

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 31 October 2007

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 31 October 2007

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good afternoon. Our time for reflection leader today is Father Michael John Galbraith, from St Kentigern's, in Edinburgh.

Father Michael John Galbraith (St Kentigern's, Edinburgh): Tonight we celebrate the eve of All Saints day, more commonly known as Hallowe'en. Perhaps some members of the Scottish Parliament will be stopping at the costume shops on their way home to pick up their outfits for the occasion. I shall leave to members' imagination which costumes they might choose for their fellow members.

Dressing up for special occasions is surely something common to all cultures. Priests dress up too, not usually for Hallowe'en, I might add, but in recognition of a role we play as acting in persona Christi—in the person of Christ. We put on vestments during mass to make a clear distinction between our own personalities and the personality of the one we represent.

Much of the dressing up that we do as human beings, in fact, serves the purpose of performing a role in society and is perfectly good in itself. At other times, such as at Hallowe'en, it is simply for the harmless fun of the occasion.

However, there is another type of dressing up, which is less than harmless. In the book of Genesis we are presented with an image of Adam and Eve dressing up with fig-leaves after they have sinned and turned away from God. It is an image that is meant to help us understand the shame of sin and the desire to hide from the truth of God and the truth of our own human nature.

Such dressing up is not a sign of frivolity and fun but an image of broken humanity trying to mask its true nature as created in the image and likeness of God with an eternal destiny. The temptation can always be there in our own lives, too, to hide from the truth of our human nature, with the intellectual or political masks that we wear in public. Indeed, even legislation can be used to disguise our true dignity or distort our natural moral framework.

So, whichever costume you intend to wear on Hallowe'en—or even if there are aspects of your own personal lives that you try to hide from the outside world—may your important work in the Scottish Parliament always serve to build up and

strengthen our common human dignity and never to disguise or disfigure it.

As the apostle St Paul says:

“Fill your minds with those things that are good and deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and honourable. And the God who gives us peace will be with you.”

Amen.

Housing

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Before we come to the next item of business, it is with some regret that I have to say that concerns that the content of this afternoon's statement has been covered in press reports this morning have been brought to my attention. Members will be aware that this is not the first time that such concerns have been raised.

The fundamental point is that we should not be reading in the press what is going to be said in the chamber; we should read what has been said. I object strongly to detailed pre-announcement of ministerial statements, which constitutes a discourtesy to this Parliament and, by extension, to the people of Scotland. Having made my position clear on such matters previously, I was somewhat surprised and dismayed to hear the trailing on radio and television this morning of the announcements to be made this afternoon. There can be no doubt that, by whatever means, information found its way into the public domain before being presented to the Parliament. The Scottish Government has to take full responsibility for that.

I have now had the opportunity to consider an advance copy of the statement, which confirms my view that information was put into the public domain before being announced in the chamber. I fully acknowledge that, during the course of the day, the Minister for Parliamentary Business has gone to some lengths to ameliorate the situation. It is therefore with some regret that I inform the Parliament that I intend to take the statement as read in its entirety, and to move straight to questions to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing. In fairness to her, there are matters in the statement that were not covered in the press. I will therefore allow her some leeway in her responses to questions to allow those issues to be addressed.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I make it absolutely clear that we are angry that some information about the statement got into the media. *[Laughter.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Bruce Crawford: We do not know how that transpired. I make it absolutely clear that the Scottish Government did not brief the BBC. The permanent secretary has been asked to investigate.

I accept your ruling, Presiding Officer. However, I make it clear that the Government is very

concerned that we are unable to go ahead with the statement. There are a good number of substantial announcements in the statement that the media did not cover this morning, such as a new funding regime for housing associations, a Scottish sustainable communities initiative—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. I remind the Minister for Parliamentary Business that I will allow the cabinet secretary some leeway in her answers in order to raise those issues.

Bruce Crawford: I understand that, Presiding Officer, but, in your ruling, you made reference to those points of information being made available. There are only two others that I would like to mention—

Members: No.

Bruce Crawford: They are the abolition of Communities Scotland and progress on Glasgow Housing Association.

I want to outline the action that we took to address the matter, as soon as we became aware that the information had been broadcast on the BBC. At 7.50 am this morning, business managers were notified that information would be made available as soon as possible. A hard copy and an electronic copy of the consultation paper were with all members of the Scottish Parliament by 11 o'clock this morning, and a copy of the cabinet secretary's statement was with each business manager by 11.55 this morning. At 1 o'clock, a copy of the statement was emailed, for circulation to all members, to the Scottish Parliament information centre.

Given your ruling, Presiding Officer, the cabinet secretary has made it clear that she is willing to answer questions for up to an hour to allow issues that are of the utmost importance to the people of Scotland to be addressed.

Thank you for allowing me to make this point of order.

The Presiding Officer: I think that it will serve all purposes best if we simply move on to question number 1, which is from Johann Lamont.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Jackie Baillie has a point of order.

Jackie Baillie: I welcome your ruling on the statement. In the spirit of generosity, I welcome the attempts that Bruce Crawford, the Minister for Parliamentary Business, made to ameliorate the situation, but—frankly—it should not have happened in the first place. Your ruling was absolutely correct.

The Presiding Officer: My apologies. Question number 1 is from Margaret Curran.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): My draft notes show that I was going to thank Kit Fraser of the BBC for notice of the statement. However, you have dealt with the matter, Presiding Officer. Whoever was at blame, what happened is grossly disrespectful to the Parliament. If it was the first time, perhaps there might be an explanation, but it is not. For a Government that is resting on such a fragile minority, I hope that lessons are learned. In the cabinet secretary's response to my questions, I hope that she will apologise and commit to never doing this again to the Parliament.

On housing—[*Interruption.*] I say genuinely that the Government does not appreciate the scale of the error that it has committed this morning. It is grossly disrespectful to the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: A question would be helpful around now. [*Interruption.*]

Margaret Curran: If I am permitted to do so by members of the Government party, I will put my question.

In the discussion document, the Government recognises the achievements over many years of the Labour-led Executive. [*Interruption.*] Members should read the document, which the cabinet secretary has signed off.

One of the big headlines that we learned about this morning is that the cabinet secretary has set a target of building 35,000 houses a year. How much resource will be committed to ensure that that target is met? What proportion of the 35,000 houses will be local authority build? Will all local authorities that have not transferred their stock be required to have a target for local authority build, and will they get support from the Scottish Government for that?

In the cabinet secretary's statement, she mentions the widespread aspiration for home ownership that exists throughout Scotland. I therefore ask her to explain a seeming contradiction: on the one hand, she tells us that the Government will stick to the Scottish National Party manifesto commitment to review the right to buy once we have a proper understanding of the effects of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, which we introduced and which modernised the right-to-buy system; but, on the other hand, in her statement—and, it would seem, to any members of the press who would listen—she has made it clear that the Government will end the right to buy. Does she accept that that is the utmost in political hypocrisy? If the SNP planned to end the right to buy, it should have put that in its manifesto. It is at least disingenuous not to have put the measure in

its manifesto and now to make it a key plank of Government policy.

I will summarise my questions. Will the cabinet secretary apologise? How many of the new builds will be in the local authority sector? Why did the cabinet secretary not tell the Scottish people that she would end the right to buy?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I reiterate that neither I nor any other minister in the Scottish Government authorised any release of information. That is why I have asked the permanent secretary to investigate the matter.

I am delighted to publish today "Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland: A discussion document", which sets out the Government's ambitious and radical proposals to tackle Scotland's housing crisis—a crisis that the previous Administration signally failed to tackle. The fact that our action draws attention to that failure to act perhaps explains why some members do not want people in Scotland to focus on the substance of our proposals.

In response to Margaret Curran's questions, I confirm that, in the document, we set out an ambitious new target for house building. We think that the current rate of house building of 25,000 a year is simply inadequate, which is why we have set an ambitious target of 35,000 houses a year by the middle of the next decade. We want to increase the supply of housing across all tenures in Scotland. Given that, at present, 80 per cent of the houses that are built every year are built by private developers, it is clear that those developers will continue to have a significant role. However, we expect an increase in the number of social houses that are built.

Today, we lay out several proposals that will help to bring that about. First, we propose a new role for local authorities in house building, to reverse the 30-year rundown of their role. Secondly, we propose a new subsidy regime for housing associations so that, rather than simply spend more money on housing, we ensure that this Government, unlike the previous one, gets more houses for the money that it spends. Thirdly, I confirm that the Government will end the right to buy for all new-build social houses that are built by local authorities or housing associations. We think that it is right to safeguard new public social houses for the future of tenants in this country.

More generally in relation to the right to buy, we have said that we will review the policy overall, and we will do so when we have had an opportunity to see the impact of the reforms that were made in the 2001 act. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. Members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

Nicola Sturgeon: We have produced an ambitious and radical set of proposals that people who are on housing waiting lists throughout the country will warmly welcome. Finally, our spending plans will be laid out in the budget.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We have had a very comprehensive housing statement today, although the issue would have benefited from a debate, rather than a statement. Nonetheless, I commend Kit Fraser and the BBC's "Good Morning Scotland" for their premonitions about the statement and their thorough and accurate analysis of the content. I hope, as you do, Presiding Officer, that perhaps one day the Government will respect this Parliament by announcing measures here first.

I will try to limit my questions. First, the total debt of councils in Scotland is more than £9 billion. Of that, £2 billion is council housing debt. Given the new role of local government in building and managing more homes, how will the Government ensure that the debt will not continue to increase and that council tax payers in Scotland will not have to pay their share of even higher debt charges in the future?

Secondly, 480,000 families in Scotland fulfilled their aspiration of home ownership through being given the right to buy the homes that they lived in. The policy also increased labour mobility across Scotland. Why should future generations be denied that choice? There is no research base to prove that abolishing the right to buy will free up any more affordable housing. Is it really the aim of the Government to abolish the right to buy for all council homes in future?

Thirdly, why is there a need for the Scottish sustainable communities initiative to

"encourage local authorities and their partners to bring forward proposals for sustainable new communities"?

Does the Government think that local authorities are incapable of doing that without encouragement from an outside body?

Finally, why did the SNP campaign against council housing stock transfer in the Highlands, in the knowledge that £153 million of housing debt would be written off—as would more investment in homes as a result—given that Highland Council has sought exemption for 4,250 homes that will not meet the Scottish housing quality standard? Why should people in the Highlands live in substandard housing as a result of SNP campaigning and policy?

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree that local authorities carry a large burden of housing debt, but I gently point out to Mary Scanlon that that is perhaps one

of the worst legacies of successive Tory and Labour Governments in this country.

I want to encourage local authorities to continue and enhance their role in housing provision. That is why we have set out proposals today to encourage those local authorities that can to use prudential borrowing to build new houses. We have also set out proposals that will enable the Scottish Government to give local authorities financial incentives to do that. That eminently sensible proposal will be welcomed not only by local authorities but by tenants across the country.

The communities of the Highlands and Islands rejected stock transfer, and they had an absolute democratic right to do so. Stock transfer remains an option for local authorities if communities want it and vote for it. However, I think it wrong—I have always thought it wrong—that communities are, in effect, held to ransom with stock transfer. That is why my colleague, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, has written to the Treasury to ask in which other circumstances the write-off of debt could be considered.

If Mary Scanlon reads "Firm Foundations", she will see that we are making proposals for alternatives to stock transfer. Arm's-length management organisations—ALMOs—would allow councils to retain their stock but to outsource its management so that stock can be managed more effectively. That could make a real contribution towards meeting the housing quality standards.

I acknowledge that the right to buy has had a positive impact for many tenants who have been able to purchase their own homes. *[Interruption.]* However, in circumstances in which our social rented sector is under such enormous pressure, it is right to review the policy. It is a disincentive to local authorities and housing associations to build new houses if they know that the houses are likely to be lost through the right to buy. Therefore, I believe that it is right to consult on the ending of the right to buy for new-build housing. We will consult more generally on the future of the policy once we have had a chance to consider the impact of previous reforms.

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): I thank you, Presiding Officer, for your firm decision to plug the leak from whatever SNP source it may have emanated.

I thank the cabinet secretary for early sight of the discussion document. Aspects of it will find favour with the Scottish Liberal Democrats—no doubt we will return to them in the near future.

My first question focuses on the right to buy. The Liberal Democrats welcome the aim of giving councils greater local flexibility. However, I am concerned that the paper merely suggests that the

Government may, at some indeterminate point in the future, re-examine the policy. Will the cabinet secretary give a commitment today to start such a review in January 2008?

In reviewing the right to buy, will the cabinet secretary consider the case for going much further on local flexibility? Does she agree with the Liberal Democrats that the full range of right-to-buy powers should be devolved to democratically elected local councils to help them meet local need? Will she consider our plans to give councils, not ministers, the power to vary discounts, introduce pressured area status for up to 10 years or even abolish the right to buy altogether, as long as tenants with an existing right are given at least five years to use it before they lose it? *[Interruption.]*

Liberal Democrats welcome the proposal to abolish the right to buy for new-build properties. However, does the cabinet secretary share my concerns that the policy could be undermined if too many tenants were moved from demolished or refurbished property to new build and then exercised their right to buy, given that many of the new-build schemes in future years will be replacements for existing poor-quality stock? Will the cabinet secretary commit to look in detail at all the available options to avoid undermining the policy and removing the incentive to build new social housing?

I am bemused by the lack of detail in the paper on the 2012 homelessness target. It discusses the role of the private sector in meeting that target—that sector clearly has a role—but the Government must ensure that it allocates sufficient funds in the upcoming comprehensive spending review for social housing to meet that need. Will the cabinet secretary take this opportunity to commit the Government to the homelessness target not as an aspiration but as a pledge?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Jim Tolson for his questions. I also thank the Liberal Democrats for their support, albeit that it is no doubt subject to how our proposals on the right to buy are developed.

I say to Jim Tolson that I am persuaded—although we will consult on this—that ending the right to buy for new-build social houses is the right thing to do, and I think that we should move to that extremely quickly. Interestingly, I heard the leader of the Scottish Labour Party say just a couple of weeks ago that she would look at the proposal favourably. Clearly, that message did not reach the rest of her front bench.

On Jim Tolson's other general points about the right-to-buy policy, I have sympathy with some of the Liberal Democrats' proposals in this area, and I look forward to their contributing to the

consultation exercise. It is clear that local authorities already have options, under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, to apply for pressured area status and the right to vary the discount. A number of local authorities already have pressured area status, but none has yet applied to vary the discount. We need to look at not only the operation of the existing flexibility, but what additional flexibility we might want to give. I can certainly give a clear pledge that, in the more general review of the right to buy, I will reflect carefully on Jim Tolson's points.

Jim Tolson referred to a lack of detail on the homelessness target. On my rough count, around four pages in the consultation document are about meeting the homelessness target. We have said that we want to give local authorities more flexibility to meet the target by using the private rented sector more. Not only would doing that give local authorities more flexibility, but it would give more choice and options to homeless people, which many of them want because the private rented sector can offer solutions that are more appropriate to their situation than are the solutions in the social rented sector.

I say categorically to Jim Tolson and to the chamber that we honour the 2012 homelessness target, not as an aspiration but as an absolute pledge.

The Presiding Officer: I should explain to members that the interruptions to sound are due to a problem. Apparently, there is no sound in the gallery, and the technicians are trying to fix the problem.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the statement from the cabinet secretary, which I have now had the opportunity to scan—I was not listening to the radio this morning.

I welcome the proposal to end the right to buy for new-build homes. I agree that, at the time, the right-to-buy policy was a good idea, but its consequence over the decades has been that there is such a lack of social rented housing that people have been driven to buy, because they have no other option. I am delighted to see balance being restored.

My question on the right to buy relates to the "Firm Foundations" document, which says that the right to buy a new-build house might continue, as Jim Tolson mentioned, when a tenant is moved as a result of demolition or refurbishment of their existing house, for example. I ask the cabinet secretary to consider the position of an elderly couple who have secured the right to buy over a three-bedroom house, but who, for medical reasons, are required to move to a new-build one-bedroom house. In such circumstances, would their right to buy transfer to the new property?

Perhaps a right of pre-emption for the housing association or local authority could be built in.

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Christine Grahame for her question. I note that she was not up early enough this morning to hear more about my statement. Unfortunately, I was up early enough.

I heard the point that she made on the right to buy. I apologise to Jim Tolson, because there was a point in his question that I meant to address. It is important to say that although we want to abolish the right to buy for new-build houses, we have to consider the situation of people who are in essence forced to move into new-build houses because of the demolition of their existing house. We would allow such people to continue to have the right to buy. The number of people involved is estimated to be around 10,000. We want to consider carefully the implications of that.

Christine Grahame mentioned other categories of tenant, which we will consider carefully in the consultation exercise. We have to ensure that more social houses are built—that is key. We have to incentivise local authorities and housing associations to do that. There are a range of incentives that we can give them. An important step is to remove the clear disincentive of losing new-build houses through the right to buy. I am proud to say that this SNP Government will remove that disincentive.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): The minister has a very odd notion of ministerial accountability. What happens on her watch is her responsibility and, on that basis, we expected her to make an apology to the Parliament.

On the right to buy, it seems odd and inconsistent that, having acknowledged the need for flexibility and the fact that the right to buy is experienced differently in different communities, the SNP has plucked out one aspect and made a decision on it ahead of the review.

I ask the minister to reflect on the sentence in her statement:

"We will also consider further our proposed £2,000 First Time Buyers Grant."

That rather begs the questions what consideration the SNP gave its proposals before they were put to the electorate and whether the minister is unaware of the trenchant comments by a range of academics that the proposal is expensive, ineffective and meaningless without targeting. What further consideration does the minister intend to give? What form will it take? What is the timetable for coming back to us? Who will be consulted on the matter?

Surely the minister will recognise the suspicions that have been generated that that sentence in her statement is simply a cover for, on the one hand,

her inability to defend the policy of the first-time buyers grant and, on the other hand, her reluctance to acknowledge that the promise that was made at the election was made simply to win votes and that, having been successful, it is now a broken promise. Will she give us a timetable for the consultation on the matter? Will she explain why she is not willing either to meet the promise or to justify the opposition to it?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Johann Lamont for her questions. My comments on abolishing the right to buy for new-build social housing stand. I hear that the Labour members might have different views on the policy. Once they sort out their views, they are perfectly free to feed them into the consultation exercise, and we will give them due consideration.

