

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 11 May 2006

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 11 May 2006

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

Council Tax and Pensioner Poverty

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Good morning. The first item of business today is a debate on motion S2M-4363, in the name of John Swinney, on council tax and pensioner poverty.

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I find it appalling that, despite lodging an amendment to this very good motion, my party and I have not had it selected for debate. Other parties have had their amendments selected. We have 100 per cent attendance in the chamber today, whereas only three Labour members, two Lib Dems and two Conservatives are present.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): There are three Liberal Democrats.

John Swinburne: My party represents solely senior citizens, but it is continually ignored when it lodges amendments. Presiding Officer, will you look into the problem and rectify it in future?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Swinburne, you are one of 129 members. If you look at the score, you will find that you do rather better than your proportional entitlement. You will be called if you are good.

09:16

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Mr Swinburne referred to the fact that only a few Labour members are here. I see that the Government front bench has now been taken over completely by the Liberal Democrat party, which is one of the most frightening sights I have seen in my life.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Here is another one.

Mr Swinney: Oh my goodness—it has taken a turn for the worse. I thought that things could only get worse, and they have. I say to Mr Lyon that it is only a matter of time before I am over on the Government front bench, which I look forward to with enthusiasm. Who else will be there is a different matter.

Christine Grahame: He agrees with you.

Mr Swinney: I am sure that he does.

This debate provides Parliament with the opportunity to examine how local taxation is raised and to establish the extent to which the method is fair. Our motion contends that the council tax is unfair because it is based neither on income nor on ability to pay, and it sets out our belief that local taxation will be made fair only when Parliament introduces a local income tax.

The fairness or otherwise of the council tax has been hotly contested since its introduction. Those who support it say that it is appropriate to tax on the basis of property value because so much other taxation is driven by income. They put the equally important argument that adequate measures have been put in place through the council tax benefit arrangements to temper any unfairness in the system.

On 12 February 2004, the First Minister told me:

“Those who are lowest paid or who have the lowest incomes receive council tax benefits that contribute towards meeting their costs.”—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2004; c 5839.]

On 26 February 2004, the First Minister told me:

“Such a benefit system exists to help those who have problems with making their payments.”—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2004; c 6078-79.]

However, statistics provided in parliamentary answers from Mr Lyon to my colleague Christine Grahame and information from the Department for Work and Pensions expose the First Minister's assurances as hollow rhetoric. In Scotland, 496,429 pensioners are eligible to claim council tax benefit, but information from the Department for Work and Pensions shows that only 56 per cent of them make a claim. More than 200,000 pensioners in Scotland who are entitled to claim council tax benefit do not claim it and therefore pay more council tax than they should. That means that more than one in five Scottish pensioners pay an extra £540 every year—Scottish pensioners pay a staggering £118 million more than they should in council tax.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): So much for the Labour Party.

Mr Swinney: I am coming to the Labour Party. Mr Ewing should be patient and should not think that we will leave the Labour Party out of this.

Among pensioners, the take-up of council tax benefit has decreased by about 10 per cent since 1997-98. A Labour Government that is supposedly dedicated to helping the most vulnerable in our society has presided over a situation in which a smaller proportion of pensioners claim the support to which they are entitled. It is no wonder that not one Labour minister has come to the front bench of the Parliament today to face those statistics. It is an absolute scandal. All the advertising campaigns that have been undertaken to

encourage take-up have delivered a very poor performance.

The take-up of council tax benefit by owner-occupiers is even lower than the average figures suggest; only 35 to 40 per cent of owner-occupiers take up the benefit. The statistics demonstrate that efforts to tackle the manifest unfairness of the council tax through a benefit system have failed to deliver on ministers' rhetoric. If we needed any further evidence to show that the current council tax system is unfair, the figures that I cited have delivered all that is required. Evidence that the benefits system is too complex to ensure that individuals receive the support to which they are entitled has dealt a body blow to claims that the system is fair. The council tax is manifestly unfair and must be abolished.

We believe that the council tax should be replaced by a system of local income tax based on the ability to pay. A local income tax would have a number of clear attractions as a new system for collecting local taxation. It would have the advantage of being local. Local communities would be in control of how much they wished to contribute to pay for local services. A local income tax would be based on the ability to pay. The income tax system already identifies those who are liable to pay income tax, and a local income tax would be a bolt-on to that system. A local income tax would be clear and simple and would not involve the bureaucracy of council tax and the council tax benefit system.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): In the interests of a full and informed debate on the proposed local income tax, will the Scottish National Party publish its estimates of what local income tax would be for each of Scotland's 32 local authorities?

Mr Swinney: Obviously, Mr Muldoon is not paying attention. We published the estimates some time ago, when we launched the local income tax policy. We will, of course, publish our proposals in advance of the election campaign. We will also share with the public the consequences of retaining the council tax, which will be a revaluation of properties and a massive increase in council tax under the Labour Party. In the months to come, we will share that information with every household in Scotland.

A local income tax would be more reliable to collect. The income tax collection rate is 96.17 per cent, whereas council tax collection rates are much nearer to 92 per cent. A local income tax would be cheaper to collect. Council tax collection costs £78 million, £30 million of which is spent on the failing council tax benefit system. Those compelling reasons make a local income tax attractive and desirable, but there are others.

The Government amendment, for which the sparse Liberal Democrats on the front bench will argue, I presume, refers to the independent inquiry into local government finance. Goodness knows who will speak to the Labour Party's position. The amendment states that both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats have

"submitted clear and detailed proposals"

to explain their positions. The word "different" is missing, to paper over the cracks in the coalition, but they exist. As I indicated diplomatically to Mr Muldoon a moment ago, an essential element of the Labour Party's commitment to retain the council tax is that there will be an expansion of the bands for properties and a revaluation to take account of changes in values. Even if today the Labour Party is not keen to spell out clearly from the front bench the impact of its proposals, we will do our level best to ensure that the public clearly understand the consequences of the Labour position.

A brief look at the Welsh revaluation gives us a flavour of the cost of keeping the council tax. Across Wales, the council tax burden on nearly 40 per cent of properties increased as a result of revaluation. In the city of Cardiff, which has experienced the same housing pressures that many of our cities have experienced, 50 per cent of properties went up one band, 13 per cent went up two bands and 8 per cent went up three bands or more. Labour should make clear to the electorate that retaining the council tax will mean an escalating bill for many people, to add to the 60 per cent increase that has taken place since the Labour Government came to power.

Those are some of the reasons why Parliament should move to new ground in local taxation. The council tax system has been shown to be unfair and the benefits system has been shown to have failed to protect the most vulnerable. A local income tax would be the fairest and most efficient system. I invite Parliament to support the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that the council tax is an unfair tax which is based neither on income nor on the ability to pay; further notes that the council tax, which has increased by over 60% since 1997, discriminates against those on a fixed income, particularly the elderly; notes that means-tested council tax benefit has failed to help many of the elderly, in particular older owner-occupiers, and calls for the abolition of the unfair council tax and its replacement by a local income tax based on the ability to pay.

09:25

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): I am pleased to take part in this debate and to restate the Executive's position on

the future of local taxation in Scotland. Following the last election, this devolved Government agreed to set up an independent review of local government finance. We all, I am sure, agree on the need for local taxation and on the importance of having the right systems to provide the funds that local authorities need to deliver the many vital services for which they have responsibility.

Of course I recognise that there are genuine differences of view across the chamber about what system is right. It is no secret that there is a difference of opinion between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party on this matter. Even the far-reaching and highly regarded Layfield committee report of 30 years ago recognised the difficulty of choosing between a property-based tax and a local income tax.

More recently, in 2002, the Parliament's Local Government Committee also examined the issues and highlighted the need to strike a balance between council tax funding of local services and the funding that the Executive provides. That is why we gave the independent review committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Peter Burt, a wide-ranging remit. Two months ago, Tom McCabe—the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform—and I met the committee to review progress and receive an update. It is clear to me that the committee has approached its remit thoroughly and comprehensively. It has considered options for property-based local taxation, including the council tax, domestic rates and land value tax, and it has considered options for non-property-based local taxation, including a local income tax and a poll tax—although I have not seen any political support for that last one.

Mr Swinney: What about the Tories?

George Lyon: I had a look to see whether the Conservatives had supported the idea, but it seemed to be missing from their contribution to the review committee's consultation.

The committee consulted widely and has published a summary of responses on its website. I have a paper copy here with me today. From the summary, it is clear that the position of pensioners and their ability to pay are key issues that arose during the consultation.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): When does the minister expect the committee to give Parliament its final report? Will both Executive parties endorse its conclusions?

George Lyon: The committee has indicated that it is likely to report in the autumn. Once we receive the report we will examine it closely and discuss how to respond to it and how to proceed.

The committee has taken evidence from a range of experts as well as from individuals and

organisations with an interest. The work has taken time, but the committee has been able to indicate to us—as I have just said to Mr Morgan—that it is on track to publish its report in the autumn.

Mr Swinney: Will the minister take an intervention?

George Lyon: If Mr Swinney does not mind, I would like to make some progress.

In the meantime, we have not simply sat back to await the committee's report; we have acted to tackle pensioner poverty in Scotland. As a result, since 1999, 80,000 Scottish pensioners have been lifted out of relative poverty, which represents a reduction in relative pensioner poverty of more than a third. We have also introduced a number of specific measures, such as our central heating programme, the warm deal scheme, unlimited Scotland-wide free bus travel for older and disabled people, and free personal and nursing care.

Mr Swinney: I am interested in that list of measures, including those on bus travel and central heating, but none of them pays the council tax. Will Mr Lyon explain what measures the Government has taken to increase pensioners' uptake of council tax benefit, which the First Minister and others have cited as the mechanism for protecting pensioners from council tax poverty?

George Lyon: As Mr Swinney will know, we are doing a lot of important work in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions and local authorities to try to increase the uptake of council tax benefit in Scotland. Of course, for pensioners and for all council tax payers across Scotland, we have just had the lowest average council tax increase since devolution.

The independent review committee received around 350 responses to its public consultation, of which almost a third were from pensioners. It also received 450 postcards from pensioners, as part of a campaign co-ordinated by Help the Aged. I have no doubt, therefore, that issues relating to low-income pensioner households are being fully considered by the review committee. I am also sure that the team will closely examine those responses and all the others that it received, including those from political parties. The committee will examine all the ideas that have been presented.

For the future, of course we want a system of local taxation that is fair, reliable, predictable and stable. I am sure that members across the party divides agree with that basic concept. That is why we should await the review committee's report. I do not intend to speculate today on what the committee might or might not conclude. What I can say is that we will examine its

recommendations very carefully, and we will act on them.

I move amendment S2M-4363.4, to leave out from first “council tax” to end and insert:

“Scottish Executive has established the independent inquiry into local government finance consistent with the Partnership Agreement of May 2003; notes that the Labour Party has submitted clear and detailed proposals to support changes to the council tax, and further notes that the Liberal Democrats have submitted clear and detailed proposals to support a local income tax and that the inquiry is due to report in the future.”

09:31

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): It is fair to say that no one doubts the importance of tackling pensioner poverty. When high council tax levels make that poverty worse, we have to consider carefully any measures that can be taken to ease the burden. There should be no doubt that for some pensioners, as for many groups in society, council tax is a real burden.

At the heart of today's short debate is a fundamental divide over whether the council tax is simply a flawed tax that cannot be improved or whether it is the level of the tax that causes the problems. In short, the question is whether the council tax should be abolished or reformed. As others have suggested, disagreements exist not only within the Parliament but within the Executive.

We could have a long debate—or a relatively long debate within our time limits this morning—on the merits of the council tax versus those of a local income tax. No doubt when the review committee publishes its report we will have a rather longer debate on the subject.

I want to touch on some of Mr Swinney's figures. He talked about the benefits of a local income tax in terms of collection rates. Most people accept that the collection rate for income tax is generally quite high, but the collection rate for income tax for Scotland that Mr Swinney mentioned is actually lower than the collection rate for council tax in England and Wales. That is a signal that, in Scotland, council tax collection could be better.

John Swinburne: Will the member give way?

Derek Brownlee: No, I would like to make some progress.

If we improved collection rates—as the amendment in my name suggests we should—we could shave some money off the average level of council tax. The amount would not be huge, but it would make a difference.

Even if the review committee recommended a change, and even if—we might have to suspend our disbelief for a moment—the Executive agreed, any change to the local government finance

system would take time. If we want to tackle pensioner poverty now, we should be considering more immediate measures. We should be considering what we can do with the council tax now.

The fundamental problem with the council tax is that it has increased by 60 per cent since 1997. That increase is well above the rate of inflation and well above the increases in income of most people who pay the tax. If we want fundamentally to reform the level of council tax rather than simply make an incremental change—that is, if we want to do something significant about the level of council tax rather than simply tinker at the edges—we will have to take a fundamental look at what councils do and at what we expect them to raise through the local government finance system, whatever that system might be.

Every time the Executive suggests new or enhanced services, we have to ensure that the councils that will be expected to provide them will be funded in full. I suspect that a significant portion of the increase in council tax since 1997 results from additional services being asked of councils but not financed.

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Mr Brownlee said that we have to take a fundamental look at what councils do. What powers would the Tories either take away from councils or give to them?

Derek Brownlee: The point is more about what councils can do with what they are asked to raise. For example, if education services were taken away from local authorities, shifts could be made in council tax. That should be considered. Education could be devolved to a lower level.

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Will the member give way?

Derek Brownlee: No, I want to make some progress.

We could consider many issues in relation to the role of councils and what we expect them to raise.

As John Swinney pointed out, the uptake of council tax benefit is nowhere near as high as it should be. I suspect that many pensioners do not know that they are eligible for it, while others find it difficult to complete the application form or have a problem with the intrusive nature of many of the questions that they are asked in order to qualify for it.

Pensioners' difficulties have been compounded by the Chancellor of the Exchequer's scrapping of the temporary £200 council tax rebate that he introduced before last year's election. The day after he introduced it in his budget, he told the “Today” programme that his

"spending plans ... including what we can do for pensioners"

were "costed and affordable". In an online chat at the Labour Party conference, his friend the Prime Minister went further and said:

"Labour is helping the most vulnerable to meet the costs of council tax".

Of course, as soon as Labour got back into power, it scrapped the rebate.

I should point out that between 33 per cent and 42 per cent of pensioners who are eligible for pension credit do not receive it, so it is a bit naive to think that the Scottish Parliament alone can deal with pensioner poverty. Instead, we need a joined-up approach with the Westminster Administration.

Moreover, we should not discount the impact that improving council tax collection could make. Some councils—particularly those in cities, but I could mention some others—are simply not collecting the appropriate amount of council tax.

Mike Rumbles: What practical measures to improve their council tax collection rates should councils take that they are not already taking?

Derek Brownlee: They should look at best practice. However, I strongly urge all councils not to look at what Inverclyde Council is doing. Its tax collection rates seem to be going down.

Mike Rumbles: But what should councils do?

Derek Brownlee: Inverclyde Council provides a very good example of what a flagship Liberal Democrat authority is not doing.

If we are serious about tackling pensioner poverty instead of scoring political points, we must work with the United Kingdom Government, no matter its colour. I realise that that might be difficult for some SNP members who take a different view of life.

Defenders of a local income tax system claim that it will benefit pensioners, because they will not have to work, but the Liberal Democrats recently suggested that pensioners should work and that we should take the tough decision to raise the state pension age. As a result, under the Liberal Democrats, pensioners would be no better off, because they would have to work and pay local income tax.

We should not expect to resolve local government finance issues in a 75-minute debate. However, we need to address some pretty fundamental issues of council tax reform rather than debate certain parties' ideological obsession with the local income tax, which would be difficult to implement and expensive to collect.

Christine Grahame: The phrase "ideological obsession" will come back to haunt the member.

Derek Brownlee: I was referring not to Christine Grahame but to political parties.

I have pleasure in moving amendment S2M-4363.1, to leave out from "recognises" to end and insert:

"notes that the council tax has increased by 60% since 1997 and that it is this large rise which has made the cost of local council services a punishing burden for so many Scottish households, especially pensioners; calls on the Scottish Executive to fund fully the centrally-driven policies which it imposes on local councils; further calls on the Executive to ensure that those who are entitled to council tax benefits are in receipt of them, and notes that in 2004-05 councils collected only 92.7% of council tax and that, if the Scottish councils improved their average collection rate to that of England, 96.5%, an extra £41.50 could be shaved off the average band D council tax in 2005-06."

09:38

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): My amendment falls into two separate parts. First, it recognises that, as some members have already pointed out, the council tax is unsustainable as a system of raising revenue to pay for local government jobs and services. For a start, it is fundamentally flawed and unfair. It charges the very wealthiest people in society very little while charging the lowest paid workers, and particularly pensioners, a lot. Because it hammers the poor and pensioners and pampers the wealthy and well-off, it is clearly a Tory tax.

Unfortunately, since 1997—and particularly over the past seven years since 1999—this Tory tax has survived on a life support system operated by the Labour Party and, in Scotland, by Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Because they have helped to keep the council tax in place over the past seven years, the Liberal Democrats, in particular, should be ashamed of themselves.

Mike Rumbles: Does Tommy Sheridan accept that, given that the Labour Party and the Conservatives are opposed to changing the council tax system, there is no majority in this Parliament for such a change?

Tommy Sheridan: I hope that during the 2007 election campaign Mr Rumbles and his colleagues will stand up at every hustings and say, "Listen, there's no much chance of us getting our policies through because we're no going to have a majority, but gaunae vote for us anyway?" The Liberal Democrats are involved in deliberate political deceit. As in the recent Dunfermline by-election, they are telling the electorate, "Vote for the Lib Dems to scrap the council tax in Scotland." However, in this Parliament they are saying, "Oh, wait a wee minute, we've no got a majority, so we cannae vote to scrap the council tax. Let's just

keep it now we've got the electorate's votes under false pretences."

Members should be in absolutely no doubt that the council tax is unfair. Even according to the Scottish Executive, 110,000 pensioners in Scotland are officially in council tax poverty because they are paying more than 10 per cent of their disposable income on the council tax. Indeed, Help the Aged suggests that that figure might be as high as 30 per cent. Of course, we are talking not just about pensioner households but ordinary working-class households. Seventy-eight per cent of Scotland's workers earn less than the average annual wage of £20,603. They are being hammered by this unfair tax. The first and foremost principle that we must establish this morning is that the council tax is rotten to the core and it must go.

In the second part of my amendment, I point out that the SNP has been politically duplicitous and has displayed rank political hypocrisy. In February, the nationalists had the opportunity to abolish the council tax when the Parliament voted on the general principles of the Council Tax Abolition and Service Tax Introduction (Scotland) Bill, but they refused to seize that opportunity, even though the convener of the Local Government and Transport Committee made it clear that the principle behind the bill was to abolish the council tax and replace it with an income-based alternative. We proposed that the form of any such alternative could be decided at stage 2, but the SNP refused to vote to allow the bill to proceed to that stage. That was political duplicity.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I remind the member that at the time he used the phrase "featherbedding". Under his bill, I, my wife and MSPs would have paid less tax. Only 21 words in the bill would have survived stage 2 amendments to make it into a piece of legislation to replace council tax with a fair local income tax. Mr Sheridan's proposal was simply not possible, and he should acknowledge that now.

Tommy Sheridan: I will acknowledge that, under our alternative, Mr Stevenson, with his salary of £52,000, would have paid an average £2,500 more than he is currently paying in council tax. The same would have applied to everyone in the chamber, which is probably why the bill was voted down.

Stewart Stevenson said that, after stage 2, only 21 words would have remained of my bill—well, it would have been 21 words more than the SNP has introduced to deal with this matter in seven years. The SNP tells us that it is sincerely committed to replacing the council tax, but it has not introduced a single bill to do so. That political duplicity should be exposed today.

By all means let us scrap the council tax, but we must also expose the political double-dealing and duplicity of the SNP and the Liberal Democrats, who might well be partners in future.

I move amendment S2M-4363.3, to leave out from "and calls for" to end and insert:

"regrets the failure of the SNP and Liberal Democrat parties to vote for the replacement of the unfair council tax with an income-based alternative, when presented with such an opportunity during the February 2006 debate on the Council Tax Abolition and Service Tax Introduction (Scotland) Bill; notes the failure of either the SNP or Liberal Democrat parties to propose any concrete legislative alternative to the council tax over the last seven years, and believes that the overwhelming majority of Scottish citizens support the replacement of the council tax with a system based on income and designed to tax the wealthy more and ordinary workers and pensioners less."

09:44

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, not least because it provides us with an opportunity to highlight what Labour has done for pensioners both here and throughout the United Kingdom since coming to power. It also offers us an opportunity to examine the very real effects that the SNP's proposals for a local income tax would have. At best, the nationalists' attacks on council tax and their proposals for a local income tax are disingenuous. The very phrase "axe the tax", which the nationalists are so keen to punt, belies the fact that they are not planning to axe the tax at all, but merely proposing a different tax. We all know that no tax system will please everyone and that no tax system is ever perfect. The SNP must face up to the question whether its proposed tax system is fairer. In particular, does it deliver for our poorest people?

Alasdair Morgan: Will the member make it clear whether criticisms of the SNP also apply to her colleagues in Government?

Karen Whitefield: I shall mention that—I am sure that Mr Morgan will not be disappointed.

Is the SNP's proposed tax system practical and cost effective to collect? On all those points, the local income tax fails. I will touch on that later.

Let me be clear: improving the lives of older people—in particular, the poorest and most vulnerable—always has been and continues to be a priority for the Labour Party. Over the past few years, we have introduced a range of measures that I know from conversations with my constituents have made a real difference to older people in Scotland. Initiatives such as free national bus travel, the central heating initiative and warm deal, free health and dental checks and free personal care have complemented the improvements made by Labour colleagues at

Westminster, which include the winter fuel allowance, free television licences and the pension credit. All those initiatives have helped to lift more than 170,000 Scottish pensioners out of poverty. That is not to say that more should not be done. In relation to today's motion, I recognise the need to improve and reform the current council tax system. In particular, it is important that the concerns raised by organisations such as Help the Aged are dealt with and that we improve the uptake of council tax benefit among the elderly. That is why I look forward to the findings of the independent local government finance review committee, which are due to be published soon.

Christine Grahame *rose—*

Karen Whitefield: Christine Grahame should sit down. I have a lot to say and she is just going to have to listen for once.

Christine Grahame: What a spiteful madam.

Karen Whitefield: Christine Grahame taught me all I know about that.

John Swinney was wrong to suggest that the local government finance review is considering revaluation—we have ruled that out. The nationalists' proposals and, it has to be said, those of the Liberal Democrats, are not the solution. Many of the difficulties with those proposals have been fairly and clearly set out in the Local Government and Transport Committee's stage 1 report on the Council Tax Abolition and Service Tax Introduction (Scotland) Bill. Like Mr Sheridan's bill, the nationalist proposal would require primary legislation at Westminster and would take about nine years to implement. There would be no quick way to modify the pay-as-you-earn system for the collection of the tax, which in any case would be set at different levels in the 32 Scottish local authorities. Bristow Muldoon challenged John Swinney to set out what that would mean in all 32 local authorities. I have John Swinney's paper here. It gives us examples of seven local authorities in Scotland; it does not list all 32. It is about time John Swinney came clean and gave us the details on all 32 local authorities and all bands, not just band D and up, given that 70 per cent of Scots live in bands A to C.

It does not take much imagination to predict the kind of difficulties that would be faced in setting up a collection system. That is one of the questions that the nationalists and others in favour of a local income tax must face up to. How much will it cost to set up and run the bureaucratic system necessary to assess and collect a local income tax? What impact will local income tax differentials have on public services if people choose to move to areas of low taxation? What burden will be placed on the poorest citizens, who are in most need of those services? How will councils meet

the shortfall in income resulting from the withdrawal of council tax benefit from the Treasury? The nationalist proposals are ill considered and would result in a bureaucratic nightmare that would leave Scotland's local authorities short of much-needed money and our public services struggling. That is why I cannot possibly support the SNP's motion.

09:50

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):

Today's debate is aptly named "Council Tax and Pensioner Poverty". The council tax is not the cause of pensioner poverty; the blame for that lies firmly at the door of 11 Downing Street. The golden boy, Gordon Brown, and all his predecessors at 11 Downing Street have combined for about 60 years—since the end of the second world war—to treat with indifference and disdain the financial problems of long-suffering pensioners. The result has been that pensioners feel that politicians pay only lip service to their problems. They are 100 per cent right. Gordon Brown, in his latest lengthy budget, allocated a mere few seconds to pensions, saying that he would be examining in detail the findings of the Turner report, before continuing on to more pressing issues. That sums up his brief reaction to the fact that 1.8 million pensioners in the United Kingdom—by the Labour Government's reckoning, not mine—are living below the poverty line. In Scotland, that equates to 194,000 pensioners below the Government's poverty line. For one of the richest countries in the world, that is an abomination. No politician can look a pensioner in the eye and say, "We're being fair to you." Politicians should think, "Black, burning shame on us for what we are doing for pensioners—it is not nearly enough."

I could go on and on all day, but there is an issue that we can do something about. In a written question to the Scottish Executive, I asked whether it would consider exempting pensioners who are in full receipt of council tax benefit from paying the cost of water and sewerage rates. It sounds logical: if a pensioner who has been means-tested qualifies for council tax benefit, having jumped through all the hoops, that can bring their income up to about £114 a week. However, then they are sent a bill for their water rates. For an average band D home, that amounts to £354.60. Where in the name of goodness is a pensioner who is on the breadline and who lives alone going to get £354.60 to pay their water rates? We can settle that question in the Parliament by instructing councils to stop sending out water rates demands to pensioners. That would avoid a lot of problems.

The answer I received from the Executive was:

"On 1 April 2006 the Scottish Executive introduced a water services charges reduction scheme for vulnerable households."

That means pensioners, by the way. The answer continues:

"The scheme provides a reduction in charges of up to 25% a year for households with more than two adults, who are in receipt of Council Tax Benefit (CTB), and no other discount. The purpose of the scheme is to introduce a permanent means of assisting low-income households largely occupying lower Council Tax bands, in receipt of CTB, which had previously received little or no assistance with their water services charges. The Executive has no plans to extend the scope of the scheme."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 9 May 2006; S2W-25504.]

The Executive lifts pensioners marginally out of poverty, then puts its foot on them and pushes them back down into poverty with water rates. For a single pensioner in a band D house, £354 is one hang of a lot of money. How the Executive can sit there and allow that to go through unchallenged is beyond my comprehension. No wonder ministers are hanging their heads.

By the way, I say to John Swinney that taxation raised through PAYE is not necessarily the answer. Lord Levy, who is alleged to have helped Tony Blair to sell peerages, is a multimillionaire and, allegedly, paid only £5,000 in income tax last year. A nurse pays more than that, so the Treasury will have to tighten up. I wish that Gordon Brown would tighten up on the Lord Levys of this world, as opposed to tightening up on the pensioners, who cannot afford to pay council tax and deal with all the other financial impediments that are put in their way.

I am proud of what the Parliament has done to introduce free personal care, free travel and free central heating for the elderly. The free central heating scheme is magnificent but, sadly, as time goes on, increasing numbers of pensioners find it impossible to turn on their excellent free central heating systems because the cost of fuel is going up at such a rate.

Politicians simply do not seem to be able to grasp the reality of what is happening to pensioners in this country. Pensioners make up about 22 per cent of the population and when it comes to putting an X on the ballot paper, they will not listen to the weasel words that are flung at them but will look at the council tax and water rate demands and will vote for people who are out to try to better their situation. Then members will think, "I wish I'd done a wee bit when I had the chance."

09:56

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP):
As an aside, I must pick up one illogical piece of

nonsense from the Labour Party. In her speech, Karen Whitefield ruled out any revaluation and then went on to criticise the bureaucracy of the local income tax. However, she fails to realise that ruling out revaluation in her preferred system will, for the next 20 years, cause assessors to go around valuing any new property that is built—some are still being built despite the mismanagement of Scottish Water—at the price that it would have been worth had it existed in 1991. What kind of bureaucratic nonsense is that?

I refer members to the report of the Scottish Valuation and Rating Committee, also known as the Sorn committee, which I first mentioned in a debate in June 2002—there are some new members who did not hear me speak on that occasion. The Sorn committee considered different methods of raising tax. On the proposal of a local income tax, it said:

"This suggestion has been put to us from one quarter only, namely, the Scottish Council of the Labour Party."

That was in 1954. It is a pity that the ancestors of current Labour Party members did not manage to pass down some of their wisdom.

One of the reasons why the Sorn committee rejected local income tax was that, although it acknowledged that the rates, as they were then, did not reflect ability to pay, it thought that the totality of local government funding—at that point, 51 per cent came from the Treasury and 49 per cent came from rates—reflected ability to pay, because the 51 per cent from the Treasury was collected from income tax. If that was the case then, it would be true in spades now, because the Treasury contribution has gone up from 51 per cent to something like 80 per cent. Although it is true for the totality of local government finance, it is decidedly not true for individuals on fixed incomes, who are the subject of the motion. Their contribution is not based on ability to pay; it is based on a fixed council tax that they have to pay out of a fixed income.

Another reason why the Sorn committee rejected local income tax was to do with practical difficulties. It is interesting that the committee did not investigate the difficulties itself but simply quoted a previous committee, which sat in 1922—I remind members that the Sorn committee reported in 1954. I hope that, as a result of his conversations with the Layfield committee, the minister will be able to assure us in his closing speech that the committee will not say whether or not something is practical simply by quoting the evidence from the 1922 committee—if he needs it, I can give him the reference for the document.

Any tax system relies on relief to make it equitable and acceptable, but if the types of relief become complex and costly to administer, if a

substantial number of the proposed beneficiaries of them do not take them up and if the proportion that is not taking them up is increasing, we clearly have a major problem. The predecessor to the council tax—the poll tax—collapsed under the weight of its complexity, its contradictions and its huge unpopularity. It also brought its proponents to political near extinction in Scotland. We are fast approaching the point at which the council tax will go the same way, and, for the good of Scotland, I hope that when it goes—as surely it will—it also brings down the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition that has been supporting it for the past seven years.

