far, some of which have been good, but I am concerned that it does not say what our voluntary sector as a whole is about and acknowledge the sector's diversity. I am worried that we are starting to talk about the voluntary sector as if it is all one, without realising that, just because people are in voluntary organisations, that does not mean they are all the same. It is the same with the business sector: we talk about it as if it is all one, but everybody realises that IBM is not quite the same as the wee grocer shop on the corner.

I make a plea on behalf of small organisations that have been working away in their communities

for many years—decades, in some cases—but feel that they are losing out because the umbrella organisations are involved in a big voluntary sector push. That push is a good thing, but not all voluntary organisations are members of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, have staff or feel confident to approach the Executive.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): To add to that, does Linda Fabiani agree that not all volunteers work in the voluntary sector? Many volunteers work in the statutory sector.

Linda Fabiani: Yes, and that is what Christine Grahame said earlier. There are an awful lot more volunteers in Scotland than we count, because people volunteer to do things all the time and do not even realise that they are volunteers. However, there are organisations that provide vital public services and need the funding, partnership agreements and compacts that allow them to operate. The Parliament has been in existence for six years and we have talked away about core funding, three-year programmes and the fact that voluntary organisations need the guarantee of continuing funding, but none of that is happening. In May last year, the minister said that core funding was no longer an issue because we were moving on to full cost recovery. When on earth will that happen?

I am also interested in ProjectScotland, which I mentioned in last year's debate. It is marvellous. The minister said today that ProjectScotland is being focused on less well-off young people. I ask him to tell me how that is happening. Do we have in place something that allows them to go overseas and volunteer for a year even though they do not have the support network to fall back on in a family, a home or some kind of funding? Are we examining the benefit system and finding ways to allow them to achieve such things? I have spoken to young people in Motherwell who would love to go overseas and do international development work but, if they are homeless, on benefit and do not have the support network that much more fortunate young people have, it is just a pipe dream.

The minister says that, through Jobcentre Plus, we are building up support networks for those who are less well-off to enable them to volunteer. How is that being done and what type of people are benefiting from the initiative? Is an agreement on benefits in place to allow people to volunteer as a step towards employment in time?

I end by making a plea for the small organisations, which Donald Gorrie mentioned. They do very good work on a small scale but are told that there is no point in their applying for more lottery funding if they carry on doing the same thing—that is on the Community Fund website. For some people who need support, innovation is

not good, because they like the familiar and like to continue with what they have. That must be acknowledged.

10:53

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I share some of Christine Grahame's and Linda Fabiani's sentiments about the format of the debate. I welcome the opportunity to debate the subject, but I wish that we had a little more focus to the format. I hope that the Parliamentary Bureau did not make the decision to hold such a debate in the expectation that members would be elsewhere in the country and would not want to miss a vote. I am sure that it did not.

We keep debating volunteering year after year, and it is right that we should do so in one format or another because volunteers keep volunteering year and after year. The Parliament must maintain its interest in that work and its recognition of it.

In last year's debate, I mentioned a few aspects of my experience of volunteering, such as with recycling projects. The Executive should be commended for reaching its recycling targets, but I am sceptical about whether it would have done so without people such as the community activists who got doorstep recycling projects up and running before anybody else caught up during the many years when recycling was recognised by few but the voluntary sector. Those activists are still diverting much waste from landfill. Many furniture recycling projects not only divert waste from landfill but ensure that, rather than junk them and buy new, we get more use out of our resources.

I also mentioned the volunteers in sexual health in the statutory sector and the voluntary sector whose work helps the Executive to hit its targets and meet its sexual health strategy priorities.

I touched on youth work, which has far more to contribute to the Executive's antisocial behaviour agenda than is often acknowledged as it helps to develop young people as active citizens. The fact that volunteers and the voluntary sector do so much to help the Executive meet its targets should be acknowledged. The best way to do that is to ensure that volunteers and the voluntary sector do not feel that they are the poor relation. We need to ensure that they are given the same level of support and recognition as the statutory sector and other public service providers.

There are a few areas in which we could do better. I hope that the Executive will address some of them when it works on its strategy. I am sure that members of all parties acknowledge that many asylum seekers who come to our country, whose interests we represent just as much as we do those of people with citizenship, are skilled, articulate, passionate and motivated. It is essential

that they do not lose those qualities and the self-esteem that allows them to use them, regardless of whether they are granted asylum, refugee status or permission to stay. If they return to their country of origin, we have to equip them with the skills and ability to make a go of it. If they stay here, we want to ensure that they are able to contribute fully to our society, which many of them want passionately to do. I wish that we in this Parliament were able to give them the opportunity to work, but we can give them the opportunity to volunteer and make use of and expand their skills.

We also have to ensure that we give people the time and support to combine volunteering with a working life. I hope that the Executive is talking to its colleagues at Westminster about welfare reform. If we are looking—as we should—to encourage people to move into work if they are ready and able to after being on benefit for a long time, a stepping stone of volunteering can be of great use. I hope that the Westminster Government acknowledges that the gradual transition back into work should be supported.

I make no apology for mentioning the volunteers to whom I am closest, as I am sure are many members: the political party activists who are part of a vibrant volunteering democratic culture. Whether they are volunteering this week in Dunfermline or anywhere else, we should congratulate them all.

10:59

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I welcome this morning's debate, not only as a timely reminder of the importance of the voluntary sector and of volunteering to our country, but as an opportunity to endorse and refresh our commitment to volunteering. I also welcome a troupe of Boys Brigade from my constituency—

Christine Grahame: On a point of order, Presiding Officer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes. I have noticed that Mr Macintosh's microphone has not come on and I wonder whether the sound engineer could connect him now.

Mr Macintosh: Should I move to the next seat?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, you should move to the connected microphone and probably begin again, Mr Macintosh. I do not know whether the official reporters caught your first remarks, but I am sure that the public in the gallery will have struggled to do so.

Mr Macintosh: It is worth saying twice, Presiding Officer.

I welcome this morning's debate because it reminds us of the importance of volunteering and gives us an opportunity to refresh and endorse our

commitment to volunteering. I want to extend a welcome to a Boys Brigade troupe, who I know have just arrived downstairs. They are an example of community spirit and are supported by volunteers in Barrhead in my constituency.

The point that I want to make, which many members have also made, is that it is vital to support the voluntary sector not just with words but with funding. I am particularly concerned that we are both consistent and fair in the application of that funding.

I will give a couple of examples of the difficulty the voluntary sector faces. Members might be familiar with the questions that have been raised about the scout facility called Lapwing Lodge in my constituency, not least because of the members' business debate that Bruce McFee initiated last year. It is an old-fashioned scout camping facility that is well used not just by a range of uniformed organisations but more broadly by groups and individuals throughout the community. It desperately needs upgrading and modernisation.

I do not believe that any of us who has taken the time to visit Lapwing would argue that it should not qualify for some form of public support. Unfortunately, it does not qualify. I will not repeat all the arguments and explanations for that. Although my local authority has offered a substantial contribution, the lodge has, so far, failed to meet the criteria laid down for lottery, Executive and other public sector grants, despite its being, on the face of it, a deserving cause.

One of the comments made by the applicants, which has stayed with me, is that many of the voluntary sector grants that are awarded, particularly through the lottery, go to newly formed organisations that turn out to be unsustainable and cease to exist after a couple of years. That point is similar to one Donald Gorrie and other members made. The approach hides a complex process of accountability, but I appreciate fully why it rankles with long-established youth uniformed organisations that have proven their commitment, worth and benefit year after year but struggle to meet the criteria for voluntary sector funding.

The Executive and the public purse will never be able to meet all the demands, but if we can demonstrate consistency, equity and fairness across the board, the disappointment of some will not be further marred by a sense of grievance or injustice.

Voluntary Action, an umbrella organisation for all the voluntary groups in East Renfrewshire, has just built a tremendous new centre for all those groups to use. The funding came from umpteen different sources and the process involved in securing it was long and arduous—and involved

several disappointments along the way. How many of us have heard the same story from voluntary groups: too much time is spent filling in forms and applying for funding? How many of us have heard people say that they were led to believe that they would get a grant and put a huge effort into getting it only to be turned down at an advanced stage? Volunteers do not give up their time to be full-time fundraisers and grant chasers, but that is what can happen.

There is not enough time for me to expand on other examples and issues that I want to highlight. I mention in passing the uncertainty about the future and about long-term support that many voluntary organisations face, even those that work with local authorities. Some organisations have difficulty securing funding from local authorities that fail to recognise the value for money that they can provide.

The good news is that the strategic funding review addresses those difficulties. The Executive has already taken a number of positive steps, from the millions it put into the futurebuilders fund to simple steps such as introducing a common application form for all its grant schemes. The move to three-year funding and further streamlining of the over complex application process is also welcome. I am particularly hopeful that the new funders forum, which will bring together national and local government and voluntary providers, will drive on the process.

We might not meet every demand, but we can apply the principles of consistency, equity and fairness in all our decisions. We have made great strides in that direction and I commend the Executive for its continued support and commitment.

11:04

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con): Volunteering is something that we Scots are very good at. It comes naturally to us; it is instinctive within the Scottish character, which embraces an understanding that we have a mutual responsibility and an obligation to help those who are less fortunate than ourselves. That view is borne out by the statistics. There are 50,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland, supported by more than 1 million volunteers who put in 9 million hours of unpaid effort each month. That means that, at the average wage level, more than £1 billion-worth of wages do not have to be paid by the state because volunteers successfully provide services and support that, in effect, the state has failed to provide. The first thing that we politicians need to do is give a resounding thank you to Scotland's volunteers. Their contribution to Scotland's economy is massive and their service to the people whom they support is even greater.

One of my favourite times of the year is volunteers week, when, like other members, I am asked to volunteer by a number of local projects. Thus far I have, among other things, helped to deliver meals on wheels in Kirkcudbright and—believe it or not—helped to create new flower beds at Threave gardens near Castle Douglas, which I thoroughly recommend to anyone who is in the area. I have also helped to build a bird hide from which the pupils at Belmont primary school in Stranraer can study the bird life in their gardens. It is probably the only structure I have built that has remained standing four years later. However, pride of place goes to the occasion when I called the bingo numbers at the Millennium centre in Stranraer. I think that I can modestly say that I have a natural flair for that activity and the experience gave me some comfort that there is a career that I might successfully pursue should the electorate ever decide that I need a new one.

Volunteers week serves to highlight the vast range of activities that volunteers undertake. Some 90 per cent of those who are involved in citizens advice bureaux and 53 per cent of museum staff are volunteers. People do not know that. The Museum of Lead Mining at Wanlockhead in my constituency is a unique monument to the incredibly tough lives that the miners led, but I can safely say that it would not exist if it was not for the voluntary effort that is put in. Other members mentioned befriending schemes; prison visitors; drug rehabilitation initiatives; victim support; work with abused women, men and children; our sporting life; our cultural life; and our environment. All of those and more would be considerably the poorer without the input of volunteers, which is often unsung and taken for granted.

I endorse and support the volunteering strategy and its aims. As members said, it is difficult not to support it. However, I do so with a belief that the correct level of state management of the voluntary sector involves a balance that is difficult to achieve but vital to attain. I will suggest two areas in which the Executive could act to improve the balance. I must be right to do so, because almost every member who has spoken has mentioned them. The first is funding—not the amount, but the timescale and the process. All too often, applications for funding, if they are approved, result in a three-year package. The funded body spends the first year becoming established, the second year carrying out the work it was established to do and the third year trying to secure further funding to guarantee survival. Surely that is not the best way either to ensure the best return on taxpayers' input or to make the best use of volunteers' efforts.

The second area that is ripe for improvement is the process that is required by Disclosure Scotland. It is sad that the process is required at

all, but it is necessary. The complex processes that we have had since the introduction of disclosure have put some people off volunteering and made recruitment to voluntary organisations much harder. I welcome the commitment that the Minister for Education and Young People made in yesterday's debate to simplify the process and end the ridiculous requirement for multiple disclosures. Those changes cannot come soon enough. They will give a welcome boost to volunteers' morale and bring an overdue element of common sense to a process that no one wants but which is forced upon us by some of the darker elements in society.

I am interested in the commendably compact brief that Volunteer Development Scotland issued. As well as being a perfect example of how to present a brief to MSPs, it contains a subtle message. It says, "Please continue to support us along the lines of the volunteering strategy. Please help us to build on the positive base from which we start in Scotland. Please continue to debate what Parliament can do, with others, to energise the latent resources of the people of Scotland." However, it also seems to state an unwritten message: "Beyond that, please keep your hands off and let us independently do what we do best: volunteer, with minimal interference, to the huge benefit of our country and our citizens."

11:09

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): The Scottish Socialist Party welcomes this morning's debate on volunteering because it gives us an opportunity to think about and discuss the many thousands of people in Scotland who give their time to help others, who could be close to home, many miles away or even on other continents. However, I agree with Christine Grahame's remarks about the nature and focus of the debate and I hope that the Minister for Communities will take those concerns on board.

Recent disasters such as the tsunami and the earthquake in Pakistan threw on to our television screens individuals and organisations who work around the clock to ensure that assistance reaches those in desperate need. Food, blankets, medicines and clothing are collected, packaged and delivered to other parts of the world. Volunteers also provide crucial support for people here in Scotland.

Like others in the chamber, I worked as a volunteer. I was an advocate at Equal Say and I worked as a volunteer councillor at ChildLine Scotland. I was subsequently employed as a supervisor at ChildLine Scotland. If people do not already know what that entails, they should be made aware of what is involved, how that relates to funding and where the problems lie.

Voluntary organisations train their volunteers to do their jobs. Equal Say and ChildLine delivered training that stood me in good stead for my job as an MSP. For example, the training gave me the ability to assist people who are in pain, people who are afraid and folk who are in a crisis and have no one else to turn to. MSPs will recognise those situations. I am extremely privileged to have the tools to know what to say and do at a time of crisis and I was given those skills by my trainers at ChildLine.

I was also given a unique insight into the difficulties that young people face. I learned how to handle casework, how to deal with paperwork, how to deal with the pain of a desperate child and how to seek appropriate help. My self-esteem and confidence improved enormously during the process. I am eternally grateful to ChildLine for that training, which gave me strings to my bow that I would not otherwise have had. However, the training took 12 weeks and it cost £1,500 to deliver. What did ChildLine get in return? I worked on the phone lines for a time and I stayed on as a supervisor, but then I moved on. A new volunteer had to go through the training and take my place and ChildLine incurred training costs again.

The turnover of volunteers costs organisations such as ChildLine and Equal Say a fortune and there is little or no recognition that people are being trained and given skills and confidence that enable them to participate in society. Workplaces benefit from that, as do society and the economy. Voluntary organisations provide a service to the child on the phone or the starving and cold in Pakistan but they also develop the skills of volunteers. I want us to recognise that those skills are transferable.

As Linda Fabiani pointed out, the voluntary sector comprises a huge network of organisations from global charities to local groups. Their work includes child care, education, youth work, care of the elderly, anti-poverty initiatives and the environmental initiatives that Patrick Harvie mentioned. The list of those who benefit is endless. The voluntary sector holds civic society together and we would grind to a standstill without its work and support.

When we praise volunteers, we must also recognise that the voluntary sector faces a constant battle for funding and resources. That has been said time and time again. I want the minister to hear it and to respond to it. Annually reviewed funding packages leave organisations and groups in a precarious situation and can affect volunteers' motivation. It has to be said that employees in the voluntary sector suffer from lower pay than their counterparts in the public sector.

We must not simply pat volunteers on the back; our job is to ensure that organisations that provide vital support and training have secure funding that fully recognises the vital role that they play in our society. The Scottish Executive should today make a commitment to ease the precarious nature of funding by establishing a four-year minimum funding period for all publicly funded projects and ensuring that funding takes account of inflation and staff training costs. That would surely reduce the atmosphere of uncertainty that constantly surrounds projects that are funded year to year.

Many members have said that they visit organisations and meet brilliant volunteers and employees, only to hear that some of those people may lose their jobs soon and that the services may be lost. The voluntary sector should seek not to duplicate services that local government should resource and provide. In recognising the people who give so much for others, we should promise those folk and those organisations support, security, respect and funding. That would be a true vote of thanks and support. It is incumbent on us to make that promise.

In his opening remarks, the minister said that the potential is limitless. That is not true: the future of many essential organisations hangs in the balance. The limits are therefore clear.

11:15

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): In preparing for the debate, I was taken by an article in a *Holyrood* magazine supplement. It listed the five things that volunteering is not. It is not a cheap option, as it requires resources, commitment and skilled management, and I commend Rosie Kane for discussing those. Volunteering is not amateurish, as many volunteers are highly skilled, with a wealth of experience. It is not a minority activity, as research indicates that more than 1.5 million people are involved. Volunteering is not unchanging, as it continually affects and is affected by change in society. It is not a cliché or a stereotype, but incredibly diverse. Those descriptions are why, in a debate such as this, Parliament should not deal in clichés, platitudes or patronising pats on the back, well-deserved though a pat on the back may be. Volunteers in Scotland look to the Parliament to tackle real and difficult practicalities. Several members mentioned funding and disclosure, which I will come back to later. We have responsibilities; we have to make things easier for volunteers. We have to remove the barriers. That is the test of whether we are doing our job.

Fantastic volunteering work is being done. Only last night we had a debate about the Linlithgow primary school pupils who act as tour guides and take people round Linlithgow Palace. That is a

great example of the positive role that young people can play in volunteering. I agree with Patrick Harvie that volunteering is the flip-side of the antisocial behaviour argument. The involvement of young people in positive aspects of life means that they can make a constructive contribution well into the future.

I want to touch on three areas: young people; the elderly; and disclosure. I am interested in ProjectScotland, and I wish it well. I am interested in the minister's focus on involving those from more deprived areas in ProjectScotland. He also said that Scotland is the first area in the UK to develop a national volunteering programme. I recognise David Cameron's belated entry into the debate; he wants to have forced volunteers, which is a contradiction; national social service is different from volunteering. However, I am pleased that the idea has raised its head. Interestingly, Gordon Brown and David Blunkett have talked about young people volunteering. They are considering the possibility that young people who want to go to university, but have a gap year, will have their tuition fees paid if they volunteer. That would be interesting, bearing in mind that we are not meant to have tuition fees in Scotland, although we have the graduate endowment fee. Can the minister tell us whether there will be any Barnett consequentials should the UK scheme go ahead, and if so, whether we could use some to pay off the graduate endowment fee for students who volunteer in their gap year?

I welcome the fact that the focus may be on those from more deprived areas becoming involved in ProjectScotland. If that is the case, it is important that we know that that is where the focus is. It is well and good that any Barnett consequentials should go into that, especially if it is explained why. Again, that is something practical that the Parliament should discuss. We should consider paying graduate endowment fees for those who volunteer in a gap year before they go to university. That is a practical and simple move that we should debate. If we want to put those resources elsewhere, we should debate that as well.

A lot of voluntary work is done in children's services and there is a huge opportunity to combine that and the work that is done with the elderly. Developing cross-generational understanding has a lot of good will. Karen Whitefield had a debate about the good work that the older generations do with the younger in her constituency. That work can generate huge synergy and we should pursue it.

Many of us have complained for many years about disclosure. The Education Committee's child protection inquiry raised some of those concerns. I welcome the fact that people who work in more

than one children's sector will have to go through the disclosure process only once. There will be organisational issues about how all the voluntary organisations with which they work will then be notified if there were a change in their circumstances. When the Bichard legislation comes to the Parliament, we should look at disclosure through the lens of the volunteer to ensure that we make it simple, operational and safe. We must have realistic risk. The best way to prevent young people from being at risk is to ensure that there are well-organised youth organisations. We want young people to participate in society, not hang around the streets. One way of ensuring that is to champion the idea, but we need to ensure that we have a robust disclosure mechanism that protects our children and also makes volunteering risk averse for those who want to do it.

11:21

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

There was some question in the early part of the debate as to whether this was a constructive or an appropriate time to debate volunteering. Although I am concerned that no great announcements were made, it has been a practical and sensible way to use an hour of our time. I have found the debate reassuring.

My concern has always been to ensure that we appreciate all that the voluntary sector contributes. I remember hearing Carolyn Leckie speak in a previous debate and heaping great praise on the voluntary project that was under discussion, but she suggested that, ultimately, the public sector is always better than the voluntary sector. Rosie Kane said that again today about certain projects. I have never taken that view. I continue to believe that the voluntary sector is capable of providing services as good as—if not better than—those of the public sector. That is why it is important that we all accept that not only is the voluntary sector here to stay, but it is something that we should encourage, fund and develop where possible. I took from Malcolm Chilsholm's speech that he believes that too. He certainly said nothing to discourage me in that belief. That is why I take something positive from the debate.

However, several serious and significant points have been raised to which I will add my support. The first concerns funding. Many of the voluntary sector projects that we all visit in our constituencies face the same problem: three-year funding. Many of them depend on finding grants, and they live from one year to the next without knowing whether they will be able to continue. I regularly visit Angus young carers' project in Arbroath. That is an incredibly worthy organisation, but it never knows where its funding

for the year after next will come from. For that reason, I have the greatest sympathy with much of what Donald Gorrie said about funding.

Alex Fergusson was perfectly right to say that volunteering makes a major economic contribution. Volunteers freely give billions of pounds worth of effort. Without them, the country would be a lot worse off. However, there continues to be a problem in encouraging people to become involved in volunteering, particularly those who are less well off, unemployed or on benefits. Consequently, because some areas in Scotland are better off than others, there are certain areas in which there remains a shortage of volunteers.

That takes us to some of the things that David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative party, recently said about volunteering. He is no new convert to the concept of volunteering. In fact, through his personal circumstances, David Cameron has been involved with voluntary organisations for many years. That is why he has become highly motivated by the idea that volunteering should be encouraged. Listening to the minister's opening speech, it is clear that many of the things that David Cameron is talking about in the south are already further along the road in Scotland than they are in England.

However, we must address the key issues, which perhaps need to be dealt with in the south as well. As many have said in the debate, we must ensure that volunteering provides those who have had health difficulties or who have been unemployed with a stepping stone—as Patrick Harvie said—back into work. However, that means that there must be a more understanding attitude towards the payment of benefits, particularly unemployment benefit. The combination of being on benefits and doing voluntary work should be as smooth as possible. Volunteering should not be seen, as it is by many in difficult circumstances, as a barrier to continuing to claim benefits.

The debate has been extremely useful. I have heard some positive contributions, not least from the minister, and I support the position that he set out. I hope that the debate will encourage others in the chamber to support their local voluntary organisations and to bring the message of those organisations back here in future.

11:26

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): When I saw that we were going to debate volunteering, I and others, not just in my party, thought that this was an ideal opportunity to question ministers on core funding and strategic funding. I am sorry that the ministers seem more interested in the Tory plot over there than they are in the speeches, but perhaps that tells us something about the

ministers. We come here to debate and we expect answers and announcements from the Executive; it is not about platitudes or patting people on the back. I am not being dismissive of volunteers; I am saying to the ministers that they should take volunteering much more seriously. It has been mentioned throughout the debate that volunteers come to us every other day about core funding. We want answers. Here is a ministerial statement, but no motion on which to vote. We are speaking in a debate that gives no answers to people out there. The Executive should consider closely its agenda and not waste the Parliament's time on a debate such as this, when a members' business debate on volunteering would have had the same outcome.

I thought that there might have been consensus in the debate, but the Tories have broken it. If Mr Cameron wanted his name constantly mentioned here, why did he not stand for the Scottish Parliament? It is a disgrace that the Tories mention Mr Cameron. On behalf of the many thousands of volunteers in Scotland who want an answer from the Executive, the Tories should tell Mr Cameron to stand for the Scottish Parliament and to stop electioneering. The Tories are no better than the Executive.

As other members have said, we must celebrate volunteering, but it is also important to give volunteers something to celebrate. Core funding has been raised time and again in the debate by members from all parties. I would like the minister to answer a couple of questions on funding. Strategic funding was first mentioned in 2000; then the Executive said that it hoped to report back in 2004. Now, six years down the line, we have the minister's admission that

"The Strategic Funding Review aims to improve the availability"

of funding, but that it

"will be implemented over the next year to 18 months."

Will the minister be more specific about the date? We have waited six years, only be told that the plan

"will be implemented over the next year to 18 months."

The volunteers out there want to know an exact date and they want to know exactly what is happening with strategic funding. That is what debates in the Parliament are all about: getting answers, not platitudes.

