

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 7 February 2008

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 7 February 2008

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

Survivors of Institutional Abuse

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The first item of business is a statement by Adam Ingram on support for survivors of historical in-care and institutional abuse. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement and there should therefore be no interventions.

09:15

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): The determination of the Scottish Government to improve the life chances of children who are looked after is well documented. We all acknowledge that there are no easy fixes and that achieving fundamental change will take years. However, in many areas, there is tangible progress.

That said, we cannot forget the physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children that took place in Scotland's residential establishments. The issue has been a running sore in Scotland's history of taking care of children who could not live at home. The pain and trauma of those experiences were eloquently and bravely set out by survivors in their petitions to the Scottish Parliament. The cross-party group on survivors of childhood sexual abuse plays a crucial role by reminding us of survivors' concerns.

My statement today sets out the progress that we are making to improve the support that is available for survivors of in-care and institutional abuse. I make it clear that this statement is made on behalf of the whole Scottish Government. My ministerial colleagues and I cover the range of survivors' interests and, collectively, we are determined to work closely with our partners to achieve real change.

Survivors' commitment and action led, in 2004, to the then First Minister's apology for the abuse committed. He put in place a raft of work to get to the heart of how that abuse happened and to help us understand how we could prevent abuse on such a scale from recurring. One important area of work is the review that was led by independent expert Tom Shaw and which published, in November 2007, the document "Historical Abuse Systemic Review: Residential Schools and Children's Homes in Scotland 1950 to 1995".

The Scottish Government is pleased to accept the recommendations of the Shaw review in full. There are a few differences in the detail of some of our proposals for taking forward the recommendations, but there is nothing that will affect their substance or intent.

In relation to Shaw's recommendation on the introduction of support services for in-care abuse survivors, I am pleased to inform Parliament of recent developments. Within the context of survivorScotland, the national strategy for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, which is being led by the Minister for Public Health, we intend to improve the well-being of, and services for, all survivors and to raise public awareness of the existence and impact of all forms of abuse.

The reference group that is taking forward survivorScotland has recognised the specific needs of in-care abuse survivors by establishing a sub-group, which is chaired by Gary Westwater and is made up of survivors and other stakeholders. That group concluded its work this week with proposals for a national service framework. It wants a national hub that provides advice and information and is able to link up with the local services that in-care survivors need, which should include advocacy, mediation and counselling services.

I am persuaded in principle that that is the way forward. I have made available central funding for the next three years and, subject to the comments of the survivorScotland reference group, I expect to be able to move ahead quickly with the procurement of this national service.

More widely, the Scottish Government has listened to survivors and their explanations of the importance of society acknowledging the suffering that they have experienced. At the moment, the courts are the only avenue by which survivors can receive such public acknowledgement. Of course, it is essential that abusers are brought to justice, but often that route alone will not meet survivors' needs.

I am pleased to inform Parliament that we have been actively scoping the adaptation of the principles of a truth and reconciliation model. We are committed to that. We are considering good practice examples for establishing a forum to give survivors the chance to speak about their experiences and to help them come to terms with the past. That will provide an invaluable opportunity to establish the facts, learn from the suffering and use the experience to help us protect and provide for children in the future.

I assure Parliament that, as the process develops, there will be further consultation with survivors of abuse, organisations that provide them with support and information and other

providers of care that share with Government responsibility for acknowledging and supporting survivors.

In that context, I turn now to the Scottish Law Commission report "Personal Injury Actions: Limitation and Prescribed Claims", which was published on 5 December. The time bar is an issue in cases involving survivors of in-care and institutional abuse. That has recently been brought directly to members' attention through a letter from a survivor. My ministerial colleagues and I have every sympathy for survivors of abuse. However, the Scottish Government accepts the Law Commission's recommendations that prescribed claims should not be revived. The events in question took place before September 1964, and any attempt to legislate to revive those very old cases would run into very serious difficulties in relation to retrospection and European convention on human rights considerations.

The Law Commission's report does not make specific recommendations for survivors of abuse in relation to the limitation period for raising a claim, which is currently three years. It recommends the continuation of non-time-limited judicial discretion for cases outwith that period.

We genuinely do not believe that a change in the law to give abuse survivors a right to take any case to court would actually right the wrong in question and provide positive outcomes for survivors. Changing the law is not the way to tackle this issue. The Government's focus is the development of the forum that I have just described.

Another aspect of support for survivors that was identified by the Shaw review was the importance of ensuring that survivors and past residents could access their records. It is a tragedy that so little value was placed on keeping children's records. The stories of adults discovering from their records that they had siblings or finding out details of their families' circumstances that they never knew before are deeply moving. Even more heart-breaking are the stories of survivors who can find no record of themselves or their family.

We have learned the importance of looked-after children having a diary and memory book and records maintained for them from birth. However, we still have a responsibility to support adults to access their records and to make sure records for children in care now are properly stored.

The Shaw report rightly makes important recommendations about records and record keeping. The first is the need for a review of public records legislation. There are clear advantages in such a review, as the existing law is more than 60 years old. We have therefore asked the keeper of the records of Scotland, in consultation, to review

the legislation on public records in the light of the shortcomings that were exposed by Shaw.

Shaw also stresses the importance of using the existing law to improve the management of and access to children's records. Shaw recommends that children's organisations use the section 61 code of practice on records management from the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. We agree, so we will seek to include that code as a model for best practice within the looked-after children regulations, which are currently out to public consultation.

Shaw highlights the overriding concern of the survivors to whom he spoke that all those responsible for children in residential care now and in the future must learn the lessons of the past. He outlined the need to develop a culture in residential child care that is founded on children's rights and the need to raise respect for those children. I whole-heartedly agree with him. I want to work with partners to make residential care the first and best placement of choice for those children whose needs it serves. The starting point must be improving the status, morale and skills of residential care staff, who have among the toughest of jobs in caring for our most vulnerable children. We depend on their dedication and commitment, and they deserve improvements.

I am pleased to announce that the Scottish Government intends to take the necessary steps to require residential child care workers to register with the Scottish Social Services Council. Of course, many such staff have already registered with the council, but progress is not good enough. We must ensure that all staff register with it in order to secure a well-qualified and highly professional workforce. We will engage with a range of key stakeholders, including employers and the council, to ensure that all parties are well placed to take forward such a vital agenda.

More widely, the Scottish Government is committed to the long-term, sustainable development of the social services workforce in Scotland. We have been working with the social services sector to build capacity and skills through developing a continuous learning framework, which will help everyone in the sector to manage their career development and learning more effectively, and through a programme of action to improve leadership capacity.

Further improvements in residential care are also required. I will invite a range of partners to work with us to help achieve residential care of the best possible quality. I will look for recommendations on how we can achieve a supply of residential child care that matches the full range of needs of children and young people. We must also strengthen care planning for children in and out of placements by using the

getting it right for every child framework. Furthermore, we must develop a more consistent approach to commissioning that is based on the desired outcomes for all children, with agreed roles and responsibilities for commissioning authorities and providers. We need to achieve agreement among providers, local authorities as corporate parents, the inspectorates and others on respective responsibilities for ensuring safety and good-quality care for children. I expect to receive early proposals on how those challenges can be addressed by June this year.

I want partners to ensure that we demonstrate that we have learned the lessons that are set out in the Shaw review and other inquiries, but of course we need to be continually alert to the potential for the abuse of children and ensure that our systems for listening to children are continually refreshed.

In October, I announced that the Scottish Government and Glasgow City Council had jointly commissioned an independent inquiry into abuse at Kerelaw and that further details would follow. Today, I have placed on the Scottish Government's website the jointly agreed terms of reference for that inquiry. The inquiry team will engage thoroughly with survivors and ensure that their voice is central to the inquiry. Ex-members of staff will also be invited to provide insights into how abuse occurred over a long period of time without being prevented. The inquiry team will produce further details on its engagement with all relevant parties as its work continues. When the inquiry concludes, we will have a comprehensive picture of the strengths of the systems that we have in place to protect children and keep them safe, the shortcomings of those systems and further improvements to them that may be necessary.

Knowing what we know now, the Scottish Government considers that no further inquiries into historical abuse are necessary. Rather, our efforts will focus on the prevention of abuse in residential care and on the provision of support for survivors now. I am sure that all members will agree that the programme that I have set out will, over time, transform support for survivors.

The time for saying that we need to learn the lessons of historical abuse is over. Survivors deserve visible signs of progress. Their campaigning and willingness to share the horror of what they suffered will result in important changes that will help to protect children in the future.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 30 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I thank the minister for his statement and for the early sight of it, and I join him in thanking Tom Shaw for his comprehensive report. We all recognise the many practical challenges that Tom Shaw faced. The report was commissioned to consider past systems, but I particularly welcome the fact that he took time to speak to former residents before he constructed his recommendations, which built on their clear desire to protect current and future residents of residential care homes.

The minister spoke of a forum that will give survivors of abuse a chance to speak about their experiences. Will past workers in residential units be involved in that forum? Will it reflect the Irish example? In Ireland, the Government provides funds to make fair and reasonable awards.

The report recognised—as the minister has done in his statement—the crucial need to improve the training of residential care staff and other social workers. In the past, there was a specific budget of £6 million for social work training, but funding for such training is now part of general local authority funding. How will the minister ensure that money for social work training is protected and that every local authority can adequately fund such training?

Finally, the minister said that Shaw outlined the need to develop a culture in residential child care that is

“founded on children's rights and the need to raise respect for those children.”

How will the Government ensure that every child who is being looked after or is in residential care will have their voice heard?

Adam Ingram: Perpetrators will, obviously, be invited to take part in the proceedings of the truth and reconciliation forum, as has happened in models elsewhere in the world—the South Africa model is the classic example. However, I am open to persuasion on the example that we should follow. You mentioned the Irish model, but models exist in other parts of the world. New Zealand provides an interesting example. Financial compensation or redress is not part of the picture there. The key issue for survivors of abuse is to be able to relay their experiences, get them out into the public domain and have them recognised, and to get perpetrators or organisations that were responsible to admit what happened. That is the key element that allows individuals to move forward with their lives and lead fulfilling lives, and not to continue to be scarred by what happened in the past. As you know, the Catholic Church in Ireland has put up a substantial amount of money to assist financial compensation. At this stage, I am not persuaded that we should follow that

model, but, as I said, I am open to persuasion and argument.

I turn to social work training and qualifications. It is clear that some of the problems with residential care and other social care services were a consequence of people's lack of qualifications, knowledge and understanding. We must improve the skills set in the social care workforce. Shaw highlighted that matter, and it is a priority of mine.

Under the new relationship with local government, we will work with our local authorities on the matter to maintain and improve training efforts at the local level. Just yesterday, I spoke at a conference hosted by the Scottish Social Services Council, at which a learning qualifications framework and new qualifications were introduced.

The key finding of the Shaw report relates to children's rights. Throughout the history of abuse, children were not listened to—their stories were not believed. We must address that. Last October, in my first statement on the subject, I indicated that I had spoken to the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland about how to engage children in the Kerelaw inquiry. The key to future progress is to ensure that children's voices are heard and believed in residential care systems.

The Presiding Officer: Minister, I encourage you, as I encourage all members, not to refer to other members in the second person singular, but to use their full names. Thank you very much.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I pay tribute to the Government for bringing the matter urgently to the Parliament and I thank the minister for early sight of his statement.