10:01

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): John Swinney's opening speech dealt with local income tax as an alternative to the council tax, rather than considering other aspects of pensioner poverty and how they have been tackled by the measures that the Labour Party is delivering in the coalition, but I suppose that that was to be expected.

I begin by considering the matter that John Swinney concentrated on most—the replacement of the council tax with a local income tax. There is no doubt that a local income tax would hit working families the hardest. Double-income families would be among the biggest losers. That has obvious implications for younger people who are just starting work, given the difficulties that they face with finding affordable housing, which we all know about. Single people who live alone would lose their current discount, which means that every person who lives alone would pay more. A local income tax would be less stable than a property-based tax, as the yield from income tax is less predictable.

Tommy Sheridan: Will Sylvia Jackson give way?

Dr Jackson: I am sorry, but I have a lot to get through.

A local income tax would be more complex and expensive to collect than the council tax. Although the proposal might look attractive to pensioners, the local income tax form could be as complicated to fill in as self-assessment tax returns. Those issues have not been addressed at all.

The Labour Party believes that the council tax can be redesigned to be fairer and more representative of today's property market. The 2003 Scottish Labour Party manifesto and the partnership agreement committed us to an independent review of local government finance. The manifesto commitment stated:

"We will design a fairer council tax banding system which is more representative of house valuations in Scotland",

particularly by extending the range of the upper council tax bands. That is another point that John Swinney and other SNP members conveniently did not mention.

The real issue is what the SNP's proposals are for a local income tax and whether they can stand up to scrutiny. Although the SNP is always willing to highlight what its proposals would mean to those with no income, it is less enthusiastic about spelling out their effects on working families. Its proposals, which were launched in March 2004, seek to replace the current council tax with a locally set income tax and, according to the SNP's figures, would increase income tax by 4.3p in the pound. There is no doubt that such proposals would hit ordinary working families the hardest.

It must also be pointed out that the SNP's proposals consider only seven local authorities, not all 32. There is no reference in the SNP's material to what its proposals would mean to any of my constituents. Moreover, the SNP does not consider council tax bands A, B or C; all that it considers in its material is band D. Is it not suspicious that the SNP considers only one band?

I reiterate what Karen Whitefield said about the many things that the Labour Party has done to alleviate pensioner poverty. The winter fuel allowance, the warm deal, the central heating programme, free television licences and free national bus travel—the list goes on. For the reasons that I have outlined, we cannot support the SNP motion.

10:05

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): I am grateful to the SNP for spending part of its debating time this morning on the unfairness of the council tax and the growing problem of pensioner poverty, not least because it gives me the opportunity to expand on not one, but two, key Green economic policies: land value taxation and the citizen's income. As the Greens argued in their submission to the independent review of local government finance, land value taxation is a more equitable, efficient and economic solution to the needs of local government finance. We hope that, whenever that report comes out, it will recognise the benefits that LVT—to which I will return later—can bring.

The first question that we must address is that of why pensioners are facing such hard times. What are the causes of pensioner poverty? Council tax poverty is only one kind of pensioner poverty. Pensioners face fuel poverty, and they even face food poverty. As John Swinburne rightly pointed out, inadequate pension provision lies at the heart of the matter. Less than half of pensioners earn enough to pay any income tax at all. A recent

report showed that a worker earning an average wage is likely to retire on less than the minimum wage. We are an affluent society but, at the moment, we are not providing a decent income for all pensioners.

The single most helpful action that we could take for the pensioners of both today and tomorrow would be to restore the link between pensions and earnings. We can change the local government finance system as much as we like, with income taxes, council taxes, poll taxes or LVT, but unless we tackle the central problem that is faced by pensioners, which is that they are not getting enough money in, we will not do anything to tackle the causes of pensioner poverty.

The latest long-term projections by the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions show that the amount that they plan to spend on the state pension is falling as a percentage of gross domestic product, from 6.2 per cent today to 5.8 per cent by 2050. The number of pensioners is going up, but the Treasury predicts that it will spend less of GDP on the state pension. That is largely due to the windfall of at least £5.5 billion a year from the retirement age for women going up to 65. It is also a consequence of the Government's failed approach, with a morass of means-tested benefits topped off by the minimum income guarantee.

That is a major disincentive for anyone to save. With means-tested benefits, if people have saved, they will not get the minimum income guarantee. That is why Green policy is to award all pensioners a citizen's pension, as a supplement to the citizen's income scheme, which would mean a guaranteed payment to all by right. That would be the solution for bringing pensioners the money that they need.

That arrangement would have to be linked to the taxation system—a fairer, more equitable system of local government taxation. The problem with the council tax is not, as Derek Brownlee argued, that it is too high. It is a flawed tax, which was drawn up by the Tories on the back of a fag packet to deal with the disaster of the poll tax. It is not based on real ability to pay, and—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): The sound system has been switched off because the fire alarm is sounding. The fault—if it is a fault—has not been traced. The building is being evacuated in phases, and it is now necessary to evacuate the chamber.

When we resume the meeting, we will probably have to adjust the remainder of the day's business. I do not think that I will be calling you for the remaining 30 seconds of your speech, Mr Ballard—although it was very well received by members.

10:09

Meeting suspended.

10:29

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. I think that the official reporters can carry on straight from the sound. The sound goes upstairs. What we do not have are the people to send the messages in the chamber, but I think we can pick up the debate with the closing speeches.

Because of the interruption in the course of the debate, I communicate my apologies to Andrew Arbuckle and Stewart Stevenson, whom I am not now going to call. We are going now to the closing speeches. I call Tommy Sheridan to close for the Scottish Socialist Party.

10:30

Tommy Sheridan: The interruption gives a whole new meaning to the idea of continuing the debate outside. It appears that that has a different connotation in the west of Scotland from the one that it has in the east of Scotland.

We have had a partial debate. Unfortunately, none of the SNP or Liberal Democrat speakers was able to defend themselves from the accusation of duplicity. Obviously, whoever sums up for those parties will try, in vain, to defend themselves from that accusation. I look forward to highlighting over the next 12 months the fact that, when this Parliament was given the only opportunity to—

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member give way?

Tommy Sheridan: I will give way because the member never got a chance to speak and I am a fair type of guy.

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member accept that, under the proposals that he brought to Parliament, which I voted against, I would have paid no tax, although I have one of the highest incomes of anyone in this Parliament?

Tommy Sheridan: Not for the first time, Stewart Stevenson is talking nonsense. Under the service tax proposal, he would have been taxed on his income as an MSP at a rate of £3,900 a year. There is not a council tax bill in the whole of Scotland that currently reaches £3,900 a year. Stewart Stevenson would have paid more under the Scottish service tax than he pays under the council tax. That would have been quite appropriate, because he can afford to pay that amount of money.

In relation to the abolition of council tax, we are talking about introducing a fairer form of taxation

that redistributes wealth away from those with plenty and toward those with little. That is what redistribution of wealth is all about and is what the proposal that was before Parliament in February would have delivered. After we had voted for the principle of abolishing council tax and replacing it with a form of income-based taxation, we could have had an argument at stage 2 about the form of taxation that we wanted to put in place and debated the pros and cons of a tax that is set nationally in comparison with a tax that is set locally.

My argument is that the form of tax that was proposed in the Council Tax Abolition and Service Tax Introduction (Scotland) Bill would have been more cost effective, more efficient and more redistributive than a local income tax could be. A local income tax would require 32 different sets of taxation. If that local income tax system also involved different rates within each local authority, each of the 32 local authorities would set different rates. There would be 32 different collection mechanisms and 32 different sets of explanations of the level of income at which people would have to pay their tax. However, under the proposals in the bill that the SNP and the Liberal Democrats voted against, the rates that would have been set nationally would have ensured that an individual on £20,000 a year in Paisley would have paid the same in local taxes as an individual on £20,000 a year in Perth.

Some members on the Labour benches have asked the SNP how much people would pay under the SNP's local income tax scheme. We can tell members in detail how much people would have to pay under our system. We can tell members that, based on the latest figures from HM Revenue and Customs, the proposal that the SNP voted against would not only have taxed people more fairly but would have raised £300 million more for local government jobs and services. We would have had a win-win situation.

The problem is that the SNP and the Liberal Democrats have spent seven years desperately telling everyone in Scotland who was willing to listen that they were going to scrap the council tax but, when they had the only opportunity in seven years to do so, they were fearful of taxing the wealthy too much. That is disappointing, not only for the people who voted for those parties, but for ordinary Scottish citizens.

I urge members to support the amendment in my name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As Sylvia Jackson has already spoken on behalf of the Labour Party, I call Dave Petrie to close for the Conservatives.

10:34

Dave Petrie (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank you for your warm welcome to the chamber, Presiding Officer—nothing to do with the fire, of course.

It is patently obvious that there is no palatable way in which to fund essential local services. However, the most important provision that we want from our local authorities is a service that represents value for the money collected. The concern of all parties must be that, at the moment, money is not being used to the best effect and, more important, is being driven into ever-increasing bureaucracy while the provision of front-line services continues to disintegrate.

I am particularly concerned about the double handling of public funding of major functions such as transport, education and social work at Holyrood and councils. That feeds bureaucracy and undermines those vital services. It is worth pointing out again that, since Labour came to power in 1997, council tax has risen by 60 per cent. I agree with the widely held view that people are dissatisfied with the high levels of council tax that they must pay today and endorse the view that they are paying too much, particularly given that, on average, councils collect only 92.7 per cent of owed council tax.

We have had an excellent debate and have heard some interesting speeches. As my colleague Derek Brownlee said, council tax can be only one part of the overall equation. The Scottish Conservatives' argument is for a broadly based and rational funding system rather than one that is based solely on income. Because of that, I cannot agree with the SNP motion.

Under the local income tax proposals, it seems that the greatest burden would fall on those who have families and on parents who have mortgages, income tax, national insurance and household bills to pay. Hard-working families are often cited as the very people whom political parties would seek to help. We should not be weighing them down with additional taxation. The SNP's proposals would make housing more unaffordable for young couples and first-time buyers, whose income would be targeted. As an MSP for the Highlands and Islands, I am particularly aware of the lack of affordable housing to buy or rent and the difficulty that people have in making the first step on the housing ladder.

There are already great disparities between the levels of comparable council service in rural and urban areas. In Argyll and Bute Council's area, in which I live, residents pay similar levels of council tax to those that are paid by people in Glasgow and Edinburgh but do not receive anything approaching comparable levels of public services

such as libraries, museums and recreational facilities. In addition, there is a moratorium in Argyll and Bute on free personal care for the elderly. I have great sympathy for those pensioners who are suffering and living in poverty. While council tax bills have increased at twice the rate of pensions, real poverty has left them at risk of cold-related illnesses.

Tax rises, such as those of the past decade, are most hard on those with low, fixed incomes, such as pensioners. As Help the Aged has pointed out, council tax benefit can be highly effective in alleviating the worst effects of council tax and should be a mechanism to ensure that the poorest in our society do not suffer. However, the system is so complicated that the benefit often no longer reaches the people who are entitled to it.

On-going difficulties in finding out about entitled benefits and consequent limited take-up of such initiatives is a serious problem. To simplify the matter and make the system more inclusive, we propose to restore the link between pensions and average earnings as a better way to help pensioners. Pensioners who are suffering due to the current weaknesses in the system deserve a revision of that reality and should be given a more appropriate liability to pay.

I urge members to support the amendment in the name of my good friend, Derek Brownlee.

10:38

George Lyon: The debate has reflected previous debates on this matter, with the various parties setting out their positions with regard to the future of the council tax.

Mr Swinney set out the SNP's position quite clearly and recognised the difference of opinion that exists between the Liberal Democrat and Labour members of the coalition.

Mr Brownlee talked about improvements in the collection of council tax. Everyone in the chamber would like collection rates to be improved and agrees that such an improvement would have an impact on the provision of services and on council tax levels. With regard to his claim that council tax has increased by 60 per cent since 1997, I point out that since 1999—when the Liberal Democrat and Labour coalition came to power—the increase in council tax has been 11 per cent.

Tommy Sheridan: I take it from the minister's comments on the difference between 1997 and 1999 that Labour is to blame for the rises in council tax.

George Lyon: I am just quoting the facts. I leave it to Mr Sheridan to draw conclusions.

I was interested in Mr Brownlee's comment that the Conservatives were going to take responsibility for education away from councils. I am not sure whether that was a new policy announcement or whether Mr Brownlee was just thinking out loud.

Derek Brownlee: Will the minister take an intervention?

George Lyon: No. I will make some progress. We are short of time.

We heard Mr Sheridan's usual strong rant from the back about the Scottish service tax. As we all know, that would be a national and not a local tax. It would centralise decision making and be punitive in nature. It would drive out entrepreneurs and those who create the wealth in Scotland, but Mr Sheridan has made it clear in previous debates that he does not give a damn about that.

Mr Morgan mentioned the Scottish Valuation and Rating Committee report of 1954. Unless I misheard, he mentioned my conversations with the Layfield committee and said that I should do various things. I think that he meant the Burt committee. I certainly was not around when the Layfield committee reported.

As I said in my opening speech, in 2004 the Executive commissioned an independent local government finance review to undertake a comprehensive study and make recommendations on the way forward. I reiterate the commitment of Scotland's devolved Government to the independent review, which is the correct way forward on the vital issue of local taxation. The matter is serious and complex and the Burt committee needs to complete its work before the Parliament makes decisions on that important issue.

As I have said to the Parliament before, we need a careful and independent consideration of the different models of local taxation. That is what the review team is doing. The committee is considering all the various models of taxation that have been proposed by the political parties: the local income tax model from the Liberal Democrats and the SNP; the improved council tax model from the Labour Party and the Conservatives; and the land valuation tax model and the Scottish service tax model from the Greens and the SSP. Even the poll tax is being considered, although I do not think that there is any political support for its return.

I am heartened by the interest and debate that the independent review has generated and continues to generate throughout Scotland. I am sure that I am not alone in receiving many letters on the issue, particularly from pensioners. They are glad to have the opportunity to feed their views into the review and the committee's work. Many

pensioners and pensioners groups took the opportunity to respond to the Burt committee's consultation and I am sure that they are well aware of the many issues that have been raised today.

I have some sympathy with many of the points that have been made, especially on pensioner poverty, which is an important issue. None of us wants a system that impacts disproportionately on some of the most vulnerable people in society. The issues are complex and challenging and the debate will continue. Local taxation is a fundamental issue and we look forward to the review's conclusions and findings.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Christine Grahame to wind up for the SNP. You have seven minutes.

10:43

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will speak slowly; I thought I was going to get only five minutes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If you can do it in five minutes, that would be helpful.

Christine Grahame: I will try. I wish I had not said that, now.

It is a great shame that the fire alarm—which will, no doubt, be the butt of many jokes in columns and perhaps newspaper headlines tomorrow—will overtake what has been a serious debate about pensioner poverty and the complete failure of the Liberal-Labour coalition, over seven years, to do something that we have the power to do in Scotland, which is to get rid of the council tax and put in its place a fair local income tax.

The basic rule of tax is that it should be fair and collectable. None of us likes paying tax, but we accept that basing taxes on income is the fairest way to tax people. I will move on to the collectability of tax shortly.

The background to the debate is the shame of pensioner poverty in Scotland. Some 190,000 pensioners in Scotland live in relative poverty even though Scotland is an oil, gas and energy-rich nation. There is a failure in the targeting of benefits. I find it astonishing, after my many years here, that Labour is still defending the targeting of benefits. As Labour members know, there has been a 10 per cent decrease in claims for council tax benefit in the past five years. We also know that one third of pensioners who are eligible for the pension credit do not claim it. In a debate many months ago, I produced the pension credit application form—all 60-odd pages of it—and another booklet about how to fill it in. There are many reasons why people do not claim pension

credit, including the complexity of making a claim, the fact that they do not know that they are entitled to it, and the shame of asking for it. During the same period, the Labour Government at Westminster has had the shameful record of keeping the basic state pension at the same level—currently, it is only £82 for a single pensioner. Many single pensioners do not even get that, particularly women who do not have enough credits to their name. Again, many of them do not claim pension credit.

Against that background, what could the Scottish Parliament have done for the 1 million Scottish pensioners? What does it have the power to do? It has the power to introduce a fair tax, but the Labour and Liberal coalition has singularly failed to do that. No matter what members from the Labour benches say, if one speaks to individual pensioners in the supermarket or to pensioners organisations, the two things that they say they want are a decent pension and a local income tax. Of course, with independence we could also deliver, as my party would, a decent citizens wage. That would take all the means testing out of the system.

Despite pensioner poverty in Scotland, pensioners pay their council tax bills, their rent and whatever else they have to pay. Where are the cuts made? They are made on eating and heating. If we go to the supermarket and look in pensioners' trolleys, we see they do not contain a Sainsbury's crate of six bottles of wine, or instant meals. Pensioners buy small amounts and individual bits of food that they can use up and they look for things that are reduced. Many of Scotland's pensioners buy their clothes in charity shops.

The central heating programme is welcome, but what is its point if people cannot afford to switch on the heating? In 2004-05, there were 2,760 excess winter deaths in Scotland.

Tommy Sheridan: I waited three and a half minutes before trying to intervene. Christine Grahame is right to highlight the fact that the Lib Dems and Labour have failed to change the tax for seven years. However, does she accept that, during that time, the SNP should have brought forward legislative proposals to change the council tax? In the absence of such proposals, does she accept that the SNP should have voted for the socialist Council Tax Abolition and Service Tax Introduction (Scotland) Bill?

Christine Grahame: I will come to Tommy Sheridan's bill shortly.

I wanted to set out the background because we should remember the canvas against which we work.

I turn to the points that were raised by other members. Tommy Sheridan's bill was fundamentally flawed. Ten of the 11 sections in the bill would have punished people and would have done nothing to alleviate pensioner poverty. Not only that, the bill would have taken away local accountability. Frankly, the Parliament has taken too much away from local government. I want local government to be responsible for raising some of the money that provides the services. We would still provide some of the money from here. People want that to happen. We cannot expect people in the Borders to pay the same local income tax as people in Glasgow because they have different needs and requirements.

Karen Whitefield's claim that she was my star pupil astounded me. I have to say that my pupil has not been paying attention and that she must speak to teacher after class. She has lessons to learn.

Free personal care was lauded, but the coalition had to be dragged kicking and screaming to deliver the initiative, which was driven by the Scottish National Party. The SNP took the lead on the issue—I was the first person in the Parliament to lodge a member's bill on free personal care. The SNP drove forward the proposal, against the wishes of the then Minister for Health and Community Care, Susan Deacon.

The point about the cost of collecting local income tax was a red herring. Consider the money that is wasted at present: £30 million-worth of council tax benefit is not collected and £78 million is spent on collection. The system would be simple to administer. We all have national insurance numbers, income tax codes and postcodes, so it would not be beyond our wit to administer the system. Sylvia Jackson talked about working families, but Labour's record on the shambles of the working families tax credit system is shameful. My in-tray is full of letters about that.

Pensioners will not be reading tomorrow's paper to read about a fire. Pensioners will want to know what members have said in the chamber. I will use extracts from Labour members' speeches in my election campaign next year. Votes are running away from the Labour Party. The 1 million pensioners in Scotland are listening to the fact that the SNP would deliver a local income tax and a decent pension. The Liberals have had seven years to deliver that and they have not done so, but they swan around as if they have achievements. Were we in their position, we would now have a local income tax. The voters are waking up fast to the Liberals, who have no proposals. I am also delighted that it has been put on the record that a revaluation will not take place.

Scottish Enterprise

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

We come to the next item of business still some distance behind the clock. I have taken the opportunity of inviting one member to stand down from the debate. It may be necessary to reduce speaking times in the open debate, but I will try to protect time so that all members who wish to speak are called.

The debate is on motion S2M-4367, in the name of Jim Mather, on Scottish Enterprise. Mr Mather is entitled to seven minutes for his speech, but any economies will be greatly appreciated.

10:51

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

Today's issue is not Scottish Enterprise's management trying to do an impossible job. Scottish Enterprise is a subset of the tools that Scotland needs—that view has been endorsed recently in reports that have slipped out from Scottish Enterprise under cover of darkness, such as those on the knowledge economy and on headquarters. As we have seen in recent weeks, Scottish Enterprise's management labours under considerable structural and procedural complexity. Meanwhile, other nations enjoy the lean and focused efficiency of financial autonomy and of getting on with growing their economies.

The debate is more about the Executive's promotion—amazingly—of the idea that that inadequate tool is enough, which is a big lie that goes back to 1974. We know that because we have an internal Government memo from 1974 that says:

"an SDA would be attractive just because it might make it possible to buy off some of the pressures from Scotland without a substantial addition to expenditure there."

That was said in the McCrone era.

The memo also says:

"There would be an element of window dressing about it in that the SDA would take over money now spent through the Department of Industry's Regional Office."

That window-dressing continues. We have had 30 years of Scottish Development Agency and Scottish Enterprise activity, which have resulted in the lowest growth rate in western Europe in that period.

Our objective is to knock more scales from more eyes. As Peter MacMahon said in *Scottish Business Insider* this week,

"We need a more mature attitude to this area of public policy".

We must find a better way—that is the mature approach—and make the Executive's top priority

much more than rhetoric. Recent events have further endorsed our position and our aspirations for Scotland.

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

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Jim Mather: I am delighted to take an intervention.

Christine May: If our strategy is such a basket-case, how does Mr Mather explain the view of the *Financial Times* that Scotland is the United Kingdom region of the future and the best region in Europe for human resources, skills and education, and that it has the best strategy for inward investment?

Jim Mather: I will meet Scottish Enterprise representatives tomorrow. We should take that medal and use it where we can, but I hope that our opponents do not subject it to audit, because it is the thinnest thing that I have ever seen.

The fact is that senior managers of Scottish Enterprise and ministers support something that cannot work. The growth rate over the years shows that Scottish Enterprise is certainly not enough on its own. We have evidence that managers and ministers are trying too hard to make an engine that cannot work move into action, hence the deficit and the cuts to, and threats and uncertainty about, services. There are asset disposals that look like a fire sale, redundancies and last-minute cash and resource transfers. The net effect is that Scottish Enterprise—our only tool—has been damaged by the people who are supposed to be its custodians.

Can Scottish Enterprise—our only tool—lift our living standards to the average level elsewhere? We face a choice: will we continue to hear the claim that the current strategy will work—that strategy would increase the damage and earn the condemnation of posterity—or will we admit that it cannot work on its own without economic powers? If we admit that, we can start the recovery process and gain the plaudits of posterity. Members will note that on 25 April, neither Jack Perry nor John Ward felt able to answer the question whether the strategy will work.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the member give way?

Jim Mather: No. I will crack on and put some content on the record.

The question whether we can converge must be answered. An honest answer from the minister that would stand the audit of posterity would start a new era and would be good news. It would acknowledge that Scottish Enterprise and the

minister are responsible to the people of Scotland and that the powers have limitations and would recognise poor continuity and poor expectation setting. It would force the Scottish Executive and Scottish Enterprise's management at least to start the process of taking a new mature attitude to public policy.

Mr Stone: Will the member give way?

Jim Mather: Mr Stone is persistent, so I will give way.

Mr Stone: Jim Mather's colleague Alex Neil first gave Scottish Enterprise's management three months to sort out the situation and then said 10 days later that the management should be fired. I notice that the motion does not mention that. What is the Scottish National Party's policy?

Jim Mather: The SNP's policy is to make the best of what we have, and Scottish Enterprise is all that we have. The roots of its failure and difficulty are in the window-dressing of 1974 that Governments have kept going for 30 years. For my entire working life, Governments have kept that farce going—I expect Kafka to appear to analyse and audit Scottish Enterprise.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Jim Mather: Sit down—I will not take an intervention.

Governments have created a system that is complex and confusing. The Executive is either a player, the coach of Scottish Enterprise or at arm's length away from Scottish Enterprise when it says, "That is an operational matter for Scottish Enterprise—we won't touch that." The Executive will never recognise its joint and several liability for making that one engine of economic growth its responsibility.

Karen Gillon: Will the member take an intervention?

Jim Mather: Karen Gillon can sit down.

In the past week or two, Ronald MacDonald has moved from fiscal federalism to financial independence or full independence, on the basis of the implicit moral hazard of a safety net. That moral hazard prevents wise spending and the achievement of economic growth. I advise the minister to read Ronald MacDonald's paper with great interest.

The mature approach for which MacMahon calls is the Ronald MacDonald approach—the full-powers, standing-on-your-own-two-feet approach. That is why I will write to members today to seek support to create a cross-party group on Scotland's financial future that will debate all the options, inform the debate, properly assess the problems, challenges and opportunities, examine

all the alternatives, create a climate for honest examination of the options and honestly assess others' experience. The question is who will join that cross-party group. Who is callous enough not to join the debate? Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise will never be enough. I have pleasure in moving the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament views the current financial position of Scottish Enterprise with mounting concern, given that the overspend is now estimated to be in excess of £60 million; is doubly concerned that this overspend will jeopardise jobs, skills and training, including those jobs of Scottish Enterprise employees; is disturbed to discover that Scottish Executive ministers were unaware of the true extent of the overspend for four months after it was first identified; criticises the failure to address this mismanagement at an earlier stage, and calls for urgent action to be taken to address the current problems facing Scottish Enterprise, for future guarantees that organisations must live within their established budgets and a recognition that the activity of enterprise agencies will never adequately compensate the people of Scotland for the lack of economic powers and the full means to manage the Scottish economy competitively and effectively in the interest of everyone in Scotland.

10:58

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Nicol Stephen): Jim Mather called for a mature debate—he certainly quoted Peter MacMahon's call for a mature debate. Jim Mather started the SNP's contribution by saying, "It's just a lie," and he quickly distanced himself from Alex Neil's call for the chairman and the chief executive of Scottish Enterprise to have three months to prove themselves, which was followed by his call days later for them to be sacked.

Over the years, Jim Mather has made interesting contributions on the Scottish economy. I recall that when he spoke to *The Courier* newspaper back in June 2004, he called the Scottish economy "a crazy, deviant economy" and "A busted flush." I ask members to judge whether that was part of a mature debate. Is that likely to develop Scotland's economy, to attract international investors or to create the cross-party consensus on the economy that is important to Scotland's future economic success?

Jim Mather: People are entitled to make such comments when the economy is unlike anything else in the world and when the results justify them.

Will the minister tell us what Jack Perry and John Ward could not tell us? Will the current strategy make the living standards of Scottish taxpayers converge with those in London, the south-east and elsewhere? Yes or no?

Nicol Stephen: Given the language that Jim Mather has used in the past and has continued to

use in today's debate, perhaps he should consider whether Peter MacMahon's call for a mature debate is not directed at him and the Scottish National Party.

I will take the opportunity to update members on developments since my previous statement to the Parliament on 30 March. As members know, KPMG was commissioned to investigate the reasons for the overspend, to check the accuracy of the overspend estimate and to make any recommendations on financial practice and reporting. The KPMG report points to some serious failures, which I have instructed Scottish Enterprise to address. I have written formally to Sir John Ward to require implementation of the recommendations of the KPMG report. In addition, Scottish Enterprise intends to implement the detailed recommendations of its own internal audit process. The Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department will liaise with Scottish Enterprise on the implementation of the KPMG recommendations, but I also intend to ensure that there is an external check on progress.

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

Nicol Stephen: I give way to John Swinney.

Mr Swinney *rose*—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have sound for Mr Swinney please? I suggest that Mr Swinney should speak from the microphone next to him.

Mr Swinney: I am grateful to the minister for giving way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Swinney, your own microphone has now been switched on.

Mr Swinney: Is the minister aware that, as a consequence of Scottish Enterprise's budget crisis, several local projects that the agency had committed to deliver in partnership with local authorities and private sector providers have now been cut back?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must be quick.

Mr Swinney: Those projects include initiatives in my constituency that were due to receive rural initiative funding and a crucial enterprise programme in Dundee's life science industry centre. What action can the minister take to ensure that the economy is not damaged by Scottish Enterprise's withdrawal from those programmes?

Nicol Stephen: I should perhaps signal that I am happy to take interventions—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, we are very short of time.

Nicol Stephen:—and I would be willing to release time from my summing-up speech if that would be helpful.

It is important that we make available to Scottish Enterprise additional resources, which will also assist those partner projects that are under threat. However, I realise that Scottish Enterprise will continue to experience difficulties—I will focus on that point later in my remarks—and I ask MSPs to continue to keep both Scottish Enterprise and me informed of any particular concerns that they might have. Along with the staff of my department and of Scottish Enterprise, I will work hard on those issues over the coming weeks.

Scottish Enterprise has accepted that it should have taken stronger action in November and December once the scale of its estimated overspend became known and that the lack of such action is the key cause of the overspend. Scottish Enterprise's non-cash budget, although it was not the central issue, has been an important factor.

Regarding the financial situation over the coming 12 months—the period 2006-07—I promised last week, when I gave evidence to the Enterprise and Culture Committee, to announce funding to allow the Scottish Enterprise board to fix its budget at its meeting on 12 May, which is tomorrow. Today, I have written to that effect to Sir John Ward and I have met Jack Perry, who is the chief executive of Scottish Enterprise. I have also answered a parliamentary question on the issue and I have written to Alex Neil, who is the convener of the Enterprise and Culture Committee.

Karen Gillon: Will the minister explain where in his resources the £25 million that has been given to Scottish Enterprise will come from? What would that money have been used for if it had not been given to Scottish Enterprise?

Nicol Stephen: Clearly, within the enterprise and lifelong learning budget, we have had to reprofile spend and use the limited flexibility that existed within budgets that were already fixed so that we could deal with the issues.

I want now to clarify what additional funding has been made available. The Executive will provide an additional £45 million of resource cover so that Scottish Enterprise can meet its non-cash requirements in 2006-07 and access its reserves. Scottish Enterprise will also be able to retain receipts of up to £5 million above the previously agreed target. Those steps will cover repayment of the non-cash element of the budget overspend in 2005-06. Scottish Enterprise will therefore be able to deploy an additional £50 million of resources, which will allow the board to agree Scottish

Enterprise's budget for 2006-07 in a way that reflects the Executive's priorities.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Nicol Stephen: I would be happy to do so, but I am already significantly over my time and, unfortunately, I still have some more remarks to make. Perhaps I can come back to the member in my summing-up speech.