I commend the minister for considering older people in volunteering. Although, quite rightly, he mentioned youth volunteers throughout his speech—the aim of ProjectScotland is to encourage young people to begin volunteering—we all know that the vast majority of volunteers are older people. We have an ageing population and a

golden opportunity to produce a strategy, so I welcome the minister's announcement that he will produce a paper. I have raised it time and again with the minister, while older volunteers have also asked for the matter to be addressed. However, we do not have a date for that report either. That makes two issues for which no date has been given: the strategic funding review and the report on a strategy for older volunteers. I would like answers on those issues.

We have missed out another great swathe of the population: disabled volunteers. The report on volunteering and disability is good; I hope that the minister will try to take its recommendations further, one of which is as simple as improving access to buildings to enable disabled people to volunteer. Another recommendation concerns engaging in information. Those are two core issues that are raised in the report—I hope that the minister will take them up.

We welcome and celebrate volunteering, but it must not replace core services. We must take it on board that that is happening in various areas. The Executive is making cuts to councils left, right and centre, and some core services that are run by councils, such as after-school care, are having to be taken over by volunteers. If that is the Executive's approach to volunteering, we will struggle dearly to get more people to volunteer. People volunteer because they get great pleasure out of it and learn from it; they do not want to be used to replace core services. I would like answers, not only to my questions but to those of other members.

11:31

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): We can divide the debate into two parts. First, there were the sensible, practical and thoughtful contributions on the hard issues for the voluntary sector. Secondly, however, there were the contributions that basically said two things at the same time: that we should not be having the debate and that there are lots of hard things to be said in the debate. Christine Grahame ought to try to be a little more consistent. She should not say that we should be debating something else, then say that there are lots of things to debate. The definition of a debate should not hinge on whether there is a motion. Anybody who knows the Scottish Executive will know that it is perfectly capable of having a robust, hard and challenging discussion without a motion at the end of it.

Christine Grahame: There is no focus.

Johann Lamont: Then we have a responsibility to give it focus. I am grateful that others in the chamber have managed to do that. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The minister is not taking an intervention.

Johann Lamont: I wish to say something on a technical point. The SNP may wish to raise with its representatives in the Parliamentary Bureau whether there should be a subject debate. Today's debate was agreed by the bureau. The Executive members of the bureau did not insist that there should not be a motion. It is a red herring on Christine Grahame's part to raise that point.

I want to reflect on some of the hard issues that Christine Grahame could have raised and that we could recognise in relation to challenging—

Christine Grahame: The minister will not take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Not from a sedentary position, Ms Grahame.

Johann Lamont: I wish to make a general point about volunteering. People talk about platitudes and about being patronising and so on, but there is a hard political issue here, and there are dividing lines on it in the chamber. There was a time when I would have argued that volunteering is nothing to do with Government or the state; that the state should provide and it should be a matter for the public sector to deliver for people. However, that view flew in the face of the Executive's experience and our understanding that people volunteer because it is something that they want to do. Not only can volunteers work where the state does not choose to work, but they can go to places that the state cannot reach.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the minister give way?

Johann Lamont: I ask Fiona Hyslop to let me make progress.

I had the privilege of visiting the Caladh Trust on Uist, which is a project that provides a service that the state is incapable of providing. Its volunteers did not talk to me about funding, but about the initiatives that the trust has developed. The vast majority of its funding does not come from the state. Many voluntary bodies do not talk simply about funding. When we are talking about volunteering we have to be careful that we go beyond the important and relevant debate about funding and develop it further.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the minister give way?

Johann Lamont: If the member will let me progress, I will take her point.

We should recognise the hard questions that have been raised, such as how services are delivered and what the voluntary sector consists of. However, people should be consistent. They should not say that they welcome the voluntary sector then define social rented housing as privatisation. We have to ask a hard question: to

what extent can the state control a sector that develops from human instinct? What level of state intervention should there be? I accept that an interesting and challenging question arises about the balance between funding innovation and funding success. We are wrestling with that, because we realise that the voluntary sector and volunteers can be innovative. We must have a place for that, but we must also have a place for successful projects.

Fiona Hyslop rose—

Johann Lamont: There are now record levels of funding for the voluntary sector, which I am sure Fiona Hyslop will welcome.

Fiona Hyslop: That is interesting. Is the minister acknowledging that the Executive has only belatedly recognised the importance of volunteering? The SNP has acknowledged for some time that volunteering is essential, as have the Conservatives, to be fair. I see that the Minister for Education and Young People is in the chamber, so I point out that we should remember that the voluntary sector provides a huge number of children's services, which will now be subject to the joint inspections that are to be introduced. Why has the rest of Scotland had to wait while, by the deputy minister's admission, the Executive has played catch-up on the importance of volunteering?

Johann Lamont: I was reflecting on my 30-year journey as a political activist. Some members have not yet made such a journey. Since devolution, we have shown that we understand that Government should track and support innovation rather than impose it from the centre, and thereby support local communities. The centralists in the Parliament may wish to reflect on that. The Executive has embraced that idea and the country has made progress on that journey.

A false division can be made between big and small organisations. It is possible to have a volunteering strategy that recognises the success of ProjectScotland and at the same time accepts that we must not drive out small organisations through overwieldy and overburdensome regulation. There has been movement on that issue in relation to Disclosure Scotland and the central registered body in Scotland. The SNP is trying to knock down a straw man, because the Executive has made progress.

Christine Grahame: Surely the minister accepts that we acknowledge the movement on Disclosure Scotland and are delighted with it, although it has taken a bit longer than we hoped. The question that I asked earlier was about what has happened to the strategic funding review, for which we have waited for six years. That was a straightforward point for the minister to address, but she has not done so.

Johann Lamont: As the member has been harassing me to take an intervention, I will respond to that. We recognise the importance of a strategic funding review and we are moving to implementation of that following the publication of the joint action plan. Nobody thinks that we should not move on that, but we have to move at the same pace as all the partners, which include the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the SCVO and the wider public and voluntary sectors. It has not taken six years—we have already made a great deal of progress. As I said, we are moving to change and slim down the grant application process. I am sure that all members accept that we do not want to create an industry that rewards those who know how to fill in application forms rather than those who can support developments.

As Cathy Peattie said, volunteering is about much more than the voluntary sector. Research from a variety of sources has shown consistently that about 25 per cent of people who volunteer say that they do so in the public sector. Volunteers work with local councils to make life better for vulnerable people such as children, older people and people with learning disabilities. We have a recognised Executive initiative in community planning to harness volunteers' energy to ensure that decisions about local communities are made by those communities.

Mary Scanlon mentioned citizens advice bureaux. We recognise their role and I accept the point that she made about communication systems, but we must put that in the context of the highest-ever funding for the voluntary sector. We should work round the system rather than expecting those who are in need to do so. However, we must recognise that, even though we want to make the disclosure process easier, address the central registered body in Scotland and make more funding available, there will still be hard questions about where the money goes. We must have public accountability in relation to disclosure. We must have confidence in the system so that vulnerable people are not made more vulnerable. We accept that tension and we want to work together to find solutions to it.

We should not listen to the SNP members with the half-empty glasses who say that nothing has been done. They sit passively and say that we need to do this and that, but the fact is that the Executive is addressing the hard issues in partnership with the voluntary sector and local communities and a great deal more will be done. We understand that an active voluntary sector and active volunteers are challenging. Volunteers are not sitting passively waiting for things to happen; instead, throughout Scotland, they are contributing more and more, to the benefit of the people of this country.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

School Curriculum (History)

1. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on the place of history in the school curriculum. (S2O-8937)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): I am clear that history is a subject that has a huge contribution to make to the purposes of education. As such, it will continue to play an important part in the school curriculum.

Bill Butler: I welcome the minister's firm support for history, which I assume is for the teaching of history as a discrete subject in secondaries 1 and 2. The minister will be aware that concerns remain. Will he comment on a report in today's press that the head teachers of Lochend community high school and Govan high school in Glasgow have decided to phase out the subject for first and second-year pupils as of the next academic year? Given the age profile in history departments throughout Scotland and the number of history graduates who are undertaking teacher training, is the minister confident that history has a future?

Peter Peacock: History certainly has a future. I am not going to make it a thing of the past, as somebody once suggested I was thinking of doing.

In the Scottish education system, it is ultimately schools and local authorities that decide on the precise way in which to teach subjects and to deliver the curriculum, within the guidance that is issued. However, it is inconceivable that people could have a complete education without exposure to history. The methods of delivering that are for schools, but it is an important part of children's learning. When we have completed the curriculum review that is under way, we will issue guidance on the way in which the matter ought to be dealt with.

On the issue of the age of history teachers, we now profile the ages of all the different groups in the teaching profession as part of the annual workforce planning exercise. We use a much more sophisticated method than was used in past generations, which allows us to secure university places in advance to ensure that we have an adequate supply of teachers for all subjects. History will remain an important subject in schools

and it will remain part of our workforce planning to ensure that we have an adequate supply of new teachers.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): I call Murray Tosh.

Murray Tosh (West of Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer—sorry, I mean Presiding Officer. [*Laughter.*] I was repeating the refrain that I am so used to hearing from other members.

The minister clearly understands the point about the age profile of the teaching profession, but is he aware that student history teachers are now readily finding jobs and that, in some areas, shortfalls are emerging with which schools are finding it difficult to deal? Is he aware of the information that was given at a presentation yesterday in the Parliament building that colleges are cutting the number of student places that they propose to offer next year? In the light of the assurance that the minister has just given Mr Butler and that information from the colleges, will he revisit the workforce calculations and satisfy himself that they are rigorous, given the bulge in retirements that the profession faces in the next couple of years?

Peter Peacock: I am happy to investigate that matter. In the workforce planning process, which is now much more sophisticated than it was in the past, we take account of peaks and troughs in the current and future age profile and try to secure the right number of teachers for certain points in time. We do not want to have an oversupply or undersupply in particular subjects, because we do not want unemployed teachers or teacher shortages. That is why there can be fluctuations in the yearly intakes. However, I am happy to look into the matter that the member raises.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I share the concerns that were raised in the previous questions. Does the minister agree that a central part of a civilised society is that people understand their history and where their country fits in, which in our case, means fitting into British, European and world history? Fundamentally, people have to know the basic facts about their country's history because otherwise they are not civilised. Will the minister ensure that that happens here?

Peter Peacock: I agree completely with Donald Gorrie. One of the few comments that I made to my officials at the outset of the curriculum review was that young people must have a sense of how we got here. They need to understand the origins of our society and how it has developed, but they also need to understand the many lessons that history teaches through consideration of major and other world events. It is hugely important that young people know where they are, how they got

here and how our society developed and that they learn the lessons of history, if we are to avoid making mistakes in the future.

Play Opportunities

2. Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it is aware of the importance of play opportunities for improving child mental health and tackling obesity and antisocial behaviour in young people. (S2O-8952)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): Play is an integral part of childhood and helps children to develop skills in forming relationships, negotiation and dealing with conflict, all of which are important in emotional and social development. Research evidence suggests that children who have good emotional skills from an early age are likely to have lower rates of obesity, mental illness, teenage pregnancy and substance misuse in later life.

Mr Macintosh: Is the minister aware of a 2004 report from University College London that found that free play was second only to physical education in burning off calories in children? Is he also aware of the 2001 report from the *British Medical Journal* that warned of an "obesity epidemic" among children? That report said:

"Opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity."

Can the minister assure me that he understands the benefits that play can bring to young people and to tackling the obesity epidemic and that he will give his best efforts to securing further opportunities for Scottish children to play?

Robert Brown: Yes. Play is extremely important and the Scottish ministers and the Executive recognise its importance in a number of areas. Of course, the issue is not just to do with play; it is also to do with matters such as physical exercise, the opportunity for games, good dietary habits and our hungry for success programme. Play is not viewed in isolation. We must think about the availability of places in which to play and about what happens in schools, particularly in nursery schools and primary 1, and we must encourage PE and games opportunities in schools.

There are a number of areas across the board in which we are anxious to develop play opportunities. Sadly, some children do not have opportunities to play because their families have forgotten how to play with them; we want to encourage change in that aspect of the matter. There are a number of objectives regarding play that we are trying to support right across the board with such things as our active schools programme and play arrangements for young children.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I am pleased that the minister recognises the importance of play, but is he aware of the growing call from communities, particularly in deprived parts of Glasgow, for derelict land to be turned into play and recreation areas for their children? Does he agree that that call from local communities and people is commendable? Will he agree to meet local groups and perhaps help them to turn the derelict pieces of land into areas in which their kids can play and get physical exercise?

Robert Brown: I touched on the importance of having and developing places in which to play and of retaining greenfield sites and open spaces. However, by and large, those are matters for local authorities. Although I am happy to talk further to Sandra White about the issue that she has raised, I think that, at that level of enterprise, it is a matter for the local authority rather than the Scottish Executive to be engaged with. However, the Executive strongly supports encouraging play and providing play opportunities in every way possible.

Social Housing (Edinburgh)

3. David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions have taken place at a ministerial or official level with representatives of the City of Edinburgh Council in respect of an alternative strategy for social housing in light of the no vote in the housing stock transfer ballot of tenants in December 2005. (S2O-8929)

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): I had a formal meeting with the executive member for community safety and housing on 22 December and a number of informal discussions thereafter. Officials from the Scottish Executive and Communities Scotland have also been in on-going dialogue with their counterparts in the council and have had two formal meetings: one in January and one earlier this week.

David McLetchie: I know that the minister is as disappointed as I am at the outcome of the ballot, which is a significant blow to hopes for the regeneration of housing in the Sighthill area of my constituency. I am sure that he will agree that there is a pressing need to develop a plan B. I understand that a partial stock transfer of houses in particular estates is under consideration. Given that a total debt write-off by the Treasury was a feature of the original proposal for a total stock transfer, would there be a partial and proportionate debt write-off if there were a number of partial stock transfers?

Malcolm Chisholm: Certainly, I am extremely disappointed, as I have made clear on many occasions. Clearly, it is up to the City of Edinburgh Council in the first instance to look at the options

that are before it. David McLetchie raises one possible scenario. Since 2004, local authorities on the community ownership programme wanting to undertake partial transfer have been able to get the equivalent debt write-off for the section of their housing stock that they transfer, so that is certainly one of the scenarios that Edinburgh may well be considering.

As I have made clear on many occasions, I shall certainly do all I can in this new situation to support Edinburgh, but it is impossible to provide the level of investment that would have been brought into Edinburgh through community ownership. I know that councillors are thinking long and hard about the situation and not ruling out the option of partial transfer for the future.

The Presiding Officer: Question 4 was not lodged.

Fuel Poverty

5. Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to tackle fuel poverty among low-income households with dependent children. (S2O-8964)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): The Executive is committed to eradicating fuel poverty as far as is reasonably practicable by 2016. We have already installed more than 63,000 central heating systems and insulated more than 220,000 homes, including those of a significant number of households with children. Our warm deal programme is targeted at low-income families in receipt of certain welfare benefits. In addition, we are working to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and have a number of initiatives to help families with children to find routes out of poverty, such as our child care strategy, sure start Scotland and our working for families programme.

Karen Whitefield: Does the minister agree that there is a lack of detailed and reliable data to allow for the monitoring of the effect of fuel poverty on children? Can she assure me that more extensive and reliable data will be gathered on fuel-poor households with children to ensure that fuel poverty programmes reach such families in the future?

Johann Lamont: Yes. It is important that what we do is based on robust data and that we ensure that when we decide how to invest money in the best way to help families who are in fuel poverty, we do so with a proper understanding of the issues. The data can come in a number of ways through research and so on, but I recognise particularly the role of organisations that work with low-income families and the important dialogue that we have with that part of the voluntary sector, which helps to shape our actions.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I remind the minister of the 5,000 children who live in fuel-poor households with no central heating. Is the Executive considering including those households in the central heating programme that is currently under review at a cost, I understand, of £1.9 million?

Johann Lamont: As I have indicated, we are reviewing our central heating programme, which of course is far beyond what is available in other parts of the United Kingdom. It is important that we develop that programme, particularly in relation to fuel poverty. It is clear that what we need to do for children who live in fuel poverty is to support their families out of poverty. That is why our child care strategy, sure start Scotland and our working for families programme are also important. It is important that we recognise the hard work that has been done and the significant investment that has been made. Given that the Scottish National Party's offer to the children of Scotland is independence and not taxing the oil companies, I am sure that those children will recognise the key role of the Executive in supporting them.

Schools (Devolved Management and Budgets)

6. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to encourage greater devolution of budgets and management to schools. (S2O-9003)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): We have issued revised guidance to local authorities on devolved school management. Everything that can reasonably be devolved to head teachers should be, and certainly up to 90 per cent of relevant budgets, in line with our partnership agreement commitments.

Iain Smith: Does the minister agree that standards in our schools will be driven up only by having motivated pupils, which requires motivated teachers, which in turn requires motivated head teachers? Does he consider that head teachers in Fife will be motivated by having only 52 per cent of the education budget devolved directly to their schools? Will they be motivated by the 1.5 per cent cut in their books and equipment budget, which the Labour council has proposed?

Peter Peacock: Local decisions are matters for local councils, which will stand accountable for them. The administration in Fife has delivered a very good quality of education over many years and I am sure that that will continue into the future. Head teachers have very much welcomed what we have said about devolved school management. The circular that we issued only a couple of weeks ago, which pushed forward the whole business of devolved school management, was warmly welcomed by head teachers, who had been consulted on it beforehand.

Iain Smith is right to the extent that having motivated head teachers means having motivated teachers, which in turn will mean better motivated pupils. I am sure that that is as true in Fife as it is anywhere else.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Can the minister explain how anyone is to believe the Government's education targets? The Executive is now stating that it wants to move from an 80 per cent devolved school management target to a target of 90 per cent, despite the fact that, in huge swathes of Scotland—including Fife, as we have just heard—it is failing even to meet the initial target of 80 per cent?

Peter Peacock: We are clear about our intentions, and we know that we can do more to liberate head teachers in what they do. We want the role of local authorities to adapt and change so that they become much more supportive in facilitating head teachers' decisions. The circular that we recently issued will drive that aim forward. We will achieve the 90 per cent devolution target that is being sought. Many local authorities have moved dramatically on this issue in recent years. We expect them to move further and I will ensure that that happens.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): The minister has mentioned the views of head teachers, so will he agree with the view that was expressed by Bill McGregor of the Headteachers Association of Scotland in *Scotland on Sunday* on 29 January? Bill McGregor said:

"If more money was devolved to heads and they were given the freedom to spend it then there would be a far better chance of matching resources to the needs of pupils".

Peter Peacock: I am pleased to say that Bill McGregor has very much welcomed the increases that we announced we are seeking in the extent of devolved school management, which we will secure. School budgets totalling £2.6 billion are already devolved. We have made it clear that we want head teachers to have three-year budgets, so that they can plan effectively how to use that 90 per cent devolved management. We will do everything that we can to encourage that and push it forward.

Ayr Hospital

7. Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Ayrshire and Arran NHS Board in respect of the board's proposal to close the specialist accident and emergency unit at Ayr hospital. (S2O-8926)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): There have been a number of discussions between the Executive and NHS

Ayrshire and Arran about the process for progressing the board's proposals under the review of services project. I understand from NHS Ayrshire and Arran that consultation on the emergency and unplanned care phase concluded on 2 December and that the board received a report on the consultation process at its meeting of 25 January. I am told that the board will reach a decision on the proposals at its meeting of 19 April. The proposals will then be submitted to me for my consideration.

In coming to a decision, I will want to be assured that the proposals are consistent with "Delivering for Health" and I will want to be satisfied as to the adequacy of public engagement and consultation. As with all instances of significant service change, I will consider all the information that is available to me and all the representations that are made to me before I come to a final decision.

Mr Ingram: The minister will be aware of the local government by-election in Maybole last week, in which the Labour vote melted away. The key issue in that by-election was the threat posed to accident and emergency facilities at Ayr hospital. Would the Executive care to address the concerns of the people of South Ayrshire on the issue?

Mr Kerr: When David Kerr's report was discussed in the chamber, it was widely accepted that its conclusions were the right ones for the next 10 to 15 years of the national health service. When it comes to a local proposal to develop five community casualty units in response to community needs, in line with the Kerr report and following consultation with the community, I would rather leave it until the conclusion of the consultation before reaching any views on the matter.

It is a matter of ensuring that we make the right decisions for patients and communities, and that is what I will continue to do. In light of many aspects of our discussions, we are making the right decisions for patients and we will make our decision on this matter in due course.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The minister will be aware of the level of opposition to the proposed changes to accident and emergency services in Ayrshire, with 55,000 signatories to the petitions on the matter and a protest march planned for 25 February. How does he propose to reconcile that huge opposition to the proposed changes with the principles of the Kerr report, which emphasised the importance of noting views that were expressed in a consultation process, when the consultation did not offer the public the possibility of keeping open both accident and emergency units in Ayrshire?

Mr Kerr: That will be a factor in the decision that I make when the reports reach me after being discussed by the local board. The Executive very much wants care to be localised and wants to ensure that patients have access to the right clinicians with the right skills as locally as possible. We must deliver that in our modern health care service.

I repeat that we should wait for the completion of the consultation process when the health board's reports reach me. After that, we should consider the evidence in the round and reach conclusions about what is in the communities' best interests and about investment for patients in those communities.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-2104)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The Cabinet will discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

It is appropriate for everyone here to wish all the very best to our two curling teams from Scotland who are representing the United Kingdom and to all the other Scottish athletes who are taking part in the winter Olympics in Turin, which start tomorrow night. *[Applause.]*

Nicola Sturgeon: I echo that—we wish all our competitors the best of luck.

Following the case of the 11-year-old heroin user in Glasgow, the First Minister said last week that he wanted more children of drug-abusing parents to be taken into care. Is he therefore concerned that Glasgow City Council today proposes a £2 million cut in its support services for children who need care?

The First Minister: It is hard to comment on Glasgow City Council's proposals before its council meeting. What I said last week was very clear. Everything that I have read since last Thursday in several detailed reports of individual cases reinforces my strong view that the current balance in the system is wrong and that the provisions that should guarantee the exchange of information between the health services, schools, police forces and local authority social work departments are inadequate and are not being competently administered consistently enough throughout the country.

I am absolutely determined that for vulnerable children—not just those of drug-addicted parents, although we think of them in particular at this time—we ensure that agencies work effectively together. We gave the agencies three years to get the system right and we will inspect them now to check whether they have done that. I am also determined that we should review the policy and, if necessary, the legislation to ensure that children always come first, regardless of other circumstances.

Nicola Sturgeon: It is all very well for the First Minister to make policy on the hoof, but does he not also have a responsibility to ask whether local authorities can deliver on his policy, given the funding crisis that they face? Should he not be

concerned about a proposed 15 per cent reduction in residential care places for vulnerable kids? Should he not also be concerned about the removal of teachers from nursery schools and the replacement of a daily meals-on-wheels service for the elderly with a delivery of frozen meals once a week? Is he aware that such cuts in Glasgow—many more are proposed today—are being replicated all over Scotland? In most council areas, such cuts are to be accompanied by inflation-busting council tax rises. Will he take the opportunity to apologise to the people of Scotland for breaking his promise that council taxes this year would rise by no more than 2.5 per cent?

The First Minister: I do not agree that policy was being made on the hoof last Thursday. We said just over three years ago that we would give local authorities and the other agencies that are involved three years to put their child protection services in order, after which we would inspect them to ensure that they had done so. I am certain that we will fulfil that commitment in the coming months.

Secondly, it has become increasingly clear in Scotland that when the provisions of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 are being implemented, they are being interpreted in a way that leaves vulnerable children in vulnerable situations rather than leading to their being put into other forms of care. That serious development has taken place over a long period. As I said, policy is not being made on the hoof. I absolutely assure members that I am even more determined than I was last Thursday to see things through.

I will not comment on council meetings in Scotland that have not even taken place. Local authorities must answer for their budgets. It is already clear that some local authorities in Scotland will manage to keep their council tax rises below 2.5 per cent while other local authorities' council tax rises will be above that figure. People throughout Scotland will ask why some councils can keep council tax rises below 2.5 per cent while others cannot, and those people deserve an answer.