There is no question but that we give our unequivocal support to addressing the issue, and I am sure that the same is true of all political parties in the Parliament.

I have two highly specific questions. First, will you clarify—

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry—my instruction not to use the second person singular applies not just to the minister, but to all members.

Elizabeth Smith: In his statement, the minister said that the Scottish Law Commission report

“does not make specific recommendations for survivors of abuse in relation to the limitation period for raising a claim, which is currently three years.”

The report recommends that, outwith that period, the absence of a time bar should continue. Am I right in thinking that that is a matter for judicial review? Although the Government cannot interfere with judicial discretion, will it monitor the situation as regards cases that do not fall within the three-year period?

Secondly, will the minister provide additional information on how the hub system to which he referred will interlink with existing Government mechanisms and with the many local services that people who have been victims of abuse take advantage of, which help to allay some of their fears?

Adam Ingram: The time bar is an issue of some controversy. I emphasise that, in Scotland, the courts exercise their discretion in such cases. However, no guidance is provided to judges on how they should exercise that discretion. The Scottish Law Commission report recommends that such guidance should be issued. We will respond to that recommendation shortly, and to the notion of extending the limitation period from three to five years, which will apply to compensation claims for personal injury as well as those for abuse. We are not doing nothing on that front—we are making progress on it.

With regard to the hub system, as Elizabeth Smith might be aware, we are building on the survivorScotland strategy for survivors of childhood sexual abuse by extending services and support mechanisms to survivors of in-care abuse. Some £1.7 million has already been made available, over a two-year period, to 25 organisations to develop a range of services for survivors, so a network of expertise and support mechanisms is being built up. We hope to build on that initiative through the sub-group's proposals. As I said in my statement, I hope to commission services from the survivorScotland reference group and the sub-group immediately, and something should be up and running by the summer.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement. As other members have said, we are all supportive of the expeditious way in which the matter has been brought to Parliament for consideration. The Liberal Democrats are fully supportive of the Shaw report's recommendations and we welcome the Government's determination to implement them. However, there are a number of issues that I would like the minister to clarify.

What level of funding will be provided for the national hub? What will the source of that funding be? Is the minister able to tell us about the likely composition of the truth and reconciliation centre that he mentioned? What powers to call witnesses will it have? For example, will it be able to compel witnesses to appear? Will the code of practice on record keeping cover all local authority records as well as those of voluntary organisations? Will such records fall within the scope of both freedom of information legislation and protection legislation?

Adam Ingram: The member's first question was about funding. I assure him that funding has been

secured for the new services for in-care abuse survivors. I mentioned that £1.7 million has already been set aside for services for the survivors of childhood sexual abuse, the provision of which we will extend to survivors of in-care abuse.

As regards the truth and reconciliation model, we must discuss with survivors, representatives of survivors groups and other stakeholders what powers any such forum will have, to ensure that the model that we adopt will be effective. A number of issues must be considered carefully, not least because some truth and reconciliation models elsewhere in the world have failed. For example, the failure of the model that was adopted in Nova Scotia has probably added to the considerable number of problems that were already faced.

The member's final question was about the code of practice. As I said in my statement, significant problems were experienced with record keeping and the management of records. We suggest that the keeper of the records of Scotland should review the current public records legislation, which is 60 years old. In principle, we are prepared to introduce legislation to amend and update the law in that regard. As far as freedom of information is concerned, children's records are, of course, confidential and should not be available to everyone. However, we are keen to ensure that when children become adults, they are able to access all the records that are available to them.

The Presiding Officer: We come now to back-bench questions. There are nine members who wish to ask questions and 15 minutes to fit them in—I encourage brevity in questions and answers.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I thank the minister for his statement, and I pay tribute to the survivors of abuse. The minister mentioned the time bar, which—as we know—prevents victims from taking action against their abusers. I understand that it would be very difficult to pursue some cases, considering the timescale, and I welcome what the minister says about the guidance and the extension of the limit from three to five years. The minister will, however, be aware of the recent ruling in England that virtually ends the time bar. If the forum that the minister mentioned does not meet the needs of survivors of abuse, will the Government examine the time bar again?

Adam Ingram: As I indicated in my remarks, the Scottish Law Commission has investigated that whole area of law, and has concluded that it could not recommend changes to the law. However, the situation in England and Scotland has until recently been different—the non-time-limited judicial discretion that we have in Scotland was

not a feature of English law, so we should not make direct comparisons with cases in England.

As I pointed out in my response to Elizabeth Smith, we are seeking to extend the time limitation period and to make other adjustments that will, I hope, address the issues that the member is concerned about. In addition, the truth and reconciliation model that we propose will, I hope, deal with the key issues of addressing the historical abuse that people have gone through and helping to reconcile their situation.

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I am sure that the minister will be aware that the previous Public Petitions Committee brought this issue to the chamber and that that has ultimately led to today's statement. As I convened that committee, I take a particular interest in the petitioners' position. I know that Tom Shaw's review group involved the petitioners, but will the minister tell members what discussions he has had with the petitioners? Have the petitioners indicated which issues remain outstanding and how will they be involved in developing the report's recommendations?

Adam Ingram: I have had no direct discussions with the petitioners as yet, although I pay tribute to them for bringing their petitions to the Scottish Parliament, and to the work of the Public Petitions Committee in that regard. However, I am keen that survivors, including some of the petitioners, make a significant contribution to putting together the truth and reconciliation model that we are talking about. I want to ensure that all their concerns are properly addressed.

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): In your statement, you say that you believe—

The Presiding Officer: I ask the member to refer to "his" statement, please.

Trish Godman: Oh dear, imagine me getting that wrong. Minister, in your statement you state that the Government believes in improving status, morale and skills for residential staff. I worked in a residential list D school for three years. I had no qualifications, and I walked in the door because I knew somebody who knew somebody who worked there. I knew nothing about the girls, I was never told anything about them and no information was shared with me within or outwith the home so, for me, staff training is imperative.

Minister, can you assure me, on the record, that the single outcome agreements with local authorities will be adequate to ensure proper social work training? Will you—I mean, the minister—also say whether you will check the progress of those single outcome agreements? It is not very good if you are only checking every so often and then, between checks, we discover that the training is not taking place. From the councils'

point of view—and I hate to say this—social work training is an easy budget to cut.

Minister, will you also assure me that advocacy for both previously and currently looked-after children will be properly funded and the right to advocacy explained to the survivors and the children? We set targets—will you continue with them?

The Presiding Officer: I will not, but we will ask the minister.

Adam Ingram: The Government currently provides funding in the region of £2.2 million to the Scottish institute for residential child care, which assists with training in the residential care sector. What I announced today is essentially an upgrading of our efforts to improve training and to try to ensure that every staff member in a residential home has appropriate training. We are requesting that every staff member registers with the Scottish Social Services Council, and with that registration comes the obligation to acquire skills in relation to continuous professional development.

The indicators and outcomes in single outcome agreements are very strong in this particular area, and it is critical for the success of our approach that proper monitoring and scrutiny are put in to ensure the outcomes that we are all looking for.

I am sorry, I did not quite catch Trish Godman's last question, but I can perhaps respond to her in writing.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the minister's announcement about the acceleration of registration for child care staff. My previous employers and colleagues will be delighted at such a commitment from the minister. Can he tell us about the work that he will undertake with the Scottish Social Services Council and local authorities to ensure that the historically slow progress of staff registration is addressed? Will there be a review of the minimum qualification requirements? There has not been such a review for about six years.

Adam Ingram: I am in discussions with the Scottish Social Services Council on those matters. The member is quite correct to say that the registration process with regard to residential care staff has been extremely slow. Of 4,000-odd staff, only 1,000 or so have registered, which is a matter of concern. That is why we are moving towards making registration a requirement rather than voluntary. As I mentioned, yesterday I helped to launch new qualifications for residential care staff at a conference that was hosted by the SSSC and I am keen to progress that particular issue. I believe that Garry Coutts, the convener of the SSSC, is in the public gallery to hear the statement. We are committed to the process.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank the minister for his statement. I think that the Shaw report is excellent. I have spent a considerable proportion of my psychiatric life in treating patients who have experienced abuse, including abuse that has taken place in a residential setting. It is disappointing that psychiatrists have treated such individuals as personality disordered, and have not accepted that really serious damage has been done to them.

I want the minister to provide the Parliament with absolute clarity about funding. The previous Government provided £1.7 million, which the minister has mentioned already, for the creation of survivorScotland. I want to know whether the new money will be additional money and whether the existing 25 organisations that were supported by the previous Government will continue to be supported, because the fund was originally time limited. Will the new moneys, which will be for advice, counselling and treatment at a national level, be in addition to funding for those organisations?

I see that the Minister for Community Safety, Fergus Ewing, is in the chamber. I ask the Minister for Children and Early Years to consult him on the specific provision of counselling, advice and support for the 70 per cent of offenders in women's prisons who have been abused—that includes childhood abuse—according to research by Dobash and Dobash.

Adam Ingram: I acknowledge the member's knowledge and expertise and I guarantee that the funding for the commissioning of the new in-care abuse service will be additional money. It will not be part of the £1.7 million.

As I have said, I am keen to move ahead as quickly as possible. The sub-group finished its work this week and came forward with recommendations. I am keen now to get on with commissioning the service.

On Dr Simpson's final point I will happily consult my colleague, who will then perhaps write to Dr Simpson.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Although I do not underestimate the difficulty of gathering evidence and establishing proof in cases that date from before September 1964, that date seems arbitrary. In the Scottish Law Commission's report, the justification on human rights grounds for not reviving prescribed claims seems to me perverse. Survivors believe that changing the law is the way forward, so how does refusing to give survivors the right to take their cases to court provide resolution? Why are the human rights of the perpetrators placed above the human rights of the victims?

Like Sandra White, I ask the minister to take account of the recent House of Lords ruling in a rape case, in which the time bar was dropped to allow the victim to pursue justice. I ask him to allow the victims of in-care and institutional abuse in Scotland to gain the legal assistance and the legal redress through the courts that they need in order to get resolution for the evil acts that were done to them.

Adam Ingram: As I said to the chamber earlier, in Scotland we have taken a different approach to the time bar than in England. There is always judicial discretion in the pursuit of abusers; it is up to the court authorities or the judge to determine whether a case can be brought—taking into account all the possible difficulties in accessing evidence, finding witnesses, and so on. People trying to prosecute a case from 40 or 50 years ago would have to acknowledge that large holes would exist in the evidence. For example, many witnesses will have died.

There is a difference between prescription and time limitation. I am not a lawyer, so I will not go into the difference in detail today. However, I undertake to write to the member to explain how the European convention on human rights relates to these particular matters. It is not just about the abuser or perpetrator; it goes wider than that. The member might not be satisfied with my answer, but I will write to him anyway.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): The minister talked about survivorScotland and said that the Government was determined to raise public awareness of the existence and impact of all forms of abuse. How will the Government do that?

Adam Ingram: As the member may know, survivorScotland has a website, which obviously does the job of raising awareness. The survivorScotland strategy calls for a raising of awareness, and a roadshow is planned for later this year.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): In light of the minister's response to Des McNulty's question, I ask him to meet me and a constituent of mine who is a survivor of sexual abuse. My constituent will be deeply disappointed that the minister is not moving on the issue of the time bar. What he and other survivors want is justice. I ask the minister to meet him to explain his next course of action.