On the issue of the first-time buyers grant, Johann Lamont cannot have it both ways. She cannot, on the one hand, lecture me for having no respect for Parliament—which is untrue, incidentally—and, on the other hand, criticise me because I am not willing to ignore the views that have been expressed in Parliament and elsewhere before coming to a definitive view on how we progress our manifesto commitment on the first-time buyers grant. The timeframe for consultation on that issue will be the timescale for consultation on the paper, and we will listen carefully to views that are expressed.

I direct Johann Lamont to the section in the consultation paper that makes a number of proposals that will be of assistance to first-time buyers—a group in our society that the previous Government did little, if anything, to assist. The Government will propose a low-cost initiative for first-time buyers. Through that initiative, we will expand assistance for first-time buyers through a mix of Government grants, shared equity schemes and mortgage-related products and services. We will fund that expansion by implementing our manifesto commitment to create a Scottish housing support fund. This year alone, we will assist 1,800 households to get their first foot on the housing ladder, with Government grants to subsidise low-cost home ownership schemes. We want to expand and improve that model. In addition, we want to attract private finance so that we can expand the model further. Also, yes, we will further consider our manifesto commitment on the £2,000 first-time buyers grant. In addition, another proposal in the paper represents a confirmation that—in contrast to the dithering of the previous Government—this Government will take forward the single seller survey, which will save first-time buyers £200 to £300 and ensure that all buyers have good and reliable information about the houses that they seek to buy. All in all, that adds up to a good deal for first-time buyers in Scotland.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): I congratulate the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and the Minister for Communities and Sport on the work that they have done over the past six months to produce the most coherent and radical housing strategy in decades. Just as John Wheatley, a Glasgow MP, brought forward a strategy for housing in the first ever Labour Government, it has taken Ms Sturgeon, a Glasgow MSP, and the first-ever SNP Government to really tackle Scotland's housing crisis.

Will Ms Sturgeon tell us whether the proposal to establish a low-cost initiative for first-time buyers has found favour with mortgage lenders, and how many first-time buyers she hopes the scheme will support?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Tricia Marwick very much for her comments. Of course, John Wheatley was the minister responsible for health in the first Labour Government. He also pioneered the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924, which was, I suppose, the first recognition of the close link between housing and health. I am proud to say that that is a link that this progressive SNP Government has restored.

Tricia Marwick asked about our proposals to assist first-time buyers. As I said to Johann Lamont, through proposals that we are already implementing, we intend to help 1,800 first-time buyers this year. We are looking to expand that through Government investment and through our efforts to attract private finance, which is important. We have had positive initial discussions with mortgage lenders and people in the financial industry. We will continue to have such discussions because this Government is determined to give, through a range of measures, the help that first-time buyers did not get from the previous Government.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): The SNP has, at long last, recognised that John Wheatley saw the connection between health and housing, but it has not so far recognised that John Wheatley also saw the links between housing and other aspects of behaviour and problems experienced by communities.

Quite rightly, the minister's document makes much of the role of housing associations as housing providers, but it is notably silent on their wider role in many of Scotland's communities. Does the minister accept that housing associations have such a role and can she explain how her proposals will strengthen their role in, for example, helping to prevent antisocial behaviour? Does she accept that the role of a housing association is not only to build houses but to build and support communities? Can she guarantee that her proposals, particularly the proposal to change the way in which subsidies such as the housing

association grant are distributed, will not diminish that role in any way?

Nicola Sturgeon: I do not seek to embarrass the member, but that is the most pertinent and sensible question that has come from the Labour benches this afternoon.

I recognise not only the link between housing and health, but the link between it and other aspects of Scottish society. That is why my portfolio contains sport, regeneration, and anti-poverty strategies—we acknowledge those links. I agree with Patricia Ferguson that housing associations are not just housing providers, but have a wider role in the communities that they serve. I will use a housing association in my constituency as an exemplar of that model: Linthouse Housing Association not only provides good quality housing for its tenants, but does a power of work to improve the environment and cultural life of its community, and to tackle antisocial behaviour. My proposals will not undermine that approach—I passionately believe in it and want to encourage it as much as possible.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): As other members have done, I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of "Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland". I recommend for the future the practice of the early issuing of such documents. I am intrigued by what the minister describes as a "national aspirational goal"—there is a clear distinction in the 2012 stuff between aspiration and pledge—for expansion in housing supply from 25,000 to 35,000 houses a year by 2015 or thereabouts. The cabinet secretary proposes to achieve that primarily by challenging local authorities, developers and builders, but is notably lukewarm about the role of housing associations, despite what she said about Linthouse.

The paper also specifically says that 500 to 600 houses a year could be delivered by expanding prudential borrowing. Will the cabinet secretary confirm—I refer to Margaret Curran's question—the number of socially rented houses that are included in the increased aspiration to build 10,000 more houses a year? Will she also confirm that the incentives for new council-house building will not be provided by reducing the amount of housing association grant—or HAG—that is available to housing associations? Will she tell Parliament whether—in broad terms, and subject to the spending review—the total funding for social house building is to be increased in real terms or not? In other words, is it substance or is it smoke and mirrors?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Robert Brown for those questions. On the question of the target to build 35,000 houses, he said that that is an aspiration and not a firm pledge—

Robert Brown: No—Nicola Sturgeon said it was.

Nicola Sturgeon: Absolutely—the member was absolutely right to point out the wording in the document. In all seriousness, Governments cannot turn housing supply on and off like a tap. What Governments can do—and what this Government will do—is set the clear direction of travel and seek to create the political and financial climate for that house building to take place. Stewart Maxwell is already chairing the housing supply task force, which is looking to take down some of the barriers to more house building, such as land supply, and some of the barriers in the planning system. That is real practical action to create a climate in which more house building can take place.

On social housing and housing associations, if Robert Brown had had the benefit—it would have been a benefit—of hearing my statement, which I am sure that he has read, he would have heard me make it clear that, notwithstanding our desire for local authorities to have an enhanced role in provision of housing, we see housing associations as the lead providers of social housing. They will continue to build the bulk of social housing.

Regarding the amount of the money that we will invest, our spending plans will be published on 14 November—Robert Brown knows that I cannot go into more detail on that. On subsidy, let me make it quite clear that this is not about reducing the overall level of subsidy; our proposals are about getting more houses for the subsidy that we already invest. Subsidy levels in Scotland are some £30,000 per unit higher than in England and the rate of subsidy is rising at 8 per cent over inflation. To put it bluntly, that is not only not value for money—it is not sustainable. If we are to meet the ambitious house building targets, we need to reform the subsidy regime to get more for our money. I am determined to do that because it is in the interests not just of tenants but of people who want to be tenants but cannot at present.

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): I give an unqualified welcome to the announcement of an end to the right to buy, which is a long overdue change of policy. I am sure that most of us hope that it will result in new council house building and more building by housing associations, although we must accept that that will not happen overnight. I think that the cabinet secretary will agree that most councils have built very little, if anything, in the past 30 years.

What indications have there been as to how many councils will move to new build as a result of the policy? Have a variety of business models been considered or is that purely a matter for councils? What support does the cabinet secretary envisage councils such as Perth and Kinross

Council will need to move back to serious house building? It is only serious house building that will have an impact on Scotland's housing situation.

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Roseanna Cunningham for her questions. Her comments on the right to buy will strike a chord with people throughout the country—they are in tune with what the public want. That is why I am proud to put forward the proposals today.

Roseanna Cunningham is right to point out that councils have built almost no new stock in the past 30 years. To be frank, that is thanks to the political climate that the Tory and Labour Governments created in those years. We want to reverse that and reverse the rundown of the role of local authorities, but Roseanna Cunningham is also right to say that that will not happen overnight. She asked me what response we have had from councils: we have had a welcoming and positive response, but we will continue to discuss with councils the role that they can play.

Many councils can make use of their prudential borrowing ability, but it might be that they need further incentives to encourage them to do so, which is why the paper makes it clear that we are willing to consider further financial incentives. We will discuss the matter further with all local authorities that show an interest in moving down that road. As well as provide incentives, one of the most powerful things we can do is remove the disincentive of the right to buy, which has put most local authorities off building any new houses.

I end with a point that I have already made. Councils have a role to play in the future, but housing associations remain central to our drive to build new social rented housing. That is why I encourage all members to read carefully the proposals on reforming the subsidy regime for housing associations. They represent a positive way forward to ensure, first, that we invest properly in housing and, secondly, that we get more from that investment.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): What evidence does the cabinet secretary have that the single seller survey scheme is wanted in the market or has worked in trials? Will she admit that single seller surveys are an unnecessary interference?

Secondly, will she take action to streamline the grants process for rural property grants so that bureaucracy is reduced to a minimum and people are not deterred from applying for grants in our rural communities?

Thirdly, will she acknowledge that mistakes were made in the past in the development of large-scale council housing, which led to massive sink estates? Will she ensure that lessons have been learned and that local authorities and housing

associations co-operate to achieve the smaller and more varied developments that have proved to be more successful?

What will the cabinet secretary do to ensure that delivery, as opposed to approval, of affordable housing units is achieved? Does she agree that there has been a mismatch between approvals for affordable housing and what has been delivered? Will the Government take responsibility for delivery of houses—

The Presiding Officer: I think that that is enough questions for one member.

Jamie McGrigor: I am just finishing, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: No—we will go straight to the minister.

Nicola Sturgeon: First, Jamie McGrigor's point about the mismatch between approvals and houses actually being built is an important point and one that we need to address.

On his other points, I do not agree that the single seller survey "is an unnecessary interference". He asked about the response to the proposal. There was a consultation on the single seller survey and the response was overwhelmingly positive. In fairness to the Law Society of Scotland, I have to say that its response was not as positive, but the overall response was extremely positive. The single seller survey has huge potential benefits. That is the case not only for first-time buyers, but particularly for them because the cost—in most cases—of multiple surveys mounts and becomes a barrier to access to the housing market. It is a significant and positive proposal.

I am pleased to say that the rural property grant remains as part of our thinking on how to help people on to the housing ladder. It is one of the mechanisms that will enable us to help 1,800 first-time buyers this year alone.

I could not agree more with Jamie McGrigor's point about mistakes having been made in relation to the sale of council houses. That is one of the reasons why social housing has become discredited over the past few years. Social housing used to be varied and mixed, but now it is predominantly occupied by people in our most deprived communities. We must try to reverse that situation, which is why I stress the boosting of the housing supply in the social rented sector but not only in the social rented sector—we must boost supply across all tenures, so that we can encourage vibrant mixed communities in which people are pleased to live. That is the thrust of the proposals that I have published today.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I do not think that the cabinet secretary will dispute that

the lowest and most stable interest rates for 40 years have helped thousands of first-time buyers, both here in Scotland and in the United Kingdom. We have not had the benefit of hearing her statement today, but I assume that in it she would have agreed that lack of supply drives house prices upwards and contributes to the financial problems that are faced by first-time buyers in Scotland.

How will the Government handle local authorities that want to reduce the amount of land that is available for house building? The population of Fife is growing. I am sure that the cabinet secretary is aware that as part of Fife Council's structure plan reappraisal, the SNP—which forms a large chunk of the administration in Fife—is seeking to reduce the amount of land that is available for house building in Fife. The council's proposal will mean less house building and higher house prices for house hunters in Fife. Can the cabinet secretary assure the thousands of people who are looking to get their foot on the housing ladder in Fife that, when the structure plan comes to the Government at the end of the year, the Government will reject any proposal that reduces new house building in Fife?

Nicola Sturgeon: In the wake of what happened with Northern Rock and given the increasing numbers of reposessions, perhaps now is not the time to crow about the Labour Government's financial management.

We want to, and will, encourage increased supply of land by local authorities. The housing supply task force, which is chaired by Stewart Maxwell, is currently considering that matter. As we increase the supply of land, encourage more house building and, I hope, encourage new and sustainable communities—as outlined in our proposals today—we must ensure that we also have regard to the kind of communities that we want people to live in. That means that we must ensure that there is green space, good transport links and access to retail and leisure facilities—all the things that people want in communities.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Can you try answering the question? What about Fife?

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Nicola Sturgeon: In direct response to Lord Foulkes, who is heckling from a sedentary position, I can say that I will encourage Fife Council—as I will any other council in the country—to increase the supply of land so that we can ensure that the housing crisis, which was not challenged by the previous Administration, is tackled by this Government.

The Presiding Officer: We have virtually no chance of getting in all the members who want to

ask a question, so one question per member would be extraordinarily helpful.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I welcome the opportunity to ask a question and wish the Presiding Officer luck in his efforts to tackle the bad form, which we have seen from the previous Administration and this Administration, in relation to ministerial statements.

I will ask about the first-time buyers grant, which has come up before and will come up again. I am glad that open questions are asked in the document and that the Government seems to be willing to think again about the detail. However, why were more detailed options not outlined? One option would be to target the grant at measures on which first-time buyers might not otherwise spend money, such as improvements to the energy performance of buildings. That would not replace money that is already being spent, so it would not be inflationary. It would also cut people's fuel bills and achieve the environmental objectives that all political parties share. Would not that be a far better option for the cabinet secretary to pursue than a universal and untargeted first-time buyers grant?

Nicola Sturgeon: I respect Patrick Harvie's views on the matter; unlike some members, he has always put forward a well thought out and rational point of view on the first-time buyers grant. The reason why we have not been definitive on it in the consultation document is that we recognise that there are several ways in which we might implement our manifesto commitment. Through the consultation, we want to hear views expressed inside and outside Parliament on the best way forward. I hope and expect that Patrick Harvie will feed his views formally into the consultation. That is what having respect for Parliament is all about, and it is what I will always do.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement, especially her announcement that the Government will proceed with the single survey. She will be well aware of the considerable costs that buyers can face in trying to buy a property. Often, first-time buyers run into double figures when instructing surveys to be carried out. How does the cabinet secretary intend to introduce the policy? Will it be phased in in relation to the cost of property, as happened down south? Can she also give us an idea of the timescale for the policy's introduction?

Nicola Sturgeon: I echo Michael Matheson's comments: the single survey is a positive step forward that will help everybody who tries to buy a house, whether or not it is their first house. It will have particular benefits for first-time buyers, who often have to spend several hundred pounds on surveys while, in many cases, still being unsuccessful in buying a house.

We will introduce the single seller survey next year. A wealth of information will be publicly available about its content and operation. I hope that all members will play their part, as public representatives, in ensuring that the level of awareness and understanding of the new procedure is high.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I congratulate the cabinet secretary on tackling the right to buy; however, I remind her that the objection to the right to buy was that the councils were unable to replace lost stock. I fear that much of what is in the consultation paper could lead to that mistake being made again.

Unlike Michael Matheson, I have great suspicions about the single survey. Has the minister looked at what is happening to the single survey procedure in England? It appears to be discredited.

Also, under the heading of "Direct Support for Home Ownership", reference is made in the consultation document to the Government working with lenders to develop "mortgage related products". What will those products be? Will their availability be selective or will they be a right for any category of buyer?

Also, will she consider—

The Presiding Officer: I asked for one question per member, Ms MacDonald.

Margo MacDonald: I will be brief. Will the minister consider suggesting to councils that they put their houses in trust so that, in the future, it will be much more difficult to take them out of council ownership? That would help if we are trying to keep a balanced supply of all different types of housing.

Nicola Sturgeon: The idea that councils could put their houses in trust is interesting. I am more than happy to reflect on it.

Margo MacDonald asked pertinent questions and she is absolutely right that the fundamental problem with the right to buy was that councils were not allowed or were unable to replace the stock that they lost through the right to buy. We cannot replace stock that has already been lost, but I hope that she sees, throughout the consultation paper, the desire and determination of the Government to boost housing supply across all tenures, including the social rented sector. That is vital if we are to tackle the lack of available housing not just for those who want to buy—which is the majority of people in the country—but for those who either cannot buy or who would prefer to rent.

On the single seller survey, I recognise that people may be concerned about the experience in England. I understand that concern, but I stress

that the single survey model that we will adopt will, in a variety of ways, be radically different from that which was adopted in England. Indeed, English ministers said recently that they wished that they had taken the road that we will take because they would have been able to avoid some of the difficulties they have run into.

On home owners and encouraging mortgage lenders to make more flexible products available, we have already had initial discussions with mortgage lenders and we will continue with those. In particular, we want to examine the possibility of developing for first-time buyers mortgage products that are designed to lower the cost of home ownership, particularly during the first years of a mortgage. I look forward to progressing those discussions—they could be fruitful.

Finally—and briefly, Presiding Officer, because I can see that you are looking at me with that look—we are also keen to talk to mortgage lenders about how to develop green mortgage products. That idea also has great potential.

The Presiding Officer: Once I discover what “that look” is, I might use it more often.

Because we started late, I am going to take questions until 5 past 3.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I draw members’ attention to my declaration in the register of members’ interests.

As Mary Scanlon pointed out, the nationalists campaigned against stock transfer in the Highlands. That was not communities making informed decisions; it was party-political hoodwinking of Highlands communities. The cabinet secretary has a moral obligation to assist those communities. What help was offered to them in her statement? What comfort is there for tenants who are facing delays and repairs, coupled with rising rents? Given the scale of the Highland Council’s housing debt, can it benefit from prudential borrowing? How many more houses will be built in the Highlands as a result of today’s statement?

Nicola Sturgeon: The SNP members who campaigned against housing stock transfer in the Highlands and Islands were members of the communities that would have been affected by the proposed stock transfers, so it was perfectly appropriate for them to make their views known, as it would be for any other member of any other community.

I recognise that local authorities bear a large burden of housing debt, but that is not the fault of this Government; it is the fault of previous Labour and Tory Governments. That is reality.