Nicola Sturgeon: Will not most councils in Scotland have council tax increases that are well above the rate of inflation? Whatever the First Minister might say, is it not the case that most people are facing service cuts and council tax rises? Could not such a double whammy have been avoided if the First Minister had listened to the Parliament's Finance Committee, which includes members from many parties, when it identified a funding shortfall? Has not Labour achieved nine in a row—nine inflation-busting council tax hikes—since it took office? That is a shameful record. Surely it is time for the First Minister to stop arguing about which branch of the

Labour Party is to blame and to say sorry to folk throughout Scotland who will feel the pain of council tax hikes.

The First Minister: I do not recall Miss Sturgeon saying sorry to anybody last year when Falkirk Council and Angus Council had the highest council tax increases in the country. I am sure that we would welcome her apologising for those increases.

If we want to have a serious debate, we must have serious information that backs up what we say. There will be a 3.9 per cent increase in the local authority grant throughout Scotland and more than £400 million on top of the more than £7 billion Government grant that local authorities already receive. The reality is that some local authorities have managed to ensure that their council tax increases will be below 2.5 per cent, but the figures for other local authorities will be far higher than that, and those authorities must say why that is so. The people of Scotland will ask why those authorities cannot keep their council tax increases below 2.5 per cent, but others can.

Nicola Sturgeon: I point out to the First Minister that Falkirk Council has the second-lowest council tax and Angus Council has the fourth-lowest council tax in mainland Scotland. Perhaps he should tell his Labour colleagues to consider what those councils are doing right.

Does not the First Minister realise that the council tax will have increased by 60 per cent since 1997? Does not he understand that such a tax is unfair and bears no relation to people's ability to pay and that, as a result, massive hikes hit pensioners and hard-pressed families hardest? When will he stop making excuses? He should wake up and do something.

The First Minister: We know about the considerable increases in local authorities' budgets as a result of central Government funding in the past few years. There have even been increases of more than 10 per cent in real terms. Such increases have made a huge difference to the provision of services throughout Scotland and are an additional reason why local authorities should be more responsible in setting their council tax rises for the coming year. This year, local authorities have again received an increase in the Government grant that is above the rate of inflation and have again received the largest share of the budget of the national Government in Scotland. They have a duty to behave responsibly when they set local budgets. If some local authorities in Scotland can keep council tax increases below 2.5 per cent, other local authorities must say why they cannot do likewise.

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-2105)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I expect to see the Prime Minister again soon. We will discuss issues that are important to Scotland.

Miss Goldie: While hundreds of thousands of households throughout Scotland have anxiously awaited confirmation of their council tax increases, they have watched a public squabble between the Executive and councils. The Executive says to councils that they receive enough money from the Executive and that they should use it better, and the councils argue that the Executive ring fences a significant chunk of what it gives them and that it makes them do more and more with what is left. The real concern for the public is the size of the bill. Does the First Minister accept any responsibility for those increases?

The First Minister: I pose the same question to local authorities and to Scotland that I just put to the chamber. There is a case to be answered. Those authorities that have not managed to keep their council tax increase below 2.5 per cent have to answer the question, "If others can do it, why can't you?" In that context, those councils that received above-average increases in Government grant and which today impose increases at double the rate of inflation must answer the question why some authorities in Scotland can receive below-average increases in Government grant and still stay below the 2.5 per cent increase in council tax. Those important questions must be answered locally, but there are questions that can be asked nationally, too.

Miss Goldie: It is precisely this sterile blame game that the public find so infuriating—while the squabble rages, the public pay. Surely we have to move the debate on.

Does the First Minister agree that after nearly seven years of devolution, a reappraisal of the role, function and accountability of local government is overdue?

The First Minister: That time might be fast approaching. However, it is also important to take a stand on the issues of today. If Miss Goldie agrees with Ms Sturgeon that we should simply back down in the face of cries from local government for more and more resources, without councils exerting any pressure on their own budgets, I do not agree with her.

We have a duty as the national Government to fund local services, particularly where we specify particular improvements. We have fully funded the agreed settlement on teachers' pay and

conditions; additional teachers and other improvements in education; free personal care for the elderly; the concessionary fares scheme, with which local authorities have been involved recently; and a number of other areas.

We have taken our responsibilities seriously, but I take my responsibilities very seriously in saying to local authorities that following on from that funding, they have to keep their council tax rises low. I repeat the question: if there are authorities in Scotland that can stay below 2.5 per cent, even within the current system, why cannot the others?

Miss Goldie: With reference to accountability, about which the First Minister was remarkably taciturn, I suspect that it suits him and wasteful local councils to hide behind the smokescreen of confusion. As a first step towards dispelling that confusion and restoring local accountability, will he offer a radical review of how he applies ring fencing?

The First Minister: Given the years and years not just of ring fencing, but of capping, specifying budgets and introducing new rules that came from a Government that was actively supported by Miss Goldie and whose return is desired by Mr Fraser, I have to say that I am proud of the actions that we have taken in this Labour and Liberal Democrat partnership Government since devolution to free up the rules on local authority capital expenditure and on local authorities themselves so that they can make local decisions on finance to ensure that they take the lead with the strategic role that they play locally.

However, with those changes come responsibilities to the local electorate who pay the tax locally. Local authorities must ensure that their budgets are efficient, that they keep rises to a minimum and that resources are targeted at front-line services. That is the challenge to local authorities in that freed-up regime.

We will continue to make progress on relaxing the rules and on giving authorities more responsibility, but they need to respond positively and deliver the efficient budgets and low council tax rises that people demand.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We come to supplementary questions. I will use my discretion to allow questions on the Shirley McKie case, but I warn members that the case is still technically active.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the First Minister now order a comprehensive independent inquiry into the Shirley McKie case and all the issues surrounding it? Does he not agree that the case has thrown up some issues, not least those relating to justice, the now world-wide lack of confidence in the Scottish fingerprint service and the fact that the Executive has ended

up losing £2 million that could have been saved if the case had been settled at the right time?

The First Minister: First of all, a number of important investigations into elements of this case and, indeed, into the fingerprint provisions in Scotland have proved that the fingerprint evidence used in this country is reliable; that we can ensure that it can be used in the Scottish justice system; and that the people involved deal with it honestly and accurately. In this case, it is quite clear—and this was accepted in the settlement that was announced on Tuesday—that an honest mistake was made by individuals. I believe that all concerned have accepted that.

I think that the substantial financial settlement that was reached was appropriate and that it is right to ensure that the family are compensated for what they have gone through. However, it is entirely wrong for politicians and parliamentarians in Scotland to use this situation to run down at home and abroad a justice system in which we can have confidence.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Is the First Minister aware of my concerns that, despite this week's settlement, only one side of this campaign has ever been given any publicity, and that four public servants—three are my constituents and one is represented by Des McNulty—have had their reputations blackened, their families hurt and their careers ruined by a campaign of manipulative misinformation? How does the First Minister think that it is in the public interest to award £750,000 to a policewoman who has been cleared of perjury while the lives of four individuals, who have done nothing other than serve the public interest, have had their lives turned upside down?

The First Minister: I am not going to comment on individuals on either side of the situation. However, I say clearly that a settlement that I believe is fair and right in the circumstances has been reached with the McKie family. It recognises that an honest mistake was made and that they deserve compensation. All sides have accepted that. I believe that we in Scotland need to ensure that we move on from this and that the quality of work in the Scottish fingerprint service and the changes that have already been made in its administration are built upon. At the same time, we must ensure that the integrity and quality of our justice system and our confidence both in it and in its fingerprint service are maintained at home and abroad. I hope that everyone in the chamber will want to help in that respect.

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-2118)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I meet the Secretary of State for Scotland regularly to discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Robin Harper: Three years ago, almost to the day, the Executive parties voted down my Organic Farming Targets (Scotland) Bill. At that time, the Executive made a commitment to increase the area of organically farmed land in Scotland. However, we are now in 2006 and, instead of meeting my 20 per cent target, the area of organic farmed land in Scotland has decreased, not increased. That means more chemicals in the environment, poorer water quality, less wildlife and more pesticides in our food. What is the First Minister going to do to fulfil the commitment that his Executive made to the Parliament and the electorate in 2003?

The First Minister: I am not sure about the position with regard to acreage, and I am happy to ensure that Mr Harper receives a written statement on the matter. However, with the commitment that has been made by Ross Finnie and other ministers and with my own personal commitment, I am absolutely certain that provisions in Scotland, including the organic aid scheme, have been increased and improved over recent years. That commitment is important not only to the environment—although that is important in itself—but to the future of farming. Indeed, the quality and reputation of Scottish farming benefit from the natural produce that we in Scotland boast about at home and abroad.

Robin Harper: Farmers who are lucky enough to get on the organic aid scheme might get a little bit more money, but the First Minister is missing the point. Organic farming delivers for the environment, clean water, wildlife and chemical-free soils, yet the Executive has slashed the overall budget for organic farming from £8.44 million last year to £2.6 million this year—the budget is a quarter of what it was. The Executive is reneging on its commitments. What will the First Minister say to all those farmers who will be denied financial help to farm land organically because of his dismal overall budget?

The First Minister: I am not completely up to date with all the details, but I know that no applicant has been denied access to the scheme and that the resources that are available to those who apply are increasing. The scheme is an opportunity to expand organic farming in Scotland, and we want to encourage more farmers and others in Scotland to exploit it. We want to encourage organic farming for the environmental reasons that Mr Harper raised but also because increasing support for and participation in organic

farming can improve the reputation of Scottish farming at home and abroad. That is why we remain committed to it. I do not recognise the picture that Mr Harper paints, and I will be happy to ensure that the Minister for Environment and Rural Development sends him a detailed response.

Utility Charges

4. Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether discussions have taken place between the Scottish Executive and Scottish Gas in respect of proposed utility charge increases. (S2F-2110)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Ministers maintain regular dialogue with a range of energy companies to discuss how to protect vulnerable customers.

Dr Murray: I am sure that the First Minister shares my concern over the effect that fuel price rises of possibly up to 25 per cent will have on many residents in my Dumfries constituency. It will affect people on fixed incomes, such as pensioners, and those in low-income households. Will he encourage the utility companies to extend programmes such as the winter rebate and here to help, which assist vulnerable households? Will he ensure that those schemes are publicised as widely as possible? Further, does he agree that the current situation demonstrates the perils of overreliance on one source of energy and the need to develop a balanced and self-sustaining energy policy that should not exclude the possible contribution of nuclear energy?

The First Minister: I urge all the utility companies to become involved in the schemes that Elaine Murray mentions and to support and expand them. I also urge them, in advance of their making final decisions or of confirming those decisions publicly, to think again about the scale of the increases that were being suggested earlier this week.

The Executive remains committed to its energy efficiency and improvement programmes in Scotland. They have led the way in the United Kingdom and have ensured that central heating is available for more old-age pensioners in Scotland. The warm deal scheme has also ensured that many low-income families in Scotland have better-insulated, more energy-efficient homes, which has helped to lift them out of fuel poverty. Those schemes have been a big success, and we are building on them, with further announcements due from the minister soon. We will ensure that we remain committed to them.

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): Given that a gas company such as ScottishPower has just posted a 95 per cent rise in profits this quarter, does the

First Minister agree that the proposed 25 per cent increase in the price of gas is unjustified? If so, will he intercede to ensure that there is an immediate price freeze? Will he also accept the case for providing Scotland's pensioners—who are at risk from hypothermia this winter—with free fuel?

The First Minister: Colin Fox started well, but he fell away towards the end. I absolutely agree with him that the utility companies need to think again about such proposed large increases. I do not pinpoint particular companies, because the figures are as yet just speculation. I hope that all the companies involved will think very hard about the scale of the increases that were suggested earlier this week. However, the answer is not for Governments to start running companies or setting utilities prices. Such a system would be entirely wrong, and it has failed in the past elsewhere. However much Colin Fox may want to urge such a system on Scotland, I doubt that the people of Scotland want it from him.

Life Expectancy

5. Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive has made an assessment of the impact of life expectancy on economic performance. (S2F-2119)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The link between life expectancy—in particular, healthy life expectancy—and economic performance is complex and no single, quantified assessment has yet been carried out. However, I have no doubt that more Scots living longer, healthier and more active lives is good for our economy; more important, it is good for individuals, for families, for communities and for our society.

Euan Robson: Does the First Minister agree that much improved health promotion will help to release Scotland's hidden talent and that population trends make that policy all the more important?

The First Minister: It is clear that our work on health improvement is essential both for the individuals concerned and for our economy. We are taking action to reduce the number of Scots who smoke—we hope that, over time, a dramatic reduction in that number will be achieved—to tackle alcohol abuse, to improve eating habits and to encourage more people to be involved in exercise. All those measures are about personal responsibility far more than they are about the responsibilities of the state. Such action can make a difference to individual families, to communities and—in the longer term—to our economy.

It is interesting that the report that was published earlier this week highlights life expectancy and health as areas in which Scotland still lags behind

comparable nations, in spite of the improvements that have been made. If we take the chance to make a further step change on that, our economy will prosper as a result.

National Grid (Renewable Energy)

6. Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what progress is being made in connecting renewable energy generators to the national grid. (S2F-2114)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I apologise for the fact that my answer is long, but I thought that Mr Morgan might appreciate some detail.

Our Government is committed to meeting its ambitious renewables targets from a mixed portfolio of generation. That ambition will rely on effective management of applications for grid connection. The introduction of the British electricity trading and transmission arrangements included a deadline of the end of December 2004 for applications to be guaranteed grid connection by April 2006. That led to a rush to apply and the development of a long queue. We would certainly be concerned if advanced projects—those for which planning consent had been obtained and the construction of which was ready to begin—were to be delayed unnecessarily as a result. I can confirm to Mr Morgan that we have been in touch with the grid operator, with the regulator, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, and with others to ensure that such grid connections are dealt with sensibly, and that we will maintain our interest in the issue.

Alasdair Morgan: The First Minister alluded to the fact that some projects have been given dates for getting connected to the grid of as far away as 2013. If that rate of progress is maintained, the Executive's highly commendable renewables strategy will not succeed.

At the weekend, an Executive spokesman said:

"We hope that the grid queuing system can be revised".

If we are not to be subject to the price increases and the reliance on gas that Elaine Murray mentioned, does the Executive not need to do a bit more than just hope?

The First Minister: We have made suggestions to the bodies involved and have had a dialogue with them about how they could improve the system that they have put in place, especially for those projects that might get connected after 2006, some of which have been told, as Alasdair Morgan said, that it will take a number of years for them to get connected. It is right for us to give the bodies that are responsible a chance to respond and to say what they will do to improve the system. I believe that improvements can be made.

The main concentration of initial applications will almost certainly be to do with wind energy, but we want a proper balance to be achieved with biomass and with other forms of renewables. Ensuring a better mix of renewables technologies and sources will involve a rearranging of the queuing system. That is what we are seeking to achieve. The fact that we hope that we have made some progress with that is a good thing rather than a bad thing.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Given the difficulties that are being experienced with the national grid, if there was to be a massive investment of public money in energy in Scotland, does the First Minister agree that the project that would give the best return on that investment would be a sub-sea cable down the west coast, which would allow us to exploit our enormous marine energy resource?

The First Minister: Issues arise to do with how energy generated in the islands can be transmitted down the west coast, and issues arise to do with connection to the wider grid. All those issues are under detailed consideration; they are being discussed with the companies involved and with the United Kingdom Government. I would be very happy to ensure that the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning is able to inform Parliament—perhaps through a submission to the Scottish Parliament information centre—of the current position of those discussions. That would be helpful for everybody.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Enterprise, Lifelong Learning and Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Question 1 has not been lodged and question 2 has been withdrawn.

Well-paid Jobs

3. Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive, in light of the recent closures of information technology manufacturing plants, what steps are being taken to encourage businesses to generate well-paid jobs and how such steps compare with those being taken in England, Ireland and Norway. (S2O-8996)

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): Both “The Framework for Economic Development in Scotland” and “A Smart, Successful Scotland” focus on raising productivity levels as a means of increasing economic opportunities and generating well-paid jobs. The Executive’s investment in infrastructure, health, education and skills, along with our commitment to reduce business rates and reform the planning system, is creating an environment where businesses compete effectively in the global economy.

Jim Mather: If the situation is as good as that, why, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, do a third of people who are working in Scotland earn less than £6.50 an hour? Can the minister explain how the decision to exclude the earnings of those who work less than 18 hours a week from the annual survey of hourly earnings will aid his efforts to monitor progress and allay my fears that, for many people, this country is becoming an increasingly low-wage economy?

Allan Wilson: We will concentrate on raising productivity levels and increasing employment opportunities as a means of lifting people out of poverty. A key feature of that economic strategy is the minimum wage, which we set in our first year in power—that is, the Labour Government in Westminster set it in its first year in office. Allied to that, of course, are the tax credits that lift the tax burden from many of our low-paid workers.

We have the highest levels of employment in the European Union and unemployment rates are at an historic low. Obviously, we cross-checked our policy, which is set out in “A Smart, Successful Scotland”, with comparable strategies in Europe

and beyond. I would argue that there is little strategic difference between our policy and those of the Norwegians and the Irish—

Jim Mather: There is one big difference.

Allan Wilson:—to name just two examples. Our policies have been cross-checked and cross-referenced and most of them are similar to those found elsewhere, in that they are determined to seek out opportunity rather than take a spatial approach to economic planning.

Edinburgh to Bathgate Rail Line

4. Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Network Rail in respect of the dual tracking of the single-track section of the Edinburgh to Bathgate rail line. (S2O-8958)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): Transport Scotland officials meet Network Rail, the promoter of the proposed Airdrie to Bathgate rail link, regularly to develop plans for the early delivery of the benefits of double tracking the section east of Bathgate.

Bristow Muldoon: I am sure that the minister will be well aware that, as well as widespread support for the reopening of the Airdrie to Bathgate line, there is a strong call from the people of West Lothian for the double tracking of the existing single-track section to improve the reliability of the service. I understand that Network Rail could, technically, progress that at an early stage of the project. Can the minister give both financial and moral backing to the early completion of the twin tracking?

Tavish Scott: Mr Muldoon makes a good point about reliability, which is one of the essential components of the delivery of this rail capital transport project. I can tell him that we are aiming to start work on the doubling of the current single-track section east of Bathgate by spring 2007. As he knows, that does not depend on the passage of the bill but can bring some early benefits to the scheme that we all want to see in place as quickly as we can.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I welcome the minister's statement. Commuters who travel on that line have severe difficulties meeting their work obligations because of problems arising from the lack of double tracking. If the minister could confirm that there will be an early start to the double tracking of that part of the line, that would send a strong signal of the Executive's full support of the extension of the line beyond Bathgate to Airdrie. An early start would be welcomed by our constituents and by employers in Edinburgh who are suffering because of the frequent late arrival of trains that use the line.

Tavish Scott: I cannot add greatly to the answer I gave Bristow Muldoon a moment ago. I can say that the arguments that have been developed in the context of the promotion of this line recognise the points that Fiona Hyslop has made with respect to the economy of the east of Scotland and Edinburgh in particular and the benefits that this capital investment project can bring to those areas. We are determined to progress it and I hope that I have given some indication of how we will do that in the context of the single-track section.

Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I have written to the minister, explaining that, on a daily basis, constituents of mine are put off the train at Livingston North or the train does not arrive at Bathgate to pick them up. Does the minister agree that that is totally unacceptable? Although I welcome what he has said about the dual tracking of this route, can he ensure that, in the meantime, First ScotRail does something to address the problems for the people who are not getting the service they deserve?

Tavish Scott: I would be happy to discuss with First ScotRail the issue that Mary Mulligan rightly raises. One of the aspects of delivering capital transport projects is remembering current commuters and others who currently use Scotland's rail services. Also, we should ensure that we can continue to improve, day by day, the delivery of rail services so that they meet the frequency and time schedules that I am sure are important to the people who use those services to get to work. I give Mary Mulligan an assurance that I will raise that issue with First ScotRail and see what progress we can make.

First Bus (Meetings)

5. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications last met representatives of First bus and what issues were discussed. (S2O-8950)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): I last met First bus representatives on 19 October last year

for a general discussion about FirstGroup operations and current initiatives.

Paul Martin: When the minister next meets representatives of FirstGroup, will he remind them of the significant public subsidy that FirstGroup receives, especially from the Parliament, in respect of the concessionary fares scheme? Will he ask them to take some responsibility for providing the many services that are required to meet social needs throughout Scotland, including those in my constituency? If they are not willing to do that, but continue to cherry pick routes in Glasgow and other areas, will he consider introducing legislation to regulate an industry that appears to suit itself rather than its passengers?

Tavish Scott: I appreciate Paul Martin's concerns. We have discussed them. I know that there are considerable issues around the withdrawal of some services and the proposals to withdraw some services in Glasgow, and the impact that will be felt by people in many parts of the city. I recognise the figures he describes and, therefore, that we might have to seek a degree of co-operation with respect to important bus services through financial mechanisms such as the bus service operator grant—which was some £56 million in 2004-05—the grant-aided expenditure for local authorities in the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive area and other initiatives that are funded through the bus route development grant.

As Paul Martin will know, local transport authorities have the power to introduce franchising in their areas by asking the Scottish ministers to approve quality contracts. No such contracts have, so far, been submitted for the SPTE area. I would be more than happy to discuss that with Paul Martin and with the local authorities with a view to tackling the issues that he raises.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I note the minister's reply to Paul Martin's question, for which I am grateful. The minister will have received a letter from me on the same issues, especially the announcement by First that it is going to axe 37 routes in the Glasgow area and the subsequent reply from the SPTE, which basically says that First's pricing is unable to meet the requirements, meaning that those routes will have to be axed.

Does the minister agree that the pricing of the so-called subsidised routes that has been put into the SPTE by First is far too high, which is why many of the routes and buses are being withdrawn? Will he meet me, as well as Paul Martin, and will he look at this in any future transport strategy?

Tavish Scott: We will be happy to consider a range of measures in the context of the national transport strategy. I suspect that local people who

are represented by members of the Parliament would expect us to look closely at these issues rather more quickly than the national transport strategy may do, although it will lay out the framework that can be used in the context of the answer on quality contracts that I gave Paul Martin some moments ago.

On price, Sandra White will be familiar with the regime that is currently in place. I will reconsider the issues that she raises but, ultimately, in this context, they are a matter for the company concerned.

Buses (Accessibility)

6. Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will consider introducing a requirement on all transport operators participating in its free bus scheme to use, within a reasonable period of time, vehicles which are fully accessible by passengers whose mobility is impaired. (S2O-8943)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): No. The scheme will include local and long distance scheduled bus and coach services throughout Scotland. The timetable by which such vehicles must be accessible has already been set under legislation reserved to Westminster. It has been agreed in discussion with the transport industry and the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee.

Mr Gordon: I have to thank the minister for his answer, but I confess that I am disappointed by it. I am sure he is aware that, when they are aggregated, the various subsidies local and national taxpayers give to the bus industry are similar in size to those given to the rail industry, which is rightly heavily regulated on issues that include vehicle standards. Is it not logical and equitable to expect the bus industry to be more responsive on access issues, especially as it already complies with similar standards for subsidised contracts in the SPTE area?

Tavish Scott: Mr Gordon does not have to thank me for anything; he is quite entitled to say that he does not agree with my answer. I know that he is knowledgeable about this subject, so he will be familiar with the regulations that have been drawn up with the manufacturers and operators in the transport industry, and with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. Those standards have also been subject to considerable wider public consultation.

A balance must be struck between the timescale in which accessible vehicles should be introduced, the cost of replacing the vehicles and the replacement of vehicles before the end of their working lives. However, Mr Gordon made a not unfair point about rail.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland)

(SNP): The minister will be aware that similar problems exist in the Scottish Borders, where there are very few low-rise buses. Commendable though concessionary free travel is, it is not much use to many borderers. Will the minister remind me of the date by when buses must be compliant with disabled access requirements? I think it is somewhere around 2020. Will he also advise whether Scottish Borders Council has applied for quality contracts? I understand that those requirements can be written into contracts with First when it is providing bus routes because, as the previous question indicated, First tends to cherry-pick routes.

Tavish Scott: My advice on the timescale is that all full-size, single-deck buses weighing more than 7.5 tonnes will be fully accessible from 1 January 2016, and all double-deck buses from 1 January 2017, although I grant that there are not so many double-deck buses in the Borders. However, since 1 January 2005, new coaches and buses weighing up to 7.5 tonnes have had wheelchair access. All buses that weigh up to 7.5 tonnes will be fully accessible from 1 January 2015, and coaches by 1 January 2020. Those dates were set down in the discussions to which I referred earlier and, I repeat, they were subject to widespread consultation.