Adam Ingram: I am happy to give that undertaking to the member. However, I point out to her that we are moving forward—in our consideration of a truth and reconciliation model. I hope that such a model would be able to get to the facts of the member's constituent's case and

address them publicly. That would surely go a considerable way towards addressing his needs.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): As the minister has rightly said, the time bar is controversial. Would it not therefore be fitting for the Parliament to launch a top-to-bottom review, so that we have an opportunity to consider a number of issues surrounding the time bar?

Adam Ingram: As I said, the Government has determined how we should move forward. It is time to move on, to address the concerns of survivors and, for the current users of residential care, to learn the lessons—finally—of what has gone on in the past. Of course the Parliament will always have its scrutiny and accountability function. I welcome that.

Commercial Forestry

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I warn members in advance that the debate on motion S3M-1315, in the name of Michael Russell, on commercial forestry, is heavily subscribed.

10:02

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): I am very pleased to introduce this debate. This week is, of course, environment week—as we know from the events and receptions that are taking place around the Parliament building. As they walked to the chamber, most members will have seen a variety of posters and stands, one of which draws attention to the environment being a place of economic activity. Today's debate is about the economic benefits of one very important part of our environment in Scotland—forestry in both the public and private sectors.

In December, when I introduced the debate on forestry, access and health, I made a commitment to return to the chamber to debate the economic impact of the commercial forestry sector. I am glad to do so today.

Since becoming Minister for Environment last May, I have had the privilege of visiting quite a number of Scotland's forests and a number of the timber-processing and wood-using companies. I have been impressed throughout by the levels of innovation, investment and technology that are employed to transform a fairly simply thing—a small tree that starts out as virtually nothing—into a very large thing indeed, which can then become a variety of valuable and useful products.

What impresses me most about the forestry sector in Scotland is the long-term nature of its work. Forestry is not for the faint-hearted; it is for those who are prepared to take time to put effort into long-term investment and long-term success.

I will at no time claim that this Government has all the answers for the forestry sector. We are committed to working with a wide variety of organisations and individuals and to acknowledging the work that has been done before—by those of no political persuasion and by those Governments that have regarded forestry as an important part of Scotland's future, particularly since the establishment of the Forestry Commission in 1919.

Despite fierce global competition, the forestry industry in Scotland is a success story. Our processors have managed to remain profitable through a period of historically low timber prices. That has been due to continuous investment in new equipment and to improved operating

processes. Over the past two years alone, new wood-using developments, either commissioned or committed, have amounted to £250 million. They include new sawmills at Lockerbie, Dumfries, Fort William and Kincardine, as well as major biomass energy projects at Lockerbie, Irvine and Invergordon. Two weeks ago, I visited an impressive sawmill facility in Falkirk, which will relocate next year to state-of-the-art premises in Fife. That represents continued investment in the future profitability of forestry.

The emergence of the bio-energy sector represents another huge opportunity for Scottish forests and woodlands. The Scottish biomass support scheme is well subscribed and some £17 million of new projects will come on stream this year, assisted by £7.5 million from the scheme. I was pleased recently to receive the report of the wood fuel task force, which I set up last year. The report includes useful recommendations for massively increasing the supply of material into a rapidly developing sector. We are keen that bio-energy should develop at a pace and scale that suits our fibre resource.

Those and other positive investments not only represent timber use, but provide well-paid and worthwhile employment, often in parts of rural Scotland that are short of such employment. The forestry industry in Scotland supports 12,000 direct jobs and 14,000 indirect jobs—26,000 jobs in total—and recent investments can only add to the number.

There is also a thriving and growing hardwood sector, which operates in niche markets and produces uniquely Scottish products, often in rural areas. I was particularly impressed when I visited the Borders Forest Trust on a wet day last autumn to see how its work produces not only jobs but items of utility and beauty. There is potential to develop all those parts of the industry. I hope that the debate encourages such development, which will generate economic benefits throughout the country.

In 1970, just less than 750,000m³ of timber was produced in Scotland, mostly from the national forest estate. So successful has the industry been that in 2007 our forests produced 6.6 million cubic metres of timber, more than half of which came from the private sector. It is important to acknowledge that partnership between the private and state sectors, which is appreciated by both sides, is producing economic growth. Our Scottish forestry strategy indicates that we will increase output to about 8.5 million cubic metres per year during the next decade.

That cannot happen without forethought, planning and planting. The dip in planting since 1970 will soon produce a shortfall. I am supportive of the aspiration to plant around 9,000 to 10,000

hectares of new forests and woodlands each year. I am keen to drive forward planting, so that in time we meet the previous Government's aspiration, which we share, to have 25 per cent of Scotland's land afforested during this century. That will provide a long-term supply of wood to the sectors that I talked about. The aspiration represents significant additional woodland, much of which will be native and broadleaved woodland. We must also continue to invest in the right products to sell in the competitive forest industry worldwide.

It might seem strange to say that timber production is only part of a forest's success, but other things count in the success of forests. Forests support a vibrant tourism and recreation sector and add to the richness and biodiversity of our rural landscape. Forest-related activity, particularly in tourism, provided no less than £260 million in gross value added to the Scottish economy last year. Some 14,000 people are directly or indirectly employed as a result of such tourism activity. For example, the creation of a network of mountain bike trails by the Forestry Commission Scotland has earned Scotland the title of adventure capital of Europe.

Not all forest tourism involves such strenuous activity. The growth of ecotourism and wildlife watching is starting to deliver economic benefits. The sea eagles of Mull, at Loch Frisa, are a firmly established tourist magnet, which pulls in thousands of wildlife enthusiasts. The Forestry Commission's Kyle Rhea otter haven on Skye is another example.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): The minister will be aware of proposals for new mountain biking facilities in Glentress and Innerleithen, in my constituency. We will shortly reach the final stage of a feasibility study for a mechanised uplift facility at Innerleithen. Will the minister look favourably on the project if it requires public sector support? It could bring huge advantages in developing not just the Borders' place but Scotland's place in the mountain biking world.

Michael Russell: I am happy to look sympathetically at all investments that enhance Scotland's reputation in the world, and I will be happy to talk to Mr Purvis about the proposal and to visit the site, to see how we can help further. As he rightly pointed out, such investment has produced massive dividends. That is the key issue of the debate. State investment in the forestry sector is only part of the overall investment, but it unlocks huge benefit for the whole of Scotland.

I am well aware of concerns in the forestry sector about the hiatus that has followed the closure of the Scottish forestry grants scheme in April 2006 and I am keen that rural development contracts should be opened up as soon as

possible. I welcome the European Union's imminent approval of the full Scotland rural development programme. Some £269 million will be allocated for forestry measures over the life of the programme. That represents more than £38 million of new investment in forestry every year, which is a historically high level of support and is provided in recognition of what forestry can deliver for Scotland. I am confident that the private sector will respond positively to the new rural development contracts and I have asked Forest Enterprise Scotland to develop, in parallel, a planting programme. As I said, the state and private sectors are working together, learning from each other and moving forward.

It would be wrong of me to conclude without mentioning the community woodland sector. The Government is keen on local participation. Woodland that is managed through local involvement helps to generate local activity, particularly economic activity. I have visited a number of projects during the past nine months, including Aline community woodland on Lewis—a surprising wood to come across on the road from Tarbert to Stornoway. The project is generating jobs and activity. Training has been provided for five local residents, who are now employed by the group. The Forestry Commission Scotland works in partnership with more than 100 community woodland groups on the national forest estate and supports community woodland umbrella bodies.

Scotland's forests and woodlands, which cover 8 or 9 per cent of land mass—a proportion that we are keen to grow—deliver economic benefits, through employment in rural areas and the development of a profitable and expanding processing sector, and by making a major contribution to local industries, including the tourism industry. They also provide a backdrop to what this country is and what it can be. They provide a backdrop to our landscape, a haven for our rich biodiversity and a special place for people to find and to visit.

I am pleased to move,

That the Parliament, mindful of the Scottish Government's purpose to achieve sustainable economic growth, acknowledges the contribution that forests and woodlands make through timber, tourism and direct and indirect employment, and recognises the need to support the continued development and expansion of the commercial Scottish forestry sector and the competitive and developing industries which it underpins.

10:13

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): In the dying days of the first world war in 1918, the country was ravaged by conflict, our young people had been sacrificed on the battlefield and our economy was in free-fall. That is the context in which the Forestry Commission was born, to

replant, rebuild and renew a crucial asset that seemed impossible to replace. Replacing forests seemed to be an oxymoron. How could the native Caledonian pine forests, which were hundreds of years old, be replaced? However, the foresters of old in the 1920s and 1930s did what it said on the tin. They replanted our forests with fast-growing and mainly, but not exclusively, non-native species.

Today, the picture is very different. Our living forests play several roles—in climate change mitigation, industry and construction, jobs, biomass, housing and leisure, and biodiversity. For example, the Laggan community forest, which was born out of the national forest land scheme, is an exemplar of new thinking, which brings together various themes: timber processing, combined heat and power, holiday accommodation and recreational access. A few years ago, on a wet November morning, I attended the opening of the Wolftrax mountain bike trails, where brave adolescents risk life and limb—and their parents' blood pressure—to demonstrate that gravity does not apply to anyone under 21.

By my back-of-the-envelope calculation, which could be wrong, the Parliament last debated forestry in 2004. I strongly welcome the debate and commend the minister for bringing it to the chamber. As with our debate on biodiversity a few weeks ago, consensus may well break out in the chamber again today.

I share the view of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds that the role of Parliament and Government is to enhance the environmental as well as the social and economic value of Scotland's forests and woodlands. I fully support the Scottish forestry strategy, which was developed by the previous Administration, and its three outcomes in the areas of health, competitiveness and the environment.

Time will not allow me to develop some of the important themes that relate to the debate such as business and community development, access and health, freight and roads, tourism, and crofting and forestry townships. I hope that future debates will allow more time for those subjects.

The Scottish woodland is an important natural resource. It helps in the fight against climate change by retaining carbon and acts as an integral part of our economy not only by ensuring the availability of raw materials for the construction industry but by supporting the jobs that are associated with that industry. It also has an important role in ensuring that people throughout Scotland can access woodland areas to experience the wide range of biodiversity that Scotland continues to have.

The forestry strategy's implementation plan for 2007-08 highlights a number of commitments that the previous Government made, including an allocation of £10.5 million to support biomass schemes, to which the minister referred. Although the biomass sector is at an early stage of development, it has potential for the future. As the minister will be aware, in some parts of Europe, biomass represents 50 per cent of power use. For example, 20 years ago, Styria in Austria started from scratch a combined heat and power scheme that has become a model in Europe. It uses biomass pellets to heat schools, hospitals and housing estates. It uses low-value wood close to source and is effectively carbon neutral.

I congratulate the previous Administration on developing support of this sector. When it comes on stream, the Balcas project at Invergordon will add to Scotland's energy efficiency by producing biomass pellets, thereby avoiding the need for imports. We are on the verge of a biomass revolution.

The Lockerbie E.ON UK project, which I think the minister is to open, will be the first 100 per cent biomass-powered plant to create electricity for the grid. Does the minister have plans to continue funding through the Scottish biomass support scheme so that the biomass sector can continue to grow?