On that basis, I now expect that Scottish Enterprise's allocated budget, taking into account all income and from which it must allow for all resource-spend items, will be £550 million. As I said in response to John Swinney, Scottish Enterprise will still face significant pressures due to the scale of projects in the pipeline. I have asked Scottish Enterprise to keep closely in touch with me on those matters. Clearly, MSPs will wish to continue to keep me informed of local issues.

For Scotland's economy, it is important that Scottish Enterprise gets back on track in terms of support. I signal my strong support for Scottish Enterprise in its challenge over the coming year. Scottish Enterprise is doing good work that is vital for Scotland's economic future through investment in the intermediary technology institutes and in skills and training. Scottish Enterprise is winning international recognition and success, with new projects such as those involving Wyeth, Invitrogen and Morgan Stanley.

Scottish Enterprise must support the local initiatives and projects of its local enterprise companies and their boards. I pay tribute again to the hard work of the Scottish Enterprise board and the local enterprise company board members. That is the mix that is supported by ministers and which the Executive's amendment backs.

I move amendment S2M-4367.2, to leave out from "views" to end and insert:

"recognises the important role of Scottish Enterprise in supporting the growth of the Scottish economy; endorses the strategic direction set by ministers for Scottish Enterprise in terms of business growth, regeneration and local development initiatives, training, skills and maximising international opportunities; welcomes the steps taken by the Scottish Executive to secure effective financial management by Scottish Enterprise in the future, in particular the commissioning of the robust report by KPMG and the commitment to the implementation of its recommendations; welcomes the additional non-cash resources to be made available to Scottish Enterprise, and confirms the important role that Scottish Enterprise will play in contributing to the growth of the Scottish economy."

11:06

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The motion in Jim Mather's name highlights mounting concern about the shortfall in Scottish Enterprise's budget. I am sure that, like me, all

members have been contacted by local groups and businesses in their constituencies that have expressed concern at projects being put on hold due to Scottish Enterprise's uncertain budgetary position. I know that a great deal of distress has been caused, particularly amongst those who had anticipated funding in the current year for projects that have now been put in doubt.

The fact is that the handling of Scottish Enterprise's finances has been a credit neither to that organisation nor to the minister and his department. Two key concerns exist about how Scottish Enterprise responded to the impending overspend. First, as the KPMG report makes clear, Scottish Enterprise

"were slow to act when it became clear that the new budget and resource allocation system had stimulated expenditure well ahead of budgeted income. In November 2005 SE became aware of a significant overspend but action taken at that time was not sufficiently robust. This was not helped by poor and slow financial reporting and unclear budget accountability."

Clearly, a serious error was made. When I challenged Jack Perry and his colleagues on that point at the Enterprise and Culture Committee meeting on 25 April, Jack Perry accepted that a mistake had been made. We should be grateful to him for at least admitting that.

The second problem is that, apparently, Scottish Enterprise was told by the Executive as from May 2005 that there was no scope for additional funding in the current year but, notwithstanding, Scottish Enterprise still believed that additional resources might be made available. When I asked Jack Perry whether he had believed that the door was still open, he said:

"We felt that it was still ajar."—[*Official Report, Enterprise and Culture Committee*, 25 April 2006; c 2946.]

However, the minister told the committee:

"I certainly never suggested that the door was open for additional spend."—[*Official Report, Enterprise and Culture Committee*, 2 May 2006; c 3009.]

At best, a serious breakdown in communication took place between the minister's department and Scotland's largest public agency.

The overspend issue has been poorly handled by Scottish Enterprise, but I do not believe that it should be a resignation matter for the organisation's senior officials. In that respect, I disagree with Alex Neil's stance. For me, the more interesting question concerns the position of the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning in all this. Why did he allow the situation to develop within a department that comes within his brief? By his own admission, the minister was made aware of the seriousness of the emerging problems at Scottish Enterprise by "press reports". Thereafter, a meeting was requested between the

Executive and Scottish Enterprise officials so that the situation could be fully understood. Only subsequently was the minister advised of a likely overspend. It is simply extraordinary that the minister had to rely on information from the press to tell him what was happening in a public agency under his own brief. Perhaps we should not be too surprised, because the minister's stock is not high in the business community. Peter Hughes, chief executive of Scottish Engineering, was quoted in *The Scotsman* on 28 April as saying:

"The SE board has lacked political support all along ... My impression is that they are an unhappy bunch because the minister has lacked the balls to support them. As they were appointed by politicians, I firmly believe that politicians should get behind them. The fence-sitting and failure to support has been appalling."

That may not be parliamentary language, but nothing can disguise the seriousness of that attack on the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning by a senior business figure. I cannot recall any previous minister with responsibility for enterprise being attacked in such a way by a business leader. What a mess the minister has allowed his department to get into. Calling him a hands-off minister is putting it mildly. It is impossible to imagine Wendy Alexander getting into such a situation.

What is to be done? Scottish Enterprise must sort out its finances. We need more clarity from the minister as to where that £50 million is coming from. What budget will be cut? Will it be the green jobs strategy, the skills and training budget or transport? The minister needs to get a grip on his department and tell us what programmes are being cut.

I move amendment S2M-4367.1, to leave out from "calls" to end and insert:

"believes that the time has come for Scottish Enterprise to be restructured, refocused and slimmed down, with the savings made being invested in transport infrastructure improvements and reductions in the business rate which would deliver real benefits to all businesses across Scotland."

11:11

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): Let me start with some stats. Employment in Scotland: up. Gross domestic product in Scotland: up. Growth in the private sector: up. That is all due to the strategic direction given by Scottish ministers to Scottish Enterprise national under "A Smart, Successful Scotland", and to the stable United Kingdom economic climate generated by my Westminster colleague, Gordon Brown.

I am pleased to support the amendment in Nicol Stephen's name. It confirms that, although we rightly recognise the concern about the recent budget issues at Scottish Enterprise national, this

Parliament and the Labour-led Executive are about more than just micromanagement, which is what the SNP motion and the Tory amendment call for. It is a question of setting a vision for the nation, and I suppose that we should not be surprised by such motions from two parties whose only economic policy was to halve or cut completely the budget of Scotland's economic development agency.

Murdo Fraser: How can Christine May, having read our amendment, consider that we are calling for micromanagement?

Christine May: It is not just the Tories' amendment, but also the tone of what they say, how they say it and the history of what they have said. However, I want to move away from personalities and concentrate on strategy.

As a former board member of Scottish Enterprise, having served in a non-voting capacity on what was then known as Fife Enterprise, and as a former council leader, I know about the difficulties of balancing priorities within limited budgets. I entirely support the contention that Scottish Enterprise should be administered efficiently and I share the concerns that have been expressed throughout Scotland about recent events. However, the important question for us is what the right economic policy is for Scotland. For me, it is about setting strategic priorities in the energy and biotechnology industries, about maximising international opportunities and about the development of human capital, which must be at the heart of our approach. If Scotland's people are to be able to take advantage of the economic opportunities that are now flowing from that successful strategy, human capital, skills development and lifelong learning in our local areas will be as important as the riskier support for developing and emerging sectors.

Jim Mather: How can that be a successful strategy? In the 50 years from 1970 to 2020, Ireland will double its population while our population flatlines.

Christine May: I regret that I do not have time to deal with the population issue, although I have statistics on that.

I want to concentrate, in the final minute of my speech, on taking risks, because that is what the private sector does well. Those who argue that politicians should or could second-guess the private sector on those judgments of risk are living in cloud-cuckoo-land. My judgment of risks and priorities has frequently been the subject of comment and I can tell members that, if we were to move, as has been suggested, to a situation in which ministers took micromanagement responsibility for those decisions, the comments that we have seen hitherto would be as nothing

compared with the huge media storm that would be unleashed.

That does not mean that I do not share people's concerns, and I remind the minister that my concerns have not gone away, either as a result of his statement or because of Scottish Enterprise's agreement to implement the recommendations of the KPMG report. I am from a constituency on the periphery of two metropolitan regions. I want to see the metropolitan region strategy develop to recognise the peripheries. I want the operating plan from Scottish Enterprise to strike that balance between skills and training, local discretionary spend and the impact of any reductions in spend on work in progress. I hope to hear from the minister how he will ensure that the operating plan can do that, and how he will manage the implementation of that plan in policy terms.

11:15

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Scottish Enterprise is clearly in financial trouble, and it seems from his amendment that the minister wants to run away from the situation. His motion is the usual self-congratulatory set of words that do not accept any kind of responsibility, but that is typical of the Executive and of the role that the Liberal Democrats play in the Executive. The appointees the minister has put in place to run Scottish Enterprise are under fire, and quite rightly, from the convener of the Parliament's Enterprise and Culture Committee, but the minister himself must accept some responsibility for the situation. The fact that his appointees did not know how bad the situation was is a measure of the incompetence in the organisation and in the ministerial approach to dealing with the matter.

I would like to refer, as the minister invited us all to do, to some local matters that illustrate the impact that the problems will have. Scottish Enterprise Grampian has told me that, in the past financial year, it spent around £4 million on four programmes relating to the national delivery of training—modern apprenticeships, modern apprenticeships for the over-25s, skillseekers and the get ready for work programme. I understand that there has been a national direction that there will be no money for the over-25 modern apprenticeships, and that that direction is being applied. That is extremely short-sighted in circumstances where we are trying to diversify our economy and accept that people will have not just one, but several careers. The MA 25 programme gave people the opportunity to retrain.

In the area that I represent, we have an oil and gas industry that is crying out for people. In the past day or two the United Kingdom Offshore Operators Association's report has said that there will be thousands more jobs and we need to

retrain people to go into those jobs. There have been big cuts in training programmes across the board. There is to be a 40 per cent cut in the skillseekers programme in my area and there has been a major cut in the get ready for work programme.

Nicol Stephen: Will Brian Adam give way?

Brian Adam: I am in the final minute of my speech. I am quite happy to provide the minister with details of the cuts that I mentioned, but I am looking for some guarantee that the announcement that he is making today will mean that there will be a restoration of funding to those programmes where there have been cuts, so that the major programmes that will deliver the skills that are required across the board will not suffer as a result of the incompetence of the people at the top of Scottish Enterprise or, indeed, of his own department.

11:18

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): It is an unfortunate but recognisable human trait that one of the best ways to learn is by making mistakes. Scottish Enterprise has made some serious errors of judgment, but the blame cannot be put entirely on its shoulders. It may represent the business world, but it is being asked to work within constraints in which no ordinary businesses would work. The indication from the Scottish Executive that a review will take place on moving from annual to triennial funding is welcome. Such recognition of the need for flexibility would address some of the problems that have arisen.

How Scottish Enterprise chooses to resolve its funding problems will, in my view, be the defining factor in establishing its future credibility. If it cuts the funding of vital services such as skillseekers and modern apprenticeships, it will lose considerable support from the companies that need those skills. There are concerns in business gateways that budgets may be cut and that some services that were previously offered will be delivered in other ways. There must be absolute clarity that those vital grassroots services—although they are often perceived as lower profile—will not suffer.

I want to move on—as, I am sure, does Scottish Enterprise. Few people are fully aware of the changes that we face to our economy. The impact of climate change must be seen also as an economic issue, not only an environmental one. Rising oil prices and declining raw materials worldwide will all contribute to a very different economy. Scottish Enterprise and the Executive both include sustainable development in their policy documents, perhaps without fully understanding its implications.

Work must start now to move towards a more locally-based economy. A good starting point is to recognise and support the start of social enterprises. They have a valuable role to play in providing supported employment opportunities and they encourage and foster entrepreneurship. Scottish Enterprise must support indigenous businesses of all sizes, but the support does not have to be monetary. Proactive acknowledgment of the contribution that a business makes and being available to offer advice is often sufficient.

Scottish Enterprise will need to work hard to stem the rising tide of criticism, but fundamentally it must recognise that Scotland is more than the central belt, it is more than the city regions and it is much more than the high-profile large employers.

11:21

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Some of the comments made by my colleague Christine May are important and pertinent.

The Scottish economy is going in the right direction. It is typical of the SNP to take away from some fair points in its amendment by seeking to make the issue a constitutional crisis and by excusing from responsibility those within Scottish Enterprise—who have failed to do what they were supposed to do—by saying that it is the tool and not the implementation that is to blame.

It is interesting that Jim Mather failed to pass judgment on either Jack Perry or John Ward, as his colleague Alex Neil has done.

Brian Adam: Will the member give way?

Karen Gillon: I have only three minutes, so I must make progress.

The situation has been a shambles. Scottish Enterprise said that it knew and understood the accounting rules under which it was working, so by implication it chose to ignore those rules in the hope that somebody, somewhere within the Scottish Executive, would find it the money. The truth is that that is what had happened in the previous two years. We were told by Jack Perry and Iain Carmichael that slack had been found in the previous two years and money had been vired from within the enterprise budget. Scottish Enterprise knew the rules, but it chose not to implement them.

The reality now is that not-for-profit training agencies in my constituency were told in January that from then onwards there would be a £300 per week cut in the amount of money that they would get to deliver training, which has seriously affected their ability to deliver. This week they have been told that they will be able to offer fewer places and that less money will be available per place. Those

cuts are impacting on the people at the coalface who are working to regenerate some of our most vulnerable communities. I asked the minister—I still await an answer—where the £50 million will come from and what is being cut to provide that money?

I am not saying that Scottish Enterprise should not get the money, provided that it gets to the front-line services that I am talking about, but what guarantees does the minister have that the rules that are in place now will be followed this year? We do not want to be in the same situation again next year with Scottish Enterprise saying that it is sorry but that it did not really understand the rules and it did not have enough money anyway, so it has again overspent. What guarantees has the minister been given? How does the minister's announcement today impact on local economic regeneration in constituencies such as mine? How does the approach that he has announced ensure that more money will go to the people who deliver essential skills and training in constituencies such as mine and that it will not be sucked up by the big, sexy projects of which the leadership of Scottish Enterprise is very proud, although they do not want to get their hands dirty delivering hard stuff on the ground?

11:24

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):

Today's debate has been hampered by time constraints, not only because of the fire alarm but because the SNP allowed us only half a session to discuss such a huge issue. Some cynical people might think that the SNP is more interested in its press release than in genuine debate. I will not join Jim Mather's cross-party group on fiscal autonomy; as Karen Gillon rightly said, the debate should not continually be reduced to constitutional matters.

Although there is undoubtedly genuine concern about the budget situation at Scottish Enterprise, some of the Opposition comments ring hollow; they come from the very people who went into the previous election demanding cuts in Scottish Enterprise's budget. Opposition members have described as indispensable key areas of the agency's work that they have rightly identified as crucial local projects. Those projects were, however, clearly dispensable to the Opposition parties at previous elections. Labour members regarded the projects as indispensable then and we regard them as indispensable now.

Murdo Fraser: Will the member take an intervention?

Richard Baker: I am sorry, but I do not have time to take an intervention.

We are now entering a period when we can see how great an impact the Executive's economic strategy is having. Of course we want economic growth in Scotland to be stronger, but already our rate of growth has caught up with the rest of the UK and there is significant new business investment in Scotland. The huge new investment by Wyeth is exciting and I am pleased that the University of Dundee and the University of Aberdeen will play vital roles in that project. A number of indicators show that our economic strategy is working.

Questions have been asked this morning about how Scottish Enterprise arrived at this situation. It is right that those questions are asked, but people in Scotland are not as interested in a fruitless hunt for a smoking gun as they are in knowing that Scottish Enterprise will continue to do its job and support key local projects in their area. I am sure that the minister is aware that reassurance must be provided. It is good that the business gateway is being protected, but along with other members I have received letters from individuals and organisations that are concerned about funding for vital skills programmes. I have received letters from companies in the oil and gas sector in Grampian that state that funding for their skillseekers and modern apprenticeship programmes

"is being severely restricted with immediate effect".

That follows similar contact about get ready for work programmes in the area. As Christine May and other members have said, it is crucial that urgent action is taken to ensure that the projects are protected and that they continue. They are a key priority for this Executive.

Members have also referred to the restructuring of Scottish Enterprise. Much of the new strategic approach is welcome. I, for one, also welcome the fact that there is still a role for local enterprise companies. However, although the Deputy First Minister took action on the local enterprise companies, I question why there was a need for Scottish Enterprise to draw the work on all the key strategic areas to its headquarters. The energy team being moved from Grampian to HQ is a prime example; that team is being moved away from the majority of companies that it services. In a world of information and communication technology, it strikes me as bizarre to physically centralise operations in that way.

The key issue is not only to agree a new budget for Scottish Enterprise but to ensure that, in the longer term, the new strategy evolves and works for Scotland's economy. The true story is that the Executive's overall economic strategy is working. Labour, at Westminster and at Holyrood, is delivering for Scotland's economy. We will

continue to ensure that Scotland's economic growth is even stronger in the years ahead.

11:28

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): It does not really matter whether Scotland's economic record is the responsibility of Scottish Enterprise, the Scottish Executive or even the Labour Government. I think that we all accept that Scotland is not performing to its potential. Economic growth in Scotland is not at the level at which it should be. Before Labour members get too excited about lauding their chancellor, let us not forget that this week the independent ITEM club, which uses the Treasury's own model of the economy—the independent Treasury economic model—has said that the tax burden, which is rising all the time, is rising towards the highest level on record.

Karen Gillon: Is the truth not that if people are in work they can pay their taxes? Under the Conservative Government more people in Scotland were out of work, languished on the dole and contributed nothing to the Scottish economy.

Derek Brownlee: The point is that everyone, whoever they work for, pays more tax under this Government. As was mentioned in the previous debate, some people who do not work still pay a significant amount of tax.

Wherever we think the responsibility lies, we need to consider what contribution—it is perhaps a limited contribution—Scottish Enterprise can make. We could adopt different models. We could go down the route advocated by Brian Wilson, which is to bring the organisation in-house. I presume that that would require the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning to take a more hands-on approach than he has to date. The arms-length model adopted for Scottish Enterprise, which is designed to bring in business expertise, seems to be fundamentally the right model if the agency is to be allowed to get on with the job. However, Scottish Enterprise seems to have the worst of both worlds as it has neither leadership and direction from the Executive nor the ability to get on with what it is asked to do. It would be interesting to know how much direction has come from the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department since the discovery of Scottish Enterprise's financial difficulties and how prescriptive the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning has been about what Scottish Enterprise can and cannot do.

We are all concerned about the fundamental budget issues. I hope that the minister will answer Karen Gillon's fundamental question about where the additional money is coming from. It must come from somewhere in the Executive's budget and it

should not be beyond the wit of man for the minister to stand up and tell the Parliament from where it will come and what impact that will have on projects that might otherwise have taken place. Indeed, the "Scottish Public Finance Manual" suggests in its basic points of financial management that staff in charge of budgets should have clear guidance on the size of the budget, what it can be used for and how it can be varied. Scottish Enterprise certainly has not had such guidance and it will be interesting to know what the minister thinks of that.

On the local impact that other members have talked about, it is the uncertainty as much as anything that is causing problems. We are part way through the financial year, but only now are local enterprise companies about to get assurance on the level of their budgets and on what they can do. A number of other members and I received a letter from Scottish Enterprise Dumfries and Galloway from which I will quote because it is illustrative. The letter states:

"We will not know our final 2006/7 budget until the Scottish Executive's commissioned external advisers at KPMG have confirmed Scottish Enterprise's projected resource figures for 2005/6 and the Scottish Executive has discussed the findings. This is expected to take until the end of May 2006."

The letter continues:

"Until that time, I am unable to confirm what our annual operating budget will be for Dumfries and Galloway and what the restructuring implications will be on our services and planned projects."

That will be the case not only for Dumfries and Galloway, but for every local enterprise company up and down Scotland and, of course, for Scottish Enterprise itself. It is clarity on budgets and on what can be done with them that is so vital and we have now wasted two months of the financial year. It is time that the Executive and the minister got a grip on Scottish Enterprise.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Nicol Stephen. Minister, you have about two and a half minutes.

11:31

Nicol Stephen: We must remember that the SNP wants to cut Scottish Enterprise—we should keep that firmly in our minds. In addition, Alex Neil wants to sack the chairman and the chief executive. Would doing that strengthen Scotland's economy? Is that a mature contribution to the debate?

Alex Neil: Will the minister give way?

Nicol Stephen: I will, but I have very little time.

Alex Neil: Okay, I have two short, sharp questions. First, can the minister answer Karen

Gillon's question about where the £50 million will come from? Secondly, after Scottish Enterprise's legal commitments are met, how much of the £550 million will be left to spend?

Nicol Stephen: On the £550 million, I have set the overall budget for Scottish Enterprise and it is now for its board to meet tomorrow and agree its operating plan. Further information on that will be given next week.

Murdo Fraser talked about the need to get behind Scottish Enterprise and its board. Well, that is exactly what I have been doing, but I do not think that that is what he has been doing. Contrast that with Conservative plans to axe Scottish Enterprise spending, which would mean axing projects and plans that would be good for the Scottish economy and axing Scotland's future economic success.

Christine May made fair points about the new approach that is being taken in Scottish Enterprise. There are new industrial sector groups and I think that it is important for them to get established and for us to get behind that. There is new metro-region planning, which is also important; so, too, is the involvement of local business people in local enterprise companies, involving board members in real decision making about local budgets.

On Karen Gillon's point, I will ensure that, through today's announcement and the decisions that the Scottish Enterprise board will make tomorrow, £50 million of additional funding that would otherwise not have been available for Scottish Enterprise this year will be allocated to the sort of projects, plans and priorities that the Parliament wishes to see.

I am certain that there will still be difficult issues ahead, but I am particularly concerned to ensure that local discretion in the local enterprise companies will remain and that partnership projects will still be an important part of Scottish Enterprise's strategy and budget. It was vital today to end the uncertainty and start the process of getting Scottish Enterprise back on track with strong ministerial support. All the Parliament should work together on Scotland's future economic success. However, wider than that, politicians, public agencies and the private sector should all be in partnership—that is the best way to secure Scotland's economic success in the future.

11:34

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I emphasise that the minister has not answered two basic questions. The first, fair question was from Karen Gillon and it has now been asked of the minister three times and three times he has

dodged it; either he does not want to answer it or he does not know the answer. If he increases the spend of Scottish Enterprise this year by £50 million, unless there is an overall increase in public expenditure of £50 million—there is not—that £50 million has to come from existing allocations.

Yesterday, we read in *The Herald*, which is better informed than the Parliament, that the money was coming from the green jobs strategy, non-Scottish Enterprise spend on skills and training and the transport budget. Can the minister tell us, therefore—I will take an intervention if he has the answer—where are the £50 million-worth of cuts in existing allocations?

Nicol Stephen: I have made it clear that there are two sources for the additional funds: reprofiling the spend in the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department and using the limited flexibility in our budgets. More information on that will be issued in due course, but I have given a clear explanation of the difficult decisions that have had to be taken to find the £50 million of cover. Of that sum, £45 million is of course non-cash cover. However, the £50 million total of additional resource will now be available to Scottish Enterprise.

Alex Neil: It does not matter whether it is cash or non-cash. If the total level of spend is £50 million, it must come from somewhere. The minister says that that spend is being reprofiled, but the question is: reprofiled from which original profile? Can he give us a photograph? Can he give us a profile? Does he know the answer to the question?

Surely, before he allocated that £50 million and before he reprofiled it, he would have known where the money was coming from. If it is coming from elsewhere in his department, does that mean a reduction in money for colleges, universities, student awards or non-Scottish Enterprise skills and training spend? Is the money coming from the transport budget? If some or all of it is coming from that budget, which part of the budget is it coming from? It is absurd that the minister has come here this morning and been unable to answer such a fundamental and, if I may say so, simple reprofiling question.

He has also failed to answer the second question, though he told us at last week's meeting of the Enterprise and Culture Committee that he would have the answer this week. To be fair, the week is not yet over, so he may have the answer later on today or tomorrow—no doubt we will read it in *The Herald* tomorrow. The second question is: after Scottish Enterprise's legal commitments have been met, how much of the new budget of £550 million is left?

Christine May: Will the member give way?

Alex Neil: I will do so in a minute. I know that Christine May likes to get in on the act.

How much of the £550 million is left? Perhaps Christine May knows the answer—let us find out.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): You have a minute and a quarter, Mr Neil.

Christine May: While I agree that these are important questions, perhaps Alex Neil can say whether he and his SNP colleagues welcome the money being made available to Scottish Enterprise.

The Presiding Officer: You have a minute, Mr Neil.

Alex Neil: If there had not been this shambles in the first place, we would not need to be allocating the money. We should consider the money that has been wasted. For example, over the past six years, Scottish Enterprise has allocated £194,000 to the lobbying organisation CBI Scotland—of which John Ward and Jack Perry are former chairmen—while many a small company was told that there was no money left for them.

The Presiding Officer is trying to reprofile my timescale, so I will be brief. Two issues are at stake: first, the shambles at Scottish Enterprise; and secondly, the shambolic way in which the minister has failed to deal with the crisis.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Pay Dispute (University of Aberdeen)

1. Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to assist students of the University of Aberdeen to graduate with the awards to which they are entitled. (S2O-9764)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Nicol Stephen): Clearly, ministers are very concerned about the potential effects of the current pay dispute on students in all our universities. I know that the University of Aberdeen has in place contingency plans to minimise the effects of the dispute on student examinations and has published advice and guidance for students. However, ministers are not in a position to intervene in the internal management of any university. The resolution of the current dispute is clearly a matter between the institutions and their staff.

Mr Davidson: I, too, have seen the documentation that the university is using to inform its students of the difficulties that they may face. Is there not a role for the Executive in the dispute? Could it not act as an arbiter? It would not take sides but would try to facilitate the coming together of two groups of people in a dispute in which the innocent victims—indeed, hostages—are the students?

Nicol Stephen: It is important to emphasise that the negotiations that have been taking place on the issue are at the United Kingdom level. Representatives of the universities and unions in Scotland are involved.

I encourage a negotiated settlement on the issue. If I thought it appropriate for ministers to become involved in these matters, I would consider becoming involved very carefully. However, it is clear to me that the best way to get a resolution on the issue is to encourage the representatives of the employers and the employees—the universities and the trade unions—to get together and reach a settlement as soon as possible. That is what will minimise the impact on students. I am concerned about the potential impact on student exams and on the future opportunities for students if the issue is not resolved quickly.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

2. John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what the annual emissions of carbon dioxide are from electricity generating stations in Scotland. (S2O-9790)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): Sectoral carbon dioxide emissions are reported in "Greenhouse Gas Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland 1990-2003", a copy of which has been placed in the Scottish Parliament information centre. Emissions from electricity production are recorded in the public electricity and heat production category which, in 2003, accounted for 18,031 gigagrams—equivalent to around 18 million tonnes—of carbon dioxide in Scotland.

John Home Robertson: That is a lot of carbon dioxide from a little country. I find it disappointing that the Liberal Cabinet minister is not answering questions for which he is responsible.

Will the minister acknowledge that the base-load stations at Torness and Hunterston are not emitting CO₂ and that we will have to replace the fossil fuel stations that are causing the problem? Forty per cent from renewables is great, but where will the remaining 60 per cent come from to allow us to avoid power cuts in future? Now that the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management has resolved the nuclear waste issue and recommended safe geological storage, can we get on with the job of planning new nuclear power stations to stop the dangerous emissions of CO₂, in accordance with Labour Party policy.

Rhona Brankin: I am not going to get into an argument about which minister answers questions.

Carbon dioxide emissions from nuclear power generation are negligible, but we must not lose sight of the fact that emissions are associated with the construction of power stations and with the mining and processing of the fuel. Decommissioning and dealing with nuclear waste also lead to emissions. It is important to take a balanced view of the contribution that nuclear makes to meeting our climate change commitments in a sustainable way, including consideration of the wider environmental impacts.

For our part, as John Home Robertson well knows, the partnership agreement clearly states that we will not support further development of nuclear power stations while waste management issues remain unresolved. Of course, the UK energy review is looking at the future options—including nuclear and other technologies—that will allow the UK to meet its energy needs in a way that is affordable to consumers and meets its emissions target.

John Home Robertson mentioned CORWM. Its remit states clearly that it considers the management options for the way in which we deal with the waste; its remit is not to solve the waste management problem per se.

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): Does the minister agree that CO₂ emissions at the point of generation are not the only emissions that should be taken into account when assessing nuclear electricity generation? Does she accept that whole-life-cycle emissions make nuclear power about as climate friendly as efficient gas-fired electricity generation? Will the minister give the chamber an assurance that full-life-cycle CO₂ emissions will be taken into account in any decisions on nuclear power generation?

Rhona Brankin: I thought that I had made that clear in my earlier answer. I reiterate the importance of taking a balanced view of the contribution that nuclear makes to meeting our climate change commitments in a sustainable way, including consideration of the wider environmental impacts.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Given that renewables are the major alternative to conventional generation, is the progress towards forms of renewable energy other than onshore wind not far too slow?

Rhona Brankin: As the member knows, we are committed to developing a range of renewable energy technologies. We are reviewing the situation. It is important to get the balance right and to ensure that the maximum number of opportunities is taken up in Scotland.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): The minister referred to lifetime carbon emissions, as did Shiona Baird in her question. Does the minister acknowledge that wind-generated energy has a greater lifetime CO₂ emissions factor than nuclear generation has? That is the case particularly when we look at the installed capacity and output of wind generation.

Rhona Brankin: I am sorry to disappoint Mr Gallie, but I will not get into a broader debate on the issue. It is important for us to have a range of renewable energy sources in Scotland, of which wind is an important one.

Tay and Forth Bridge Tolls

3. Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it can give a further update on when the examination of the economic, social and environmental impact and cost of retaining or removing tolls from the Tay and Forth bridges is likely to be concluded. (S2O-9759)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): We are preparing detailed proposals for the examination and we intend to inform Parliament about the matter next week.

Tricia Marwick: It is certainly a comfort to know that, after seven weeks, the minister can tell MSPs more about when the review is taking place than that it is taking place “as soon as possible”. Can he now tell the chamber when he expects the review to conclude and when ministers will take a decision? Will he also announce today that, until the review is concluded, work on relocating tollbooths will be halted?