If Rhoda Grant thinks it unfair—as I do—that the only prospect of a local authority having its debt

written off is if it agrees to transfer its housing stock, then perhaps she will encourage her members to back the approach that the Government has made to the Treasury to ask it to consider other circumstances in which housing debts could be written off.

Rhoda Grant asked me what is in our proposals for her constituents. For the first time, we have a housing strategy that focuses on building more houses across all tenures and which makes concrete proposals for bringing that about. We now have a raft of measures that are designed to help first-time buyers, which the previous Government totally failed to provide, and we have a Government that is prepared to stand up and say that the right to buy new-build properties is a disincentive to building, so we will remove it.

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the proposals to end the right to buy for new social housing that has been built by local authorities and housing associations. The housing supply crisis should not be exacerbated, bearing in mind the legacy of the previous Labour and Liberal Executive. The right-to-buy policy has helped—

The Presiding Officer: A question, please.

Stuart McMillan: The right-to-buy policy has helped families in Scotland but it has also caused problems. Two hundred thousand people are on council house waiting lists—

The Presiding Officer: A question, please, Mr McMillan.

Stuart McMillan: Will the cabinet secretary ensure that the SNP manifesto commitment to reviewing the right-to-buy policy is fulfilled at the earliest possible opportunity? How long will that take?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Stuart McMillan for his positive comments about our proposals on the right to buy. It gives me the opportunity to say that I think that they are in the interests of tenants throughout Scotland and will get widespread support. Perhaps the views that I hear from the Labour members will change when Wendy Alexander’s views reach her colleagues.

Stuart McMillan made an important and accurate distinction between our proposals on ending the right to buy on newbuild property and a wider, more general review of the overall right-to-buy policy. Some changes were introduced by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. It is appropriate to see what effect those changes have had and to feed the experience into our wider review. However, I say to Stuart McMillan that we are determined to review the overall right-to-buy policy because we are now at a stage where we cannot put our heads in the sand—as previous Governments did—and pretend that we do not

have a housing crisis. We do have a housing crisis and this Government is determined to tackle it.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): I begin by congratulating Nicola Sturgeon on her private finance initiative. She said in her statement that the Government will attract private finance from mortgage lenders, investors and bankers—dear me, wicked people—to achieve more shared equity schemes for more first-time buyers. Will the cabinet secretary please tell us why she is so keen on using private finance when it comes to homes for our people to live in, but is so hostile to it when it comes to building schools for our children to be educated in and hospitals for our patients to be treated in? In short, will she tell us why she takes off the SNP's ideological blinkers when she wears her housing hat, but puts them back on again when she wears her health hat?

Nicola Sturgeon: David McLetchie has just demonstrated ably that I am not dogmatic; I am prepared to look at things in the interests of the people of Scotland, and to make decisions based on what I think those interests are. He makes a serious point, however—PFI for schools and hospitals results in money being taken away from front-line services and used instead to line the pockets of people in the private sector. In “Firm Foundations”, we propose to take money from private sector interests and use it to help others who would not get on to the housing ladder otherwise.

Whatever our ideological differences might be on some matters, I hope that David McLetchie will see the sense of the proposals in the document and give them a warm welcome.

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): Unlike Jamie McGrigor and the Tories and Margo MacDonald, the Liberal Democrats welcome the Government proposal to progress the single seller survey. However, given the linkages between poor health, the environment, sustainability and poverty, I am a little disappointed that, in a 56-page document, there is only a brief reference to the possibility of the single seller survey containing an energy report.

Will the cabinet secretary confirm that such a report will be slightly more than that and that it will be an energy performance certificate against which the individual citizen can measure performance and know that the certificate has Government-approved status? Allied to that, the Government has set up a panel to review and collect measures to improve energy efficiency. Will that review include reference to microgeneration?

Nicola Sturgeon: Ross Finnie raises some extremely important points. It is important that the energy efficiency report will be part of the single

seller survey. If Ross Finnie reads the chapter on energy efficiency in the consultation paper, he will see that ensuring higher standards of energy efficiency and sustainability in housing is an extremely important priority. Microgeneration is also extremely important and we will certainly seek to ensure that it is reflected in the energy efficiency report.

We have to build more houses and we are determined to do so, but it is important to stress that we have to build houses of the right quality in the right places. The proposals on energy efficiency and the inclusion of the energy efficiency report in the single seller survey will help us to ensure that that is the case in the future. Although Scotland already leads the way on energy efficiency as part of our building regulations, there is no room for complacency and we must continue to improve. Taken together, the proposals in the document will ensure that we do.

The Presiding Officer: I will have a brief final question from Michael McMahon. I apologise to all members who pressed their request-to-speak buttons—I am afraid that time has run out.

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): Following the question from my colleague Patricia Ferguson, I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to support local authorities and housing associations that work well to support communities that experience antisocial behaviour. Will the cabinet secretary tell us what she intends to do to encourage local authorities and housing associations that do not provide adequate support in that respect? Will she tell us what future responsibility and role Communities Scotland will have not only in that but in all areas where she proposes to deliver on her policies?

Nicola Sturgeon: I will say more about Communities Scotland's future role in a moment.

Michael McMahon asked an important question about housing associations. I believe that they should have a much wider role than simply providing housing; indeed, the best associations in the country already perform a wider role, and those which are not doing so should be encouraged in that respect. We all have a part to play in ensuring that they live up to their responsibilities, which are not simply about dealing with the negative aspects in our communities, although that is important. One very positive responsibility is to improve the environment in which our communities live. I am very keen for housing associations to step up to the plate on that, and will continue to encourage them in that in order to ensure that it happens.

One of the announcements that Parliament was deprived of hearing this afternoon was about the abolition of Communities Scotland by this

Government. By taking the organisation's housing functions into core Government, we will satisfy two of our important objectives: first, we will simplify the public sector landscape and get rid of one of the plethora of quangos that Labour and the Tories have managed to create over the past few years and, secondly, we will ensure a strategic national capacity to drive forward our housing policy agenda. Although local authorities and housing associations are key partners in that extremely important approach, we need interventions that are above and beyond local authority boundaries, which is why we need capacity at national level.

Obviously, Communities Scotland's current role as the middleman in community regeneration will also be removed. As a result, there will be no middleman between the Government's national strategic direction with regard to regeneration and the very important work of local authorities and community planning partnerships in ensuring that regeneration takes place on the ground.

Communities Scotland's regulatory functions will continue to be carried out by a stand-alone agency, but we will reform those functions to ensure that they focus much more on outcomes for tenants and that they are completely independent of ministers, as recommended in Professor Crerar's recent review.

Early Years and Early Intervention

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-722, in the name of Adam Ingram, on early years and early intervention.

15:08

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): Early years policy holds the key to building the sort of Scotland that we want for the future, in which all our children are successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. I believe that that ambition is shared across the chamber and by our partners in local government, health boards and beyond. However, with the evidence that stark health and education inequalities emerge within the first few years of a child's life, the scale of the challenge that faces us is clear. By the time that some children are three, their development is already up to a year behind that of their peers. The root causes are poverty and deprivation, and it is to our shame as a nation that one in four of our children is so disadvantaged. Modern medical research shows that children who are born into and grow up in such adverse circumstances suffer long-term impairment to their cognitive development and their physical and mental health.

It is time for Scotland to put a stop to that tragic waste of human potential and to break the pernicious intergenerational cycle of poverty, poor health and low educational attainment that blights our society. To achieve that, we need to gear up our public services across perinatal, pre-school, school, primary health care and social care to ensure that vulnerable families receive intense support when they need it, to build the resilience that can overcome disadvantage.

The early years strategy will be long term, will cover the period from pre-birth to eight years old—including pre-conception issues such as parenting education—and will cover the range of services that support young children and their families. Our focus must shift to prevention and helping to build resilience during the early years. We need to reconfigure policies and services across the board to deliver early intervention, thereby reducing the demand for crisis intervention, which currently dominates our systems.

Four themes are emerging as being central to the approach. First, we must build parenting and family capacity, particularly in the pre-birth and very early stages of a child's life. Most of a child's basic needs in the early years are met by parents, carers, families and their wider social networks. Children who live in families where parental

capacity is high lead, more often than not, happy and productive lives. However, there is a group of parents who are not so well equipped to meet the needs of their children, either because their own parenting skills are poorly developed or because of wider factors such as poverty, domestic violence, mental health problems, substance misuse and so on.

I do not believe that there is sufficient appreciation in our society of the fact that parenting children is perhaps the hardest, and certainly the most important, task that any adult will undertake in their life. Although children's services will have a role to play in providing the support that children in vulnerable families need, some of the biggest and longest-term gains are likely to flow from supporting parents to develop their own skills, use the strengths within the family, build social networks and address the stresses that have a negative impact.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): Will the support that the minister is proposing be available to all parents or will he seek to target it?

Adam Ingram: Clearly, we are trying to align our universal services to involve more early intervention and to be responsive to the needs of service users. In doing that, we hope to flag up as early as possible those individuals and families who need more support, so that we can mobilise specialist support and bring together agencies across the board to deal with problems before they reach a crisis situation.

We are trying to help parents to fulfil their nurturing role. That does not mean that we can shy away from the difficult decisions that will need to be taken where a parent's actions mean that children are at risk of suffering harm.

The second theme that is emerging is to do with creating communities that provide a supportive environment for children and families. The community has a significant role to play in supporting positive childhoods and the quality of experience for children that will help them to build resilience. Some of the issues are tangible and readily identifiable. For example, quality of housing, open spaces and play areas, and community safety are all important factors in the quality of childhood experience.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I would like to ask a question before the minister moves away from the point that he is making. He said that the Government will not shy away from taking difficult actions in cases where a family crisis is severe. Presumably, that means removing the child from the family and providing foster care. Does the Government have a programme to extend training for foster carers? How big a part is played by foster carers in the grand strategy?

Adam Ingram: As I mentioned in last week's members' business debate on fostering, during the summer we announced an extra £4 million to help with the training of foster carers and to provide them with better support.

We are trying to adopt a twin-track approach. First, we need to reduce the demand for foster care services by helping families to cope with their own problems. Secondly, we need to provide foster carers and kinship carers with better support. That will be the subject of the forthcoming fostering and kinship care strategy, which I hope to announce later on this year.

I return to the theme of providing a supportive environment for children and families. Less tangible aspects of the issue include the existence or absence of positive aspirations for children and the degree to which the community sees the welfare and well-being of children as a collective responsibility. We do not deal with that terribly well in Scotland. Many aspects of policy will need to come together with grass-roots social change to make an impact. I do not underestimate the challenges.

The third theme that we want to pursue through the strategy is delivering services that meet the needs of children and families in a holistic way. The early years service landscape remains quite fragmented, with a plethora of health, social work, education and child care services. The fact that several of those services encompass public, private and voluntary sector provision makes the landscape even more complex.

In many areas, local authorities and their community planning partners are doing positive work to join up approaches at local level, but fragmentation can have many consequences, from children being shuffled between several different forms of child care to multiple assessments and the risks that arise from the complexity of sharing information. Therefore, a major theme of the strategy will be to build on work that is already being progressed through the getting it right for every child programme.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): I agree with everything that the minister has said—it has been extremely good and positive—but how does he reconcile it with the decisions to close nursery and primary schools that have been revived in Edinburgh by the Scottish National Party-led City of Edinburgh Council?

Adam Ingram: I do not believe that that is what has happened in Edinburgh, so I will return to my constructive remarks.

George Foulkes: Will the minister give way?

Adam Ingram: I am sorry, George.

When need is identified, the first instinct should be not to refer the case on to another agency that is deemed more appropriate but to mobilise all agencies that can make an appropriate contribution.

As I have already mentioned, families with greater needs often have other stresses, which mean that they have to navigate an even more complex web of services—more likely, they do not even try to do so. We should not allow any child to fall through the cracks. Outreach work will be a significant feature of early intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Adam Ingram: I am sorry, but we are out of time.

The final theme, which was very much to the fore in the early years inquiry that was carried out in the previous session of Parliament, is workforce development. It is impossible to deliver the services that we want for our youngest children if we do not invest in the skills and career opportunities of the people who deliver those services—those are two sides of the same coin.

Just this morning, I launched the standard for a degree-level qualification in childhood practice, and our proposals on enhancing teacher involvement in pre-school education and on reducing class sizes will further enhance the amount of professional input in early years services. However, in the longer term we must look to a much broader agenda that involves developing the skills of all staff who work with children and families.

A strong consensus was built during the Education Committee's early years inquiry in session 2, so I am hopeful that we can build the cross-party support that will be needed in the new political landscape to deliver the scale of change that I believe is necessary. We will also need to build a wider consensus among people who plan, deliver and use services if we are to overcome the major obstacles to change that we know exist.

This is a truly national project. Fiona Hyslop will say more about that in closing, but I look forward to contributions to this important debate from members of all parties, and I look forward to the development of the strategy over the coming year.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of early years policy in delivering improved outcomes for children and young people; believes that early intervention has a crucial role to play in reducing inequalities, particularly in health and education, but also more widely; welcomes the intention to develop a long-term early years strategy;

agrees that parenting, support for families and community capacity-building are areas which require a strong focus; believes that services must work more closely together to support children and families, and highlights the importance of a highly skilled and collaborative workforce in delivering a new strategic approach to early years policy.

15:20

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): There is much in the motion on which we can agree. It is widely acknowledged that the Labour Party, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, had an excellent record on provision for early years and early intervention and began to make real strides in addressing child poverty—a particular concern of the Labour Party. In our sunrise agenda for children and young families, we made commitments to children, families and parents, and acknowledged the key role that supporting parents plays in tackling poverty and disadvantage.

However, given that the motion and the early years strategy cover pupils up to primary 3, as the minister said, I will talk about the Scottish National Party's flagship policy of reducing class sizes to 18 in primary 1 to primary 3. We think that the SNP's pledge on class sizes is under threat and is unlikely to be fulfilled. Scottish parents have a right to know about that.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): What exactly is the Labour Party's position on smaller class sizes? In 2003, Peter Peacock said that they were a good thing; in 2007, Wendy Alexander says that they are not so important. Do you want smaller class sizes or not?

Rhona Brankin: Of course, we reduced some class sizes. However, our position is very much that it is up to head teachers and schools how they deliver smaller class sizes. The SNP has been unable to quote research that says that smaller class sizes would have a definite benefit. Valerie Wilson, of the Scottish Council for Research in Education, said that the case for reducing class sizes has not been made. The SNP has not made its case. We want flexibility and parents need to know what they are going to get.

I have brought with me a copy of a document that I have sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, which sets out 40 key questions that the SNP must answer if it is to achieve its goal of reducing class sizes. Many of the questions have not been answered. The SNP has avoided providing details on nearly all the issues, which is leading to huge frustration for parents and politicians and to accusations that the SNP has made a promise to the Scottish electorate that it cannot keep.

The cabinet secretary must answer a fundamental question: what is the projected cost

of the class size reduction pledge? The SNP must have a projected cost, given that it has made a huge commitment to Scottish parents. Is the SNP seriously telling us that it does not know how much it would cost to fulfil the pledge? Has the SNP made yet another uncostered promise?

When I asked for detail on the SNP's costings for reducing class sizes in P1 to P3, Fiona Hyslop replied:

"Estimates of the staffing costs required for class size reductions in primary 1 to 3 to a maximum of 18 are not available broken down to local authority level."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 25 October 2007; S3W-5062.]

Has the cabinet secretary asked local authorities how much the SNP pledge on class sizes would cost? If you have not asked local authorities that question, will you do so? I suggest that if the cabinet secretary has not asked the question, it is because she probably has a pretty good idea of the answer, and she does not want to hear it.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): Will the member give way?

Rhona Brankin: Maybe you will tell us: have you asked local authorities what it will cost them to implement your pledge? Yes or no?

Fiona Hyslop: We are in continuing discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The member must decide whether or not she agrees with the reduction in class sizes, because many local authorities want to know whether the Labour Party supports a reduction in class sizes. So far, I think that the answer is no.

Rhona Brankin: Of course, the cabinet secretary refuses to answer the question. I say to her: members are in the chamber to debate the SNP's manifesto commitment. She does not want to hear the information that councils might provide, but she will have to listen to some of it in the debate. If the Government does not know what the local authorities' costings are, she might like to check whether her officials are taking notes.

Glasgow City Council will need to hire 397 extra teachers and build 186 extra classrooms, at a total cost of £47 million. North Lanarkshire Council will need 150 extra teachers and 83 new classrooms, at a total cost of £20.5 million. South Lanarkshire Council will need 200 extra teachers and 90 new classrooms, at a total cost of £20.75 million. The City of Edinburgh Council will need 206 extra teachers and estimates that its total extra cost for staffing and capital costs will be £42 million.

George Foulkes: Will my colleague confirm for the minister, Mr Ingram, that an article in yesterday's *Edinburgh Evening News* confirmed that the SNP-led council in Edinburgh is reopening

its plans to close primary and nursery schools in the city? Is that not the case?

Rhona Brankin: Absolutely. It is an absolute disgrace that the SNP Government at Holyrood is saying one thing and the SNP-led council in Edinburgh is doing another.

I asked councils how much the SNP's class size reduction will cost. Given that I have done it, will the cabinet secretary and her ministers now do it? The truth is that the policy is one of the biggest uncostered pledges in the SNP wish list of a manifesto. Of course, the question that I have asked is just one of many unanswered questions to which the cabinet secretary must respond.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Rhona Brankin: No. If you do not mind, I would like to get on.

Scottish parents have a right to know whether the class size pledge will lead to an increase in the number of composite classes. If that is the case, it could lead to classes of 36 pupils with two teachers. Will that be acceptable? Will schools be allowed to use school gymnasiums or music rooms as classrooms? Will portakabins in the playground be acceptable? Will the cabinet secretary restate the First Minister's promise to deliver reduced class sizes in this parliamentary session?

The SNP is discovering that it is a lot easier to make promises than it is to keep them. Its class size pledge is looking like another broken promise. Reducing class sizes to 18 is a complicated process, yet the SNP cannot provide even the most basic costing information. Given that the SNP Government has pledged to cut class sizes—not only has it done that, the First Minister has restated that the SNP will do it in the first four years—it must know the potential costs, but if it does not know, what sort of Government is it? The questions are: how many teachers will be needed and what will be the capital costs? The SNP Government is not prepared to provide the answers to those questions.

