

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 5 December 2007

Session 3

£5.00

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 5 December 2007

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is the Rev Neil Urquhart, from Fullarton church in Irvine.

The Rev Neil Urquhart (Fullarton Church, Irvine): If the wise men were to visit the Scottish Parliament this advent, would they find who they were looking for? In Irvine, we are making a short film—a sequel to “Wise Men 1”, which saw three ancient Persian magi scour Irvine for the king. After losing their camels, they searched on pogo stick, scooter and skateboard via Seagate castle, the King’s Arms pub and Burger King. In desperation, they asked for advice from North Ayrshire Council’s head. The front-page headline in *The Irvine Herald* read “At Last! The Wise Men come to Council HQ!”

Our sage sleuths were tipped off in Irvine Royal academy to look for someone younger, so they filled a supermarket trolley with computer games, nappies, rusks, cuddly toys and so on. A visit to the baby hospital did not deliver their prize. Bushed and bamboozled, they were ready to accept an offer from King World Travel for cheap flights home. Eureka—a Royal Bank manager persuaded them not to cash in their gold, frankincense and myrrh, and to look for Jesus in more unexpected places, wherever people were loving, caring and sharing.

Thus, our intrepid explorers found Jesus at work in a homeless hostel, the community health house, and nursing homes—all over the place, wherever people were serving and looking out for the needs of others before themselves. Yes, Christ, the servant king can still be found throughout Scotland today, in many selfless acts of kindness and in people’s passion for justice and sacrificial concern for the vulnerable of society. Like those wise ones, do we seek, notice or recognise Jesus in 2007?

“Wise Men 2” has latter-day wise ones Mother Teresa, William Wilberforce and Irvine-born hero James Montgomery teaming up to search for Christ in Irvine today. They visit local pubs, in search of friendship and camaraderie; a junior football ground, where Jesus Christ gets many mentions on a Saturday; shops, looking for fair trade; journalists, hoping to unearth good news; and houses and homes, searching for community spirit. They hope to find examples of kindness,

compassion and concern for justice and mercy in our community.

What if we made the film here in the Scottish Parliament? What pleasant surprises and evidence of the servant king’s presence might local hero John Knox, William Wilberforce and Mother Teresa find? Keep your eyes open—you might notice Jesus yourself.

Will you pray with me? Fierce and friendly God, may your care for the needs of others; your compassion for the vulnerable and victimised; your concern for the lonely and lost; your heart for one world; and your friendship, which crosses age, race, class, religious and political boundaries with grace, love and reconciliation, be felt and telt in our land.

“God grant us the serenity
to accept the things we cannot change;
the courage to change the things we can;
and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Amen.

Prescription Charges

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on prescription charges. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement; there should therefore be no interventions.

14:04

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am very pleased indeed to have the opportunity to announce the intention of the new Scottish National Party Government to abolish prescription charges within this parliamentary session. I will set out in detail our proposals to phase out prescription charges over the next three financial years; charges will be abolished for all by 2011, one year ahead of our manifesto commitment.

This Government is committed to building a healthier nation. We are determined to tackle the health inequalities that still scar our nation; we want to support people to live longer and healthier lives; and we intend to ensure that people have timely access to the health and social care services that they need.

In August, when we published our discussion document "Better Health, Better Care", we began to set out clearly the actions that will help us to realise our strategic objectives of helping people—particularly those in disadvantaged communities—to sustain and improve their health and of ensuring better, local and faster access to health care. One of the key commitments in "Better Health, Better Care" was to phase out prescription charges for all in Scotland. The reason for that commitment is clear: this Government believes that prescription charges are a tax on ill health. We also believe that prescription charges are a barrier to good health for too many people in Scotland.

More and more of us are living with long-term conditions. Many of those conditions can, with the right support and medication, be self-managed by patients in their own homes, enabling them to go on enjoying a good quality of life. The problem is that many people with long-term conditions who are not already exempt from charges simply cannot afford the right medication.

In October, I attended a conference organised by the Parkinson's Disease Society and spoke to sufferers of Parkinson's disease, who told me that they did not always take their prescribed medication because they could not always afford their prescriptions. That is unacceptable. This Government believes that people should not be penalised financially because they fall ill, and that

they should not have to make choices about whether to obtain essential medicines. No one should avoid seeing their general practitioner because they know that they cannot afford the cost of their prescriptions.

I want the national health service to help people to make the choices that are good for their health and well-being. I also want our NHS to be true to its founding principle of health care free at the point of use. That was the principle espoused and defended by Aneurin Bevan, and this SNP Government, by abolishing prescription charges, will be proud to restore it.

Let me set out our plans in more detail. There are two key elements to the proposals that I am outlining to Parliament. From 1 April next year, we intend to deliver the first stage of our commitment to abolish prescription charges by reducing the cost of a single prescription from £6.85 to £5—a year 1 reduction of more than 25 per cent. In April 2009, the cost will reduce again to £4; and then, in April 2010, it will reduce to £3. From 1 April 2011, prescription charges will be abolished and prescriptions will be free for everyone in Scotland.

The second element of our proposals will deliver even greater benefit for people who live with chronic conditions. Currently, people who need a regular supply of medication—this applies to many people with chronic conditions—can reduce their costs by purchasing a prescription prepayment certificate. Prepayment certificates can be purchased for either a four-month or a 12-month period, and they cover all prescriptions that are needed within that period. To provide additional help for people with chronic conditions we will, from April next year, reduce the cost of the four-month and the 12-month prepayment certificates by more than 50 per cent. Next year, the cost of a 12-month prepayment certificate will reduce from £98.70 to £48, with further reductions to £38 and £28 on 1 April 2009 and 1 April 2010 respectively.

Similarly, the price of a four-month prepayment certificate will be halved from the current level of £35.80 to £17 next year, with further reductions to £13 and £10 in 2009 and 2010 respectively. I encourage all those who need regular medication to take up the option of a prepayment certificate. Of course, prepayment certificates will be completely redundant from April 2011, when we abolish prescriptions charges altogether.

I believe strongly that introducing that substantial reduction in the costs of prepayment certificates—in addition to the reductions for single prescriptions—is the simplest and most effective way of providing faster relief from prescription charges for people with chronic conditions.

I shall set out my thinking in more detail. We considered compiling a list of chronic conditions

that would have qualified for immediate exemption, but many concerns were expressed to us about the difficulty and delay that would be associated with defining a list that was comprehensive and complete, and which—most important—would avoid simply creating new anomalies. Either the criteria for inclusion would have had to be drawn tightly, in which case too many patients would have been excluded, or we would have had to set the criteria broadly, in which case the list would have had to be kept under constant review to take account of inadvertent omissions and the emergence of new conditions.

It became evident that it would take some considerable time to compile even a workable initial list. Many views would have had to be considered and, given the complexity and sensitivity of the issues, I would not have wanted to rush the process. Our preliminary inquiries suggested that work to extend the categories of medical conditions that qualify for exemption might have taken until 2009. I was anxious to avoid such a delay, particularly since the end result might have been, in the words of one doctor, the “least wrong” list rather than one that was right and fair.

For all those reasons, I decided that the approach I propose today is preferable and will deliver real and immediate benefit for all, especially those with chronic conditions and cancer. Similarly, for full-time students and those in full-time training, there were administrative difficulties in defining those groups and determining how they would show eligibility. In the end, I considered that a more rapid journey towards universal abolition, coupled with larger reductions for those who need regular medication, was the better option for those groups as well.

In summary, everyone in Scotland will benefit from the delivery of immediate reductions in the cost of single prescriptions and a deep cut in the cost of prepayment certificates. I advise Parliament that we have made full provision for the cost of our proposals in the spending review. To phase out prescription charges, we have set aside £20 million, £32 million and £45 million over the next three financial years. We estimate that the annual recurring cost of complete abolition of prescription charges from April 2011 will be £57 million.

As I have indicated, in developing those radical proposals I have listened to many views and suggestions. I have taken great care to listen to any concerns that have been raised. One concern was that abolishing prescription charges might lead to an increased demand for prescriptions. The best available evidence that we have on that issue is from the recent experience in Wales. As members are aware, prescription charges in Wales were phased out and finally abolished in

April this year. Parliament will be interested to know that there is not yet any evidence of increased levels of prescribing during the phased reduction in charges, or of increases in general practitioner consultations. However, these are early days after full abolition of charges in Wales and it is important to be aware that the full data, when they are available, may well show some increase in prescribing. In my view, that is exactly as it should be.

Let us not forget that there are two very good reasons why the phasing out and abolition of prescription charges should result in some increase in the number of prescriptions dispensed. First, there are patients who do not take some or all of their prescribed medication because they cannot afford the charges. Those patients will benefit greatly from the changes that I am announcing today. Secondly, research shows that some people do not go to their GPs at all because the cost of prescriptions puts them off. Progressively reducing the cost of prescriptions should—and, I believe, will—encourage patients to see their GPs when they need to.

Those are the patients for whom the changes are designed. That is why it is important to be clear that a modest increase in prescription volume will not be a cause for concern. On the contrary, it will be a sign that the policy is having the desired effect. Indeed, the money that we have set aside assumes an increase in prescribing volume.

Of course, a few patients may opt to visit their GPs for medicines that are available over the counter to avoid having to pay for them. However, it is my view that that group will be small, given the low cost and easy availability of self-care medication in shops and pharmacies. I also have full confidence in GPs continuing to make prescribing decisions according to the clinical needs of individual patients.

I have absolutely no doubt that the abolition of prescription charges will have a positive impact for patients and our national health service. If patients take regular medication as prescribed, their medical conditions will be better controlled, which will lead to fewer problems, fewer complications and fewer emergency admissions to our hospitals.

The proposals will be of real benefit to all the people of Scotland. By removing this tax on ill health, we will make a significant contribution to achieving the healthier Scotland that we all want. Cost will no longer prevent people from consulting their doctor and picking up their prescriptions. The proposals will remove barriers to good health and support people in making healthier choices, improving their health and, ultimately, living longer. They will also deliver real and immediate benefits from April 2008. The deep cut in the cost of

prepayment certificates will mean that, from April next year, the financial burden of medicines for patients with chronic conditions will be reduced by up to £50, while the phased reduction in price for single prescriptions—which will lead to universal abolition of prescription charges by 2011—will deliver on the SNP Government's manifesto commitment one year ahead of schedule.

The proposals are right for Scotland. I believe that they will have the backing of the vast majority of people in the country and hope that they will have the Parliament's support as well. Next year, the NHS will be 60 years old. Abolishing prescription charges seems a fitting way to mark that occasion. Therefore, I urge members on all sides of the chamber to join the SNP Government in removing this tax on ill health and restoring the NHS to its founding principle of care free at the point of use.

I commend the proposals to the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 30 minutes for such questions.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): I thank the minister for the advance copy of her statement. I will make a few things clear from the outset. The Labour Party firmly believes that no one in Scotland should be denied the medicines that they need because they cannot afford to pay for them. We completely understand the anguish of those who suffer from long-term conditions and believe that entitlement to free prescriptions should be extended. However, it is imperative that we test the SNP's proposals and that we are all fully aware of their implications for Scotland.

I will set the proposals in context. So far, the SNP Administration has offered simplistic solutions, which often unravel in the detail, to complex and challenging problems. It is vital that the Parliament interrogates the detail and that the minister co-operates fully with that.

To that end, I will ask the minister a number of specific questions. Given that 92 per cent of all prescriptions in Scotland are issued free and that many of the people who will benefit from the SNP's proposal are very well off, who will actually benefit? If money were no object, we would all agree that all medicine should always be free for everyone. Even in better times—I remind members that, for the past five years, health spend increases averaged 7.8 per cent—health spend always required tight management and clear prioritisation. The current settlement, under which the health budget is increasing by 1.4 per cent—and by 0.5 per cent for allocations to boards—is tight. Given the challenge that we face with profound inequalities in health and profound

need in our poorer communities, and the fact that resources will be diverted to the better-off and will not be available to help those in need, is the proposal the right priority for Scotland?

The minister estimates that the on-going annual cost will be £57 million after 2011. Will the cost be capped at that level? If the costs prove to be higher, will the minister increase health budgets accordingly, or will health boards be expected to manage within their budgets and squeeze spending on other services?

Does the minister plan to adjust the guidance to boards, and therefore to GPs, on prescribing practices and budgets? If so, will she bring that guidance to Parliament, to ensure that there are no hidden limits on free prescriptions?

As the minister knows, the Long Term Conditions Alliance Scotland has expressed a serious worry. If costs rise on minor ailments, will that mean rationing of more expensive drugs? It is vital that the minister answers that question.

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please, Ms Curran.

Margaret Curran: Finally, the minister seems to dismiss the notion that the policy on free prescriptions will lead to people going to GPs for prescriptions when they could buy the medication over the counter. How will she manage demand, how will it be monitored and how will the Parliament be involved in that?

The policy seems to be one for the short term, but we must question whether it will work in the long term.

Nicola Sturgeon: First, I thank Margaret Curran for her questions. A policy that will lead to the abolition of prescription charges for all time is not a policy for the short term; it is a policy for the long-term benefit of everyone in Scotland.

I will answer each and every one of Margaret Curran's questions. First, she asked about those who currently pay for their prescriptions and she quoted some figures. Let me tell her the exact position. Around 50 per cent of people pay for their prescriptions. Many elderly people get a higher volume of prescriptions, therefore Margaret Curran is right: currently, 92 per cent of prescriptions are dispensed free. Margaret Curran seems to suggest that the remaining 8 per cent of prescriptions are purchased by people who are well off. I point out to her that, of that 8 per cent of prescriptions, two thirds go to people with long-term chronic conditions. That is the reality. Margaret Curran asked who this proposal will help. The answer is that it will help people with long-term conditions who struggle to pay their prescription charges. That includes the people

from the Parkinson's Disease Society, whom I mentioned in my statement.

Secondly, Margaret Curran asked about priorities. She is, of course, right—politics is about priorities. We have a tighter settlement over the next three years, thanks to the tight settlement that we got from the Treasury. The average increase in the health budget over the next three years is 4.1 per cent. However, I believe that it is right to give priority to the abolition of prescription charges, which will give relief to some of the most vulnerable people who rely on our national health service. I make absolutely no apology for making that a priority.

Margaret Curran asked about the £57 million that we estimate will be the final recurring cost of the policy, which will fall to be met in the next spending review period. She asked whether that figure would be capped. I say to her, very politely, that the question demonstrates a misunderstanding of how the policy will operate. As I said, all the figures that we have set aside in the next three years and the figure that we estimate as the final recurring cost already have built into them an assumption for growth in prescription volume. That is an important point. Therefore, the issue of a cap does not arise.

Margaret Curran asked about prescribing practices. Unlike her, I have confidence in GPs to deploy sensible prescribing practices. If at any stage we thought that there was a need to issue guidance along those lines, of course we would consider doing so.

Finally, Margaret Curran asked about the Long Term Conditions Alliance Scotland. I cannot speak for the alliance, but I hazard a guess that it will warmly welcome the proposals in my statement. Even if Margaret Curran cannot see it, the alliance will know that the real benefit will be felt by people with long-term conditions throughout Scotland.

Perhaps it was just me, but I missed Margaret Curran advising members whether Labour would vote for the abolition of prescription charges.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the health secretary for the advance copy of her statement, which I confirm was not fully covered by BBC Radio Scotland this morning.

I acknowledge the difficulties in compiling a list of chronic conditions for exemption from charges. There is no doubt that the current system is beset by anomalies, such as patients with epilepsy and diabetes getting free prescriptions but patients with asthma and Parkinson's disease having to pay.

Wastage of drugs is a major issue. How will the cabinet secretary ensure that wastage is not increased when prescriptions are made free to all?

I seek further clarification on a point that Margaret Curran raised. How will the cabinet secretary ensure that the abolition of prescription charges does not lead to rationing of more expensive treatments in favour of cheaper alternatives and that people with diseases such as Hunter disease, which affects only five people in Scotland, and other rare conditions get the drugs that they need?

We hope that there will not be even a modest increase in demand for antidepressants. Will the cabinet secretary give an assurance that therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy will be made widely available and that there will be shorter waiting times for referral to psychiatrists and psychologists in order to achieve her target of reducing the use of antidepressants in the long term?

What measures will be put in place to monitor the free prescriptions policy to ensure that there are not more prescriptions for over-the-counter drugs such as aspirin and paracetamol? Does the cabinet secretary know the percentage increase in the number of prescriptions in Wales following the reduction in and subsequent abolition of the charge there? I remind the health secretary that many drugs have significant side effects, so this announcement should not be viewed as a pill for every ill. Individual responsibility and lifestyle changes can sometimes be even more beneficial than drugs.

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree whole-heartedly with Mary Scanlon's final point. When she reads the Government's action plan on health, which will be published in the foreseeable future, she will see that this policy is part of a wide range of policies that are designed to help people in Scotland to improve their health and to improve access to health care, which are the twin objectives for me as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and for the entire Government.

Mary Scanlon raised a number of important points, which I will try to address directly. The issue of wastage of drugs is pertinent. It is an issue regardless of whether we charge for prescriptions. Measures are in place to try to reduce the wastage of drugs and we will continue to take action to drive it down.

On rationing and access to more expensive drugs, the procedures for access to drugs are clear. The abolition of prescription charges will not lead to rationing of drugs but, as Mary Scanlon knows, we encourage the use of generic drugs because that is known to be more efficient and to drive down the costs.

Mary Scanlon rightly points to our manifesto commitment to work towards a 10 per cent reduction in the prescribing of antidepressants.

Again, our action plan, which is coming up soon, will say more about that. She is right to say that that will not happen without alternatives being available. Those who were at the Health and Sport Committee this morning or who watched it on television—it would have been riveting viewing—will have heard us discuss these very issues and will know that one of the issues that we have pressed health boards on as we have chaired annual reviews over the past few months is what they are doing to invest in some of the alternative therapies that will allow us to reduce reliance on antidepressants.