I am not aware of any application by Scottish Borders Council for quality contracts, but I will look into it and write to Christine Grahame.

I disagree fundamentally with Christine Grahame's suggestion that the concessionary travel scheme will be no use to many people in the Borders. I could not disagree more. Of course, the Scottish National Party voted against the scheme, so I can understand why it would say that.

Dalkeith Bypass

7. Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether, in light of the report on the environmental impact of the Dalkeith northern bypass by WA Fairhurst & Partners, it will cease work on the project. (S2O-8993)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): No.

Rosie Kane: Well, is that not pathetic? The minister has given a one-syllable answer to a question on contaminated land. We are talking about contaminants that could be carcinogenic and the minister gives a one-syllable answer. Shame on him. I will continue with more than one syllable, as usual.

In light of the fact that the Fairhurst report stated that additional potentially contaminated sites have been identified along the route since the 1995 assessment, and in light of the contamination

along the proposed route of the M74 northern extension, will the minister explain why the Executive refuses to abide by the precautionary principle, continues to ignore the mounting evidence of contamination in Scotland and continues to build roads that merely contribute to increased pollution for our communities—rather than serve them, which is what the minister was elected to do?

Tavish Scott: I thought that we would get some rewards for giving straight answers, but obviously not from the Scottish Socialist Party. I am afraid that Ms Kane wilfully misrepresents the report that she alleges to know something about. The environmental mitigation report prepared by WA Fairhurst & Partners does not support the ground investigation carried out on the scheme and, in that sense, it is clear that the findings are not as Ms Kane has indicated. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency, East Lothian Council and Midlothian Council were consulted as part of the new environmental mitigation report and assessment. No land in the corridor occupied by the A68 Dalkeith northern bypass has been designated as contaminated land under the terms of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. We have to deal in facts, even if Ms Kane does not.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian)

(Lab): There have already been several environmental impact inquiries into that development. Will the minister take it from me and from Rhona Brankin, the local constituency member, that there is overwhelming public support in and around Dalkeith for a bypass that will relieve serious congestion and pollution? What has been the cost of dealing with protesters who know little and care less about pollution in the Dalkeith area? Can residents and commuters in Midlothian and East Lothian have an assurance that the bypass and long-overdue improvements to the Sheriffhall junction will be constructed without further delay?

Tavish Scott: The cost about which John Home Robertson inquires is in the region of £1.9 million, although we have yet to receive final figures, due to the assessment process that has to be followed. The benefits of the scheme are widely understood and acknowledged, and he makes an extremely important point about the benefits to people who live in Dalkeith. It would seem that some people would very much like to see heavy goods vehicles continue to trundle through Dalkeith, but I think that most of us agree that that would not be good for local people. That is why, for some years now, there has been a strategic roads need to make the investment that we are now making.

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): Does the minister recognise that the report clearly states that the bypass will lead to the loss of valued woodland and that the authors admit that there is

need for further investigation into potential contaminated land, which could contain mercury, arsenic and phenol? Does he further recognise that many of the people who felt that they had no option but to demonstrate on the site were local people who were worried about the impact of the bypass on their lives, and that without the multimodal study that was promised by Sarah Boyack in 1999 it is impossible to tell whether that bypass is the most effective way to relieve the genuine problems created by trucks and the like going through the centre of Dalkeith? Without that multimodal study, surely any attempt at a bypass would be reckless and ill judged.

Tavish Scott: It would be reckless and ill judged to ignore the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, which Mr Ballard clearly wishes to do, and to ignore East Lothian Council and Midlothian Council. All those bodies were consulted as part of the environmental mitigation report that I mentioned, which found that there is no need to designate land as contaminated land under the terms of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. I believe that that is the factual position, and I think that it is important to base any view on the issue on the facts that are presented under that act. I can only commend that approach to Mr Ballard. I cannot agree with his other assertions, other than to say that of course people have a right to make clear their views on any road proposal. However, it is important to recognise the benefits that the measure will bring to the centre of Dalkeith, and Mr Ballard continues to minimise those benefits.

Finally, it is not true to say what Mr Ballard has said—not for the first time—about the Dalkeith estate park. The scheme does go through the estate, but it does not affect the Dalkeith country park, because it passes to the north of that. Again, that is an important fact that should be borne in mind.

Road Safety (Dumfries and Galloway)

8. Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it considers safety on trunk roads in Dumfries and Galloway to be adequate. (S2O-8960)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): In 2000, the Scottish Executive set a target to reduce the number of killed and seriously injured—KSI—accidents by 40 per cent by 2010 when compared with the 1994 to 1998 average. On Dumfries and Galloway's trunk roads, that target had been achieved by 2004. However, the number of injury accidents on our road network is still too high and we are committed to reducing accidents and improving safety on all Scotland's roads.

Dr Murray: I am a trifle surprised by the minister's reply. I am grateful for the interest he

has shown in the safety concerns arising from recent fatal accidents on the A76, but, sadly, I have to advise him that there have been several other serious and fatal accidents on other trunk roads in the Dumfries constituency—on the A75, the A701 and the A7—in recent months. Not a week has gone by recently without one of those trunk roads being closed due to a serious accident.

What will the minister do to bring forward implementation of the improvement schemes for the A75 and the A7? Those schemes have been subject to repeated delay. Does the minister agree that a strategic review of the trunk road system in Dumfries and Galloway is required, to respond to increasing traffic flows and associated safety issues?

Tavish Scott: Elaine Murray has my assurance that the strategic overview that she seeks will happen in the context of the strategic projects review. I recognise her points about the recent fatalities on the A76. As she knows—we have discussed the matter in a recent members' business debate and at question time in recent months—we commissioned a report into safety issues on the A76 in response to some of the points that she and other members raised. The report is now being completed and a number of recommendations for safety improvements will be implemented in the forthcoming year. I am happy to discuss those with her when we meet in her part of the world in the coming weeks.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP):

The minister will be aware that on a significant number of occasions the A75, one of the roads Elaine Murray mentioned, has been totally blocked for substantial periods of time as a result of collisions. Such collisions lead not only to personal injury but to economic loss in the area. Is the minister happy that sufficient resources are available to address two of the main causes of the accidents: lorry drivers who flout regulations and the very poor road alignments with which drivers have to contend?

Tavish Scott: I am sure that local members know much more about the matter than I do, but I understand that Dumfries and Galloway constabulary recently undertook operation juggernaut on the A75 to target goods vehicles contraventions. I hope that that was a useful exercise; it will be important for me to learn how that work went and what, if any, prosecutions followed from it. Those matters will be addressed through normal police enforcement activity.

I take Mr Morgan's point about alignments. We will continue to discuss those issues, but I hope that they can be addressed in the context of the strategic projects review.

Justice and Law Officers

Extraordinary Rendition

1. Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it considers that the evidence presented to it by Amnesty International in respect of the use of Scottish airports by flights linked to acts of extraordinary rendition is sufficiently specific and credible to justify police investigation and what the reason is for its position on this matter. (S2O-9016)

The Lord Advocate (Colin Boyd): No credible and reliable information has to date been brought to the attention of the police that the extraordinary rendition of any individual has been unlawfully facilitated through a Scottish airport. All information submitted to the police will be considered and action will be taken if there is specific information that justifies a criminal investigation.

Eleanor Scott: The letter from Amnesty International, which I have seen, gives detailed and specific information, including the identification of specific planes and the names of people who have been subject to rendition. Does the Lord Advocate agree that that level of suspicion would, in the case of alleged drug smuggling or people trafficking, for example, be more than sufficient to trigger an investigation? What is different in the case of extraordinary rendition? What advice has the Crown Office issued to Strathclyde police about investigating the matter?

The Lord Advocate: I am aware of the Amnesty International report, but I do not believe that it would be appropriate for me to have a continuing dialogue about whether one report or another—or one allegation or another—justifies action. The police will look at all the information that is presented to them and take action where appropriate.

I understand and share the concerns of many members of the Parliament on the issue. The use of torture is abhorrent and it cannot be condoned—it is against international law and contrary to the law of Scotland. However, there is a difference between establishing an inquiry, as the Council of Europe has done, into the practice of extraordinary rendition, involving allegations that torture has been used on suspects subject to such a practice, and launching a criminal investigation in Scotland. A criminal investigation in Scotland requires credible and reliable information that a crime has been, is being or is to be committed within our jurisdiction by people who are at present within our jurisdiction. It contemplates as an end result a prosecution in Scotland against named and identified individuals

in which they are brought before the court to answer specific charges. The matter is one for the police to assess as to whether they should, in the first instance, launch a criminal investigation.

So far as advice from the Crown Office to Strathclyde police, or any other police force, is concerned, that advice is confidential and is for the law enforcement agencies. I do not intend to breach that confidence.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Will the Lord Advocate take the opportunity to inform the chamber of his powers to instruct the police to commence a criminal investigation?

The Lord Advocate: The initiation of a criminal investigation is, of course, a matter for the police in the first place. If the police decide to conduct a criminal investigation, they will have my full support. So far, the police have taken the view—correctly, in my judgment—that there is insufficient credible and reliable information to enable them to commence such an investigation.

I have statutory powers under section 12 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 and section 17 of the Police (Scotland) Act 1967 to direct the police on the conduct of their investigations. The use of such a power is a quasi-judicial act, which I perform independently of others, as recognised by and required under section 48(5) of the Scotland Act 1998. Such a direction would require there to be evidence of a crime having been committed in Scotland before an investigation could be commenced. So far, there is insufficient evidence to justify my exercising those powers.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): People in the Highlands and Islands, including Amnesty members, are rightly concerned about Central Intelligence Agency rendition flights having landed in Wick and Inverness. Will the law officers assure them that our airports, which are ultimately owned by the Scottish Executive, are not being used to break international law?

The Lord Advocate: We have no evidence that airports anywhere have been used to break international law. If such evidence is brought to our attention, the allegations will be investigated.

Noise Nuisance

2. Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what powers police and local authorities have to deal with noise nuisance in residential areas. (S2O-8938)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): A variety of measures are available to local authorities and the police to monitor and control noise in residential areas under, for example, the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004, the Environmental Protection Act 1990,

the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 and the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982.

Cathie Craigie: I am sure that the minister is aware of the powers that were introduced in the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004, under which local authorities and the police can deal with noise nuisance in communities.

The minister knows that the lives of a number of my constituents, who live in a residential area, are being made a misery because of noise from barking dogs that are kept by an irresponsible neighbour. Which parts of the 2004 act can my constituents rely on to protect them from that unacceptable level of noise?

Hugh Henry: Before I touch on the 2004 act, I want to put on record the powers that are available under the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 to the police and complainants. A complainant can take action against a pet owner under section 49(2) of the 1982 act, by making an application to the district court for an order to be made requiring the owner of the creature to take action to prevent the annoyance from continuing. Under section 43(2) of the 1982 act, the police can seize a dog if the owner refuses to comply with the court order.

Our inquiries to North Lanarkshire Council reveal that the council is producing a self-help pack for the public on the ways in which they can take action under section 49(2) of 1982 act. The council plans to publish the pack during noise action week, which will be held this year between 22 and 26 May.

North Lanarkshire Council has advised that it uses the new powers under the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 to investigate complaints from barking dogs—

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): From barking dogs?

Hugh Henry: I am sorry—complaints about barking dogs. Sometimes that may be the same thing.

The council believes that it can act more quickly using powers under the 2004 act than it can using other legislative powers. If the noise exceeds the permitted level, the council will issue a warning notice. If the notice is not complied with within 10 minutes, the council can issue a fixed-penalty notice. So far, the council has not issued any fixed-penalty notices, nor has it made any seizures.

Vulnerable Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2004

3. Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the Vulnerable Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2004 has had a positive impact in respect of prosecutions. (S2O-8954)

The Solicitor General for Scotland (Mrs Elish Angiolini): Prosecutors are committed to the effective use of the new provisions to ensure that witnesses are able to give their evidence in a way that respects their needs. The Vulnerable Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2004 currently applies to child witnesses in solemn proceedings. The provisions in respect of vulnerable adult witnesses in solemn cases are to be commenced on 1 April 2006. It is too early to comment on the impact of the new provisions, but prosecutors report that, because the processes that are now in place are much more streamlined, special measures for children can be obtained more rapidly. It is clear that that is a positive development. In August 2005, the Executive commissioned a detailed evaluation of the impact of the 2004 act. The final report is expected at the end of August 2007. We await the research findings with interest.

Mr McNeil: I welcome the progress that the Solicitor General has described, but can she tell me whether the results that the 2004 act is delivering are uniform across the country, or are some areas making better use of the provisions than others? What action will be required to ensure that progress is made throughout Scotland?

The Solicitor General for Scotland: The research has not yet been reported systematically, so the information that we have is anecdotal. In relation to solemn proceedings, central control is the role of the Crown Office and Crown counsel, especially in the High Court. We are aware that consistent guidance has been issued to prosecutors throughout the country and that the response seems to be positive, particularly if one takes into account the fact that children can now be certain that they will be able to give evidence using special measures, whereas before that was at the discretion of the court. The presumption that they will be able to give their evidence in that way, without being subject to a competence test, as used to be the case, gives children a great deal of confidence and enforces the act's effectiveness. Those provisions apply uniformly throughout Scotland.

There has been nationwide training. Prosecutors, along with the Scottish Executive vulnerable witnesses unit, the Law Society of Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, are running a series of training seminars for practitioners throughout the country in February and March. Those joint events will take place in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, Dumfries and Inverness. We hope that they will have a positive effect and will help to secure a change in the culture so that there is a presumption in favour of ensuring that vulnerable witnesses are able to give their evidence effectively.

Rural Policing (Strathclyde)

4. Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has held with the chief constable of Strathclyde police in respect of rural policing in the Strathclyde police area. (S2O-8994)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): The deployment of police officers within a force area is an operational matter for the chief constable, although I recognise the important role that policing plays in rural communities. The chief constable of Strathclyde police has not raised the subject of rural policing in his area with me as an issue.

Mr McGrigor: Is the minister aware that, because of the expected increase in the movement of people between the upgraded Oban Connel airport and the islands of Colonsay and Coll when the new airports there have been constructed, Strathclyde police are seeking additional funding to provide police services and police accommodation on those islands? Will she give me assurances that those requests will be met favourably and that, when there is so much media focus on crime in the Glasgow part of Strathclyde police's area of responsibility, manning levels for rural policing will not be sacrificed in the pursuit of lowering city crime levels?

Cathy Jamieson: Having the correct staffing levels is important to ensuring that we are able to tackle crime, whether it is committed in an urban or a rural environment. Over the past three years, the number of police officers in Strathclyde has increased by 428, taking the total number up to 7,769.

As I said, it is important to acknowledge that the chief constable is responsible for dealing with operational matters. He is the person who must consider how best to deploy his force's resources. Over the same period, there has been an increase of 651 in the number of police support staff. I take rural policing seriously, but I am sure that people would not wish me to intervene inappropriately in matters that are properly for the chief constable to determine.

Jury Selection

5. Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has any concerns about the jury selection process. (S2O-8948)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): The present jury selection process has operated satisfactorily for many years but we have noted the recent judgment of the High Court in the appeal of John Brown v HM Advocate and will be considering both the judgment and, in particular, their lordships' comments about the system by

which potential jurors are excused and juries put together.

Marilyn Livingstone: In light of the recent case, to which the minister referred, does she agree that we have to consider seriously the representation of women in the judiciary? Does she believe that the Judicial Appointments Board for Scotland can redress the balance, or is additional positive action required?

Cathy Jamieson: We have set up the Judicial Appointments Board and we are keen to ensure that a wide range of people put themselves forward for what are important posts. Members should be aware that only this week we published a consultation document seeking opinions on how to put things on a statutory footing, with a view to bringing in legislation in due course. I am sure that members will read the document with interest and I hope that they will submit comments.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I know that the minister cannot comment on particular cases without having seen the full transcript, but is she aware of any cases in which a woman has been on trial that have been decided on the basis that there were too many men in the pool of people from which the jury was to be chosen, or too many men in the pool of people who could be chosen to try the case?

Cathy Jamieson: I hesitate to give a definitive answer. All that I can say at this point is that no such cases have been brought to my attention so far.

Scottish Police Federation (Meetings)

6. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Minister for Justice last met the general secretary of the Scottish Police Federation. (S2O-8968)

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): I met the general secretary of the Scottish Police Federation and other members of its committee at the federation's annual conference in April 2005. The Deputy Minister for Justice met the general secretary at the meeting of the Police Advisory Board for Scotland on 31 October 2005.

Margaret Mitchell: As a result of those meetings, the minister will no doubt be aware of police concern about the risk of HIV infection from prisoners who are aggressive, who bite and spit and who attack police officers with syringes. In the most severe incidents, a police officer can spend six months waiting for confirmation of whether or not they are HIV positive. Does she agree that, when a prisoner wilfully attacks and endangers a police officer in such a manner, the rights of the police officer and his family should outweigh the right of the accused to refuse to undergo a blood test?

Cathy Jamieson: I remind the chamber that these issues have been raised on a number of occasions. The Scottish Police Federation submitted a petition to Parliament, and the Executive considered it carefully. As a result, we set up a working group to look into the issues in more detail. The Scottish Police Federation had the opportunity to be represented on the group.

A number of serious issues will have to be considered as we decide how best to address the concerns that have been raised. I want to take that approach because I understand the reservations and concerns of front-line police officers. I assure members that we will consider the issues carefully. However, there is no simple solution.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Can the minister confirm that the Executive has a real understanding—more understanding than the Scottish Police Federation has demonstrated—that the diagnosis window, the likelihood of an infection even when there has been an attack with a syringe and the hard science on testing mean that someone who has been subjected to that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is there a question here, Mr Harvie?

Patrick Harvie: I am asking the minister whether the Executive understands that a person who has been subjected to such an attack will still need to go through a test of their own to find out whether they have been infected. The delay and the stress will still be there, and the risk of false positives puts everybody's health at risk.

Cathy Jamieson: The points raised by Margaret Mitchell and Patrick Harvie show the range of difficult and serious issues that the working group had to consider. I was keen that the group was able to consider the issues in detail, and I look forward to further discussions when I have received fuller information. However, I hope that I can reassure Patrick Harvie by telling him that the working group has tried to take account of points raised on all sides of the argument. We have made sure that different views are represented on the group.

Social Work

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): I call on the Minister for Education and Young People, Peter Peacock, to open the debate.

14:56

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): I am delighted to have this debate at an important moment for Scottish social work. On Tuesday, I published the first major review of social work since the implementation of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, which was regarded by many people as the birth of modern social work. Our starting point in commissioning the 21st century social work review group was the growing concern about the direction of social work services, which was characterised by a lack of clarity about the role and expectations of social services and was compounded by inadequate inspection and increasing demand.

In a debate on social work some 18 months ago, members shared those concerns and set some challenging aspirations for the 21st century social work review group. The review group rose to that challenge and has delivered clear—indeed, stark—messages on social work services in Scotland and how they need to change.

The review group's work led to three clear conclusions. First, more of the same will not work; the way we currently respond and deliver social services will be unsustainable in the future. Secondly, the basis of how services are organised needs to change. Thirdly, social work does not have all the answers: other professions must be involved in finding the answers to many of our community and individual problems.

The review's recommendations will demand changes across the public sector and beyond. Those changes will bring professionals, services and agencies together in a concerted, joined-up effort. They will also build new capacity in individuals, families and communities, and will focus more on preventing problems before they become crises.

The report makes it clear that we are far from making the best use of the social workers' skills. We must therefore ensure that social workers spend their time on activities that make effective use of their therapeutic skills and which help their clients make real and lasting changes.

The review has been a major work that has been conducted over the course of a year, with unprecedented levels of engagement by interested parties. The engagement of people who use social services and their carers was particularly rewarding—the clarity of their vision was

impressive and the messages they gave shaped the conclusions of the review.

The messages that were received by the review group were consistent and the views and aspirations of service users mirror those of social workers, managers and partner agencies. Despite the excellent work and commitment of people across the country, services are not consistently doing the right things well and we are not making effective use of our scarce resource of social workers.

The social work profession lacks confidence in itself and is uncertain about its role. We have, sadly, seen high-profile service failures that have led to tragedy which has, as a consequence, compounded the problem by making social services more averse to risk. There is a lack of enabling leadership—that limits and constrains the practice and autonomy of professionals. Services do not focus sufficiently on achieving the right outcomes for people.

A major conclusion of the review is that we need to move away from the damaging effects of the blame culture in social work. Rather than dig over the reasons why our social services are in the position that is succinctly stated in the report, I hope that we can look to the future of Scottish social work.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Last year the First Minister indicated that senior social workers and directors may face jail or severe civil penalties if there are shortcomings in their social work departments. If we are moving away from a blame culture, will that approach be dropped?

Peter Peacock: I do not recall the specific point to which Fiona Hyslop refers. However, we cannot apportion blame for circumstances that have arisen and were reported by the review. We need to move forward collectively and in unison to look for a stronger and more professional social work service in the future. That is what we are determined to do. So important is the review that I decided to publish an immediate response alongside it. The Executive does not want the review to gather dust on a shelf; rather, it wants it to be the catalyst for action.

The review's 13 recommendations set out a challenging agenda of cultural change. That agenda will require change not just in social work services but across the public sector. We must all accept that social work services alone cannot deliver our aspirations—indeed, almost everything they do must be done in partnership with others. We must also accept that it is not always the fault of social work services when something goes wrong. We as individuals, families and communities have personal and collective responsibilities that we cannot expect to offload on

to social workers. However, we can expect at key moments in our lives to have the support of skilled social workers to help us through difficult moments. More often than not, the failures that occur are failures of the whole system, but in our society's rush to apportion blame, social work often receives the brunt of any criticism.

Significantly, the recommendations do not impose structural change, although they do create the right environment to redesign services to better meet the needs of citizens who use them at local level. Our response welcomes the findings of the review and sets out our commitment to respond decisively to them.

The change programme for social work services that we will support is based on 12 key actions. We will establish a system for setting national priorities in social work as a basis for providing clarity of purpose and prioritising future action. We will create a new performance improvement framework to place a culture of continuous improvement at the heart of service delivery. We have seen the benefits of that approach in driving forward the education sector, and we need to help social work services to learn some of those lessons.

We will support a programme of social service redesign at local level on an interagency basis. Through supporting local change, we can transform services to meet the needs of individuals more effectively. We can do that through improved access, a stronger role for carers and much increased emphasis on building people's capacity to be self-sufficient. We will invest in developing the leadership that the profession will need in the future and we will develop strong leadership that empowers front-line staff while supporting them to find creative solutions for the people with whom they work.

We will strengthen the role of the chief social work officer and emphasise our responsibility for professional leadership and governance as well as for the current statutory roles. The role of chief social work officer is crucial and will help by being the guardian of the highest possible standards of professional practice into the future. We will create, with partners, the framework of support for front-line social workers to give them more devolved authority and to allow them to operate more autonomously within an accountable framework. That will, in turn, enable them to be more effective in helping the vulnerable people with whom they work.

We will support the creation of opportunities for skilled front-line social workers to remain in front-line practice for the whole of their careers. Our most experienced practitioners will be able to progress in challenging and varied careers while using their advanced skills to help the most

vulnerable people. We will encourage the development of a new group of paraprofessionals to work under the direction of social workers and in support of their actions. I stress that they will work under the direction of social workers and will not replace them. That will free professionals to do the things that they are specially skilled and trained to do, and will at the same time improve the responsiveness of services and improve access to them.

We will promote ever more involvement by service users and carers in making decisions and choices about their care and in influencing the design and delivery of services. They will, in effect, become co-producers of services. We also expect our universities to work together and with stakeholders to review current programmes of education and training to ensure that they equip the next generation of professionals with the skills that they will need. We want our universities to be an active part of the change process. We will legislate to give ministers and Parliament powers in setting national priorities and the performance improvement framework. We will help to refocus legislation to emphasise the improvement of personal and community well-being as the key purposes of social work.

If the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 was the birth of social work, the new legislation must mark its coming of age. The legislation will encourage the development of social services that are based on principles of well-being rather than on welfare; an emphasis on agreed priorities and user-centred outcomes to drive performance improvement; and the establishment of social work as a mature and confident profession that is backed up by new governance arrangements.

Finally, we will deliver additional resources to support the change process following further consideration of a detailed implementation plan on which we will work with stakeholders over the coming months. The approach will need a new focus on practice governance that promotes excellence, organisational learning and effective risk management, and which enables and empowers leadership at all levels.