The biomass action plan has been published, but the question remains how the Government intends to take forward the recommendations in the renewable heat group's report on a future renewable heat strategy. Also, will the Government bring forward a sustainable procurement action plan? Although we all want the biomass sector to grow, it is vital that a balance is struck so that demand for wood fuel for energy does not exceed supply and the wood-processing industry continues to have the raw materials that it needs.

The timber industry is important to our economy. It operates in a global market. Although prices for timber have held up well, particularly over the past 12 months, the industry is subject to the same economic pressures of any other global market. As we all know, the recent credit crunch, which stems from problems in the sub-prime market in America, has led to issues in the housing market. It has led to concern about the knock-on effect on the demand for timber as the housing market continues to slow. However, at the same time, there is a strong export market for timber from Scotland. Every effort must be made to ensure that the industry can grow further.

The minister will be well aware that James Jones & Sons, the maker of the innovative I-beam, announced recently that it is going to expand its plant in Forres. He will be aware that the I-beam

forms a key part of the Forestry Commission Scotland's district headquarters in Inverness, which was constructed as an eco-building. I visited that building last week. It is an excellent exemplar of eco-building.

To ensure a sustainable future for Scottish timber in the construction industry, it is vital that people learn new skills. I welcome the minister's assurance that the development of skills in this sector is a priority. I will flag up another Highland initiative: the UHI Millennium Institute's Scottish School of Forestry at Balloch in Inverness, which is taking an excellent lead in this area.

Remote areas of Scotland are home to some impressive forests that could be used for processing. However, the difficulties in transporting the wood out can lead to companies ruling those areas out. Surely an increased role can be played by shipping and rail, through the freight facilities grant, to take the pressure off weak roads. Where that is not possible, it is vital that we bring weak roads up to standard. I hope that the minister will give his commitment to supporting the timber transport fund to help towards that.

The link between forestry and tourism is already well established. Members will be familiar with the world mountain bike championships at Fort William, which are an excellent example of that link.

I welcome this timely debate and acknowledge the contribution that the public sector, private sector and—let us not forget—third sector make towards developing woodlands and forestry. We have witnessed a sea change in forestry management since the establishment of the Forestry Commission. We have a high-value product and a growing world price for timber. There is strong export potential for Scottish timber. Indeed, one snapshot from the past shows that pulp from Irvine was once exported to Manhattan for the production of *Time* magazine.

We now have affordable forest crofts, some of which are powered by biomass. We are seeing skills development in forest management. We have sustainable development of the commercial forestry sector in which recognition is given to the importance of biodiversity. We are also seeing the replanting and regeneration of native species, urban greening that provides fair access for all Scots, and the mitigation of climate change. By skilful management of the economic, environmental and social dimensions, we can preserve and develop Scotland's rich, natural asset.

I move amendment S3M-1315.2, to insert at end:

"and further notes the significant role that Scotland's woodland plays in the mitigation of climate change and the conservation of biodiversity."

10:22

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I welcome the debate on one of Scotland's most vital rural industries. I thank the minister for honouring his commitment to hold the debate.

Notwithstanding that Scotland is one of the least wooded countries in Europe, with only 17 per cent of the land covered by trees, the Forestry Commission estimates that around £800 million of the Scottish economy is linked to forestry, with 6.6 million cubic metres of timber produced annually. Wood production and processing employ around 12,000 people in our fragile rural areas directly and 14,000 in downstream industries. In the hills and uplands of many parts of Scotland, forestry has replaced sheep farming.

In a debate on commercial forestry, it is worth remembering why the Forestry Commission was established and why it continues to be relevant today. First, in both the great wars of the last century, the strategic need for timber left much of Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom denuded of timber, much of which had been grown over centuries. The Forestry Commission was established in 1919 to reafforest Britain in recognition of the strategic and commercial need for timber. Certainly, the commercial need for timber remains to this day. That is why the Conservatives welcome the Government's planting target of 25 per cent, although that target is a reduction on the historical planting target of 33 per cent that was aimed for in recent times past.

Commercial timber production delivers more than just timber. For example, forest tourism is worth £160 million annually to the Scottish economy. In addition, Scotland's 1.3 million hectares of forestry lock up 70 million tonnes of carbon, as well as supporting much of our significant and varied biodiversity. Those benefits will only increase as we move towards the 25 per cent planting target.

It is also interesting to note the willingness of the private sector to get involved in delivering the annual planting target of an additional 10,000 hectares that will need to be planted if we are to achieve the 25 per cent target. I understand that 8,000 of those hectares will be planted by the private sector, which is prepared to take the long view in its investment strategies. That is to be welcomed, as is the reintroduction of the forestry grant scheme now that the rural development programme has been agreed.

That said, we would not be being Conservatives if, even as long-standing friends of the Forestry Commission, we did not encourage it, as guardian of the public purse, to do better in future. Many in the private forestry sector believe that they do what they do in spite of, rather than because of, the Forestry Commission. Perhaps the public and private sectors could work more closely together in future to streamline and deliver a more efficient service in terms of UK timber production.

Michael Russell: Although it is probably right that tensions will always exist between the private and public sectors, on Tuesday I was pleased to attend an all-day meeting of the board of the Forestry Commission Scotland and to find a representative of the private sector there, helping with the discussion on the next corporate plan. That is the type of co-operation that is taking place and I am sure that the member will acknowledge it.

John Scott: I am happy to do so. That co-operation should be encouraged in future—I am sure that the two sectors can work together fruitfully for us all.

On land use and planting techniques, we support the view that new planting should not take place in deep peat, as that endangers that soil type and releases further CO₂ into the atmosphere. On the location of new forests, it is becoming more apparent by the day that strategically placed forestry may have a significant role in flood attenuation. If we are to have joined-up government, the minister must be aware of the emerging evidence on that in considering the forthcoming flooding bill. Given the much-increased risk of flooding throughout Scotland, which apparently is a result of global warming, public money must be spent intelligently to deliver reduced flooding risk. Soft engineering using strategically planted forestry may well be part of the sustainable and low-cost solution that we all seek to reduce flooding risk.

Increasing hydraulic roughness to slow flood surges and remove the peaks in major flood events may be part of the holy grail that we all seek of a low-cost method of flood-risk reduction. Although further research into that sustainable long-term method of flood-risk reduction may be required, ministers should have early discussions with the Forestry Commission on the possibility of strategically placed plantations to improve flood management. In addition, strategic planting for flood attenuation might well be a challenge that private forestry interests address if they perceive such projects to be in their interests as well as the country's. Strategic planting grants could be made available in future for planting forests in high-risk river catchment areas. Part of the £38 million of rural development programme funding that is

earmarked for the forestry grant scheme annually could be targeted at flood attenuation.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) *rose*—

John Scott: Forgive me, but I am in my final minute.

I congratulate the Forestry Commission and private forestry owners on the efforts that have been made recently to increase biodiversity, which have been helped hugely by the Woodland Trust Scotland and RSPB Scotland. Our iconic capercaillie and the Scottish crossbill need all the support and protection that we can give them. The benefits from tourism are demonstrable. The opening up of our forests and woodlands to walkers, bikers and car rallying enthusiasts is just one of the additional benefits that forestry delivers. The Scottish Conservatives encourage further diversification of those national assets for public benefit.

I welcome the debate, which draws attention to the importance of commercial and amenity afforestation. Our forests are national assets that should be cherished and supported. We should encourage their use to deliver economic benefits and increased biodiversity and to play an important role in carbon capture. I urge members to support our amendment.

I move amendment S3M-1315.1, to insert at end:

“welcomes the firming up of the 25% target for forest coverage, planted in ways and using techniques which will contribute to carbon capture; further welcomes the fact that the majority of this additional planting is likely to be established through grant aid to the private sector, and supports efforts to increase the biodiversity value of all forestry in receipt of public funds, in particular new schemes which enhance habitats for key native species such as the capercaillie and the Scottish crossbill.”

10:28

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): As members have said, forestry is a major player in Scotland's economy. That is especially true in the south-west, where the local enterprise company has specialised in forestry innovation. We have the new E.ON plant, which David Stewart mentioned and which produces electricity from locally grown willow. I will return to that issue. The forestry industry, like any other, lives in a dynamic world. Needs change, and the key to any industry's advancement is innovation. That can mean simply finding new markets for old products—which requires the industry to compete on the world market—or, better still, it can mean finding new products for emerging markets.

Renewable energy is an emerging market that I studied in a previous life when I was a trustee of

the Borders Forest Trust. I am glad that the minister has visited the trust. About 10 years ago, I visited East Tyrol on the continent to see its community heating plants, which use local forestry waste products to produce hot water—simple brash is used to give warm baths. The first plant that I saw was in a rural location and fed hot water to about 300 disparate houses through a mains supply. At worst, the water in the main loses 1°C, in an area where I have seen snow in August. The fuel is simply brashings and bark, chipped to a regular size and naturally dried. Because all carbon residue is filtered out before it escapes into the atmosphere, the emissions are so clean that if somebody goes into the plant with a cigarette, the smoke alarm goes off. That plant is far better than having 300 boilers running with different effectiveness and having oil and gas transported in from who knows where to warm homes, while the profits from the heat go not just out of the community but out of the country.

Another plant that I saw on that and subsequent visits was the Stadwärme plant in Lienz. The town lies at the bottom of three valleys and had problems with pollution lying on it, which were addressed with a co-generation plant that feeds warm water to up to 5,000 houses and produces about 22MW of electricity from biomass in its two combined plants. It is hoped to get the figure up to 75MW fairly soon. That is all done using local wood products, with little processing involved. David Stewart mentioned a plant that used pellets, but the Lienz plant uses bulldozed-in waste products from the wood industry.

At the last count that I did, which was two or three years ago, Austria, with a population of about 8.5 million, had more than 700 community district heating plants. Scotland can and should do that, too—it is not rocket science. The technology exists already and can be improved. I want Scotland to be at the forefront on biomass energy, not only because it is good for the environment—as has been mentioned, it tackles our carbon footprint—but because it is good for the health of our people and, which is important, good for local economies. With such schemes, money that is spent on energy is spent locally and therefore does not go out of the economy. Also, if the whole energy process is local, that helps people to understand where their power comes from.

I lodged my amendment to strengthen Mr Russell's motion. The minister mentioned the expansion of forestry. I hope that members agree that that should be done in a way that does not exclude others and that includes all. I have mentioned before the importance of integrating existing land users with any expansion of forestry. The Borders Forest Trust has been involved in prime examples of that. I hope that the minister agrees that such integration is essential. We need

only look at the valley of Eskdalemuir in Dumfriesshire to see the lack of local people working in that now forested glen.

Michael Russell: The member raises the interesting and always important issue of local involvement. Does he accept that the investment from the strategic timber transport fund in Eskdalemuir has been done with the co-operation of the local community and that it is producing a synergy between the community and the forestry sector that can only be beneficial, given the advantages that it will give to the village?

Jim Hume: I recognise that point and I am fully aware of the situation. I hope that progress can be made on that in future.

John Scott mentioned indigenous plantings and peatland. I am led to believe that planting a tree in pure peat releases carbon into the atmosphere and that it takes the tree 30 years to negate that. I hope that the minister acknowledges that point.