Mary Scanlon's last question was about monitoring, and referred to Wales. As I said in my statement, there is no evidence at this time of an increase in GP consultations or prescription volume in Wales. I stress that we must approach the evidence with caution, though, because it is still early days and part of the purpose of the policy is to allow people to access prescriptions that they would not otherwise be able to. We will closely monitor evidence from Wales and evidence of our own as the policy takes effect, so that we can see any unintended consequences that might arise.

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of her statement. Although it does not appear in my declaration of interests, it would be appropriate, in the context of this statement, for me to declare that I am the beneficiary of an exemption certificate for drugs.

As a Liberal Democrat, I am happy that the cabinet secretary is addressing the issue of long-term and chronic conditions. I note that, in her statement, she refers to the difficulties of categorising those conditions. That was an issue that beset the previous Executive, of which I was a member. It was incredibly difficult to get any agreement on that issue.

However, on the issue of everything becoming free, could the cabinet secretary clarify whether all the items that the NHS currently charges for, and which are included in the list in the statement from the NHS on the matter, particularly wigs, abdominal supports and so on, are to be included?

I am glad that, in your response to Mary Scanlon, you said that the implementation of the policy in Wales is in its early days. Obviously, we will want to monitor that. A piece that appeared in the *Western Mail* on 5 November—I accept that it is purely a journalist's report and does not represent empirical evidence—seemed to indicate that the prescribing trends in the first five months gave some cause for concern. The concern related not to people getting access to drugs that they had not previously received but to people

simply taking advantage of the system to obtain drugs that were perfectly easy to obtain.

On the budgeting that you have made to meet demand, you mentioned a figure of £57 million in the long term. Further, you have put in place a sum of £45 million for the third year. However, the fact that the current revenue income that is brought in by charges is £47 million means that, even by your own estimate, you are putting some kind of pressure on the health boards, which are already under pressure. That might be only a small amount of pressure, but even you—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Finnie, could I ask you not to refer—

Ross Finnie: So, my question, therefore, is, if that is all that you are doing, are you not already admitting that you are putting the NHS boards—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Finnie, I was not trying to hurry you up; I am asking you not to speak directly to the cabinet secretary but to speak through the chair.

Ross Finnie: I do apologise.

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Mr Finnie for his question and say that I am glad to see that SNP policy is directly benefiting the Liberal Democrats.

I agree with Ross Finnie—who knows about the problem from his experience as a minister in the previous Executive—about the difficulty of identifying and defining a comprehensive list of chronic conditions. There are, literally, hundreds of them. Because of the time that creating such a list would involve and because of the risk of creating more anomalies while solving others, we have decided that the approach that I have outlined is much better and fairer, is more effective and will deliver the complete abolition of prescription charges much more quickly than would otherwise have been the case.

Ross Finnie asked whether everything in the NHS's list will be exempt and specifically mentioned wigs. We intend to phase out charges for NHS-prescribed wigs in line with the phasing out of prescription charges generally. Charges will not be phased out for everything else on that list—I am happy to write to the member to advise him of which items are in each category.

Ross Finnie rightly says that the current income from prescription charges is £47 million but that we have set aside £45 million for year 3. However, in year 3 of the spending review period, prescription charges will not have been completely abolished—at that stage, a single prescription will cost £3. Prescription charges will be abolished from April 2011. We estimate that the cost of that will be £57 million, which will be a recurring cost. That takes account of growth in the income between now and then, and builds in an amount

for the anticipated growth in prescription volume that I have already spoken about.

The Presiding Officer: We now come to questions from back benchers. There are 15 members who wish to ask questions, and less than 15 minutes for that to take place. It follows that questions should be short, sharp and to the point. I call Christine Grahame, to be followed by Dr Richard Simpson.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): Oh no!

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Short, sharp and to the point—George Foulkes will never be that.

Unlike the churlish comments of the former people's party, I welcome the 50 per cent reduction next year in the cost of prescription prepayment certificates, from £98.70 to £48, with further reduction each year until charges are abolished. I understand why the First Minister does not want to compile a list of chronic conditions but, given her remarks about the Parkinson's Disease Society and the hard choices that people currently make about which prescriptions they will purchase and which they will not, will she advise the chamber with which other organisations she has had discussions about charges for prescription prepayment certificates?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank the member, as I noticed that she managed to promote me to First Minister in the course of that question—I am sure that it was a Freudian slip. I will not tell him if she does not.

Christine Grahame raises an issue that is at the heart of the debate. We thought long and hard about the approach to take to fulfil our manifesto commitment to abolish prescription charges completely. It is no secret that our manifesto suggested that immediate abolition for people with chronic conditions would be the best first step. The more we looked at that, and the more people we spoke to—people who held different points of view—the more obvious it became that that was a very difficult and potentially lengthy way to go about it. That is why we have chosen the much more direct route that I have outlined today. We have spoken to and heard the views of a range of organisations, including the Long Term Conditions Alliance Scotland, the organisation that represents asthma sufferers and the Parkinson's Disease Society. I am more than happy to make a full list available to members.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): My colleague Margaret Curran tried to ask a question about the £57 million—I will concentrate on that. We understand, and can follow, the progress towards that. I restate that the Labour Party believes that nobody should be unable to get medication on financial grounds and

that a revision of some sort is therefore appropriate. However, we are talking about priorities. As it is Christmas, I am tempted to ask the cabinet secretary where the money tree is, because we seem to be getting enormous largesse.

At the end of the process, there will be free prescriptions—that is the manifesto promise of the SNP. However, the introduction of the minor ailments service has meant that anyone who is currently on free prescriptions is entitled to register with a pharmacist and have a prescription issued to them for minor illnesses. Although that may benefit those who are currently on free prescriptions, if it is going to be extended to all people on free prescriptions, it will apply to the whole population—and that will mean that people will ask for prescriptions for minor illnesses.

When the member's bill on the abolition of prescription charges was being considered in the previous session of Parliament, the Scottish Parliament information centre estimated that the increased cost from introducing free prescriptions would be between £17 million and £51 million. As that did not take into account the cost of the minor ailments programme, how can the cabinet secretary say that it will cost only £12 million to abolish prescription charges four years from now? That is £4 million on top of the £45 million. We believe that the Government has grossly underestimated the additional cost of prescribing. That is what Margaret Curran was trying to get at. When the Government introduces the policy, it is going to cost much more.

The Presiding Officer: I ask you to be brief.

Dr Simpson: Will the cabinet secretary guarantee that any new medicines that the Scottish medicines consortium approves will continue to be funded no matter what happens to the prescribing budget and the money that is applied to it?

Nicola Sturgeon: The answer to the member's final question is yes. I confirm that health boards will be expected to prescribe drugs that are approved by the Scottish medicines consortium when it is clinically appropriate to do so, as is the case now.

On the point about the £57 million, forgive me if I did not quite follow Richard Simpson's question. The difference between the cost of the phased reduction by April 2010 and the cost of complete abolition by April 2011 is indeed the difference between £45 million and £57 million. However, the member should remember that, in 2010, the single prescription charge will already be down to £3, so we will have already paid more than half the cost of getting to that point. I assure Richard Simpson that the figures that I announced today not only

cover the lost income from prescription charges but include an assumption for growth in demand.

Richard Simpson's other point was about the minor ailments service. As I think I said in the chamber in response to a question last week, the minor ailments service is a fantastic service and community pharmacies do a great job in implementing it. Clearly, the abolition of prescription charges has implications for the service because it is currently open to people who get free prescriptions. The service was not intended to apply to the whole population, at least not in the short term. We are considering the implications of the abolition of prescription charges for the service and how to make adjustments accordingly. Further announcements will be made on that in due course.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I warmly welcome the cabinet secretary's statement. She mentioned the success of the policy in Wales. Indeed, with the removal of prescription charges in Wales, the review that is being undertaken of prescription charges in Northern Ireland, and the Scottish Government's decision to abolish prescription charges, the good people of England might wish to start lobbying their politicians for a similar change.

Will the cabinet secretary join me in urging members of the Opposition parties, particularly those on the Labour benches, to follow the example of their colleagues in Wales and endorse the actions of the SNP Government to end the tax on ill health, rather than coming to the chamber with pathetic, nit-picking excuses not to support the policy?

Nicola Sturgeon: I have no difficulty in endorsing those comments.

Richard Simpson asked me where the money tree is. There is no money tree. For the first time in a long time, or perhaps for the first time ever, we have a Government in Scotland that is prepared to spend scarce resources on the people's priorities. That is the difference, and the people of Scotland are realising the benefits of it. I hope that all members will come together to support the abolition of prescription charges, because it will deliver help and benefit to some of the most vulnerable people in our society. I am proud to propose the changes and I hope that other members will support me.

James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): I return to the issue of the future cost of the policy being £57 million. In the previous session, when Colin Fox's member's bill was under consideration, SPICe stated that the total cost of the policy would be £74 million. Is it not the case that the cabinet secretary is underestimating future demand? What action will she take to protect

health boards' budgets if the cost exceeds £57 million?

Nicola Sturgeon: I do not recognise the figure that James Kelly used, but perhaps he can provide it. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps it is available, but what I am proposing today is not Colin Fox's bill. Believe me, I would never wish to speak for the former Solidarity member. *[Interruption.]* I mean the former Scottish Socialist Party member.

What I am proposing today is a phased reduction in prescription charges that ends in their abolition. I set out clearly what the costs of that policy will be, including the final recurring cost. James Kelly asked whether I can ensure that health boards' budgets will not be squeezed. Of course I can ensure that health boards' budgets will not be squeezed, as the Government is providing the additional resources to compensate health boards for the loss of income resulting from the abolition of prescription charges.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I congratulate the Government on this fantastic statement today. No longer will we have the spectacle of a patient who requires two essential medicines telling the pharmacist that they can afford only one. It was Lord Beveridge, a Liberal, who founded the idea of an NHS that was free at the point of need. It was Aneurin Bevan, a member of the Labour Party, who tried to introduce it. Has the cabinet secretary budgeted for the vast increase in antidepressants that will be required by the stone-faced members of the Opposition when they realise that it is an SNP Government that is taking this step forward?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Ian McKee for that question, although I can confirm that the demeanour of members of the main Opposition party is not altogether associated with our policy of abolishing prescription charges; there may be other factors at play. Nevertheless, their demeanour is perhaps a challenge to our manifesto commitment on antidepressant prescribing.

It was Lord Beveridge who devised the NHS and it was Aneurin Bevan who espoused, defended and delivered on those principles. However, it will be an SNP Government that restores the principle of health care that is free at the point of use.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): The minister says that the policy is directed towards people who live in disadvantaged communities. I ask her to look round at the 129 members, all of whom will get free prescriptions. Then she should look round her constituency or mine at the people who are on income support or who are living below the poverty threshold, who are already exempt from prescription charges. The pensioners and people on incapacity benefit

because they have chronic conditions are also exempt from prescription charges.

The Presiding Officer: Question, please, Mr McNulty.

Des McNulty: The Government's policy will divert resources towards those who are on middle and upper incomes—is that not correct? Furthermore—

The Presiding Officer: Very briefly, Mr McNulty.

Des McNulty: The minister says that the health boards will be compensated for the loss of income. On what basis will they be compensated? Will the reality be that the Government will take money from the very things that are supposed to provide support to improve the health of poorer people living in deprived areas?

Nicola Sturgeon: The logic of Des McNulty's argument is that wealthy people should pay for their GP appointments and hospital treatment. I cannot believe that a member of the so-called Labour Party has just made that argument. Des McNulty should get out of the chamber a bit more than he does. He should visit my constituency and others where many people who are not exempt from prescription charges and have long-term conditions are struggling to pay for their prescriptions. If he did so, he would know the benefit that our policy will bring. If a few well-off people benefit from the policy, that is a small price to pay to ensure that sufferers of Parkinson's disease will no longer be unable to afford their prescription.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I ask for a brief clarification from the cabinet secretary. Has consideration been given to temporary residents who may be prescribed treatment under the NHS? Will non-domiciled people get free prescriptions as well, or will they have to pay?

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): At last, a question!

Nicola Sturgeon: That was a heckle from the back of the chamber. No doubt, Margo MacDonald will get her question in later.

Nanette Milne raises an important issue. Parliament will want to examine the detail of the policy as it goes through the parliamentary process. There are a number of cross-border issues that we need to clarify. The most important principle is that everybody living in Scotland should get access to free prescriptions, but there are some outstanding issues—for example, the situation for people living in England who are registered with a Scottish GP. Such matters will have to be addressed, and I will bring further details on them to Parliament in due course.

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for providing a copy of her statement in advance. Unlike the cabinet secretary, I believe that the removal of prescription charges will put extra pressure on GP services. What consultation has taken place with GPs?

Nicola Sturgeon: I consulted a range of interests before deciding how we would fulfil our manifesto commitments. Ultimately, part of the Government's job is to take the decisions that it thinks are right. I never again want to have the experience of standing at a conference being told by someone who suffers from Parkinson's disease that they do not take their prescribed medication because they cannot afford it. As long as I am health secretary, I will strive to ensure that we have a better health service than that. In eight years, the previous Administration failed to deliver that; this SNP Government is determined to deliver it.

The Presiding Officer: I apologise to the three members whom I was unable to call.

Class Sizes

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a statement by Fiona Hyslop on class sizes. Again, the cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions.

14:51

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on the Government's position on class sizes.

To improve Scottish education, we need to achieve several things in relation to teacher professional development, school leadership, parental involvement, the school environment, discipline, the early years, and reducing class sizes. Leadership and continuing professional development for teachers are particularly important, which is why we are committed to publishing a leadership document in the new year to set out a Scottish perspective and direction on educational leadership. Teaching style and teacher quality are also important and, in part, come down to the quality of the teachers who are emerging from our training institutions, but are also influenced by the lead and direction that teachers receive in their schools. It is also why CPD for teachers will be a key foundation policy in driving up achievement and attainment.

This is an appropriate time to make a statement on class sizes because a number of related key events have taken place in the past month or so.

First, our concordat with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities sets out the terms of a new relationship between the Scottish Government and local government, based on mutual respect and partnership. That is a significant development and, as part of that historic deal, local government will deliver year-on-year progress in reducing class sizes in primary 1 to primary 3 to a maximum of 18 pupils; I will say more about that shortly.

Secondly, the 2007 school census statistics, published on 20 November, show that 37 per cent of maths pupils and 21 per cent of English pupils at S1 and S2 were in classes of more than 20. We now know that the target that was set out in the previous Administration's partnership agreement was not met by some margin.

Thirdly, on 23 October, the General Register Office for Scotland published positive but challenging population projections that show increasing birth rates. We are addressing the issue, and I will talk about those numbers and what they mean shortly.

Fourthly, I received the final report of the class size and resources working group on 12 November and it was subsequently published on 20 November. Its reference point was the previous Government's policies.

Fifthly, we are still in the midst of this year's annual teacher workforce planning exercise, which will provide a clearer picture of future teacher supply.

Sixthly, we have now seen the local government finance settlement, which contains an additional £1.3 billion for services and manifesto commitments, including a 15 per cent increase in capital for infrastructure, which can be used for school improvements.

Seventhly, the progress in international reading literacy study—PIRLS—report was published on 28 November. It raises concerns that, in international comparisons, the literacy levels of our nine and 10-year-olds are slipping.

Finally, only yesterday, the programme for international student assessment—PISA—report was published. It showed that Scotland's reading and maths scores have experienced one of the highest drops of all the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. Scotland also has one of the biggest gaps in performance, which can be identified as related to poverty and deprivation.

That is the situation that this Government has inherited from the previous Administration.

There is evidence to show that early intervention prevents later problems, such as violence, ill health or children not achieving their full potential. Early intervention will be the hallmark of our Government. Poverty and deprivation can impact on life chances and educational achievement from the earliest years and there is a convincing body of research evidence that supports smaller class sizes in early years, particularly for those who come from deprived backgrounds. The student teacher achievement ratio project—the STAR project—and the more recent class size and pupil ratio project in England also provide evidence that supports such a policy.

Closer to home, we have no better example of successful early intervention than the initiative by West Dunbartonshire Council. The recently published final research report on the council's literacy initiative shows that impressive results were achieved in tackling illiteracy among pupils. The project identified the importance of early intervention in tackling the problems that children face. We want councils throughout Scotland to assess what lessons they can learn from the initiative.

Smaller classes can lead to more sustained interaction between teachers and pupils, more high-order questioning, more feedback on work, less time spent on routine supervision, less time spent exercising classroom control and less time given to housekeeping by teachers.

The PIRLS report that was published last week shows that, in 2006, 19 countries had a mean score significantly higher than Scotland's, as compared with 12 in 2001. That means that our relative position in the international rankings fell under the previous Government. The report also shows that there are continuing links between deprivation and low educational achievement. In addition, the report shows that the gap between low and high achievers in Scotland is the third widest of countries within the OECD. According to the report, the literacy achievement of nine and 10-year-olds in Scotland is worse now than it was in 2001.

The PISA results, which were published only yesterday, show a similar picture. In 2003, only three countries had significantly higher mean scores than Scotland for maths, reading and science. By 2006, Scotland was outscored by four countries in science, five in reading and eight in maths. We are determined to reverse that trend.

If we are to tackle Scotland's challenges as identified in the international PISA survey and to climb back up the international tables, we must deal with poverty at its roots and tackle the impact that it can have on families. Our early years strategy can do that. We need to give more time, more attention and more access to a nursery teacher to our poorest children. We will also drive down class sizes in the early years, when literacy and numeracy are embedded. Scotland needs firm foundations for learning and the Government will provide them.

We believe that the greatest impact can be made by improving early years education rather than by trying to take remedial action later in a child's schooling when, in many cases, it is too late. Our class size policy needs to be seen in the context of our whole early years strategy.