Labour believes that having smaller class sizes is only one part of what is needed to give our children a better education. The SNP has put all its education eggs into one basket. Having done so, it will be unable to meet its pledge.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Rhona Brankin: No. I would like to continue. I have given way two or three times.

The SNP has broken the promise that it made to the Scottish people to recruit an additional 1,000 police officers. We fear that it is about to do the same on class sizes.

The Labour Party amendment

"notes the failure of the SNP Government to provide a statement on its commitment to reduce class sizes ... as called for by the Parliament on 13 September 2007"

and calls on the Scottish Government to

"bring forward detailed plans and costings on its commitment to reduce class sizes within the imminent strategic spending review statement."

Despite the First Minister's warm words in May that the SNP Government would always remember that it is a minority Government, it continues to treat the Scottish Parliament with contempt. We witnessed that earlier this afternoon. It is now time for the Scottish ministers to come clean on the costs involved in class size reductions. They owe it to Scottish parents to do so.

I move amendment S3M-722.2, to insert at end:

"notes the failure of the SNP Government to provide a statement on its commitment to reduce class sizes to 18 in primary 1 to primary 3 by 2011, as called for by the Parliament on 13 September 2007, and agrees that the Scottish Government should bring forward detailed plans and costings on its commitment to reduce class sizes within the imminent strategic spending review statement."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Elizabeth Smith, I say to members that, although I understand the difficulties involved, the use of the word "you" is creeping into members' speeches quite a bit. When a member says "you" they are referring to me, which, I am sure, is not the intention. Wherever possible, I ask members to refer to one another by their full names.

15:29

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In speaking to the Conservative amendment, which is in my name, I begin by saying that no self-respecting politician could possibly disagree with the sentiments that are expressed in the Government motion, nor could they disagree with the compelling evidence that has been presented in a wealth of social and educational research in which the behavioural patterns of children aged zero to eight have been studied.

The importance of the early years goes without saying, as does the importance of the many and varied influences during what can be the most rewarding years of childhood. We can be under no illusions at all about the importance of the pre-school years and primaries 1 to 3 for educational achievement and wider social and cultural development, whether that means developing cognitive skills, helping children to adopt healthy eating standards and good manners, or ensuring that they understand others' needs.

However, we should not just debate a few grand sentiments and principles. I hope that today's debate will be about the details of workable policy, as Ms Brankin hinted, and not just about the ideals with which we want to inspire educational thinking. The amendment in my name reflects that and our belief that several key policy areas can be identified to provide stronger support for the family and, more specifically, for the institution of marriage. Although I do not want to dwell too much on Westminster responsibilities, I stress our commitment to Conservative policies at United Kingdom level that will encourage families to stay together and give parents real choices in deciding what is best for their children. If we do not have underlying support through the UK tax and benefit system, the policies over which the Parliament has control will be much less effective.

I will go straight to the detail and deal with the importance of the family in pre-school years—a point that was enunciated forcibly by several key witnesses who gave evidence to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee earlier this month. The definition of the family is diverse these days, but there should be no doubt that its bedrock has been and always will be the institution of marriage and the creation of a stable environment within marriage.

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

Elizabeth Smith: I may be just about to answer Mr Purvis's point. I say to those who argue that that approach is somehow old-fashioned or discriminatory that, rather than ask politicians to judge, they should ask children and their parents what their ideal family situation would be. They need no reminding of the costs of family breakdown, which are now a staggering £20 billion a year in the UK. It is therefore essential that Government policy be directed specifically at redressing the situation.

Jeremy Purvis: For clarification, when the member refers to the institution of marriage, does she include civil partnerships within that broad definition?

Elizabeth Smith: Our party has made it clear that we will accept that.

It is vital that Government policy is directed in that way to end the perverse financial disincentive for couples to come together and stay together. The working tax credit that couples receive should reflect that situation, and perhaps transferable tax allowances for married couples should be introduced. Because of the situation, the Conservatives want a child benefit system that more heavily supports families with children in the age range zero to two, when costs are often at

their highest and are, in many cases, prohibitive if one parent wishes to stay at home.

Besides that, it is important to remind ourselves of the Government's appropriate role, namely that it should support, not interfere. Thousands of parents in Scotland are perfectly capable of bringing up their families successfully, and they should be able to get on with it without the burden of a nanny state. So when we use the phrase "early intervention", let us be specific about the terms of reference: it is a relevant and appropriate description when it refers to the additional support for those families who genuinely need it—there are many of them—but it is not appropriate if it relates to developing a one-size-fits-all strategy that dictates how every child should be brought up.

Frankly, that is what is wrong with some aspects of SNP policy, and it is most clearly exemplified in its universal or one-size-fits-all policy of reducing class sizes in primaries 1 to 3 even when that cannot be funded properly and it is not the appropriate priority. The Conservatives believe that class sizes should not be determined by the Government at all, but instead should be decided by head teachers—it is good to see a Labour conversion to that policy. Give head teachers the choice between having universal smaller class sizes and the freedom to run their schools and they will take the latter.

I turn to the role of schools in early learning, and specifically to numeracy and literacy skills, on which, frankly, Scotland is not performing well enough. There have been many encouraging signs at nursery and playgroup level and in some early years of primary, but much more needs to be done. Basic skills are required. I hope that we will never go back to the bad old days when the emphasis was on expression rather than a good firm grasp of phonetics and numbers.

I will close on an important point to which the minister alluded. Will the Government give a firm commitment to develop policies that support children outwith the formal learning environment? The Government hinted at that in its manifesto, but to date it has given absolutely no detail. We want firm policy details. I entirely agree with Rhona Brankin that we are not hearing nearly enough policy details.

I move amendment S3M-722.3, to insert after first "families":

"and the institution of marriage".

15:35

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): This debate is welcome, and a 10-year strategy will be welcome, too. I commend

the minister for his open approach to the other parties in the lead-up to the debate, and for the fact that we did not hear the contents of his speech on the radio this morning. That was a purely accidental reference to other proceedings today.

A number of manifesto commitments were made by the different parties. By and large, the approach to the development of a co-ordinated early years strategy was consensual, which highlights the fact that all parties in the Parliament share a common view. Today, we have chosen not to try to amend the Government's motion. The motion is fine, but we wanted to ensure a greater focus on how the strategy can give the most effective support. I hope that the Government is minded to support our constructive addendum.

I have some concerns, however. In a debate on the Government's skills strategy, I said that the Liberal Democrats would not tolerate an equally vacuous policy document. We want the early years strategy to be focused and to contain specific details, baseline data and real policy ambition. The document should not be like the mood music that we saw in the skills strategy, which led colleges in Scotland to say that it asked them to do nothing in particular and universities in Scotland to say that it asked them to do nothing at all. Gilbert and Sullivan described the House of Lords as doing nothing in particular and doing it very well, but we cannot allow the early years strategy to be so described.

The Government is on notice. Opposition parties, although wanting to work with the Government, will oppose it if it does not deliver a real strategy. Unfortunately, over the past six months we have seen too much obfuscation from the ministerial team on education. The comprehensive spending review statement must include a clear position on extending pre-school provision, on building capacity in the system, and on improving workforce skills through local authorities.

We must finally get a straight answer to the straight question of whether the Government's pledge on class sizes will be delivered before 2011. I say to Mrs Brankin that we do not need 40 questions, just the one—and we need just the one answer. By my calculations, we have had five variations on a theme from the Government. COSLA still awaits clarification. I understand that COSLA has said to the Government that it will require £300 million to deliver the commitment during this session of the Parliament. However, the Government has still not given COSLA clarity—no matter whether it is the First Minister or the cabinet secretary who has the say on when the commitment will be delivered.

We would like to consider the merits of limiting class sizes to 18. Other parties, too, have commented on the issue. Under this Government, we will be moving away from a position of having no limits on the overall group sizes in nurseries. There will be a limit regarding the ratio between staff numbers and numbers of children, but there will be no limits on group sizes, which will be potentially up to 25. There will also be a reduction to 18 for primaries 1, 2 and 3, but there will be a larger group size for primary 4. That will give heads of primary schools considerable difficulties related to staffing and to composite classes. There is no clear approach to an incremental development of a child's learning from the age of two to the age of eight—the age to which the Government has referred. The Government may be placing institutional barriers in the way of a coherent approach to education.

We must also ask about the commitment on nursery provision. In December 2006, the headline was:

"It's time to double nursery provision".

In February 2007, the SNP's website talked of a 50 per cent increase; the manifesto gave that figure as well. So far, we have not had 50 per cent, but again we are waiting on the consequentials from England to be clarified in the spending review before seeing whether that commitment will be delivered. We will give the commitment a fair wind and we will support it, as it was a commitment in our manifesto, too. I think that we would have given a much clearer statement on it before now, but I trust that such a statement will come from the Government.

We have not doubted the ministerial team's sincerity, but we have condemned this week's shifty auditing in the announcement of cuts in the number of quangos, on which the previous Administration had already decided, and spending announcements about money that has already been committed. We hope that the new strategy will be a fresh approach from the Government.

Clarity is needed on another of the Government's commitments that will be at the heart of the strategy. I refer to the commitment to provide access to a nursery teacher for every child in a nursery. There is no clarity regarding the definition of access.

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): As Jeremy Purvis said, no definition of access has been given. Does he accept that what the First Minister and others clearly said was not that there would be access, but that there would be a teacher for every nursery child, which is significantly different?

Jeremy Purvis: To be fair to the Government, which I always tend to be, it said that it wished to provide access to a teacher. However, as I saw

during a visit to a nursery in my constituency, access as currently defined could mean one visit by one teacher to one nursery each term. The Government must be clear about what it means.

We want a renaissance in play and we want to reinvigorate Scotland's playgroup movement. We want additional support for two-year-olds with regard to play. We want to be able to move the strategy towards much better intervention at an earlier age. I hope that that would be our approach with regard to places for two-year-olds, better workforce planning and the transition from nursery to formal education in primary 1; that would transform the way in which staff, local authorities and Government work together. I hope that that approach will be part of the strategy. If it is not, we will be highly critical; if it is, we will of course support it.

I move amendment S3M-722.1, to insert at end:

"further believes that the Scottish Government's approach to early years must incorporate a strategy for play and communication, give greater support for play provision for two-year-olds and develop primary 1 into a transition year from nursery to formal education."

15:42

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): It has been almost eight and a half years since the first elections to the Scottish Parliament. Eight cohorts of primary school pupils have entered the education system since 1999. A child who was born on the day of that first election is now in primary 3. Such children were failed by the first eight years of stuttering administration and I am glad that they now have a Government that will at least try to deliver for them.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Will Christina McKelvie take an intervention on that point?

Christina McKelvie: I want to continue.

I was pleased when I saw the motion that Adam Ingram lodged, which should allow us to debate the important early years in a child's life and how we can add to their life chances by improving services for them in the early years. However, I was saddened to see Rhona Brankin's amendment, not just because it seeks to score petty points in a debate as important as this, but because it misses the point altogether.

The Minister for Children and Early Years is seeking consensus in Parliament for an approach to early years services that would reduce inequalities, particularly in health and education, and seek better integration and collaboration.

Rhona Brankin: The member said that my speech was irrelevant. Will she answer the question that the cabinet secretary and the minister singularly refuse to answer? Does she

know, as a Scottish National Party member, how much the proposed reduction in class sizes will cost? Does she have any idea?

Christina McKelvie: Perhaps I will give the member that answer when she tells me whether she supports smaller class sizes—yes or no?

The Government is plotting a path that seeks to help families across Scotland and seeks to find common ground among all the parties that are represented in the chamber, for the benefit of all Scotland's families.

We have a Conservative amendment with which we may not all agree, but which at least presents a point of view that refers to the early years experience. The amendment from Jeremy Purvis puts forward ideas that the minister can at least consider as part of the consideration of the early years strategy for Scotland. However, the response from the Labour Party is predictably sour and it misses the point.

While the other parties in the chamber can all use this opportunity to focus on the vital issues at hand, Labour instead has its heart set on worrying at the bruises of its election defeat six months ago. That is as unhelpful to Scotland as it is unedifying to see. While we are concentrating on the early years, Labour is off talking about school years and seeking to criticise the SNP's laudable commitment to cutting class sizes in the first years of primary school. Perhaps that is because Labour does not understand what the early years of a child's life mean for the child's life chances. Perhaps Labour has not had a chance to study any of the research, or perhaps it is ashamed that it promised an early years strategy during the 2003 election campaign, but did not deliver over the next four years. In the eight years for which Labour was in power, it did not produce an early years or early years intervention strategy. There was consultation on what such a strategy should be, but there was no delivery. There was prevarication and no action.

The child who was born on the day of the first elections to the Scottish Parliament was failed by Labour. One would think that Labour would have the decency to try to help put that right. While I am on the subject of Labour failures, I ask members to cast their minds back to the pledge that Labour made to cut class sizes in primary 1 to a maximum of 25 pupils. The latest figures for 2006 show that there was only a 3 per cent difference in the numbers between when the promise was made and 2006, when it was definitely broken. More than 41 per cent of primary 1 pupils are still in classes of more than 25. Three years after Labour promised an unambitious improvement, hardly a shred of difference has been made. I will take no lectures from Labour on class sizes.

I applaud Adam Ingram for bringing this important debate on early years to the chamber and I urge members to engage in it. I am aware that the previous Education Committee took a special interest in examining the work of the Scandinavian countries, having visited Stockholm and Helsinki during its early years inquiry. The SNP also has a particular interest in those nations, as they are in the arc of prosperity. We favour their early years partnership model, given the high regard in which the well-trained and respected staff are held and the attitude that allows children to be children.

The SNP is painfully aware that Scotland does not have control over the tax and benefits system, which would allow us to emulate the system in Sweden and Finland, which gives so much support to parents and families. However, we are determined to do what we can within the current system to improve Scotland's lot.

Jeremy Purvis: In the interests of balance, I am sure that the member will agree that, on comparisons within the UK with regard to what has happened in the past eight years, child care services, such as the free nursery places for three and four-year-olds, have set us considerably ahead of England.

Christina McKelvie: Absolutely. At least Mr Purvis has the guts to recognise that we are trying to make a difference in Scotland and that we are making headway on that.

Research from the Abecedarian project and Perry pre-school project, as well as evidence from Reggio Emilia, shows that early intervention and an effective early years strategy pay dividends. There are lifelong benefits for recipients of the investment, whose life chances are immeasurably improved, and financial savings in later life social services for the society that provides the investment. The Perry pre-school 21 years on study suggests that the savings could be as much as eight times the spend. That is pretty good gearing.

Members of the Parliament have an opportunity today to make a commitment to drive early years provision in Scotland in a direction that will benefit us all. We will have further opportunities to help Scotland's Government refine the strategy and direction of our support for people in the first years of their life. I support the motion and commend it to my fellow MSPs.

15:47

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I am sure that we all agree that investment in early years education is vital to the future of our country. It is not just vital for the young people concerned

and their immediate families, but is central to achieving our aims of eliminating child poverty, reducing inequality and maximising our economic success.

The early years policy of Labour-led North Lanarkshire Council is making a vital contribution to the lives of my constituents in Airdrie and Shotts. I do not have time today to highlight every success, so I will focus on the one area that is making a real difference: the national pilot that the council is running, which is based around nurture groups. There are currently eight nurture groups in our primary schools, each of which has two dedicated staff providing extra support to the children in primary 1 to primary 3 who need it most. Each school has a dedicated space for the nurture group to use, including home space, which replicates a domestic living room, an eating area and a class area, which is limited to 12 children. Children spend most of their day in the nurture group, but rejoin their main primary class for larger group activities. Parents are encouraged to be involved.

Although it is still too early to judge the full benefits of the scheme, national test scoring has already improved and the children involved are already reaping the benefits by gaining maturity, self-confidence and belief in themselves. However, I remind the minister that if we are to replicate those experiences and good practice throughout Scotland, it will cost money. I believe that such initiatives will deliver more for primary 1 to primary 3 children than the flawed policy on class sizes.

On the issue of class sizes for primaries 1, 2 and 3, the Scottish Labour Party is committed to smaller class sizes. However, unlike the SNP, we promise only what we can deliver, and our policies will always be driven by the desire to improve attainment. It is important that we consider a number of difficulties that local authorities will face as a result of the policy. First, the hard fact is that many schools across Scotland are physically unable to extend their facilities to accommodate a decrease in class sizes—they simply do not have the extra space or capacity to run extra classes. What will happen to the children who currently have places at those schools but who take the class roll over 18? What will happen to the 19th and 20th members of the class? Will they be moved to another school? Will the minister clarify what will happen in those circumstances?

Secondly, the policy will significantly reduce the ability of local authorities to deal with school placing requests, which will increase dissatisfaction among parents. Many more parents will be denied their first choice of school and more children will end up separated from their friends and siblings. Surely the Government would be

better off giving local authorities the resources and power to reduce the overall pupil teacher ratio rather than focusing on the arbitrary reduction of class sizes, which has no proven benefits.

The fact is that the quality of teaching practice benefits pupils far more than a class size reduction. Reducing the pupil teacher ratio would be of far greater benefit to overall educational standards and would allow headteachers to allocate extra teaching support to the pupils who need it most, without having the headache of dealing with school capacity issues.

Leaving aside those practical considerations, the reality is that local authorities simply cannot afford to implement the Government's proposals. North Lanarkshire Council has estimated that, to meet the Government's pledge on class sizes, we will have to employ an extra 150 teachers at a cost of £5.5 million a year. However, that is only the tip of the iceberg. Building extra classrooms, where it is possible to do so, would incur capital costs of between £15 million and £20 million. That is the minimum cost and does not include any additional infrastructure needs, such as extra parking spaces or toilet facilities. Without extra funding, the Government's policy will mean that children who are not in primaries 1, 2 and 3 will be faced with larger classes of up to 40 being taught in school canteens and sports halls. It will mean that children will be taught in draughty portakabins in the school playground rather than in new classrooms in new schools.