Tavish Scott: I assume that, in her final question, Tricia Marwick was referring to the Forth road bridge. I cannot give her that assurance, nor will I. We have to ask some fundamental questions about congestion on and around the Forth bridge and I hope that Tricia Marwick and her colleagues will do so too. One of the questions that we need to ask is how it is good for the Scottish economy if the tolls are removed and congestion increases. I am sure that that is one of the issues on which she and many others will want to comment.

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): In light of the comments that were made by the Secretary of State for Transport about road pricing, does the minister favour road pricing as opposed to tolls for any of the bridges in Scotland?

Tavish Scott: Yes, I do. I was very encouraged by the speech that the new Secretary of State for Transport made in London this week. It made an important contribution to this central debate on how we value and charge for space across the trunk road network in the UK. I believe that the matter should be taken forward on a UK-wide basis. However, I must add two important caveats. First, there must be clear and demonstrable improvements in public transport services and people must be able to use those services. Secondly, if we take forward such a policy, the user of the road—whether that is the freight industry or Mr Davidson or me using our motor cars—must see a consequential reduction in other forms of taxation. Those are issues that the Department for Transport is considering at the moment.

Out-of-hours Health Services (Highland Perthshire)

4. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has any concerns in respect of the provision of out-of-hours health care services in the highland Perthshire area. (S2O-9765)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Andy Kerr): My concern will always be that

patients have ready access to the services that they need. The new contract for general practitioners enables them to withdraw from out-of-hours services. Where they do so, responsibility transfers to national health service boards. In remote and rural areas, NHS boards have adopted a range of models to ensure out-of-hours cover is provided.

Mr Swinney: I appreciate the minister's interest in the provision of care in remote and rural areas. Does he share my further concern that, in a recent GP call-out for a suspected meningitis case, ambulance cover took more than 40 minutes to arrive, which highlights the weakness of the current arrangements and the potential danger to patient safety? Does he agree that it is important that NHS Tayside should reconsider the arrangements that it has put in place to ensure that adequate out-of-hours health care cover is in place in the Rannoch and Tummel area?

Mr Kerr: Of course, I am concerned that patients should receive the best possible service from our national health service. A meeting will take place in Kinloch Rannoch on 15 May, at which NHS Tayside, NHS 24 and the Scottish Ambulance Service will discuss the service with the community. The out-of-hours service was opted out of on 1 May, but GP cover and a rapid response unit are available in Aberfeldy. I understand that Aberfeldy is 30 to 40 minutes' travel away. The situation is new and arose on 1 May, but plans have been put in place and are working. I am sure that the board will be happy to hear from the community about the efficacy and safety of those services. I look forward to hearing again from John Swinney on the issue.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): As the minister knows, I have similar problems in the rural part of my constituency around Killin, which adjoins John Swinney's area. The particular problem is how the accident and emergency ambulance service, which has been working for some time, is dealing—or not dealing—with some emergencies. Will the minister please consider improvements or alternatives to the present system, so that constituents' faith in out-of-hours health provision can be restored?

Mr Kerr: We have restored massively the confidence in our ambulance service, which now has more trained paramedics and receives more investment than ever before. Although NHS 24 still has challenges that patients quite correctly put before it, the turnaround times in the service have nonetheless also been transformed. Our overall investment in the health service is delivering a huge return for patients. The member raises specific matters about a local community, which is my concern, too. She has written to and met me and we are to meet again on the issues that she

raises. I am always happy to pass on challenges to boards and to ensure that they are met robustly. Let me reassure patients about the quality of services. Our investments are delivering a first-class health service in Scotland.

Osteoporosis

5. Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last had discussions with the European Union about osteoporosis. (S2O-9786)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Lewis Macdonald): We have not had such discussions, as European Union institutions have no remit for the planning of health care for specific chronic conditions.

Helen Eadie: Does the minister share my concern that the annual EU-wide cost that arises from fractures that result from osteoporosis is estimated to be more than €30 billion and that the figure is expected to double in the next 10 years? As many of us are aware, osteoporosis is known as the silent killer, as the disease is often far advanced before people know that they have it. What steps have the minister's officials taken to create a co-ordinated data collection system to monitor osteoporotic fractures? Is the Executive co-operating with the new World Health Organisation approach, which is believed to represent a more accurate way of identifying those who are at risk of osteoporotic fractures?

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): This is a speech.

Helen Eadie: Are the minister's officials aware of, or were they party to, the most recent meeting of the International Osteoporosis Foundation consultation panel, which was held in Bavaria, at which one of the key speakers, Professor Johnell, said that in Europe osteoporotic fractures cause more lost years of healthy life than do many other major diseases, including breast cancer and colorectal cancer?

Lewis Macdonald: Helen Eadie raises important issues, so I am happy to reply to her supplementary points. We share the priorities in the World Health Organisation approach and recognise the importance of a risk assessment as the best way in which to act. The Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guideline on osteoporosis acknowledges that the development of a validated tool for risk assessment would be a useful addition to the assessment of the condition. We are keen to learn from the continuing work of the WHO on the matter.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I have given the minister notice of my question. As he knows, one fracture leads to another. The SIGN guidelines state that patients

who have already suffered a fragility fracture should be a priority target. However, a Scotland-wide audit that was published in 2005 showed that, although in the Western infirmary in Glasgow, nearly everybody in that category received treatment, only one fifth—21 per cent—of such people in Aberdeen, Inverness, Livingston and East Kilbride received it. Does the minister agree that that is unacceptable and that the disparity in standards of treatment throughout Scotland desperately needs to be reduced?

Lewis Macdonald: I agree that those matters are important. I am glad that Mr Ewing's question was heard courteously by members throughout the chamber—that is a good model for dealing with such serious issues.

We accept that the audit that NHS Quality Improvement Scotland carried out last year showed clearly the benefits of the type of dual energy X-ray absorptiometry scanning that is carried out in Glasgow. We look to health boards throughout Scotland to adopt a similar approach to address the issues that Mr Ewing raises. A further audit of fractures, which will involve several hospitals throughout Scotland, started last month.

Scottish Water (Highlands and Islands)

6. Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Scottish Water in respect of the connection of properties in the Highlands and Islands. (S2O-9743)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): The Executive has on-going discussions with Scottish Water on a variety of topics that relate to the delivery of its investment programmes.

Mr McGrigor: Is the Executive putting pressure on Scottish Water to take on more connections, so as not to hold up urgent projects in the Highlands and Islands? Will the Executive and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency insist that Scottish Water take on connections from private properties when installing new sewage works in areas such as Connel and Tainuill in Argyll, where the continued discharge of raw sewage into the sea loch Loch Etive is a threat to the Food Standards Agency's classification of the water quality? A downgrading of that classification would prevent the harvesting of mussels in a designated shellfish-growing area that at present produces 40 per cent of all the mussels that are grown off mainland Scotland.

Rhona Brankin: Scottish Water is required to meet the strategic capacity requirements of all estimated new development. On the Loch Etive issue, the member will be aware that Scottish Water's duty to connect properties to the public

network is limited by a caveat on reasonable costs. Scottish Water's duties extend only to provision that can be done at reasonable cost. To fulfil its duties, Scottish Water's current policy is to make a reasonable cost contribution or to undertake work up to a predetermined figure. It is our understanding that Scottish Water has connected all properties that fall within that reasonable-cost guideline. I am happy to discuss the issue further with the member, if he requires that.

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): What plans does the Executive have to ensure the robustness of Scottish Water's systems in the Highlands and Islands, given last week's water supply failure in Acharacle and Kilchrenan, which led local schools to send children home and forced local businesses to close?

Rhona Brankin: It is up to Scottish Water to work closely with Highland Council. There have been several meetings with the council and I expect Scottish Water to work to resolve the issues. Again, I am happy to provide an update if the member requires one.

National Entitlement Card

7. Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what consideration it has given to the extension of the national entitlement card to local and national concessionary rail travel and what discussions it has had with current providers of concessionary rail travel schemes regarding the maintenance of existing provision. (S2O-9810)

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): Where existing local concessionary schemes offer additional transport modes such as rail, those remain the responsibility of the local authority. The Executive has agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities a fair split of resources, to ensure that those local authorities continue to be resourced for concessionary travel on modes other than bus. There are currently no plans to introduce national concessionary rail travel.

Cathy Peattie: In Falkirk East, over-60s and disabled people no longer have access to concessionary rail travel because of a council cut. I urge the minister to think again about a national scheme.

Tavish Scott: As I said, the national scheme that we have introduced relates to bus and is seen as a tremendous improvement throughout Scotland. I appreciate that specific issues may arise for the council in Cathy Peattie's constituency, but I am sure that she is pursuing those with considerable vigour in that part of the world.

Scottish Water (National Sludge Strategy)

8. Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it agrees with the conclusions and recommendations of Scottish Water's draft national sludge strategy. (S2O-9741)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Rhona Brankin): The draft strategy is Scottish Water's. Scottish Water has undertaken a public consultation on the strategic environmental assessment of its draft sludge strategy but has not yet published its conclusions or recommendations following that consultation.

Mr Ingram: As the minister will be aware, £63 million of investment will be required to bring sewage treatment plants and other infrastructure up to an appropriate level to implement the draft strategy, which, as she said, is out to consultation. Does the Scottish Executive intend to contribute to the cost or to otherwise ensure that the cost will not be passed in its entirety to already hard-pressed charge payers?

Rhona Brankin: Once the Scottish Executive is in receipt of Scottish Water's recommendations, we will consider what action is required.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): It is good to be back in the chamber.

To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Scottish Executive's Cabinet. (S2F-2280)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The next Cabinet meeting will discuss among other matters a report on the current position in Fife for the families affected or potentially affected by E coli. The matter is serious and I am sure that every member will want to wish the children well, express concern for the families and ensure that we support the local agencies that have to get to the bottom of the situation as quickly as possible.

Nicola Sturgeon: All our thoughts are with the children and their families in Fife.

I am sure that we all agree that teachers deserved a substantial pay rise when the McCrone agreement was struck back in 2001. Does the First Minister agree that the ultimate objective of any increase in education spending should be to improve the quality of education for children? If so, can he explain why, according to the report that Audit Scotland published this morning, as Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs at the time, he failed to include clear outcome measures defining what the agreement was intended to achieve, which, in Audit Scotland's opinion, made it impossible to assess the overall value for money of the £2 billion spent?

The First Minister: I start by congratulating Ms Sturgeon. There have been 63 First Minister's question times since I became First Minister in November 2001. On none of those 63 occasions has Ms Sturgeon asked me a question about schools and schoolchildren. I am delighted that she has changed that habit and has suddenly discovered her interest in the subject.

I could list many changes and improvements that have been made to Scottish education, in particular in the past five years. Given that Ms Sturgeon has raised the matter, let us go back to the debates on the McCrone agreement that took place at the time. At no time in 2001, 2002 or 2003 did the Scottish National Party say that we were spending too much money on Scottish teachers, as Ms Hyslop implied yesterday. At no time did SNP members say that there needed to be more monitoring and more bureaucracy; in fact, they said exactly the opposite. After a statement on the agreement, Mike Russell said:

"Would it not be better to reduce bureaucracy ... on schools and young people of assessment, targeting and the publication of league tables?"—[*Official Report*, 14 February 2001; Vol 10, c 1201.]

The SNP was consistent in its opposition even to the measures that were contained in the agreement and our policies on measuring outputs and on improvements in Scottish education.

Back then, the agreement was about Scotland's children—as it is today. It does not take an accountant to work out that children will benefit from lower pupil teacher ratios and from teachers spending more time in the classroom teaching them. It does not take a genius to work out that those experiences in schools will be enhanced if teachers are happy and well rewarded. I am absolutely determined now—as I was back then—that we will not go back to the days when industrial relations in Scotland's classrooms were a shambles, when Government was not directly involved and when schoolchildren's education was being affected. As a teacher in the 1980s, I knew the cost of that then, and I know today the value of the improvements that we have brought in, with which we will continue.

Nicola Sturgeon: There is no doubt that the McCrone agreement has resulted—quite rightly—in better-paid teachers, so it is hardly surprising that it has delivered better industrial relations. According not to me but to the Audit Scotland report that was published this morning, clear evidence that it has also resulted in better-educated children is lacking. I draw the First Minister's attention to the key conclusions of the Audit Scotland report. It states that the agreement contains no clear outcome measures relating to educational attainment and that it is not possible to form any judgment on its overall impact or the value for money achieved. I remind the First Minister that he was the education minister who struck the deal. Does he accept that, when he was agreeing to spend £2 billion of taxpayers' money, he should have paid much more attention to what taxpayers and their children would get in return?

The First Minister: As I said, it did not take a genius to work out that removing the administrative burden on teachers would improve what happened in the classroom and that increasing the number of teachers and improving their promotion structures, professionalism and skills would improve the teaching of children and their results. It did not take a genius to work out that the industrial relations improvements in the classroom and in schools would result in improvements in Scottish education.

The improvements have been dramatic. The percentage of primary school pupils achieving expected attainment levels has increased by 9 percentage points in the years since devolution.

Attainment among younger pupils in that age group is particularly encouraging. Almost 90 per cent of pupils in primary 3 now achieve the levels that we expect of them in that year. In the years since devolution, the percentage of secondary 2 pupils achieving expected levels has increased from 41 per cent to 59 per cent. Scotland is recognised not by Audit Scotland but by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education—the experts on education who independently assess our education system—as being in the top three performing countries in the world in every important category.

We know the improvements that we have made. Ms Sturgeon and the SNP may have moved back to the days when another party was in Government and may know the cost of everything and the value of nothing, but we understand the value of good education and are determined to continue with the improvements to which I have referred and to support Scotland's teachers who are in the front line of bringing them about.

Nicola Sturgeon: In all his ranting and raving, the First Minister has failed to answer one question: why does Audit Scotland say that there is no evidence of better education or value for money? Is it not the case that the report is not a one-off, but just further evidence of the sloppiness at the heart of the Government? Today we hear that £2 billion was spent on education with no evidence of value for money. Two months ago, Audit Scotland reported a fourfold overspend on the consultants contract, with no evidence of the benefits to patients. Is it not the case that the First Minister and the Government are very good at making promises and spending money, but very, very bad at making real improvements in the delivery of public services?

The First Minister: I accept Ms Sturgeon's definition of the Government as very good. I will not quote back to her the statistics that I have just outlined, because there are so many more that I can use. The number of youngsters in Scotland who are achieving the desired level at standard grade is going up. The number of youngsters who are achieving higher level grades in Scotland is going up. The number of teachers in our schools is going up. Class sizes in our schools are coming down. The number of new schools and the number of refurbished schools in Scotland are both going up. As a result of the McCrone agreement, the amount of bureaucracy in which teachers are involved is coming down, allowing them to teach in the classroom as they wanted to do when they chose teaching as a career.

The SNP should read the report, not the newspapers. The report says:

"Good early progress has been made in implementing the Agreement".

It also states that

"The early evidence suggests that good progress is being made,"

and that

"All but one of the milestones set for completion by August 2004 were met".

It was a good agreement that has delivered for Scottish education.

The SNP should accept that, as it did at the time. A parliamentary motion in the name of Brian Adam began:

"That the Parliament notes with concern the shortage of social workers throughout Scotland and considers that the Scottish Executive should initiate a McCrone-type review".

In its manifesto for the 2003 elections, the SNP said:

"An SNP administration will honour the McCrone agreement on teachers' pay and conditions in full"

because that is the way to guarantee

"the period of stability and co-operation that the agreement was meant to achieve."

The SNP should be consistent. It should support Scottish teachers and Scottish education and—most important of all—it should support Scottish schoolchildren and give them the best chance in life.

Nicola Sturgeon: I confirm to the First Minister that the SNP would honour the McCrone agreement. However, unlike his Government, we would ensure that it was properly implemented.

We have heard a lot in the past couple of weeks about how the First Minister wants to distance himself from Tony Blair. A source close to the First Minister told *The Sun*:

"Jack is going to spend the next year making himself different".

On today's evidence, I would have thought that making himself competent would be a better ambition.

A poll last month showed that just 28 per cent of Scots backed Jack McConnell as First Minister. Will he accept that it is his Government, and not only Tony Blair's, that people are sick fed up with? Although many of his back benchers want to see the back of Tony Blair, more and more people in Scotland want to see the back of Jack McConnell and his Government.

The First Minister: I hope that my partners in the Liberal Democrats will allow me to say one thing about the Prime Minister. He has won almost as many general elections as Ms Sturgeon has managed to lose constituency elections. He is the most successful leader of my party ever, and her party has been rejected consistently by the voters

since 1929. In fact, in just over 20 years' time, the SNP will be celebrating a century of uninterrupted defeat.

What happens in this chamber is important for next year's elections because of the record of this devolved Government and this partnership in Scotland. Waiting times are down and survival rates for cancer, heart disease and stroke are up; class sizes in our schools are down and school results are up; crimes in Scotland are coming down and drug seizures and the use of antisocial behaviour orders are up; unemployment is down and the number of jobs and economic growth are up; the number of graduates leaving the country is down and our population is going up; and the number of children in poverty is down and the number of qualified people helping Scotland to compete in the 21st century is going up.

The things that are down most in Scotland over the past seven years are the number of people who vote for the SNP and the number of members the party has in the chamber. The things that are going up include the number of teachers, the number of doctors, the number of nurses, the number of operations, the number of new schools, and—just in this past month—the number of grannies using our buses, too.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland)

(Con): I am apprehensive that many eardrums will have been burst and that no one will be able to listen to me.

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues they will discuss. (S2F-2281)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I have no immediate plans to meet the Prime Minister, but I am looking forward to meeting the new Secretary of State for Scotland this afternoon. I congratulate Douglas Alexander on his appointment.

Miss Goldie: Teachers play a vital role in the development of our children and it would be crude to suggest that they are all undeserving of their current salaries. However, Audit Scotland makes an important point in the report that it has published. It indicates that it is hard to measure what improvement the McCrone deal has made to teaching in Scotland.

Does the First Minister accept the general proposition that, rather than universally condemning teachers because of concerns over the standards in our schools, we should place the blame on the education system that ministers have created?

The First Minister: I have already outlined the improvements in Scottish education that have come about as a result not only of the agreement on teachers' pay and conditions but of the other policies that we have followed over the past seven years. I strongly believe that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and Scotland's results and standards are improving all the time. That role is vital for this devolved Government and Parliament, and I am proud that we have managed to fulfil it.

However, I also believe that this issue must be seen in the context of the agreement's objectives, which were to ensure a greater level of teacher professionalism; that teachers dealt with less bureaucracy and administration; that there were more teachers; that they had career progression; and that the promoted posts in schools were streamlined. One indication of the agreement's success is the comment in the Audit Scotland report that all but one of those milestones have been achieved. Indeed, only a few short months ago, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, which measures the quality of education in this country, said in its important annual report that Scottish education is again competing with the best in the world and that its teachers have a high degree of professionalism and its pupils have a high and ever-increasing degree of success. We are proud of—and are determined to improve on—that record.

Miss Goldie: Members of the teaching profession will struggle to reconcile the First Minister's description of our education system with what many of them have to encounter day after day. He must accept responsibility for the huge additional burden that has been centrally imposed on them. I point out that that is not my rhetoric. Last year, in his newsletter to parents, the then head teacher of James Gillespie's primary school, who I presume is an expert, said that the poor value for money and the disappointing levels of achievement that we get from our system are a result of all the shackles, initiatives and bureaucracy that surround the delivery of education in Scotland. However much it might suit the First Minister to make teachers the scapegoats for current difficulties, is not the real culprit the flawed structure of the education system over which he presides?

The First Minister: I do not accept Annabel Goldie's premise that our education system is going downhill. When I taught in the system in the 1980s, I saw the disruption that took place and how a whole generation of Scottish youngsters was affected by the then Conservative Government's appalling standard of industrial relations. I believe that, because those children missed opportunities and had fewer qualifications, their opportunities in life were damaged.

As a parent in the 1990s, I again saw the damage caused by the initiatives introduced by Michael Forsyth and others who were determined to run down the basic principles of Scottish education and to provoke disharmony, discontent and division in the system. Such an approach was very damaging to schoolchildren the length and breadth of Scotland.

However, in this first decade of the 21st century, there has been investment in teachers and teacher support; investment in schools and equipment; and a determination to ensure that, in our policies, we improve standards, performance and results. Those improvements are starting to come through in every category.

I tell Miss Goldie that Scottish schools are unrecognisable from what they were when the Conservatives were in power. Everyone who works in them and everyone who sends their kids to them knows that. Everyone wants schools to improve even more, and we are determined to deliver that.

Miss Goldie: The escalating levels of antisocial behaviour in our schools; the conduct to which our teachers are subjected every day; and the alarming fact that many universities are using their resources to re-educate undergraduates who have supposedly attained certain educational standards under our examination system suggest that all is certainly not well in the world of education.

Audit Scotland's remit was only to review the cost and implementation of the McCrone agreement, not to examine the whole educational structure within which teachers must operate. Will the First Minister agree to devolve more power down to our schools, including power over salaries, to find out whether teachers or politicians are better at running them?

The First Minister: Yet again, I disagree with Annabel Goldie. Our own independent inspectorate of education has said:

"Scottish qualifications are held in high esteem internationally",

not just in Scotland. I do not want to demean in any way individuals who are at the moment leaving Scotland's schools to go to university, but I remind the member that if there are any issues with how they were taught reading, writing and arithmetic in primary school 10 years ago, it was a Conservative Government, not this devolved Government, that was in power and running the education system.

I believe that Scottish qualifications stand the test of international comparison—all of the evidence shows that. I also believe that, rather than tinkering further with the structure of education in Scotland, we must be determined to

improve the curriculum, to improve further teachers' numbers, to raise standards in the classroom and to ensure that the increased results and achievements that we already have in primary schools, in the early years of secondary, in standard grade and in higher, are built upon. That is our priority and that is what we will concentrate on.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): We have had long exchanges today, which means that we are tight for time. I will take one important constituency question.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): The First Minister has referred to the E-coli outbreak, which is concentrated at one of the Careshare nurseries in my constituency. Although the cause of the outbreak is yet to be identified, it is concerning that four youngsters are already in Yorkhill hospital and two others are being monitored. Does the First Minister agree that establishments that provide care, education or recreation for vulnerable people, particularly the very young and the very old, must conform to the best possible practice and the very highest hygiene and cleanliness standards, and that any deficiencies highlighted in reports must be treated seriously and acted upon immediately?

The First Minister: Absolutely. As there has been some coverage of the report by the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care, it is probably important to clarify this. My understanding is that, as happens in such cases, a draft care commission report was circulated to the establishment and the establishment committed to making the improvements. When the final report of the care commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education was produced in January, the establishment put in place an action plan. However, clearly there must still be concerns about the outbreak of illness in the past week. We are determined first of all to ensure that the local agencies that are dealing with the outbreak have our full support to ensure that all individuals affected are identified and that any causes are dealt with. Subsequently, there will need to be investigations to ensure that lessons are learned and that any appropriate action is taken locally and nationally to avoid a reoccurrence, if that is at all possible.

United Kingdom Cabinet (Reshuffle)

3. Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): To ask the First Minister what effect the Scottish Executive considers that the Prime Minister's Cabinet reshuffle will have on Scotland. (S2F-2294)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I hope that my Liberal Democrat colleagues can give me some leeway here. I welcome the Prime Minister's reshuffle and hope that it is of great

benefit to Scotland. At the same time, while we have important relationships with our Whitehall colleagues—and it is important that we ensure that those relationships work effectively—we must be determined to use the powers that we have in this Parliament effectively and to make a difference for the people of Scotland.

Colin Fox: When Tony Blair reshuffled his Cabinet last week, after pleading with people not to write off nine years' work because of nine bad headlines, people scorned him. Rather than the answer that the First Minister gave to Nicola Sturgeon, is the truth not that Tony Blair's failure to help to tackle the grotesque inequalities between rich and poor in Scotland—which see men in Glasgow's east end die 30 years before people in Bearsden—his insistence on Thatcherite privatisation of public services and the decimation of the manufacturing industry in Scotland explain why he is out of touch with people?

The First Minister: Where do I start?

The Presiding Officer: It is not really your responsibility.

The First Minister: The elections that took place last week took place south of the border and it is for others to comment on them. However, on the points in Colin Fox's question—I think that there was a point—I will say, first, that his statistics are, as ever, largely inaccurate and, secondly, that the damage that his party's policies would do to the economy of Scotland, to jobs in Scotland, to the health service in Scotland and to the other areas that he mentions, would far outweigh the damage that even the nationalists would do. The policies of the Scottish Socialist Party are wildly out of touch with the people of Scotland and wildly out of touch with our modern world. The SSP is an irrelevant party with policies that would be dangerous for our country and it will be rejected decisively by the people of Scotland next May.

Colin Fox: It was not the Scottish Socialist Party that was booed off by health workers at its conference for wanting to close hospitals throughout Scotland, it was not the Scottish Socialist Party that was selling peerages to dodgy millionaires and it was not the Scottish Socialist Party that led 114 soldiers to their deaths in Iraq; it was the Labour Government. Is it not the case that Tony Blair is becoming as big a liability for Labour as Thatcher was for the Tories and that Labour MSPs see disaster looming if he continues in office?

The Presiding Officer: We are almost out of time, First Minister. If you want to respond, then respond.

Members: No!

The First Minister: I have made my point. The Scottish Socialist Party is an irrelevance and should remain so.

Fostering

4. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Executive monitors the number of children in individual foster families and what plans it has to limit the number of children being placed with any one family. (S2F-2291)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I thank Pauline McNeill for asking a question on a serious issue of substance.

Social work statistics include data about looked-after children, including the total number of children in foster care, and local authorities assess all individual foster placements based on the best interests of the child. Ministers have instructed a major review of fostering policy with the intention of developing a new national strategy to improve the range and quality of options that are available to meet the needs of each child. The review will consider the issues that Pauline McNeill has raised, but it would be premature to indicate a likely outcome today.

Pauline McNeill: The report "Hidden Harm—Next Steps: Supporting Children—Working with Parents" identifies the fact that many children live in substance-abusing households. We have a responsibility to identify appropriate support for those children, so does the First Minister agree that there is a role for fostering families in tackling the problem? If so, does he also recognise the increasing demands on foster carers, one in five of whom already looks after five children or more? Will he assure me that the review will be a priority and will consider the quality of the experience for the children? Does he agree that a comprehensive solution must also involve extended families and acknowledge grandparents' crucial role? Given that it is fostering week, will he join me in recognising the valuable contribution that foster carers and foster families make to the lives of Scotland's children?

The First Minister: I am delighted to welcome the important role that immediate relatives play in looking after vulnerable children in many different situations, including those in which at least one parent has become a drug addict. In particular, I pay tribute to grandparents.

We have recently allocated additional resources to local authorities in Scotland to provide improved foster care. All the local authorities have opportunities to review their local systems of allowances and to provide better financial support for relatives who are involved in care. Most grandparents are involved in care for the love of

the children and, as a result, do not seek financial compensation, but many find it difficult to provide the level of care that is required. On Monday, at Brenda house in Edinburgh, Cathy Jamieson and I met three young mothers who had been drug addicts and were trying to stay drug free. They had all relied on grandparents to look after their children while they were going through rehabilitation. That situation exists for many individuals in many parts of Scotland. The more support that we can give grandparents, the better, and the review will certainly consider that.

First-Time Home Buyers

5. Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Executive is taking to help first-time home buyers. (S2F-2290)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The need to increase opportunities for first-time home buyers in urban and rural areas in Scotland is a priority that is recognised by our increasing commitment to the low-cost home ownership programme, by our changes to the planning system and to Scottish Water's priorities and by the innovative homestake scheme.

Richard Lochhead: Is the First Minister aware that the average age of first-time buyers in Scotland is now 37, which is the highest in the United Kingdom? Does he accept that the crisis in affordable housing in Scotland is due to the lack of affordable housing not only to rent, but to purchase? Is he also aware that, because of a local combination of low wages and high property prices, young people in my constituency and elsewhere in rural Scotland are forced to leave their communities if they want to get on the property ladder? Does he accept that we need a radical package of measures from his Government to address that issue, otherwise young people will continue to have to leave their communities if they want to own their own home?

The First Minister: This is a vital issue for Scotland and we have increased support for the low-cost home ownership programme by 80 per cent. With our homestake programme, we have set out to support an innovative scheme for more than 1,000 new properties each year for the next three years. In the first six months, it has already gone beyond the target for the first year.

Through the affordable housing investment programme, we have agreed with Moray Council and local housing associations more than 200 new units in the area that Richard Lochhead now represents. We will continue to ensure that more housing is available, both for rent and for purchase, to more people at an affordable rate. We are determined to continue our efforts in that

regard, and I welcome Richard Lochhead's support for that.

The Presiding Officer: As we started First Minister's question time late, I will use my discretion to allow us to spill over a bit and take question 6.

Universities (Funding)

6. Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Executive considers the current funding settlement for Scottish universities to be sufficient. (S2F-2293)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The 2004 spending review settlement provided record levels of investment for higher education in Scotland. By 2008, the end of the current spending review period, the Scottish Executive will be investing in excess of £1 billion per year in higher education, which represents a 28 per cent real-terms increase since April 2003.

Mr Stone: Does the First Minister agree that it was right for Scotland to reject the system of top-up fees that was introduced south of the border? Is he concerned that any move to remove the cap on top-up fees could lead to increased pressure on our universities? Will he agree that we must work with universities to ensure that students are not faced with having to meet any funding gap that could result?

The First Minister: I recognise the success that there has been in our Scottish universities over recent years. There has been outstanding success in science. Just today, games technology at the University of Abertay Dundee has been publicised, and wonderful work has been going on at the University of Edinburgh to create a fabulous park for the commercialisation of science and to use that to the economic benefit of Scotland as well as for academic results.

We need to continue to improve the system and to ensure that it has the finance and the skills to compete in the 21st century. The route that we have chosen is the right one for that and I am determined that we will continue to pursue it.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions to the First Minister.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Today's First Minister's question time did not conform to the objectives or standards that we can identify in our standing orders. I wish an assurance from you that you will speak to the First Minister and the deputy leader of the Scottish National Party and point out to them that many of us sit here with a serious intention. If we want to pull the wings off flies or have a stairheid rammie, we will stay at home.