We know that the standard of pre-school education in Scotland is generally good and that the highest standard of pre-school education tends to be found in settings that employ teachers. Overall, the presence of a nursery teacher in a nursery class tends to bring quality of provision. That is why the Government wants all children in pre-school education to have access to a qualified teacher. A recent report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, which was published on 12 November, provides evidence to support the policy. The HMIE report found that, overall, the quality of children's experiences was of a higher standard in nursery schools and classes where,

traditionally, teachers were employed. The early years strategy will look at the broad range of service provision for young children and how that works to support families.

We have already made the most significant enhancement to pre-school education since 2002. The entitlement to pre-school education was increased to 475 hours a year from the start of this academic year. In the budget, we announced that the entitlement will increase further, to 570 hours a year, from August 2010. We have made a commitment to deliver a 50 per cent increase in the level of entitlement in 2011. Members will also be pleased to note that the concordat that we agreed with COSLA makes specific reference to ensuring that there is access to a teacher for every pre-school child as soon as possible. Those are important steps forward for early years provision. Together, they provide a welcome boost for our constituents with young families.

What does the concordat mean for class sizes? The concordat states:

"the Scottish Government and local government will each do what is required to ensure delivery of key government policies ... including ... as quickly as is possible, reducing class sizes in P1 to P3 to a maximum of 18".

We need to examine three key areas: pupils, teachers and classrooms.

Total pupil numbers are expected to drop from 703,000 in 2006 to 666,000 in 2011 and then to rise again to 680,000 in 2020. Those projections are higher than those used in last year's workforce planning exercise and show some 10,000 more pupils by 2011 and 60,000 more by 2020. Most of that change is due to revised population projections, following the GROS publication of 23 October, to allow for increased birth rates and inward migration. As a result of the revised population projections, an additional 450 primary teachers by 2011 and 2,100 primary teachers by 2020 will be required simply to meet those demographic demands.

We do not underestimate the scale of the challenge—only 11 per cent of pupils in P1 to P3 are in classes of 18 or fewer—but we believe firmly that having smaller class sizes for all in the critical early years is the right policy and the best approach. That is why we are planning to train thousands more teachers than the previous Administration trained. We expect more than 20,000 people to have entered training by 2011. That is a huge investment, if we consider that the total number of teachers is currently around 53,000.

For the period 2008-09 to 2010-11, the level of efficiency savings that all parts of the public sector will be expected to make has been set at 2 per cent per annum. Despite the tightest UK spending

settlement since devolution, we will provide sufficient resources to allow Government broadly to maintain teacher numbers as pupil numbers fall, as part of a package that has delivered an extra £1.3 billion for local government by 2010-11. There will be a reduction in ring-fenced funding streams from £2.7 billion in 2007-08 to less than £0.9 billion by 2010-11. On 2007-08 figures, the ability to retain all efficiency savings is worth £213 million each year—£639 million in total. Those measures will provide local government with the resources and flexibility to make real progress on bringing down class sizes in P1 to P3.

The Government will fund training for thousands more teachers, but we will not compromise on teacher quality. We also need to take account of the pressures on the system—the capacity of higher education institutions and, just as important, the capacity of the school system to provide quality student placements. There must be a degree of consistency. I am aware that constantly chopping and changing class configurations can compromise the benefits of class size reductions, so a degree of common sense needs to be used in class formations.

The Government has already—in its first 100 days—invested £40 million in capital infrastructure for schools to support the demands of class size reductions in future years. I contrast that with the performance of the previous Government, which provided £60 million for P1, S1 and S2 class size reductions that took three years. In the Scottish budget there is almost £3 billion over the three-year period from next April to secure investment in schools and other local government infrastructure, including an extra £115 million next year—in 2008-09—that can be invested in schools. The local government capital budget represents an average increase of 15 per cent, compared with 2007-08 figures, over the three years of the settlement, to help to meet the classroom requirements of our policy.

There is widespread support for a policy of smaller class sizes in the early years of primary education. Most of the Opposition parties also planned to cut class sizes. In its manifesto, the Labour Party in Scotland said that it would reduce class sizes to below the OECD average, which is 21.4. Given the commitments that they made during the election campaign, I say to Liberal Democrat members that we could and should work together on smaller class sizes. Their manifesto said that they would deliver 1,000 more teachers to cut class sizes and that they would cut class sizes in P1 to P3 to a maximum of 25.

We know that parents and teachers, too, want cuts in class sizes. Recently 80,000 Scots signed one of the largest petitions that has ever been submitted to the Parliament, urging that class

sizes be cut. We want real, year-on-year progress in reducing class sizes in P1 to P3. With local government, which is committed through the concordat to working with us on the issue, we will seek to deliver that.

We are right to be ambitious for our young people, their parents and Scottish teachers—we are ambitious for Scotland. The Parliament should not divide to make party-political points about our agenda for the future educational improvement of our children. The international research that was published this week and last month shows the state that Scottish education is in following the previous Administration's guardianship of our education system.

Many of us—indeed, a majority of MSPs—were elected on a platform of class size reductions. Uniting in support of efforts to reduce class sizes would give the children of Scotland the chance that they deserve. As we know, too many children in Scotland need a better chance to succeed in the early years. This Government will do everything that it can to help them.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I am stunned to hear that the Parliament should not divide to make party-political points. In the past eight years, I have never heard such a political diatribe masquerading as a ministerial statement. This is a serious issue, and to deliver such a ministerial statement does a disservice to the Parliament. Perhaps the cabinet secretary is a little defensive about her already broken promise to deliver class sizes of 18 in P1 to P3.

I remind Fiona Hyslop what she said when she was in opposition on 17 March 2005:

"In the current context, the Executive should reflect on its commitments: either it has a target or it does not have one."—[*Official Report*, 17 March 2005; c 15453.]

What is the cabinet secretary's target, and when will it be delivered?

The Scottish National Party's manifesto costings for reducing class sizes were £210 million—I have a copy of them here. There is no specific costing in the Government's agreement with COSLA. What specific funding has the cabinet secretary given councils to deliver the manifesto promise? She referred to the local government finance settlement. After inflation and the council tax freeze, how much is left for services? What is the figure?

Finally, the SNP manifesto said that it would deliver £30 million for an additional support fund. That manifesto pledge has also been broken. Is that due to the class size pledge? What do parents think about that?

Fiona Hyslop: It is important to remember that we have reached a different era in relations

between local and national Government with the signing of the concordat between COSLA and the Government. Rhona Brankin asked what targets we have—I will quote them exactly from the concordat:

“the Scottish Government and local government will each do what is required to ensure delivery of key government policies and programmes including ... reducing class sizes in P1 to P3 to a maximum of 18”.

That wording expects year-on-year progress from local government over the spending review period and our period in office. There will be a marked improvement for many of our young people.

The difference with our proposal is that we expect year-on-year progress. I acknowledge the class size reduction policies of the previous Administration, but its target was actually for after the date by which it had left office. The improvements for class size reduction in P1, S1 and S2 were actually after it had left office—our target is year-on-year progress.

The member also asked about finance. I quoted the figure of the cash increase for local government of £1.3 billion. She asked for the figure after inflation. That is £500 million, but there are also the efficiency savings, which local government can now keep. As I said, that is the equivalent of £213 million every year for local authorities if they agree to the concordat. Resources are available to local government—the additional resources that are coming in, the figures that I just quoted, and the efficiency savings that local authorities will be able to keep for the first time. Of course, that does not take into account the efficiency that can be gained from not having ring-fenced funding. We are reducing ring-fenced funding from £2.7 billion to £900 million, and much of that is the police grant. That flexibility and extra resource for local government will be very welcome.

The member referred to additional support for learning for children with additional support needs. Not only have we agreed in the concordat to specified manifesto commitments, including the class size reduction, we have agreed to outcomes and indicators. Part of the central provision of those outcomes relates to the learning experiences of all children in Scotland, including those with additional support needs. We want improvements for all children in Scotland.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for an advance copy of her statement, but I cannot see for the life of me why she bothered to make it. Apart from the call for political unity, there is nothing new in the statement. There is no costing for this policy pledge or any timescale for implementation. Indeed, when asked at this morning's meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture

Committee about costings for the concordat, COSLA representatives responded only by saying that they had no figures to hand for specific education priorities, including the class size policy commitment.

In its manifesto, the SNP stated clearly:

“We will reduce class sizes in Primary 1, 2 and 3 to eighteen pupils or less”.

That was the pledge. It contains no ifs, buts or maybes, and there is no reference to its being dependent on local government or down to a concordat. When exactly will the pledge be delivered? Will it be delivered by 2011 or by some other date, or does it simply follow the pledges to write off student debt and to make available 1,000 extra police officers as another SNP broken promise?

Fiona Hyslop: This Government will deliver on our manifesto pledge on a year-on-year basis, and we will work with local government to make year-on-year progress on its delivery. This Administration faces major challenges with regard to teacher provision such as, for example, our plans for 20,000 new teachers for the cohort of 53,000. Not only will we meet that challenge, we will also deliver on our manifesto commitments.

It is important to reflect on costs. I know that the member is very keen on business rates reduction and certain other aspects of our agreement with local government. However, none of the specified manifesto commitments comes with an individual price tag precisely because the package as a whole is being presented to local government for agreement. That includes the reductions in ring fencing, the additional £1.3 billion over the spending period to help finance policies such as class size reductions, and the efficiency savings that I am sure the member's party also supports. Those are all part of the package that will help to fund and support not only class size reductions but the policy on kinship carers that we introduced yesterday and which will make a big difference to so many people's lives. There is no individual price tag on each policy because the concordat that we have agreed with COSLA is about the package, which is about more than the 12 manifesto commitments listed in that document. It is about the national outcomes that we want to work with local government on achieving, central to many of which are opportunities for young people to succeed.

We are funding this matter, and the resources in that respect have been identified not only by the COSLA presidential team that signed the concordat, but by the leadership of councils throughout Scotland, which have agreed to put forward this package as the best deal for local government.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for providing an advance copy of her statement. On page 6, it says that the plan is

“to broadly maintain teacher numbers”.

Will she confirm whether the 20,000 teachers that she mentioned are in addition to the current 53,000 teachers or are they teachers who, like our police officers, will be redeployed, rebadged and moved around?

This is an SNP flagship policy. As such, will the cabinet secretary confirm that, on 5 September, when asked in this chamber whether he could

“confirm that his promise will be delivered in the lifetime of this parliamentary session”,

the First Minister said,

“Yes, I can and that is why we have made early announcements to that effect.”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2007; c 1378.]

Does that statement still hold?

Given that we should see quicker year-on-year progress, why is there no baseline data for expectations of annual progress? How much of the £40 million capital for 2007-08 that the cabinet secretary referred to is being directed at reducing class sizes? Finally, the cabinet secretary said in her statement that efficiency savings could be moved into education and used to reduce class sizes. Where precisely does it say that in the concordat?

Fiona Hyslop: Mr Purvis has asked a number of questions. First, I should say that although the Government is ambitious for Scotland, we are not suggesting by any means that the 20,000 teachers will somehow be on top of the current 53,000. I think that moving towards 73,000 teachers is perhaps beyond the ability even of this very ambitious Government.

However, those 20,000 teachers will help to maintain numbers in view of the level of retirements. Indeed, it is clear that, because of those retirements, we will have to recruit a large number of teachers even to maintain the current number. That said, because we recognise that we will have to recruit even more to deliver class size reductions we can say that we will have in training thousands more teachers than would have been the case under the previous Administration.

The First Minister was asked whether he was committed to the SNP's manifesto, which clearly stated that we want to reduce to 18 class sizes in P1 to P3. We are moving on that. In order to deliver that manifesto commitment, we are working in partnership with COSLA and Scotland's local authorities. Because the Government is responsive and recognises the challenges, the

concordat reflects the fact that some local authorities have the flexibility and opportunity to move faster than others.

Jeremy Purvis may be interested to know that the share of the £40 million for the Scottish Borders is £1.237 million, which is one of the largest shares, because of the challenges that that area faces. I said that the £40 million will help. If he reads the guidance, he will see that it will contribute to the policy of reducing class sizes. We know that to deliver that policy, the capital that will be available—£115 million extra in the first year, and 15 per cent across the piece—will have to be directed appropriately. In order to ensure that capital investment to reduce class sizes can be made in future years, we agreed with local government that it might want to bring forward other capital investment projects so that investment in the spending review period can be dedicated to reducing class sizes. That guidance was given.

I think that Jeremy Purvis also asked about efficiency savings. The concordat allows local government to decide where to put resources. It is clear that far more resources will need to be put into reducing class sizes in some local authorities, while the fall in school rolls in others means that, as long as teacher numbers are maintained, they can move quickly towards reducing class sizes to 18. I have heard that from several local authorities.

The local government package as a whole—some £1.3 billion extra funding, the ending of ring fencing and being allowed to keep, for the first time, any efficiency savings—means that hundreds of millions of pounds extra will go to local authorities. The concordat specifies the commitments that they must adhere to and pages 46 and 47 of the spending review document set out the outcomes and indicators on which they have agreed to deliver. That means ensuring that we deliver on the education budgets.

Many of the spending review outcomes are dedicated to young people, because, as I said, early intervention, whether in education, health or justice, is at the heart of this Government.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): In September this year, Wendy Alexander said:

“Class sizes are not a good measure of what matters”,

but in August 2003, Peter Peacock said that

“smaller classes is good news for Scotland's pupils.”

In the light of the massive Educational Institute of Scotland petition that has been lodged, will the cabinet secretary be so kind as to remind the Labour Party why small class sizes are good for Scotland's children?

Fiona Hyslop: Class sizes are very important, although they are not the only aspect to consider if we want to improve educational attainment, as I said at the start of my statement. People are concerned by what they sense is the hostility of some members to the class size reduction policy. The interpretation of people outside Parliament is that some members have moved or shifted against class size reductions. I hope that members support reducing class sizes, because people outside Parliament want them to do so. The petition that was mentioned is evidence of that.

Why is it important to reduce class sizes? We need to remind other parties why. Aspects of literacy and numeracy are embedded in the early years—indeed, there are clear recommendations on that in the research. Until the age of eight, a child learns to read; from eight onwards, children read to learn. We should pay attention to international surveys from recent weeks. The literacy survey was a sharp reminder that the attainment levels of our nine and 10-year-olds have reduced in recent years. In order to regain the position that they had and to improve the literacy levels of Scottish children in comparison with those of other countries, we will have to work to improve their literacy before they reach age nine to 10. That means that we must consider primary 1 to P3 classes and the nursery level, which is important and is where we should ensure that there is professional teacher involvement so that we get the basics right. If we get the basics and the foundation of literacy correct, we will ensure that there are improved opportunities for young children and, as important, ensure that we do not live in a country in which adult literacy and numeracy rates are shameful. It is not only about improving the life chances of individuals; it is about raising the skills of the nation.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I assure the cabinet secretary that no Labour member is against a reduction in class sizes. What we are opposed to is a Government that makes manifesto pledges then breaks them. Does the cabinet secretary agree with Councillor Isabel Hutton, the education spokesperson of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and an SNP councillor in West Lothian, who today told the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee that the class size commitment would not be met in this session of Parliament? Will she clarify how the Government defines the phrase “as quickly as possible”—with respect to its use in the concordat that was signed with COSLA—in relation to the delivery of class sizes of 18 for primaries 1 to 3? How will the Government determine whether progress has been made on reducing class sizes in each of the next three academic years?

Fiona Hyslop: I acknowledge that in the west of Scotland there are increasingly smaller class sizes, although not in all cases, and that the population is reducing at a faster rate than it is elsewhere. However, in West Lothian—where I live—and in East Lothian and other parts of the east of Scotland, although school rolls in general are falling, the rolls in the earliest years are rising, because some areas are experiencing an increase in population as a result of young families moving into new-build houses.

That is one of the reasons why a statement on class sizes is timely. Murdo Fraser asked why we are having a statement on class sizes now. He might want to ask some of his colleagues on the Parliamentary Bureau that question—I think that Labour members in particular wanted such a statement. I tried to make its relevance clear to him by explaining that in the context of the past few weeks there are several reasons why it is appropriate to make a statement on class sizes. The population projections that were published on 23 October mean that we would, even if we did nothing, have to find an extra 450 teachers because of the increase in the birth rate in the past year.

Karen Whitefield asked when we will achieve our manifesto commitment. We will be able to do so when there is year-on-year progress that delivers it. As I said, we must recognise that flexibility will be required for different parts of the country. We want to see year-on-year progress. I will outline how we will monitor that. We will ask for annual reports from each and every local authority. They will be making progress not only on the specified manifesto commitments but on the national outcomes in the spending review document. We will also have bi-monthly meetings with each and every local authority to assess their progress in achieving those goals. I expect each and every local authority to make significant progress in reducing class sizes over the four-year period, although the pace and scale of progress will vary. There are big challenges, but they do not mean that we will not make progress or that we will not recruit teachers. We will recruit 20,000 more teachers in order to deliver on our manifesto commitment. We could recruit tens of thousands more teachers on top of that, but the teacher training institutions have told us that that would compromise the quality of teaching. I am not prepared to compromise the quality of teaching just to deliver progress on class sizes. We will be able to have the year-on-year progress evidenced by local authorities, and it will continue and be monitored over the period of the spending review.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary is on record today as having said that the concordat between the Scottish Government and the Convention of

Scottish Local Authorities is a historic new partnership that will allow for much greater flexibility in delivery of front-line services. Does she agree that when it comes to class sizes and the common sense that she mentioned, the best way to ensure that those two principles are taken forward would be to allow headteachers, rather than Government, to decide on the best class sizes for their schools?

Fiona Hyslop: I agree that that is the right way forward. We must ensure that year-on-year progress is made by local government, and I want that to be evidenced. I expect every council to have made significant progress over the period.

However, common sense and flexibility will be required. I have cited the research evidence because disruption caused by changes to class configurations can undermine any benefits from reductions in class sizes. Common sense and flexibility must prevail—each headteacher will know the circumstances of his or her school.