Our change programme is a long-term programme, not just for the rest of this session but for the whole of the next session, and it is set within the context of wider public sector change and reform, which is driving services to be better integrated, more personalised and much more focused on prevention.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The minister just mentioned public sector change. Recommendation 4 of the review suggests that services must become part of a public sector-wide approach. Surely that does not exclude the voluntary sector. Will the minister take this

opportunity to ensure that his statement is not misleading?

Peter Peacock: Absolutely. I agree with what Mary Scanlon said. The range of partners in the public sector in social work, education, health and the police, in the private sector, which increasingly provides services, and in the voluntary sector—which now provides the majority of services in some places—needs to be part of a partnership approach, as do users and carers.

The review has said that more of the same will not work, so we must ensure that we do not just do more of the same while placing new demands and expectations on local services. We will achieve our aspirations only when we can be sure that we are making the best use of the £2.4 billion that we already spend every year on our social work services. We must therefore invest wisely to drive the necessary change.

I asked for the debate today because although the scale of the challenge that we face in making real and lasting change is clear, the fine detail of how we will achieve it requires further debate and discussion. The actions that we propose represent long-term change and are not a quick fix, because it will take a long time to make the cultural and other changes that we want to see. We need a programme that will involve all the partners in the detailed work and further debate.

I have committed to the production of a full implementation plan by the summer. Today, Parliament can help to shape its detail and can influence the relative priority of its different components. A Cabinet delivery group, which I will chair, will oversee implementation at Cabinet level and will drive forward interdepartmental action within the Government. In addition, we will seek to create a national forum on which all the stakeholders in social services can come together to help us drive the necessary changes.

I hope that our debate, which follows the publication of the report, will represent the start of a programme of change and renewal that will build much stronger social services for the future and give us services that we can truly be proud of and which we will be proud to use, rather than looking on them as services of last resort.

15:07

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): The Scottish National Party welcomes the debate, which comes hard on the heels of the publication of, "Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review". The report's stark finding—which the minister mentioned—that the current social work system is unsustainable, is surely an indictment of the policies of successive United Kingdom Governments of the past 40 years.

However, it should come as no surprise to members, who have regular dealings with the services that are involved.

There can be little doubt that public confidence in social work is at a low ebb, having been badly shaken by the failings that have been exposed by several tragic high-profile cases in recent years, such as the sexual abuse over 30 years of a Borders woman with learning difficulties and the murder of the Edinburgh toddler Caleb Ness by his father, which subsequent investigations revealed were eminently preventable.

Although individuals can be blamed, the "Changing Lives" report reveals a wider and deeper system failure of placing heavy burdens on dedicated front-line social work staff, who are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume and complexity of demand for their services.

Forty years ago, the current social work system was set up very much as a safety net for a society that was broadly cohesive. We would be hard pushed today to so describe our society, in which the incidences of poverty, dysfunctional relationships and chaotic lifestyles have seemingly grown out of control.

The fact that the Executive has chosen its flagship policy to be control of antisocial behaviour is surely symptomatic of the type of society in which we now live, although—if I may say so—it also smacks of treating the symptoms rather than the fundamental causes of the problems. In any case, it is profoundly misguided to blame social work professionals for failing to cope with those trends.

Last night, many of us met the chairpeople of our local children's panels, who are lobbying us in advance of the forthcoming report on the children's hearings system. Their frustration is palpable and is due to both the lack of public awareness of the good work that they do and the inadequacy of the resources that are deployed to meet the needs of the children who are referred to them. It is staggering that, last year, more than 50,000 of our children were referred to a children's reporter. Compared with the previous year, there was a 12 per cent increase in the number of referrals on care and protection grounds alone. Those are truly shocking figures. We must respond much more effectively to the needs of those children and, as the minister said, our response must be integrated throughout all public services, including health services, social work, education and the police. Much lip service is paid to joint working, but progress is painfully slow.

The "Changing Lives" report talks about the transformation of social work from crisis management to prevention and early intervention. That is a laudable aim, but the report comes up

short on answering the question of how it can be achieved. No doubt we will have to wait for the promised implementation plan before we can make hard and fast judgments. That said, the SNP takes the view that the development of universal early years services is vital. The Executive made a reasonable start with free nursery places for three and four-year-olds, but we are disappointed that the momentum subsequently stalled.

In the remainder of my speech, I will focus on some of the more detailed issues that are highlighted in the report. Chief among them is resources. Professor Arthur Midwinter has identified serious underfunding of local authority social work services; he estimates that there is a shortfall of £135 million for children and families services alone. It is little wonder that such chronic underfunding has resulted in chronic staff shortages. So many vacancies remain unfilled that some departments are operating with 40 per cent of their posts vacant, which compromises their ability to provide basic services. There are also insufficient numbers of foster carers, residential care beds and day care facilities.

The Executive is keen to take up the report's recommendation that a new performance improvement framework should be introduced. That has echoes of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000, which introduced to school education the notion of continuous improvement. As yet, however, there is no hint of an accompanying McCrone-type deal for social work professionals that would cover pay, conditions and continuous professional development. Such a deal would help to underpin the change agenda.

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): Before the member leaves the issue of resources—which underlies quite a lot of the report—will he comment on the fact that the social care workforce has increased by about 44 per cent in the past decade? That is a significant increase.

Mr Ingram: The problem is that the Executive is not providing local authorities with sufficient funding for them to fulfil their obligations. Professor Midwinter estimates that local authorities are underfunded by 50 per cent, according to their grant-aided expenditure allocations.

I return to the ways in which we reward social work professionals, which must be addressed if there is to be an end to the ludicrous bidding wars between local authorities on the recruitment and retention of staff. As Mary Scanlon said, that also has a serious knock-on effect on voluntary organisations, many of which employ social workers. We also need to see an end to the worrying trend of able and experienced social workers being sucked away from the front line and

into promoted posts that are better remunerated and less stressful, but which are arguably less important.

We welcome the report's findings and recommendations, and we welcome the agenda for change that it sets out. However, we remain sceptical of the Executive's intentions, particularly in the short term, given its track record of less-than-generous support for social work services.

15:15

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

We welcome this review of social work, which is the first in nearly 40 years. The Scottish Conservatives hope that it marks the start of a recovery process that will value and support social workers and provide the high-quality service that we all expect.

The report may be the first review of social work, but it is certainly not the first inquiry or investigation into social work services in recent years. We can go as far back as the lengthy 1992 Orkney inquiry and on to more recent ones, such as those into the Caleb Ness and the Miss X cases. I ask positively and constructively whether the problems that were highlighted in those cases have led to any lessons being learned. I like to think that they have. In the short time that I have had in which to read through the report, I have noticed that many of the problems that were highlighted previously have been raised again. That may not be a bad thing, but it would be nice to know that they were being addressed positively. I am committed to that.

Peter Peacock: The member has made a good point. The outcomes of the individual inquiries led to practice changes; we constantly learn from every tragic incident and I have no doubt that we will learn more in the future. One of the problems—and one of the reasons why we commissioned the review—was that we reported on each incident in each report on an ad hoc basis. The review allows us to take an overview of the whole system and to improve practice. It is to be hoped that that will reduce the number of tragic cases in the future.

Mary Scanlon: There certainly seemed to be a pattern of problems, which I note has been highlighted. I welcome the co-ordination of approaches.

I would like to know who is responsible for our council-run social work departments. It has been stated for years in parliamentary debates and in written and oral answers that many matters are for councils to decide and that ministers have the ultimate overview and responsibility for allocating resources. I agree with much of what is in the review, but it is a handbook on how to manage

social work departments that have significant staffing and human resource issues.

I welcome the review, even though it is full of managementspeak and jargon, and I hope that it will achieve the outcome that we all want. However, that leads me to ask whether Parliament will now tell the council departments that are responsible for roads, education, planning, police, fire and housing how they should be managed. Will they make use of job descriptions? Where the do the lines of authority, autonomy, delegation and power lie in local government?

The review's first recommendation states:

"Social work services must be designed and delivered around the needs of people who use services, their carers and communities."

With respect, I ask whether that really has to be stated.

The minister gave me an assurance about the fourth recommendation, which mentions the "whole public sector approach". That should have been corrected because it does not reflect the spirit of the minister's or my understanding. I am pleased to have received the minister's commitment that not just the public sector but the private, voluntary and independent sectors will be covered.

The report later mentions a "mixed economy of care". I was a lecturer in economics for 20 years before I came to Parliament, so I know that "mixed economy of care" means using the voluntary sector. Why does the document not just say so?

I looked at the Association of Directors of Social Work's response to the initiative. A key issue for it is the need for a national research strategy that will be informed and shaped by the work of academics, practitioners and managers. Such a strategy should commission, validate and disseminate information to enhance professional practice and improve outcomes. That is what it is looking for—it is its number 1 priority. It wants to use the research to gauge best practice and to learn from it. However, in his foreword, Willie Roe says:

"We've considered research, evidence of best practice and views from leading opinion makers, people who use services and their carers".

Who is right? Is it Willie Roe, the author of the report, or is it the Association of Directors of Social Work? Others have mentioned the 498 vacant posts in social work. That must not only put huge pressure on the people who have to carry out additional work; it also means that many vulnerable people miss out entirely on social work support. At New Craigs psychiatric hospital in Inverness, in the constituency that the minister and I serve, the recommended complement is four full-time social workers: there is currently one.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member acknowledge that although recruitment has increased, the real problem now is retention? The relationship between the statutory sector and the voluntary sector is the key. As a result of all the pressures that we have talked about, we frequently see social workers leaving the statutory sector and moving into the voluntary sector. That is one of the issues that the review should address.

Mary Scanlon: Both sectors have something to contribute, but that is a valid point and I thank the member for making it.

With nearly half of all senior social work vacancies and 35 per cent of all vacant social work posts unfilled for more than six months, there are huge problems and pressures within the system. To go back to psychiatry, how can we expect the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, which was passed in good faith by Parliament, to be implemented fully, and mental health patients to receive the benefits that we hoped for and for which we legislated, with 25 per cent of the social work workforce?

It is still not clear what the role of paraprofessionals will be, although I listened carefully to the minister and understood that they will be under the direction of social workers. However, I hope that it will not be a case of less-qualified people being given tasks and responsibilities for which they have inadequate training.

I have been looking for a focus on prioritising interagency working, which Adam Ingram mentioned, and an emphasis on better communication and partnership working between all organisations that are involved in a person's care. Although there is some mention of that, it has not been given the focus that is required, as has been highlighted by the many tragic cases in recent years. Even as far back as the Community Care and Health (Scotland) Act 2002, one of the main issues that we heard from many people was that the national health service and social work services simply did not work as a team. It is sad that, four years later, Parliament is still having to recommend that they talk to each other and that they put the person first.

The Scottish Conservatives hope that the report of the 21st century social work review group will make a difference. The acid test will be the safety and well-being of children and adults that should result from social work intervention in future. The day that councillors and conveners of social work accept responsibility for bedblocking and delayed discharge will be the day that we achieve some success.

15:24

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this afternoon's debate on "Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review". I welcome the minister's announcements today and earlier this week. Liberal Democrats recognise the importance of the social work profession in modern society. We see that it faces many challenges but we are clear that meeting those challenges is possible and indeed essential.

When Peter Peacock and I took over as education ministers in May 2003, it is fair to say that social work had been in a siding for 20 or more years. It was essential that it should return to the main line and its rightful place high in public regard—indeed among the most respected professions in our country. That has to be the objective for the profession.

The Scottish Executive has built on the initial steps that were taken before 2003. Recruitment has been stepped up so that we now have more social workers than ever. The number of vacancies is down and falling.

Mary Scanlon: Will the member give way?

Euan Robson: Not at the moment.

Investment in a fast-track scheme has enabled many more social workers to be recruited in recent months. A huge emphasis has been, and continues to be, placed on training, with major investment committed to the development of leadership capacity in the profession. The leading to deliver programme remains a particularly important aspect of the overall training programme and will ensure that the next generation of directors and managers of social work is a fundamental ingredient in the profession's future success.

The establishment of the Scottish institute for excellence in social work education was important to the profession. Mary Scanlon may have missed that, because it is precisely what she asked for in her speech. It gave a welcome focus to the education provision for social work and continues to ensure that innovation and best practice are distributed widely among social workers. For years, social work saw little investment in education and improvement in practice. I was privileged to chair the national workforce group for a time, during which that lack of investment was a recurring theme. However, the institute is helping to deliver in that regard.

Mary Scanlon: The resources that are being put into social work and the number of social workers have increased, but has the increase been pro rata and taken into account the enormous increase in work that has arisen from legislation

that the Parliament has passed, which requires huge increases in the number of social workers?

Euan Robson: The increase in the number of social workers has been dramatic and marked—it has been about 44 per cent—and it is continuing. The plan is to ensure that social work becomes an attractive profession so that we attract more people to meet the challenges that are ahead.

Last November, the Scottish Executive published the important “National Strategy for the Development of the Social Service Workforce in Scotland: A Plan for Action 2005-2010”, which set out a clear need to develop the whole social service workforce. Last autumn, the protection of the title “social worker” was introduced, which met an important aspiration after many long years. We also have the on-going registration of social workers—about 9,000 are now registered by the Scottish Social Services Council. An important ingredient that was recently added and which we discussed in a recent debate is the Social Work Inspection Agency. The previous organisation was underdeveloped, but the inspection process is particularly important in ensuring high standards.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way on that point?

Euan Robson: No, not at the moment.

All those measures have an important additional point, which is to build confidence in the profession. A self-confident profession ensures a greater degree of confidence in the community at large, particularly among those who use its services.

The review was complementary to all the activities that I have mentioned. The publication of the report and the Executive’s response are immensely timely. The 13 key findings of the review are set out in the “Changing Lives” publication. I will comment on the three groups into which the 13 recommendations fall. I agree that services should be designed and delivered around the needs of people and their carers and communities and that services must build on individual family and community capacity. However, the important findings or recommendations are those which emphasise the fundamental importance of integrating social work with other public services, because prevention and early intervention will be achieved by integrated working. The concept of letters of assurance in child protection, which are obtained from the heads of public service agencies such as chief executives of health boards or local authorities, chief constables, education directors and others, could and should be embedded through management and supervision at supervisory levels throughout organisations. As Peter Peacock said,

social workers can make a huge contribution in that respect.

We also need to develop career progression that allows those who are interested in social work to progress through a varied career—perhaps in social care, voluntary organisations or health services—that provides a broader and deeper experience. That will ensure greater readiness for and acceptance of integrated working.

Training for social workers should include a broad understanding of the work of those with whom they will engage in the health, education, social care and police services. In the long run, I see great benefit in some form of common training so that each profession has a clear understanding of the work and roles of the other professions. Training is obviously best undertaken at the outset of a career, but the review’s recommendation 8 places a strong emphasis on the commitment of individuals and organisations to lifelong learning and continuing professional development and there is no reason why that type of training might not also take place for those who are well advanced in their career.

Recommendation 6 talks about services developing

“a new organisational approach to managing risk, which ensures ... safe, effective and innovative practice.”

In managing risk, there must be clear accountability frameworks, but social workers must also be allowed to exercise professional autonomy. There ought to be a climate of continuous improvement in social work services and an ethos of learning, with strategies that are effective and that underpin best practice, which ought to be shared. I also agree that social work services should learn from difficult cases or instances of mistakes.

On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I emphasise that we recognise that for every instance of something going wrong, there are dozens of interventions by social workers that change people’s lives for the better. That should be recognised by all of us, but particularly by the media, which ought to set problems or difficulties in an appropriate context.

The review is an important step in moving social work forward. I believe that it is inevitable that the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 will need to be reviewed in the next parliamentary session in the light of all the work that has been done in this one. I welcome the minister’s remarks in that regard.

My final point is one for social workers themselves and it is that they should value their profession. I have had the privilege of talking to many social workers in recent months and I appreciate the importance of their work, the

challenges that they face and the unfairness of the criticism that is heaped on them from time to time. Nevertheless, I repeat that they should value their profession. If they do not, no one else will. Government is helping to modernise their profession and is recognising their achievement and contribution, so they themselves must promote what they do and celebrate it.

15:32

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Like others, I welcome the review and commend the review group for the great deal of work that has clearly been put into it.

We should all recognise why the review was needed and why it was right to commission it. That the review was overdue is demonstrated by the loss of skills in the field; the culture of blame, which I think is a theme that will come out of many speeches in the debate; the steadily increasing pressures on what is a vital and essential service for many people; and the fact that for many years organisations such as the Association of Directors of Social Work have called for precisely some of the changes that are included in the review's recommendations. It is welcome that the review is now before us, not least because it calls for changes in the career structure that will help to make the job more attractive and to retain people's skills.

I also commend the minister for agreeing with the review group on what I think is the central point, which is that more of the same will not work. The minister used that phrase in his speech. I think that I have never seen Euan Robson so animated as he was during his speech, although I am not sure that I agree with everything in it. Certainly, the thrust of it was passionate. The emphasis on prevention, which he mentioned, must be valued.

In *The Herald* the other day, Bob Holman wrote:

"I'm a prevention person, but I think that if prevention is to take off, it's got to be in co-operation with local community groups, not just big voluntary groups. They know their community and they know what's needed."

We should all acknowledge that there is something in that on which we should reflect.

I will come on to the legislative context and the resources, but I would also like to speak about the design of services. I have spoken to a number of people in the field recently who tell me that they are impressed with the model that operates in Sweden, where social workers are integrated into community resources. They are not in boring bureaucratic offices but are attached to gyms, playgrounds, cafes and so on. They are sited in communities in multipurpose facilities in a way that

reduces or removes any stigma that is attached to accessing those services.

Fiona Hyslop: I appreciate what the member says. Does he share my concern that, this week, the Executive abandoned its target of having every school become an integrated community school, bearing in mind that community schools were meant to provide a single point of access for social work and health services?

Patrick Harvie: That is something for the minister rather than me to respond to.

Peter Peacock: Will the member give way?

Patrick Harvie: Perhaps the minister will intervene in the SNP's closing speech and allow me to make a little progress now. How much time do I have for my speech, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will compensate for the intervention that was just made. The opening speakers took eight minutes so I will give you eight minutes as well.

Patrick Harvie: I am grateful.

The model that the social workers have been talking about—the one in Sweden—is a positive one and it enables people to access services in a way that is relevant to them and does not challenge or stigmatise them. Further, it enables them to access those services early, which helps with regard to the preventive approach, which means that people can avoid reaching a crisis point in their lives rather than having to access a service later on.

With regard to the status of the service and the status that the people who work in it feel that they have, there is a question mark against the role of paraprofessionals. I am not instinctively against their having a role, but I think that many people want that question mark addressed sooner rather than later, so that they know what to expect. Again, I have heard about models in existence in Sweden, as well as in Denmark and Germany, which many people think work well and with which many people would be comfortable. When he winds up, perhaps the minister can say whether the Executive has looked at other European models and whether any direct comparisons can be made between what operates in Europe and what the Executive's plans are.

Peter Peacock: I like Swedish models.

Members: Oh!

Patrick Harvie: I am glad that the minister's microphone was not switched on at that moment. However, I will check the *Official Report* anyway. The minister's joke has taken all the attention away from what I was saying.

There are some other question marks. The minister has indicated that some legislation might

be expected. However, there seems little indication of what that will mean. Is there an intention or merely a possibility that there will be legislation? If no major structural change is anticipated, what can we expect from the legislation?

On the question of resources, Euan Robson made a passionate defence of the level of resources that have been put in and the amount of recruitment and so on that there has been. However, none of us would argue that the service is not facing challenges in its ability to meet the level of demand.

Robert Brown: Does Patrick Harvie accept that we need to define the need for the resources first, so that we might determine their best use, and then decide whether we have got the right level of resources?

Patrick Harvie: I agree with that. That is why I had concerns when I heard the First Minister's recent remarks about the children of drug-using parents. To decide that we will start removing more of those children from their parents and putting them into other forms of care before we consider what we can do about the low numbers of places compared with the high numbers of children we think are in such a home environment is to put the cart before the horse, even in relation to what Robert Brown has just said.

On the issue of the culture of blame, all members would recognise that when high-profile cases, such as the recent one concerning the 11-year-old in Glasgow, are reported, particularly in the less reputable newspapers, we often hear cries of, "Where were the social workers? What were the social workers doing?" Often, and for the most part, the social workers were doing their jobs with great professionalism and dedication within serious constraints on resources. If we in the chamber can speak with a united voice about our respect and regard for the dedication and professionalism of the social workers who are doing this demanding job, we will have done something right. That can be expressed in an afternoon's debate, but it must not end there.

15:40

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I welcome the debate, as I welcome the report and the minister's response. The report has been criticised in many places as yet another glossy that is full of managementspeak. It is another glossy, and it has quite a bit of managementspeak in it, but that does not mean that it is a bad thing. It is important to highlight some of the key themes that sit within the document and consider how we can all play a part in taking them forward in the future.

I join other members in congratulating the review group that has done this work. If members have not already done so, it is worth turning to the back of the main report to see the number, range and breadth of the people who have contributed, on a cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral basis, to the review group and the many sub-groups that have been involved in the review. That involvement has been good, and if it can be continued through the implementation process, enabling those people to get on with the task of taking forward the changes, that could deliver results.

I will highlight a few threads that have been thrown up in the report and look not so much to the detail of the recommendations as to some of the changes in culture that have been analysed and identified explicitly in the report. Risk has been mentioned, but what has been said bears repetition. We, as politicians, need to make a significant contribution to changing attitudes towards risk. I welcome the tone and tenor of the minister's response to the report earlier this week, in which he spoke explicitly about the fact that although we can and must work hard to minimise risk, we cannot eliminate it. We have to say that a lot more loudly and more frequently.

How often do we stand up in this place, when sad and tragic things happen in society, and say, "This must never be allowed to happen again"? Of course, we must try to ensure that such things never happen again, but we know that we cannot say definitively that they will not, no matter how hard we try or how hard professionals, individuals, families and communities try. That is an important message to take from today's debate.

That applies equally to what has been said about blame in general and the blaming of social workers in particular. I have concerns when we hear of situations—they are often reported in the press—in which, on the discovery of an elderly person who has lain dead for a number of weeks, neighbours and even close relatives decry the social services and their failings. We must look a lot closer to home, in our families and communities, to see what more we can do to look out for one another and to protect one another, although I do not for one moment suggest that we should abrogate the responsibility of professionals who have a specific role to carry out.

Also, in this and in many other areas, there is a need for us not to focus simply on failure. The fact is that we focus disproportionately on times when things go wrong in our public services rather than on the daily experiences and practices of professionals that go right and have a transformational impact on people's lives for the better. I echo strongly something that Euan Robson said. People in public services have to tell that story a lot more loudly and more clearly. I do

not know how often I have heard professionals in various public services—social work, in particular, but many others besides—say, “Why don’t we hear more about the good things that we do?” I often say that if politicians—especially of the Executive parties—stand up and say that social work services are going well, people will say, “They would say that, wouldn’t they? They want to get that message across.” People in those public services need to say what they really do day in and day out. Building confidence by telling that story is a vital part of what must flow from the report.

I will highlight a couple of other things. I am struck but pleased by the fact that the report highlights the need to improve and better co-ordinate regulation and inspection. Again, we in the Parliament should hold up a mirror and acknowledge that we were a wee bit too trigger-happy in the early years of devolution by putting in place more and more layers of legislation, regulation and inspection. There was very good intent on each occasion, but many people are now reflecting on the practical implications of some of the arrangements that have been put in place. There is an urgent need to consider how those arrangements can be made to knit together more effectively, to work more efficiently and, critically, to add value to the work of social work and other key public services, rather than getting in the way of what those services are trying to do.

I must also mention joint working. To be fair, Mary Scanlon had a point when she highlighted that and said that even more could be said than has been said in the report. However, it is important to acknowledge how far things have come, particularly since devolution and particularly in the key areas of health and social work. It is important to maintain that momentum.

That takes me to my final point. In joint working, but also in many other areas that are highlighted in the report, there is a critical need for strong leadership. The minister also highlighted that point.

I note that the conclusion of the summary report says that we will require

“transformational change across the whole of Scottish society and public services.”

That is a big statement. We need to ensure that we are developing the leaders of the future, not just in individual professional groups and sectors but throughout the Scottish public sector. If the minister has not already done so, will he examine the recent report produced by the Auditor General for Scotland on this point as well as the *Official Report* of this week’s meeting of the Audit Committee, which involved an hour of discussion with the permanent secretary, Mr John Elvidge, on

the very same subject? At that meeting, we considered the particular importance of developing leadership skills so that public sector leaders can collaborate and not just work in single sectors. Progress in that area has been quite lamentable so far, but there is an appetite to make progress. That is an absolute prerequisite to taking forward the work that is needed in the social work sector.