The Presiding Officer: I do not accept your overall premise, although I accept that there are matters to be considered. I shall consider them.

14:15

On resuming—

12:33

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Finance and Public Services and Communities

Electoral Administration Bill

1. Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what information it has on what new duties the United Kingdom Electoral Administration Bill will place on electoral registration officers and to what extent the cost of performing these duties will be funded by the Executive. (S2O-9736)

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): I know that the member takes a keen interest in the matter.

As previously advised, the bill will introduce a duty on local authorities to take all necessary steps to register eligible electors. Funding to meet new duties will be provided through the local government finance settlement. It is not possible to provide further details, because the UK bill has not yet gone through all the parliamentary stages at Westminster.

Alasdair Morgan: I thank the minister for that clearer answer than the four written answers I have had since January. My point is that the Executive should avoid doing what it is frequently accused of doing, often with justification—imposing yet another burden on local authorities. There is no doubt that although the Electoral Administration Bill will impose significant extra duties on local authorities, specific funding will not be made available to carry them out.

George Lyon: It is always better to talk than to write letters, so I will provide further clarification. I assure the member that the Executive will provide sufficient resources to meet all the additional costs of implementing the measures in the Electoral Administration Bill. As I said in my initial answer, until the bill has received royal assent it will not be possible to provide the final costs associated with introducing its measures.

Free Personal Care (Local Authority Budgets)

2. Ms Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what the overall impact on local authority budgets, council tax levels and local services will be of implementing free personal care. (S2O-9761)

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): We have provided substantial additional funding to councils to meet the costs of free personal care, but the impact on council budgets will depend on the spending decisions that each council takes, which will reflect local needs and priorities.

Ms Watt: Does the minister agree that the figures of £145 for personal care and £65 for nursing care, which were introduced back in 2002, no longer cover the real costs that councils pay for those services? Wales now offers £107.63 for nursing care and Northern Ireland provides £100, but in Scotland the council tax payer is bearing the brunt of the cost of a policy that the Executive heralds as a flagship. When will the Executive put its money where its mouth is?

Mr McCabe: It is hard to see how the council tax payer is bearing the brunt of the policy when 80 per cent of local government revenue comes from the Executive and only 20 per cent comes from council tax revenue. Considerable sums are being invested in free personal care. The figure will rise from £153 million in 2005-06 to £162 million in 2006-07, and it will go up again to £169 million in the final year of the spending review period.

It is important to remember two points. First, we are still in the middle of a spending review period. When another spending review comes along, all spending decisions will be reviewed. Secondly, it is important to remember that councils were always funded to pay for the provision of personal care services to people who could not afford them. The sums that will be provided in the three years that I mentioned are on top of the revenue stream that has always been made available to councils to pay for the provision of such services to over-65s.

Planning Applications (*Edinburgh Gazette*)

3. Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what benefits it believes are delivered by requiring all local authorities to advertise planning applications in the *Edinburgh Gazette*. (S2O-9812)

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): The current view is that the *Edinburgh Gazette* provides a single, well-understood system of notification of relevant planning applications that is freely available. We will consider carefully the recommendations that the Communities Committee made on that and other matters in its report on the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill.

Karen Whitefield: I do not know whether the minister has ever looked at the *Edinburgh Gazette*, but I took the opportunity to do so before coming to the chamber. Although it includes information about applications for additional dish

antenna and the replacement of louvres, which hardly makes riveting reading, it does not necessarily provide people with information about the planning system.

Does the minister agree that local authorities would improve their websites by providing a range of valuable planning information? That could benefit local authorities by lowering administration costs, and it could ensure greater transparency and accountability in the planning system. Will the minister ensure that the Executive supports the goal of improving e-planning? That would do far more to ensure that people are involved in the planning system than does advertising in the *Edinburgh Gazette*.

Malcolm Chisholm: We strongly support the development of e-planning. We are determined to have a modern communications system that is consistent with our objective in the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill to meaningfully involve far more people in planning than have been involved in the past.

How we communicate with the public is vital. Local authorities will be required to disseminate information more widely than they have had to do. In that context, we will have to consider whether the *Edinburgh Gazette* has a continuing role to play. However, it is true that other communication methods will come to the fore.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Question 4 has been withdrawn.

HM Treasury Budget 2006

5. Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how it intends to allocate the Barnett consequential of HM Treasury's budget 2006. (S2O-9772)

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): As the member will be aware, the Scottish Executive received £38 million for 2006-07 and £48 million for 2007-08 as a result of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's budget 2006 statement. Final decisions on the allocation of those resources will be taken in due course.

Mr Arbuckle: When the minister considers the allocations, will he pay special regard to the burdens that local authorities face?

George Lyon: As I have said many times before, I will consider the case for some additional resources for local government in 2007-08. However, it is only right that I sound a note of caution. As I have noted, our resources for 2007-08 are already committed, and following the Chancellor of the Exchequer's recent decision to postpone the next spending review until 2007, there is now no prospect that the Scottish block

will be increased before then. Our room for manoeuvre is therefore limited.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Is the minister as staggered as I am by Andrew Arbuckle's question—which suggested that local authorities should be given more money—as he voted against such a proposal when it was put before Parliament only a few weeks ago?

George Lyon: Mr Swinney will know that Mr Arbuckle was talking about the coming financial year, not this year. That is how I understood the question.

Private Landlords (Registration)

6. Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what representations it has received from local authorities and private landlords regarding difficulties associated with the Executive's scheme for the registration of private landlords. (S2O-9735)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): We received representations during March that more time to register was needed. In response, we postponed the registration deadline to 30 April.

We have also received representations from some landlords that they have experienced difficulties in using the online registration system. We have taken action to correct all reported errors, and to date more than 47,000 landlords have their details on the system. The system is functioning well and applicants should have confidence in using it.

Phil Gallie: Last week, the minister suggested that 45,000 landlords had registered. There has therefore been a slight increase, which I welcome. However, I have been involved with one agency that has attempted to register with 12 local authorities. Only one—Renfrewshire Council—has been able to accept the registration, although all have acknowledged that the problem is not the fault of the agency. Can the minister assure me that genuine agencies and landlords who have attempted to register but who have so far failed to do so will not be penalised?

Johann Lamont: We have already acknowledged that there have been challenges in the system. We are grateful to local authorities and we acknowledge the pressure on them. Resources have gone towards making the system work as effectively as possible.

We expect local authorities to be reasonable. I am absolutely confident—I note how Mr Gallie phrased his question—that good private landlords have nothing to fear. They want to be part of the solution to the problem caused by some private landlords in local communities; they do not want to

be part of the problem. Landlords can be part of the solution, alongside local authorities, by highlighting where there are challenges and difficulties and by encouraging people to register and by reinforcing the importance of registration. That will secure a better reputation for the sector. Our communities will be the better for it.

Planning etc (Scotland) Bill

7. Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what proposals are contained in the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill to protect local small businesses. (S2O-9794)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Johann Lamont): The bill will make the planning system fit for purpose by introducing a clearer sense of priority and by allowing different types of application to be addressed in different ways. That more balanced approach will enable planning authorities to improve their performance across the full range of applications, including those that affect small businesses.

Marilyn Livingstone: Does the minister agree that town centres support many small businesses and are the life-blood of communities such as the one that I represent? What support will be given to initiatives such as Kirkcaldy renaissance, in my constituency, in which key stakeholders are working in partnership to develop a master plan for Kirkcaldy's High Street and promenade? Will the bill promote the development of vibrant, sustainable high streets?

Johann Lamont: I acknowledge the importance of town centres. We must be alert to the fact that town centres across Scotland have different needs and face different challenges. We have a planning policy for town centres in national planning policy guideline 8, on retailing, which we are currently refreshing. We have made a commitment to support town centres.

With a development-plan-led system we allow people to prepare and think ahead about how they want their community to look. The approach ensures that local people and agencies are engaged in the planning system at an early stage.

I do not know about the partnership that Marilyn Livingstone described, but I am more than happy to talk to her about it, so that I can learn from local initiatives. I reassure her that small businesses will benefit as much as other groups from the more streamlined planning system and the increased, earlier engagement that the bill envisages.

Budget Review Group Report

8. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when the independent budget review group, which was

established last autumn, will publish its report. (S2O-9745)

The Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform (Mr Tom McCabe): The group expects to submit its report before the summer recess. I will publish the report in due course thereafter.

Derek Brownlee: The timescale reflects a delay, given what was originally proposed, but I hope that the minister agrees that it is better that the report be thorough than rushed.

Given that detailed work will inevitably go into preparing the report, when the minister publishes it, will he also publish the working papers and back-up information that the review group considered before coming to its conclusion?

Mr McCabe: We will publish what we think is relevant. Many papers might constitute advice to ministers and therefore will not be subject to normal publication rules. We intend to use the information that is garnered from the group as part of our platform for the next spending review. The group's report will be an important part of work towards the spending review and we hope that it will be useful. However, we will not necessarily agree with every word of the report, and members might not either.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Will the report that is published at the end of the process represent the view of the independent budget review group or will ministers guide or reshape the report's contents? Will the report be subject—heaven forbid—to political interference? Will it represent the review group's view, even though ministers will have a say in its contents?

Mr McCabe: It will be an independent report.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 9 was not lodged.

Public Sector Homes (Penicuik and Borders)

10. Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how many homes for rent in the public sector were built in Penicuik and the Scottish Borders in 2005. (S2O-9770)

The Minister for Communities (Malcolm Chisholm): In the financial year 2005-06, 87 homes for social rent were either built or under construction in the Scottish Borders. Although no social rented homes were built or under construction in Penicuik in 2005-06, 95 such homes were built or under construction in adjacent settlements across Midlothian.

I recently announced an expanded affordable housing investment programme for 2006-07, which will result in a 35 per cent funding increase

for those local authority areas compared with the allocations that I announced this time last year.

Jeremy Purvis: My constituents will be grateful for the large increase in investment. Is the minister aware that the average house price in my constituency is £158,000, according to the Bank of Scotland, which means that buying a house is well beyond the reach of many of my constituents? Is he also aware that one of the main inhibitors to growth in building affordable houses for rent is the increase in land prices? Will he give more consideration to land banking in Penicuik by social landlords and Midlothian Council to offset land price inflation to some extent, which would allow more affordable homes to be built?

Malcolm Chisholm: We are keen to encourage the development of land banking. The pilot scheme in Highland has been very successful in respect of the cost of houses. We are also developing homestake initiatives throughout Scotland, which the First Minister mentioned during First Minister's question time. There is a homestake development in the Borders. Land is a big challenge in many parts of Scotland, but new planning advice note 74 will help the Borders and other areas that face shortages, as 25 per cent of private developments will require to consist of affordable housing. Therefore, a raft of policies will complement the significant extra resources to which I referred in my initial answer, on which I will elaborate.

The allocated investment in affordable housing in the Borders in 2005-06 was £4.8 million, which was 61 per cent more than in the previous financial year. In the current year, the allocated investment in affordable housing will be £6.577 million, which equates to a nearly 37 per cent increase in investment. Therefore, the Borders is doing well in respect of the money that it receives. Apart from the money for Midlothian to which I referred, Midlothian is preparing a council house new-build programme that is planned to provide 1,000 houses in the period to 2010.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): In an earlier question I referred to private landlords. Is Scottish Borders Council having difficulty registering private landlords? What proportion of the estimated 62,000 private landlords in Scotland reside in the Borders? What part will they play in providing housing to Jeremy Purvis's constituents?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am not aware of particular difficulties with the information technology system in the Borders, but I will write to the member if I am wrong to think that there is none. The member would not seriously expect me to carry in my head the precise number of private landlords in the Borders.

We value the role of the private rented sector in providing housing opportunities and believe, for the reasons that Johann Lamont gave, that its role will be enhanced by the registration system.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I am aware of the Executive's policy on and the importance that it attaches to making available affordable houses for rent and low-cost home ownership, and I am aware of the investment in that respect. However, the minister might be aware of evidence on homelessness that was recently given to the Communities Committee, that if we are to meet the targets that have rightly been set, we must provide many more houses for rent and low-cost ownership. Will the minister assure me that he will make that a high priority in his bid in the next spending review, so that a worthy Executive policy can be delivered?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am aware of the supply issues that relate to homelessness, although I am sure that Cathie Craigie agrees that other issues must also be addressed, including preventing homelessness.

We are on an upward supply trajectory. Some 6,400 units were provided last year, which met our target. On the current spending review, my announcement on Monday took the figure for this financial year up to 7,100 units, which will increase to 8,000 units next year. We are doing detailed work, taking into account our homelessness obligations, on assessing housing needs as part of our preparations for discussions on the next spending period. Cathie Craigie can be assured that I shall continue to be a champion for housing.

Education and Young People, Tourism, Culture and Sport

Social Care Workers (Recruitment)

1. Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to continue programmes to increase the recruitment of social care workers. (S2O-9776)

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Robert Brown): Yes. This year will see the continuation of the care in Scotland recruitment and awareness campaign for the social services sector as a whole. Implementation of the recommendations in "Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review", the supporting front-line staff framework and the national strategy for the development of the social service workforce will also support the aim of making the social services sector a more attractive sector in which to work.

Euan Robson: The minister will be aware of a series of adverts that are being run by NHS

Scotland. What liaison arrangements does his department have in place to ensure that social care job opportunities are available to people who respond to the national health service campaign? Social care is clearly allied to the health professions.

Robert Brown: Euan Robson makes a good point. My understanding is that there are liaison arrangements for passing on suitable applications. We are all well aware of the restricted catchment from which recruits of various kinds come to the workforces of the NHS and the social care sector alike. The care in Scotland campaign will target press and radio coverage, both national and local, throughout 2006-07 and will have stands at the Scottish Social Services Council's recruitment fairs across the country. It will also provide support for employer-led workshops to assist employers' efforts to make more effective use of their recruitment budgets. A range of work is being undertaken across the board. I will write to Euan Robson with the detail of the linkages that he has asked about.

VisitScotland (Registration)

2. Dr Jean Turner (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Executive what incentives are in place for small tourist establishments to register their businesses with VisitScotland. (S2O-9750)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): VisitScotland seeks to build strong business relationships with every tourism establishment across Scotland. It offers a number of business opportunity packages for businesses to purchase, ranging from local and national marketing opportunities to quality assurance schemes and product development.

Dr Turner: As I said to the minister yesterday, my question was prompted by a constituent logging on to the VisitScotland website to find out how many camping sites there were between Ullapool and Durness and finding that there was only one. When he got up there, he found many excellent sites and wondered why none of those sites, nor the bed and breakfasts, wanted to register with VisitScotland. The businesses said that the costs were far too high and that they depended on their visitors from abroad and from Scotland telling others how good they were. VisitScotland has a 10-year contract—which is quite a long contract—and is four years into it. How does the Executive monitor visitscotland.com to check whether it is delivering value for money to small businesses?

Patricia Ferguson: [Visitscotland.com](http://visitscotland.com)—that is the element of our tourism network that we are talking about—has placed some 340,000 bookings, the majority of which have been with

small accommodation providers. More than £45 million of business has gone in that direction, and the feedback that we have received indicates that some operators are getting more than half their business through that website.

At first sight, the fact that large providers pay the same as smaller providers might seem off-putting; however, businesses might be reassured to know that the amount of space that is allocated to providers on the website is the same, regardless of the size of the business. In addition, the annual cost of registering with visitscotland.com is £30. I do not think that that should be off-putting to many of our tourism businesses.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister accept that the take-up of visitscotland.com among small accommodation providers is much less than we would like it to be if the website is to provide a fair representation of the accommodation and other facilities that are available in Scotland?

Patricia Ferguson: As I explained, the cost of registering with visitscotland.com is relatively small. I hope that that will encourage small businesses in particular to use the facility. As I said to Dr Turner, the majority of the bookings that come through visitscotland.com go to smaller providers.

Having said that, visitscotland.com is not resting on its laurels. It is about to launch a new system that will allow new and small accommodation providers themselves to update their room accessibility, their allocations and their room rates electronically.

At the end of this year visitscotland.com will also launch a web-in-a-box idea that will give smaller operators their own website, which will be powered by visitscotland.com's booking engine. I hope that that will allow potential customers to make their bookings directly with the accommodation provider, which will encourage many more of our small operators to register with visitscotland.com.

Angling

3. Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it provides to angling. (S2O-9802)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): The Executive and several public bodies responsible to it contribute in various ways to the development of angling in Scotland. Sportscotland provides financial and other support for the three recognised governing bodies and for the development of facilities.

Mr McNeil: Does the minister recognise the value of getting young people involved in angling?

It not only gets them into the fresh air and keeps them out of trouble, but teaches them patience, discipline and other vital skills. To keep youngsters interested throughout the winter months, are angling clubs able to secure some modest funding from the minister's department or from other departments to purchase, for example, fly-tying equipment so that they can run classes during the closed season?

Patricia Ferguson: It is always good to find new and innovative ways of keeping young people occupied, particularly during the winter evenings.

The Scottish Anglers National Association, the Scottish Federation of Sea Anglers and the Scottish Federation for Coarse Angling receive some development money from sportscotland. In addition, since the inception of lottery funding, sportscotland has awarded almost £530,000 to the facilities programme for angling, £200,000 of which was for the construction of the national game angling academy at Loch Leven. I hope that once all those initiatives are established, they might be able to encourage clubs to do what the member suggests.

There are also opportunities for clubs to apply individually for funding from the awards for all scheme, which is a very useful tool, and from sportscotland directly. If the member would find it helpful, I would be happy to provide him with website links for those particular organisations.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I welcome any support that the Executive can give to game or coarse angling in Scotland, and to tourism angling, which is so important to the rural economy and to my region.

At the moment, there is speculation among Scottish angling bodies that the Scottish Executive is considering introducing a new rod licence for anglers in Scotland as part of the forthcoming aquaculture and fisheries bill. Can the minister confirm or deny that, or can she shed some light on the origins of the rumours of a new fishing-pole tax on anglers?

Patricia Ferguson: I might not be able to shed any light on the origin of the rumours but I might point to my colleague Mr McGrigor for their continuation. I am certainly not aware of any such proposal. Having said that, I respectfully suggest to the member that that might be a question to which Mr Finnie or Ms Brankin would be able to respond more readily. I will certainly check out the situation and make sure that the member receives some more information.

I hope that those who have concerns have responded to the consultation on the proposed aquaculture and fisheries bill. At the moment, we are analysing 436 written responses to the

consultation, which closed on 3 March. Our response will be published in the near future.

Proposed School Meals and Snacks (Scotland) Bill

4. Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it is aware of how many children's charities, anti-poverty groups and health organisations support the proposed school meals and snacks (Scotland) bill. (S2O-9756)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): Yes.

Tommy Sheridan: I thank the minister for his brief response.

Children 1st, Children in Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament, Shelter families projects, Oxfam, One Plus, NCH Scotland, Save the Children, the Poverty Alliance, the Child Poverty Action Group, Perth citizens advice bureau, West Glasgow Against Poverty, NHS Ayrshire and Arran, NHS Dumfries and Galloway, NHS Greater Glasgow, NHS Lanarkshire, East Lothian community health partnership—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have a question, Mr Sheridan?

Tommy Sheridan: Is the minister aware that those are just some of the 121 separate organisations that are now calling on the Executive to stop means testing kids for school meals and to start introducing free and healthy meals for all children as part of an anti-poverty and pro-health campaign? Will he stop arrogantly ignoring the will of those organisations, which represent the majority of Scotland?

Peter Peacock: Far from ignoring children's charities, I have met representatives of a number of them to discuss the issues. It would be wrong of Tommy Sheridan to represent them as totally opposed to the Executive's plans because, almost without exception, they support our plans. They commend our free fruit programme, our breakfast schemes and our work on nutritional standards. However, there are a range of views among those organisations on the issue of entitlement. Some want us to target what we do better, some want us to target more people and some would go for universal provision, such as Tommy Sheridan has described. Our recent consultation paper raises the possibility of there being some extended entitlement and asks for people's views about that. I look forward to receiving the views of the charities in that regard.

In Tommy Sheridan's rather bizarre world of economics, there seems to be a limitless supply of money. His proposals would cost more than £200 million, most of which would go to the best off in our society rather than to the worst off. He wants

to give free meals to the children of everyone in this room, after having offered us all free prescriptions a few months ago. He wants to give free meals to the sons and daughters of showbiz personalities, top lawyers and judges and fat cat businessmen. I find that a strange form of socialism. No doubt the international society of socialists is meeting as we speak in order to expel Tommy Sheridan for proposing the redistribution of wealth to the wealthy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn.

Recreation and Tourism (Forests)

7. Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what recreational and tourism opportunities are being encouraged in Scotland's forests. (S2O-9784)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): Our forests are an important part of the Scottish countryside, which appeals to many of our visitors. To build on that appeal, a wide range of recreation and tourism opportunities are encouraged in forests, including walking, cycling, picnic sites, camping, wildlife viewing and water sports. Art, sculpture, music and theatre are additional attractions for visitors.

Cathie Craigie: Obviously, a lot more is going on in our forests than just taking care of trees, which is a good thing.

The minister will be aware of the tremendous work that is undertaken in my constituency by a group of volunteers in the Carron valley forest, who work with Forestry Commission staff to provide an excellent mountain bike trail. Unfortunately, the minister was unable to come to the launch of the trail, but I look forward to receiving her written response to the event.

Will the minister ensure that positive partnership working exists at every level of the Forestry Commission? That is important with regard to not only local authorities but voluntary groups that are willing to get involved. The Carron valley mountain bike trail is in an excellent location in central Scotland and is well placed to exploit the beauty of that area and encourage tourism. It would be an ideal location—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is there a question, Ms Craigie?

Cathie Craigie: It would be an ideal location, should Glasgow be successful in its bid for the 2014 Commonwealth games, which I am sure it will be. If mountain biking is in—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but there must be a question.

Cathie Craigie: Will the minister promote the Carron valley as a venue?

Patricia Ferguson: I, too, was disappointed that I was unable to attend the launch of the trail. I look forward to meeting the volunteers and the agencies that are part of the partnership that made that biking experience possible. I hope to visit the Carron valley mountain bike track during the summer recess. Such partnerships are important.

Although most of us would accept that a certain amount of rough and tumble will be involved in mountain biking, there have been a number of serious accidents recently on Forestry Commission land. It is correct that the Forestry Commission, local authorities, volunteers and others working at those sites should be conscious of the risks and give all due consideration to them when promoting the sites.

I am delighted that the Carron valley mountain bike route is now on the Forestry Commission website and I am sure that it will prove to be a great attraction to people from around the country and abroad. It is something else that we can add to our portfolio of places where people can mountain bike, all of which have contributed towards Scotland being accorded global superstar status by the International Mountain Bicycling Association.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): What role will the minister's officials play—alongside Ms Brankin's officials—in the development of the Forestry Commission's national mountain biking strategy? In particular, will they ensure that the strategy focuses on the need for larger-scale facilities in the central belt as well as in the Highlands and Islands? Those facilities are needed if we are to deliver the benefits that the minister and Cathie Craigie mentioned.

Patricia Ferguson: It is important that we consider forestry in an even wider context than Mr Ruskell suggests. This is not just about mountain biking; it is about the promotion of tourism in forestry areas, on which we have been working with the Forestry Commission. We have many conversations with the commission, across portfolios, about such initiatives. Our focus is not just on those in the Highlands but on those in the central belt and the Borders. The events at Glentress in the Borders are particularly good and are becoming very successful. The area will continue to grow and, as Mrs Craigie rightly identified, it will grow best through partnership.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Does the minister accept that opening up walkways, as in the successful case of the Clyde Calders initiative, not only greatly assists the environment but encourages tourism?

Patricia Ferguson: It is important that we consider the environmental impact of activities that we promote in forest areas. That is one of the things that we are concerned to do, but the environmental impact can be balanced successfully with access. There has been a great deal of progress in that area in recent years.

VisitScotland (Highlands and Islands)

8. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how VisitScotland ensures that it is providing a good service for the Highlands and Islands. (S2O-9771)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): We and VisitScotland recognise the crucial importance of tourism to the economy of the Highlands and Islands. VisitScotland engages closely with stakeholders in the north to ensure that it provides a good service to visitors and tourism businesses in the Highlands and Islands, and it promotes the area strongly in its marketing.

John Farquhar Munro: Has the minister's department consulted local authorities and asked them whether they think that they get a good deal in exchange for their funding contribution? The feeling on the ground in many parts of the Highlands is that there is a great deal of room for improvement. I ask the minister to pursue the issue so that local authorities throughout Scotland get the maximum benefit for their contribution to VisitScotland.

Patricia Ferguson: I point out to Mr Munro that the local authorities—for example, in the Highlands—are not the only contributors to the funding of VisitScotland. We in the Scottish Executive, on behalf of Scotland, also contribute a great deal to its funding streams. I am conscious that there is a need to make sure that we all get value for our money.

On the specific issue of Highlands and Islands tourism and the promotion of the Highlands and Islands, it is fair to point out that the year of Highland culture was a major focus during tartan week this year. It was much in evidence to anyone who visited the VisitScotland village at Grand Central station or saw any of the marketing material. Also, the three adverts in the senses marketing campaign, which focus on spring, autumn and winter, heavily feature the Highland scenery. In addition—I have a fairly long list, so I could go on for some time about the matter—one of VisitScotland's city freedom campaigns is specific to Inverness and the surrounding area. The Highlands also feature strongly in the autumn gold campaign, which promotes wildlife, walking, golf and activity holidays throughout Scotland.

If Mr Munro thinks that there are issues that need to be addressed, he should raise them directly with Philip Riddle, the chief executive of VisitScotland, who will be in the Highlands next month, and the chair, Peter Lederer, who hopes to be there soon, subject to dates being finalised.

Indoor Football Facilities

9. Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made in respect of providing full-size indoor football facilities. (S2O-9760)

The Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport (Patricia Ferguson): Of the 10 projects that were approved under our national and regional sports facilities strategy in 2004, five will provide indoor football facilities, including full-size pitches. Four of them are due to be completed by 2008 and the other is due in early 2009.

As part of the work that is being done to implement the youth football action plan, the Scottish Football Association has established a facilities development steering group to develop a national facilities strategy for football.

Mr MacAskill: I thank the minister for that progress. However, because many projects are public-private partnerships, some concern is felt that national and league teams that do not have access to much cash might be restricted in obtaining the playing times that they seek. Will criteria be set to ensure that, for example, the Scottish youth team or the Scottish women's team will have access at critical times when they require it and will not lose out to a corporate baron who has more cash to spend?

Patricia Ferguson: The details on the use of facilities are a matter for their ultimate operators, many of which will be local authorities. It is important to begin discussions about scheduling early. I make it clear that we intend such facilities to be used by our elite athletes and to be available to local communities. The best place to negotiate the balance of use is locally.

Drugs and Hidden Harm

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S2M-4370, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on drugs and hidden harm.

14:56

The Minister for Justice (Cathy Jamieson): Every child has the right to be protected from harm, to have the best possible start in life, to live free from poverty and disadvantage, to be safe, nurtured and healthy and to have a happy and fulfilling life.

Since devolution, we have made good progress for children in Scotland. We have delivered on our promises by lifting more than 130,000 children out of poverty. More families are in work and almost all four-year-olds are in early years education. We have also made our streets safer by tackling antisocial behaviour and providing better facilities for children and young people.

We are proud of our achievements in government, but we are not complacent. As we progress and improve the well-being of more children, the most vulnerable children will be harder to reach and will have more complex problems that require more intensive solutions. That should make us more determined to reach them. I know that thousands of children in Scotland remain vulnerable. They are excluded from the opportunities that others take for granted. They include children in families who have been out of work for generations, children in families who are involved in crime and children who live with domestic abuse. All those children need our support and we should continue our work to reach every child we can.

Children who live in substance-misusing families are among the most vulnerable in our communities. The words "hidden harm" vividly describe their lives. Too often, they suffer in silence. They are not known to our public services and they do not know who to turn to for help. Too often, they suffer the devastating and long-lasting effects of poor parenting.

Some such children show remarkable resilience: they care for their mum or dad who is addicted to drugs or alcohol and they somehow keep up with their schoolwork when they never know what will confront them when they go home and open the front door. They go on to achieve stable and fulfilling lives, but it is not always like that: many suffer a life of underachievement and serious social and health problems. It is a chilling fact that they are seven times more likely to become drug users.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Will the minister confirm that the Executive's proposals are not about removing children from families but about providing caring support for young carers, which must be resourced?

Cathy Jamieson: The point about young carers is important and is reflected in "Hidden Harm—Next Steps: Supporting Children—Working with Parents", which we published on Monday. I will highlight what that document outlines and what we will do to improve how we identify, protect and support children who live in the families that I have described.

A clear programme of action is to be achieved by 2007. I will describe a few of the key actions. Legislation will be introduced to create a duty to share information to protect children. We will improve contraception and family planning services for substance misusers. Maternity services, addiction services and services for children and families will work together better. Legislation will be introduced to place a duty on all agencies to identify and act on the needs of all children for whom they have responsibility, which will implement "Getting it right for every child—Proposals for action".

Other key actions include establishing incentives for general practitioners and their practices so that young carers—this responds to the important point that Fiona Hyslop raised—will be put in contact with local support services and support agencies; and expanding the Scottish drug misuse database to ensure that information on dependent children of drug-using parents is not only collected but used to inform policy and practice.

We know that we have more to do and we know that we must do it better. If anything or anyone is standing in the way of supporting these vulnerable children, we have to challenge them. That is the message not just from me as a politician but from the children, their families and the front-line professionals. As I worked at the front line for many years, I know that taking children away from parents is a difficult decision. It is not to be taken lightly and should never be a knee-jerk reaction.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Cathy Jamieson: I will just finish this point.

When the First Minister and I visited Brenda House in Susan Deacon's constituency earlier this week, we spoke to mothers who have had serious drug problems. They gave us the clear message that, although losing their children for a period was a cause of heartache and anger at the time, now that they are clean and free from drugs they can say with the benefit of hindsight that it was the right decision in the circumstances. Looking back, they know that they were not in a fit state to look

after their children, but with the right kind of support they are starting to live drug-free lives and learning to be good parents again.