We have seen the early growth of the renewables market in Scotland, which is no surprise to me. The Lib Dems made significant progress on biomass initiatives as part of the previous Administration with, for example, its £22.5 million investment in the Aberdeen Renewable Energy Group and its biomass action plan. In March last year, Nicol Stephen announced an extra £3 million for that initiative, which took the grant scheme up to £10.5 million. I call on the Government to put effort into progressing the biomass industry in Scotland to build on the previous Administration's work. That would help the Scottish National Party to meet its manifesto commitment on decentralising generation and developing local heat and power grids for communities.

I seek support from throughout the Parliament for the amendment in my name, on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. Combined biomass community central heating plants present a huge opportunity for Scotland, local communities and their economies and, of course, our environment.

I move amendment S3M-1315.3, to insert at end:

"further recognises the role that forestry can play in helping to meet Scotland's renewable energy targets through biomass generation; welcomes the work of the previous administration on promoting the biomass sector through the highly successful Biomass Support Scheme, and calls on the Scottish Government to maximise the opportunities for growth, jobs and sustainability offered by the expansion of the biomass sector in Scotland by delivering the previous administration's Biomass Action Plan."

10:33

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Commercial forestry can create a good deal more employment throughout Scotland, but it is up to us to ensure that it is targeted at suitable localities. I hope that the large-scale clear-fell forestry of the past can be changed as we begin to develop sustainable forestry that has a more farmed nature. That would tie up with the idea of having many more forestry workers resident in the areas in which they do the job of growing trees, brashing them, cutting down some and farming them in a way that the clear-fell approach has not allowed in the past. That is why there is a potential for communities. New forestry, crofting and community forest enterprises can fit into the picture, so that commercial forestry is much more diverse than it has been.

Each amendment acknowledges that we must address the climate change imperative. If we are to do that, we need a clear map of Scotland showing the best areas for forestry. Jim Hume mentioned the fact that peat soils are dangerous to stir up, although we have already done so in large parts of the Highlands. We must be careful to plant new forests in a way that will not disturb the biosphere so much. I hope that we can consider the potential in the east of Scotland, which has lower-peat soils. I dare say that some of the areas to which I refer are grouse moors at present, but they could well become forests in future.

John Scott: Does Rob Gibson agree that more research needs to be carried out to establish the level and depth of peat on which one should not plant? As Rob Gibson and I know, there is an issue with black-top ground. Will that be acceptable in planting terms, or will it not? I will be interested to hear what the minister has to say about that later.

Rob Gibson: I quite agree with Mr Scott. That is the sort of research that can give us a much clearer picture of where we should be planting. I urged the previous Executive to think about the matter, and I am sure that the SNP Government will treat it as a priority now.

We should give some thought to the kinds of species that we are growing. No one has yet mentioned that, if we are going to have a lot more wooden buildings, we should be growing more Douglas firs here. We need to do that commercially, to supply the main beams and structures that will last 300 years—rather than the 30 years' life of public-private partnership schools, houses and other buildings that are being built at the moment. We need to plan for the long term. If we start growing Douglas fir in our own country, rather than importing it, we have the opportunity to create many more jobs here. I believe that Sitka

spruce can be used for cladding. We have got a lot of it, and such uses would be better than using it for the gash purposes that some fast-growing woods have previously been used for. We should recognise the huge new market in the kinds of timber that will be used for eco-friendly homes.

I have asked about the possibility of a forestry map, and about resident workers. It is interesting to take note of the Balcas factory, which I hope will soon be built at Invergordon. It is based on a structure used at Enniskillen in Ireland. The company there serves a whole market across Ireland by transporting the pellets that are created. If we can ensure that such a body gets going here, it will allow people to use wood-fuelled stoves, which cut the amount of carbon that is emitted and increase the amount of heat in the home. That could be of great benefit.

I know that the minister is concerned that, when we tie up parts of the sector in producing the wood for making pellets and for wood burning in biomass form, we must have a secure market. Therefore, we must ensure that the machinery works. The plant that uses waste heat from the distillery in Wick is an example of something that must be able to work. There are plenty of good examples on the continent, as has been mentioned, which could help to ensure that we get the sort of equipment that can do the job. What an opportunity that is, considering the news that the waste plant in Lerwick is bringing hot water to 700 people—although it is burning waste, rather than wood, unfortunately. The thing that bothers me about the Lockerbie plant is that there is nothing there to use the waste heat. That is a mistake that cannot be repeated.

On the matter of having a joined-up rural agency, there has not yet been any mention of how the Forestry Commission is to work with other agencies. I hope that the minister can tell us a little more about how farmers, communities and others can buy into the whole sector. We know that the use of forests, in their many forms, can increase the number of people involved. We should ensure that the Administration enhances the potential to bring new people into forestry.

The rural development programme will be tight, and we will seek to make additions to it in the near future. The forestry sector offers one of the brightest hopes for us to create more sustainable jobs in Scotland. I fully support the motion, but I hope that we can sort out and agree on the amendments in such a way that they do not negate one another. The basic principle is that we need a sustainable forestry. That is the best way forward for Scotland.

10:40

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in this debate on forestry, because the industry is so important to the economy of the south of Scotland, particularly that of Dumfries and Galloway. Forty per cent of Scottish forestry capacity is in the south of Scotland, and 60 per cent of those businesses are located in Dumfries and Galloway. Many of them are small businesses, employing fewer than five people, but they offer vital employment in rural areas.

One of the challenges to forestry has always been how to add value to the felling and logging of trees. When I was first elected to the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the Steven's Croft site next to the M74 near Lockerbie was something of an embarrassment to the local enterprise company, which had invested heavily in it—from memory, I think that it invested about £1 million. The expectation had been that there would be a multimillion-pound development by the Austrian multinational firm Kronospan but, unfortunately, Kronospan shelved the plans.

At that time, the investment was perceived as a terrible waste of public money, and the local enterprise company was the butt of many sarcastic floats at the local galas. Perhaps there is a lesson there about the public sector being prepared to take risks: eight years, on, Steven's Croft is perceived as being a great asset to the area. It has become established as the site of a number of forestry-based industries. Admittedly, there have been highs and lows in the narratives of the firms that have located there. There was a loss of jobs last October, when Forest Garden decided to consolidate its production nearer its market. However, a month or so later, there was an announcement of a further investment of £20 million by James Jones & Sons for sawmills on its site. David Stewart has referred to the James Jones investment in Inverness.

Steven's Croft is now the site of the UK's largest biomass plant, I think. It came into production in the autumn. Totally by serendipity, I visited it a week past Monday—I was unaware at the time that this debate was to take place. E.ON's 44MW plant can supply energy to about 70,000 homes, displacing about 140 tonnes of greenhouse gases. Including the supply chain, it will contribute about £12 million per annum to the local economy. It uses a mixture of fuels, including by-products from the sawmills on site. It uses logs that are the wrong size for further production, as well as branches. Increasingly, it uses short-rotation willow coppice, which is beginning to be grown locally. About 20 per cent of its fuel is recycled waste wood. It is all produced by the firm AW Jenkinson, which is in charge of commissioning the various products to fuel the plant.

There has been criticism of the plant over the failure to recycle the heat that is generated. I should say in defence of the plant that its efficiency is about 33 per cent, which compares very favourably with the efficiencies of coal-fired and oil-fired power stations. That does not mean that improvements cannot be made but, to an extent, the criticism has been unfair.

The biomass market encourages the management of neglected woodlands, and willow coppice offers diversification opportunities for local farmers, and also employment opportunities. Everybody is aware of my position on a balanced energy policy—indeed, I believe that nuclear power has to be part of that. One of the good things about biomass is that it contributes towards base-load capacity, which addresses one of our concerns about other renewable energy sources. The First Minister will be officially opening the plant in March, and I urge him to take advantage of the opportunity to climb up the outside of the plant. I do not say that out of any vicious intent; there is a very good view of the surrounding countryside from there.

Commercial forestry is contributing to the local economy in other ways. There has been reference to mountain biking. The 7stanes mountain biking trail through the Borders and Dumfries and Galloway is now well known, and it was awarded global superstar status by the International Mountain Bike Association in 2006. By the end of this year, the estimated annual number of visitors to 7stanes is expected to reach about 650,000.

The region offers a variety of events ranging from events for novices to major competitions. As a result of the success of the 7stanes, Dumfries will host the world mountain bike conference in September. I believe that that will be the first time that the conference has been held outside Canada, so it is quite a feather in our cap in Dumfries and Galloway. The conference will attract around 400 delegates and is expected to bring £1.3 million into the local economy.

Mention has been made of Eskdalemuir, which is also in my constituency. I stress the importance of the timber transport fund and the work that was done with the Eskdalemuir community over quite a long period to address the problems caused by the transport of logs through the village. The fund, which the previous Executive set up, has been extremely successful and I hope that the minister will confirm that such investment will continue in order to alleviate the problems that arise when harvested timber is taken through communities.

10:45

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Forestry directly provides 19,000 jobs in

Scotland, many of which are in my region of the Highlands and Islands, especially in remote and isolated communities where their value—and that of the associated jobs that they sustain—is consequently great. I hope that the number of people who are employed in the industry in the future will increase as the sector expands. Scotland has the land to provide further significant forestation and huge potential can be realised in many areas if the Government puts in place the right conditions and support, including adequate infrastructure.

I live on Loch Awe in Argyll. I remember when every house in the villages of Eredine and Dalavich, which were both purpose built by the Forestry Commission, was filled by a forestry worker. Almost all those workers have now departed, despite the fact that the forests are still there. I acknowledge that the Forestry Commission did good work in the past, but I share the concerns that have been expressed about how much value for money the taxpayer has received from the investment that was made.

Michael Russell: I am fascinated by the reference to value for money. I visited the village of Dalavich on a wet and dreich day last November to launch a Forestry Commission publication. I found that the community there was live and vital and that many people there are still working in some aspect of forestry. The diversification has been vital and has been about the state and the private sector working together.

Jamie McGrigor: I hope that the state and private sector will continue to work together, but I disagree with the minister that many of the people living in Dalavich work in forestry—they do not.

The private forestry sector is concerned that it does not have a level playing field. I hope that the minister will respond to such concerns in his summing up. Will he concede that the state forestry sector receives four to six times the level of support that the private forestry sector receives? Will he assure me that the new grant proposals under rural development contracts will be fair and equitable? Will he today provide specific details on how grants for restocking and replanting will be administered? I want to see the private forestry sector, with its excellent delivery mechanism and value-for-money comparisons, winning adequate support to allow the replanting that is needed for a sustainable forestry sector.

What will the minister do to ensure that the enlargement of the commercial forestry sector, taking account of biodiversity and the enhancement of native woodlands and open space, is moved up the agenda of the regional project assessment committees? That is vital, but so far it seems to be a very low priority for the RPACs.

The previous Executive let down the private forestry sector badly when, in 2006, it ended the forestry grants scheme a year earlier than planned. We therefore look to the new Scottish National Party Government to treat the private forestry sector with more respect and to promote forestry that encourages wildlife. John Scott's amendment refers to capercaillie and Scottish crossbills. I add to that blackcocks and greyhens, which will thrive in diverse forests but are destroyed by the monoculture of massive blocks of Sitka spruce.