The recent class census showed that the previous partnership agreement had failed to deliver on its target to have a maximum class size of 20 in maths and English. The previous Administration then realised that we should listen to headteachers and that averaging the targets might be better. Ministers at the time acknowledged that that was reasonable. We acknowledge it, too. Members might want to reflect on that before they criticise us for introducing a bit of common sense and flexibility to our policy on class sizes.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning will know that the Scottish Executive that existed before May missed all its targets on class sizes, despite amending them regularly. Does she, like me, welcome the finding of a recent YouGov opinion poll that showed that 78 per cent—yes, 78 per cent—of the people of Scotland support the agreement between the SNP Scottish Government and Scotland's councils to work together to cut class sizes in the first three years of primary school? Does she agree that the Opposition parties should have the good grace—something that is foreign to them—to join Scotland's people in welcoming the work of the SNP Government?

Fiona Hyslop: I was not polled by YouGov, but had I been, I would have supported the concordat—and the COSLA presidential team that was present when I signed the concordat would have been pleased. Of course I welcome such popular support for our policy. However, the YouGov poll is not the only show of fantastic support for the SNP's progressive policies in education; there has been a petition of 80,000 signatures lodged in Parliament.

It will be important for all of us to move this debate on. The people of Scotland must see that we are working together to reduce class sizes. I hope that we can work together here in Parliament, but we are also working with local government in a new relationship that will bring significant changes, not only to the life chances of young people, but to the face of governance. That will be very important.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I assure the cabinet secretary that I and my Labour colleagues support the reduction of class sizes, as begun by the previous Labour-led Scottish Executive.

The concordat with local government says that local government will be expected to show year-on-year progress towards delivery of the class size reduction policy. However, today at the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, the COSLA representative said that local authorities would reduce class sizes “where demographics allow”.

Pupil numbers in Linlithgow and many other places are increasing. Those increases are known; the children have already been born and half of them are already in nursery. Will the cabinet secretary guarantee my constituents and those in other such areas that they will still see class sizes of 18 in P1, P2 and P3 by the end of this parliamentary session? Is COSLA closer to the truth, and should the SNP manifesto have read, “We will reduce class sizes, but not where pupil numbers are increasing”?

Fiona Hyslop: Local government has supported the concordat at COSLA presidential level and council leader level. Mary Mulligan is a resident of West Lothian; I am too, and I understand the situation there very well. I have had constructive discussions about delivering the policy with the convener of education in West Lothian Council.

West Lothian Council is an interesting local authority. One of the commitments in the concordat is to ensure that every child in nursery has access to a nursery teacher. Unlike, for example, Glasgow City Council, West Lothian Council has kept nursery teachers in nurseries. The council will therefore have more flexibility in deployment of teachers; it will not have to move more teachers into nurseries, because they are already there and are able to give of their time and attention. The council will not have to use those resources in order to reduce class sizes. That is an example of flexibility.

The success of new build and the challenges of new population are putting pressures on areas such as West Lothian, and the SNP-led West Lothian Council is willing to work within the concordat to deliver class size reductions. I expect

every other local authority that signs up to the concordat to do likewise.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): Last week, during the equality and diversity debate, I mentioned educational attainment as being part of the equalities agenda. According to the PISA 2006 report, Scotland has one of the biggest gaps in performance, which can be related to poverty and deprivation. Besides reducing class sizes, what steps will the Scottish Government take to address that appalling situation, which was inherited from the previous Labour-led Administration?

Fiona Hyslop: Evidence on class size reductions, particularly from the Tennessee STAR project, shows that the biggest impact is in areas of deprivation. There is also evidence from nursery teachers of improvement among three and four-year-olds in areas of deprivation. We can learn lessons from the PISA study that was published yesterday, which makes it clear that although there are issues in respect of leadership in schools, continual professional development, the school environment and discipline, if we want to make fundamental changes we have to address the barriers that poverty places on educational attainment. Part of the early years strategy that we are developing—and one of the first policy areas to be developed collectively with COSLA and local authorities—is to try to address the fundamental issue of poverty in this country. The gap between rich and poor has extended, which has held back children who should be able to perform better. Tackling of poverty is fundamentally related to education. I will be urging local authorities to make a start in delivering class size reductions in deprived areas because, according to the PISA study, they are the areas in which we can make the biggest difference.

In international comparisons on performance, some of the best-performing pupils in this country do extremely well. We will ensure that we retain our position in international rankings if we close the gap between the top attaining pupils and the poorest attaining pupils. Yesterday's international research shows us the way forward. This is about tackling poverty: we can do that and help to improve life chances if we reduce class sizes, particularly in areas of deprivation.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): What regard has the Government given to efficient use of classroom space by local authorities, for example those with the smallest space-to-pupil ratios? The £40 million that was previously announced, and which has apparently now been reallocated, made no such allowance and effectively penalised authorities for taking a sustainable and greener approach to their school estate. As the minister will know, the most efficient councils have the least capacity and flexibility to respond to the

demand for extra classrooms. Is that yet another tricky problem to be left to—and therefore blamed on—local authorities, or does the minister accept that it is an issue for her, too?

Fiona Hyslop: We are keen to pump-prime investment in schools. The £40 million that was released this year was delivered promptly in order to address class size issues. More generally, there are issues about how capacity is interpreted—what was understood to be the appropriate capacity for schools in previous years may not be appropriate now. My ministerial colleague Maureen Watt is taking a keen interest in that.

The local government settlement, as has been provided through the concordat, will not specify that funding streams from national Government follow a narrow track of ring fencing to address capacity. Local authorities will have to determine how they use resources; they must also determine their capacity issues. There are major challenges, which we must address: for example, some new-build schools have open-plan arrangements, which will present different challenges to those in the traditional, Victorian-built schools that have different-sized classrooms. That has to be taken into account and is where common sense comes into play. We must also recognise that capital infrastructure will be needed, which is one of the reasons why I have managed to secure from my Cabinet colleagues such a healthy capital infrastructure provision within local government. The major challenges include reducing class sizes and ensuring that we have the classrooms available for those reductions, but they also include improving the fabric of our schools.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): The cabinet secretary vehemently referred to the major challenges, but the major challenge that we have is to get the SNP Government to nail some figures to the airy-fairy promises that we get from it, so I will try again quickly. How much funded time will be allowed to free teachers from classroom duties to engage in the continuing professional development programme? When does the cabinet secretary expect to deliver all the promises that have been made on provision of nursery teachers? What does—I quote from her statement—"as quickly as possible" mean when it comes to delivering class sizes of 18 for our most deprived communities?

Fiona Hyslop: That will vary from local authority to local authority. The population trends in Falkirk, Stirling, North Lanarkshire and West Lothian are different from those in parts of Glasgow and other parts of the west of Scotland.

I say to Hugh O'Donnell that 78 per cent of the public supports our policy of class size reduction. I would not call that "airy-fairy"—it is solid support for delivery.

Hugh O'Donnell: It is not about support; it is about delivery. What is the delivery schedule?

Fiona Hyslop: The delivery schedule will vary from one local authority to another, as will provision for nursery teachers. As of tomorrow, some local authorities will be able to say that they have fulfilled the concordat because they already have nursery teachers in their schools: they never took them away in the first place. Some local authorities have started taking nursery teachers out of nurseries, so it will take them longer to provide nursery teachers because they have to start from a different position.

Part of the single outcome agreements that we are agreeing with local authorities will include their commitments to delivering on specified manifesto promises. I look forward with enthusiasm to receiving their commitment to deliver them. I have spoken to councillors throughout Scotland who are pleased that the Government is finally giving them a responsible position and trusting them. My understanding is that the Liberal Democrats believe that local authorities should have the decentralised powers to make decisions themselves, which is what we will deliver by working with local government.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): The cabinet secretary said that

"Scotland needs firm foundations for learning and the Government will provide them."

Why, in that case, is it not advising local authorities that they should use phonics to teach reading? That would be the single most successful way of improving the reading standards to which she correctly referred.

Also, were more than 450 applicants for teacher training denied places on this year's training courses? I fail to see how, at present, she can maintain the high quality of entrants into teacher training and get the number of students that she wants unless she turns away that number.

Fiona Hyslop: There are many local authorities and most of them use phonics already. They tend to use different reading techniques, including phonics. Individual children learn differently, as we know, so phonics has its place. It has been successful and will continue to be, but local authorities can decide how best to use it.

Margo MacDonald's point about the need for high quality applicants was well made. I reassure her that our teacher training institutions are already turning away more than the number that she says is required. There is a great demand for people to be teachers in this country. The idea that they can improve the life chances of our young children is fantastic and it is a great advert. I am

sure that many of them will take up the challenge to become teachers in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): That ends questions to the minister. Four members were not called, but I will take a note of them.

Fostering and Kinship Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-965, in the name of Adam Ingram, on fostering and kinship care.

15:39

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): One of the most important responsibilities of government is the care and protection of our most vulnerable children. We were all dismayed by the 2006-07 looked-after children statistics, which showed an unacceptable lack of progress in the achievement of educational outcomes and positive destinations. The Scottish Government is resolute in its determination to support all children and young people in fulfilling their potential. There is nothing inevitable about looked-after children doing less well than their peers. "We can and must do better" is not just the name of a strategy but a stark challenge to us all to transform life chances for those children. There is no magic bullet; there is no one easy and straightforward approach. We must tackle this huge and varied challenge on a number of fronts in partnership—across Parliament, across government bodies and across the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors.

Yesterday, we published "Getting it right for every child in kinship and foster care". I am delighted to say that it is the first joint strategy between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, following the signing of our concordat last month. That approach heralds a new partnership between national and local government. It is fitting that our most vulnerable children—those who are looked after away from their families—and their dedicated carers should be the first to benefit from such a collaboration.

Together, we intend to work towards fulfilling the five key principles that are at the heart of the strategy: first, that the needs of the child must be paramount; secondly, that families should be supported to stay together; thirdly, that where the child needs to be away from their birth parents, care within the family circle should be the first option, unless it is not in the best interests of the child.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Ministers have specified the allowances that are to be paid. When will they be paid? How will the Government ensure that they are paid by all councils?

Adam Ingram: The concordat specifically commits the Government and COSLA to providing allowances for kinship carers, and the cash settlement covers that, as it covers payments for

foster carers. The current payment of allowances will continue, and I anticipate that kinship care allowances will start in April 2008.

There are two other principles in the strategy. Fourthly, that all placements should be designed to achieve stability; and fifthly, that appropriate support should be provided.

How will we achieve those principles? As I stated in our debate on early years and early intervention, we must focus on prevention and on helping to build resilience in children and families in the early years, identifying at an early stage those families who need more support. Then, we can mobilise agencies, under the getting it right for every child framework, to address problems before they become crises.

There will always be some cases where the interests of the child are best served by their being away from home. Removing a child of any age from their parents, whether for just a brief period or whether there is a possibility of permanence, is a huge step that places a great responsibility on both the local authority, as the corporate parent, and on the carer of the child. When that occurs, we want to support the wider family circle in looking after the child, where that is in his or her best interests.

The majority of kinship carers do not want or need any interference by the state, but they might welcome the occasional helping hand to ensure that both they and the children in their care get the support that they need. That is why I am delighted that Citizens Advice Scotland will establish a national framework of information services that are tailored to the needs of children in kinship care arrangements. Not only will kinship carers be able to get specialist advice and support from any citizens advice bureau in Scotland, local citizens advice bureaux will provide support to local kinship care groups and to the professionals who advise them.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): All of us welcome the support that citizens advice bureaux can give to kinship carers. Can the minister tell me how much money the Government has set aside for local authorities to pay for kinship allowances?

Adam Ingram: As was explained previously, the Government will settle a block grant for local authorities.

We have considered carefully the needs of looked-after children who live with kinship carers. It cannot be justified that such children who are looked after and for whom the state is the corporate parent receive less practical and financial support than they would in foster care. The strategy therefore sets out our proposals to achieve parity and equity of support for all children

who are looked after and accommodated in kinship or foster care.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I am sorry to return to the issue of money, but it would be helpful to know how much has been added to the local government block to accommodate the required increase in resources. I do not think that we have had clarity from the minister on that point. Can he help us?

Adam Ingram: I would have thought that what matters is the impact of what we do through our agreements with local authorities and the outcomes, rather than the inputs. I make no apologies for giving the answer that I gave earlier.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the minister give way on a similar, but not financial, point?

Adam Ingram: Yes.

Brian Adam: As well as helping financially, we need to encourage more fosterers. I note the recent change in the law. When does the minister plan to publish the regulations on fostering and when will they come into force?

Adam Ingram: The draft regulations were published yesterday. This evening, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and I are going to an event to launch them formally. There will be consultation on the regulations, which will close in March. I am not sure when we will be in a position to launch the regulations thereafter. I will write to the member about the details of that.

It follows that children in kinship care should be afforded the same level of protection and quality assurance as children in foster care. A light-touch approval process for kinship carers will ensure that the kinship carer can meet the child's needs and it will clarify how the kinship carer will be supported to do so. That will include payment of a financial allowance by the local authority at the same rate as that paid by the authority to a foster carer, minus child benefit, to which a kinship carer is entitled but a foster carer is not.

Our fourth principle is about achieving stability. We must be in no doubt that reducing the drift and uncertainty that too many looked-after children face will require a transformational effort across all the care settings—our early intervention work, foster care, kinship care, residential care and adoption. What kind of life experience are we offering our most vulnerable children when, of the 4,313 children who were looked after away from home for more than two years, 40 per cent—or 1,800—had experienced three to five placements and 521 had experienced six or more placements?

From early 2009, there will be a new legislative tool. The permanence order, which was introduced

by the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, will give children for whom adoption or return to family is not possible the assurance of a permanent home with an approved carer or in an appropriate residential setting. Preparations for that change are well under way.

The final strand of our strategy is to identify a proper and appropriate level of support for kinship and foster carers. The Scottish Government and COSLA have established a multidisciplinary reference group, co-ordinated by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering and the Fostering Network, to develop proposals on the recruitment and support of carers that are informed by best practice. It will report in the second half of 2008 and its recommendations will cover recruiting the right range and number of carers to meet the needs of children; providing a consistent assessment and approval process for foster and kinship carers; providing improved training arrangements to meet the requirements of today's and future carers; and identifying whether existing organisational arrangements for placing children in foster and kinship care are fit for the challenges that I have outlined.

The strategy sets out the vision and signals a joint commitment to deliver. However, we recognise that it is only the first step towards a genuinely child-centred system. Our next step is to embed into the legislation the getting it right principles. As I said, this evening, I will officially launch a consultation on regulations for looked-after children. We are consulting on a number of issues: the approval of foster carers and kinship carers; how we can address any shortcomings that are identified in the recent report from the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care on the quality of fostering services; improving the planning process for the child; creating and retaining records; and removing existing barriers to recruitment by lifting the prohibition on fostering by same-sex couples.

Taking forward the strategy will be the joint responsibility of the Scottish Government and local authorities. However, the people who do the really hard work are those who pick the child up from school, read them their goodnight story, take them to the nurse or dentist and give them a hug when they pass a test in class. All children need and deserve a carer who cherishes them and stands by them through thick and thin. I intend to ensure that this strategy will help more vulnerable children to get that type of care. We owe them nothing less.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that the needs of a child are paramount and that families should be supported to stay together; agrees that, where the child needs to live away from his or her birth parents, care within the family

circle by a kinship carer should be the first option unless it is not in the best interests of the child; believes that all placements for a child who must live away from his or her birth parents must provide a safe and nurturing home, whether for a planned short-term period or on a permanent basis, and affirms its commitment to the provision of equitable and appropriate support for all carers of looked-after children, with systems in place to ensure that carers can provide the best possible opportunities and chances to all looked-after children.

15:51

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): On behalf of my Labour colleagues, I welcome the launch of the strategy that is outlined in "Getting it right for every child in kinship and foster care", which continues work that was started by the previous, Labour-led, Scottish Executive and was supported by the Education Committee in the previous session. I am aware that a number of people—some of whom are present here today—were members of that committee, including the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, who has just left the chamber, the Minister for Children and Early Years, Ken Macintosh and Wendy Alexander. Although all of those members can be proud of their work, it was Wendy Alexander, upon taking up her role as leader of the Labour group in this Parliament, who asked the First Minister on 27 September to provide the £10 million that is required to ensure that kinship carers receive the same allowance that is paid to foster carers. I am sure that the cross-party support that she assured him of in that regard will be in evidence today, and I welcome the minister's announcements. I have some concerns about whether that £10 million is being made available, but I will return to that later.

It is important to recognise, as the minister did, that children need a safe and secure environment in which to thrive. That is most often found with their parents. It is essential, therefore, that central Government and local government have a strategy to support parents. No one can be unaware of how a child's future can be challenged by a parent's abuse of illegal drugs or alcohol. Duncan McNeil will enlarge on that when he speaks later. The Scottish Government must identify resources to support such families.

I note that the strategy suggests that the forthcoming early years strategy will expand on how to support children in difficult family circumstances, but we must remember that not only young children are in difficulty—older children are just as likely to be in difficulty. In fact, it is often the case that, because of their own development needs, teenagers are caught up in family problems. Can the minister say what resources will be available for them?

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Is the member aware of Children 1st's family group conferencing programmes, which deal with the immediate and the wider family in just the circumstances that the member has described?

Mary Mulligan: I am aware of the work of Children 1st and I support it.

In relation to early years, I note that the successful sure start programme does not feature in any of the budget lines that are presently available, and nor does it feature in the concordat. Sure start has helped many parents and has often helped to keep children with their parents. Can the minister explain where it is in the budget? There is little point in having an early years strategy without any resources to fund its elements.

Unfortunately, there are times when it is not possible for children or young people to stay with their parents, as the minister acknowledged, and I welcome the minister's statements regarding the five key principles that underpin the child-centred approach. Having already acknowledged in my speech that the child's needs should be paramount, and that families should be supported to stay together, I welcome the view that the wider family should be the first option when a child cannot stay with their parents. However, that applies only in appropriate and properly assessed cases, and it should never be seen as the cheap option.