Stewart Stevenson: The minister said that "Hidden Harm" contains a clear programme for action and that she will not let anyone stand in the way of the action points in it. In section 5.2, the third key action point for children in need of care is:

"ensure that Chief Officers of local authorities, NHS Boards and Chief Constables respond to Ministerial requests for assurances that ...".

Are chief officers of national health service boards and chief constables not doing their job? What does that action point mean? It does not sound like much of an objective to me.

Cathy Jamieson: That objective is clearly about being on the case, looking again at what is happening at local level and continuing to work with chief officers in every agency to ensure that they do all that they can to ensure that their staff work to respond to situations. We have written to chief officers on various occasions, but I will not let up on the message—children's lives depend on it.

I have listened to strong messages from children who desperately want their parents to come off drugs, but I know that there are children who have still not spoken out or who have not been listened to. Some children hide their problems, struggle in silence at home and say nothing at school. As some professionals and users of services have confirmed to me, too often the drugs services that are available place the adult client at the centre and do not recognise the impact of the adult's drug taking on his or her children.

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): Is the minister aware that, in many areas across the country, services are woefully inadequate and mothers have no access to them? She need only read the briefings that we have received to see the findings of the Association of Directors of Social Work and Children 1st. I could tell the minister what I am finding in my case load, if she would take the time to speak to me about the issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): You must be quick.

Ms Byrne: If our aim is to protect children, we need to treat the mothers as well.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: This is becoming a speech.

Ms Byrne: Does the minister agree that we need to ensure that those services are available?

Cathy Jamieson: I welcome Rosemary Byrne's intervention in the sense that I know that she takes the issue seriously, but she will also know that I

have spoken to her. I will continue to work with any member who wants to take the issue forward.

One point that I want to make about one of the organisations that provide services is that I have a concern that the available services should be used to capacity, but I am not sure that that always happens.

The Aberlour Child Care Trust's think tank report was put together by a wide range of professionals. It states clearly that drugs services must take decisions

"based on the impact ... on the child, measured against timescales that are appropriate for the child, not for the adults."

I agree absolutely with that. With the right support for parents and children, it will often be possible for families to remain together, and I saw the benefits of that when I visited the Aberlour Child Care Trust's project—a project, I have to say, that workers tell me is not always used to full capacity.

Serious and chaotic drug taking is just not compatible with good parenting. That does not mean that all drug users are bad parents or bad people and that their children must be removed, nor does it mean that drug users cannot be helped to change. Effective treatment for parents is one of the main ways in which we can help their children, and the women whom I met earlier this week demonstrate that. However, we must face the stark reality that there are some circumstances in which parents' drug taking is so serious and so chaotic that the children are at an unacceptable risk. We know that if children are living in families where drug addiction is so powerful that getting the next hit transcends the most basic parental responsibilities of nurture, care and protection, they can suffer irreparable damage.

Sometimes, nobody is able to pick up the pieces afterwards, so every agency has a responsibility to put the needs of children first, identify the children at risk and give them the support they need. From maternity units right through to GPs, nurses, nursery and school teachers and the police, everybody has a vital part to play, and they need to be clearer about what is expected of the substance-misusing parents when it is decided that their children can remain with them.

Drug users with children need to undergo an integrated multiagency assessment. That might sound like jargon, so I shall explain it quite clearly. It means that every agency has a responsibility to look at what it can do to contribute to a child being safe. That might involve contracts between parents and the agencies involved. If part of the contract is that the parent has to stay clean or free from drugs, we need to know that they are clean, and that is one of the reasons why we must also give serious consideration to drug testing.

At times, we need to have a clearer, more honest and more challenging approach to parents with drug problems, and we must also support the staff who do that difficult work on our behalf. I could go on at length about training for social workers and others who work in child protection, but I shall resist the temptation to do so now. Fostering is also an important issue—one that I am sure will be drawn out in the debate, as will the issue of support from members of the extended family.

When decisions are taken to remove children, they are not always removed permanently. Sometimes, a child needs temporary protection during a period of crisis. We need to look more innovatively at different types of support, such as respite and day care facilities.

The agenda is challenging—I do not underestimate the task that is before us. Everybody must be clear about their duties and responsibilities to young people at risk. We will support local agencies to do that. We are bringing into the Executive a team of people with front-line experience in a range of areas whose job will be to work directly with the agencies to help them raise their game quickly and effectively. We must also be honest enough to say loudly and clearly to drug-misusing parents, "For your children's sake we've got to act, and for your children's sake you too must act."

I hope that all parties will support the direction that we are taking. A lot of detailed discussion needs to take place and I hope that members will engage in that discussion in the constructive way in which we have usually dealt with this issue. That is the direction that we must take if we are to do the best that we can for Scotland's most vulnerable children.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication by the Scottish Executive of *Hidden Harm - Next Steps: Supporting Children - Working With Parents*; acknowledges the wide range of work currently being undertaken to protect and support children living in substance-misusing families; recognises the serious risks and problems faced by many children in drug-abusing households and the incompatibility of serious and chaotic drug use with effective parenting; acknowledges the important role of the extended family in helping to safeguard and nurture children who have been affected by substance misuse, and supports the Executive's commitment to further improvements in the way that agencies protect and support children in these circumstances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I remind members that the debate is as tight as the proverbial drum. I intend to call everyone who gave prior notice that they wished to take part, but I advise those who will speak in the open debate that they will have five minutes to speak rather than the usual six. In that way, I hope

to be able to balance the debate appropriately among the parties. I call Fiona Hyslop to speak to and move amendment S2M-4370.2.

15:09

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): The update report, "Hidden Harm—Next Steps: Supporting Children—Working with Parents", which was published this week, makes the point that child protection should be a main objective of drugs policy and practice. As 50,000 children live in a drug-misusing family and one in 50 babies born in Scotland is born to drug-misusing parents, no one should underestimate the scale of the problem. Neither should we fail to appreciate the complexity of the issue.

Perhaps because drugs are illegal, too many people see the drugs issue first and the child second. I make it clear that the SNP views the issue as a child protection issue. The fact that drugs are the cause of the chaotic family life of the young people concerned should be a secondary consideration.

The original Executive response to the initial "Hidden Harm" report also addressed children who are harmed because of alcohol abuse. An estimated 100,000 children in Scotland are in that position.

Drug abuse brings with it particular issues. For example, it means that the Executive has to provide more support for outreach to connect with hard-to-reach families. Early intervention is required if the abuse is to be reported. It is important that parents do not have to ask sheriffs for a disposal to get rehabilitation in prison. This is as much about early intervention as it is about crisis management. I have concerns that some of the focus is on crisis management.

I do not doubt the concern and commitment of those involved, whether they be ministers, social workers, police or health professionals, but I am becoming increasingly frustrated and angry about the Executive's slow and cumbersome progress on delivering the reams of recommendations that are made in myriad reports.

Patience with the Executive is running out. The problem is that slow action means that too many children are losing out on a childhood of care and nurture. There have been a series of delays and—as recently as this week—mistakes by the Executive, which have hampered progress on child protection reform.

The Executive has failed to get its collective act together, as it was urged to do by the First Minister himself in 2002.

Cathy Jamieson: Can the member outline specifically which actions have not been taken?

Fiona Hyslop: Certainly. One is the failure to deliver recommendation 17 of the 2002 report. It stated that by 2005 there should be a linked, computer-based information system that would include a single integrated assessment—which the minister called for—that would allow a planning and review framework for children in need.

Only this week, West Lothian Council produced its own information system, called C-me. It is meant to share information, but the important point is that there was meant to be a national system. As the minister knows, the problem is that because many vulnerable children are moved around the country, localised systems will not be enough.

The Executive established the social work inspection agency but failed to legislate to give it powers to inspect. Last minute fast-track legislation had to be introduced to allow it to go and inspect without invitation. Remember that it could conduct an inquiry into the Western Isles child protection case only at the council's invitation.

Vital joint inspections of children's services were held up by six months and started again only this week because the Executive failed to legislate properly, even though Wendy Alexander and I questioned the Executive on the issue as far back as 2004.

Yesterday, the Executive completed a piece of legislation to replace school boards with new parent councils. That is hardly the most important need for children in Scotland, given that the introduction of the much needed adoption and fostering bill was pushed back in the queue. That bill, the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Bill, does not mention the role of extended families.

Only yesterday, Children 1st urged the Parliament to amend the bill to require adoption agencies to consider alternative arrangements with the extended family before a child can be placed for adoption. In New Zealand, 75 per cent of children live in kinship care, but only 12 per cent of children in the UK are in kinship care. Kinship care will be vital in relation to the drugs issue. Children 1st also proposes family group conferencing, which the minister did not mention in her statement. Such conferencing will play a vital part in resolving how to cope in a drugs-misusing family.

There is also no sign of the children's hearings system legislation. That will also have an impact. I doubt whether that legislation will be introduced during this session of Parliament. Following Bichard, the Executive has promised more child protection legislation, but time is running out.

On Monday, the minister visited Brenda House in Niddrie in Edinburgh, which specifically provides

rehabilitation for mothers with children. I visited the same Brenda House with the Social Justice Committee of the Parliament as part of its drugs inquiry five years ago. The recommendation made then to the Executive was that many women do not present themselves for help with addiction because they are frightened that their children will be taken away. That is an important consideration in the light of the shift in practice that the Executive proposes. The Parliament told the Executive five years ago that children who live in drug misusing families need support.

Councils are spending up to 50 per cent over their grant aided expenditure on children's services, mostly for child protection. The City of Edinburgh Council has reported that it is short of administrative workers to type up case notes and that it might not be able to comply fully with Government child protection measures. The minister may look glum, but she should remember the cases of Caleb Ness and Michael McGarrity, in which problems arose because of a lack of information sharing. Typing up case notes is part of that.

We found out this month that 109 clients in Edinburgh have waited more than 52 weeks for assessment for their addiction. The Association of Directors of Social Work says that across Scotland some key services operate with a vacancy level of 40 per cent, so the minister will forgive me for not being completely consensual on the issue.

It is essential to ensure that progress is made, but it might have been more appropriate to take first steps before "next steps". The minister will know that taking children away from their families is a serious matter indeed. The public sector is not necessarily the best carer for such children, as the minister has highlighted. There is so much to do in this area, but everybody must face up to their responsibilities.

The SNP will offer its support to deliver improvements, but we will not do so uncritically. Experience on this issue shows that the Executive often needs to be closely scrutinised to ensure that momentum is not lost.

I move amendment S2M-4370.2, to leave out from first "acknowledges" to end and insert:

"notes that in 2002 the current First Minister, formerly minister with responsibility for children, said that the Executive and relevant agencies had three years to get their collective act together on child protection; recognises that child protection issues generally, including the increasing number of cases where drugs misuse is a factor, are complex and need thought-through policy solutions and concerted action for delivery, and calls on the Executive to redouble its efforts to complete implementation of the child protection recommendations contained in the 2002 report, *It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright*, which it committed to fulfil but which are still outstanding, and to ensure that it adopts a comprehensive policy approach to

proposed legislation for child protection, adoption and fostering and children's hearings which puts the child at centre stage and which addresses support for kinship care, listens to children and to professionals in the field and also addresses support services where current spend on children's services by local authorities on average far exceeds GAE allocation to a disproportionate extent."

15:16

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland)

(Con): I welcome today's debate as an opportunity for the Parliament to address another side of drug abuse. In a number of debates in the chamber, we have discussed the damage that drug abuse causes in Scotland and what we can do to help an addict try to achieve a stable and drug-free lifestyle.

As members know, however, it is never only the addict who suffers through drug abuse; some of the more heartbreaking stories that have been reported recently involved children of drug addicts. Fiona Hyslop mentioned Michael McGarrity. We also have Derek Doran and, of course, the tragedy of the 11-year-old girl in Glasgow. Those stories illustrate the impact that drug-abusing parents can have on children. That is why my colleagues and I welcome the Executive's "Hidden Harm" report, which was published on Monday.

I whole-heartedly agree with the minister that the protection of children must always be top priority in such cases. However, I have some concerns. The Executive still cannot tell me how many individual rehabilitation places are available across Scotland. As we heard on Monday, there is a shortage of foster carers for children who must be removed from their parents. I am worried that the Executive's glossy document will turn out to be another bitter disappointment.

In 2003, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs published the original "Hidden Harm" report, in which it was estimated that between 41,000 and 59,000 children in Scotland have a drug-using parent, and between 10,000 and 19,000 children live with a drug-using parent. Vitally, one of the key findings of that report was that the number of children who are affected is likely to decrease only when the number of problem drug users decreases. I agree with that finding and it is why I am disappointed that the Executive's report does not put more emphasis on preventive measures.

I cannot understand why drug treatment and testing orders are available only to offenders who have built up a catalogue of offences, whereas individuals who have committed their first offence because of their drug addiction are denied any intervention. My party and I have continually argued that such interventions should be available in district courts and in children's panels so that individuals can be helped and diverted from the

path to crime. It seems absurd that, to get help, someone must become a serial offender. I know that that was not the principle that drove the concept of drugs courts, with which my party is content—we approve of that principle—but consequences are emerging that it would be foolhardy to disregard.

I am also worried about what will happen to the parents of any children who are taken into care. If the Executive does not have comprehensive information about what rehabilitation is available, what hope does an addict have? There is a danger that parents could try desperately to seek help to stabilise their lives and get their children back, but be unable to access the help they need. Even for accessing methadone, at the end of the quarter to September 2005, 130 people across Scotland had waited more than a year to get prescribed drug treatment.

I concede that none of us has all the answers, but is the Executive looking at practices and treatments elsewhere? Is it investigating what other countries are doing or what may be available within the United Kingdom? What about neuro-electric therapy, which was pioneered by a Scottish doctor? Is it available and could it work? Is the Executive prepared to look at that?

I think we all agree that prioritising the very worst parents for help so that they get their children back but giving the parents who are deemed to be not so bad no help at all would be unacceptable. If we intend to use the ultimate sanction of removing children from their parents and expect it to work as an incentive and as a deterrent, we will have to ensure that parents can get help with addressing their addiction.

I return to the basic principle that the advisory council highlighted in 2003: if we are to help to protect children of drug abusers, we will need to reduce the occurrence of drug abuse. Indeed, I agree with and applaud the Executive on three of the key priorities in "Hidden Harm": to

"increase the number of problematic drug users getting timely and effective treatment; reduce reoffending"

by endeavouring to assist and

"reduce the availability of drugs".

That has to be our goal and I believe that it can be done. More preventive measures need to be taken to stop people getting into the hellish environment of addiction in the first place. That is why I propose the addition of a couple of lines to the motion.

I move amendment S2M-4370.1, to insert at end:

"but believes that progress will be impeded unless there is an increase in the availability of rehabilitation for those addicted parents, as well as a greater emphasis on educational and preventative measures to stop people getting involved with drugs in the first place."

15:21

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I note what you said about the shortage of time, Presiding Officer.

I lodged and will move my amendment, but not to deny the good intentions of the Executive's motion. In the section of "Hidden Harm" on the strategy for tackling drugs, the Executive says:

"There is no single treatment option that works better than others."

I could not agree more and my amendment supports that approach. Indeed, our experience over the past 25 years of having roughly the same mix of policies for dealing with substance abuse has taught us that. We have also learned that the mix of measures falls far short of achieving the objective that is identified in the report of people having

"wherever possible ... a drug-free life."

A week or two ago, the minister spoke about the small reduction in the number of heroin abusers. I doubt whether that can be identified as a trend, however. Even if the decrease is not reversed, I think it is accepted that other drugs have filled the gap. The overall picture is that we continue to have a huge drug-abuse problem.

As we have heard, tens of thousands of children live with parents who abuse substances. In, "Hidden Harm", the Executive says:

"Across Scotland there are an estimated 40,000-60,000 children affected by parental drug use. An estimated 80,000-100,000 children are affected by parental alcohol misuse."

That is why I always prefer to talk of substance abuse.

By and large, we understand the use and abuse of alcohol much better than we understand the use and abuse of drugs. Although I would like integrated policies and service delivery for alcohol and drug abuse to be developed, particularly in relation to children who live with substance-abusing parents, I have concentrated on drugs in my amendment today because it is the area where we should have more evaluation of current practices and more investigation of alternatives.

Because alcohol is legal, policies are easier to change than are those that apply to illegal drugs. We neither control the market in illegal drugs nor attempt to control attitudes—or, rather, we try to do so, knowing that we cannot. I will therefore concentrate on illegal drugs for the remainder of my contribution, as the issue is more difficult to resolve.

I suggest, as I have done before, that one of the things that we must do, if we are to think seriously about how to cope with the huge number of

children whose lives are blighted here and now by drugs, is to admit that we do not have the facilities, services or service delivery mechanisms that those children require.

Perhaps we can think about short circuiting. Could we return to the old system and have a pilot scheme in a suitable area to provide heroin users with legally prescribed heroin? I want such a scheme to be evaluated. No one can argue that the present system is any better than the old one of delivering measured amounts of heroin through a medical route. I wonder whether it can be proved that it is any worse for children to live with heroin-using parents when the heroin is prescribed and delivered by a doctor than it is for them to live with parents whose lives are made chaotic not only by their heroin abuse, but by what they have to do to get their heroin and by the consequences of using heroin that might be cut with heaven knows what.

Annabel Goldie has spoken movingly in the Parliament about methadone, but I still feel that we have not worked out what methadone is for. Is it a palliative or a short-term treatment? Or, if we take into account the realities to which I referred, such as the shortage of services on the ground and the lack of delivery mechanisms for services, is it really a medicine that people take to keep going when they are desperate? For some people, we should face the unfaceable. At present, we do not offer anything other than methadone, so we must consider how we can make the system just a wee bit better. I agree with Rosemary Byrne that we must intervene and get to the mothers of the children as soon as they leave hospital.

My amendment mentions kinship carers, whom we often think of as being grandparents, although sometimes they can be other members of the extended family. There are also community carers. Those people must be recompensed. It costs money to do normal activities with children, such as going to the swimming baths or taking them to sports activities. I am glad that Glasgow City Council has acknowledged that, but we do not have a national attitude or policy on recompensing kinship and community carers. I hope that members will support my amendment.

I move amendment S2M-4370.3, to leave out from “; recognises” to end and insert:

“and to that end guarantees to investigate properly alternative regimes that aim to reduce the harm done by drug abuse and stabilise the lifestyle of persistent drug abusers; acknowledges the important role of kinship carers in helping to safeguard and nurture children who have been affected by substance misuse and recognises this role by financially recompensing them to an agreed national standard, and supports the Executive’s commitment to further improvements in the way that agencies protect and support children in these circumstances.”

15:27

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD): We are all well aware of the links between drug abuse, poor health, low educational attainment and crime. If we need any reminder of the problem’s cross-portfolio implications, we can find it in the ministerial foreword to “Hidden Harm—Next Steps: Supporting Children—Working With Parents”, where no fewer than three ministers’ faces grace the page.

The impact of substance abuse is not restricted to the individual abuser; it can be no less than devastating for their children, so we should not underestimate the scale of the problem. As several members have said, 40,000 to 60,000 children throughout Scotland are affected by parental drug abuse, together with the 100,000 or so children who are affected by alcohol abuse. That means that between one in 10 and one in 15 of all Scotland’s under-16s suffer from so-called hidden harm. It is worth hanging on to that truly worrying statistic. The number of babies who are born to drug-addicted mothers has risen by more than 30 per cent in less than a decade. Maternal drug taking jeopardises foetal development and maternal drug injecting carries with it the risk of transmitting viral hepatitis and HIV. Parental drug abuse is associated with poverty, frequent changes in residence, interrupted education and exposure to criminal behaviour. It can lead to emotional, cognitive, behavioural and other psychological problems and early substance misuse in children. We must remark on the resilience of the children who survive that kind of home background.

Drug abuse also causes dangerously inadequate parenting, including lack of supervision and neglect in the most serious cases. Furthermore, sadly, children who live with drug-addicted parents can sometimes access toxic substances. We know of the serious and very sad case of the toddler, Derek Doran, who died recently after drinking his parents’ methadone.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to protecting our most vulnerable children. The Executive has already taken steps in that direction through, for example, the Scotland-specific response to the 2003 report, “Hidden Harm: responding to the needs of children of problem drug users” and policy documents such as, “It’s everyone’s job to make sure I’m alright”. The publication of “Hidden Harm—Next Steps” should be welcomed as a further sign of the Executive’s commitment to helping those children. I compliment the work of the working group. I look forward to seeing the updated alcohol plan, which is said to be coming soon.

I commend the emphasis in “Hidden Harm” on the role of voluntary bodies. It is vital that we co-

ordinate a multi-agency approach to combating hidden harm. Vulnerable children should be identified quickly. That will be facilitated by the proposed information-sharing measures that the minister mentioned and which the report outlines. Once identified, it is crucial that such children are tracked and do not become lost in the system, which can happen at the transition from nursery to primary school, from primary school to secondary school and from secondary school to further and higher education. Children should be tracked to see what progress is being made. There needs to be early intervention, joint working by agencies, information sharing and effective outcomes.

The minister referred to the proposal to remove some vulnerable children from drug-addicted parents. Obviously it is preferable for children to remain with their family, or indeed their extended family. However, if parents are completely unable to provide a satisfactory level of care for the child, action must be taken to place the child in a safer environment. The foundations of the children's hearings system, the culture of the Scottish courts and the ethos of our education system and Scottish public policy lie in the promotion of the best interests of the child, which is why the minister was right in what she said. Placing the child in care might seem like a drastic solution, but it is a step that might need to be taken if the wider family cannot care adequately for the child.

I turn briefly to fostering. I have had some experience of the Fostering Network, in a different role. I welcome the proposed development of a new national fostering strategy. We have been able to increase markedly allowances for foster carers, whose work is of fundamental importance. Unlike Fiona Hyslop, I do not believe that there has been a delay in the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Bill, which I think is on target. She might have spent a bit more time thinking about the work that has gone into making it one of the most important bills that we will pass in this session of Parliament.

Family group conferencing is immensely important, but it is a voluntary activity that cannot be created by statute. We might say that those who are engaged should use it as a procedure or form of helping to resolve a particular circumstance and that it should be developed.

If we are able to remove the burdens on some of the children who are affected by hidden harm, we will release what might be described as the hidden talent of the nation. Members should think of the talent that has been wasted because so many people live in these circumstances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come now to the open debate. I start by calling Patrick Harvie, to be followed by Rosemary Byrne. Because their parties have no opening and closing

time, I will give them six minutes and other members will receive five.

15:34

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I certainly welcome the opportunity to debate the Executive's report. I will begin by reflecting, as many members will, on the cases that we hear about and their emotive impact. There cannot be a single member of any party who is unmoved by the many such cases.

We are talking about a problem that is difficult to solve. No Executive, regardless of its composition, would find that it suddenly became easy to solve. Given that much of the problem is hidden, the easy thing to do would be not to go looking for it. Although I have criticisms of some aspects of the work that is being done, we should all acknowledge that the Executive has not taken that easy option and is willing to face up to the issue.

Given the complexity and the difficult nature of the problem, I find it highly frustrating that its treatment in the media and in some aspects of public debate is often dominated by stereotypes of drug users and simplistic ideas about the kind of people they are, the types of drugs they use—alcohol is often ignored, even though it often accounts for the bulk of the problem that we are discussing—and whether their children should be taken into care. There is little recognition of what a stark option that is or of the fact that the facilities that allow that to be done are limited. Drug-using parents are often stereotyped as being uncaring and incapable people when, although their ability to be parents may be restricted, in most cases they have something to offer. The simplistic assumption is made that the high-profile, extreme scenarios are the norm. We should acknowledge that that is not the case. All those ideas, assumptions and stereotypes are deeply unhelpful.

We must consider what would be helpful. Much of what is contained in the Executive's report is helpful. It recognises that we must focus on the best interests of the children. I hope that I misheard Annabel Goldie, but I think that she suggested that children could be taken into care as an incentive or a deterrent. The extreme action of taking a child into care must be taken only to protect that child's welfare; it should not be used as an incentive or a deterrent.

"Hidden Harm—Next Steps" points out that it is not appropriate to apply the same approach on every occasion. I am most drawn to the amendment in the name of Margo MacDonald, who spoke about that. We should examine all the alternatives, including the prescription of heroin, for the reasons that Margo MacDonald outlined.

In addition, we should consider alternative approaches to the application of the criminal law as it stands. My party and the Scottish Socialist Party would like the criminal law to be used in a very different way; in that regard, we do not sign up to the consensus that exists among the majority of members. We should all aim to ensure that when people come into contact with the criminal law because of their drug using, that serves as a route to support, treatment and services rather than a route into the punitive system of prison. We should recognise the deeply damaging impact that imprisonment can have not only on the individuals concerned, but on their families. In that context, I highlight the work of the happy project in Glasgow, which works with the families and youngsters of prisoners to ensure that contact is maintained.

Cathy Jamieson: I had a meeting with the happy project only last week.

Does the member acknowledge that on several occasions I have made statements in which I have said that we should seek to provide pathways out of drug misuse at every stage in the criminal justice system and that we should use a variety of methods to do so, including mandatory drug testing, which I hope would lead to treatment?

Patrick Harvie: I welcome the minister's comments, but we should recognise that the fact that we are still imprisoning people who have addiction issues can only help to fuel the idea that what they require is judgment and condemnation, when we should be focused on support and care.

As the report mentions, it is crucial that we get beyond the idea that all we need to do is to decide whether a child needs to be taken into care. We must acknowledge that when we consider the welfare of a child about whom we are concerned, we should take account of all the resources that are available. As well as those that are available through the state, we should remember those that are available through the child's community, their extended family and their parents, even if those parents are misusing drugs.

Before I finish, I want to make two quick points. I know that Susan Deacon will talk about issues that go beyond the interventions of hospitals and antenatal classes and so on, and will talk about fertility issues and about encouraging addicts to take control of their fertility. I would like to associate myself with what I think she is likely to say. I look forward to her speech.

Finally, at the front of the "Hidden Harm" report are the pictures of three ministers, but of those three only the Minister for Justice is here today for the debate. That is slightly regrettable.

15:40

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland)

(SSP): I welcome this debate and the further commitment to protecting children. However, the issues surrounding drug addiction and child safety are complex. It is important that we treat parental drug addictions while ensuring that children are protected and have their needs met. We do not need knee-jerk reactions of the kind that lead to children being taken into care; and we certainly do not need knee-jerk reactions to one or two incidents that—although serious, frightening and extremely worrying—represent only a minority of cases. We must consider the whole picture and not just part of it.

Negative stereotyping of drug-using parents is counterproductive to the treatment of drug users and, consequently, to the safety of children. Mothers will not access services if they feel threatened. If mothers feel that their children will be taken away from them, they will not go near services—and those children will be the ones who suffer the most. Therefore, we must be careful that as we try to improve the lot of children, we do not make things worse.

The ministerial foreword to the report says:

"We recognise that parents with substance misuse problems need help. The Scottish Executive has increased the availability and range of treatment and rehabilitation across Scotland. But our priority, and the priority of every local agency, must be to protect and safeguard children."

I believe strongly that we need to protect and safeguard children. Anyone who knows me and knows the work that I have done will acknowledge that. However, I must ask again: if we do not treat the parents, how can we protect the children? I take issue with the statement in the foreword because we have so many waiting lists and so many people who are not accessing services. Yes, more money has been put in, but the services are not integrated. I welcome the aim to integrate those services but we are a long way from achieving that.

In a briefing, the Association of Directors of Social Work states:

"The effective treatment of the parent can have major benefits for the child. At present, insufficient help is given to help parents who have a substance abuse problem. There are waiting lists for methadone prescribing and insufficient alternatives to methadone."

I agree whole-heartedly with Margo MacDonald that we need a pilot on methadone. We need pilots on other substances as well.

The ADSW briefing continues:

"Sheriffs tell us that offenders are asking to go to prison as they know that they will be able to access health services for their addiction problems there. ADSW contend that by not providing sufficient rehabilitation services to help people stop their misuse, we are not just failing drug users, we are failing their children."

I could also read members a quote from Children 1st. In its experience, treatment is not always readily available when parents want to get help. I feel that we are missing the boat on many occasions.

I received an email after the last—

Cathy Jamieson: Will the member take an intervention?

Ms Byrne: Yes.

Cathy Jamieson: I am sorry to interrupt, because I am sure that Rosemary was about to describe a particular case. Before she does so, will she accept that there are some people who, despite all the help, all the support and all the treatment facilities that are made available, do not take them up. Sometimes, in the best interests of the child, it is the responsibility of the local authority to act and to ensure that the child is safeguarded.

Ms Byrne: Yes, Cathy. Anyone who comes to access services should have an assessment that results in a care plan, so that the needs of the family, as well as the needs of the addict, are taken into consideration. To me, that would be one of the best ways of protecting children. Yes, there will be extreme cases in which people have their children taken away from them, but I do not want that to happen whenever people have not had access to the right kind of treatment. We must offer a range of treatments, and that range of services is not available throughout the country, which is why I differ from the Executive on the matter.

A young woman from Campbeltown e-mailed me a few weeks ago, after the Scottish Socialist Party debate on drugs. She said that she was a heroin addict who had been prescribed coproxamol—Jean Turner will tell me if I pronounced that incorrectly—but she had been told that the drug was no longer available in her area. The young woman said that she now has two addictions but gets no support. She asked me for help and because I am not an MSP for her area I passed on her e-mail. I also asked parliamentary questions on the matter. A doctor who works in drug services told me a similar story about a young woman who went through detox in Glasgow because there were no services in her home town of Campbeltown. The doctor said, “I detoxed her with a heavy heart, because if she injects heroin she will die.” Those are anecdotal examples of the issues that we must deal with. I wish I had more time to speak.

We need integrated services that treat addicts, assess children's needs and put together a care plan. I welcome the acknowledgment of the role of the extended family and I am disappointed that the Executive's document on hidden harm contains

just two scant mentions of kinship care and extended families. The best way of protecting children is to support grandparents and other members of the extended family who take on the children and do a good job.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close now.

Ms Byrne: The Presiding Officer is indicating that I must finish, which is unfortunate. Let us have an approach to the problem that supports and protects the more than 50,000 children in Scotland who live with drug-using parents, by keeping children with families as much as possible, making the necessary assessments and providing the support that is required.