When the costs are added in for local authorities that, in the face of changing school rolls, will also have to conduct catchment reviews, it is clear that the Government's policy of focusing on class sizes is not only misguided and costly; it is a diversion from the real needs of our children in the early years. We need an early years policy that is right for all young people and which focuses on children's real learning outcomes rather than on arbitrary targets.

Parents in my constituency, like parents across Scotland, want an early years strategy that puts their children first. I hope that the Government will listen to their concerns, as they have been expressed by members today—

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): Will the member give way?

Karen Whitefield: I am in my last minute, I am afraid.

It is important that the Government begins to deliver on those priorities and ensures that effective action is taken to ensure a bright start for every young child in Scotland.

15:53

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank Adam Ingram for bringing the debate to the chamber. As Jeremy Purvis and Elizabeth Smith have said, the debate is consensual. Many of us can agree with the basic thrust of what we are talking about. It is always slightly worrying when Jeremy Purvis talks about consensus, as that is unusual for him. However, I totally support his view today.

Jeremy Purvis Will the member give way?

Jamie Stone: I am not used to taking interventions from my own side. I certainly will not give way.

As I usually do, I will use examples from my constituency to bring some matters to the attention of the minister. I hope that he and his colleagues will consider them positively. One of my examples arises from a visit that I made to Pennyland primary school in Thurso. The children put on a particularly good video presentation that I would like to copy to the minister. They brought up the simple issue of bullying among younger children, and there is no doubt that—in terms of everything that we are trying to achieve together—that is one factor that can militate against our best efforts. The video was thought-provoking; it posed questions that I had trouble answering in Thurso, on the day, so it would be helpful if the minister is willing to engage.

Secondly, I want to mention a problem that occurs in my home town; I am sure that it will be familiar to many members. The workers from Europe whom we have in our constituencies are truly welcome; they are making a vibrant difference to our lives and to everything that is done in our constituencies. However, in Knockbreck primary school in my home town of Tain, there is a problem with the running of the Gaelic unit and the sports facilities, as we have so many immigrant workers' children—who are welcome—that the facilities are overstretched. That is posing a problem for the local authority, and it should be brought to the minister's attention.

My third point is the most serious. I ask for members' indulgence—I will go back slightly in history to before the recent election. The Highland Council was, in its infinite wisdom, considering the closure of a number of nursery units in Caithness. The unit in Thrumster, just south of Wick, is one example, and Keiss, just north of Wick, is another example. The council was talking about closing down those units altogether, which would mean that small pre-primary children would be transported from the village of Thrumster, south of Wick, to Wick for the nursery provision, and then back to Thrumster when they hit primary 1. In terms of sibling support, keeping families together

and making life liveable for parents who are trying to transport children around, it was unthinkable. It became a cause célèbre—the minister might be aware of it—in the far north of Scotland, and it made many newspaper column inches. It caused great anxiety. There was a climate of uncertainty.

In fairness to the Scottish Government and the previous Scottish Executive, that plan seemed to fly in the face of the best intentions for the best interests of small children. Subsequent to that—and in fairness to the present Scottish Government—we got a new administration in the Highlands. The decision was put on ice, and has been frozen. However, we do not know what will happen at the end of the day. We are not certain that those small, crucial rural nursery units will be kept open. In terms of access to nursery units, it seems that a child who lives in Perth, Edinburgh, Glasgow or Lanark has exactly the same rights as a child living in a small remote village in Caithness, such as Keiss or Thrumster.

Ministers must ensure that there is no backing away from the best intentions of the Scottish Government, and that there is no behind-the-scenes unrolling of all that has been done in the best interests of our children. It is about checking that capital expenditure meets needs, and that grant-aided expenditure figures are being examined properly and used in the way that Government intended. It is an unfortunate fact that, in the nature of politics and government in Scotland, there is a big telescope from the decisions that are made here by the Scottish Government to what happens out there in a faraway county such as Caithness. Things can change—we all know that through our experience. I am saying, in a friendly way, to the Scottish Government, "Do your best. We, as Liberal Democrats, will support you whenever we believe that you are backing the best interests of the children." We need a consensual approach—the questions that have been posed on funding by the Labour Party are relevant, and I am sure that the Government will come back with answers.

Elizabeth Smith made points about the nanny state. I am not aware that the social work department in my constituency acts out of order in intervening in families. It has got the balance about right between providing a safety net for those children who need it, and non-interference. However, I accept that there is a debate to be had on that matter.

I urge the Scottish Government to look closely at the outcomes of the decisions at the lowest levels, and the impact on children, and I ask Scottish ministers please to keep in mind the small nursery units in my constituency that were under threat and which, pray God, will never be closed.

15:59

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP):

As my colleague Christina McKelvie noted, it has been nine years since Scotland compiled any kind of comprehensive strategy on early years and early intervention. Given that we all agree how crucial it is to have healthy, happy, informed, inquisitive, aspiring and involved children, we might think that one of the things that the new Scottish Parliament would have done in 1999 would be to look at an overarching strategy to help us help our children become all those things. That would have been a fitting intervention for the early years of our Parliament. That is why I was pleased to hear our Minister for Children and Early Years talk so passionately and with such commitment about a comprehensive plan to do the best for Scotland's children.

The nine-year-old strategy that I mentioned a moment ago—"Meeting the Childcare Challenge: A Childcare Strategy for Scotland"—was not so much an early years strategy as a plan to provide more accessible child care. That is important, of course, and it is something that the SNP supports, but it is not the end of the story. Doing the best for children is not just about education—it is also about health. If children are well nourished, fit and healthy, they will learn better. If they are emotionally secure and their psychological needs are taken care of, their minds will be free to learn. That, too, will enable them to learn better.

Doing the best for children is about social interaction. It is our duty to create an environment in which children have access to a variety of experiences and adult influences. If they have that access, their learning will deepen.

Doing the best for children is about having loving, supportive families, as Elizabeth Smith noted. It is society's duty to support families and enable them to provide the right environments for their children. Children thrive in stable, loving environments, where their capacity to learn increases.

Doing the best for children is also about wealth and poverty. The link between poverty and learning is unquestionable, as are the words of Douglas Hamilton, the head of policy and research at Save the Children, who said of the child poverty figures in March:

"The Scottish Executive and the UK Government strategies have not gone nearly far enough—the figures are disgraceful."

As the minister said, the SNP Government takes seriously its pledge to eradicate poverty. As we do so, children will be free to learn and they will do so better.

It is right to invest time and money in our children's early years, but it also makes economic

sense. When the Work Foundation published the results of a major investigation into the early years, it came to the following conclusion:

"Many of society's most intractable social problems—crime, drugs misuse, unemployment, poor skills and endemic unhappiness—are rooted in the experiences of children during their first five years of life."

If we get things right in the first five years, we will undoubtedly save money that would otherwise be spent on dealing with the effects of crime and drugs. The Work Foundation estimates that, for every £1 that is spent on helping families and young people who are at risk, up to £17 of public expenditure can be saved. If the conclusions of the Work Foundation's studies are correct, we have only a short period of time in which to influence and encourage children positively, so we must not waste any more time.

What do we have to do? For a start, we need to ensure that our children are fit and healthy. The introduction of the free school meals pilot is a terrific start and is heading in the right direction. Many children go to school without having breakfast and rarely eat a nutritious meal. Our approach is simply common sense.

Often, common sense is all that is needed to help to improve children's lives. That is why I find the actions of South Lanarkshire Council—with particular reference to getting children fit—bizarre. I will give an example of something that happened at a school in Carluke in South of Scotland. To encourage participation in sport, the school has new enclosed playing fields. That is good news so far. From afar, they look like bright, new, shiny, wonderful facilities, but on closer inspection the surfaces are not grass or new age AstroTurf but tarmac. A friend of mine said, "In my day, they called that a road."

Jeremy Purvis: I do not disagree with most of what the member says, but does she understand that there is frustration about the way in which the Government is developing its approach because it is limited to P1 to P3? The free school meals pilot is an example. The Government is not proposing free meals in nurseries or in P4. Why is there an obsession with P1 to P3?

Aileen Campbell: It is a strategy and an approach, and we want to make contributions to further that. At the moment, the project is a pilot. The results will be considered and the project could be rolled out further.

I return to the point about tarmac. I think that we all agree that, in the 21st century, tarmac is not the best surface for children to play energetic sports on. It will not help us to find the next James McFadden.

Learning happens not only in nurseries and primary schools but throughout people's lives. We

have to ensure that children's life experiences are about more than home and school. They need to venture out into wider society, but that is becoming more and more difficult. We have all seen the report by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, which says that nearly half of the adults who were surveyed fear being wrongly accused of harming a child and will not volunteer to work with them. Often, that means that local clubs and organisations are not set up. If children are denied access to such clubs, they miss out on other parts of life that will add depth and fun to the learning experiences that they get in the classroom.

The arguments for focusing on the early years are compelling. The Work Foundation argues that investing more in early years services, especially in parental support and community-based day care, will better help disadvantaged children and help us to save public money in the long term.

Tonight is Hallowe'en and many children will be excited and happy to dress up to go guising—perhaps some of us in the chamber will do so, too—but Hallowe'en is not only a game. When it comes to the future of our young children, let none of us play games and let us work together as a Parliament towards ensuring that the children who need our help and intervention are provided with a brighter, healthier and happier tomorrow.

16:06

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I declare an interest, as I am a father of two and a grandfather of two, although my wife might question my claims to expertise in bringing up children.

For Aileen Campbell's information, James McFadden learned his football at Turnbull high school, in my constituency—I think that he played on red ash rather than tarmac.

I support Rhona Brankin's amendment. I will confine my remarks to a particular aspect of early years provision: nursery school education. As SNP members will know, it was the Labour Party that introduced the policy of a free nursery place for every three and four-year-old whose parents want one. That was a Labour promise made and a Labour promise delivered.

What of the SNP in government and its commitments to nursery provision? It has announced an increase in the number of weeks of free provision from 33 to 38—translated into free hours, that is an increase from 400 hours to 475. Yet the SNP's manifesto commitment was to increase nursery provision by 50 per cent—in other words, from 400 hours to 600. That is another SNP promise made and another SNP

promise broken. Perhaps the minister will tell us when that manifesto promise will be delivered.

While the minister is thinking about that, perhaps he will consider doing something about ensuring that finance for free nursery places begins on the child's third birthday. This problem was brought to my attention by a constituent, Mrs Alexis Stevenson, who lives in Kirkintilloch. Her son Sam was three earlier this month. When she inquired about a place for him at a local nursery, she was told that the funding for his place would become available in January, in line with Scottish Executive Education Department guidelines. The current rules state that children become eligible for funding for their nursery place in the term following their third birthday. The term start times that are laid down by the regulations are August, January and April, which means that children such as Sam who were born between August and January must wait for six months before their funding becomes available.

Last week, Mrs Stevenson and I launched a petition, which we will bring to the Parliament, to try to correct the anomaly. It is called "Free at Three" and calls on all local authorities in Scotland to make the funding for free nursery provision available as soon as a child reaches their third birthday. That already happens in three councils: Stirling, Scottish Borders and Shetland. Perth and Kinross Council does it only if resources allow and the SNP-led Aberdeen City Council had a free-at-three policy but has now reverted to following the Education Department guidelines.

I am sure that members throughout the chamber agree that early years education is probably the most important and that no children should have to wait six months before they can access their free nursery place. That is not what the policy intended.

To ensure Sam's place at the nursery of their choice, Mrs Stevenson and her husband are having to pay £200 between now and January. They have had to borrow the money to give their son the best possible start, but they should not have had to.

When I corresponded with East Dunbartonshire Council about the issue, I was told that it was "common practice" for parents to pay for placements before the funding became available. What about those who cannot afford to pay? I was also told that it had been anticipated that extra funding would be made available for third-birthday entries but that that had not happened. As with most things, it comes down to resources. However, there can be few things that are more worthy of investment than our children's education.

At the weekend, the SNP's minister with the money, John Swinney, complained about the

settlement from Westminster. He said that it is not enough—£30 billion is not enough for the SNP. Yet, at the same event, his fellow ministers, including the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, were throwing money around like lottery winners: £100 million for capital spending in colleges and universities; money for the M8 motorway—a decision that had, incidentally, already been taken by the previous Administration; and a commitment to introduce free prescriptions for all. Money was promised for all those things, yet the SNP is still determined to plead poverty in relation to nursery provision.

What the SNP is really suffering from is a poverty of excuses for the trail of broken promises that it is leaving behind it. The claim that it does not have the money will not wash. To the £30 billion from the comprehensive spending review it can add another £700 million in end-year funding, with the prospect of another £500 million or so as the Barnett consequential from the crossrail project in London. It is not a shortage of cash that the SNP is suffering from; it is a shortage of ideas.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

David Whitton: I am just winding up. Sorry.

Labour is the party of social justice, and we deliver on the people's priorities. We are committed to investing in early years education, improving health care and family support for the under-twos, and expanding free early years education for three to five-year-olds. We also want to see fully trained early years teachers—even those with a degree in childhood practice, as mentioned by the minister—working alongside primary teachers in primary 1 in our most deprived areas. For nursery provision, there must be more free hours per week and more weeks per year. On a personal note, for the sake of young Sam Stevenson and the children who have not yet reached their third birthday, I want to see free at three introduced into every local authority in Scotland.

16:11

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the debate, although there is a bit of knocking copy going on. This is a subject that the Parliament should be concerned about and I compliment the minister for bringing it before us.

It goes without saying that illiteracy and poverty are close bedfellows. The briefing from Save the Children makes grim reading. It states that 250,000 children in Scotland are living in poverty—that is nearly 25 per cent of all our children. Worse still, 150,000 children are living in absolute poverty. We do not recognise the Scotland in which we live when we read such figures. Scotland is one of the richest countries on

the planet, yet some of our people are living lives that are closer to the dark ages. I therefore believe that it is important to put on public record some of the statistics that have been produced by Save the Children. Its briefing document states:

“Families living in severe poverty get by on very low incomes. For example, a couple with one child have to make ends meet on an average of £7000 a year for clothes, toys, food, childcare, electricity and gas, other bills, transport, health needs, and other essentials ... In Scotland, 72% of children living in severe poverty parents' are not in work ... 66 % of children in severe poverty in Scotland are in families claiming income support, job seekers allowance and incapacity benefit ... 1 in 2 two children living in severe poverty in Scotland live in single parent families.”

Mary Mulligan: The document from Save the Children also states:

“despite significant progress in reducing the number of children living in poverty since 1999, the latest official figures suggest progress in reducing child poverty is stalling.”

What is the SNP going to do about that stalling and how will it make the situation better?

Gil Paterson: As I progress with my speech, I will mention some of the things that are being done in that area.

The briefing continues:

“Educational disadvantage begins at an early age. Children from more deprived backgrounds are more likely to experience lower attainment at primary 5 and beyond and less likely to continue their education beyond school ... Save the Children is therefore concerned that current policies aimed at reducing child poverty are not reaching the families most in need.”

It is not all bad news, however. In West Dunbartonshire, sterling work is being carried out through the pilot scheme on early intervention. Although West Dunbartonshire Council had serious questions to answer at political and officer levels last year, and those questions are still not resolved, the early intervention initiative shone out like a beacon. The initiative was and is supported across the political divide, and all parties, officers and staff at every level are proud of their achievements.

Rhona Brankin: I am sure that we would all applaud West Dunbartonshire Council's achievement. However, does the member agree that that was possible because the council used staffing flexibility and that the reduction in class sizes in primaries 1 to 3 could threaten the ability of councils such as West Dunbartonshire to take interesting and creative approaches to tackling literacy problems?

Gil Paterson: The initiative went ahead and was successful because it was agreed to right across party lines. There was a willingness to see the initiative through, which is why it prospered and is

still doing so well. The SNP at a local level sees the need for such an initiative to continue and expand. Without a doubt, it is making a difference, but it still has work to do.

I will tell the chamber about the benefits of intervention in later life rather than at an early age. My wife was involved in a scheme to tutor and teach mature adults to read. The impact on a person of being able to fill in a simple form or to write a postcard for the first time in his or her life is profound. It raises an individual's self-esteem and gives them confidence. People grow in stature before our very eyes as they achieve the simple things that we all take for granted but which have such an important impact on them. We can just imagine what the early intervention scheme is doing for the long-term good of some West Dunbartonshire children. We are saving them from the trauma and embarrassment of having to approach others later in life to announce that they are unable to read. The benefits to the individual cannot be overstated or even measured.

To conclude, I will give my good friend the minister a few tips for nothing. He should take a leaf out of West Dunbartonshire Council's book. He should encourage that council and give it more resources to do more and he should extend its fine work throughout Scotland. He should not reinvent the wheel; it is already sitting there, so he should lift it and take it elsewhere. If he does that, illiteracy and poverty will be on the run in Scotland.

16:18

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): Aileen Campbell questioned Labour's vision. Labour has a vision for education generally but also specifically for early years education. It was because of that vision that we extended the opportunities for parents to send their children to nursery schools free of charge. Because of our vision, we extended opportunities by making sure that play is a prominent feature in primary 1 and into primary 2, as Jeremy Purvis suggested. That was one of the things that I did when I was minister. Our vision is also one of the reasons why Labour's manifesto suggested that there should be a qualified early years worker in primary 1 classes in schools with the lowest attainment.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Does the member agree that one of the top recommendations from Children in Scotland is that we should look to the Nordic nations for lessons? For example, we should consider nature kindergartens in order to combat the appalling aversion to risk taking among parents that pervades our educational system, stunts outdoor education at upper school level and affects our children's relationship to their environment at kindergarten level.

Hugh Henry: We can learn from the interesting experiences of many countries. I will return to that in a moment.

As Karen Whitefield said, we were careful to ensure that all our policies and pledges were costed and could be delivered. As I pointed out to Jeremy Purvis earlier, the First Minister was very specific on 31 May when he talked about

"the commitment to provide a fully qualified nursery teacher for every nursery child in Scotland".—[*Official Report*, 31 May 2007; c 317.]