Today is an important watershed, so it is important to treat it as the beginning and not the end of a process. I hope that action and implementation are not held up by unnecessary delay in the design of the implementation structure, or choked by too much central guidance and the like. I do not think that that is what anyone wants but, all too often, that is what happens. If we can keep up the momentum and make this report into a living, breathing piece of work by involving the people who have taken it this far and letting them get on with the next critical stage of the job, we can deliver results and improvements for the social work profession and, crucially, for the people whom it serves.

15:48

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland)

(SNP): Along with others, I recognise and want to address the complexity of the issues that face our social workers in an increasingly fragmented and tense society. Who could have known 20 years ago what social workers would have to deal with today?

Although I agree with much of what Susan Deacon said about moving away from the difficult cases, we must realise that they are why we are here. It would not have been difficult to prevent some of those bad and tragic cases. I was closely involved in scrutinising the case of Miss X, a vulnerable adult in the Borders, and I had access to some of the files. The errors that occurred over a period of 20 to 30 years were heartbreaking. The background reasons were the social workers’ very heavy case loads. Organisation of the material was difficult and the social workers were unable to prioritise. There were also interagency failures. Two or three people were involved in what happened to that woman and they all had separate files, but no one shared the information in them. There were failures in other agencies and the case reviews also failed because they did not happen. As the minister will know, all the warning signs were there all along and were obvious even to someone completely unskilled, such as me. There was a failure even to speak to the vulnerable woman herself. Most of all, there was a failure of senior management. Through that case, I now have a particular interest in the security of vulnerable adults, and vulnerable children become vulnerable adults very quickly, at 17 or 18.

My party and I are pleased that we are coming to grips with an issue that is not easy, and we hope that "Changing Lives" will help us to provide a social work service that is fit for this century. However, there are problems that are terribly difficult to solve, including boundary disputes, the silo mentality and cross-cutting issues. I hear what Susan Deacon says, but I am afraid that my experience is that the national health service protects its budget, social work departments protect their budgets and the criminal justice system protects its budgets.

Let us consider the simple example of secure accommodation. Secure accommodation for children at risk would be funded by the social work department. Secure accommodation for children who are subject to a criminal investigation would be funded by the criminal justice system. I remember cases that we examined when I was a member of the Justice 1 Committee in which the social work department was having children moved over to the criminal justice system simply to get them a place. At that stage, members—to a man and woman—wanted single funding for secure accommodation.

There are some simple tweaks along the way that could deliver for children, because the child who is at risk today may be the child who offends tomorrow while absconding from an unhappy home. I remember a case in Dalkeith in which the police had no option but to send a child back to the mother from whom he was running because there was nowhere to put him. For three days, he was at large in Edinburgh. Nobody knows what he was doing during that time, but he managed to eat, so he must have been stealing. There are clearly problems to resolve.

Early intervention is commendable, but I listened carefully to the words of an experienced retired social worker who said on the radio that many social workers find that they are firefighting. Notwithstanding the good intentions of the minister and many members of the Parliament, I think that they will continue to firefight because of the shortage of social workers. I heard what Euan Robson had to say about increasing numbers, but the reality is that there is a 40 per cent shortage in greater Glasgow for a start. There are increasing demands on social work services that we cannot keep up with. The Executive's own "Changing Lives" document states:

"Social workers are a relatively scarce specialist resource, making up only around 5% of the total social service workforce."

I pick up on what Patrick Harvie and other members have said about paraprofessionals. We need to get to the meat of the argument. We need to know exactly what a paraprofessional can and cannot do. It is my understanding that the social

work service already employs people to do paraprofessional work—they are called social work assistants or resource workers. We need clear defining lines between what social workers do and what paraprofessionals do, and I welcome references to protection of title. I have had the opportunity to examine the information that makes clear the issues that front-line social workers must deal with. I suggest to the minister that that should act as the foundation for regulations, as recommended by the ADSW. We may even need guidance for social workers on exactly where they can go with work that could be done further down the line, because there seems to be a conflict between their involvement in early intervention and perhaps having paraprofessionals working at that level. We need answers to the questions that arise in that area.

My colleague Adam Ingram raised another issue that I would like the minister to address: continuing professional development. In my former profession, law, one was not allowed to practise unless one got 18 of what I called brownie points each year. We had to upgrade our skills continually, and the same happens in many professions. The world changes fast under our feet and lawyers and other professionals cannot practise unless they upgrade their skills. What Euan Robson said about social workers valuing themselves was worthy, but they should also be appraised, they should upgrade their skills and they should be remunerated for that and be given status accordingly.

I welcome structural change but, as Susan Deacon said, the huge issue for the minister is to achieve cultural change among the various agencies, which often protect one other and, to an extent, themselves. They must be prepared to share information, because what matters is not professional reputations or taking risks: it is the vulnerable adult or the vulnerable child, who is at the centre of everything. The agencies had best err on their side.

15:55

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): I express admiration for social workers. They have a challenging but admirable profession. For many of them, it is more than a profession: it is a vocation.

We give a cautious welcome to the report of the 21st century social work review group and to the Executive's response, especially with regard to the move away from a blame culture. Many colleagues have taken up that theme this afternoon: a blame culture is inappropriate, counterproductive and unfair.

As Christine Grahame suggested, we want high standards and we want to prevent harm from

being done to those who are at risk, whatever their age. We must support those who are vulnerable and cannot care for themselves. It is not enough to intervene only at the late stages of a problem, for example by removing a child from drug-addicted parents; there must be early intervention.

A MORI survey found that some respondents felt that the onus for tackling social problems should not lie solely on a new and improved social work service; the Government needs to make greater efforts to tackle the causes of problems by, for example, encouraging individuals to take more responsibility for themselves and their families. As Willie Roe, the chairman of the 21st century social work review group, said at the launch of the report on Tuesday, there needs to be a shift in approach in social services from welfare to well-being.

We have long argued that the culture in social work departments that says that it is best to keep children with their families at all times should be challenged in certain cases. The protection of the child must remain the paramount concern, but as it is not always possible to anticipate child protection problems, legislation cannot necessarily safeguard us against every eventuality. We support the minister's conclusion on the matter.

Most of the failures that have occurred in the system, such as the cases of Michael McGarrity and Caleb Ness, have involved ineffective interagency working and poor communication. Even a recent report on the assessment of children in need in West Lothian and Ayrshire, "Ayrshire and West Lothian Pilot Projects Assessing Children in Need", found that concerns remain about standards of recording and assessment in general; about depth, detail and analysis of evidence; and about how agencies act together to complete assessments. On the other hand, it appears that the 21st century social work review identified too much bureaucracy and information gathering as a weakness in existing practice. That finding is not wholly consistent with the findings of the other research. Therefore, I recommend that strong leadership and common sense be applied to create a balance between flexibility and accountability in care services. The Joint Inspection of Children's Services and Inspection of Social Work Services (Scotland) Bill may go some way towards remedying the problem. The minister has undertaken to review the impact of the legislation before 2007. All 32 local authorities should receive joint inspections of children's services by the 2008 deadline that is pledged in the legislative programme.

The ministerial statement on the action that the Executive proposes in response to the recommendations made in the Bichard report is to be welcomed. The proposed action was discussed at length yesterday. No system provides an

absolute guarantee, but we have a moral obligation and duty to develop the best system that we can. I echo once more the words of Willie Roe: the real changes within the social care system must be implemented by practitioners who work at the chalk face.

Social workers need not wait for the magic day of legislation or for ministerial pronouncements to take action; they can start to make changes for the better from today. We should be grateful to them for their tireless efforts in what can be the most difficult of circumstances. There is so much that they can and will do for the safety and well-being of Scotland's children and adults. Therefore, coupled with our gratitude to those practitioners is the will that they should receive the necessary resources to bring their numbers up to strength. We wish them every possible success in their many tasks in the public interest.

16:00

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, which is highly political in nature. We are debating changing lives and our very different political philosophies go right to the heart of the debate. Any debate on social work in the 21st century must be placed in that context.

There are 10,000 workers in social work today, not all of whom are registered social workers. The majority are home helps, carers, social care workers, community service officers, community care assistants, social work assistants, residential care officers, nursery nurses or members of the many other groups involved in the delivery of front-line services. The majority are low-paid women workers, many of whom are employed in services that are under direct threat, particularly in Glasgow. Any debate on the subject must be placed in the context of that reality.

Many of my friends work in the social work field. They welcome the review and welcome and embrace the changes that will be made to social work organisation in Scotland. They tell me that they recognise that things cannot continue as they are, but say that the measure of success will be whether change affects the situations that one exhausted social worker friend asked me to highlight in my speech.

She asked me to say that we cannot continue to keep elderly people in hospital because no home help is available to support them in their home; to ask the workers on the minimum wage who staff our nursing and care homes to work without support supervision or qualifications; to place children on the child protection register or supervision orders without allocating them a social worker; to ask children on place-of-safety or

secure orders to continue to live at home because there are no resources for alternatives; or to separate looked-after siblings because there are no appropriate carers. We cannot ask community care social workers to make needs assessments for disabled and elderly people only to be told that their assessments are not realistic and that there is no budget to meet the needs that they have identified.

It is not acceptable for criminal justice social workers to be told to supervise newly released offenders for whom the Scottish Executive has provided no funding; neither is it acceptable to ask social workers to be responsible for supporting drug and alcohol addicts when no access can be provided to rehabilitation services, again because of a lack of resources.

All those situations put untenable pressure on social workers, who have all the responsibility but none of the means to deliver the quality of service that they want to deliver. Social workers want to deliver a service that is fit for the 21st century, but the reality is that their case loads are too big and they have to attend more and more meetings and produce an increasing number of reports, all of which gives them less time to spend with service users. We will know that things are improving when social workers have stopped chasing their tails.

It is unacceptable that councils throughout Scotland have entered into Dutch auctions that have resulted in social workers being valued more in one region than in another—even between authorities that are next door to each other. Social work staff want to do a better job, but they need the support to do so. They want the public and politicians to understand their roles and responsibilities. They are also begging for more resources—financial and physical.

All the inquiries into the terrible situations that members have mentioned have focused on the lack of communication by and involvement of social work services. They have also highlighted the role of other agencies and their lack of communication and commitment to the development of common understanding. However, in the media, social workers alone have taken the brunt of the blame. There needs to be a shift in attitude. Social workers cannot go on like that; it does no good for their morale and it does not give them the basis for embracing change and moving on.

Although I agree with Susan Deacon that we need to focus on the positive, the worst cases can expose systemic problems that could have resulted in other tragedies but, thankfully, did not. A great deal can be learned from such cases, although we will never be able to say that they can always be avoided. Incompetence is one thing, but

overwork, stress and a complete lack of resources are another. We have spoken about the blame culture, which disables staff by forcing them to dot i's and cross t's and by discouraging innovation and problem solving. Although local authorities have statutory responsibilities, social workers are left to take responsibility for events over which they have no control. The fact that there is no appropriate housing for a sex offender must be the responsibility of the local authority rather than of a particular social worker.

It is easy to pursue a populist law and order agenda and to make pronouncements about antisocial behaviour orders in Parliament, but no resources have been provided for looking after and caring for children who may be struggling at home, at school or in the community. The provision of such resources is the hard part. The parents with mental health, alcohol or drugs problems who struggle with their children are blamed rather than helped and offered appropriate resources. The hands of the children's panels are tied and their decisions are not followed through because of a lack of staff resources. They cannot implement measures that would benefit families, such as respite or the provision of better housing.

Social workers try to uphold society's values—it is society that does not want children or vulnerable people to be hurt, abused or exploited. We ask social workers to help to protect those people, but we give them crumbs off the table and blame them when things go wrong, even though the responsibility lies with society as a whole. Social work and even local authorities cannot be held responsible for a human being's actions, but we in the Parliament can be held responsible for how we respond to those actions. We need to respond well, by providing resources and being accountable for the deployment—or otherwise—of those resources.

The world once envied our Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and the children's panels. Let us return to that state of affairs. I offer a plea on behalf of social workers: we need the money and the commitment from politicians. Once that has been provided, we might be able to win the hearts, minds and good will of social work staff and management, who already work extraordinarily hard.

16:07

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): I welcome the review, even though it has been a long time in coming.

Since 1999, I have pursued three goals in particular: the de-tolling of the Erskine bridge; the establishment of an independent review of local government finance; and the creation of a minister for social work. I have got my eyes, fingers and

toes crossed on the de-tolling of the Erskine bridge and the Executive is having an independent review of local government finance but, unfortunately, there is no minister for social work.

I want to examine that issue. A group chaired by the Minister for Education and Young People will overview the social work service, but it is not clear to me how that group will bring together all the relevant departments to fund and direct social work services. I have always been interested in the fact that three ministers sit round the Cabinet table to argue for funding for what is basically the same service. Christine Grahame gave a good example of that. I am disappointed that the review contains no reference to creating a minister for social work or holding an independent review of social work finance.

I have some general comments and criticisms to make, which I hope will be constructive. The potential of the paraprofessional needs to be explored more fully, as I will explain later. We must also explore the contribution that social work makes to integrated services and say more about multi-agency teams and how that integration is managed.

We all agree that it is right that we manage risk. The report of the review group suggests that it is the role of the social worker to help others to understand risk, but I do not believe that that is the case. A political lead is needed if risk is to be understood. That does not square with recent reports in the papers and the solutions that have been proposed for children who live with parents who have addictions.

The report recommends that social work should work alongside individual families and communities, but we must recognise that, in some cases, the nature of the responsibilities of social work brings social workers into legitimate conflict with the people whom they are tasked with helping. Recommendation 7 in the report states that it is not only social workers, but members of the social care workforce such as residential workers, who are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, who need to be

“enabled and supported to practise accountably and exercise their professional autonomy.”

It is imperative that social work core activities remain and that they develop around personalised social work services. Along with other agencies, social work needs to develop early-intervention strategies. However, we must not use that term too loosely. By its very nature, social work deals with sections of the population who are socially excluded. In some cases, a prevention strategy would mean socioeconomic change. That would require a much broader and more political approach, which I do not believe is for a social worker.

If the social worker is to be central to the delivery of quality services, it goes without saying that we need the best person in post. As I have said before, there is a wealth of talent out there—mature people with life and work experience who would be willing to undertake a formal education that might not have been available in their youth.

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):

I want to emphasise the point that Trish Godman just made. Forty per cent of people who are five years away from retiring age are unemployed. We could tap into a vast pool of great experience.

Trish Godman: I could not agree more and, as I say, I have made the point before. We should also encourage colleges and universities to introduce social work courses for people who have chosen to retire early or have retired earlier than they had hoped to retire.

When I was a social worker, part of my job was to supervise students. What is social work? It is not about working out systems, writing court reports, standing up in court or going to a children's panel to present a case; it is about planning the best way to support the client. That client might have been abused or might be addicted, disabled, ill or old—there is a whole range of clients. Can members imagine what it would be like to go into work on a Monday morning, be given a first referral that contains a name, and be told that it is a family where there might be drug abuse and there is certainly alcohol abuse, because the father has been in the clink over the weekend, that the mother is in hospital because she has been battered and that the kids are not turning up to school? A case like that is not unusual. The social worker does not know the family, has never heard of them and may never have been to the area where the family lives.

What do they have to do? They have to knock on the door when they do not know what is behind it. I have been verbally abused; I have been threatened; I have been locked up in a room for three hours by a woman who was mentally ill. Obviously, those were not pleasant experiences. Social workers have no idea what they will face.

Very early in my dealings with students, it became clear to me that some people do not have the skill to make cold calls. They may be good academically, and people came to me with great recommendations that said that they wrote very good reports. However, they could not talk to the punters, and if people cannot talk to the punters, they cannot do the job. I agree fully with the review's recommendation that social workers with skills on the front line—the ones who can make that first call—should have career opportunities that allow them to stay on the front line.

I said earlier that we need clarification on paraprofessionals. I am not sure where we will find

them. As Christine Grahame asked, will they be social work assistants, will they carry out the same job as a social worker, and will they be trained? Perhaps we will hear some answers.

The review is not meaty enough about how social work will link with other agencies. By "link", I mean how all the agencies will talk to one another, listen to one another and learn from best practice. I know that we have come a long way in multi-agency provision, but I still get the impression that it is patchy in some areas. The advent of bed blocking makes me feel that.

As the minister said, doing more of the same is not an option. There are increasing demands on social workers: the massive use of illegal drugs changes their case load completely. I can remember going to social work teams in the east end of Glasgow and saying to them, "No. A drug addict doesn't have three ears, a bashed nose and one eye in the middle of their forehead." Those teams had never seen drug addicts, did not know what to expect and thought that drug addicts would look different from everybody else. How that has changed.

The massive use of illegal drugs and the rising expectations of the public mean that we need to respond. Effective political leadership is needed both in this chamber and in local government. The strategy for social work needs to be Scotland-wide; good leadership, good practice and good, sensible multi-agency working need to be encouraged.

Social work is not an easy job—most of us in this chamber would shy away from it. We need a framework that values, nurtures and develops social workers and the whole workforce. The review goes some way towards that. It is not great, it does not have great punch, but we have started.

16:15

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I thank Trish Godman for her honest, straightforward and informative speech. Having spoken to social workers, I am afraid that things do not change very quickly. They are still experiencing some of the unpleasant aspects of social work that Trish Godman experienced. However, I am sure that she also had some uplifting moments.

Although a review of social services was long overdue, I welcome the group's report. Social workers have a demanding job. The focus is always on the failures of the system, which have been highlighted, and the tragic consequences that those have. Often the invaluable work that social workers do goes unnoticed. Social work is a difficult job. Unfortunately, the press tends to concentrate only on the failures and never on the successes of social services. People should have

more confidence in social workers and should recognise that they do a very good job.

Social workers are not the only people who work in social services. As Carolyn Leckie pointed out, there are also carers, home helps, domestics and other workers. Social workers are on the front line. Theirs can be a hard and lonely career path to travel. The many strengths of the present system are recognised in the review group's excellent report. It is also up front in mentioning the challenges that social workers and the service face. I am usually the first to comment on glossy reports that are not written in plain English, but Susan Deacon has already made that point. This report is concise. It identifies both the strengths and the weaknesses of social services.

If we want a modern social services system, we must take on the report's recommendations and the independent advice from social workers and users of social services. The minister recognises the challenges ahead and that it will take a long time to meet them. That is an honest answer. We cannot simply believe that three months down the line all the changes that the report recommends will have been implemented. Although joined-up thinking between the various agencies is needed, not just social work but society as a whole must be involved in making those changes. After all, we are products of the society in which we live.

It is important that social workers should be allowed to use their experience and initiative, without being tied down by red tape. They should not have to spend all their time writing reports and must be given the flexibility to be involved in initiatives to deliver services locally, without having to seek a decision from the paraphernalia and bureaucracy at head office. That is one of the review group's most important recommendations. I have been talking about social workers, but such an approach would also give people who use the services of social workers and others confidence and pride in the services that they are receiving. I hope that the direct involvement of service users will give them the confidence to become responsible citizens and that the report's recommendations will bring about a shift from a dependency culture, in which services are simply received, to a system in which people can input into services and feel much better about themselves.

Other members referred to social workers' lack of confidence in their management teams. Some social services staff feel that they are not fully supported by their managers. The report states that

"employing organisations should resource employees to deliver first class services."

It also says that managers and line managers are bogged down by pressures of management and

budget considerations, and suggests that those responsibilities be taken away from them, so that they can have a better understanding of the issues that affect front-line staff.

Trish Godman said that social workers might not understand the “punters”, as we might call them. People who go straight into social work from university may not know about life, so perhaps they should not be put into a one-to-one situation. Glasgow City Council does not have a policy on lone working for social services, but I do not know whether that is the case in every sphere of social work in every local authority. The council does not prioritise resources for simple things such as mobile phones for its social work staff. Housing officers get mobile phones, but social workers, who are often in threatening situations, do not. I will not name names, as I do not want to go into individual cases. However, I find it worrying that social workers in Glasgow may find themselves in threatening situations but be unable to contact someone immediately. Social workers who have not been trained in lone working may find themselves in a close in a deprived area with only one light. I would like that point to be taken on board, perhaps not now but in the future. Mobile phones and training in lone working should be compulsory for all social workers.

Social workers should be furnished with other fundamental tools. Last night I attended a meeting in Glasgow about children's panels. People told me that there were still advertisements in social work departments advising them to attend a children's hearing if they want to find out what goes on there. Along with mobile phones and lone working policies, attendance at children's hearings should be a compulsory, fundamental tool for all social workers, to make life easier for them and to help them to serve their clients.

Euan Robson said that social workers should learn to value themselves. That is fine and dandy, but social workers often feel that they are not valued by their employers. It is difficult for people to value themselves if they feel that their employer does not value them. Susan Deacon made that point and said that social workers should sing their own praises. I agree, but without a culture change in society that call will fall on deaf ears, among the public and social workers alike. I hope that the report will change attitudes.

Adam Ingram, Carolyn Leckie and others mentioned the underfunding of social work services. Professor Midwinter arrived at the figure of £135 million, which is significant. The issue must be looked at, because there is a 40 per cent shortage in the recruitment of front-line social workers in the Glasgow area. The retention of social workers is equally important. That is a big problem: we may be able to recruit, but we cannot

retain front-line social work staff because of the difficult situations in which they find themselves. I agree with Robert Brown's answer to Patrick Harvie's question about funding. We must examine the funding provision that we are making.

Robert Brown: Both Sandra White and Christine Grahame mentioned the situation in Glasgow. Currently, Glasgow City Council's vacancy rate for social workers is 5 per cent. That has come about as a result of the recruitment and retention practices that we have introduced over the past year or two.

Ms White: I thank the minister for that information, but the letters that I have received and from which I am quoting say that there is a 40 per cent shortfall in front-line social workers. Social work encompasses many issues; it is not just a question of front-line social workers. Perhaps we should concentrate on front-line social workers who are involved at the coalface.

We have to look at the money that we spend on social work. A shortfall of £135 million throughout social work is a serious matter. I welcome the report and am sure that the minister and others will take on board all the good points, as well as the criticisms that it makes. I hope that they will work towards giving us a 21st century social work service for a 21st century Scotland.

16:24

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): As members have said, for many years social workers have got the blame for society's failures. There have been a number of appalling cases, some of which have been mentioned, in which professionals such as social workers and social work departments have deservedly received a fair amount of criticism because they failed to act or to work together. Unfortunately, there has been a perception that social workers have a magic wand to sort out all the problems that everyone else is unable to sort out and that they are at fault when they fail to do so. That has been the case for a long time.

Adam Ingram and Christine Grahame came close to suggesting that there was a golden age of social work. My mother was a social worker, so I can assure members that the lot of a social worker has never been particularly happy—it has always been a stressful and difficult job. However, we must acknowledge that issues relating to alcohol, substance and drug abuse have made the profession even more difficult than it has always been.

I agree with Susan Deacon, Carolyn Leckie and others that social workers get the blame for what everyone else does. We are all reluctant to accept responsibility as individuals and as a society.

There is too much of a culture of “someone should do something about it”, rather than “we all ought to be doing something about it”.

The review group was established two years ago against a background of problems in recruitment and retention. Councils were competing to attract social workers, and some were offering financial incentives to poach them from neighbouring authorities. There were also wide differences between authorities. Dumfries and Galloway Council is in a state of extreme flux at the moment. I apologise for the rather rude noise that my mobile phone made earlier; I was getting updated on the crises in the council. I discovered not only that the council had vacancies in social work but that it had a smaller number of posts per thousand of the population than other councils. I found that rather extraordinary, given that the area has a fairly elderly population that needs support. When I pointed that out to the director responsible, he seemed unaware of the fact that the council had a smaller number of posts than other authorities.

It is perhaps surprising that, despite all the problems in social work, there has been a high level of interest in the social work training that has been offered recently. We have heard about the fast-track training that the Executive has introduced. The University of Glasgow offers a master of arts honours degree in social work, which was introduced at the Crichton university campus in Dumfries in September last year, with support from Dumfries and Galloway Council to fund a lecturer. The course attracted a large number of applicants, including some who were not quite in the last five years of their working life but were more mature. The only slight disappointment was that the vast majority of applicants were women. Fewer men than we would like are demonstrating an interest in social work training.