15:46

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): The toll that substance misuse in all its forms takes on wider family members is often incalculable. The estimate that more than 50,000 children are affected by a parent's drug misuse is mind boggling and it is incumbent on all members to do whatever they can to address the issue.

I hope that the debate will make it clear that there is no single solution to the problem. Myriad complementary strategies need to be developed and enhanced if we are to tackle the issue effectively. This might have been said, but it should be continually restated, particularly in a debate such as this one: we must focus not just on the parent but on the child or young person. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 could not be more explicit in stating that the needs of the child are paramount. That is easy to say but much more difficult to put into practice. We must ensure that children's interests remain at the forefront of our attention, but those interests can often conflict with what parents want or think they want.

The minister acknowledged that the decision compulsorily to remove a child from the parental home is difficult. I have had to make such decisions, as have other members. We know that outcomes for most children in the public care system are poor, but we must also accept that the outcomes for children in some households are as poor, if not poorer. The task that faces not just social workers but wider society is to get such decisions right. There must be no presumption that children will be left at home, but equally there can be no presumption that we will remove more than 50,000 children from their homes and place them in the public care system. We need to know which children require extra support, what support is needed and when that support is needed. We must also ensure that we provide the right support.

When I left the employment of Fife Council in 1999, 94 approved foster carers were looking after

about 150 young people. This week, 150 council-approved foster carers are looking after 253 young people. It would be neither possible nor desirable to increase the number of carers exponentially so that the 1,500 or more children in Fife who live in households in which there is substance misuse could be admitted into the public care system. Some children will have to be taken into public care, but others can live at home, be cared for by the extended family or be cared for in a shared-care arrangement on a statutory or voluntary basis.

Indeed, it seems to me that the principles of the 1995 act are not always being upheld. Far too often, young people end up in public care under statutory orders as opposed to living in substitute care on a shared-care basis through voluntary means in which both foster carers and wider kinship care are utilised. If we are serious about addressing the problem that we are discussing, we must start to embrace the concept of shared care. There should not be a one-size-fits-all approach, or one system or the other system. Wider family members are regularly utilised in our child care practices, but the public care system far too often involves a choice between one system and another. A much more appropriate system is not utilised.

“Hidden Harm: Scottish Executive Response to the Report of the Inquiry by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs” is an incredibly worthwhile document. It must be acknowledged that more than half of it consists of recommendations and what will be done, which we must concentrate on—that has not been mentioned. One response that I want to highlight relates to recommendation 10. The document states:

“Ministers have announced that child protection training will be a mandatory requirement for all social workers registered with the Scottish Social Services Council”.

For far too long, child protection has been seen as being the responsibility only of child and family social workers, when it is the responsibility of all those who work in the child care system as well as of wider society.

More resources are needed, but much more effective use must be made of the resources that are currently available. It is not acceptable that 50 per cent of places at Brenda House are vacant. Before we call for more resources, we must ensure that local authorities are using the resources that are currently available to their maximum potential.

One size does not fit all. If we are serious about ensuring that children's and young people's needs are central to our agenda, we must ensure that parents' needs are not confused or conflated with them.

15:52

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): I happily concur with a great deal of what Scott Barrie has said, but I want to make three points.

First, I agree with what the minister said about needing to put child protection at the heart of things. Clearly that needs to happen. Child protection is at the heart of various matters in Scotland, including in disputes between parents when they are getting divorced. In such situations, it is not a matter of choosing between mum and dad, but of what is in the child's best interests. The same applies when we are talking about drugs. Scott Barrie testified to the fact that it is not a matter of choosing between a drug-free environment and an environment in which there may be drugs, albeit that they are monitored and controlled; the issue is what is in the best interests of the child.

Secondly, it is important to consider the point that Fiona Hyslop correctly made. The problem is a social problem that requires social solutions—it is not simply a criminal justice problem.

Thirdly, in looking for solutions, we must ensure that we do not create scapegoats. In many tragedies, the agenda is not so much political as driven by tabloid headlines and a desire simply to find someone to blame. We must recognise that if judgment calls must be made, they can sometimes go wrong. We cannot get into a position in which nobody is prepared to make a decision because they are afraid that it might be wrong. I am not saying that we should allow people to make mistakes willy-nilly or that we should not consider mistakes that have been made in the past and how problems can be solved to ensure that they are not replicated; I am saying that we must recognise that mistakes will sometimes be made, that wrong judgment calls will be made and that, rather than stigmatise a social worker who is to blame—

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): Will the member take an intervention?

Mr MacAskill: By all means.

Hugh Henry: I share the member's sentiments, but would he say that politicians in this Parliament and elsewhere have a responsibility? If he believes that judgment calls can sometimes go wrong and that their doing so should not lead to people being stigmatised, politicians here or elsewhere should not call for an inquiry every time a mistake is made.

Mr MacAskill: I heartily concur with that. When a mistake is made, we must review, but an inquiry is clearly not needed or beneficial in every instance. If an incident happens, there might be a public inquiry, but in many instances that will not be necessary. It is a matter of balance.

On the general point, I agree with Hugh Henry that politicians should take cognisance of the fact that we have access to the media and can either damp down the situation or inflame it.

Other members have made the point that the state has not been a good parent. Mistakes have been made in the past and there was a perception—which transcended political parties and went across the view of the social work service—that we should ensure that kids were dealt with at home. Clearly, we went too far. That is not to say that those decisions were made wrongly; nobody deliberately set out to create a situation in which people would be harmed. Nevertheless, we recognise that we got it wrong and went too far. We must ensure that we do not simply bounce back, have a knee-jerk reaction and go entirely the other way. We must recognise that, as in many instances, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

We must consider what is in the best interests of the child. In some instances, we may have to take them out of the parental home irrespective of how their relationship is, but in other instances that would be inappropriate, because—as other members, in particular Fiona Hyslop, said—the state has not been a good parent. It is not that the state set out deliberately to harm the children, but there have been problems because of the nature of the environment in which the children live and we must address that.

We need legislation to ensure that access to information is changed. We have a problem in that people can be—perhaps correctly—hung up on the fact that it is not within their ability or their rights to disclose information. We must also recognise that some of the issues come down to personalities. We cannot make the health visitor speak to the police officer and the general practitioner. We can put the structures in place, but we must also try to ensure that people work together within those structures. It comes back to the point that, at some stage, decisions will have to be made.

As Scott Barrie said, we will have to make a decision about what is in the best interests of a child, and we must give some slack to those in the front line who have to make those decisions. They will be social workers not at the senior level in the ADSW, but at the rank-and-file level, and we will have to allow them to make some mistakes without being pilloried.

15:57

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): By any measure, the 2003 report from the UK Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, “Hidden Harm: Responding to the needs

of children of problem drug users”, was a landmark document that has hugely informed us about the critically important area of the impact on children of parental drugs misuse. Equally, the work that has been done by the Executive in response to that report has helped to progress both policy and practice in the area. However, there is a challenge for all of us politicians—not just the Executive—to ensure that we use the material in a thoughtful way to reflect the complexity of the issue and that we resist taking a simplistic approach either in a debate on the issue or in seeking policy solutions. Although the hidden harm work rightly shows us the particular impact that parental drugs misuse has on children, we should not single out drugs misuse in areas of policy and practice where there is a commonality of problem or issue with, for example, alcohol misuse and other circumstances that may endanger children or have an adverse impact on their upbringing.

I join other members in saying that we must also factor into the debate a proportionate approach to risk. We must always work to reduce risk, but we can never eliminate it. If we are to retain and recruit the professionals we need in this complex and sensitive area of work, it is vital that we create a climate in which that is recognised, rather than stoking up a climate in which those professionals operate with a fear of failure and ultimate blame when things go wrong—as they will, from time to time.

It is also important that we consider each individual situation and ensure that, in assessing the outcomes of different actions or interventions, we look not just at those that are tangible and measurable. It is easy to recognise the failure in a situation in which a child has been left in the home and subsequently has been injured or—worse still—tragically has died. It is much harder to assess the impact or damage that might result from removing a child from the home, and what might happen over many years to the child, their parents and the wider family as a consequence of the child having gone into care or having gone backwards and forwards between temporary care and their parents.

I want to highlight three specific health policy issues from the “Hidden Harm” report that the Executive published this week. Although I acknowledge that the health and education ministers have signed up to the report along with the Minister for Justice, I am disappointed that no health minister is participating in this debate, because much of this work is about health policy and practice among health professionals and in the national health service.

The first area to mention is maternity services, a theme that I am pleased to say has run right

through all the hidden harm work from 2003 to the Executive response in 2004 and the action plan that has come out this week. Indeed, it has run through other associated documents such as “A Framework for maternity services in Scotland” and other work that has been done during the past five years. As is so often the case, the problem is that the commitments have not been translated into practice throughout the country. I do not think that that is because of a lack of political will, but somehow we have to understand why those things have not happened and why many vulnerable women do not get the antenatal care, support at birth and post-natal support that they require.

The second issue is contraception and family planning, which is another theme that runs right through all the various stages of the hidden harm work but which is still not happening in practice. I have heard it said that the budgets are not available to offer some of the contraceptive solutions that might be made available to women who misuse drugs. However, I note that although it costs approximately £80 to £90 to offer a long-acting contraceptive implant that lasts for three years—I stress the word “offer” as it should be part of a process of informed choice—that is not being made universally available to substance-misusing women at the times and in the places that would allow them to access it.

The final issue that I want to mention is school nursing, which was highlighted in the Executive’s 2004 response to the advisory council’s report. Many school nurses gathered in the Parliament today for an event that I hosted. Let us translate aspiration into practice, as school nurses could do so much more in this area.

16:02

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): The “Hidden Harm” report estimates that approximately 50,000 children are affected by substance misuse in Scotland. As Scott Barrie so aptly stated, that statistic is “mindboggling”.

Where children live with a parent or parents who misuse a substance—drugs or alcohol—the safety of the children must be the primary concern of the professionals who have to decide whether they should remain in those households. That is the main message of the “Hidden Harm” report and it is one to be welcomed.

However, although the focus on a child’s well-being and safety is clearly good, the issue is far from being straightforward. Children 1st points out that making decisions about the best interests and the future well-being of a child is complex. In other words, it is far from being a black-and-white issue. Some children of substance-abusing parents have strong support and are protected and cared for;

sadly, others are not. That being the case, there must be better identification of the children who are at risk and their needs. As the Barnardo’s report says, there have to be sustainable ways of supporting children in their families, if that is a safe option.

The importance of family to children cannot be overestimated, yet many of the children of parents who are addicted to drugs or alcohol do not enjoy a normal childhood, and they often assume the role of carers for their parents and younger siblings. That point was poignantly brought home to me and some fellow MSPs who undertook a heartstart UK course recently, during which the instructors from the British Heart Foundation said that some children as young as five, six or seven are already expert at ensuring that an unconscious person is put into the recovery position pending the arrival of medical help because they frequently have to do that when their drug or alcohol-dependent parent has passed out.

How, in that case, can we best deal with this problem? Certainly, each case must be judged on its merits and, where possible, rather than removing children from their family, the role that the wider family—aunts, uncles, grandparents, other relatives and close family friends—could play in supporting the child should be considered. I am pleased that the motion recognises that.

The approach makes sense, particularly given the shortage of foster carers and the well-documented shortcomings and frequent adverse outcomes of institutional care, including low educational attainment, increased risk of drug use, mental illness, homelessness, offending behaviour and a lack of self-esteem.

Without doubt, however, the best way in which to ensure the safety of children and to improve their lives is to ensure that help and treatment for their substance-misusing parents are available, especially at the point at which those addicts are ready to face up to and tackle their addiction. That is when rehabilitation programmes have the greatest chance of being successful. As Rosemary Byrne said, and as the Children 1st report confirms, that help is not always readily available. That situation must be rectified by making drug testing and treatment orders available not only as a high-tariff disposal for offenders with a series of offences but as an early intervention measure for those addicts who have committed one or two minor offences. Further, a sufficient number of rehab places must be available and a directory must be established that would provide information on where those places are, how many of them there are and when they can be accessed.

Without that vital support, I fear that the Executive’s proposals for substance-misusing parents to complete the social work and related

services' care plans and other extremely worthwhile measures are unlikely to be effective or to achieve the desired end result.

With that in mind, I hope that the Executive will support the amendment in the name of Annabel Goldie.

16:07

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): This is an overdue debate. Like many people in the real world, I express some surprise that there is a debate about whether a child should be left in the supposed care of drug-addicted parents who are living chaotic lives. How can anyone justify leaving a baby to fend for itself while dad is pimping, or robbing gran? How can it be acceptable to leave a seven-year-old to get up and get herself and her wee brother ready for school? How can it be acceptable to leave a seven-year-old in a situation in which he has to climb out of the back window to run to his gran at 2 o'clock in the morning because the latest man in the house is beating up his mother over drugs?

Some would say that those examples are hyped or are of a tabloid nature. However, unfortunately, they represent the reality for too many of our children in Scotland and reflect my case load and the experiences of the people who come to see me. How can it be right, even in the politically correct world of Patrick Harvie, that we leave that situation unchallenged? How can we propose a test that asks whether something would be acceptable for our children and says that, if it is not, it cannot be acceptable for anyone else's?

Patrick Harvie: Will the member give way?

Mr McNeil: No, we have limited time and Mr Harvie has already said a lot.

The children whom we are talking about are the real victims of drugs. We have had many debates that have treated the drug addict as the victim. However, it is the children who take the consequences, not the individuals who turn down help and who are in a life of addiction, drug use and crime. Some of them choose to take drugs. Some of them end up pregnant when they are in no way able to look after a child.

I am pleased that we are talking about the hidden harm today. However, it has not been hidden at all; the problem is simply that we have not faced up to it. I am glad that we are facing up to it today. The measures in the document will do a lot to tackle the problem.

Objections have been raised over the cost and dubious benefits of putting drug addicts' children into care but, as others have said, local authority care is not the only option. Indeed, it may be the second-best option. Many members would agree

that we can address the situation with the help of the wider family. In my experience of such cases, grandparents are desperate to get involved, to look after the children and to protect them from harm.

Grandparents can make a real contribution, but they have been excluded by the system. They believe that the system has conspired against them and prevented them from being involved. They have suffered from the actions of overoptimistic professionals who say that everything will be okay in a week or a month. Jack McConnell mentioned the role of grandparents earlier today, and Rosemary Byrne raised the matter as well. As Jack McConnell said, grandparents are not in it for financial gain, but we should not exploit their love for and commitment to the children. They need support to ensure that they can do a good job.

Susan Deacon referred to the other question that we need to ask. Why are we in a situation where so many of those who are addicted to drugs are having children? We know from the document and from reality that there are dangers such as HIV and AIDS and dangers to the mother and child from difficult pregnancies. We are talking about people with long-term addictions. Susan Deacon gave us some ideas on how we can tackle the problem, but as a first step we need to explore putting an oral contraceptive in methadone. In that way, we could reduce the problem and prevent some children from coming to harm. That would be good not just for the families involved but for taxpayers, who spend a lot of money on the problem. I hope that ministers will take those ideas on board.

16:12

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate. It is a classic example of a debate on not just a cross-cutting issue but a cross-party issue. The Parliament should be able to debate and discuss the matter independently of party politics because we all know the problems that people face as a result of drug addiction and the problems that that creates for many of our children.

The issue is not just about justice, the health service or education. I am pleased that Robert Brown has turned up to hear part of the debate. It would have been helpful to have one of the health ministers here too, but I am sure that they will find out what was said in the debate. It is important that we take a cross-cutting approach to the matter. Indeed, the "Hidden Harm" document was published jointly by three key departments: the Justice Department, the Education Department and the Health Department. That sends out an important message.

We need co-operation and co-ordination between services on the ground too. We need co-operation between maternity services, health workers, general practitioners, child care services, nursery nurses, teachers and law enforcement agencies to ensure not only that services are provided as and when they are required but that information is available so that people know whether they need to look out for a problem. If a teacher does not know that a child comes from a family with drug addiction problems, they might not know that they should look out for problems. In the recent tragic case in Edinburgh, the child did not turn up to nursery, but that was not spotted for weeks. That is a classic example of a case in which something should have happened simply because people should have been aware that there was a problem.

Ms Byrne: Will the member give way?

Iain Smith: I am sorry. I have only a few minutes and I do not want to take an intervention on that particular point.

It is important that we have information, but we must also be aware of the law of unintended consequences. We must not require information in a way that puts people off coming forward for the help and support that they need. We must be aware of that, because it is an important issue. We cannot have parents refusing to seek support for their addiction problems, whether they are alcohol or drug related, because they fear that they will be prosecuted or stigmatised or that information will reach their employers that affects their ability to continue their work. Those are important issues that we must bear in mind. Those considerations extend beyond parents to the extended family, about which we have spoken much in the debate. Grandparents, uncles, aunts and siblings should not fear that by coming forward to seek support and services, they will be in some way disadvantaged.

The child's interests are of course paramount. We cannot take 50,000 children into care and we must recognise that the state does not have a great record on the outcomes of the care that it provides. We should support approaches such as those of Children 1st and measures such as family conferences and extending kinship care to ensure that help and support are available to children when they need it.

The Drug and Alcohol Project Levenmouth has recently organised a project on family support services in my constituency. It had to scramble to obtain funds to run the pilot project, but that has proved a success, so I hope that longer-term funding will be obtained. Funding should be provided for such important additional services, which are aimed not directly at the family and the children but at the extended family and how they can cope when parents have drug problems.

It is important to recognise that access to addiction services is not as widely and readily available as it should be. It cannot be right that some people who want help to deal with an addiction problem might have to wait months before they have access to services. It is not in a child's interests if their parent is left in limbo while waiting for access to support. That child may be left in care or in an unsatisfactory family situation because their parent does not have access to the support that they require.

I fully accept that our society has priority areas that have more concentrated problems with drugs, so it is right to concentrate resources on such areas. However, we must not forget that there are hidden problems of drugs—not just hidden harm—in some of our more rural communities, where people who suffer from addiction can suffer severe problems of isolation and in getting transport and access to services. We must not forget that those people need access to services, too.

The debate is important and has been good. I hope that we can take the politics out of the issue for the remainder of the parliamentary session and in future sessions, because members need to act together on the issue.

16:17

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): How many members sometimes wonder—like I do—why we do our job? I know that many people out there think that they could do it much better than we can. On a day such as today, we realise that we can do something to change people's lives and the "Hidden Harm—Next Steps" report provides a way to do that. Much in the report is useful and positive. We can identify the problem but, as many members have said, the solution involves many factors and one size does not fit all.

In all my training and, I hope, my practice as a social worker, the child's welfare was paramount. How many times have I written and read that phrase in reports to children's hearings and to courts? Even before the massive misuse of substances, we always had the option of taking children into care or of using the extended family when care was inappropriate. Whether to take children into care has always been one of the most important decisions that a social worker makes and it is never a knee-jerk reaction, believe me.

Where did we put kids in the past? They went to large residential settings that were usually short of staff. However, we were sure that they had three meals a day and clean beds and that they went to school, so that was great—that was as much as we could do.

I have said before in the chamber and I will say again that social work is a much-maligned

profession. It is not for social workers to make the final decision on whether a child goes into care; that decision is for the children's hearings system or the court. As Susan Deacon said, a risk is attached to that. As she spoke, I thought of two occasions when my recommendation was kicked into touch and two children went home to be sexually abused again by their parents. I cannot tell members how that felt. It took six weeks before I could sort out the situation. I was frustrated and angry and felt fear for the children. We must remember that social workers do not take kids into care just because to do so is a good idea for getting them out of the way for a wee while.

Back in those days, case conferences were seen by some disciplines as not very important, but I think that things have improved a great deal. The report will ensure effective multi-agency assessment for substance users with children. Accurate communication between disciplines is essential. I can remember GPs, psychologists and social workers not turning up to case conferences because they did not think them important. We must build on the proposed legislation by introducing a duty to share information for the purposes of child protection. That is good practice.

If the proposal is to retain children at home under a possible contract with the parents and to develop a new national fostering strategy, some serious questions need to be addressed. I agree with the points that were made by Fiona Hyslop, Margo MacDonald and Rosemary Byrne, in that I have a wee bit of a fear that the report puts the cart before the horse in some ways. Retaining children at home must mean immediate help and support for the parent who is looking after them. Contracts will be no good if a range of support services is not available.

Margo MacDonald raised the issue of what methadone means. Methadone means that there is an immediate and definite change in a chaotic lifestyle. It means that the kids get up, get their breakfast and get to school. It means that there is food in the house when they return from school. However, methadone treatment is absolutely no good if it is not backed up with serious support and services.

What does it mean to be the child of a substance user? It means that a kid is withdrawn, aggressive, has no confidence and faces social isolation. These kids are afraid of what they will find when they get home. They feel in second place to the drugs.

I am impressed by the 14 local authorities in Scotland who convene family group conferences that include all members of extended families who are encouraged to take on responsibility for the family plan and for the care and protection of the kids involved. However, many such children are

looked after by their grandparents. If their parents have a chaotic lifestyle, grandparents often step in without any support from the public services. Such support is unknown and untapped, because the kids may be looked after for only six weeks before the parents stop using. However, the same situation might arise in another six weeks' time. If such kids are in and out of their grandparents' care, how do we provide support? To my mind, it is clear that grandparents who look after grandchildren who are known to the services should be paid, in money and in kind. Fewer grandparents would then walk away feeling that they were not supported. I believe that we need a national scheme.

The weakness in the document is the lack of checks and balances to ensure that the money—the issue will be money—is being properly used by local authorities and voluntary organisations. I am not absolutely sure that, once a need has been identified, the services will be available to respond to that need.

Children have a right to a childhood and we have a responsibility to ensure that they have one.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I should advise at this stage that I will need to deduct a minute from the time available for each of the closing speakers as well.

16:23

Ms Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): Although the publication of the "Hidden Harm—Next Steps" report gives the Executive another opportunity to highlight the plight of children who are exposed to drugs, I hope that the many professionals who work with vulnerable children do not say, with an air of resignation, "Aye, another report—aims but nae action and nae meaningful money into the right places." I hope that the report is not simply a knee-jerk reaction to the media coverage of recent months that has highlighted the tragic consequences for the vulnerable children of drug-abusing parents. Action must be taken and measurable success achieved as a result of the report.

In recent years, studies have concluded that, contrary to popular opinion, children are introduced to drugs not by pushers outside schools or peers, but mostly by family members. In one University of Glasgow study, a third of the 10 to 12-year-olds in the sample had been exposed to drugs, a quarter had been exposed to cannabis and substantial numbers had been in situations in which harder drugs had been used. Although children may be able to avoid situations in which friends and peers use drugs, it is much more difficult for children to avoid situations in which family members are the drug users. As

others have mentioned, that would seem to be borne out by the recent tragic cases of Michael McGarrity and Derek Doran, both of whom were identified as children of substance-misusing parents.

Such conclusions also highlight the need to ensure that education in schools on the danger of substance abuse not only adopts a broad-brush approach towards all pupils but targets supplementary help at specific groups of vulnerable children. If such targeting allows children, individually or in small groups, to open up to professionals about the specific dangers that they face in their home environment, meaningful intervention might be possible at an earlier stage.

That would obviously be relevant only to school-age children but, as Susan Deacon mentioned, those of us who met school nurses at lunch time today and those who have read the Association of Directors of Social Work's report will know that obtaining consent from the parents of primary school children is often a real difficulty, and that solution could allow the problem to be addressed at an early stage. I hope that the minister will agree that removing barriers to listening to children themselves must be an early priority.

One thing that I hope will result from the report and from today's debate is a recognition by all those working with children—midwives, practice nurses, doctors, nursery nurses, teachers, classroom assistants and anyone working in health, education, social work, the police and even the prison service, where prison officers see children on prison visits being used as drug mules with drugs hidden in their nappies and in other parts of their clothing—that they have a duty to share their concerns at an early stage. No one should say that it is not their place, and I agree with Trish Godman that everyone should see it as their duty to express their concerns and to have those concerns investigated—better to be safe than sorry.

The concerns of wider family members should also be taken seriously, as has been suggested. As soon as such concerns are brought to the attention of the authorities, action should be taken. Far too often, family members are ignored and those who would be willing to help if support were given are left feeling powerless to intervene. We saw such a situation in the tragic case of Danielle Reid in Inverness.

That leads us on to the question whether at-risk children should be left with their parents or taken into the care of foster parents or local authority children's homes. Experience has shown that long-term stays in children's homes can often be detrimental to children's academic and life skills attainment, so it should not be a route that is taken lightly. Fostering is often a more positive

experience, but if children who are at risk can be cared for safely by drug-free family members—grandparents, older siblings or members of the wider family—that should be considered.

I agree with Scotland's commissioner for children and young people that each case should be considered individually and that the best should be done for each child. I would also like to highlight the question that Pauline McNeill asked at First Minister's question time this morning, and I caution the Executive to think carefully before blindly following England in the numbers game and settling for a maximum of three children in one foster home. Such a limit takes no account of the persons already in the fostering family or of the need to keep larger numbers of children together.

The minister mentioned the implementation group. I would have been much more impressed if, instead of a top-down approach being taken again, that group had included members from neighbourhoods with drug problems, people who have already been drug users and others who could enable the group to take a bottom-up approach.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move now to winding-up speeches. I call Jean Turner.

16:28

Dr Jean Turner (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)
(Ind): This has been an excellent debate. Trish Godman put her finger on the crux of the matter: it is one thing to identify a need but it is another thing to provide for that need. So often, professionals find that they have a problem but do not have resources to help them deal with it.

Workforce is essential, and I am glad that the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care is in the chamber, because I think that it is mainly a health problem. I hate to think of anybody going to prison because they have a drug problem. We must do some research to find out why people take drugs and why it is such a problem. We all recognise that it is a huge national problem, but none of us has the answer. We need to find answers and we must consider Margo MacDonald's suggestion of a pilot project for heroin. Methadone has its place, but all that that does is to substitute a prescription drug for an illegal one. The tragedy of drugs is that it is often a mixed picture, with people taking methadone, alcohol and other things. Someone may go into prison an alcoholic and come out a heroin addict. Things like that must stop.

It is lovely to hear everyone saying that the child is important and so is the family. Children love their parents regardless of what they do or how they are. They love their parents and their parents love them. We must not separate children and

parents if we can avoid it. Care within the extended family is by far the best way to deal with the issue. Sometimes extended families cannot provide such care for financial reasons. They need to be given support. It is inevitable that on some occasions a child will have to be taken into care, but the period should be as short as possible. Therefore, the parent must receive treatment immediately so that the child and the parent can be married up again.

I have been delighted to hear the debate, although it is tragic that 20-odd years on we are still discussing the issue. It used to be my despair when I was in general practice. I say in defence of general practitioners that it was sometimes difficult to get to meetings, but I got to as many as I could. I sometimes had to get a locum in so that I could be there, because the meetings were not always at times when I could leave my desk unattended.

We must consider a range of financial ways in which we can help in addition to addressing the workforce issue.

The issue is often kept secret by children and families as they do not want to let anybody know what is going on in their family. It can be extremely difficult for health professionals to put their finger on the problem or to get help for the people who need it.

Kenny MacAskill and other members made the good point that we should not do anything to make it difficult for professionals to do their job. They must not be scared to do their job and should not fear that the law will turn against them. When people make mistakes they have to carry the can, but there must be an easier way for people to deal with the issue. Rehabilitation services are certainly not sufficient throughout the country. The problem exists everywhere, but good practice occurs only in pockets here and there.

Time is running away from us. We must try to do more research and provide the support suggested by Margo MacDonald. I take on board the points that many members made, but Trish Godman certainly put her finger on the crux of the matter. I hope, in the light of the report, that it is not the case that once needs are assessed they cannot be met.

16:32

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): It is a privilege being an MSP during debates such as this, but there is also deep personal frustration that we cannot right all the wrongs all the time.

The estimated 40,000 to 60,000 children in Scotland who are affected by parental drug use require a range of support, from the public sector

and, as we have heard, from other family members, friends, volunteers and communities. The kind of support that the children need will often come from different parts of the state: local government; national Government; schools; children's hearings panels; social work departments; the police; and health boards. I know that it is the holy grail, but it is vital that all parts of the public sector work together effectively. As the minister said in her speech, an integrated multi-agency approach is required. She is right, of course, but better integration is required now.

As has been said, many parents who have drugs and alcohol problems lead chaotic lives. In some cases the lifestyle leads to the drugs and alcohol abuse, but in others the drugs and alcohol abuse has created the lifestyle. I am glad that there is reference to the matter and that actions are outlined in "Hidden Harm—Next Steps", but there is even wider scope to provide the range of support that is needed for many single parents or families with substance abuse problems. Such parents often experience housing difficulties and unemployment, and in many cases they have mental health issues—that has not been touched on much in the debate—as well as physical health issues.

Many of the parents are very young. I met a young woman on an excellent Fairbridge scheme. She told me that when she was in hospital giving birth to her daughter—she was in her teens—her mother was in the same hospital giving birth to her new sister. Because of her drug taking—an addiction to heroin—she was told that there was a real possibility that the baby would be taken away from the hospital. What is the way forward for someone like that? How do we provide the right level of support for such a family?

I was impressed by the young woman as a person and not just by her attitude on the Fairbridge scheme and by how she saw herself through her difficulties. I was struck by her knowledge of the system and its weaknesses and gaps. Such knowledge is part of the hidden talent of many such people, which Euan Robson highlighted in his speech. I received a masterclass from her in nonsensical aspects of the benefits system and users' perspectives of social work services. Such information is vital for local and national policy makers.

Margo MacDonald and others mentioned alcohol. Society is, to an extent, to blame for the many more children who are affected by alcohol-abusing parents or family members. Alcohol problems are too often regarded as acceptable harm because there are not the same preconceived views about the economic backgrounds of alcoholics as there are about drug abusers. The alcohol abuser can be the advocate,

the consultant or the businesswoman. They can be fine at work in many situations, but not fine at home. We do not focus sufficiently on alcohol abuse in Scotland. Scott Barrie made an excellent speech about the dangers of glibly stating that it would be a solution simply to put more children into the public care system. Trish Godman was extremely eloquent about the complexities of the process that would lead to that.