It is equally important that placements should provide stability. In the previous session of Parliament, I was pleased to welcome to the Parliament a group of looked-after children from West Lothian. They spoke to MSPs about their experience of being looked after. Many of them had had the experiences of which the minister spoke. They spoke thoughtfully about the fear of waking in a house and wondering where they were; moving from one foster home to another, leaving friends and family behind; building new relationships that might be broken when they moved yet again; and the detrimental effect that all that uncertainty had on their lives, specifically on their education. Placements need to be stable, and for that to happen they need to be thoroughly planned and supported. I will come back to that.

Carers also need non-financial support to provide contact with the family or to help with difficult decisions, including crisis situations. More social workers are needed to provide such support, but that needs additional resources. Members are not reassured on that, as the additional resources cannot be found in the minister's budget figures. When children or young people cannot stay within their wider family circle, well-supported foster carers are needed. In a recent members' business debate, I said that my

own local authority of West Lothian was managing to recruit foster carers, but I was told that other local authorities were not so fortunate. I would like to hear how the Scottish Government intends to support local authorities to attract more foster carers. How will the Scottish Government ensure that there is high-quality training and support for all carers, including kinship and foster carers?

I must raise very strong concerns about the financial package that is being put before us to support the strategy—a strategy on which there is much agreement. I welcome the fact that the strategy is jointly signed by the Scottish Government and COSLA and, as a former local councillor, I recognise the role of local authorities in delivering fostering and kinship care services. However, I hope that agreement was not reached at the expense of certainty about the funding that is available for kinship and foster carers.

Adam Ingram's motion refers to

"the provision of equitable and appropriate support for all carers of looked-after children".

The Scottish Government speaks of a minimum national allowance of between £119 and £198 per week for kinship carers as well as foster carers. How can the minister guarantee that? I have a constituent who currently cares for two children who are relatives. They are originally from different authorities, so she receives different allowances. It is intolerable that one child is being discriminated against, but nothing that I have heard today makes me think that that will change.

I am sure that the minister agrees that many children and young people are in informal kinship care situations. How will they be supported? The minister spoke of the role of CABx in his speech in offering financial advice and support to informal carers. What happens to people such as my constituents who are unable to access a CAB easily? The minister has powers to make regulations and set allowances under the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. He needs to consider his actions—looked-after children should not be made to wait.

In conclusion, we should never forget that looked-after children and young people are among the most vulnerable members of our society. They rely on us to make the right provision for their care. Although there is much to welcome in the strategy, it will consist of just warm words if it is not adequately resourced. Independent figures show that £10 million will be needed to fund allowances for kinship carers. Is the £4 million that has been identified only part of the allocation? Will the Scottish National Party Government identify where the other £6 million will come from? Is it an annual settlement? If the money is not ring fenced in local authorities' budgets, how will the

Government ensure that the provision of kinship care allowance does not become a postcode lottery? We have such a lottery at the moment.

What provision is being made for informal kinship carers? Is the Government saying that everyone will need to go through the courts or the children's hearings system for their status to be formalised? I am not sure that those bodies could cope with the workload. I see that the minister is shaking his head, so perhaps that is not the Government's proposal. However, is it saying enough about how it will support informal kinship carers?

If the Government is to maintain the support that it has today, it must answer the Parliament's questions. We need those answers if we are to say that we really have a strategy to support children who are in kinship or foster care.

16:00

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This time last year, the Scottish Conservatives welcomed the publication of the previous Executive's consultation document that set out a national strategy for fostering and kinship care. We are happy to support the motion this afternoon, given the Government's determination to pursue that strategy's main objectives. The importance of the issue cannot be overestimated, as Mary Mulligan said, nor can the need for cross-party effort to take significant steps to address the need for greater provision and better care for some of the most vulnerable children in Scotland.

In difficult situations where children cannot live with their parents, we fully appreciate that they usually want to live with a family member or friend under kinship care, or, if that is not possible, in a family environment with appropriate foster care, rather than in a residential establishment. In our view, such placements usually give the child the best chance of overcoming the disruption and stress that they had to face in coming to terms with their previous circumstances. There is likely to be more stability and continuity in kinship or foster care, both of which are major factors in developing new confidence and self-esteem.

However, we also recognise that in some cases, perhaps when the child has been severely scarred by an experience at home, or if they require intensive specialist health care or educational support, residential care plays an important role. Whatever route is taken, it is imperative that the child's best interests come first in their educational development and their social and economic integration.

The Scottish Conservatives have advocated a national system of kinship care allowances, a national system of fostering allowances and more

careful allocation of placements. We have also expressed concern that the provision of care varies widely throughout the country. Areas of significant shortages and poor practice persist, so it is good to hear that the Government is trying to address them.

We are most concerned by the overall growth in demand for vital services and the question mark over whether the present funding arrangements are adequate. Professor Arthur Midwinter flagged up his concern about the funding shortfall between the provision of grant-aided expenditure and local authorities' spending on core social care for children. The Government has made provision for some extra funding. We welcome the announcement that was made in the past 24 hours. There will be some transfer to local authorities, but the budget's 17.7 per cent reduction in funding for child care services over the next three years raises serious questions, as Mary Mulligan said, about how we can finance all the changes when demand is growing so quickly. More important, Professor Midwinter flagged up the need to tie the overall policy objectives to financial arrangements much more coherently than they are at present. We urge the Government to debate that point fully.

Everyone recognises the importance of a child's first placement. If it works well, it increases the chance that the child will develop confidently and will have the maximum security and permanence during their time in foster or kinship care. Thus, the assessment processes that the young person and the prospective foster or kinship carer undergo before the placement is decided are crucial. The bodies that are responsible for matching children with care arrangements—local authorities and independent fostering agencies—must continually review their procedures and make the area a priority for the deployment of their best qualified and most experienced staff.

The previous Administration made the sensible suggestion that the child should be more involved in the choice of placement. It is good to hear that the Government is also approaching the matter in a child-centred way.

Obviously, once a placement is made, it is essential that the relevant parties have an opportunity to agree the care plan for the child, under the supervision of a lead professional. The child needs to feel entirely confident that all the key people are involved, just as the team needs to feel confident that there are strong links between the child, family members and the members of the professional bodies. That is a matter not only of trust, but of adequate resources and, increasingly these days, adequate funding. The social care sector has had to put up with increasing expectations from Government, therefore

Parliament has a duty to clarify the role that it expects kinship and foster care to play and to ensure that carers are fully supported.

It is vital to recognise the growing importance of the kinship role—I am pleased by the Government's announcement in that respect—and the need to remove some of the barriers that currently affect its status. Only 12 of the 32 local authorities pay the main categories of kinship carers the same basic allowance that they pay foster carers. A further 10 local authorities pay a fraction of that allowance—usually only around a third. That seems grossly unfair.

What matters most are the best interests of the child and the achievement of a workable and effective balance between family and state support. That latter issue is never going to be easy, given the conflicting influences that can sometimes cloud the matter in defining where final responsibilities should lie, especially in an age when vulnerable children face increasingly complex problems. We look forward to taking part in cross-party discussions to address the important issues.

16:06

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):

"Our vision for all children in Scotland is that

'in order to become confident individuals, successful learners, effective contributors and responsible citizens, they must be safe, nurtured, healthy, achieving, included, active and respected and responsible'."

Those are the opening words of the former Scottish Government's consultation paper on a national strategy for fostering and kinship care. There can be no disagreement with those aims for every child in Scotland.

Liberal Democrats will offer no disagreement with the Government's motion, but we will not offer unconditional support for the proposed regulation—the minister would not expect anything other than a constructive position from us as the strategy continues. The parties bring different emphases to what can be a sensitive area, but it is right to highlight agreement when the Parliament wants to progress social policy and equality and to increase support for our vulnerable young people. There is an overall consensus.

Some young people are born into, or find themselves in, families that become dysfunctional or dangerous. When that happens, it is not in their best interests to remain with their parents. This is an extremely difficult area in which to develop policy and child protection social workers and those in the voluntary sector who deliver front-line services experience even greater difficulty.

I spent a day with staff who work in this area in my constituency. I was extremely impressed by their commitment and professionalism. I was also struck by their frustration about resources and the stressful environment in which they work. I was impressed by the genuinely supportive multidisciplinary team that is developing in the locality integration area with the police and health staff, and I was acutely aware of the largely thankless nature of the task they carry out in the face of the views of the press and some reactionary politicians. We all think that we are not reactionary, but when there is bad news Parliament and politicians often respond badly. I am not sure why that has generated laughter from Ms Grahame, but it is a fact.

Children are often cared for by members of their family other than their parents, who need recourse to foster carers. I recently hosted a reception for fosterers in the Borders and had the pleasure of speaking to foster parents about their experiences and needs. More than 3,000 foster carers provide care in their homes for some of the most complex and vulnerable children in Scotland. Kinship carers also require additional support, and I am pleased that funding for advice and support for kinship carers is to be made available through Citizens Advice Scotland. However, that funding is for a three-year period. As much as we have heard the new Government say that it will put an end to initiative approaches and ring fencing, we have just that. If there is a defined need to provide support for kinship carers, it should be core support and not a one-off initiative.

We have heard about family group conferencing, which is making a real contribution, but the Government's strategy document states clearly that it happens in only 17 of the 32 local authority areas in Scotland. I know about the work that is being done in Selkirk, which is in my constituency. It should be supported. The strategy goes into depth about its benefits and highlights it as best practice and a non-legal way of determining the best interests of the child—I and the Liberal Democrats support it—but I am surprised that there is nothing more concrete about its development and expansion into the other 15 local authority areas.

One of the main concerns about the Government's budget is that it is in danger of undermining the strategy. Last week, we heard about the difficulties with ring fencing funds for dealing with domestic abuse and domestic violence. Much of that funding has been transferred to local government. When the First Minister was asked about it, he said that it remained a top priority for local government. Of course, that is not detailed anywhere and, regrettably, as we scrutinise the Government's budget on fostering, kinship care, child protection

and health support, we see a similar picture. We have not been provided with any clarity and, when there is political pressure, ministers say that it is local government's top priority. The blame can be shifted quite easily.

Adam Ingram: Does Jeremy Purvis agree that the proof of the pudding is in the eating? There is a joint commitment between local authorities and the Government. We will report on this annually, at local authority level. I will be held as accountable as a local authority for this particular policy; I will not be blaming local authorities as a matter of course.

Jeremy Purvis: I appreciate what the minister says; I will take him at his word and I hope that all his fellow ministers will follow suit.

The minister needs to be clearer about funding and the concordat. He said that payments for kinship and foster carers are included in the concordat and that they are funded and included in the block grant for local government. I would be grateful if the minister would publish those budgets with a breakdown of how much each local authority area is expected to receive so that it can provide support for kinship carers. If he does not do that, there will be continuing concern about the sustainability of the funding.

Can the minister state where in the draft regulations is the legal requirement on local authorities to make payments? On my reading of the draft regulations, that requirement does not exist.

The Government has to be more transparent. If it makes press releases about payments before it makes an announcement to Parliament, it must be transparent about the budget documentation, as Robert Brown and Kenneth Macintosh said. That is how Parliament will hold the minister to account.

I am extremely disappointed that the relationship of kinship and foster care with local government is not reflected in health. The majority of looked after young people have complex mental health needs, but there is no mention of that in the strategy or the draft guidelines. I hope that that will be rectified at the end of this process.

16:13

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome what the minister said, particularly the proposal to introduce a minimum allowance of between £119 and £198 per week for all carers, whether they are approved kinship carers or what we would know as foster carers. The emphasis should be on the word "approved".

I raised this issue in my members' business debate a few months ago: I said that at least 1,700 additional foster families are required because of

the patchiness of provision—Mary Mulligan referred to that—and because many kinship carers receive nothing at all. Payments are long overdue and I am sure that they will be welcomed by everyone in the chamber, the organisations, the carers and across all parties.

With the recognition of status will come the need for training, assessment and appraisal. I am sure that we all support that. I also welcome the fact that the minister said that he will look at the manner in which those things are done because, in that members' business debate, I drew attention to the fact that training sometimes takes between six and eight months. Of course we want training and appraisal to be rigorous, but they should not deter good people with good intentions. I am pleased, therefore, that the quid pro quo for the allowances will be training and support. That is necessary.

In the earlier debate, I welcomed the minister's £4 million package for training, advice and information for foster carers and approved kinship carers. He may have answered this question, but where will that money be directed? I refer him to the briefing from Citizens Advice Scotland, which will be expected to do quite a bit on the issue. I took it from the minister's answer that the money will come through normal local authority funding. I will listen to what the minister says but, given that the benefits system may be the main support for foster carers and approved kinship carers, the interaction between allowances and benefits is an issue.

Adam Ingram: The £4 million, to which Mary Mulligan also referred, was a one-off payment this year to provide foster and kinship carers with training packages, at a cost of £1,000 for each carer. In fact, we have been rather oversubscribed as we have spent £6.2 million. That gives an indication of the demand.

Christine Grahame: I suggest that more oversubscription may come the minister's way because the Citizens Advice Scotland briefing states:

"It is estimated that as many as 10,000 children have more informal arrangements."

Such people may never have thought of themselves as kinship carers. They may provide such care simply because it involves the family or because they are in extremis and in an urgent situation. The issue is quite complex.

The issue is also complex with regard to reserved and devolved matters. If someone who is on benefits takes in a child and, after approval and training—they are not paid, but receive benefits—gets an allowance as an approved kinship carer, what will happen to their benefits? What is the

interaction? Will they be worse off? I do not know the answer to that.

In the final part of my speech, I want to refer to other issues that have been raised. On the business of supporting families—I speak from 12 years' experience as a family practitioner—the welfare of the child is of course at the centre of everything we do in legislation and in policy. If possible, the child should remain within the immediate or extended family, as that is a far better thing.

Evidence suggests that children who stay with their extended family—with granny or granddad or with an uncle or whomsoever—are, at the age of 16, more likely to remain in the same household than those who are put into more formal foster care. Children in more formal foster care are more likely to break loose and to want to be independent, sometimes with the predictably sad consequence that they repeat the cycle of their own childhood. All kinds of benefits can be gained if the child stays within the family, although there are times when that is highly inappropriate and, frankly, the child needs to be removed, either temporarily or permanently.

As Jeremy Purvis mentioned, Children 1st has a family centre in Selkirk. I was very impressed by its family group conferencing, of which I saw a demonstration recently. The child is at the centre of the whole programme. When the child who is finding things difficult at home is asked which people should be involved in discussing what should happen, they sometimes make very strange choices. For example, neighbours might be brought in of whom the rest of the family might not necessarily approve, but the process is consensual. Such conferences take place before any of the professionals are involved. I commend the programme to the minister, if he has not already seen it.

I note that 50 per cent of the funding for that family group conferencing project comes from statutory sources and 50 per cent comes from the voluntary sector. I believe that we need to move towards better funding for such programmes, even if it means only shifting the balance so that it is 60:40. I put that bid into the pot now. We have a great deal of sympathy for that kind of front-line work which, because of its focus on early intervention, might prevent children from going into any kind of foster care.

16:19

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate on an issue that is of vital importance to thousands of children and their carers throughout Scotland. I begin by welcoming the Government's

strategy on kinship and foster care. The strategy, which has its roots in the work of the previous Labour-led Scottish Executive, will receive cross-party support.

I welcome especially the commitment to give kinship carers financial support in the form of a national allowance and to pay approved kinship carers allowances equal to those that foster carers receive, with the aim of ensuring that all foster and kinship carers of young people receive allowances that are based on the Fostering Network's recommended rate of between £119 and £198 per week.

I am sure that kinship carers throughout Scotland, many of whom are struggling to make ends meet and are in urgent need of extra financial support, will welcome that move strongly, but I am concerned that although independent forecasters have estimated that it will cost £10 million to ensure that allowances that are paid to kinship carers match foster carers' allowances, just £4 million has been allocated to local authorities. That is a significant shortfall. When she winds up, will the Minister for Schools and Skills assure us that the required money will be available?

I am also concerned that the money has not been ring fenced. Mary Mulligan ably put the case for considering ring fencing. If we are to ensure that every kinship carer in Scotland receives the financial support they need, it is vital that the money that is allocated to local authorities to support kinship carers reaches them and delivers benefits. We must end the current postcode lottery of funding, in which some local authorities fund kinship carers but others do not. It is important that we have consistent, nationwide delivery of kinship care support. That can happen only if we are confident that the money will get to carers. I am keen to hear how the minister will ensure that that happens, through the concordat that has been signed with COSLA.

We also need to ensure that the Government's strategy does not undermine people with more informal arrangements. It is estimated that about 1,700 looked-after children are part of a formal kinship care arrangement, but that as many as 10,000 children in Scotland are part of a more informal arrangement. All too often, some kinship carers, especially grandparents, feel that children have been dumped on them, with no support. It is vital that we ensure that all carers, no matter how formal the care arrangement, receive the support and information about their rights and responsibilities that they need, and that friends and family members who provide kinship care are fully involved in developing their care options, plans and solutions.

Like other members, I regard the Government's commitment to fund a one-stop information and advice service for kinship carers, run by CABx, as a welcome move. It is important that we ensure that carers can access confidential, independent advice, and I am a great supporter of CABx. However, I am anxious about how the commitment will be funded. Recently I wrote to Stewart Maxwell about funding for CABx in my area and was told that that was a matter for North Lanarkshire. How can we be confident that the money that has been allocated for the service will be available, to ensure that free, independent and impartial advice is provided?

Although kinship care arrangements work well for many children, there must remain a clear distinction between informal kinship carers and local authority foster carers. I seek assurances from the minister on the safeguards that will be put in place to ensure that kinship carers provide the kind of care that has been assessed as required and that we know that kinship care is bona fide. I accept that many kinship carers do an excellent job, but if they had to undergo the same checks as foster carers, some of them would fail to be approved. That must be recognised in whatever scheme is agreed.