If we are to keep new graduates in social work, the profession—and the public’s perception of it—must change. People who take up careers in social work do so because they want to help and support people who are in need for a variety of reasons, just as people who take up teaching do so because they want to help children to learn and people who take up nursing do so because they want to care for people who are unwell and to help them to improve their health. Professionals in the public sector take up their jobs because they want to help other people in society. They do not do it for fame or recognition, but because they have a fundamental desire to help their fellow man and to contribute to society. That must be acknowledged, because we often hear the public sector condemned as a drain on the nation that does not contribute. Public sector professionals are extremely important people. It is incumbent on us

to ensure that the structures that support them are modernised and that we support them in their aims.

If we consider the ways in which we are modernising the public sector—for example, through the Kerr report and the debates that have taken place on the national priorities and legislative change in education—we see that many similar things are happening in different parts of the public sector. The priorities are similar, but the methods of achieving things differ between disciplines. For example, we are developing national priorities and strong leadership. Individual social workers sometimes end up with problems because line managers have not taken responsibility. We need strong leadership and people who are able to take courageous decisions, but it is difficult for them to do that in a blame culture. We need to move away from a blame culture, so that people can make the decisions that need to be made.

We are developing personalised services that meet individual needs. In education, we need to respond to the needs of the child; in social services, we need to respond to the needs of the client. Despite the problems that Trish Godman mentioned, we need earlier intervention so that we can prevent crises. That is important in social work, just as it is in health and education.

We need to strengthen the profession through continuous professional development and to enable experienced social workers to progress in their careers while remaining in front-line services. We should not lose people who have the valuable hands-on experience that is so important in ensuring that the right decisions are made. We need to work in partnership with users and carers and to involve people in the decisions that are made about their futures. We need to foster joint working between sectors and to develop a culture of improvement and excellence, rather than a culture of blame.

I accept that, as Trish Godman said, some people in the profession are a bit disappointed by the review and think that it is not radical enough. For example, there is no designated minister for social work. I do not think that any of us would argue for more ministers, and I am sure that the First Minister would not want a larger number of ministers than he has at the moment. However, it may be possible to bring together portfolios and to give one minister responsibility for social work, rather than splitting it up between ministers. That is happening to a certain extent in any case.

There has been criticism of how long it took to carry out the review, but it is part of a more general reform and modernisation of public services to make them fit for the 21st century. Christine Grahame and others referred to a silo

mentality that resulted in people in health, social work and criminal justice not speaking to one another, but we are gradually getting rid of that. It is difficult to change cultures and to require people to work together, but that is essential if we are to provide seamless services that meet the needs of individuals. Individuals do not care who gives them support—they care about whether the support that they need is available.

The public sector has much to deal with. It must adapt to the challenges of demographic change and addiction, but the way forward that we have identified of trying to modernise public services is to be welcomed. I am sure that the journey will not always be easy, but it is worth while for us to progress along the road. I hope that we will work together in a spirit of consensus to achieve the objectives that we all have.

16:32

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It is disappointing that more members were not in the chamber to hear the excellent speeches that have been made, especially the speech by Trish Godman, who was a respected social worker. It was good of her to share her knowledge with the rest of us.

I am told that one of the aims of the review of social work was to reassess what a social worker is. My experience is that social workers are good people. They are well intentioned, but they often get a bad press—they are damned if they do and damned if they do not. They often get the blame for mistakes that happen even if they are not responsible for them. When things go wrong, it is easy to blame the social worker.

Most social workers at the coalface are extremely conscientious and they work well with other sharp-end workers such as the police, doctors and district nurses. The problem seems to arise at the management level, where collaboration breaks down because of fights over budgets and work territory. At times, there appears to be a clash between child psychologists, nurses, health visitors and social workers even though, ultimately, they all want the same outcome for their clients—that is, the removal of the problem. That appears to be due to the way in which services are run, rather than the fault of the people who provide them.

We Conservatives have continually called for a unified budget for health and social care and for improved interagency care. If we want social workers to deal with the minefield of problems that arise in child protection, they must have high-quality training so that they are competent to do that work.

It is imperative that the protection of the child is the priority, even if that means removing that child

from the family from whom he or she may be at risk. Most of the failures in the system, such as the case of Michael McGarrity, who survived trapped and alone in a flat for three weeks after his mother had died, have involved bad interagency work and poor communication between different agencies.

My colleague James Douglas-Hamilton mentioned a report about the assessment of children in need in Ayrshire and West Lothian. That report found that concerns remain about standards of recording and the depth of analysis of the evidence on how agencies work together to complete assessments. The 21st century social work review identifies too much bureaucracy and information gathering as weaknesses. We therefore need strong leadership that will unify the different agencies into giving social workers the detailed information that they need to do their jobs properly. They need not only the information, but the funding.

It is all very well to expect social workers to work hard to complete detailed assessments of the needs of a child or an elderly person. However, what is the point of that work being done if the funding is not there to fulfil those needs? How incredibly frustrating and what a blow to morale it must be when social workers see their efforts blocked by the Scottish Executive's failure to properly fund its promises. The Executive will blame the local authorities, but it cannot get away from its promise to provide free personal care.

Both of my parents have recently been in four different hospitals, and during my visits I talked to many doctors, nurses and social workers. I was horrified to learn that in Argyll and Bute not one home care package has been arranged since November and that there have been no referrals from the Oban hospital to nursing homes since Christmas. That has impinged on the hospital, resulting in bedblocking and delayed discharge. That in turn has caused fury and low morale among the hard-working people in Argyll and Bute who are trying to do their jobs. I know that other councils in Scotland are in a similar position.

As well as the problems that the doctors, nurses and social workers face, what about the angst, misery, pain and disillusionment that are caused to those people who suffer because their needs are not being fulfilled? What about those who believed in the Liberal Democrat and Labour Party promise on free personal care? They now realise that that was perhaps a hollow promise to win votes—the Scottish Executive is not delivering what it promised to the people of Scotland. I would be delighted if the minister were to offer an explanation for that fiasco.

We Conservatives cautiously welcome the response to the 21st century social work review, which is overdue. However, we reassert that the Executive must work harder to create a more

helpful infrastructure in which our social workers can produce real and rewarding results from their undoubted labours. The Executive must not continue to let down our social workers.

Highly qualified social workers must be given the autonomy to use their considerable powers of judgment, and ministers must create the conditions that will encourage successful outcomes. I agree with Willie Roe, the chairman of the review group, who said:

"We need to harness all our resources and expertise to design services around the needs of people, delivering the right outcomes for the people who use them. That means finding new ways of working that position social work services alongside the work of their partners in the public, voluntary and private sectors. Together we will need to shift the balance towards a much greater focus on preventing problems and intervening early to resolve them."

Those are wise words, but will the Executive listen to them?

Above all, the Scottish Executive must ensure that social workers' assessments can be followed through with action. Is it not time for the blame game between the Scottish Executive and the councils to end? Adequate funding must be provided so that councils can meet the Scottish Executive's commitments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Fiona Hyslop to close for the SNP. I am happy to award you nine minutes, with compensation for interventions.

16:39

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer; you are very generous.

We were particularly fortunate to hear about Trish Godman's experiences. Scott Barrie is absent, but I know that he will be disappointed not to have contributed; I am sure that he will make his views known to the minister in due course.

We have had an interesting, informed and considered debate, apart from the minister's sedentary distraction during our discussion of the Swedish model. I did not know that he had such an interest in Saab cars.

The minister said that the review represents a coming of age for social work—my daughter might be a bit disappointed if she has to wait until she is 38 to get the keys to the door. Adam Ingram pointed out that society has changed. In the past 40 years, the safety net for a socially cohesive society has become fragmented and there are many new challenges, not least the drugs challenge, which many members mentioned. When we consider that 50,000 children are being referred to children's panels, we realise the scale of what we are dealing with, although we could view those referrals as an opportunity to secure

resources. One of the tests of whether the review delivers will be whether children need to be referred to children's panels for resources to be secured.

There was some consistency in the speeches and some useful points that we can take forward. Leadership is critical. The review talks about the increased role for the chief social work officer within the council, but leadership needs to come from the top and there is a real challenge for the Executive in how it deals with that. That should be considered in the consultation and the response.

Many members, including Trish Godman, suggested that we should have a minister for social work. It is increasingly difficult to reconcile community care, criminal justice and social work within the potential silos of the civil service and the Executive. It would be helpful if the minister would address how the Executive will change as part of that leadership challenge, part of which involves recognising the Executive's delivery mechanisms and responsibilities. Euan Robson mentioned the Social Work Inspection Agency, but—oh dear—it appears that we forgot to legislate for inspectors, hence the reference to social work inspectors in part 2 of the Joint Inspection of Children's Services and Inspection of Social Work Services (Scotland) Bill.

Will the minister address the issue of legislation? I understand that although legislation will be introduced as a result of the review, that will not happen until 2008, yet we are faced with legislation on adoption and in relation to Bichard. We are also looking forward to the introduction of legislation on children's hearings. I would have thought that legislation on social work and on children's hearings would have been compatible if they had been delivered together. I am concerned about any slippage in timescale and I would be interested to know when we might expect to have all those pieces so that we can deliver for the people of Scotland.

There is scepticism and concern about the paraprofessionals. They represent an opportunity, but Christine Grahame made an important point about the protection of title. The suggestion about regulation should be taken up. We should remember the idea of a ladder of progression into social work, which arose when the Education Committee considered child protection. The issue of the tens of thousands of people working in care positions should be addressed, in order that we can ensure that they make progress and, if they so wish, can join the profession, having completed the required training. Perhaps we should be a bit more open minded; the consultation and the Executive's response will have to address that area.

Points were made about research and degrees. One of the proposals that was mentioned during

this morning's debate on volunteering was that because so much social work and care is provided by the voluntary sector, working with the voluntary sector must be part and parcel of the training for social workers. That proposal, which came from Volunteer Development Scotland, should be considered when we talk about joined-up thinking.

Euan Robson, who has obviously not lost his passion for the subject of social work, stressed the importance of ownership and pride, as did Lord James Douglas-Hamilton. A point that has been repeated by many members—it was made by William Roe, too—is that we have to start now; early establishment of the national social work services forum that the minister mentioned would be a signal that we agree on that point. Such a forum could hit the ground running; legislation and other aspects could come later. Why not set up the forum early? Doing so, and having joint ownership of it with the profession—as I think is implied—would be a good step forward.

Funding is critical. No one denies that there are more social workers than before or that the input of resources has increased, but the central issue, as raised by Mary Scanlon and others, is that demand has increased. That demand is twofold—it is a result of the societal problems that we have talked about with child protection and drugs, but it is also a result of legislation that has been introduced. To return to the issue of joined-up thinking, we should reflect on yesterday's debate on the local government settlement, in which Des McNulty, the convener of the Finance Committee, made the important statement that, when legislation has been passed, its implications must be considered. When subject committees consider bills, they receive the Finance Committee's report on the financial memorandum—I see Elaine Murray, who is a member of the Finance Committee, nodding. I am not sure of the extent to which the consideration of certain financial memorandums has addressed the implications for social workers—perhaps the Finance Committee operates on a higher plane. We all have a duty to examine the interrelations.

Last week at First Minister's question time, the First Minister was asked about children from drug misusing families and the implications of their situation. I understand that the crisis in the provision of foster care places and the concerns about temporary accommodation are serious. If we are to have policy shifts and changes, please let them not be, as Carolyn Leckie said, changes in responsibilities without sufficient resources to match. That will be an important factor in considering the policy change that has come from the First Minister. The rationale for that change, the delivery and, not least, the resources that are made available should be subject to serious scrutiny.

Trish Godman was absolutely right to mention the absence of an independent review of funding. Her comments echoed those that were made in one of the first debates in the Parliament in 1999, on local government, during which everybody said, "Hang on; where is the local government funding review?" We should take the opportunity to have such a review for social work. There is not a bottomless pit of money, but we must address the escalation in local government expenditure on children's services. At a time when we have an aging population, we do not want to rob Peter to pay Paul in social work provision—we do not want funding for young people to be provided at the expense of the elderly. We have a responsibility to face up to that issue.

Integrated working in social work and health is important, whether it takes place in schools or cafes. I indicated that I would take an intervention from the minister on that point, so I give way now.

Peter Peacock: It is obvious that Fiona Hyslop is running out of things to say, so I will help her out. On a point that she made earlier, to which she has just alluded, I want to be clear that we are not talking about not having integrated community schools; we are saying that the concept of integration is caught up in the modern concept of an excellent school. A school is not excellent unless it is integrated—that is the spirit in which we are making progress.

Fiona Hyslop: I thank the minister for his intervention, but I want to address the issue of communication. Mary Scanlon made a point about health services, care services and councils working together. That happens in West Lothian. When I saw the system in early 2000, it worked well and could have been a template for child protection; indeed, I understand that it now is such a template, although that has taken five years.

Susan Deacon raised the issues of leadership and risk, which are absolutely central. The members of the Executive and the Parliament must, as politicians, take a leadership role in ensuring that we have a temperate and realistic debate about risk. We do not want to wrap children in Scotland in cotton wool, but we must accept that, with child protection issues, everybody must look closer to home. It is easier to blame or have concerns about the stranger in the dark but, if we are serious about tackling the problems of drugs or child abuse, we must accept that the issue is closer to home. In that debate, we must embrace the proposals of the social work review.

I commend all those who took part in the review, which has opened the door for a new phase and era for the social work profession. However, social workers cannot and must not walk through that door alone. Whether they have to try to do so will be the test of the success of implementation.

16:49

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): The debate has been one of the best that I have heard and in which I have participated in the Parliament. I thank all members for their speeches, which finished with the excellent speech that we have just heard from Fiona Hyslop. In the time that is available to me, I will not be able to respond to all the points that have been made, but I undertake to read the *Official Report* of the meeting.

We will want to ponder a number of matters, in any event. Indeed, the minister made his initial response to Willie Roe's report in the context of taking matters forward, discussing and considering implications, taking a reasonable amount of time over the detailed response and very much moving towards an action plan for implementation. The social work agenda is probably one of the most important agendas to come before the Parliament. It is important that we get it right.

I start by thanking the social workers and the social work workforce of Scotland for their contribution. It is important, as many speakers said, that we move towards recognition of the society in which we live and the way in which social workers must interact with it. Indeed, that very much lies behind the report, which tries to focus on what social work, in its broadest context, can best do to change lives. The title of the report—"Changing Lives"—is very much the right one. Elaine Murray talked earlier about the fact that social workers go into their profession to change lives, and we want to concentrate on that. They certainly do not go into social work just to process children's hearings referrals or complete reports, per se. Sandra White touched on the implications of that.

We must regard the report that we have before us today as part of a wide series of different reports and actions that are coming together—for example, on adoption and fostering, on the Bichard report, on the reform of children's hearings and on the social care and early years workforce. All those things together add up to a major and radical programme of reform.

It is clear that we live in a society that is different from that of 1968, when the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 was passed, or 1971, when the 1968 act came into force. That is perhaps borne out by the fact that there has been a sixfold increase in the number of social workers in Scotland since then. A central part of today's debate is to identify the best use to make of that resource. We can have arguments about the statistics—I will come back to that in a minute—but the workforce cannot expand indefinitely. We must concentrate first on what it can best do, free it up to do that and then assess whether we have

the right level of resource for the detailed challenges that we face.

One challenge, of course, is the problem of addiction in society. I was very much horror-struck, as were other members of the Education Committee—it sticks in my mind to this day—by the statistic that one child in 56 in Scotland is born to drug-abusing parents. That is not the fault of Governments, per se, whether this Government or past Governments, but it is a social phenomenon for which Governments must provide, as far as they can, solutions and responses—no doubt, Governments contribute to solutions. That challenging social phenomenon is mixed up with a series of other challenging phenomena that are coming at the same time. That is the background against which the whole agenda operates.

Transforming social work services will be a challenging task that, as Peter Peacock rightly said, will take a number of years to bring to fruition. Of course, we are not starting from scratch. In many respects, we are building on many years of good practice, and for every intervention about which there may have been issues, there have been many successful interventions in people's lives. We have already achieved much that, as a country, we can be proud of. Almost 8,500 social workers are registered with the Scottish Social Services Council, which provided regulation for the profession for the first time. The new honours degree in social work is established and will produce the first of a new generation of professionals later this year. That very much links into the question of leadership, which is one of the key themes of the debate.

We have turned around the problems of recruiting social workers, with a 30 per cent reduction in the number of vacancies since 2003. We do not have the level of problem that some people have said we have. Social worker levels in Glasgow, for example, are pretty much up to establishment levels, with a 5 per cent shortfall. I think that that is a significant achievement. However, that is a different question from whether numbers have been set at the right level. As I said, we will have to return to that issue once we have identified more clearly the contribution that social workers can make. However, there have been considerable changes in the figures.

On moving forward towards action, Fiona Hyslop rightly asked about when the legislation will be introduced and about the action that we were taking in that regard. We will need to contemplate the pressures that will come from the Bichard bill and from other proposed social work legislation. Fiona Hyslop rightly identified the linkages between social work and the children's hearings system—after all, both were dealt with in the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. We will try to

make announcements to Parliament very soon about that.

Christine Grahame: I wish to raise two points with the minister. First, I welcome the idea of a consolidation bill. Certainly, the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill, which we are considering, is not such a bill and, in my view, is a bit of a mess. Secondly, I raised the issue of regulations in my speech. Is the minister contemplating regulations that will define the role of a social worker, their duties and obligations, with separate regulations defining those of a paraprofessional?

Robert Brown: I will come to that issue later. First, we need to consider the action plan and implementation.

It is proposed that the social work services forum, which Fiona Hyslop asked about, will be established as soon as possible. We intend to have the first full meeting of the forum in April. There is no holding back, and it is important that that work goes forward.

There are many parallels between this area and others in terms of the challenges that are faced. The linkages with other areas are also important. Issues relating to leadership come out in education and health, as do the issues of professional development, accountability and the ways in which the skills of the best people can be used at the coalface. The issue of the support that is provided by paraprofessionals also arises in various areas—in relation to classroom assistants, for example. We need to define that role, and that work will form part of the role of the forum and of the other agencies that will be involved in the implementation programme.

Putting community well-being at the heart of social work is important. A lot of work is already taking place and is going forward.

I want to touch on one or two of the specific comments that have been made this afternoon.

Adam Ingram and a number of others spoke about the changes in society. The statistics are worth dwelling on for a moment. Some £2.4 billion goes into social work every year. That is a substantial sum of money and we need to be sure that we get proper value out of it. The workforce has grown by 44 per cent in the past decade. As I said, the number of qualified social workers has risen sixfold since 1971 and vacancy levels are going down. In addition, social work student levels are up by 38 per cent since 2001. A lot of the indicators are going in the right direction and are widening the resource in a way that will give us the potential to take action.

In what was one of the many extremely able speeches that were made today, Euan Robson talked about social work having been in a siding for some years. That is absolutely correct, and we

are trying to bring it out of the siding and into the mainstream position that it should have in relation to the way in which we deal with a number of society's problems. He also talked about the strategy for the social services workforce, which was announced in November.

In a helpful speech, Carolyn Leckie, like others, talked about the need for joined-up thinking in areas such as health and bedblocking or social work and children on supervision not having to wait to be allocated a social worker. Joined-up thinking is part of the issue and, to illustrate the point, I should say that the point of the children's hearings review is that we want to deal with the problems before people get to a hearing so that we can reduce the associated bureaucracy, which will not be necessary if people are able to access services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am reluctant to interrupt the minister but, as members who took part in the rather excellent debate that we have had this afternoon would like to hear the minister's responses, I must say that I would be grateful if members could sit quietly through the remaining exchanges.

Robert Brown: Carolyn Leckie made another important point that goes to the heart of some of the issues when she spoke about local authorities' statutory responsibilities and the way in which social work departments are blamed. We have to have joined-up thinking about that. Local authorities have corporate responsibility and we have to encapsulate that in practice. Many of our difficulties in Scotland relate to issues that fall between the stools of various agencies. We have to keep that at the heart of what we are trying to do.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, in an excellent speech, made a number of worthy points about moving away from blame culture, interagency problems and so on. People have already talked about Trish Godman's speech, which helped us to understand some of the issues that are involved in the area that we are discussing.

Paraprofessionals are not new, but we will have to define their role more precisely. That will be part of the on-going work. The right mix of skills in a team will improve access to services and ensure that highly skilled professionals are using their expertise effectively to make a difference for our most vulnerable people.

The review process began against a background of a number of tragedies but it ends with a major opportunity to transform social work services into services that we will all be proud to use and which will make differences.

Achieving the transformational change that is set out in "Changing Lives" will not be easy or quick.

However, the report represents the fundamental modernisation of the way in which we design and deliver services, building on the capacity of the services and the workforce to respond to changing demands and on the capacity of the client, who is an important part of the picture.

Such change will require clear and consistent leadership. Social services are vital to many in our society, and high-class, targeted services make a big difference to the quality of life of many vulnerable people. Today, we have started that process. We need to continue the debate about the future shape of services, underpinning them with legislation and the action plan that will lay the foundations for social work for the next 40 years. That is the challenge, and I am grateful to members for the contributions that they have made to the debate.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):

There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S2M-3909, in the name of Tom McCabe, that the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No 3) Bill be passed, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 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)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gorrie, Donald (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (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)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (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)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Wilson, Allan (Cunninghame North) (Lab)

AGAINST

Kane, Rosie (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Leckie, Carolyn (Central Scotland) (SSP)

ABSTENTIONS

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)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (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)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 43, Against 2, Abstentions 32.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No.3) Bill be passed.

Cumbernauld Town Centre

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S2M-3848, in the name of Margaret Mitchell, on Cumbernauld town centre. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that, in the Channel 4 programme, "Demolition", broadcast in December 2005, the public nominated and voted for Cumbernauld Town Shopping Centre as the most hated building in Britain; acknowledges that Cumbernauld is in a great location; commends the residents of Cumbernauld for maintaining a sense of pride in their town despite the problems, which have existed for many years, associated with design and the lack of an identifiable town centre; congratulates Channel 4 for having produced this excellent piece of broadcast journalism which, firstly, ensured that these problems have been the subject of a national awareness-raising exercise and, secondly, which provided practical solutions to these problems; recognises that quality of life is the core issue; expresses concern that North Lanarkshire Council intends to proceed with design plans for the town shopping centre which will, in the view of those who took part in the programme, merely compound the problems which already exist; believes that the Scottish Executive should encourage North Lanarkshire Council to take on board the suggestions made in the programme to regenerate Cumbernauld by creating an identifiable town centre starting at St Mungo's Church and continuing to tree-lined boulevards with shop fronts facing widened pavements where bistro and alfresco activities could be provided, and considers that North Lanarkshire Council should initiate a consultation with the residents of Cumbernauld on these proposals.

17:03

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): It is important to set today's debate in context. Members' business debates are, I believe, one of the Scottish Parliament's successes. They enable members to bring a constituency issue to the forefront of public opinion; they are a superb mechanism for raising awareness of an issue; and the discussion is generally conducted in a positive manner with the consensual support of members, irrespective of their political differences, and with all members being committed to moving forward. I hope that today's debate will be conducted in that spirit.

I cannot be other than disappointed, therefore, that, rather than focus on the issue that the motion addresses, Donald Gorrie has lodged a highly politicised counter-motion that appears to be more about political point scoring. The points that his motion raises can be made in the debate; however, if something worth while is to be achieved today, we must put political differences aside and focus on Cumbernauld's future.

The "Demolition" programme, which was shown on Channel 4, brought the problems that are

associated with Cumbernauld into the spotlight. That came on top of the town's shopping centre receiving the pluck on the plinth award from the architects' magazine *Prospect* for the second time.

Clearly, there is a design problem with the existing shopping centre, given that it was voted the most hated building in Britain in the "Demolition" programme. That design problem, coupled with the absence of an identifiable town centre with open social spaces where residents can spend time, is affecting the key players' ability to attract big, popular and prestigious retailers of the kind that are necessary to encourage people to travel to Cumbernauld and spend time there. The proposed new Antonine centre is a facelift development that, in itself, will not address the current problems or provide the revitalised centre that everyone hopes to achieve.

The Antonine centre first gained planning permission in 2003 and was due to open in 2004. It has been beset by problems principally because it has failed to attract—

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Margaret Mitchell: I will just finish my point. The centre has failed to attract the prestigious retailers that would make the town centre and the existing shops sustainable and viable.