That commitment was far more specific than just giving access to a nursery teacher. I hope that the First Minister will see that commitment through to delivery. If he does not, he should at least explain to us why.

Yesterday, we read accusations of shifty auditing; today's debate highlights what is more akin to shifty promises, especially the promise to deliver cuts in class sizes to 18 in primaries 1 to 3. Before I address that issue, I want to reflect on the superficial and inadequate logic that seems to underpin the SNP's thinking on the policy.

When I asked a parliamentary question on what international evidence had been considered before deciding to proceed with the policy, I was referred to the student teacher achievement ratio project—the STAR project—in Tennessee. However, closer examination of that research reveals that, of the 79 schools in the sample, only 40 showed any significant gains in educational attainment. That is hardly a ringing endorsement. Worse, as the project could not control movement in and out of the schools, only 1,842 children out of the total of 11,600—just under 16 per cent—remained in the project throughout the time of the study.

Recent academic reviews of the STAR project have raised serious questions about the viability of a simplistic blanket reduction in class sizes. Eric Hanushek of the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University questions the quality of the STAR project and suggests that its evidence overstates the impact of reduced class sizes. He states:

"The one limited and flawed experiment in Tennessee cannot be taken as providing the definitive evidence needed for policy changes that cost billions of dollars annually."

Other academics have also questioned the STAR project's approach.

Maureen Watt: Does the member believe that Unison and the 80,000 people who submitted a petition on reduction of class sizes are wrong?

Hugh Henry: I point the minister to the international evidence. She should perhaps read it at some point.

It is clear that the quality of teacher development, the availability of proper resources and access to teacher support are all more important than crude reductions in class sizes. Normore and Ilon from Florida International University conclude that some of the lessons learned

“include the need for adequate facilities, policies that allow flexibility in the use of funds to maintain focus in learning and not just on getting the numbers down, excellent teaching, and directing resources”

particularly towards children in minority and low-income families. Again, Normore and Ilon state:

“Our results show that lower class size is the least cost-effective intervention for public monies that Florida elementary schools can make.”

All the evidence has been ignored except one piece of research that fits the prejudice of SNP ministers.

Karen Whitefield and others have talked about the consequences of the policy, but I dispute whether the policy can be met. Before the election, the SNP gave a clear commitment that the policy would be delivered and it said nothing about having to rely on others. Those in the SNP who were responsible for formulating the policy before the election had access—as did all the parties—to civil servants to cost their policies and consider their implications. They knew roughly the budgetary parameters and they knew the logistical implications. I believe that they would have been told before the election that such a promise could not be delivered by 2011, yet they persisted with the duplicity.

Worse, ministers will also, I believe, have been told since the election that the promise cannot be delivered by 2011, yet they have persisted in saying that it can. Three ministers—Alex Salmond on 7 June and 6 September, Fiona Hyslop on 21 June and Adam Ingram on 4 October—have persistently repeated a promise that I doubt can be delivered. What is worse is that they will, I believe, have been advised of that.

This issue goes beyond the usual broken promises and failure to deliver. Such is the seriousness of the matter that, given the way in which ministers have behaved, I believe that there should be a full parliamentary inquiry into whether the commitment can be met, whether ministers knew that it could not be met and whether they have tried to hide the truth from Parliament.

16:24

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I am grateful to ministers for bringing this important debate to Parliament. It is also a proper preliminary point to highlight the fact that the strategy builds on the considerable work carried out by previous Scottish

Governments over the past eight years, largely with the consensus of all parties in the chamber—a point that I made repeatedly when I spoke in a different capacity.

Against that background, I take some umbrage at the speeches of one or two back-bench SNP members, who seem to emphasise declamation and gripe over analysis and remedy. They should recognise that, when in government, the Liberal Democrats and Labour delivered free pre-school and nursery education for three and four-year-olds; 3,000 new teachers in the previous parliamentary session, with all the flexibility that such a move brought; and 300 new and renovated schools. In fact, they achieved pretty much a revolution in additional support needs, in the curriculum, in leadership and in many other aspects of the Scottish school system.

This strategy deals with children from nought to eight. The key point of any strategy is that it should add value to what Governments would otherwise do. I have no particular disagreement with the suggestion that it might be useful to focus on that age group and the strategy certainly fits in with Liberal Democrat thinking about making primary 1 a transition year from nursery to primary education. Such a move, which is increasingly gaining professional support and has already been carried out in many schools, rightly recognises that children develop at different rates and that, as Hugh Henry pointed out, they need a more play-based approach to learning.

It is no coincidence that in many other countries—not least in Scandinavian countries—formal school often starts later, at six or seven years; that more innovative approaches, such as nature kindergartens, are taken at the pre-school or nursery stage, and that there is a broader view of the importance of play, recreation, sport and wraparound care than we sometimes take in Scotland. I see no reason to dispute the suggestion that in Scotland 50 per cent of children who start school at five years old have imperfect communication—and sometimes substantial communication difficulties—which can hamper and inhibit them as they progress through school.

During the recent election campaign, I had the privilege of attending the launch of Play Scotland's manifesto at a nursery facility in Cathcart in Glasgow. At that event I was very glad to offer Liberal Democrat support for a Scottish play strategy, whose introduction I had become convinced would be both helpful and necessary early in the new parliamentary session.

What should such a strategy contain? First, it should be a play and communication strategy that brings together those two complementary elements and allows one to reinforce the other. Children express themselves through play, and

one of the saddest commentaries that I have ever heard on the challenges that we face in our often fractured society is the bald statement that many parents do not know how to play with their children. How sad is that? However, is it really surprising when we learn that about 80 per cent of girls who leave care are pregnant within a year? Often they are children and are woefully ill-equipped to look after themselves, far less a new generation. A play and communication strategy must bring in effective family support, widen the availability of nurture classes and target in particular the needs of those who have been in care or are at risk.

Secondly, a Scottish play and communication strategy must contain a programme of improvements to early years facilities, with more green space and a recognition of the importance of outdoor learning for all children.

Thirdly, we must support the reinvigoration of the Scottish play group movement with a commitment to a free play group place for every two-year-old. As our programme of a free nursery place for every three and four-year-old has taken effect, play groups have to some extent been displaced from their traditional territory and have had to reinvent themselves. Their role is not just to provide play opportunities for young children: indeed, they have a huge role in spreading good practice, providing mutual support for parents, particularly mothers, in building confidence in parents and children, in bringing in expertise on play methods, and in harnessing such methods to education.

Fourthly, staffed play centres should be developed throughout Scotland. If the minister has not had the opportunity, I urge and invite her to visit Reidvale Adventure Play Association centre in the east end of Glasgow. The size of a football field, no less, and with a variety of facilities, including a kick-about area and an indoor facility, the centre is staffed by professional play leaders and is managed by a community-based management committee that was instigated by the local housing association. Although it is run on a shoestring and is badly needing some capital investment in the perimeter fence and equipment, it is hugely successful in catering to the local community and beyond, with a specific role in helping children with additional support needs in Glasgow.

I imagine that the centre costs around £200,000 to fund, and I can think of few better investments than 20 or 30 similar facilities across Scotland, which would cost about £5 million per annum. Among all the things that are on the SNP Government's wish list and on other parties' wish lists, few offer comparable effectiveness with such a facility for such a cost.

We must consider free play, which I do not have much time to go into. We must tackle the attack on green space in our cities. Play is linked with adventure, challenge and confidence building.

Liberal Democrat concerns about the class size policy turn on the need for more teachers and the availability of facilities such as classrooms. It is remarkable that the SNP Government has seen fit to provide no figures, no teacher numbers and no capital investment figures to show what would be required for that policy. I well recall that, before the election, the SNP wanted to double nursery provision—or was it to increase it by 50 per cent? However, it turned out that the SNP had no proposals for under-threes. All that gave us was the impression that the SNP was devising its policies on the back of an envelope.

The SNP Government's actions across the board have been marked by a series of populist announcements rather than a sense of long-term policy coherence. That must not be the case in early years policy. We must not have what Jeremy Purvis was right to call "a vacuous policy". The key elements of the policy must give flesh to the worthy aspirations about which the minister spoke earlier and deliver a step change, both from what has gone before and in our young children's life chances. That is what the Government will be judged on. It will have our help and support in that, but it should take the time and effort to develop and get right a coherent early years policy.

16:31

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

The debate has been wide ranging. In the short time that is available to me, I will address a few issues that have been raised.

I will start by commenting on the amendment in the name of my colleague Elizabeth Smith. We in the Conservative party make no apology for raising the important question of government support for the institution of marriage. The reason for that is simple. It is not because we wish to make a moralistic point, but because the evidence all points in one direction—marriage is good for society and particularly for children. In general, children who are brought up in a family where their parents are married to each other do immeasurably better than children who are brought up in other families in their health and educational outcomes and in relation to crime, antisocial behaviour and criminal justice system figures. I do not denigrate other households that come about, whether deliberately or by accident but, in general, the evidence is incontrovertible: marriage is a good thing, so marriage is a model to which society should aspire.

George Foulkes *rose—*

Murdo Fraser: I am happy to give way to Mr Foulkes.

George Foulkes: I agree with Murdo Fraser: I have survived 37 years of marriage—*[Interruption.]* My wife is very long suffering. I have three children and four grandchildren. He says that “the evidence is incontrovertible”, but he has not quoted it, and I do not think that it is incontrovertible. Will he please give chapter and verse? Otherwise, his argument will carry no weight.

Murdo Fraser: I will happily provide Mr Foulkes with all the evidence that he requires, but doing all that will take more than the six minutes that remain to me. I say in passing that I am sure that Mrs Foulkes has all our sympathies for the 37 years.

The important issue is that Governments should not be neutral on marriage, which they have been. Governments should actively support marriage as a good thing for society.

I will move on to other issues in the debate. Many members have said that parenting is difficult and brings many challenges. Societal changes in the past 30 or 40 years have in many ways added to those challenges. Increasingly, parents rely hugely on child care providers—much more than many years ago, when one parent often did not work or parents relied on immediate family members to provide child care. For many, child care is too expensive and too inflexible. David Whitton made good points in describing some of the challenges of accessing affordable child care.

For the Conservatives, some of the main weaknesses of pre-school nursery entitlement are that it gives too much control to local authorities and that parents lack choice. We should enhance the parental right to choose. Whether parents want a local authority nursery or a private sector nursery—if that suits them better—or whether they think that money to which they have access would be better used to pay a family member to care for a child should be matters for parents and not for ministers or local councils to determine.

We also need to be careful to avoid duplication of provision by the public sector when there is already good private sector provision. I can think of an example in which the local authority is talking about opening up a nursery to provide wraparound child care, which can only take youngsters away from the excellent existing private sector nurseries. We should not encourage such action in circumstances in which existing child care provision is working well. The people who provide such services should be supported and we should look to local authority provision to fill the gaps in need.

Robin Harper: The motion mentions health and education, but so far we have talked mainly about education. Does the member agree that it would have been rather good to debate the huge advantages in reducing inequalities that could be achieved by doubling the number of health visitors?

Murdo Fraser: That is a very interesting point, but it is rather outwith the scope of the debate; perhaps we could address it on another occasion.

The use of salary sacrifice child care voucher schemes should be extended across the public sector and the Government should encourage their use in the private sector.

I turn briefly to smaller class sizes, to which the Labour amendment refers. Smaller class sizes are important, but they are not the be-all and end-all of education policy. As Hugh Henry said, there are other important issues that could and should be addressed. Many teachers would prefer to teach a class of 30 well-behaved pupils than a class of 18 in which there are disruptive pupils or pupils who have been mainstreamed inappropriately and whose education might be better served elsewhere. The issues of mainstreaming and discipline require to be considered in the context of class sizes.

As we have heard, the Government's commitments on class sizes raise huge issues, such as teacher recruitment and the cost of providing infrastructure and new buildings. As yet, the SNP Government has given us no idea of where the money will come from. There will be a negative impact on parental choice and composite classes will become an issue. Fundamentally, it should be up to heads to decide the priorities in their schools. If the Government wants to give them extra cash, they should be able to decide whether to use that to reduce class sizes or for additional investment in other areas. It is not for the Government to dictate to every school the size of its classes; that decision should be taken at school level.

We will support the Labour amendment because it is true that we need more information on the Government's proposals and on costings. Councils need to know where they stand if they are to plan their school estates and their teacher rolls for the future, but they are simply not getting the information from the Government.

Do I have time to make a few, brief closing remarks, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): You have one minute left.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you.

There is much in the motion with which we agree, but it lacks detail. Fine words are all very

well, but we need to know what policies are proposed to advance the motion's sentiments. Perhaps the cabinet secretary will expand on that when she winds up the debate. We need to know what policies are proposed, what they will involve, what they will cost and where the money will come from.

In principle, we accept the value of early intervention and the importance of the early years but, as my colleague Elizabeth Smith said, early intervention should be exercised only when families require it; such provision should not be one size fits all but should be targeted at those families who need it. With those caveats, we will be happy to support the wording of the Government's motion.

16:39

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): Everyone who has spoken has welcomed the opportunity to debate the early years and early intervention, and there have been many good ideas and suggestions on how to make life better for our children in their earliest years. Like Murdo Fraser, I would have liked a little more detail on how ministers propose to bring about such additional support, but perhaps the cabinet secretary will provide that.

The first area on which I would have liked more detail is support for families through the early years and—given how important health is before and during pregnancy—perhaps even from conception. Secondly, I would have liked to have been told about support for projects such as sure start or the starting well demonstration project. In that context, I agree with Mr Harper that we need to consider the role of health visitors. His intervention was relevant to the debate.

Thirdly, I would have liked to have heard about the provision of child care. Fourthly, I would have liked the minister to have answered questions about how the Scottish Government intends to reduce class sizes. That issue has been more than ably covered by my colleagues Rhona Brankin and Hugh Henry, but I might return to it if I have time.

I would have liked the minister to have said how the Scottish Government intends to build on the record of the previous Labour and Liberal Democrat Executive and reduce child poverty—I tried to get more information from the minister on that issue, which cuts across all the areas for consideration that I mentioned. Save the Children has acknowledged the work that has been done, but there is a need for renewed effort on the targets to reduce child poverty by half by 2010 and to abolish it by 2020. I am interested in hearing

specifically how the Scottish Government intends to meet those targets.

I will talk about support for families. Babies and young children are totally dependent on their families, particularly their mothers and fathers. During the early period after birth, when feeding patterns and routines are being established, a bond is made that will affect the child's development throughout their life. A child's development can be badly impaired if a parent or close family member is misusing drugs and/or alcohol. In its manifesto, Labour promised to expand residential services to help women who have children to kick drug or alcohol habits.

Labour also acknowledged that the wider family can play a critical role in getting drug users into treatment and in caring for children. What support will be available for the wider family? I was disappointed to receive today a letter from Mr Ingram in response to questions that I asked about additional funding for kinship carers. The minister ignored all my questions. In particular, I asked when kinship carers throughout Scotland will begin to receive the increase in their allowances to the level recommended for foster carers, which was promised by the First Minister in the Parliament. I hope that the cabinet secretary will answer that question when she winds up the debate. Scottish Government ministers have acknowledged that they are part of a minority Administration that will need to build support in the Parliament if its policies are to be implemented. There is cross-party support for kinship carers in the Parliament. We need action.

Trauma can also be caused to children during their early years when there is marital breakdown. After the Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 was passed, the Justice 1 Committee in the previous session of the Parliament tasked me with considering what services are available to couples who need support because there is a risk of marital breakdown and to parents—in particular non-resident parents—after a breakdown. Organisations such as Scottish Marriage Care, Mediation Scotland and Couple Counselling Scotland provide invaluable services. Will the cabinet secretary tell us what funding the Scottish Government will make available to the national bodies of those organisations? Can she guarantee that if a council tax freeze is forced on local authorities those voluntary organisations, which do crucial work in our localities, will not have their funding cut?

I mentioned how poverty affects children. Most people agree that the best way to keep families out of poverty, thereby benefiting children, is to keep adults in paid employment. Employment rates are as high as they have ever been, but access to child care is a major barrier, particularly

for lone parents. The SNP said in its manifesto that it would

“extend access to high quality, affordable and flexible childcare services”.

I—and nearly every other member—can sign up to that commitment, but we need to know how the SNP will meet it. The Scottish Government is not a direct provider, so how can it ensure that local authorities and the private and voluntary sectors deliver such services? How can the Scottish Government prevent local authorities from reducing full-time nursery places, which are available to needy children in our communities—as the City of Edinburgh Council has just announced it will do? How does the Scottish Government support local authorities such as West Lothian Council, which provides wraparound care but is facing not just financial challenges but severe challenges to do with the management of numbers and demand?

I also lodged questions on fathers and their role in raising children. I am grateful to the minister for answering them at 3 o'clock this afternoon. However, I await the reply to one question on which I am particularly keen to hear a response. The question is:

“To ask the Scottish Executive what changes it is making to its employment practices to support and encourage a better work/life balance for fathers.”

Child care is an issue not only for mothers and the Scottish Government should be leading by example.

If we are serious about giving parents the confidence to use child care, we have to invest in those who provide it. Child care is often seen as a career for young, single women. If we do not address the issue of pay and conditions, it will stay that way. Women with experience will move on and men will not even bother to enter the profession. As a result, we will lose the possibility of having a professional, quality service that is delivered by people with a variety of skills—one to which our children are entitled.

I turn to the issue of class size. As other members said, the Government does not seem to have thought through the implications of its policy. Funding is a major issue in policy delivery. We heard about the £40 million that the Government has made available, but if councils around the country do as the City of Edinburgh Council has done and use the money to clear debt, class size reductions will not happen.

On 13 September, Maureen Watt spoke about “another 300 teachers”. I say to her that West Lothian Council has estimated that it will need 100 additional teachers. I will find it interesting to watch the other 31 councils fighting over the remaining 200 teachers.

One of my biggest concerns about the policy is that additional money will need to be spent in schools that are already oversubscribed. That could divert important resources away from schools in areas of social exclusion, which is not how to tackle the social exclusion of our youngest and most vulnerable children.