I agree with what other members said about the tourism potential of forestry. We must plant a diverse range of deciduous trees as well as conifers because that will benefit the environment, wildlife and tourism. I hope that most members agree that the days of simply planting thousands of acres of Sitka are over and will not be missed. Monoculture in forestry is a bad idea—the Gearraidh na h-Aibhne plantation of western hemlock on the Isle of Lewis was completely destroyed by the pine beauty moth.

Forestry must be planted with markets in mind, whether we are talking about the production of fuel briquettes for biomass, which Jim Hume mentioned, or the production of high-quality paper, for which Scotland already has a good reputation: *Time* magazine, for example, uses Scottish paper. Pulp and paper mills, such as those that sustained Fort William and Invergordon in the past must be strategically planned and timber transport should be planned to involve sea and rail, so that as little damage as possible is done to Scotland's roads.

I am also interested in alternative types of fencing for forestry. Young trees must be fenced to protect them from deer, but it is possible nowadays to use unobtrusive electric fencing in place of the conventional high fences that can kill birds and are expensive to maintain.

Today's debate has been constructive and welcome. If ministers take anything from it, I hope that they will recognise that the private forestry sector wants to play a full, positive and dynamic part in developing the commercial forestry sector in Scotland, and that it is uniquely well placed to do so. All the private forestry sector wants is a level playing field in accessing the support that is available, and a process that is not bogged down with bureaucracy and red tape. I support the amendment in the name of my colleague John Scott.

10:51

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the chance to debate the position and significance of commercial forestry in Scotland. Many people throughout the country will not

realise the significance of the industry, but the minister and others have set out its importance.

Forestry and wood processing provide thousands of jobs and are worth hundreds of millions of pounds to the Scottish economy. The industry currently produces some 6.8 million tonnes of softwood round timber a year, which is forecast to rise to more than 8 million tonnes a year over the coming two decades. We are currently pretty good at sourcing material from indigenous sources: it is important that we maintain that, given the forecast rise in production. That is one of the reasons why I welcome the Government's commitment to increasing forest and woodland cover within 25 years. There are other reasons to welcome that commitment, to which I will return. As the industry grows and production increases, it is vital that we ensure that more raw materials for the forestry industry are secured by way of greater forest cover.

We should also note that more than 70 per cent of the softwood round timber that is sourced in Scotland is processed in Scotland. Although I welcome the fact that the remainder finds ready markets elsewhere, we should take pride in the large degree of self-sufficiency that exists in the Scottish industry. The fact that the vast majority of timber that is sourced in Scotland is processed in Scotland is good news for the Scottish economy and jobs. The fact that most of the timber stays within our borders to be processed here ensures environmental effectiveness by reducing transport emissions.

The environmental angle is important. Our forests and woodlands are important tools in mitigating the effects of climate change. Crucially, the industry itself recognises the importance of that. The Confederation of Forest Industries estimates that tree planting is now offsetting around 8 per cent of Scotland's carbon emissions. I accept that carbon-emissions offset is not in itself going to win the climate change battle, but it has an important part to play, so the Scottish Government's commitment to increasing forest cover within 20 years or so is important in that regard. The more trees that are planted, the greater will be the carbon-emissions offset. Increasing forest cover is good news not just for the industry but for the environment.

Increased forest cover is good for the physical environment and combating climate change, but it is also good for our aesthetic environment. Scottish Environment LINK has recently contacted members to set out the importance of Scotland's landscapes. It states that the value of good landscapes to local economies is shown in tourism surveys, which consistently reveal that scenery and landscape are a key reason for visiting Scotland. Ensuring better forest cover can go

some way towards ensuring more attractive landscapes.

According to the Confederation of Forest Industries, Scotland has 17 per cent forest cover, which compares favourably with the UK figure of 11 per cent, but lags significantly behind the EU25 average of 36 per cent. At one stage, Scotland was almost entirely covered by forest. I am not suggesting that we will be able to roll back thousands of years of human activity, but the Government's important commitment to increasing forest cover will help to create more attractive landscapes in our country and therefore to assist tourism, which is an important part of the national economy in which, of course, forestry also plays a part.

I have not yet mentioned forestry's importance to biodiversity. Only two weeks ago in the debate on the biodiversity strategy, Parliament broadly agreed on the need to maintain Scotland's biodiversity. I think that, this morning, we broadly agree that our forests—and our forestry industry—can also play a role in that respect. As a result, I welcome the Labour amendment. My only hope is that, if and when the amendment is successful, Labour members will, unlike yesterday, not go into hiding when it comes to the vote on the substantive motion.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): Oh grow up, Jamie.

Jamie Hepburn: There you go.

I congratulate the Government on securing this debate. Our forestry industry is pretty strong at the moment, but there is scope for growth. After all, the UK currently imports 90 per cent of its paper and much wood-based produce, and the value and cost of those imports amounts to £6 billion. There is no reason why, with continued growth, the Scottish industry cannot replace some of those imports and provide the necessary materials to make many of those products. I am sure that commercial forestry will continue to flourish in Scotland and that the Government's policy of increasing forest cover, which will bring us closer to the European Union average, will play a huge role.

I commend the motion to Parliament.

10:56

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in the debate. I support the forestry sector's expansion. As a result of that expansion, we have an opportunity to promote and develop greater public access to our land.

We should remind those who manage forestry land on our behalf that they are doing exactly that:

access is as important as planting and harvesting trees, managing the forest for future generations and future needs, creating employment and adding to our economy. It is beneficial not only to the financial viability and future sustainability of our forests and associated land but to the health and well-being of the people who use those areas.

I welcome the Forestry Commission Scotland's growing involvement in managing forests and woodland in my Cumbernauld and Kilsyth constituency. Over the past few years, it has moved from managing what I consider to be large-scale forestry projects to becoming involved in smaller areas close to residential communities. However, it should always be mindful that it cares for some of the most beautiful land and landscapes in our country and, in the case of the Carron valley in my constituency, probably in the world, never mind in Europe. People want to see their lands, forests and woodlands managed to the highest environmental standards and to have access to them for recreational purposes. For those who are unfamiliar with the Carron valley, it is geographically at the heart of Scotland. Stirling claims to be the gateway to the Highlands, but the fact is that Kilsyth, the Kilsyth hills and the Tak-Ma-Doon Road, which leads from Kilsyth to the Carron valley, is the front door. Resting in the heart of central Scotland between Kilsyth, Stirling and Denny, Carron valley forest enjoys an enviable location. As most major Scottish cities are within an hour's drive, it is understandable that people want to visit the area and use the trails and paths for walking and cycling. I want to ensure that we make the most of that advantage by developing what we already have and providing facilities for visitors.

The minister is aware of the Carron Valley Development Group, which came together in 2003 to develop the potential of the Carron valley forest. Those volunteers put a lot of hard work into designing, raising money for and building an ambitious trail. In spring 2006 the group, in partnership with North Lanarkshire Council, Stirling Council and the Forestry Commission Scotland, launched the first purpose-built mountain bike centre in central Scotland. The group then developed a further three trails, which opened in August 2006. Such trails, which were designed to the highest specification and built to take account of future maintenance needs, could be developed throughout Scotland.

However, that partnership appears to be going downhill. It seems to the volunteers and the councils that unless the rest of the partners agree with the Forestry Commission—and unless that organisation puts forward a particular idea—nothing happens. I will write to the minister later this week on this matter; I do not have time at the moment to highlight all the issues, but he knows

that last autumn I met representatives of the Forestry Commission Scotland and the other partners.

Michael Russell: I am happy to meet Cathie Craigie to discuss that long-standing problem. I understand that the Forestry Commission holds the same position as I do: if we can help to solve it, we will try to do so.

Cathie Craigie: I am happy for the minister to intervene but, although the commission says that it is happy to solve the problems, nothing is happening on the ground. I welcome the minister's offer and will get in touch with his office to arrange a meeting with me and representatives of the Carron Valley Development Group and partner organisations.

11:02

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): The minister will be very busy if he is going to meet everyone who has spoken this morning. He is very welcome to visit Wester Ross and see the Forestry Commission Scotland's excellent work. I am glad to see—and am encouraged by—the Parliament's support for Forest Enterprise Scotland and the Forestry Commission Scotland.

There is no doubt that the commission is one of our outstanding national assets, and we cannot ignore its tremendous contribution to Scottish life and commercial forestry over the past 90 years. As members have pointed out, it was established a long time ago, in 1919, to reverse the massive deforestation that was caused by the high demand during the 1914 to 1918 war for timber, which was used in the trenches or to make pit props for our coal mines. The commission's remit at the time was to establish an important national strategic reserve of our timber in the event of hostilities recurring.

In fact, the commission was really a massive job-creation exercise that provided much-needed employment in rural areas through the depression of the 1920s and 1930s. The availability of jobs kept young families in the straths and glens, where they supported the economy and the social structure of those remote areas.

The commission also had a great social conscience. For example, after the evacuation of St Kilda in the early 1930s, it housed the island's residents in different parts of the west coast, including Dalmally, in Mr McGrigor's area. He says that not many forestry workers live there today, but it was certainly one of the main areas where the St Kildans were housed.

The Forestry Commission also provided many in its workforce with rented housing, which was

something new in those days. Some of the houses were attached to crofts and other small agricultural holdings. That is evidenced today by the descendents of the original tenants who are still living on the holdings and happy to be employed in sustainable forestry activity.

Following the 1939 to 1945 war, the commission continued to provide work and new housing for workers to rent. As Mr McGrigor mentioned, whole new villages were built using timber houses, albeit that they were imported from Sweden. Those houses are still in excellent habitable condition, despite our inclement weather and 60 years of use. We should be appreciative for the past efforts of the forestry developers.

The rural economy derives great benefit from planting, management and harvesting of mature timber. Transport companies have expanded to meet the growing demand for timber supplies delivered over long distances to pulp and paper mills, to the Bonawood and sterling board factories and to the sawmills to produce building-grade timber for the construction industry.

As several members have said, the Forestry Commission is today the largest landowner in Scotland and it has been progressive in the use and development of its woodlands for timber, tourism and recreation. However, more needs to be done. We have heard of the developments for outdoor pursuits in much of the forest estate, and they are to be welcomed, but I would like more of its unproductive land to be made available for affordable housing. The commission has done that in the past—it built villages in the straths and glens—so why should it not start the process again?

Michael Russell: Let me reassure John Farquhar Munro that the commission is keen to enter into discussions with any social landlord who wishes to build houses on any suitable part of the forest estate, particularly if the construction uses wood and includes a combined heat and power plant using wood biomass. That is the way forward, and the commission is desperately keen to ensure that it is part of it.

John Farquhar Munro: I thank the minister for that comment, but I would like the Forestry Commission to be a scheme promoter. It has the resources, and the houses could be built with locally sourced timber. Biomass could be used to heat the homes, so there would be great benefits all round.

As I am in my last minute, I will make a final plea to the minister on something that I have spoken about before. We have previously made a freight facilities grant available to take freight off the roads and put it on to rail. The Forestry Commission should be given a marine facilities

grant so that timber from remote areas can be transported by sea. Marine structures are difficult and expensive to establish, so consideration should be given to supporting such an exercise.