Cathie Craigie: I am dismayed that Margaret Mitchell is talking down the Antonine centre proposals. Does she know when the first proposals were made and when discussions started about the centre?

Margaret Mitchell: It was quite some time ago, and the centre got planning permission only in 2004. That is the point. Despite the fact that the centre has been the cards for so long, it has been beset with problems because of the failure to attract outlets that would make the centre viable.

We need to look at the current problems and build on the positive aspects of Cumbernauld. The town already has a huge catchment area of potential shoppers. With a population of 50,000, it is the largest settlement in North Lanarkshire and is situated in an ideal location to attract the economic regeneration that is required to restore the sense of civic pride that its residents, many of whom were pioneers of the new town development, still have in their town.

The point was made clear in a letter that I received from a constituent who voices the feelings of so many of the people in Cumbernauld:

"I have been a Cumbernauld resident for almost forty years, having moved here when not long married, raising my family in the town.

Recently I walked from Carbrain Road up the ramp towards the town centre, passing the commemorative

sculpture on the way. I was overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of sadness. Why?? Because I remembered being in that spot in 1967 waiting with my two year old son for the arrival of Princess Margaret to open the new town centre.

I remembered the feelings of hope for the future of our new town. We were supposed to be the pioneers of a new concept in town planning and had been encouraged to leave our comfortable home in Glasgow's west end where we were visited and vetted to ensure that we were suitable. We arrived in Abornhill in 1966 and put up with inconveniences such as lack of shops, few bus links etc as all were promised in time when our wonderful new shopping centre was built ...

I believe that the opportunity has been missed for a good shopping mall here in Cumbernauld which would have attracted people from surrounding towns in the central area. People are now accustomed to travelling to Falkirk, Stirling, East Kilbride, The Forge, Braehead etc and even the local population won't stay in the town for the poor quality"—

of shopping. The letter continues:

"Years ago I know that people did travel to the town to visit Woolco and the opportunity to build on this was missed. My children have now all left the town, I am in my sixties and rarely spend any time in the depressing centre."

My constituent finishes by saying that she still has a feeling of civic pride. She suggests that one thing that could be done is to relocate the town centre and make a square with cafes and alfresco areas or, as the motion and the "Demolition" programme suggest, make the existing shops face the front and create a tree-lined boulevard and pavement space where people could spend time.

I believe that, if there is the political will, the fact that the centre is in the hands of private developers will not matter. That was not the case in Hamilton, when the then leader of Hamilton District Council, Tom McCabe, refused to take no for an answer and the whole centre was revamped. The same could be true for Cumbernauld. All that is required is political will and for the key players to get round the table and to try with one voice to do what the people in Cumbernauld are clearly calling out for—the creation of an identifiable town centre where people can spend time. Anything that the minister can do to aid that process and those talks would be much appreciated.

17:10

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): It is a good thing that we are debating the issue and I am happy that Margaret Mitchell has raised it. She is obviously unhappy about the fact that I lodged an amendment, which we are obviously not debating, but which set out some history. The problem with Cumbernauld is the way the Cumbernauld Development Corporation was wound up and made to sell off bits of the centre to different private developers, which inhibited any coherent attempt to sort out the problems, many of which were caused by a Conservative Government.

The council should initiate a consultation of the residents of Cumbernauld, and the owners of the town centre should as a matter of urgency engage in meaningful discussions on the centre's future. Three parties are involved. First, and most important, there are the residents of Cumbernauld. Secondly, there is the council which, without my getting political, has a slightly questionable record in its dealings in respect of Cumbernauld. I think that Cumbernauld was better dealt with under the former district council. Thirdly, there are the people who own the site and the buildings. Those people must all get together. We must ensure that the Cumbernauld people have their say and can put forward positive proposals for how to sort out the town centre.

There are a lot of good aspects to Cumbernauld. There is the old village, which is attractive and has the somewhat underused but very fine Cumbernauld House. The town also has a successful theatre and many other things going for it, but the shopping centre has been a problem because of the difficulty of sorting everything out.

As a contribution to the discussion, some Cumbernauld people have put to me the idea that a public area could be developed between the college, the medical centre, the new town hall and the community centre, between Tryst Road and North Carbrain Road. Some of those buildings have space around them in which public space could be developed. The view that has been put to me is that there is a great lack of public space in Cumbernauld because areas are owned by private corporations. At a very trivial level, I have suffered because of that, by being driven off a car park where I was trying to electioneer. It is privately owned land, so I was sent away in disgrace. Open public space is what is needed, and Margaret Mitchell made some sensible points about that. It is vital to involve the people of Cumbernauld with the council and the owners of the land so that they can sort out the issue and restore the town, give it a really good centre and allow it to continue as the good town that it is.

17:14

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Cumbernauld new town gained fame in the 1970s. It was considered to be an ideal place to live, a modern and safe environment in which to raise a family, and a place where almost all houses offered residents a piece of green space to claim as their own. It was a place where there would be jobs to suit everyone, available on their doorsteps, so people moved to the town in a pioneering spirit. They wanted that modern town to work for them and for their children. The reputation of the town spread, and visitors from all over the world came in numbers to see that modern method of town planning.

Architects, town planners, designers and students picked over every aspect of the plan and the buildings. We were presented with a number of awards. The town centre, which featured the first indoor shopping mall in the United Kingdom, was seen as a triumph of design. We were famous. "Gregory's Girl" put us on the big screen, and "What's it called?"—

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): "Cumbernauld!"

Cathie Craigie:—was on everyone's lips. That was not rehearsed.

We still have a great community. Groups in the town offer something for every taste and there is support for almost every need. Housing is attractive and desirable and our population continues to grow. There are good-quality schools and high employment levels, but something is wrong: we do not have a shopping centre that meets the needs of the town. The plan went off the rails and for a long time we have been struggling to get it back on the tracks. I use the phrase "off the rails" because many of the pioneers who came out to Cumbernauld were railway workers from Springburn.

What went wrong? What derailed us? It is clear to many people who live and work in Cumbernauld that the problems began when the town centre was sold to a private company by Cumbernauld Development Corporation. I am sorry if Donald Gorrie offended Margaret Mitchell, but facts are chieftains that winna ding. The development corporation did not want to sell for a very good reason, which was that the centre was not finished. In the words of a former Cumbernauld Development Corporation employee,

"the Corporation kicked up hell"

with the then Scottish Office officials and ministers. However, I am told that their protests fell on deaf ears. The Tory Government at the time had a vigorous policy and it encouraged—indeed, directed—the development corporation to sell off its assets.

Margaret Mitchell: What advantage is to be gained from going over the past? Surely the benefit of the debate is that it enables us to move forward and see what can be done now. We are where we are.

Cathie Craigie: The advantage of going over the past is that we can learn from our history. If Margaret Mitchell was at the presentation that was given earlier in the week in Parliament by history teachers, she will know that we can all learn from history.

The development corporation protested because the town centre was not finished; it knew that it would be extremely difficult to complete the

envisaged centre when control of the heart of our town had been sold. With that little but important piece of historical knowledge, I found myself looking at Margaret Mitchell's motion with disbelief. The Tories were the ones who allowed control of our town centre to be sold and to be lost to the people of our area.

We, as a town, have unfortunately now received national attention for all the wrong reasons, but the television programme highlighted the many successes in our town as well as the negatives. If the publicity helps in the long run, that interest is welcome.

What is happening in Cumbernauld now is important. Work on the Antonine centre has at last begun. The Antonine centre will also provide civic spaces in the area to which Donald Gorrie referred. Because of difficulties in the planning process, it has taken six years to reach the point at which the centre is starting to be built. I am pleased that representatives of the community—people who have lived and worked in the town for a long time—now meet the council regularly to talk about and plan for the future.

Cumbernauld is a unique town in many ways. We reflect the architecture of our time, just as other Scottish towns do theirs. We have the opportunity to learn from our history and to complete a centre that is—as the original plans envisaged—a utopia. Solutions will be designed and found locally, with the involvement of local people. It is not for the Scottish Parliament or for North Lanarkshire Council to tell the people what should happen; it is for us to work with them, and I will continue to work with them in any way that I can. When I come to the deputy minister's door looking for financial assistance, I hope that that door will be open.

17:19

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Margaret Mitchell on securing the debate, despite the fact that I do not support the motion—although she told the *Cumbernauld News & Kilsyth Chronicle* otherwise.

Our new towns, which were developed on the lines of Ebenezer Howard's garden-city model, have had varying degrees of success in the development of their town centres. As Cathie Craigie pointed out, over recent years Cumbernauld town centre has collected a number of national awards—unfortunately, for all the wrong reasons. The present state of the town centre has become a festering sore. The problem was recognised some time ago, when the former CDC, having acknowledged the need to redevelop the town centre, appointed Arrowcroft consultants to produce redevelopment plans.

However, following the abolition of the CDC and local government reorganisation, the plans were ditched. North Lanarkshire Council decided not to go ahead with the plans, despite the CDC having set aside money before its abolition for the work to be carried out. To date, local representatives say that they do not know where the money disappeared to in North Lanarkshire Council's budgets.

Ministers should be aware that the local community has little faith that North Lanarkshire Council is truly committed to redeveloping Cumbernauld town centre as it should be developed. Ministers should also recognise that North Lanarkshire Council has produced substantial redevelopment plans for all the major shopping centres in its area, except—for some strange reason—for the shopping centre in Cumbernauld. The mindset in North Lanarkshire Council seems to be that Cumbernauld is at the periphery. Given the big development at Ravenscraig, which is to be welcomed, the suspicion is that the council's energies are being ploughed in that direction instead of towards areas such as Cumbernauld.

Some progress has been made in recent years, in particular the Tesco and Asda developments. However, some argue that those developments have made it more difficult to sustain businesses in Cumbernauld town centre, as people who shop in Tesco and Asda do not need to go into the town centre. Cathie Craigie mentioned the Antonine centre, which also represents progress. However, that it is largely a retail outlet and its development raises questions about the long-term future of the mega centre. Cumbernauld town centre needs more than just a shopping centre; it needs a true town centre. Over the past nine years, North Lanarkshire Council has failed to grasp that that is what many local residents want.

As Margaret Mitchell rightly said, we need to move forward. It is wrong to say that blame can be apportioned to one group or another for how the issue has or has not been taken forward. That said, Cumbernauld town centre needs a substantial redevelopment plan, such as other town centres in the North Lanarkshire area have had. An example of the good practice that North Lanarkshire Council could achieve is Falkirk Council's recent redevelopment of Stenhousemuir and Denny shopping centres. Falkirk Council brought in a number of developers and asked them to produce a range of plans. It then consulted the local communities on what they wanted in their town centres, after which the council asked developers to finalise their plans, working with the local communities. Finally, the council invested in developing the town centres.

One of the key things that North Lanarkshire Council has failed to do is to engage the local

community in Cumbernauld in a wide consultation process in order to achieve that.

Cathie Craigie *rose*—

Michael Matheson: I accept that a community forum has been established and that that is a step in the right direction, but the council had to be dragged kicking and screaming even to get to that stage. North Lanarkshire Council has to realise that local residents should have a say in shaping their town centre. The use of the community forum is one step in that direction, but it is not sufficient in itself. The council needs to reach out to the wider community of Cumbernauld to identify exactly what people want in their town centre.

If that can be achieved in other local authority areas where councils are willing to work with local residents, I see no reason why North Lanarkshire Council cannot raise its game and start to do that in Cumbernauld. Ultimately, the people who live in Cumbernauld are those who should decide what is in their town centre. North Lanarkshire Council needs to wake up to that fact.

17:24

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): There is no doubt that the subject of the debate has led to passions running high in Cumbernauld. Not long ago, I attended a modern studies class at Greenfaulds high school and it was good that the children were enthused about the political issues surrounding the town centre. The provision of a decent town centre for Cumbernauld is long overdue.

I supported Donald Gorrie's amendment. No one should be condemned for supporting amendments to motions, even if they are motions for members' business debates. We are here because we agree with the concept of democracy. I agree that we should move on in a spirit of consensus. If we all agree that Cumbernauld needs and deserves a new town centre, we should work to achieve that. However, we must learn from history. Those people who have made mistakes need to accept responsibility for making them. All that we are asking for is acknowledgement that mistakes were made. The Tory Government made mistakes, as has Scotland's current Government. Cathie Craigie recognises the Executive's responsibility in that regard and seeks assistance from it. North Lanarkshire Council must accept its responsibility, too.

The e-mails and phone calls that I receive show that there has rarely been an issue that has united residents so much as the desire to have a town centre for Cumbernauld. It is right that that centre should not be just a shopping mall—we do not need an East Kilbride mark 2. Cumbernauld needs to develop a distinct character that meets the

needs of the people who live there. They must have a space of their own that contains a diversity of shops, not just the big chains. They want space to be provided for small, individual shops that allow local traders to develop their businesses. That would have been easier if the CDC had not been compelled to sell off the town centre to private companies.

As someone who speaks to the residents and visits Cumbernauld town centre quite frequently, I know that it is dying on its feet and that it has an extremely depressing air about it. It is unfortunate that the bad reputation of the shopping centre sometimes leads to the whole town being tarred with the same brush. It is a testament to the resilience of Cumbernauld's residents that they do not allow that to drag them down. They are right to stand up for their town.

We have mentioned the private control of the town centre. That is where the responsibility of the present Government and of North Lanarkshire Council comes in. If the political will existed, we could correct that mistake by letting the council take the town centre back into public ownership. That would be the radical thing to do but, unfortunately, I do not think that that is likely to happen.

The current planning regulations have obviously been a problem in improving the town centre. I do not necessarily agree that the fact that a big Tesco and a big Asda have opened is a good thing, as it simply perpetuates the town's status as a car town. That is a common theme in new towns. Although the planning of new towns represented progress in many respects, they were developed as car towns and there is still a dearth of decent public transport links around them. The development of big stores just perpetuates that situation. We must move away from the predominance of big stores by encouraging the growth of smaller shops and smaller retail developments. People need to be able to live, work and socialise; it is not just a question of being able to go to the shops, as other members have said. The people of Cumbernauld must be consulted and their democratic will implemented; consultation alone is not enough.

I will conclude with a more general point. In such debates, there is always a temptation just to talk things up by saying, for example, that Cumbernauld or East Kilbride—the new town where I live—is great. New towns offer many advantages, but they are also the source of problems. As someone who lives in a new town, I think that one of the problems is that not enough attention has been paid to the development of character. In many cases, new towns are monotonous—their districts have no individuality. East Kilbride has the advantage of its village, with

its tradition, history and diversity. In future planning, local authorities and Government will have the responsibility for giving new towns a bit more diversity and character.

17:30

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): The opportunity to debate town planning is very welcome. If we are to seek inspiration from anybody, we should seek it from the great Sir Patrick Geddes—a former resident of Edinburgh who was perhaps the father of town planning—and his ideas on how towns and cities should reflect our relationship with the environment, with space, and with trees, plants and flowers. If the design of future towns is based on Geddes's ideas, we may not make the mistakes that we made in the past. If we design our towns around people rather than around cars, and around people's aspirations rather than around the aspirations of big business, they will look very different.

I echo much of what Carolyn Leckie said. In fact, I subscribe to everything that she said—especially what she said about small shops. What do we like a town centre to look like? For most people in this chamber, a town centre would be somewhere with a nice restaurant, a cinema, local amenities, shops and businesses—and even lawyers—that we could drop in on during the day or at night. We should design our cities so that people can walk to most of the places that they want to go to. In some of our cities—if I may divert from Cumbernauld for a second, although this may apply to Cumbernauld too—small shops are being driven out of business by the incursion and ever-growing power of supermarkets.

A House of Commons committee has been investigating the problems of small shops and on 15 February it will publish its report. I hope soon to have the opportunity of drawing members' attention to the results of that investigation.

Forty per cent of people in Scotland do not drive a car. When we design city centres, we should think of the people who do not drive, we should think of children, and we should think of old people. They are also the people we should consult. The theme of consultation has run through this evening's debate. Children should be consulted on the design of schools as well as on the design of town centres.

I will finish by mentioning the passion for allowing big chain restaurants into city centres. The net result of that is to siphon off money from the local economy. Such restaurants do not provide a net gain. My figures are from the United States, but the figures here will not be any different. A chain restaurant may provide some

employment in a small town, but it will import food and materials from outside, and 90 per cent of the profits will go furth of the town. Only 10 per cent of the profits will be recycled in the local economy. In other words, there is a net loss every time we allow one of these restaurants into a small town.

This has been a good debate. I am the convener of the cross-party group on architecture and the built environment and I would have been very happy to debate this subject for the next hour and a half. I thank Margaret Mitchell for securing the debate. It is one that should continue.

17:35

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): Although there are strong feelings on the issue, members have conveyed their views in a way that has allowed the debate to be challenging and interesting. I shall do my best to continue in that vein.

I did not see the Channel 4 programme that is referred to in Margaret Mitchell's motion and so cannot comment on its journalistic merits. On the upside, it is good that it has stimulated discussion and debate about places such as Cumbernauld town centre and the Parliament building, Scotland's other public building that has been nominated for demolition.

I am somewhat uneasy about such programmes, in which places are used to capture and describe a problem. As a consequence, those places come to be seen as being beyond saving. Decline and decay are images that are triggered in people's minds when they think of Cumbernauld; they think that it is a place that must be demolished. That is a reproach and an insult to the individuals and agencies in such communities who work hard to change them.

I am somewhat anxious when there is a sneering tone behind what is said. It may be helpful if some of the experts who sneer were to reflect on the fact that when the decisions on these town plans and buildings were made, they were made on the basis of professional advice, so although hindsight is an exact science, it should be remembered that planning decisions were made with the best intentions. Cumbernauld must be seen in that context.

Regarding Robin Harper's point about town planning, one feature that has emerged from the discussions on the planning bill is the potential for town planners to make significant changes. The Executive wants to reinvigorate the notion that town planning is a career in which people can make changes and differences.

Cathie Craigie said that she would be coming to my door looking for financial assistance for Cumbernauld. There is no change there—she

spends a great deal of her time bending the ears of whichever minister she can get hold of on behalf of her constituents. The Executive has supported significant investment, not just in the shopping centre but in the town centre, in closed-circuit television and in housing developments.

The Scottish Executive places great emphasis on the quality of the built and natural environments and we believe that investment in good design and public spaces is a sound investment. It can help to transform both the perception and the reality of our neighbourhoods, towns and cities and it can help to create a sense of pride and identity. Equally, buildings that are poorly designed or poorly maintained can bring a place down or give it an undeserved reputation.

Cumbernauld has a great deal going for it. It is well connected to the rest of Scotland, it has a growing population, unemployment stands at just over 2 per cent and it has a good mix of housing. The picture I have of Cumbernauld is that it is a positive place. I remember that while I was a wee girl growing up in Anderston in Glasgow, one of my school pals got the chance to live in Cumbernauld. We got to go out in the train to see this wonderful, exotic, bright, open and green place with houses that had gardens and underfloor heating. For our generation, Cumbernauld was seen as a place of opportunity. We all understand why Cumbernauld wants that perception to remain.

It is not for the Executive to prescribe the form or content of particular developments, be they in Cumbernauld or anywhere else. Members will appreciate that, given my ministerial responsibilities for planning, I am unable to comment on specific proposals. However, the Executive sets the policy framework and provides advice, guidance and support to promote well-planned and well-designed places and buildings.

Planning policy recognises the importance of town centres. National planning policy guideline 8, on town centres and retail, which we are in the process of revising, sets out our commitment to the protection and enhancement of town centres. The aim of the policy is to sustain and enhance the vitality, viability and design of town centres, which must be about more than just providing a shopping mall. Current planning policy also discourages exclusive reliance on the private car.

The Executive's planning policy statement, "Designing Places", which was published in November 2001, also provides guidance for local authorities and others. It sets out the Executive's aspirations for design and the role of the planning system in delivering them. It is backed up by a series of design-based planning advice notes, which cover subjects such as open space, housing, road layouts and design statements. We

also have in place a policy on architecture that acknowledges the value of good design in development and regeneration. A new statement, that takes account of the Cultural Commission's comments on strengthening the role of the existing policy, will be launched later in the year.

I acknowledge the importance of ensuring that those who live in the houses and who use the buildings are part of shaping the plans. Communities Scotland has accepted the importance of such involvement in developing its housing policy and in respect of new build. Such involvement is how we can make intelligent decisions about the kind of buildings that we create.

Well-designed towns and cities emerge because deliberate and careful design direction is given to urban growth, conservation and change. Last year, Scottish ministers established a new champion for good design in the built environment in our country in Architecture and Design Scotland. A key function of that new body is to engage with planning and procurement processes and to demand excellence in development at all levels and in all parts of the country. Architecture and Design Scotland takes a proactive role in promoting and advocating good design. Therefore, I encourage North Lanarkshire Council to consult Architecture and Design Scotland on its plans for the town centre of Cumbernauld.

I said earlier that I welcome, with certain caveats, the debate and discussion that the "Demolition" programme generated. I particularly welcome the fact that it is not just planners and architects who talk about places and buildings. It is important that communities such as Cumbernauld understand and influence planning decisions. Although the current planning system allows people to become involved in the process, there is a need to ensure that all communities can participate in the planning decisions that affect their lives.

That is why the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill, which is currently progressing through the Parliament, will provide better opportunities for people to influence decisions in developing the planning process and in considering individual developments. In order to support the measures in the bill, the Executive will work with stakeholders to prepare a planning advice note on community engagement. The note will provide advice on the new requirements for inclusion, it will give practical guidance on the approaches to community engagement and it will highlight examples of best practice. There will also be an information campaign on the changes in the planning system to tell people how they can become involved.

Those steps to engage people in planning will complement the work that the Executive is doing

to ensure that people have a voice in the regeneration of their areas. Communities Scotland, for example, is working with local authorities and others to implement national standards for community engagement. Through the community voices programme, it will provide £9 million over the next three years to give communities a real say in regeneration.

I am aware that North Lanarkshire Council organised a meeting with Cumbernauld community forum and the association of community councils in December to discuss the future of the town centre. The meeting was attended by the chief executive and other senior officials, which is a good sign that the council is taking the issue seriously. I understand that there have been meetings since then, including one today. I welcome that approach and encourage the council to continue working with the community on this important issue.

Of course we acknowledge the democratic accountability and authority of local councils, too. Democratic provision means that it is not for the centre to decide anything; there is an inner planning process. We have to recognise the key role of local authorities.

Michael Matheson: Is the minister aware that the chief executive and the head of the planning department in North Lanarkshire Council refused to meet seven councillors from Cumbernauld to discuss the town centre? They are happy to meet community groups, but they are not prepared to meet elected representatives. Does the minister condone the council's position?

Johann Lamont: I will not comment on something that I am not aware of. I was trying to make the point that any local authority has its own democratic authority that the Scottish Parliament must recognise.

We have heard interesting views on the importance of design in the future of Cumbernauld town centre. North Lanarkshire Council has acknowledged that changes to the town centre are required and it has proposed amendments to the Glasgow and Clyde valley structural plan that identify Cumbernauld town centre as a renewal priority. The council has also worked with others to deliver road and lighting improvements, environmental works and the refurbishment of the Tryst sports centre. Construction of the Antonine centre, which is a new retail development that will bring in an estimated 600 jobs and £50 million of investment, started last week. All that, coupled with investment and support from Communities Scotland and Scottish Enterprise Lanarkshire, will bring benefits to the town centre.

It is clear that we and others should take the design of places and buildings seriously, and I have outlined the policies that the Executive has in

place to support that. I encourage North Lanarkshire Council and its partners to take account of the policies and to involve local people fully in the town's future. We want to think of Cumbernauld as I had always thought of it: a thriving place of great potential. I am sure that members and people in the Cumbernauld area will work extremely hard for the successful outcome of discussions so that we can have a revitalised town centre.

Margaret Mitchell: Will the minister take an intervention? It was just to make the point—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sorry—the minister is finishing.

Margaret Mitchell: Has she finished completely?

Johann Lamont *indicated agreement.*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Since you have started you might as well finish, I suppose.

Margaret Mitchell: Does the minister accept that there is a problem with the absence of an identifiable town centre? Although all the news about the new centre is to be welcomed, it will not in itself solve all the problems without addressing the original one.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should finish, minister.

Johann Lamont: I have said already that we take seriously the development of the town centre. We have invested in it and we recognise the importance of all the people involved coming together in the best interests of the people of Cumbernauld.

Meeting closed at 17:45.

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