Members entered the debate with a great deal of support for action to support children in their earliest years. However, we can now see that we need a bit more detail. More in hope than in expectation, I ask the cabinet secretary to answer some of the points that were raised in the debate in her closing comments. In particular, I ask her to respond to questions on kinship carers, funding for family support services, the ways in which to deliver high-quality, flexible and affordable child care, and how the Government intends to ensure that it delivers on its promise to reduce class sizes.

Will the cabinet secretary correct what Mr Ingram said in his response to my colleague George Foulkes? Will she accept that the SNP and Lib Dem Administration in Edinburgh is to reintroduce its plan to close nurseries and schools in the city, as we read in yesterday's *Edinburgh Evening News*—and, no, I do not always believe what is in that paper, but it was reported there.

There is much that we can agree on in terms of an early years and early intervention strategy. However, a strategy is not the answer; it is a process. Our children need action that is backed up by resources. I look forward to the cabinet secretary introducing proposals for action at the earliest possible opportunity.

16:49

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): The aim of the debate was to focus time and attention on children who are in need of support. I am encouraged by the constructive tone of most, if not all, of the contributions to it.

The needs of children will be first, foremost and always in the early years strategy. Across the chamber, there is recognition of the importance of early years policy. There is also a lot of support for the themes that Adam Ingram set out in his opening speech. I assure members that we will look constructively at the many suggestions that they have made; we want to engage Parliament in shaping the policy.

Rhona Brankin: Will the minister give way?

Fiona Hyslop: If the member does not mind, I will move on.

I want to respond to some of the points that have been made and say a little about how the

Government will move forward from here. I put on record my recognition of the previous two Administrations' work in developing integrated children's services.

The Liberal Democrat amendment makes specific points about play for two-year-olds and the transition into primary. There is plenty of scope to examine the strategic issues that surround children's play, as mentioned by Robert Brown and Jeremy Purvis, and to consider the mix of support for younger children in the work on the strategy. Similarly, there is scope to consider a range of issues on the transition to primary education.

Members will be aware that moves are already being developed to pursue more play-based and less formal learning in primary 1, through the curriculum for excellence. There are also interesting developments such as nurture groups, which Karen Whitefield mentioned, that aim to support vulnerable children during that transition. I can tell Karen Whitefield that I have visited nurture groups in North Lanarkshire—they have an important role.

Although I am happy to support the Liberal Democrat amendment and to consider those policy areas in developing the strategy, our work has not reached the stage at which we can guarantee to adopt the specific proposals in the amendment. I cannot do so for one specific reason, which I want to share with members. If we can secure agreement on a new relationship with local government, the development of the early years strategy will be the first policy area of co-ownership between councils and the Government. We cannot prejudice that or commit local government on it, but local authorities will be vital in producing successful policy for the early years. We will pursue the points in the Liberal Democrat amendment.

The Conservative amendment talks about supporting the institution of marriage. I support that institution, but I am not convinced that it should be a central theme of an early years strategy for children who are already born and whose parents may not have been married at the time of their birth. The strategy must address the needs of children and families whatever their circumstances. I stress that the theme of building parental and family capacity will aim to address some of the stresses that parents face. It should have the dual benefit of supporting parents in meeting their children's needs and reducing the stresses that can lead to relationship breakdown, but let us put the needs of the child, not the relationship of adults, centre stage in policy and, importantly, in decisions on resources.

The Labour amendment refers to a request on 13 September for a statement. In response to that

request, Maureen Watt wrote to 12 Labour members, including the front-bench team, on 21 September. Last week, the second-largest petition ever was presented to Parliament. In it, more than 80,000 people call for cuts in class sizes. Parents, teachers and pupils want those cuts, but Labour does not—it is content for us to have the largest class sizes in Europe.

Hugh Henry: Has the minister been advised that the proposal to cut to 18 the number of pupils in primaries 1 to 3 cannot be met by 2011?

Fiona Hyslop: The pace and scale of delivery will vary, depending on council area, the school population and teacher retirements. Other important factors will be class configuration and the need to maintain the quality of provision and ensure quality teaching in our classrooms. We are committed to reduce to 18 class sizes in primaries 1 to 3 and we will work to deliver that. We will look for support from other parties in the Parliament, along with support from the 80,000 people in Scotland who want class sizes to be reduced. Labour is out of touch; no wonder it is out of office.

Adam Ingram spoke about supporting parents and families. Aileen Campbell, in a considered speech, talked about the emotional security that is needed in children's development. David Whitton raised an important point about the need to examine the dates on which funding is provided for access to nursery education. That relates to our commitment to deliver 50 per cent more nursery provision. We will consider the issue as part of the strategy.

Mary Mulligan seemed to have missed Adam Ingram's speech: he did talk about support for families and kinship care and he mentioned delivering a statement on that later this year. Within eight months, the new Government wants to deliver for families and kinship care providers, whereas we had eight years of Mary Mulligan's Government ignoring the needs of those people.

Mary Mulligan: Will the minister take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: No, I will not.

On the need for a positive environment, it is critical to the agenda that we tackle poverty and inequalities. Gil Paterson talked eloquently about the need to address poverty, and Robin Harper referred to nature kindergartens, which was one of the positive proposals that were made during the debate.

Jamie Stone referred to the Highland region. The Government acknowledges the important work of the pathfinder project on integrated services. Perhaps contrary to what Murdo Fraser thought, Robin Harper was absolutely right to talk about the health agenda as part of the early years

agenda. We are talking about integrated services—about children's education, care, development and health and about other provision.

Another theme on the early years workforce developed—Robert Brown talked about play and the communications strategy, which are critical issues and a constructive development in our policy. He also talked about staffed play centres, which is an issue that we can consider.

We will have to consider an integrated training and qualifications framework. We are committed to that and we will deliver it. The previous Government was perhaps a little slow in providing it.

Rhona Brankin: The cabinet secretary has implied that Labour did not care about the early years. We care passionately about families and about early years, but Labour will not promise what it cannot deliver. Will the cabinet secretary promise Scottish parents today that she will deliver a reduction in class sizes to 18 in primaries 1 to 3 within the first four years? Yes or no.

Fiona Hyslop: We will deliver on our policy of class sizes, but we will do so in discussion with local authorities, who have a key role to play.

While we are on the subject of promises, in 2003 the Labour Party promised an early years strategy. Did it deliver? No, it did not.

George Foulkes: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Fiona Hyslop: The Labour Party talks about providing for kinship carers. Did it deliver? No, it did not. Within eight months of this Government we will deliver for kinship carers; in eight years, the Labour Party did not.

George Foulkes: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Fiona Hyslop: Presiding Officer, there is a loud noise in my ear. I wonder whether you can do something.

I will finish by saying a few words on how we want to make progress. What our strategy is trying to achieve is on a groundbreaking scale. It is ambitious. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order. Too many conversations are taking place around the chamber. Could we have some quiet, please.

Fiona Hyslop: As I was saying, our strategy is on a groundbreaking scale and it is ambitious. We are shifting from policy that was geared to crisis management to policy that is geared to intervention and prevention. That will not be easy, but academics across the world—including the

economist Professor Heckman—have called for early intervention. We will be able to deliver on our ambitions and to make our strategy last in the long term only if we approach the issue in an open and inclusive manner that harnesses the wide range of expertise that exists.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I am afraid that I will have to move on.

Foremost in—

The Presiding Officer: Order. I am sorry to interrupt again, but I have to repeat that too many conversations are taking place around the chamber. Could we please have some quiet.

Fiona Hyslop: Foremost in our thinking are children themselves. We are determined to base our work firmly on analysis of their needs and aspirations. We will develop processes that give children and parents a voice in the strategy. We will also work with the early years sector and with the adult services that play such a crucial role in supporting families with young children. In particular, we will engage with local authorities, health boards and other providers, all of which make such a big contribution. The work of the health inequalities task force will be crucial, as will the constructive work with justice colleagues. That work has already started.

From today's debate, it is clear that members of all parties share our ambition to provide a better experience of early years for Scotland's children and families. I have listened carefully to the points that have been made. We will reflect on them as we work to make progress with the strategy. I look forward to returning to the chamber to debate more detailed proposals in due course.

A few years of neglect in the early years of a child's life can lead to a lifetime of disadvantage. Together, we can help to support lifetimes of opportunities, and positive futures, for all Scotland's children.

Points of Order

15:59

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Can I draw your attention to a press release that was issued this afternoon by Labour in the Scottish Parliament? It was issued at nine minutes past one o'clock and was about your decision not to allow Nicola Sturgeon to make her statement on housing.

The press release states:

"Following representations from Labour's Business Manager Jackie Baillie MSP, the Presiding Officer has decided to cancel the Health Secretary's statement to Parliament."

Is it right, Presiding Officer, that the Labour Party should issue advance notice in that way, before you have had the opportunity to impart your decision to the full Parliament? Is it in order for anyone in this Parliament to try to give the impression that your decision is based on their representations rather than on your own independent powers of judgment?

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Ms Baillie has indicated that she would like to respond to that. I think it is appropriate that she should do so.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am sure that the chamber agrees that I would not—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. Please allow Ms Baillie the courtesy of listening to her response.

Jackie Baillie: I hope that the chamber agrees that I would not at any point want to be discourteous to the Parliament or, indeed, to the Presiding Officer. If that has been interpreted as being the case, it is a matter of personal regret. I would take full responsibility for the inadvertent release of a press statement in my name. I wish to make it absolutely clear to the chamber that, in line with the standing orders of the Parliament, the ultimate decision on whether the statement was heard was for the Presiding Officer, and for him alone.

I hope that members and you, Presiding Officer, recognise that I would not abuse this Parliament, unlike some others in the chamber. Frankly, despite Alex Neil's best attempt at smoke and mirrors, there is no getting away from the central reason behind your ruling today, Presiding Officer. That view is shared by all the parties in the chamber, bar one.

The Scottish National Party Government has been found out today. It has no regard for this chamber. It appears to have quite deliberately

released information into the public domain before coming to the chamber. That, as you pointed out today, Presiding Officer, is indeed wholly unacceptable.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Further to the point of order, Presiding Officer. I wonder whether, given that your statement was leaked in advance, you should have made it at all.

The Presiding Officer: I think it is best if this matter is left and we move on, but I will say just one thing: any suggestion that the ruling that I made earlier was in any way influenced by any other party is very wide of the mark. I think that we should move on to other business.

Business Motions

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-731, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 7 November 2007

2.15 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time
followed by Ministerial Statement: Creative Scotland and Cultural Policy
followed by Scottish Government Debate: National Food Policy for Scotland
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 8 November 2007

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Labour Party Business
 11.40 am General Question Time
 12 noon First Minister's Question Time
 2.15 pm Themed Question Time
 Europe, External Affairs and Culture;
 Education and Lifelong Learning
 2.55 pm Scottish Government Debate:
 Scottish Government's EU Priorities
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 14 November 2007

2.30 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motion
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 15 November 2007

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Scottish Government Business

11.40 am

General Question Time

12 noon

First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm

Themed Question Time

Health and Wellbeing;

Rural Affairs and the Environment—

[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-730, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1 be completed by 21 December 2007.—[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motion S3M-732, on the designation of a lead committee, and motion S3M-733, on membership of a committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health and Sport Committee be appointed as the lead committee in consideration of the Public Health etc. (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that Nigel Don be appointed to replace Tricia Marwick as a member of the Public Petitions Committee.—[*Bruce Crawford.*]

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

Decision Time

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S3M-722.2, in the name of Rhona Brankin, which seeks to amend motion S3M-722, in the name of Adam Ingram, on early years and early intervention, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)

Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 75, Against 45, Abstentions 2.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-722.3, in the name of Elizabeth Smith, which seeks to amend motion S3M-722, in the name of Adam Ingram, on early years and early intervention, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)

Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 59, Against 62, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that amendment S3M-722.1, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, which seeks to amend motion S3M-722, in the name of Adam Ingram, on early years and early intervention, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 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)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)

Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of 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)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 107, Against 15, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S3M-722, in the name of Adam Ingram, on early years and early intervention, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (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, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 61, Against 45, Abstentions 15.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of early years policy in delivering improved outcomes for children and young people; believes that early intervention has a crucial role to play in reducing inequalities, particularly in health and education, but also more widely; welcomes the intention to develop a long-term early years strategy; agrees that parenting, support for families and community capacity-building are areas which require a strong focus; believes that services must work more closely together to support children and families, and highlights the importance of a highly skilled and collaborative workforce in delivering a new strategic approach to early years policy; notes the failure of the SNP Government to provide a statement on its commitment to reduce class sizes to 18 in primary 1 to primary 3 by 2011, as called for by the Parliament on 13 September 2007, and agrees that the Scottish Government should bring forward detailed plans and costings on its commitment to reduce class sizes within the imminent strategic spending review statement; and further believes that the Scottish Government's approach to early years must incorporate a strategy for play and communication, give greater support for play provision for two-year-olds and develop primary 1 into a transition year from nursery to formal education.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to put a single question on motion S3M-732, on designation of a lead committee, and motion S3M-733, on membership of a committee, both of which are in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

The question is, that motions S3M-732, on designation of a lead committee, and S3M-733, on membership of a committee, in the name of Bruce Crawford, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health and Sport Committee be appointed as the lead committee in consideration of the Public Health etc. (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that Nigel Don be appointed to replace Tricia Marwick as a member of the Public Petitions Committee.

Young's Seafood

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-662, in the name of Elaine Murray, on further job losses at Young's Seafood, Annan. This debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament regrets the announcement on 11 October 2007 by Young's Seafood of the loss of 89 jobs from its Annan plant; notes that 100 jobs had already been lost in February this year and at that time the company announced that it remained committed to a long-term future for its Annan site; notes also that only approximately 25 jobs are likely to remain at Young's Seafood in Annan; believes that the workforce and the local community have been badly let down by the company, and considers that the consultation period for the current tranche of job losses should be extended from 30 to 90 days to enable workers facing redundancy to consider relocation options and that those workers wishing to take up employment opportunities at other sites should be offered appropriate financial support.

17:10

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): This time last year, Young's Seafood employed around 250 people at its site in Annan in Dumfries and Galloway. By Christmas this year, there might be only a tenth of that number still in employment with Young's in my constituency. This is a story of the betrayal of a loyal workforce and of a community that has sustained the company in Annan since the 1940s. It is also an example of—to quote Mike Bridger of the Transport and General Workers Union section of Unite—

“globalisation at its very worst”.

On 14 November last year, Young's Seafood announced that 120 jobs were to be lost at the Annan site—an announcement that was widely condemned. The company's plans involved the transfer from Annan to Thailand of the process of deshelling langoustine tails, which are required to manufacture scampi—a product that was invented by Young's some 60 years ago. As of February this year, langoustines that have been caught off the west coast of Scotland have been undertaking a nine week, 12,000 mile round trip to Thailand, where their shells have been removed by workers who are reportedly paid 25p an hour. On their return, the tails are breaded, packaged and sold as “Scottish scampi”.

That announcement, in itself, was a devastating blow to Annan, but Young's was quick to issue assurances to the workers who would remain. According to the company's press release of 14 November 2006, the “re-introduction of hand peeling” was part of a long-term plan to grow the

Scottish langoustine market. Young's director of scampi stated:

“we remain committed to Annan and fully expect that our development plans for the Scottish langoustine will result in long-term security for the site and even possible expansion in the future.”

The company's deputy chief executive officer, Mike Parker, also advised me during a meeting at the beginning of this year that transporting langoustine tails to Thailand was carbon neutral, as there would be savings in water use and refrigeration. Although he advised me that this claim was being validated by the Carbon Trust, I found it to be rather counterintuitive. However, an evaluation that was undertaken by Enviros Ltd stated that possible effects range from a net carbon reduction of 292 tonnes to an increase of 229 tonnes. The Carbon Trust agreed that the methodology that was used by Enviros was sound—but the input data were provided by Young's. Perhaps I am cynical, but we should all have been equally sceptical about some of the other assurances that the company was offering.

After a sustained and vigorous but sadly unsuccessful campaign by the T & G, 100 workers were made redundant in February this year. Less than a month later, at 1.30 am on Thursday 8 March, a major fire broke out at the scampi production plant in Annan. Mr Parker, the deputy chief executive officer, issued reassurances that very day. He said:

“there is absolutely no question mark over the future of the facility or our Annan employees ... I want to make it absolutely clear to all our staff that their jobs remain secure. Young's is committed to staying in Annan and building a bigger scampi business.”

However, on 11 October, a mere 32 weeks after those assurances were given, Young's announced a planned restructuring of its United Kingdom operations, with the transfer of 23 jobs in Pewsey and 89 in Annan to Cromer, Fraserburgh and Grimsby. Young's cunning plan is to reduce the workforce in Annan and to retain the site as its

“langoustine grading, freezing and coldstore operation.”

However, one wonders for how long using the Annan site as a big freezer will remain viable.

Unlike the previous redundancies, when there was a 90-day consultation period, a consultation period of only 30 days has been offered. The unions have been arguing that that is not enough for workers to consider the option of relocation—which is available because an additional 50 jobs are now available at the site in Grimsby, hence the wording of my motion. However, John Holroyd, the regional organiser for T & G Unite, has advised me that most of the work force are totally scunnered, and have no wish to remain in the employment of Young's at Annan or anywhere else. Who can blame them? To date, three

workers have indicated an interest in relocating to Grimsby—I understand that the company is offering them the financial incentive of the train fare there and a week in a bed and breakfast.

I accept that the Scottish Government is not able to force Young's to reverse the decision—it is a commercial decision that has been taken by a commercial company—and we hear frequent complaints from industry and politicians about overregulation of industry. My colleague John Park will expand on that issue. In this case, there has been no protection for Scotland-domiciled workers who are producing a product that is labelled and marketed as being Scottish, and who are working for a company that has its headquarters in the United Kingdom. There is no regulation to protect those workers or to force the company to say that the product is not processed in Scotland.