11:08

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): It is particularly important when we debate forestry that our horizons stretch far beyond our own short lives. The first world war was not the first time Britain and Scotland were stripped of their trees. I can think of an instance in the mid-16th century when the whole of Fife was denuded of its oaks to build the Great Michael, then the biggest warship in the world.

Here is a lovely story. In the middle of the 16th century, Brasenose College built a new hall and wanted an oak hammer-beam roof. At the same time as the roof was built, the college looked forward two hundred years and planted on its land enough oaks to replace the roof at the time it thought it might wear out—at the maturity of an oak, which is between 100 and 200 years. That is the kind of long-term planning that we will need in a forestry strategy if we want high-quality construction wood and high-quality environments in Scotland.

Today's debate has been extremely interesting and informative, and I am happy to say that I will support all the amendments and the motion. I have just a few comments.

One of the mixed uses of forestry that we have not addressed today involves forestry and farming. Ten years ago, a small group of experts went from Scotland to Norway to find out how forestry and farming are managed there. The findings were interesting, and I recommend them to the minister. I will not go into detail, but one example was mixed forestry and sheep farming, which would be ideal for us in Scotland.

John Scott: I should have declared an interest to begin with, but does the member acknowledge that the Scottish Agricultural College has already carried out work on mixed forestry and woodland enterprises at Kirkton and Auchtertyre near Crianlarich? I am sure that he would applaud that work.

Robin Harper: I acknowledge that point—it is a pity that such work is not spreading further.

We have a serious shortage of construction timber in Scotland, and we need to plant for the future. That is evidenced by the fact that wood for one of the best developments in timber-framed housing in the past couple of years has had to be imported from Germany. It is also evidenced by the fact that the designer of the new primary school at Acharacle—one of Scotland's leading

environmental architects and not someone who would go for imported materials lightly—is importing wood from Austria because that is what he needs for a high-quality school.

I was pleased to see Jim Hume's amendment, and it would be good for the Government to reflect on the history of Torren Energy and why it had to be taken over. That happened because it had difficulty in selling its product to councils. It was selling a system of heat from wood fuel, and it designed its system for use in council buildings and schools.

I was delighted to hear Rob Gibson's mention of better uses for at least some grass moors. It would perhaps be better to plant them with forestry rather than use them for the annual ritual slaughter of birds for the delectation of foreign visitors. I know that that activity is an important part of our economy, but some of our moors would be better used for trees, which would benefit our economy as well.

Finally, it is a pity that John Scott did not include in his amendment what he said about flooding in his speech, because his comments were sensible. We do not need research: as I have said before to the minister, we could be getting on with planting trees in river catchment areas now.

11:13

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I suppose that it might come as a slight surprise to some members that I am speaking in the debate, given that there are not a huge number of trees in Caithness. However, as the minister well knows, there are many in Sutherland and Easter Ross.

Like others, the minister correctly drew our attention to the history: the important date of 1919 and why the Forestry Commission came into being. He mentioned also the 12,000 direct and 14,000 indirect jobs that the forestry industry supports. All of us welcome his commitment to plant more trees and to seek to attain 25 per cent of Scotland's land area planted with trees. His was a good introduction to a consensual debate and, like Robin Harper, I hope that we can coalesce around all the amendments.

John Scott correctly mentioned deep peat planting on the flow lands of Caithness, which is a huge issue. He also introduced a new term to the debate—"hydraulic roughness"—which I will remember. The intervention that I sought to make on him was this: in anticipation of flooding on sloping land, there is no doubt about the important role that strategically placed planting can play in preventing landslips. If trees had been planted where we have seen some of the extensive landslips in recent times, they would not have been as bad.

Jim Hume talked about innovation and spoke from his background about the importance of the product, markets and marketing. Like David Stewart, he referred to the Austrian experience. David Stewart and Jim Hume were correct to say that Austria is far further along than us and is where we should be now. Austria provides the example of the direction in which we should go.

Jim Hume talked about health. I think that we all agree that Scotland's forestry represents a kind of green lung for us all. Many young and old people use forest trails in my constituency. Some people indulge in the incredibly dangerous occupation of mountain biking, to which David Stewart referred. I would not be seen dead on a mountain bike—well, if I were on a mountain bike, I would be dead.

Rob Gibson, who has had to leave us but who was kind enough to apologise, talked about sustainable forestry and the idea of local forestry workers living and working in and around the communities in which trees have been planted. As he said, that would be in deep contrast to what happens under clear felling. What Rob Gibson and John Farquhar Munro said reminded me that, in my childhood, forestry workers' houses stood at Morangie on the outskirts of Tain, but forestry workers no longer occupy those houses.

I draw to the minister's attention the village of Lairg in central Sutherland, which depended greatly on forestry in years gone by, although that is not the case today. There is room for work on that, but I do not doubt the minister's commitment.

Michael Russell rose—

Jamie Stone: I was going to invite an intervention.

Michael Russell: The member knows—because I invited him to be there, although he could not be present—that I visited Lairg last summer to talk about ways in which the whole rural delivery service is changing job patterns. However, I remain concerned and I shall be back in Lairg this summer, when I will invite Mr Stone to join me again.

Jamie Stone: I look forward to greeting the minister in my constituency. As always, he is welcome.

Jamie McGrigor slightly confused me by referring to a pulp and paper mill at Invergordon, which I do not recall in my time. However, he and others were correct in their sentiments about the Balcas development in my constituency. The first thing to say about Balcas is that we have got there: the innovative plant is being built in Invergordon. It will produce very small wood pellets by a highly efficient method that uses all the tree. Brashings have been referred to. The plant will operate a highly efficient system in which almost everything is used.

I say to the minister that the method by which we reached the Balcas development was not always as easy as we would have liked in the Highlands. My colleague Fergus Ewing would bear witness to that. At times, we nearly went down the wrong road for the sort of plant that we would have at Invergordon, but we got it right. However, a backward-looking exercise would give ministers and the enterprise network room to examine some of the avenues that were previously considered, but that is perhaps for another day.

Cathie Craigie gave an excellent advertisement for her constituency and John Farquhar Munro said that the Forestry Commission was

“one of our outstanding national assets”.

He was right to talk about the marine transport of timber, but highly pertinent to my constituency is getting as much timber as we can off our hard-pressed road structure and on to rail. Many people from parties across the political spectrum have referred in the past to that, on which more work has to be done. Given that the railway line moves inland as it goes through Sutherland and approaches Wick and Thurso, timber could without doubt be moved by rail.

The heat and power initiative in Wick was mentioned—I forget by which member. That is a tremendous success story. It is what we should have done years ago and what has been done in Austria and many other parts of Europe. The scheme provides affordable heat and power for families who need such assistance. According to national parameters, the Pulteneytown area of Wick is recognised as an area of need, so the resource is being targeted where it is most needed. As other members said, the scheme's beauty is that it provides a completely sustainable form of energy with the minimum transport—locally grown timber from as close to Wick as it can be obtained is used. If we can replicate the Wick experiment the length and breadth of Scotland, that will be a great success story.

I support my party's amendment and I am sure that we will support all the other amendments later.

11:19

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

The debate is well timed, as it takes place in the middle of Scottish environment week, the theme of which is enabling sustainable livelihoods, and just after the Confederation of Forest Industries (UK)—the forestry industry's trade association—has challenged the Government to unlock the potential of Scotland's forests. The debate has made it clear that that potential is enormous and diverse.

ConFor's chief executive, Stuart Goodall, is striving for greater public recognition of the value

and benefits of forestry and I commend him for that. He argues, and we do not disagree, that forestry has a major role to play in tackling climate change, not only by locking up carbon, but by providing the wood that the construction industry is increasingly using as a substitute for concrete and steel and which has significant potential as a fuel, as many members have said.

Biomass generation could contribute seriously to meeting Scotland's renewable energy targets, as Jim Hume's amendment highlights. We are happy to endorse his call for continuing support for the biomass sector and we are pleased with the minister's commitment to continue the biomass support scheme.

I recently visited the Enterprise North East Trust's headquarters in Inverurie in Aberdeenshire, which is heated by woodchip biofuel. I was extremely impressed by the system's efficiency and the building's warmth. Market potential clearly exists for wood fuel and forestry expansion will be crucial to developing that market.

As Stuart Goodall told *The Press and Journal* in a good article last weekend, the industry is optimistic, as the price of wood from forestry has increased significantly. However, we need to look to the future by increasing the forest area in Scotland to ensure long-term supplies of timber to satisfy the growing demand. As the minister said, wood production is a long-term process.

ConFor also wants to restore the credibility of the industry, which is still in the shadow of the monoculture planting that blighted much of the Scottish landscape in the 1980s and early 1990s—as in the Caithness flow country, to which Jamie Stone referred—and which Jamie McGrigor described vividly. The industry accepts that new forest planting must be of mixed species and must have open spaces for people to enjoy and in which wildlife can prosper. That view is endorsed by organisations in Scottish Environment LINK, such as the Woodland Trust and RSPB Scotland—of which I declare I am a member—which want woodlands to be managed in ways that maximise biodiversity and which caution against tree planting purely for carbon sequestration.

As much of the existing forest is due to be felled, my party is pleased that the Government has promised to raise £15 million a year from the sale of national forest estate to be reinvested in new woodlands, which will be managed in line with the Scottish forestry strategy. We are especially pleased that the Government has firmed up the previous Executive's aspiration to increase forestry coverage from the current 17 per cent to 25 per cent by promising about 10,000 hectares of new planting per annum, most of which will be established through grant aid to the private sector.

As we have heard, the industry's profitability depends heavily on partnership between the state and the private sector, and the latter is keen to be involved in developing the industry.

Great concern and despondency were felt when the previous Executive ended the forestry grant scheme prematurely, which in effect ended new planting by the private sector. The welcome new financial support should redress the situation by encouraging the establishment of new forests and not least by assisting owners of agricultural land to diversify into sustainable forestry.

The promised new planting provides an excellent opportunity to correct the damage that was done by the dense and largely lifeless plantations of the past and to regenerate our native woodlands, which are valuable for tourism and rich in biodiversity. As John Scott said, strategic forest planting could play a significant role in flood prevention.

As we have heard from all parties, there is no doubt that forestry is one of the most important industries in rural Scotland. With the increasing number and variety of businesses that use timber, it is at the forefront of sustainability and mitigating climate change. The industry's growth by 39 per cent in the past eight years shows its economic potential. It contributes nearly £1 billion to the Scottish economy and employs many thousands of people in wood production and processing. In the past 15 years, it has achieved £60 million of private sector inward investment.

Many benefits can be derived from our woodlands. They are home to numerous species of insects, plants and animals, including, as we have heard, the Scottish crossbill and the threatened capercaillie, whose survival depends on our ancient Caledonian pine forest.

Thanks to the Forestry Commission, the Woodland Trust and others, our forests have in recent years been increasingly opened up for recreation. Every day, my dogs enjoy walks in the woodlands at Countesswells, near my home. The tracks there are also used regularly by horse riders and cyclists. Many visitors and locals enjoy the sculptures and views in Kirkhill forest, and the Gight Woods, near Methlick, which are managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, provide education and enjoyment for many people from the local neighbourhood and beyond. Those are only a few examples from Aberdeenshire; there are many more the length and breadth of the country. As we have heard, Scotland's forests also play host to many sporting events, such as car rallying and the mountain bike world cup.