For high-profile incidents or difficult processes involving a decision to remove a child from a home and put them into foster care or into the care of the state, we must ensure that we do as much as possible to make the bureaucratic systems as efficient as possible. The time that a child spends away from a parent or parents should be determined solely by the interests of the child and not by the bureaucratic processes and their timeframe.

I recently visited Wellington school, which used to be the kind of institution to which Trish Godman referred—a borstal. The school is in my constituency, but it is a City of Edinburgh school for boys with behavioural or other special problems. I met a boy there who is looked after by the state. He is a resident and he is perhaps one of the children to whom Duncan McNeil referred. The boy has distinct needs, one of which is that he does not have a mam or dad. He does not have such role models to give him the kind of constant support that I took for granted when I was growing up. The teachers in the school do a fantastic job, but what is heartbreaking is that they are effectively his mam and dad.

My point is that the kind of thing that happened to him 10 years ago is what we are in part debating today. The interests of the child are not just the immediate interests in the particular circumstances of that day. If we as legislators get it wrong and continue to do so, it will be much harder to get it right 10 years from now for young people like the lad I met.

16:37

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I do not often do this in a debate, but I will start with a personal anecdote. As members will be aware, I live in the west end of Glasgow close to the Queen Mother's maternity hospital. Some years ago I got a telephone call from the social work department asking whether someone could come and see me to get a place-of-safety order for a child. A social worker arrived and, as I put her on oath, I saw that this case-hardened woman was close to tears. The application was in respect of a child who was three hours old and whose drug-abusing parents wanted to take it, in a jaundiced condition, out of hospital.

Naturally, I granted the petition, but I wondered what happened to that child. Indeed, I wonder today what happened to the child. If anyone feels that a situation would never arise that would justify taking a child away from parents, that case is a classic illustration—as were the illustrations that Duncan McNeil gave. Of course, taking a child from parents must always be a last resort and the situation must be extreme, but that facility must exist. We must consider other answers, too. We must recognise that, as Scott Barrie and Maureen Watt said, the situation of children in long-term care is not a happy one and we must look to a more positive alternative such as fostering.

On the question of drug addiction generally, we must consider certain matters. The debate has advanced an awful lot over the past few years and I think that today's debate has been good. It demonstrates the progress that has been made, but there is still much more to be done. There must be recognition that there are not enough rehabilitation places in Scotland. Indeed, when the Executive was asked about that matter some time ago, it did not know the precise number of available places. We must recognise that we have a problem of massive proportions and that a greater number of rehabilitation places must be made available.

As I have said before, we have got the emphasis wrong in the drugs courts. There is little point in sending people who have 40 or 50 convictions to those courts in the vain hope that some of them will get their act together. The fact is that that does not happen.

The Executive's statistics on the performance of the drugs courts are very disappointing. If the Executive was prepared to send first offenders or those with a marginal number of convictions to those courts and ensure that they got immediate drug treatment and testing orders and that residential rehabilitation was made available as a possibility, the courts' success rate would be immeasurably higher. We would see real progress in that direction if that was to happen.

Ms Byrne: Does the member agree that it is cheaper to send someone to rehab than it is to put them in prison?

Bill Aitken: I accept that, on the face of it, it is cheaper, but the argument is wide. What we cannot do is to quantify the damage that the individual may do when they are at liberty.

I say to Patrick Harvie and Jean Turner that people are sent to prison not because they are drug addicts, but because they are harming other people.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member give way?

Bill Aitken: I am sorry, but I must press on.

As Jean Turner rightly said, we must look at the issue of methadone and find more imaginative solutions. I despair of the fact that people are prescribed methadone as a temporary panacea and not as part of a programme under which they will be weaned off methadone by the use of other drugs or therapies. I hope that the Executive will get round to considering that issue.

There are other aspects of the report that I find vaguely depressing. First, it is wrong that the Executive has to legislate to address the fact that departments are not behaving cohesively.

Hugh Henry: We do not.

Bill Aitken: The Deputy Minister for Justice may say that, but there is an air of resignation on the subject. I appreciate and understand the reason for that; it is borne of frustration. The deputy minister is a caring man and he sees that the system is failing. If highly paid professionals are not performing, we need to know why. Legislation is not required; agencies must simply get their act together. In this day and age, it is not acceptable for them to do otherwise.

As I said, we have progressed in this area but there is still much more to do. Drug abuse is probably one of the principal problems that faces Scotland today and we have to react accordingly.

16:42

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Like many members, I have found the debate to be illuminating and interesting. However, one voice that was missing from the debate was the voice of the child.

In looking over the motion and amendments, I note that the word "children" appears only in the fourth line of the Executive motion. That criticism applies equally to the SNP, because in our amendment the word comes even further down. That point was prompted by what I heard in the debate. It was an oversight, which is further exemplified by "Hidden Harm—Next Steps: Supporting Children—Working With Parents." On reading the progress report in annex 1 to that document, nowhere do I see that children were asked to tell us about their experiences. Elsewhere in the report, I found reference to a small episode in which children were listened to.

The reality is that no child is in the chamber. I do not know that there is an addict in the chamber, but I know that there are parents, and members who are social workers and who have indirectly been exposed to the experience of the hidden harm that is done to children by substance misuse. We should not imagine that children are unable to articulate their experience and deliver it to us. The absence of children from the report and

the chamber is the big hole in the middle of the Polo mint that is the debate. We should all take that fact away from the debate and consider it further.

The SNP has put up a cross-cutting team for the debate—I have the justice portfolio and my colleague Fiona Hyslop is responsible for children's issues. I am glad that the Executive front bench is now populated by representatives of all three departments that have signed up to the report. It was excellent that members of each of the relevant committees from various political parties—the Education Committee, the justice committees and the Health Committee—have participated in the debate.

In her opening remarks, the minister said that the document contains a clear programme for action. I raised that point with the minister at the time; I ask her to forgive me, but I do not see it that way. I do not find anything harmful or to which I object in the report. Some new money has been announced and there are one or two references to timetables but, by and large, the report does not fit the description of a programme for action. I simply cannot get away from an objective that says that the Executive will "ensure that" certain people respond to "requests for assurances". To be fair, that is the worst example, but much of the report is about stuff that is happening anyway. The report does not do justice, as a follow-up, to the Executive's initial response to the "Hidden Harm" report, which had substantially more merit and was more focused.

The speeches have been varied. I regret that Ms MacDonald did not mention children once in her speech—I listened carefully for that. I may not be the only member who experienced drug addicts coming to the house in which I lived for their prescribed heroin fix. My father was a general practitioner and, in the 1950s, GPs dealt with that scheme. I must say that I saw no outcomes that justify particular enthusiasm for a return to the system. The Swiss find that fewer than 5 per cent of addicts benefit from the scheme. On that basis, I cannot be persuaded to support Ms MacDonald's amendment, now that she has explained what the words are meant to imply.

Other members spoke about children—Euan Robson had some useful comments in that regard, although Patrick Harvie did not speak particularly about children. As always, Rosemary Byrne spoke a great deal of sense and I respect her comments. Kenny MacAskill said that we must be tolerant of mistakes. The issue is one on which it is easy to make knee-jerk reactions. For example, on a related issue, Mr Blair, the Prime Minister, came to Glasgow on 18 February 2001 and committed to having a drug-dealer register that every convicted drug dealer would have to sign. Earlier today, I

asked the House of Commons library to update me on that and was told that no such register exists and no progress has been made.

The love between parents and children has been touched on and is an important point to bear in mind. A child will love a parent. My father once said in a speech about someone else that he was the person's friend because of his many virtues, although my father felt that the person was his friend despite my father's many failings. Relationships between drug addict parents and children are often thus. We must always support the children above the parents.

16:49

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Hugh Henry): The debate has been useful. Several members have mentioned the cross-cutting nature of the issue and the fact that it covers several portfolios. We take that seriously, which is why three ministers feature in and give their support to the report and why the document is a product of joint work between the departments. It is important to emphasise that, although Cathy Jamieson and I have responsibility for justice, there is a health element to many of our considerations of and dealings with people. There is also an education element for us to consider, just as there is a justice element for the other ministers to consider. The fact that Cathy Jamieson opened the debate and I am closing it does not imply that the other departments are not involved; they have been involved intimately in the production of the report.

Stewart Stevenson asked where was the voice of the children. I refer him to Cathy Jamieson's opening speech, in which her first words were "Every child". At the heart of her speech was the need to consider the interests of children. Stewart Stevenson also asked about the consultation. The report, "Hidden Harm—Next Steps: Supporting Children—Working With Parents" does not repeat the first "Hidden Harm" document, around which there was extensive consultation, which involved listening to the voices of children. It is not intended to duplicate the work of voluntary organisations such as the Aberlour Child Care Trust, which work with children, listen to them and allow them to express themselves. Having said that, I put on record the fact that we consulted children and families directly when we developed the report. It is important that children's voices influence what we are trying to do.

Miss Goldie: Does the minister agree that, given the context of the debate, it is impossible to consider the best interests of the children without having an intelligent debate about the plight of their addicted parents?

Hugh Henry: It is clear that we cannot consider children's needs in isolation from the parents'

behaviour and needs, and the needs of the wider family. Equally, we cannot put the needs and interests of others before the interests of the children. It makes absolute sense to say that a complex integration of relationships influences what needs to be done in relation to children. I will return to that point.

The question was asked whether the report is an action document. We have said deliberately that it sets out the next steps. We do not see it as the final product, but nor do we see it as simply the starting point. If members care to refer back to the document, they will see that specific actions are set out in relation to a number of issues. Those include:

"invest a further £1m in workforce development

establish incentives for GP practices

establish key performance indicators".

The document refers to legislation, preparing guidance and a number of things on which we are acting and will continue to act.

There have been many useful and thoughtful speeches. When Jeremy Purvis spoke about the young person whom he met at Wellington school, he used a word that sums up what we are talking about. He said that he found the issue heartbreaking, which it is. If we strip away all our political differences and the fact that sometimes we try to score points and advance our own political interests against those of others, when it comes down to it we are talking about children who are living in desperate circumstances, facing daily danger in some cases, whose futures are blighted and whose lives are at risk. That is heartbreaking.

I can cite examples that I have come across, as Bill Aitken did. I remember the joy that my family felt when my first grandchild was born. We were in the hospital at that time of joy and celebration. In the same ward as my daughter was a young girl whose baby was already addicted, because of her circumstances. That baby had to be put into immediate isolation with support and the mother had to be given intensive support. They had to be isolated for the sake of the child and for the safety of those around them. The father, who wanted to visit the child, came into the hospital ward full of drugs, shouting at the nurses, making demands and wanting to take the child away to God knows what fate. I wonder what happened to that child. The comment that I and others in my family made was, "God help that child." We wondered what was in front of the child and whether it would live through to adolescence, even if it made it out of hospital. That was heartbreaking and tragic to see. It is an example of why we need a measured response.

Kenny MacAskill and others were right to say that mistakes are sometimes made. We should not punish workers who do a job fantastically well in extremely difficult circumstances. I would not like to do that job. Rather than punish people for making mistakes, we should correct their mistakes and help them to move on. People who are guilty of deliberate inaction or who go beyond the guidelines and do something that is harmful should be punished, but those who make mistakes should not continue to attract opprobrium. If they do, we will not be able to get people to work in such jobs.

Fiona Hyslop: The Government plans to establish a legislative duty to share information. Will a linked national computer network that allows information to be shared be provided before people are criminalised for not sharing information?

Hugh Henry: That is a farcical question. It is absurd to try to substitute some of the points that have been made with a point about information technology systems. In any case, we have made progress with such systems. We have piloted IT child protection systems in Lanarkshire, which will be rolled out more widely. In a few days, an update on all the recommendations that are contained in "It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright" will be presented to the Education Committee.

There are issues that we must face up to. Scott Barrie spoke about the importance of focusing on the needs of children; he also mentioned the need to make the best use of current resources. Although substantial resources have been provided, they are not always used wisely. We need to know why that is the case. Scott Barrie was right to say that there should be no presumption that children will be left at home.

Something that has attracted no comment is Cathy Jamieson's suggestion that parents could be tested to find out whether they are addicted. We must take some fairly drastic steps to provide the protection to children that members agree is necessary.

Trish Godman was one of several members who mentioned kinship and the need to support families. She was right—families must be supported.

Trish Godman: Will the minister take an intervention?

Hugh Henry: I will develop my point and if the member still wants to intervene once I have done so, she can.

Trish Godman and others were right to highlight the fact that the children of drug-abusing parents often live in social isolation and have to assume

the responsibilities of adults. It is tragic that they are scared to find out what will happen when they go home. Such children could benefit from the support that grandparents can provide, although I recognise that grandparents sometimes struggle to support children financially. Local authorities have the responsibility and the resources to take action on that. Trish Godman mentioned that some of them already do. Given that councils have that responsibility and the necessary budgets, and that they know we believe it is a matter on which they should act, Cathy Jamieson will take up the issue with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities if they fail to do so. She will ask COSLA to introduce a national scheme to ensure that there is consistency throughout Scotland. If that does not happen and councils continue not to fulfil their responsibilities, the Parliament will need to revisit the issue.

A number of useful points have been made in the debate. We recognise that kinship carers play a fantastic role but, ultimately, we must do something that protects children who live in tragic circumstances, whose futures are blighted, whose lives are at risk and who are suffering, sometimes in silence or in heartbreaking circumstances. Those children demand our help and we should pledge it to them.

Decision Time

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid):

There are 11 questions to be put as a result of today's business. In relation to this morning's debate on council tax and pensioner poverty, if amendment S2M-4363.4, in the name of George Lyon, is agreed to, amendment S2M-4363.3, in the name of Tommy Sheridan, will fall; and in relation to this morning's debate on Scottish Enterprise, if amendment S2M-4367.2, in the name of Nicol Stephen, is agreed to, amendment S2M-4367.1, in the name of Murdo Fraser, will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S2M-4363.4, in the name of George Lyon, which seeks to amend motion S2M-4363, in the name of John Swinney, on council tax and pensioner poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 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)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGregor, 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)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Petrie, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)

Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 52, Abstentions 1.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-4363.1, in the name of Derek Brownlee, which seeks to amend motion S2M-4363, in the name of John Swinney, on council tax and pensioner poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Petrie, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)

Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 19, Against 89, Abstentions 7.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Amendment S2M-4363.3, in the name of Tommy Sheridan, falls.

The next question is, that motion S2M-4363, in the name of John Swinney, on council tax and pensioner poverty, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 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)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGregor, 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)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Petrie, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 51, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament recognises that the Scottish Executive has established the independent inquiry into local government finance consistent with the Partnership Agreement of May 2003; notes that the Labour Party has submitted clear and detailed proposals to support changes to the council tax, and further notes that the Liberal Democrats have submitted clear and detailed proposals to support a local income tax and that the inquiry is due to report in the future.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-4367.2, in the name of Nicol Stephen, which seeks to amend motion S2M-4367, in the name of Jim Mather, on Scottish Enterprise, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)

Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 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)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGregor, 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)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Petrie, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)
 Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 46, Abstentions 7.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Amendment S2M-4367.1, in the name of Murdo Fraser, falls.

The next question is, that motion S2M-4367, in the name of Jim Mather, on Scottish Enterprise, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)

McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 McGregor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Petrie, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

ABSTENTIONS

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 86, Against 21, Abstentions 8.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament recognises the important role of Scottish Enterprise in supporting the growth of the Scottish economy; endorses the strategic direction set by ministers for Scottish Enterprise in terms of business growth, regeneration and local development initiatives, training, skills and maximising international opportunities; welcomes the steps taken by the Scottish Executive to secure effective financial management by Scottish Enterprise in the future, in particular the commissioning of the robust report by KPMG and the commitment to the implementation of its recommendations; welcomes the additional non-cash resources to be made available to Scottish Enterprise, and confirms the important role that Scottish Enterprise will play in contributing to the growth of the Scottish economy.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-4370.2, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, which seeks to amend motion S2M-4370, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on drugs and hidden harm, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)

Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Petrie, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 27, Against 64, Abstentions 24.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-4370.1, in the name of Annabel Goldie, which seeks to amend motion S2M-4370, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on drugs and hidden harm, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 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)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Petrie, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

AGAINST

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 47, Against 64, Abstentions 4.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S2M-4370.3, in the name of Margo MacDonald, which seeks to amend motion S2M-4370, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on drugs and hidden harm, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Baird, Shiona (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Ballard, Mark (Lothians) (Green)
 Byrne, Ms Rosemary (South of Scotland) (SSP)
 Fox, Colin (Lothians) (SSP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Martin, Campbell (West of Scotland) (Ind)
 Ruskell, Mr Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Scott, Eleanor (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Swinburne, John (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
 Turner, Dr Jean (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Ind)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Mr Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Mr Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Mr Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyon, George (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Maclean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 May, Christine (Central Fife) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McFee, Mr Bruce (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Mrs Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Petrie, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Tosh, Murray (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watt, Ms Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 13, Against 102, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S2M-4370, in the name of Cathy Jamieson, on drugs and hidden harm, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament welcomes the publication by the Scottish Executive of *Hidden Harm - Next Steps: Supporting Children - Working With Parents*; acknowledges the wide range of work currently being undertaken to protect and support children living in substance-misusing families; recognises the serious risks and problems faced by many children in drug-abusing households and the incompatibility of serious and chaotic drug use with effective parenting; acknowledges the important role of the extended family in helping to safeguard and nurture children who have been affected by substance misuse, and supports the Executive's commitment to further improvements in the way that agencies protect and support children in these circumstances.

Scottish National Statistics

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S2M-4171, in the name of Jim Mather, on ensuring the independence of Scottish national statistics. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament, in light of the proposals from HM Treasury for the establishment of an independent UK Office for National Statistics, notes that no proposals were made for Scotland; further notes that such proposals for Scotland are the responsibility of the Scottish Executive, and considers that, in light of previous statistical issues such as the loss of Objective 1 funding for the Highlands and Islands through statistical error, the Executive should take similar measures to place the production of Scottish statistics on a statutory basis, incorporating the National Statistics Code of Practice, and establish an independent Office of Scottish Statistics with independent governance answerable directly to the Scottish Parliament.

17:11

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): First and foremost, I thank those members—not all of whom are here—who gave me cross-party support to ensure that this debate could take place. Despite the turnout of members, the debate is important, because it is about trust in official statistics. That issue continues to grow as demands for evidence-based policies, international comparability and transparency increase.

Statistics drive decisions that affect everyone, including decisions on the allocation of public money to local government and the national health service. Operational decisions, policy interventions, policy evaluations and assessments of public service performance depend on statistics. The electorate obviously has a right to know as part of the democratic process.

Trust in statistics is essential for effective administration and the delivery of public services. If members of the public do not trust the figures, they will not trust decision makers and they will not believe Government statements. Survey results show that two thirds of the United Kingdom public believe that figures are changed to support arguments and that information about mistakes is frequently suppressed. I am among that 66 per cent. I am also among the 50 per cent-plus who believe that there is political interference in the production of statistics.

The June 2000 "Framework for National Statistics", which was signed by Scottish ministers and members of other Administrations, was a move in the right direction. It established a more

formal code of practice and set up the Statistics Commission. Now, in "Independence for statistics: A consultation document", the Treasury proposes to entrench UK statistical independence in legislation by

"introducing direct reporting and accountability to Parliament, rather than through Ministers"

and

"placing a statutory responsibility on a new independent governing board to assess and approve all National Statistics against the code of practice, also backed by statute".

Those are further steps in the right direction, but what about Scotland?

In such a climate, the Scottish Parliament and the Executive have several options. Option 1 is that we do nothing and revert to pre-2000 arrangements, with no Statistics Commission and no statutory code. That would fail to meet any of the objectives of a statistics service. There would be no independent oversight, no guarantee of impartiality, no openness in selecting statistics to produce and no consistent handling and release of statistics. That would go completely against the UK Government's moves and recent legislation, such as freedom of information legislation. If that happened, the independence that has been proposed for the Office for National Statistics in London would be sacrificed, as Government statisticians there would use Scottish figures that would undermine their independence and the quality of their data, which would be disastrous.

Option 2 is that we replicate the current arrangements and set up a statistics commission for Scotland. The Statistics Commission for the UK has consistently worked to have itself replaced as a statutory body, so that would get us off to a poor start. It would, essentially, take us nowhere and give us no momentum. It would create no opportunity for Parliament to be the arbiter of the quality of our statistics.

Options 1 and 2 are seriously flawed.

That brings us to options 3 and 4. Option 3 is that we create an independent statistics office for Scotland that is modelled, in part, on the proposal for the Office for National Statistics. Option 4 is that we replicate the Treasury's proposals for the oversight of statistics at Whitehall and create a statutory compliance and audit body. Either of those proposals would be a significant improvement. They would offer greater independence for the Scottish system and ensure that the current UK system was not compromised by a lack of Scottish independence and accountability. That would be in the best interests of everyone and would offer a high-integrity direction of travel. Under current constitutional arrangements, there is sense in mirroring the

proposed structure of the Office for National Statistics so that it and the Scottish body can work together without compromising the work of either.

Scottish legislation should be passed to enshrine that objective. We need a world-class system. Scotland is one of the few countries in the world that does not have statistics legislation. We need to correct that anomaly as soon as possible. No country can now join the European Union without such legislation, so we should not operate under a lesser standard. We should aim to meet all the statistical standards of the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations.

Ideally, the Scottish body should report annually to the Scottish Parliament, for example to the Finance Committee or the Audit Committee. With the current constitutional arrangement, the Scottish body should have statutory representation in the UK body to ensure that the UK figures relating to Scotland comply with the same standard of independence. At no point should there be ministerial control over any element of the statistics system; it would be better for ministers to work on the statistics that come out of the process.

I echo the words of the 1997 Labour Party manifesto:

"Unnecessary secrecy in government leads to arrogance in government and defective policy decisions. The Scott Report on arms to Iraq revealed Conservative abuses of power. We are pledged to a Freedom of Information Act, leading to more open government, and an independent National Statistical Service."

That is exactly what we need.

My guru, W Edwards Deming, who transformed modern manufacturing, said that no improvement is possible in any system until that system is under objective, accurate statistical control. We should be satisfied with nothing less, especially when we are talking about the statistics of our country.

17:18

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Jim Mather on securing the debate and on not quite managing to clear the public gallery, as perhaps might have been expected given his chosen subject. I also congratulate him on mentioning Mr Deming once again. That seems to be a recurring feature of Jim Mather's speeches, which shows that persistence is one of his virtues.

We all agree that it is important that we can have confidence in statistics and that we have an objective and impartial statistics service. We can agree on that as a general aim; it is how we get to that that is more difficult to agree on. I am not saying that the current statistics system is not working at all; I am just acknowledging that it could

be improved and that good statistics are important not just for good government, but to enable businesses, voluntary organisations and a host of other groups in society to plan ahead and to evaluate what work is being undertaken. The worst thing that we could do would be to have statistics that had all the reliability of a bar chart on a Lib Dem leaflet—that would not be a helpful manoeuvre. An independent statistics service would increase confidence.

Jim Mather is right to learn some lessons from what has happened south of the border. We should not be afraid to learn lessons from Westminster on this issue. The Treasury is only now, in 2006, consulting on an independent statistics service, despite having promised one back in 1997 in the manifesto to which Jim Mather referred. That has handily allowed the Chancellor of the Exchequer to play fast and loose with a number of statistics, not least those on the economic cycle. It has conveniently allowed him to pretend that he has managed to keep to his golden rule rather than breaking it. I notice that such is the interest of Labour members in statistics and the record of the chancellor that none of them is here to defend it.

The current Government at Westminster created the Statistics Commission in 1998. Of course, its objective then was

“to advise on quality assurance and statistical integrity across the statistical system”

if we are to believe the HM Treasury consultation document. If the proposals in the consultation are enacted, the Statistics Commission will be abolished.

The Statistics Commission has played a valuable role, to some extent. In its 2004 report, it revealed that the Government had been using “unreliable figures” for “political reasons”. That is very unlike this Government; no doubt the minister will tell us that it is purely a Westminster problem. In the same report, the Statistics Commission also identified several instances where the Scottish Executive and Scottish ministers had breached the statistics code of practice, so we should not be complacent.

Jim Mather outlined four options that we are faced with. The idea that we can go back to what existed before 2000 is nonsensical; I agree with him on that. If we are to have confidence in the statistics that we use in Scotland, we need to have a reliable set of statistics that everyone—Government, Opposition and everyone else—can deal with. An independent statistics service that is underpinned by legislation and accountable to the Parliament is a healthy proposal and one that members across all parties could support. I hope that the minister will give us a firm steer in his

remarks tonight about the route that the Executive is likely to take. As I said earlier, I do not think that the route of doing nothing is one that the Executive can credibly take if it is to inspire confidence in the statistics on which we all depend.

17:22

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): I join Derek Brownlee in thanking Jim Mather for bringing to the chamber this debate on a very important subject. Given the way in which the issue of waiting times is bandied about—there is a statistical rammy about waiting times at just about every First Minister’s question time—I am disappointed that there are not more members in the debate. We use statistics as the bedrock of our political discussion; where they come from and how they are assessed should be much more seriously dealt with. The responsibility of Parliament is to hold the Executive to account. The key element of that is the Parliament’s ability to measure what the Executive is doing and to assess the success of Executive programmes. All of that means that we have to have reliable statistics.

I have an A level in statistics, so I am well aware that they can be presented in many different ways. However, whatever the presentation, the underlying statistics should be acceptable, reliable and agreed by everyone. Jim Mather made the entirely valid point that ministerial control would be inappropriate in any kind of office of national statistics. Although I am sure that George Lyon is in every way beyond reproach in how he deals with statistics, it is important that ministers are not only beyond reproach but clearly seen to be beyond reproach. The source of the statistics that we chuck around the Parliament like confetti must be seen to be independent.

That is why I agree very strongly with Jim Mather and Derek Brownlee that we need an independent office to act as a creature of the Parliament. It should be reliant not on the Executive but on the Parliament. My understanding is that that would be quite similar to the situation in the United States of America, where there is an independent congressional office of statistics that fulfils that purpose. As we discuss the potential creation of another commissioner, ombudsman or creature of this Parliament, it is worth bearing in mind that, under the current constitutional set-up, that is the only viable way we have of making certain that the information and activities that are undertaken by an office of statistics, a commissioner or another institution are genuinely independent of the Executive.

I welcome Jim Mather's efforts in securing the debate. I hope that Scotland can move forward in a way that is similar to the way in which the Treasury proposes that England will move forward, and that we will be able to create an office of national statistics as a creature of this Parliament, accountable to Parliament, and not to ministers.

17:25

The Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business (George Lyon): I congratulate Jim Mather on securing a debate on this important subject. It is disappointing that there appears to be so little interest in the subject in the chamber.

As the speakers have pointed out, the issue is important. Statistics affect the decisions that we make about the spending of huge amounts of Government finance and Government-raised taxation and underpin the political discourse that takes place in the Parliament. A great deal centres on statistics, their reliability and what they have to say about whether policies are working.

The debate gives the Parliament an opportunity to feed into the on-going ministerial discussions about how we are going to respond to Whitehall's proposals.

Ministers have a strong commitment to the integrity of official statistics. We recognise that reliable and objective statistics are vital not only to informed decision making by Government but to public and parliamentary debate. In particular, we recognise that the professional independence of statisticians from ministers is a key feature of statistical standards across most nations. Our current arrangements reflect that. Ministers are not involved in decisions on the format, content or timing of statistics releases and our compliance with standards on those matters and with all other standards is open to constant scrutiny by the independent Statistics Commission.

We will, of course, be considering whether any changes are appropriate in the light of changes that are being pursued by the UK Government and I do not wish to pre-empt that matter, although I was interested to hear the views that were expressed by members on the subject.

I would like to correct some of the impressions that might have been given during the debate. First, it is entirely wrong to suggest that the statistical error that is referred to in the motion would have been prevented had there been a separate office of Scottish statistics. Indeed, the errors were in statistics produced by the UK Office for National Statistics, which, even then, was largely independent of Government. The member might wish to reflect on the fact that it was Scottish

Executive statisticians who identified the error and that their understanding of the policy implications—stemming from the fact that they were working within Government—was a key factor in their ability to identify the mistake. We shall endeavour to ensure that they are able to continue to exercise that function under the new UK set-up.

It is also important to understand the type of statistics that the UK Government will be transferring to the new independent body. A range of economic and labour market statistics that are produced by the UK Government rather than the Executive will be transferred, as will statistics such as neighbourhood statistics and registration statistics, which raise few concerns. The UK Government will not be transferring most of the types of statistics that the Executive produces. For example, it will not be transferring education statistics, crime statistics, or homelessness statistics.

We will also wish to weigh up proposals to increase organisational independence against the considerable benefits that are to be gained from having statisticians work as part of an integrated approach to the analysis that underpins our policy making and from ensuring that they have, in the words of the UK consultation document,

"good working links to policy makers, allowing them key insights into developments and needs".

The "National Statistics Code of Practice" ensures that that is done in a way that does not impinge on the independence of statistical decisions and that statistics are made publicly available to everyone at the same time. I am sure that the member will agree that decisions that we take on independent production need to be right for Scotland and should not simply follow what might be right for the UK Government. Devolution, of course, allows us to ensure that that is the case.

It is also important to recognise that a substantial part of the UK proposals—and, indeed, the part that is most relevant to Scottish Executive statistics—is about independent scrutiny of the statistics that are produced by Government rather than about independent production. Those are two separate matters. At present, we are part of the scrutiny arrangements that apply by mutual agreement throughout the UK, so we will want to consider our position on the matter as the UK Government's arrangements start to emerge.

As I said at the outset, I welcome the contribution of today's debate—and of the issues that are raised in the UK Government's consultation document—to deciding the best way forward on the matter. The key point is that we must get the right balance between ensuring that Government statistics are robust, reliable and

subject to independent scrutiny and ensuring that they provide the proper information at the right time to shape decisions that involve large sums of public expenditure and many issues that affect the lives of the people of Scotland.

Tonight's debate has been helpful in teasing out some of the concerns that exist and allowing us to consider a range of opinions before we make our final decisions. I congratulate Jim Mather on bringing the debate to the Parliament.

Meeting closed at 17:30.

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