The current minister's predecessor, Allan Wilson, advised me last year that Young's had been taking forward its application for a Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department processing grant for four deshelling machines for the Annan site, which would produce a better product. Members of Young's management also referred to that in conversation with me last year as part of the alleged potential expansion. Can the minister or his colleagues in the rural development and environment team advise whether that grant was awarded to Young's and if so, what has happened to the four machines that should have been coming to Annan?

This is a sorry tale of globalisation and betrayal of a workforce. I do not blame any of my constituents for not wanting to work for the company any longer. I seek the minister's assurance that whatever can be done for the workers who are being made redundant will be done, in order to enable them to reskill and to find alternative employment in the Annandale and Eskdale area.

17:17

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Elaine Murray on securing the debate. I will clarify for members why I did not feel able to sign the motion. It was not because I disagreed with much that was in it. In fact, I agree with about 95 per cent of what is in it, and it is almost impossible to argue with the assertion that the people who are employed by Young's have been badly let down by the company.

What switched me away from signing the motion was the idea that extending the consultation period or offering relocation would have any great impact. The point that Elaine Murray made about whether workers would feel keen to relocate and the figures that she gave answered that question

rather well. If I was an employee of the organisation, not only would I not be keen to relocate, I would wonder what future lay ahead, because there is a cultural issue concerning Young's, which employees have to consider carefully. I did not disagree with her tone or the sentiments that she expressed—perhaps there is even greater cynicism on my part than the cynicism of which she spoke.

We could focus today on what the future of Young's might be, but given the scale of what has happened there, it is more appropriate to ask what the future is for Annan and the local area. Elaine Murray touched on the history of the company, the scale of the reduction in head count and the serious consequences that that has had for the area.

I have been impressed with the fact that, when the matter has been discussed locally, people have not been raising expectations unfairly. It is the easiest thing in the world for us as politicians to stand up and say that something must be done, as if we can wave a magic wand. In reality, in circumstances such as these, there is very little that we can do immediately. To her credit, Elaine Murray did not suggest in the motion or in the local press that there is a magic wand available to the Scottish Government or to the United Kingdom Government. Instead, we have to focus on what we can do for the area. Retraining must be available for the significant number of workers who are affected.

There are also broader issues to be taken into account in this part of the world. Chapelcross nuclear power station is a serious economic issue with serious consequences in respect of employment. Dumfries and Galloway already faces demographic challenges: if there is a perception that employment opportunities are decreasing, it is difficult to turn around the demographic crisis, to keep young people in the area, and to prevent people from moving to employment opportunities elsewhere. There is a serious challenge for the local enterprise company and the Government to address. It will not be easy to reverse the trend.

I was intrigued by some of Elaine Murray's points on labelling. Many people would find it astonishing that a Scottish product can be processed so far away from Scotland but still be marketed as being Scottish. Labelling and sourcing of products are wrapped up in legal complexities, so it might be the case that nothing can be done. I will be interested to hear what the minister will say about that.

If any Executive funding went to Young's in recent times, we should consider carefully whether it can be recouped. In general, governments of all persuasions are happy to hand out money to

companies but are not nearly as robust in getting the money back when companies fail to do what they ought to do. It is time for us to reassess the circumstances under which we pass money out, not just to organisations in the food industry, but to others.

As Elaine Murray said, there is no expectation that the minister can wave a magic wand, but there is real interest in what can be done to improve Annan's prospects. We cannot allow the recent bleak news to blight the future of the community. We have to send out a message that the local community has a future.

17:22

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I congratulate Elaine Murray on bringing the motion to the chamber for debate. Given that I come from the opposite end of Scotland, members might wonder why I rise to my feet in tonight's debate. After all, there will not be many column inches in the *John O'Groat Journal* or the *Caithness Courier* on what I am about to say. However, I believe that one of the better aspects of the Parliament is that there are friendships across party boundaries. It is in the spirit of that friendship, and with a degree of sympathy for Elaine Murray and her constituents, that I speak. After all, what happened in her constituency could easily happen in my constituency—a remote, rural constituency that depends to a large extent on fishing interests.

Elaine Murray described the grotesque business of the langoustines being taken to Thailand to be processed by workers who work for 25p an hour. I congratulate Derek Brownlee on his thoughtful contribution. As he said, there is no easy answer. The issue of globalisation and small, local, skilled workforces being put out on the streets lies before us, and I fear that it will arise again in the future. The question for the minister is, how important is it to us to keep such food processing local? In terms of the carbon footprint, energy and food safety, it makes the greatest sense to process food near where it is produced or caught. The issue is about labelling and consumers' awareness of what they are buying.

Notwithstanding the fact that there is a poor section of society for which we must strive, it is ironic that the average disposable income of people in Scotland has hardly ever been higher, and it is why people can be choosy about food and spend more on food and drink than our parents or grandparents ever dreamed of. The issue for the minister—it is a tricky one—is how we should balance free enterprise and the global market against intervention to try to keep workforces local.

I have bored the Parliament before with the fact that I worked in a fish factory. It is not a pleasant

job, but skills are involved, and if we lose those skills we cannot necessarily get them back. Come the day when energy is so expensive that we have to process food locally, it will be a shame if we have lost the skills to do so.

The workers should be recognised for what they are—a skilled, dedicated workforce of people who have given their lives to the company. Elaine Murray said that they were offered a ticket from Annan to Grimsby. That says it all. I am sure that Elaine Murray has our sympathy, as does the minister, in trying to work towards a solution. It is not a job for one minister. It will take a team of highly skilled civil servants to work out how we can tackle the problem, but the matter is hugely important to Annan and many of our other remote and rural constituencies.

17:25

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Elaine Murray on securing the debate. I apologise on behalf of Mike Russell, who would have liked to be here, but he has a ministerial meeting.

I agree strongly with the comments in Elaine Murray's motion about extending the redundancy period and increasing help with transfers. I understand Derek Brownlee's argument, but the difficulty of finding alternative jobs in a place such as Annan means that making extra time and support available might help a few people who are on the margin of deciding to relocate by giving them extra employment for a period, however long.

The examples that Elaine Murray gave of statements that Young's management made and then reneged on give some businesses—by extension, all businesses—a bad name. I do not know whether it was a case of duplicity, of speaking without thinking or—more important—of speaking without consulting the finance director. I know that if politicians had made such comments they would receive opprobrium in the chamber.

We must realise that Young's is still a big player in Scotland. Ironically, I note that some jobs and some work from the Wiltshire plant, which is closing, are going up to Fraserburgh. That is the irony of capitalism. I am not arguing that we should do away with capitalism, but one of its ironies is that we tend to set one group of workers or one location against another.

As Elaine Murray said, commercial imperatives drive large firms. Scotland is an exporting nation. We cannot set up barriers, because doing so would cost us much more than any benefits we would gain. We must therefore think about what we can do. I can think of two things.

First, Elaine Murray alluded to labelling. I have said previously in the chamber that it should be made clear when goods are produced in one place and processed elsewhere. I must admit that I do not buy Young's frozen or chilled products, but I looked at its website, where it has examples of its labels. I could not see any labels that stated "Scottish produced", but one referred to

"scampi, from the coastal waters of Britain & Ireland".

There was no reference to it going to Thailand. To be fair, the website stated:

"We also peel some langoustine by hand in Thailand, where we have a dedicated team who are highly skilled".

I suspect that high skill was less of a factor in Young's decision than low wages. We can try to make labelling describe in total where a product has been on its journey from origin to the supermarket shelf, so that people can make an informed decision.

Secondly, we have to create a stronger economy in Scotland, through measures such as reducing corporation tax and ensuring that we have the sort of environment that makes the country a more attractive place to do business. I do not know whether that would influence Young's decision, but it would influence many firms, so that when a firm went for whatever reason—bad or good—there would be more chance of other jobs being available locally. In answer to Mr Stone's question, that is the way that we must go.

17:29

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am very keen to speak in the debate, as I have real interest in the issue and would like to show solidarity with and support for the workers at Young's. It is important that the Parliament does that.

I have been through the redundancy cycle myself. I worked at Rosyth dockyard and was the union convener there when there were hundreds of redundancies. It is important for people to be given extra redundancy notice, so that they have extra time to adjust; it is an important time in people's lives. Some people make the most of the opportunity and any support that the Government can give the workers at Young's through the partnership action for continuing employment initiative would be very welcome in the circumstances that they now face.

The situation at Young's is a disgrace. The company needs to take any criticism that it gets from within or outside the chamber firmly on the chin. I believe that sustainability should be a key component of economic prosperity, so I was appalled last year when Young's decided to move its scampi-peeling operations from Scotland to

Thailand, flying the food back to be sold in the UK. That might save the company in wage costs, but there are a lot of other costs that we have not quantified. What about the costs to the environment, to the workers and to the local community that we have been talking about?

I am fed up with hearing from a small but vocal lobby of business organisations about the burden of red tape on employers. That does not truly reflect what happens in workplaces throughout Scotland. The real challenge that Scottish business faces is how best to respond to the harsher side of globalisation, which is what we are talking about with Young's. We need to hear more about how we can move Scottish industry up the value chain. We also need to hear more about how we can improve workplace productivity. That is where the debate needs to go. We must ensure that Scotland has the right skills to remain internationally competitive. That is what the Parliament should be discussing and what business organisations should be pushing towards the Parliament.

I ask the minister to consider some issues in his summing up. I ask him to challenge head on the myths that are out there about red tape. As part of the United Kingdom, Scotland compares very well internationally—it is rated sixth in the world by the World Bank for ease of doing business and it regularly tops Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development surveys as a lightly regulated economy. It would be helpful if the minister agreed to challenge the myths that are out there. I also ask him to challenge business to take advantage of the favourable economic conditions that exist in the UK just now and to ensure that the priorities of Scottish business are to invest in people, plant and productivity over the next few years. I hope that the Government will act on those suggestions.

I finish by paying tribute to the workers at Young's. As members have said, it is doubtful that we are going to change the company's decision by having this debate, but it is important that Parliament send out a message of support for the workers and for the community that relies on employment at Young's. We must send out the message that the Parliament will support only those businesses that treat their employees fairly and show loyalty to Scotland.

17:32

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): I, too, congratulate Elaine Murray on her motion. I welcome the chance to speak in the debate, as Annan is an area with which I have had a long family history.

I will focus first on the local economic impact of the decision of Young's to cut jobs in Annan—

again. In the past, the company has declared a commitment to the south-west of Scotland that it does not seem to be putting into practice now. The news of the 89 jobs to be lost this time round is disappointing, to say the least. I hope that the company will review its decision and reduce the number as it did in February, when 120 job losses became 100.

Our sea-fishing and related industries and their communities are mutually dependent. Not only are those industries integral to the heritage and traditions of the communities; they are also essential building blocks for the future of the local economies. From the perspective of the changes that are taking place in much of rural Scotland, those industries are vital to retaining population and, hence, viable communities. A greater proportion of the south of Scotland's economy depends on agri-food industries than is the case for the national economy, which clearly demonstrates the need for that sector to be retained within the region. I hope that the minister takes note of that.

Of course, there are several financial considerations for any company. It makes sense to locate a business where it is most cost effective for the goods to be processed, according to the business guru Michael E Porter in his "Competitive Advantage of Nations". Having the Annan operations temporarily relocated to Grimsby, following the fire in March, will perhaps have given the company's management a chance to see another way of working—a way that is probably less costly.

However, the company has a moral obligation to the local community in Annan. That is why I agree with the motion that the consultation period should be extended to 90 days. The company should make the relocation options clear to those who face redundancy and everything should be done to help employees who wish to relocate. With transfers of work to Cromer, Fraserburgh and Grimsby, employees at Annan will have physical reasons why they cannot move so far to follow their jobs—their families and finances and so on. I hope therefore that the company will offer an appropriate redundancy package and that employees will be given time to take stock. We also need the company to give a meaningful commitment to the area. As Elaine Murray said, we do not want to see it as a big fridge.

This most recent development is a sad reminder that much of our food and drink processing is being outsourced to cheaper units abroad because of globalisation. The 100 job losses at the Young's plant in February occurred when the prawn de-shelling was relocated to Thailand. That is a 17,000-mile round trip with, of course, environmental costs, as John Park said. Most

members who are in the chamber this evening will be aware of my interest in the use of local produce, and I will be interested to hear about the Government's progress on that, but using the food that Scotland has on offer is just a small part of that. It is a great pity that, in some circumstances, the use of Scottish produce is blighted when the economic advantage of processing it elsewhere is so great. It is shipped to other countries and then shipped back. It is beyond sensible reasoning and removes economic benefit from Scotland for what will be a relatively small saving to a company of the size of Young's. It is unsustainable, as is lamb flying in from New Zealand and beef from Brazil where, interestingly, farmers are now losing money on their products.

I hope that the debate can be used to highlight the importance of ensuring the security of sustainable local economies and what they mean to their communities, particularly those in rural areas. Local economic prosperity is key to ensuring the success of Scotland's communities and I hope that Young's will bear that in mind for its future operations in the south of Scotland.

17:37

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): I, too, congratulate Dr Elaine Murray and thank her for raising the issue of the latest proposed job losses in her constituency. She has given us the opportunity to debate the challenges that those job losses present to the people who are employed by Young's Seafood, and the implications for the economy of Annan and the wider Dumfries and Galloway area. Like Jamie Stone and Jim Hume in turn, it is easy for me, coming from my constituency, to empathise when the threat to population, viability, and the vibrancy of the local economy is so palpable.

I have listened with considerable interest to some very good speeches, and noted the views of those who have taken part in the debate. It is clear that we all understand how enormously stressful a time this is for Young's employees in Annan, especially at this time of year.

Elaine Murray is an esteemed colleague. We spent four years together on the Finance Committee, so we know each other; she knows that I am a devotee of taking a better, more collegiate approach, such as that which we see in Japan. I prefer to see management and staff working together to produce a joint future. The present situation represents a lost opportunity for that.

As John Park knows, other places, such as the Diageo co-operation in Alloa, are taking that new Japanese-style approach with people sharing the

work, managing continuous improvement, improving workplace conditions, and achieving an appropriate level of regulation that is balanced, optimised and respectful. We need to look carefully at merging the return of bringing pride into work with those Japanese approaches.

Elaine Murray mentioned the specific issue of grants. I understand that the £426,000 award has not been paid, and it will not now be paid.

A consultation process is under way, although that will offer no comfort because it is clear that the company believes that it will lead to 89 job losses at the Annan facility. Those job losses come on the back of the February job losses, so they will add to the impact on the economy.

On Monday, Scottish Development International staff and the Dumfries and Galloway account manager from Scottish Enterprise visited Young's to see what could be done to review the situation and examine the rationale for the move, the company's relocation offer—I understand that that will stick in the craw, because it is unacceptable—the potential for the company to grow in the future, and the potential for alternative local employment. That meeting heard Young's say that the situation had been triggered by the fire that has been mentioned and the company's subsequent decision that restoring the plant was not commercial. The company stresses, however, that that does not reflect in any way on the workforce in Annan.

We are rolling up our sleeves to ensure that everything possible is done to assist people. We understand that companies such as Pinneys of Scotland, St James Smokehouse and Tesco are likely to be looking for people with those skills, so we are working hard to ensure that local people are able to grasp those opportunities.

Although the decision by Young's Seafood will mean that only 30 of its jobs will remain in Annan, we should note that the company is still a major employer in Scotland, with 1,500 employees over five sites. Over the past eight years, the company has invested substantially—including a recent £10 million investment, its cumulative investment amounts to £50 million—so the company is a serious player. As a major UK company with a disproportionately significant presence in Scotland, the company has some 30 per cent of its turnover based in Scotland and it currently buys £70 million-worth of seafood in Scotland to which it adds a further £84 million of value.

As was mentioned, provenance is an issue that we need to consider with great seriousness. Given that we are legislating on whisky provenance to ensure that we maximise added value, I am certainly keen to debate with the company whether consumers, who are becoming more and

more discerning, would be willing to pay a premium for a product if it was turned round more quickly and made available here in Scotland. As Alasdair Morgan said, having a stronger economy will give us more discerning consumers who are willing to pay that premium. I hope that there will also be a greater propensity among companies to see the potential to add to their margins by delivering products with that type of provenance.

Meanwhile, as I said, we are rolling up the sleeves. The partnership action for continuing employment is already embedded in the company and is getting thoroughly involved. It will help people to get ready for interviews and it will address the staff on 5 and 6 November. That is being done with full support. We understand that some 15 staff have already had interviews with other local food processing companies.

No matter what action is taken, the proposed job losses are devastating in a community such as Annan. Although Scottish Enterprise's focus has, properly, been essentially on companies that have the greatest potential for growth—Young's was viewed as one of those companies—we need to ensure that we do everything in our power to get the vibrancy back into the area.

With our moves on the enterprise networks, I am looking to ensure that organisations come together. I think that that has already been triggered in Argyll and Bute, where we have a coming together of the business community, the voluntary sector, the council and the community councils at both constituency level and sub-constituency level.

In that climate, I am keen to ensure that we work exceedingly hard to leverage great brands such as Dumfries and Galloway—and, indeed, Annan—so that we can persuade more and more companies to be based in the area, to take advantage of local skills and to move forward. Perhaps in the future Young's will even be persuaded that its decision—like those of other companies that moved their call centres to India—is a false economy, which it would be better to reverse by adding more value here. Companies need to work with committed staff who can come up with the ideas that provide added value and a better way forward.

When I watched Sir Gerry Robinson on television earlier this year, I was very taken with the way in which he went into hospitals and identified that hospitals had heroes to be made and people on the front line to be activated in order to get better results. Those better results were forthcoming. Therefore, members can imagine my joy when, at the Highlands and Islands convention this week, I discovered that Highland NHS Board has involved those very people in our public services. If we are involving public sector staff to achieve perpetual

improvement in public services, I expect more private enterprises in Scotland to adopt a similar process: set a worthy aim; share it with all stakeholders, including staff; commit to continuous improvement; introduce good ideas that have worked elsewhere; and keep the whole thing under open statistical control. A key statistic will be the number of people in Scotland who are in compelling and rewarding work.

Meeting closed at 17:44.

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