We urgently need more foster carers, but few, if any, local authorities pay the minimum national fostering rate that the Fostering Network recommends. Foster carers are also required to go through a lengthy and difficult recruitment and approval process. Given that the outcomes for young people in stable foster care placements are better than for youngsters accommodated in residential care, will the minister tell us how and when the Government plans to address that issue? I do not have time to go into private fostering, but I would like to know what consideration the Government has given to it.

In the limited time available, it is difficult to raise all the concerns that I am sure would gather cross-party consensus. Ultimately, we need to ensure that, in developing a national strategy for fostering and kinship care, the interests of the most vulnerable children and families in Scotland are paramount—something that I think the Government is attempting to do today.

16:25

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): Before the election on 3 May, I met a group of kinship carers in Possilpark, Maryhill. That group in the north of Glasgow organised an election hustings and invited kinship carers from across Scotland to attend, ask questions and listen. At the hustings, I pledged to campaign to give kinship carers of looked-after children parity of esteem and financial support with foster carers. I returned to the north

Glasgow kinship care group after my election and gave the same pledge.

It is with great pride and humility—something that I will return to shortly—that today I can say that the promise looks like it will be fulfilled. It will be fulfilled not just by our new Scottish National Party Government—this is not about party politics—but by local authorities throughout Scotland, whose representative body, COSLA, and 32 leaders have supported the local government concordat, which says that the allowances to kinship carers of looked-after children should be equivalent to those for foster carers.

The concordat is also central to the fostering and kinship care strategy that was launched yesterday. It is a team effort by our nation's Government and local government that will vastly improve the lives of many of our most vulnerable families. As we have heard, the Fostering Network has recommended an allowance of between £119 and £198 per week, and that figure has been accepted by the Government as a minimum level of support. That money can make a dramatic difference to the lives of carers and the young people who are cared for.

I approach the debate with great humility because I have seen the invaluable service that kinship carers provide, not just to children and their relatives, but to society in general, often in financially and emotionally tough circumstances. Many kinship carers struggle to cope, but they do. They cope because they have no choice but to cope. While I was talking to one kinship carer in Possilpark, I asked whether she would benefit from additional respite care. She said that her grandchild was not ready to be left alone with anyone bar her, but that if they could occasionally have just a short break—a day here and a day there—that would be something. At the moment, they cannot afford that. I hope that that kinship care family are closer to being able to have such an activity as part of their lives. It is something that most people would take completely for granted as a normal and happy part of the childhood experience.

Children 1st has welcomed the fostering and kinship care strategy. It has called it a bold new move and, in particular, praised family group conferencing, which is a model that it has championed and excelled at. There is a clear acknowledgement that the best place for any child is a loving and caring home with their parents, and that if that is not possible a kinship carer close at hand is the next best option, with fostering following that.

The most expensive and poorest outcome for children, parents, families and society is when children unnecessarily end up as looked-after

children in a residential setting. That is clear in terms of educational attainment, life expectancy, a drastic reduction in quality of life and the likelihood of progressing to the criminal justice system, developing drug and alcohol abuse problems or developing mental health problems.

It not only makes good sense but is socially just to provide kinship carers with financial support similar to that for foster carers. After all, kinship carers know their kids best and are best placed to deal with challenging behaviour and to provide the required emotional support. Moreover, they save the state money and improve the life chances and quality of life of looked-after children.

I hope that the strategy and the parity of esteem, financial support and dignity that it affords the kinship carers of looked-after children will not only improve the life experience of those children and families but prevent more children from unnecessarily entering a residential setting under local authority care.

I commend the motion to the chamber. It is fantastic that the chamber can sometimes get things right and that we can find cross-party support for a measure on which we can all agree.

16:30

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde)

(Lab): Given the impact of drugs on our society—and, indeed, the disproportionate effect that they have had on our children—I welcome the minister's announcement, which recognises that too many children in this small country of ours need to be rescued from the dire circumstances of their parents' drugs misuse.

We cannot overestimate the scale of the problem. There is a recognised need to increase the availability of care places through fostering and kinship care. By such means, we can improve these children's life chances. In short, we must be able to meet the increased demand for children's services on all fronts.

I share NCH's concern that if adequate resources are not provided we will be unable to tackle this issue effectively. A national fostering and kinship care strategy is long overdue: the carers in question are the least supported, the least well trained, the least well paid, the least inspected and the most isolated of all child care workers. As a result, we need to understand what new money is being made available. How many carers will benefit? What social work assessment will be required? Who will meet the cost of those assessments? Given the current workload of social workers and child services, is the capacity that other members have mentioned available in the system? As Christine Grahame wondered, will the allowance impact on other benefits that carers

receive—particularly as many of them are elderly grandparents who receive, for example, housing benefit? Finally, will the benefit be available in all local authorities?

Such questions need to be answered clearly. If the Government—with the cross-party support that it has secured today—announces this initiative and creates the expectation among carers that they will receive this allowance only for them to find out that they cannot access it locally or that there are other barriers to receiving it, it will be a cruel deception indeed. Worse still, what if children's services, which are currently underfunded, come under additional pressure, resulting in many children having to continue to live with parental drug abuse? The minister knows from our regular correspondence that I feel strongly about this matter. At the moment, these children do not have their needs assessed, never mind met. What if this measure overburdens existing services and means that people who are in greater need slip further down the priority list? Is it simply a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul?

We cannot criticise the intent behind the strategy, as it aims to help carers and increase opportunities and real alternatives for young children who live in difficult family circumstances, but we cannot and must not introduce unintended consequences. We must not allow it to be detrimental to other children who face similar circumstances.

I agree that the scale of the drug problem and its impact on families and children is massive. Indeed, previous Administrations and the Government have described tackling the problem as a priority. Christine Grahame is not here, but the priority that it is given was proved only last week when three cabinet secretaries gave evidence to her committee—the Health and Sport Committee—on the impact of drugs on society. Indeed, four cabinet secretaries and, to my knowledge, three ministers, are involved in the area. As a result, I am concerned that the number of ministers who are involved will be a problem rather than a solution. That said, I am confident that ministers agree with the chair of the Scottish Association of Alcohol and Drug Action Teams, Tom Wood, who said during a Health and Sport Committee evidence session:

“We need to invest in young people and families. We need to invest in the unborn and young children who are in an environment in which there are alcohol or drug-dependent people, instead of pouring lots of money into lost causes.”—[*Official Report, Health and Sport Committee*, 14 November 2007; c 162.]

Many of us agree with that statement.

A Health and Sport Committee paper stated that the priority should be to give drugs and alcohol budgets to families with children, but figures

relating to children and family social work budgets indicate a significant reduction in that area—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The member should wind up.

Duncan McNeil: I will cut short my speech by saying that the rhetoric and the reality must meet.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I need to limit the time for the next two members. They have four minutes each.

16:37

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I will do my best to cut short my speech.

I welcome what the minister said in his speech, including the announcement of allowances for family carers. We would all agree that such allowances are well overdue. Members have said that thousands of children are looked after by extended families. The measures that have been announced to alleviate the real financial and emotional difficulties—we must remember the emotional difficulties—that people face are welcome.

Members have also said that at present it is almost impossible for kinship carers to find out where and whom they should go to and what they are entitled to. Sometimes that leaves them wading through numerous agencies in the hope that they can reach the correct one and get much-needed help. That is why I welcome the proposal for a specialist information service for all kinship carers that would give much-needed advice. I also welcome the involvement of Citizens Advice Scotland.

When the minister sums up, will she reply to the question that Christine Grahame asked on whether there will be a partnership with local government? Obviously, ministers will be aware, as members are, that the services that local authorities provide vary greatly area by area. Mary Mulligan and other members also made a relevant point about kinship carers' payments being made through local government social work departments. I would like clarification on both those issues.

I raise those two issues because of a number of constituency cases that I have dealt with—I am sure that other members have had similar constituency cases. I know how difficult it is to extrapolate the relevant information. I will give an example of a recent case in which I was involved.

An elderly gran who was the carer for her grandson did not receive any benefits whatsoever—her only income was her old-age pension—but she supported her grandson through thick and thin. She did the best that she could to

provide him with a safe and stable environment to the extent that she used part of her pension to pay for after-school care. Eventually, she could not continue to do so, given the money that she had, and she found it almost impossible to get the help that she and her grandson deserved. Fortunately, through contacting various agencies, we were able to help to guarantee funds for after-school care. Those funds are guaranteed only until March 2008, but I hope that what is proposed will help that lady and others who are in the same position.

I thank Glasgow City Council for providing that help through a vulnerable families fund. Without that, the lady's grandson, who had led a chaotic lifestyle in difficult circumstances, would not have help and would not be able to mix with other children. That helps him emotionally and helps his grandmum emotionally, as it gives her much-needed time on her own when she knows that the kid is being looked after.

The woman who I have mentioned is one of thousands of people who care for and nurture children. Often, they rescue those children from a chaotic lifestyle. We must not forget the important point that those people save Governments thousands, if not millions, of pounds by preventing kids from going into care. We should not deny those people the same right as others have.

I thank the Government for these important and welcome measures and I look forward to their introduction.

16:40

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, welcome the policy, but I want more. I will explain why. The policy is specific—a kinship care allowance is available only to a kinship carer who fulfils the criteria: that the local authority has placed the child or young person with the relative; or that a court order or a children's hearing requires the child or young person to live with that relative.

Kinship carers often step in quickly, which means that children do not come into the local authority's care and are therefore not looked after or placed by the local authority. As a result, such carers do not meet the criteria that are set out in the policy, yet if they did not come forward, the state would have to look after the children. In many of the cases in which I have been involved, local authorities have asked family members or friends to step into the breach without instigating a formal process or taking children into care, so I urge the minister to change the criteria to include children who would be looked after were it not for kinship carers.

I have been contacted by constituents who are kinship carers but who will not benefit from the

measures in the strategy. The children for whom they care were placed with them because of difficult and tragic circumstances. My constituents' local authority asked them to take on parental rights and responsibilities for the children and they agreed, after which the local authority put them in touch with a solicitor and paid their legal fees to enable them to seek guardianship through the courts. They did that willingly, having been told that the alternative was that the children would go into care.

My constituents want to give the children a secure and loving home, but they are struggling hard to provide that. They struggle financially because of health problems, and that has an impact on the children. They cannot provide for the children in the way that they wish to. The stress of making ends meet is also taking its toll—so much so that their general practitioner has written to me to express concern.

If the anomaly that I have described is not dealt with, it will discourage family members from stepping in immediately. Family members in similar situations would be better off allowing the children to become looked after before stepping in to become kinship carers. However, that would mean a period of uncertainty for the family and a feeling of rejection and instability for the children when they were least able to cope with that. Social work services would also experience an added burden, as each case would have to be assessed.

When we take into account the fact that the vast number of kinship carers are grandparents who have no income other than pensions, the situation becomes almost unthinkable, as it means that the families who need the allowance most will be debarred from obtaining it. Grandparents are much less likely to risk allowing their grandchildren to become looked after, because they might fear being assessed as not physically fit to take on the caring role. The choice is stark: struggle alone or risk losing the children.

I am not asking the minister to pay every relation who does a spot of baby-sitting or who steps in to cover a short-term illness. However, I ask for family members to be termed kinship carers and to be eligible for the allowance when a child would be taken into care if that family did not step in. A local council would need to oversee that process and it could look for alternatives. If it could not find alternatives, it could deem family members to be kinship carers.

Grandparents who take on care in circumstances involving drug and alcohol abuse do not do so overnight—the process is gradual. At no time does a local authority step in and make them kinship carers; that just happens slowly as parents slide into a circle of abuse.

If the policy is centred on children, the anomaly needs to be addressed. If it is not addressed, the policy will be getting it right not for every child, but only for the chosen few.

16:45

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I want to begin by warmly welcoming today's debate on the long-awaited national kinship and foster care strategy. Many informed speeches have been made; many members have detailed knowledge of the issue from constituency experience.

The issue of what happens to children and young people could hardly be more central to our society, to its standards and to its pretensions to be seen as caring and compassionate. Adam Ingram was right to refer to the lack of inevitability of the poor outcomes that many young people suffer. I am talking about the children who will end up as NEET—not in education, employment or training—and who will end up homeless, without skills, suffering from mental health problems, or in trouble with the police. Their self-confidence and ambitions are of the lowest, and their potential is not being realised—to the enormous loss of their own life prospects and the contribution that they should be making to our society and our economy.

I have met, as we all have, remarkable young people who have survived, who have resilience, and who, despite the odds, will make their mark positively on the world. As the minister suggested, the challenge for us is to find a way of nurturing that resilience, of fostering ambition and self-confidence, and of widening opportunity for many more young people. Such issues are at the heart of this debate.

Our knowledge of these issues is getting better but all the relevant statistics—on education, on employment, on success in pushing away risk factors and on mental health—remain stubbornly flat. We know more about the importance of personal identity, which is why we changed the structure and basis of adoption law in the previous session of Parliament and why we introduced the idea of permanence orders.

We know, too, that outcomes for children in long-term foster placements tend to be significantly better than those for children in residential care. That is even more true when the comparison is with children who stay with unsuitable parents in home situations where the children are at risk. However, generalisations are dangerous, because every situation and every child is unique. Some young children have had the debilitating experience of being in 18 or 20 foster placements that have broken down, normally because of the scale of the challenges and the negativity that has developed. In its briefing, NCH

reminded us that one in three children in foster care in Scotland moves placement more than three times in the first year. The figure in England is one in eight. That statistic offers us a challenge.

I know that the minister is personally very committed to moving forwards effectively on this issue. However, to be frank, I was a little disappointed with the strategy itself. To be sure, there is a good analysis of the issues and there are significant features that will make a difference. Foremost among those features, of course, is the announcement on fostering allowances and on kinship care allowances. I welcome too, as others have done, the pilot project with Citizens Advice Scotland for enhanced advice to kinship carers on their entitlement. I have met the Possilpark group that Bob Doris referred to, and I have met many other grandparents who are in desperate need as a result of assuming responsibility for grandchildren. Rhoda Grant made good points about the criteria for qualification as a kinship carer. We will have to tease out those issues.

Will the minister make it clear whether kinship and fostering allowances will be national and statutory? That was not clear from his speech or from the strategy. If they are to be statutory, regulations will be forthcoming. Will he also make clear the funding assumptions behind the costings—is the figure the £10 million that has been referred to, or some other figure? What exactly is the position? The chamber is entitled to know about such essential points. Will he clarify what COSLA's input to the strategy has been in the three weeks since the concordat was signed? It must have been fairly nominal.

The strategy talks about the centrality of the child's care plan and the planning process. However, the challenge is how to hear the child or young person's voice effectively, and how to put it at the heart of the process. Moreover, how does that relate to other plans and to the day-to-day reality at school? Young people often tell us that they were not listened to, that their needs were a sort of add-on at school and that the planning process did not work properly for them.

The strategy and today's motion signal a reinforcement of the potential of kinship care and the wider family. This is manifestly the correct thing to do—if it is carefully handled. However, I urge caution on the minister as he develops the idea. Situations vary enormously—from many family members who are brilliant, through to family members who have significant issues of their own and whose quality of care, quality of insight into the child's needs and quality of support for the child's development are questionable.

Some children move backwards and forwards between different situations. Where does the balance lie between the parental home, kinship

options and outside foster placements? There is a lot to be drawn out as the debate develops. The strategy recognises the need for respite and family support, and both have a part to play.

We need more foster parents. Will there be a national television campaign to build on the successful children's panel recruitment drive model? If so, is there enhanced funding to pay for that, and are there enhanced arrangements to respond to, assess and train the new recruits, which in itself is a big job?

Finally, although the part of the strategy that deals with transition to adulthood is one of the most crucial, it is the least satisfactory. The aim of allowing foster care placements to continue to 18, and beyond that if possible, is absolutely correct, but it appears to be aspirational only. As a former minister, I recognise the phraseology. "Encourage", "work with" and "seek to ensure"—they are not quite what they seem. We could develop that area much more satisfactorily.

Ultimately, much of this is about relationships: it is about people having key adults in their lives and the capacity to develop normal relationships with friends, employers and partners. The national kinship and foster care strategy must be the continuation, not the end, of a process. It must be something that will be supported by other public policy drivers to ensure that we do indeed get it right for every child. I welcome the strategy.

16:51

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

Like Robert Brown, I welcome the debate, and the publication of the strategy, "Getting it right for every child in kinship and foster care". This has been a good debate, and a consensual one, as evidenced by the fact that no amendments to the Government's motion were lodged.

I am sure that the motion will have cross-party support at decision time. That is important, because there should not be party-political divisions on this subject. Indeed, it has been one of those important debates that the Parliament sometimes has that are consensual and which deal with important issues that affect people's lives. Although important, I suspect that such issues get little attention in the media, which is obsessed by much more trivial issues—I will not dwell on that.

Many members have talked about the importance of the family environment. The briefing for the debate from Children 1st makes some important points. It says that it is widely accepted that children who are looked after away from their home experience usually have poorer outcomes than those who are looked after within their wider family. That is what makes the issue of kinship

care so important. Many children who are removed from their families and placed with foster carers or in residential care are left to fend for themselves when they get to 16. Some end up in temporary or unsuitable housing; some end up not in education, employment or training; and some end up with addiction problems. Many end up in the justice system, or suffering from mental illness. Others have difficulty caring for their own children.

Placing children in kinship care generally delivers much better outcomes: better health—both physical and mental—and better opportunities in later life. That is not to denigrate in any way the excellent work done by foster carers, who play an important role, but it demonstrates the importance of kinship care. The Government is right to highlight that important issue.

Many members have talked about additional support for kinship carers and, in particular, the financial implications of kinship care. Kinship carers make a major financial sacrifice when they take on children who are not directly their own. There are major costs to be borne in bringing up children. Looking after someone else's children is already a personal sacrifice in terms of time and commitment, never mind the financial package that goes with it. It makes sense for government to step in and be prepared to support kinship carers with finance. That makes sense in the long run because if those children were not being supported in kinship situations, some of them might end up having to go into foster care, which could prove more expensive.

As Elizabeth Smith and other members have said, we have a mixed bag of provision at present. The situation varies throughout local authority areas. Of the 32 local authorities, only 12 pay the main categories of kinship carers the same as they pay foster carers. A further 10 pay an allowance that is a fraction—in most cases a third—of what is being paid to foster carers. The idea of a nationally-set allowance to put matters on a proper footing is therefore welcome.

However, probably the only discordant note in the debate was struck over the need for clarification of that funding. Mary Mulligan, Jeremy Purvis, Duncan McNeil and a number of other members made the case for clarification, and it would be helpful if the minister would clarify where exactly the funding is and whether it will be available nationally. Consistency is needed across our local authorities so that the current patchwork of delivery does not continue, and I welcome the fact that COSLA has agreed to recommend a consistent approach to its members.

There is always a tension. I support the desire for localism and the Government's general approach of removing ring fencing in a number of areas. That is entirely right. For too long, we have

run down local government, taking away its importance. However, the local approach creates a tension with national Government's desire to deliver on its targets, so I would be interested to hear how ministers intend to address that issue.

Paragraph 26 of the strategy makes an important point about Government interference. It states that Government should not

"distort existing and future family relationships by any unnecessary interference in ... kinship care arrangements".

Many such arrangements already exist naturally. They do not require the Government, local authorities or social workers to set them up. That is the correct arrangement, but it is also important that those families get the right support. That is why the programme to provide kinship carers with additional support and information—which it is proposed that citizens advice bureaux throughout Scotland will deliver—is important.

There is also a need for advocacy. Many young people have difficulty getting their voices heard, which is why the idea of family group conferencing is welcome. Family group conferences put the child at the centre, balance the wider family's interests and, we hope, reduce the need for a series of subsequent meetings, which can be highly disruptive and cause a great deal of upset and concern to the children.

This has been a good debate on an important subject and the strategy is welcome. It may not make tomorrow's front pages, but it is no less important for that.

16:57

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): All speakers have welcomed the kinship and fostering strategy's publication and the debate. I will repeat a point that was made during the passage of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Bill just over a year ago in the Scottish Parliament and which holds equally true for our discussion of the strategy: we must accurately describe who is being fostered in Scotland today. Many MSPs have debated that subject. They are aware of the needs of looked-after children and the harsh reality of life for some of our most vulnerable families, but the public perception can still paint a rather cosy picture, and a similar dewy-eyed haze surrounds our image of foster carers.

I do not want to quote a lot of statistics, but some are revealing. For example, 68 per cent—in other words, more than two thirds—of looked-after children are aged between five and 15, and half of those are aged between 12 and 15. As Duncan McNeil and other members have highlighted, many of those children have been damaged by poor parenting, often by drug-abusing or alcohol-abusing parents.

Although foster carers' motivation to provide loving and caring home environments for children is no doubt, they have made it clear that they want to be regarded as part of, or certainly on a par with, the social care workforce. I said that I did not want to quote too many statistics, but it is interesting to note that the average age of foster carers is now over 50.

The kinship and foster care strategy has been a long time in the planning—many people will say too long—and has been welcomed by all sides. It is clear that we need to recruit more foster carers and do more to value those whom we already have. Our hopes and expectations that the strategy will fully address recruitment and retention now rest with the newly established reference group.

Every member who has spoken has mentioned allowances. They are not foster carers' only concern—support, training, recognition and status are all important, as Christine Grahame highlighted—but they are still a worry. The Scottish Government has made a clear decision not to go for a mandatory national system of allowances, but the lack of clarity that surrounds the funding that has been announced is perhaps more worrying. All members hope that the 15 or so local authorities that do not currently provide the recommended national minimum allowances will agree to implement or follow the new national guidance. Market forces and competition between local authorities for foster carers might oblige them to do so. However, until that happens, the current postcode lottery will remain a serious concern to all of us.

Several colleagues, including Mary Mulligan, Karen Whitefield, Jeremy Purvis and Elizabeth Smith, emphasised the apparent difficulty in putting a figure on the funding that has been allocated for putting the recommendations in place. I have no objection to empowering our colleagues in local government through local outcome agreements but, as was mentioned earlier, if those agreements disguise a lack of funding in the first place, they will be merely vehicles for passing difficult decisions, and therefore blame, from the central Government to local government.

The announcement on kinship care is very welcome—we can all share the sentiments that Bob Doris, Sandra White and others expressed. There is no doubt that grandparents and others who look after family members should not be financially disadvantaged compared with foster carers. The strategy's emphasis on good practice, such as family group conferencing as proposed by Children 1st, is also welcome. However, it is only weeks since the First Minister agreed with Wendy Alexander to find £10 million to fund kinship care.

From what we can gather, only £4 million has been announced, and it is buried in the local government settlement. Aside from funding, much of the detail concerning kinship care remains unaddressed. Rhoda Grant, Mary Mulligan and Robert Brown in particular emphasised that the implications for informal carers remain far from clear.

I turn now to placements, particularly the lack of a limit on the number of placements. Those of us who served on the Education Committee in the previous session of Parliament will, I am sure, remember evidence that was given by Lynne Isaacs from the Fostering Network. She said that she fostered six children in the run-up to Christmas. She went on to say:

"On 23 December, I had a phone call at 2 am. I was asked whether I could come down to the police station and pick up a four-month-old baby."—[*Official Report, Education Committee*, 24 May 2006; c 3304.]

That illustrates that the most experienced and reliable foster carers are often expected to cope with, and are unable to refuse, very large numbers of placements. There should always be exceptions, such as sibling groups of three or more, but England, Wales and Northern Ireland have operated with a statutory limit of three for several years, so it is disappointing that the Scottish Government cannot offer our foster carers the same protection. At the very least, should not the Government set a target for implementing such a limit in three or four years?

Adam Ingram: We are not following the line that has been taken in England, which is to put a flat placement limit on every foster carer or kinship carer. We intend to personalise the system for the individual carer, depending on their home circumstances, how many children there are in their family and so on. Each carer will have their own limit for the number of placements they can accommodate.

Ken Macintosh: I welcome the minister's assurances and have no doubt of his best intentions, but I still worry. There is no doubt that some of our best and most experienced foster carers have suffered what we might term burn-out from being taken advantage of by the system. Without there being legislative recourse in place to protect them, or at least a strategy that has been approved by Parliament, carers could still be taken advantage of by some local authorities.

Another issue that the minister highlighted is one of the most important developments that has affected fostering: the implementation of permanence orders, which were introduced under the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. The strategy gives due weight to the potentially huge benefit of that policy shift in helping to reduce the number of temporary placements.

However, it is a worry that permanence orders are seen as an end in themselves, rather than their being part of the process. Above all, they must not mean an end to the support and services that are available to carers. There is fear that they will not be used.

The strategy goes a long way to giving foster carers status and recognition for the phenomenally difficult job they do. We do not have professional foster carers, although that is perhaps a better way of viewing the service that they provide to our society. The strategy also puts kinship care on an equal footing, and it properly acknowledges and rewards kinship carers for their hugely important role.

There are still many questions about how the strategy will be implemented. I do not believe that the Government can abdicate responsibility or funding for those decisions to local authorities. I hope that the Government recognises that every party and member is committed to getting it right for every child.

17:05

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): I thank members for making this a constructive and helpful debate. We share a common vision and commitment to provide all children with the best possible care. I welcome Robert Brown's endorsement of the kinship and foster care strategy. He might recall that when we were discussing the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Bill I said that I thought that the fostering strategy should have been part of it and that we should have been considering adoption and fostering together. I am pleased that my colleague Adam Ingram has managed quickly to get the strategy in place and has married the two aspects.

We have agreed absolutely that families should be supported to stay together where that is in the best interests of the child, and our forthcoming early years strategy will be crucial in achieving that. When a child needs to be placed away from his or her home, care within the family circle should be the first option, unless there are clear reasons why that cannot happen.

Most members have recognised the potential value of family group conferencing. We need to have in place processes that draw on the strengths of the wider family if that is in the child's best interests. Family group conferencing seems to be a way of supporting that because it puts children at the heart of questions of care and focuses primarily on their needs.

When we consider whether kinship carers are in a position to look after the children, we will take a light-touch approach to ensuring that children are

in the best place for care. Kinship carers will not have to go through all the hoops that foster carers have to go through; we will try to apply as light a touch as possible in that process.

The reference group that we are setting up will be chaired by Anne Black, an eminent child professional who has been listening to our debate in the gallery. The group will take forward specific proposals on effective recruitment and retention of foster carers so that we can increase the pool of carers and ensure that they have good-quality support, and it will recommend an approval process for kinship carers that will, as I said, apply a light touch.

Robert Brown: Will the minister deal with my point about the national recruitment campaign? Will there be a television campaign? Will more resource go into supporting volunteers once we have them?

Maureen Watt: We will leave it to Anne Black and her team to come up with specific proposals on that.

Many members are concerned about the support that is available to kinship carers. A great number of such carers neither want nor need daily involvement from the state. We have all come across the sort of situation that Rhoda Grant described, in which grandparents take on the care of children. A retired social worker to whom I spoke last night welcomed our strategy and payments and said that if they had been in place when she was a social worker, the situation would have been so much better, because she had seen so many families and grandparents put themselves in poverty in order to ensure that children were kept and looked after within the wider family group.

Jeremy Purvis: Is the Government intending to make it a legal right for kinship carers to receive financial support? Will not there therefore be a statutory duty on local government to provide it?

Maureen Watt: That is not going to be a statutory duty on local government; it will be up to local authorities to work with the kinship carers to decide the best way forward for the children in such situations. We said that we want to ensure that support is in place when it is needed, which is why the advice that is to be provided nationally by Citizens Advice Scotland for the programme will be important—

Rhoda Grant: Will the member give way?

Maureen Watt: I would like to make progress.

It will be important that a helpline is in place for the benefit of people who do not live in close proximity to a Citizens Advice Scotland office.

We should also acknowledge the discretionary financial help that will be provided to many kinship carers across Scotland.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I am sure that the minister will have noted the point that Robert Brown made about continuing care for 16 to 18-year-olds. Will the minister also agree that the present supports that are available for 16-year-olds in their transition from care to the outside world are entirely unsatisfactory and that we ought also to do more in that respect?

Maureen Watt: I welcome Robin Harper's intervention. The issue that he raises is the reason why our early intervention strategy is important. We need to ensure that the children who fall into the category that he mentioned, and who need more choices and chances, are identified early so that we can help them with that transition. Local authorities, which have a duty of care to such children, can use the resources that are available to them to ensure that those young people do not fall into the category of young people who need more choices and chances. As I said, early intervention is important in that regard.

We are grateful for Parliament's support for our proposals to achieve equity of support for all looked-after children, whether they live with a foster carer or a kinship carer, including the payments of allowances. We are also grateful to COSLA for its support for our prioritisation of the commitment. It is significant that COSLA has agreed with us and is satisfied with the funding, which is the first agreement that has resulted from the concordat.

Rhona Brankin: The minister says that COSLA is pleased with the funding. In this chamber, the First Minister agreed with Wendy Alexander that an additional £10 million should be made available each year for kinship care. Is that being made available? Yes or no?

Maureen Watt: Rhona Brankin and other members including Mary Mulligan, Karen Whitefield and Ken Macintosh clearly do not get it: £4 million has already been given this year. With regard to the concordat and the settlement with local government—Liz Smith identified the reduction in central Government funding for this matter—the money has been moved to local government. It is new money and it is in the new concordat.

We will not be shifting responsibility solely to local authorities; we will be working with local authorities to ensure that the strategy is in place throughout Scotland. The commitment will, over the coming years, build on the best practice that exists in some local authorities for supporting kinship carers.

We know that there are concerns that more children might be brought into the system. We are not convinced that that is necessarily the case, but we will keep the situation under review. Decisions about whether children need to be looked after are not taken lightly. It might be that, for some who are affected, becoming looked after will be a positive first step towards the development of a planned approach to their care and nurture.

The Government fully recognises the concerns that have been expressed in the debate and by the Fostering Network that foster carers should be paid the TFN's recommended rate of allowance. Over the past two years, the number of authorities that are paying it has increased. I am sure that COSLA will encourage the remaining local authorities—as we will—to consider increasing the rate of allowance as part of their efforts to improve recruitment and retention. We want to ensure that they step up to the plate on that.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The minister should close now.

Maureen Watt: Ken Macintosh mentioned keeping families together: we totally agree. We want to ensure that foster carers and kinship carers get short-term breaks. That will also help with recruitment and retention. We acknowledge the challenges that are faced by foster and kinship carers; the strategy marks the start of our work. We have a long way to go before we can be satisfied that we have the right range and sufficient numbers of carers in place to meet the range of challenging needs that are presented by vulnerable children, but I hope that all members agree that the strategy is an excellent start.

Business Motions

17:16

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-980, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a revised business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 6 December 2007—

after

2.55 pm

Scottish Government Debate: Summary Justice Reform

insert

followed by

Scottish Government Motion: Membership of the Committee of the Regions and the Regional Chamber of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe—*[Bruce Crawford.]*

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S3M-981, 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 12 December 2007

2.30 pm

Time for Reflection

followed by

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by

Ministerial Statement: Scottish Government's Health Strategy

followed by

Scottish Government Debate: The Benefits of Woodland and Greenspaces

followed by

Business Motion

followed by

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm

Decision Time

followed by

Members' Business

Thursday 13 December 2007

9.15 am

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by

Scottish Liberal Democrats Business

11.40 am

General Question Time

12 noon

First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm

Themed Question Time
Rural Affairs and the Environment;
Justice and Law Officers

2.55 pm Ministerial Statement: Local
Government Finance Settlement 2008-
2011

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Local
Government Finance Settlement 2008-
2011

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 19 December 2007

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Graduate Endowment
Abolition (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motion

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 20 December 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
Finance and Sustainable Growth

2.55 pm Stage 3 Debate: Abolition of Bridge
Tolls (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—[Bruce Crawford.]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:17

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motions S3M-977, S3M-978 and S3M-979, on the approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007 (Inquiries and Hearings Procedure) Rules 2007 be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007 (Applications and Objections Procedure) Rules 2007 be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007 (Consents under Enactments) Regulations 2007 be approved.—[Bruce Crawford.]

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

Decision Time

17:18

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S3M-965, in the name of Adam Ingram, on fostering and kinship care, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises that the needs of a child are paramount and that families should be supported to stay together; agrees that, where the child needs to live away from his or her birth parents, care within the family circle by a kinship carer should be the first option unless it is not in the best interests of the child; believes that all placements for a child who must live away from his or her birth parents must provide a safe and nurturing home, whether for a planned short-term period or on a permanent basis, and affirms its commitment to the provision of equitable and appropriate support for all carers of looked-after children, with systems in place to ensure that carers can provide the best possible opportunities and chances to all looked-after children.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on motions S3M-977, S3M-978 and S3M-979, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments. If any member objects to a single question being put, please say so now.

As no member objects to a single question being put, the next question is, that motions S3M-977, S3M-978 and S3M-979 be agreed to.

Motions agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007 (Inquiries and Hearings Procedure) Rules 2007 be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007 (Applications and Objections Procedure) Rules 2007 be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007 (Consents under Enactments) Regulations 2007 be approved.

Lancastria

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-786, in the name of Christine Grahame, on the Lancastria. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the armistice commemorations and takes time to reflect on the remarkable sacrifice made by veterans of many countries during numerous conflicts since the First World War; notes, in particular, the loss of the troopship, Lancastria, which was sunk on 17 June 1940 with the loss of 4,000 lives, an estimated 400 of them Scots, including individuals from the South of Scotland; notes the decades of official silence surrounding this loss, the worst for British forces in the whole of the Second World War, and supports the calls from the remaining survivors and relatives of victims for official recognition of this tragedy.

17:19

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I put on record my thanks to all those members who signed the motion and to colleagues who have stayed behind, especially those who are contributing to the debate. The motion continues a campaign that has been pursued for decades by family members and survivors and which has accelerated since the inception of the Parliament.

I made a contribution as long ago as May 2005, when I recounted the story of one man's survival in hellish, oily seas that were being strafed by German fire intent on igniting the oil, all within sight of Saint-Nazaire on the French coast. Here is a short extract from a survivor's account of that moment:

"During this time the enemy continued to strafe the men on the ship and in the water. They also began dropping incendiaries in an attempt to light the leaking oil. At some point a seemingly crazed man tried to remove my life jacket, but I manage to fight him off. Even with the jacket on I stayed as still as possible in the water hoping this would improve my buoyancy. I believe I was in the water for around two hours. At one point a large dog swam by. I briefly held onto it because it was swimming away from the ship and I thought it would take me with it. I believe it had belonged to some refugee Belgian children who had been on the boat. They did not survive."

At least 4,000 souls perished that day—civilians and refugees; men, women and children. Included in that number were hundreds of Scots. I sent members a roll-call of the Scottish dead, so far as we know them—men from Ayrshire, Dumfriesshire and many other parts of Scotland; men from their teens to the age of 60. They came from many ranks and from all regiments—the Royal Engineers, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Royal

Artillery, and the field bakery. Mercifully, they never knew that 17 June 1940, the day when they embarked on the *Lancastria*, would be their last day and that their names would live on in the roll-call of the dead.

Their deaths were silenced by a D-notice so as not to undermine the propaganda of Dunkirk. That was understandable at the time. After the passage of nearly 70 years, why should it matter to the remaining survivors in Scotland—some seven in all—and their families? It simply does. I can do no better than to quote the words of Fiona Symon, who is in the chamber today. She is the daughter of Andrew Richardson, who was aged 27 and in the Royal Army Service Corps when he lost his life. She told the Public Petitions Committee:

“My mother died in 1992, still very bitter and sad that the country seemed to regard my father’s life and the lives of the thousands who died with him as being of less value than the lives of others who died in world war two and who are remembered with honour.

In many cases, the survivors suffered more than any of us. They had to live out their lives with horrendous memories and nightmares. Today, they would have been offered counselling; instead, they were forbidden to talk about the sinking. As a result, they are forgotten and ignored ... No shame was involved in the disaster: it did not have to be covered up, but desperate times called for desperate measures. The shame is in the silence and cover-up of the past 67 years ... Unless someone has walked in the footsteps of the victims, survivors and their families, they cannot even begin to understand the depth of the human tragedy involved, the effects of which continue to this day.”—[*Official Report, Public Petitions Committee*, 6 November 2007; c 230-31.]

Fiona Symon said those words in presenting a petition that seeks the commissioning of a commemorative medal to put the record straight. Westminster, to this day, has refused to designate the remains of the *Lancastria* a war grave, which would offer sanctity and protection to the site. The Ministry of Defence has refused to issue an official medal, so the survivors and their families seek redress and justice from their own Scottish Parliament.

There is an important distinction to be made between the words “official” and “commemorative”. The MOD’s website states:

“The term ‘official’ could be used to describe any medals for which Her Majesty, or her predecessors, has given approval. Only these medals are permissible for wear on a service uniform. Commemorative medals are those which have been produced by organisations or private medal companies”—

or indeed the Scottish Parliament—

“to commemorate particular branches of service or areas of operations.”

As some of us know, issuing commemorative medals is well within the compass of the Scottish Parliament. I know that because I have one, and I did nothing to get it.

The *Lancastria* Association of Scotland has made progress in establishing a memorial in the grounds of the Golden Jubilee national hospital, because the ship, which was originally a cruise ship, was Clyde built. There is a memorial service each year in Edinburgh to commemorate the unsung dead, and there is also such a service in Saint-Nazaire. Yet there is still no official recognition of the individuals who were involved in what was the worst maritime disaster in Britain’s history. The history books have largely bypassed it.

Outside the chamber today is an exhibition on the *Lancastria*. I ask members in the chamber and outside to pause even for a short while to inform themselves of the rightfulness of the campaign and to sign the book of remembrance if they have not already done so. There is a photograph to be auctioned to raise funding for the memorial site.

We have a new Scotland, a new Government and a Parliament that has outgrown its infant clothes. There is no legal impediment to commissioning a medal for the few hundred people who desperately seek public recognition of their loss. I am sure that the people and the mayor of Saint-Nazaire, together with the Parliament, could provide the means and the method to commission those well-deserved medals. I therefore ask the minister to meet me and survivors’ families in the *Lancastria* Association of Scotland to take the proposal forward in the spirit of the words that are woven into thistles at the head of the Parliament’s mace, which represent the aspirations of the Scottish people: wisdom, justice, compassion, integrity. Those words should inform all our actions, especially those that we take on such a solemn and long-deserving cause.

17:25

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I congratulate Christine Grahame on securing the debate. When I met her on 1 July 1999, I recognised immediately that she was someone who had firm commitments and a determination to proceed with things. She has certainly been determined and persistent with the agenda on the *Lancastria* disaster.

As the member for Clydebank, I have a particular interest in the subject. As Christine Grahame pointed out, the *Lancastria* was built in Clydebank, in Beardmore’s yard in Dalmuir. The proposal is to have a memorial within the Golden Jubilee hospital, which is on the site of the former shipyard. I think that that is appropriate. Already in Clydebank we have a memorial to the Polish ship that played a prominent role in the Clydebank blitz, its sailors being involved in trying to put out the fires that affected Clydebank in March 1941.

There are similarities between the way in which the Clydebank blitz was not given publicity at the time and what happened in connection with the Lancastria, as Christine Grahame said. Of course, the Clydebank blitz could not be hushed up in quite the same way as the Lancastria disaster. However, for a long time there were strong feelings in Clydebank that, because of the feared impact on public morale, the scale of the carnage and the deaths in Clydebank during the blitz was given much less publicity than incidents of bombing elsewhere. It is obvious from the number of people who lost their lives in the Lancastria disaster and the number of families that were affected by it that it had a huge impact on many individuals and was a genuine tragedy that should have been recognised. Perhaps, in the 67 years since the end of the war, it should have been given greater recognition, as Christine Grahame suggested.

When I was a minister, before the election, Murdo Fraser raised the subject of the battle of Passchendaele and the memorial that was to be erected there. The Scottish Executive responded positively to his suggestion, and there was a formal process of recognising the impact of the battle of Passchendaele on Scottish regiments, which were heavily represented. There is a case for looking at the Lancastria disaster in a similarly sympathetic way.

Christine Grahame has been a persistent campaigner on the issue. She is aware that I have also been a persistent campaigner, over the years, on asbestos. It is proposed that a memorial be sited on the Clydebank waterfront to recognise all those who have lost their lives through asbestos-related disease. It would be entirely appropriate if, along the same stretch of waterfront, we had a memorial to the Lancastria disaster and a memorial to the asbestos disaster that has affected so many people in the civil sector.

17:30

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Christine Grahame on securing a debate on this very important subject. I enjoyed hearing Des McNulty's reference to my members' business debate earlier in the year on the Passchendaele memorial. I had the pleasure of going to Flanders in August to see the unveiling of the Scottish memorial at Passchendaele. The trip was tremendous and I am sorry that Des McNulty—having been deprived of ministerial office by the cruel electorate—was not able to join us. I assure him that Linda Fabiani very much enjoyed attending on behalf of the Scottish Government.

We are debating the sinking of the Lancastria, an event in world war 2 that affected and still

affects hundreds of families and many communities throughout Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. I pay tribute to the Lancastria Association of Scotland for all its work and dedication in endeavouring to ensure that all those who were on board the Lancastria at the time are remembered and honoured appropriately.

Christine Grahame set out the facts and the history. The Lancastria was sunk on 17 June 1940, while taking part in operation Ariel, with an estimated loss of 4,000 lives. The number of lives lost makes the sinking of the Lancastria the single bloodiest engagement for UK forces throughout the second world war. One of the many tragedies of that day is that we do not know how many people died, because there is no itinerary to show how many people were on board the vessel when it was sunk. The Lancastria was evacuating soldiers and civilians from France in the face of the German occupation. People were rushing on to the boat at the last minute, so no proper record was kept and we have no idea exactly how many died.

Christine Grahame referred to the eyewitness accounts of survivors. What those who survived had to face on that day is indescribable. They watched friends and thousands of fellow soldiers perish, some from the initial bomb blasts, drowning in the sea, choking on the 1,400 tonnes of fuel oil that had leaked from the ship, dying in flames or being shot by the German aircraft that were circling overhead seeking to kill the men in the sea.

Hundreds of Scottish soldiers lost their lives. In mid-Scotland and Fife, there were sons of Perthshire such as Auchterarder's Corporal James Whittet of the Royal Air Force, and Coupar Angus's Private Thomas Young. Trooper William Kidd of the 1st Fife and Forfar Yeomanry and Walter Small of the RAF from Angus were also among those who died. Every community throughout Scotland lost young men during the second world war, and the loss of hundreds of Scots through the sinking of the Lancastria scarred many communities.

As Christine Grahame said, the massive loss of life led to the British Government banning any public announcements about the disaster by means of the D-notice system, which was put in place to silence the media, if need be, during the war effort. It is hard to look back and disagree with Winston Churchill's decision to sign the D-notice. The Government of the time was trying to keep the nation's morale high when we were in our most perilous state in fighting the Germans. To hear of such a tremendous loss of life would have been a terrible blow to national morale at a time when we were trying to talk up the success of Dunkirk.

Of course, that decision should have been overturned. The fact that it was not seems not to have been malicious; not lifting the D-notice was simply an oversight by the Government at the end of the second world war. However, the consequence is that there has been no proper recognition of the tragedy. I agree with Christine Grahame that now is the time to recognise it.

I do not understand why the British Government will not designate the site as a war grave under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986. I welcome, and join, Christine Grahame's call for the Scottish Government to recognise the tragedy. I am not entirely convinced that we should strike medals—the Scottish Parliament's record on striking medals is not particularly happy. However, official recognition from the Parliament and the Government would be welcome.

17:34

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I, too, congratulate my colleague Christine Grahame on her persistence in raising awareness of the terrible events of 17 June 1940. The scale of losses in that engagement guaranteed that it would touch families and communities throughout Scotland, the United Kingdom and further afield.

In the parliamentary debate in May 2005, Christine Grahame referred to her links with the tragedy through her father's friend, Jock Hunter, and her assistant's grandfather, Walter Hirst. I pay tribute to other survivors, among whom was a Mr Duncan Reid from Kilmarnock, who was the father of my friend and colleague Councillor Douglas Reid of East Ayrshire Council. Mr Reid senior, who died very recently, sailed as a 20-year-old Scots fusilier on the *Lancastria*. The number of contributors to the debate who can relate personally to the event emphasises the scale of the losses that occurred among the Scottish forces.

As has been recorded elsewhere, the events of that day were kept from the public during the war and continue to be subject to considerable secrecy and confusion. Duncan Reid did not talk about his experiences at all. Many of his family found out about his part in the events only after his recent death. Mr Reid kept his side of the bargain even to his death. His family, who are now looking into the events, already question whether the full facts are available and, if they are, whether they match those that have already been placed in the public domain. Uncertainty about the number of victims seems to be matched by similar uncertainty about which regiments were present on the vessel when it went down and how many of their men perished.

I commend to the Parliament the work of the *Lancastria* Association of Scotland. It is vital that

we increase public awareness of the sacrifices—not just those of the second world war but the continuing sacrifices beyond that—that have been made by our armed forces.

It has often been said that truth is the first casualty of war. In the case of the *Lancastria*, not just truth but transparency suffered as a consequence. It is entirely understandable that, in the heat of battle, attempts were made to manage public awareness of the events—as Murdo Fraser rightly said—but the British Government's continuing failure to recognise the sacrifice that was made on 17 June 1940 is less understandable. The legitimate interest of the families and colleagues of those who served and died or survived should be acknowledged.

I urge colleagues to support this important motion.

17:37

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I add my congratulations to Christine Grahame on securing the debate. I recognise the work that she has done and I commend her on how powerfully she spoke as an advocate on behalf of those who want recognition for the people who died.

In a previous life, I was a deputy minister. The thing that I was probably most proud of in that post was that I was veterans minister. It was a huge privilege to be given the critical responsibility, which lies with this Parliament, for the care of veterans. As minister, I had an important role in participating in and supporting remembrance celebrations, especially around the 60th anniversary of the end of the second world war.

At the time, people asked why it was important to look back. In looking back with respect and gratitude to those who lost their lives fighting to defend our country, we are also able to look forward. We have an opportunity to shape the future through understanding the past and the sacrifices that were made. It is critical that we remember those people, but it is also important to give out a strong message to our young people about their history so that they understand what happened and what ordinary people were prepared to do. It is important to mark and to acknowledge those sacrifices and to remind each new generation of them. Knowing the price that was paid by those who went to war—they were very often young people—and by those who continued to suffer as a consequence teaches important lessons about the horror of war.

Part of the real tragedy of this story is that families not only had to live with the impact of that huge loss of life, but had to suffer without the comfort of some recognition of the price that was

paid. We owe a debt of gratitude to those people who lived in silence.

As someone of island community stock, I remember the respect that people had for the power of the sea and for any tragedy at sea. The thought of what people saw that night—as Murdo Fraser said—is very powerful. I also remember the small graveyard on the island of Tiree where the graves marking out those who lost their lives in the war—perhaps unknown people—came to be respected and revered. That, too, said that we remember and are grateful.

I, too, pay my respects to the members of the Lancastria Association of Scotland, who, like many such campaigners, have sustained their campaign over a long period, with compassion and persistence from which many of us could learn. Another example is the campaign to grant posthumous pardons to those who were executed in the first world war. Although it took a very long time, eventually the campaign was successful.

It would be fitting if, as Christine Grahame's motion states, the debate contributed to our supporting

“the calls from the remaining survivors”—

how poignant that phrase is—

“and relatives of victims for official recognition of this tragedy.”

We owe them nothing less. Their sacrifice was massive, and they have suffered in silence for a long time. As Christine Grahame says, the Parliament should acknowledge that sacrifice and support calls for it to be recognised.

17:41

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): When I came to the chamber, I did not intend to speak, but I have been so moved by the speeches that have been made in the debate that I may be able to contribute something to it.

I am one of the historical advisers to the new museum of transport on the Clyde, which is being built on the river just opposite the Govan shipyard. The museum has one of the most wonderful shipbuilding model collections in the world, for boats that were built on the Clyde. When going through the museum's contents, I was struck by the fact that, although in Edinburgh castle we have one of the finest national war memorials in Europe—a unique memorial to an entire people caught up in the first world war—we do not have a fitting memorial to those who died, often civilians and merchant seamen, in the great battle of the Atlantic during the second world war. The sinking of the Lancastria was the first awful episode in that battle. If ships were torpedoed, those on board did

not have a chance of surviving. Many families in Scotland were affected by that experience.

It struck me that some means of commemorating the ships that went out and sank, and the people who died, might be found in the new museum, which will be placed at a point where one can look up and down the river and see the great hive of activity that was once there. Kids and school parties will go there and, if the museum included a memorial, they would have a chance to commune with the past. The sinking of the Lancastria is the first chapter in the story, but there are other tragic chapters. The Arandora Star, which was carrying interned Italians into exile, was torpedoed, taking with it about a third of the Scots Italian community. Both friend and suspected foe perished in those seas, but there is no memorial to them. If we are contemplating setting up such a fine museum, it should include a section on these events, or some means of commemorating them that draws the visitor to it.

17:43

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): It is an honour for me to respond on behalf of the Scottish Government to this important debate. I thank all members who have taken part in it.

Like other members, I congratulate Christine Grahame on securing the debate and on raising awareness in the chamber and throughout Scotland of the tragic loss of HMT Lancastria at Saint-Nazaire on 17 June 1940, during the withdrawal of the British expeditionary force from France. As other members have stated, congratulations are also due to the Lancastria Association of Scotland for its work and excellent campaigning on the issue. Christine Grahame asked whether I was willing to meet her and representatives of the association to discuss the matter; I am more than happy to offer to do so.

To this day, the terrible event that we are debating represents the greatest loss of life in British maritime history. As Murdo Fraser pointed out, it was also the greatest single loss of British forces in the second world war. The loss of 4,000 lives, of which around 400 were Scots—even those are merely estimates—is horrific enough, but for the loss of the Lancastria to be officially denied for so long is not only insulting to the memory of those who perished but offensive to those who survived the tragedy of that day 67 years ago.

The Scottish Government firmly believes that every Scot who has made the ultimate sacrifice in defence of their nation, and the courage and valour of Scots who have fought—and who still fight today—to defend our values and our

democracy should be appropriately recognised and commemorated. They deserve nothing less than our overwhelming gratitude and support. It is particularly important that we do not allow our young people, for whom there may not be any direct family link to the military, to forget.

As we have already heard, the survivors of the Lancastria believe that they have been denied that recognition. This Government applauds the efforts of the Lancastria Association of Scotland in campaigning on behalf of those who were killed and those who survived.

On Monday this week, I met Derek Twigg MP, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence and Minister for Veterans at the Ministry of Defence. I raised the issue of the Lancastria and the association's campaign. It is clearly preferable that the loss of all 4,000 lives—not just the 400-plus Scots involved—should be commemorated, and in that regard there is an important role for the United Kingdom Government to play. Mr Twigg has promised to come back to me in due course with the MOD's position. If appropriate, I will be happy to share those views with Christine Grahame and other members.

This Government supports efforts to raise a permanent memorial to the incident in the grounds of the Golden Jubilee national hospital in Clydebank, which Des McNulty spoke about. The ship was built on that site, and we fully endorse a previous minister's approval of the scheme, subject to statutory planning permissions.

I should perhaps reiterate that the long-standing policy of successive Governments has been that the cost of erecting memorials and associated projects is not usually met from public funds but from private donations and/or public subscription. Neither the Scottish Government nor the Ministry of Defence has responsibility for the funding or maintenance of memorials.

I am aware of the petition presented to the Public Petitions Committee by the association, which calls on the Parliament to commission a commemorative medal for the Scots who were caught up in the terrible actions of that day in 1940. I will come to that in a moment. Colleagues will, however, appreciate that calls for a more formal, official recognition of the tragedy and the designation of the Lancastria's final resting place as an official war grave are outside the competence of the Parliament and fall to the UK Government to resolve, although I am more than happy to support them.

Each year on remembrance Sunday, Scots the length and breadth of our nation gather to commemorate those who, in the words of the Kohima epitaph, gave their tomorrow so that we can have our today. Each of us finds our own way

to remember those who fell, but I wonder how many of us are aware of the tragic events of 17 June 1940.

Being aware is not always the same as recognising the sacrifice. Indeed, a recurring theme in discussions with veteran's organisations is not a desire for grand gestures or even memorials but for simple recognition of the endeavour, courage, valour and sacrifice of the Scots men and women in our armed forces. The Scottish Government and the Parliament can be proud of the support that both have shown since devolution for Scotland's veteran's community. We have an opportunity today to continue that tradition of recognition of and support for those who have given the utmost sacrifice in our name and in defence of our nation.

The Government is therefore happy to support the call in the motion for official recognition from the UK Government of the tragic event, and it awaits a response to the representations made to the Minister for Veterans. I hope that we get a positive response from Mr Twigg that gives due recognition to all the fallen from this terrible event. If we do not, I can confirm today that, in light of the unique scale and enormity of the disaster, this Government will act to put right years of neglect and lack of recognition by providing a commemorative medal for each Scot who gave the ultimate sacrifice in the tragedy. I believe that that is the appropriate and right action for the Scottish Government to take on behalf of the survivors and those who fell in the Lancastria disaster.

Meeting closed at 17:49.

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