We are happy to support the motion and the amendments. We want to see the on-going development of forestry, which is already a key

industry in rural Scotland, in ways that will increase its biodiversity as well as its commercial value. We look forward to an increasingly confident and competitive industry that is encouraged and assisted by Government support, and we are anxious to hear the details of that.

11:26

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): This is another important and worthwhile debate, which has been constructive and, in the main, consensual. It is a welcome recognition of the role that forestry plays in a range of sectors in Scotland, but perhaps most importantly in the conservation of our biodiversity and the mitigation of climate change. Indeed, yesterday, the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee heard how forests can act as a soft engineering measure in tackling flooding in Scotland. That is an issue on which we will want to see some progress made.

As we sit in this fabulous chamber and marvel at the beauty of the wood that surrounds us, we must reflect on the fact that far too much of it required to be imported from overseas because too much of our indigenous woodland has been lost, leaving little for current generations to share. I am interested to hear how the minister and the Government will address that problem.

Rob Gibson rightly mentioned the potential for using timber in housing development. Sweden has taken the lead in that—indeed, I was brought up in a so-called Swedish timber house, which is still our family home. Ikea now seems to be getting in on the act by supplying kit houses. Sweden has exported many good things to the world, including Abba—I could ask Jamie Hepburn, “Does your mother know that you're out?”, but that would be churlish—and I am keen to know the minister's views on how timber and eco-friendly housing can play a role in meeting the Government's housing targets. I am also interested to hear how he will work with his colleagues across portfolios and in other departments to make progress on that.

As we develop further opportunities for the planting of forests in Scotland, it is essential that we proceed in a way that is sensitive to the wildlife and biodiversity of any area. I seek assurances from the minister that the new forestry planting strategy will not repeat the mistakes of the past but will avoid sensitive areas that are important for wildlife and that provide a range of public benefits. Can he assure Parliament that any efforts to combat climate change will not—as other members have mentioned—result in the implementation of environmentally damaging models of forestry? I am thinking particularly of the dangers of planting in peat bog areas.

In relation to the public benefits of forestry, I will focus on two specific issues. First, the minister is

aware of my interest in the sale of forestry and woodland to community groups for their management. I welcome the written answers that I have received, which say that he is reviewing the guidance to ascertain whether there are ways in which sales can be made below the current market value. I encourage him to ensure that that happens where it can clearly be demonstrated that there would be community benefit, so that woodlands throughout Scotland can be owned and managed by the communities around them.

The second issue is the use of wood-burning stoves and heating systems in public buildings. In my constituency, groups such as Carbon Neutral Biggar are keen that any new schools that are built should use such systems. Indeed, in opposition, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth put forward such arguments in the chamber. There is disappointment that the biomass boilers have been withdrawn from the City of Edinburgh Council's PPP schools project. Obviously, the council has the right to make that decision, but it seems strange that we are not using such major new building programmes as a driver for changing the type of heating systems that are installed, which would be of great advantage for the future. Perhaps the minister will reflect on how the Government could provide greater incentives and more forceful guidance to local authorities and other public bodies to encourage the development of sustainable fuel sources as new buildings are constructed. That would be good for the environment, good for those who would use the buildings and, as other members have said, good for the industry.

Several members have mentioned the importance of forestry to tourism and how we can expand and develop tourism in our forests and wooded areas. Some have mentioned the use of mountain bikes, having attended the mountain bike world cup. I noted that a number of members were offering to chip in to buy Jamie Stone a mountain bike, but I am sure that they did not mean it. Nevertheless, mountain biking has provided an invaluable source of tourism for Scotland, especially in Fort William and the Highlands but also in the Borders, at Glentress. As the facilities there expand and develop, it will become a positive tourist attraction. I am keen to learn how the minister believes that that can be driven forward and used to best advantage.

I find myself in the strange position of supporting a Conservative amendment—again—as well as the Liberal Democrat amendment and the Government's motion. I urge other members to do likewise. This is an important area for Scotland in which the industry, the public sector and the private sector can move forward together. We must do that to ensure not only that Scotland has a sustainable resource for the future and that our

children are not left with the legacy of deforestation that we inherited, but that Scotland is in a much better position to face the challenges of climate change that lie ahead.

11:31

Michael Russell: The debate has been consensual, positive and well informed. Those in the forestry sector who are listening to or watching the proceedings will be heartened by that. Members seem to have taken advantage not just of the briefing materials that have been distributed at various stages, but of their own genuine knowledge of and research into the sector and its importance.

We must acknowledge the wide range of players who will be interested in the discussion that we have had today. Those include the Forestry Commission Scotland and Forest Enterprise, in the public sector; the private sector, to which I will return in a moment; and the community sector. I pay tribute to the community sector and acknowledge as a live issue Karen Gillon's point about community purchase and the valuations that are used in such purchase. I am working hard with Forestry Commission colleagues to provide the answer that both she and I want within the state accounting rules. We will do our best to provide that answer.

The environment and wildlife non-governmental organisations are also key players in the sector, and the users of timber—in the processing, building and energy industries—are important. Finally, we should always remember the public interest. The public are deeply involved in the forestry sector for tourism, recreation and health. They are also involved as the consumers of timber products. So, everybody in Scotland has an involvement in forestry.

I know that the messages that the debate sends out will be listened to. Calum MacDonald, the non-executive forestry commissioner for Scotland and the chair of the Forestry Commission's national committee for Scotland is in the public gallery—I am sure that we all welcome his presence here and the fact that he has listened to the debate. Bob MacIntosh, the director of the Forestry Commission Scotland, will also have listened to the debate, as will many forestry workers throughout Scotland who are keen to hear not just what we know, but what we are going to do—both the Government and the Parliament—to encourage their work.

I am slightly critical—which is very unlike me—of one speech this morning. I think that Jamie McGrigor should get out more into our forests and woodlands. If he did that, he would understand that there is an active partnership between the

private and public sectors and that there is no attempt to give an unfair advantage to either side. I felt slightly resentful at his implication that there would not be fair and equitable treatment of all those who apply for the SRDP funding. The idea of that funding is to generate new activity in every part of Scotland and by every player. Again and again, we have stressed the need for people to be active in promoting the scheme, including members of the Scottish Parliament. They should not be implying that there will be unfairness, but should be trying to ensure that as many people as possible take part in the scheme.

Jamie McGrigor: I think that I said that there has been unfairness in the past and that we look forward to a much more progressive attitude and a more level playing field for private and state-funded enterprises within the forestry sector.

Michael Russell: I am a great fan of revisionist history and I accept that revisionist history of what was said.

I am deeply appreciative of John Farquhar Munro's speech, in which he reminded us how forestry has been central to the Scottish rural economy, certainly in the 20th century. Robin Harper mentioned the situation before 1919—indeed, he implied that he could remember back to the 16th century, at which I am deeply impressed—and I take his key point about the need for sustainability. We should be mindful of his example of those who use wood but also plant trees.

Let me address some of the detailed points. On the important issue of flooding, forestry has a key role to play, as it has in all land-use activities and indeed in many climate change activities. Climate change is not the core driver for the forestry sector but it is a driver, so I am happy to take on board Robin Harper's point by acknowledging that forestry not only can but must start to play a role. In addition, I was pleased to be involved in discussions this week about moving ahead quickly with demonstration projects so that we can start to do things.

Transportation was another key point. I must express some disappointment that it has been difficult to involve the rail sector in forestry, but there are reasons for that, especially for particular projects in Galloway. However, not enough has happened.

Jamie Stone: Will the minister give way?

Michael Russell: No, I must make progress.

On the shipping sector, the contribution that John Farquhar Munro called for is being made. The Forestry Commission in Scotland currently supports the timberlink shipping service, which removes lorries from roads on the west coast by

enabling the timber to be sent by sea. The subsidy for that is just under £1 million a year. There has been some slow build-up of similar services in other parts of Scotland.

I am keen for timber lorries to be taken off the roads if at all possible. The strategic timber transport fund has been highly successful in doing that but it was due to close in December 2008. I am sorry that members suggested that an announcement was yet to be made on the fund's renewal—clearly, they have not been keeping enough of an eye on the timber press—as I announced in December that the life of the fund would be extended. Financial support for the fund will continue until 2011, with a total budget of £15 million over the next three years.

I am grateful to all those who have been involved in projects such as the one at Eskdalemuir, which Elaine Murray and a number of others mentioned. Community involvement in such projects is vital, because they are of high significance to all of us who use the roads in one way or another, including—as was the case in Eskdalemuir—those who walk on the roads.

I conclude by drawing attention to some key messages on important issues for forestry that need to be communicated following today's debate. First, Scotland's wood-using sector is a major long-term success story—

John Scott: Will the minister give way?

Michael Russell: Sorry, I really must finish.

As all Governments—even a Government as good as this one—are transitory, every Government must make a long-term commitment to the wood sector. Although the current Government will not be that transitory—if yesterday is anything to go by, we have a long-term Government—it will eventually change at some time. The sector supports 40,000 jobs in all and provides £760 million of value added to the economy and those figures can grow.

We must remember that imported timber will continue to be needed in Scotland. Some timber that has particular advantages cannot be grown here and must be sourced from elsewhere. However, we need to up our penetration of the Scottish market.

We accept that bioenergy presents a major opportunity, that our small but important hardwood sector can increase and that forest-based tourism makes a significant economic contribution. We also accept that sustainable timber construction—a point that was raised by Karen Gillon among others—can contribute to affordable homes, climate change mitigation and sequestration. Indeed, I am keen that we continue our work on housing by making land available—and possibly

by being a player in the way that John Farquhar Munro suggested—and on using wood in building design. Again, I was pleased—although I am sorry that members did not seem to be aware of this—to launch a book on timber construction last month at Napier University's centre for timber engineering.

This has been a good debate. I have been impressed by virtually every speech—as have, I am sure, the forestry sector representatives who have been listening—and I am pleased to be consensual in accepting the Labour and Tory amendments. I am not yet certain whether I can accept the Liberal Democrat amendment because, although it would perhaps do no great harm, its ambition for future biomass projects is less great than ours and it takes no account of the conclusions of the wood fuel task force. However, I will think about the matter further during the course of the day and—as I am always consensual—if I can help in any way to bring about a resolution, I will do so.

I thank members for the debate and look forward to another debate on the issue in future times.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Forth Road Bridge (Cables)

1. John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will provide an update on the condition of the main cables on the Forth road bridge. (S3O-2243)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson):

Investigating the condition of the main cables on the Forth road bridge is a matter for the Forth Estuary Transport Authority. I understand that FETA is confident that the current dehumidification project offers good prospects for slowing down or halting corrosion. However, FETA will not know the answer until the results of inspections that are due in 2011-12 have been analysed.

John Park: I was pleased to read a couple of weeks ago and to hear again today that it looks likely that heavy goods vehicles will not be banned from the Forth road bridge. The minister will surely agree that it was perhaps inappropriate that the suggestion that they might be banned found its way into the public domain.

I have two questions. First, when all the information on the condition of the cables is available, will the minister make a statement to Parliament on the issue? Secondly, given the need to focus on public confidence no matter the condition of the cables, will the Scottish Government set up information seminars similar to those that were held on the options for the new crossing, to update people in Fife, the Lothians and other appropriate areas on the condition of the cables when that information becomes available? It is important to ensure that we maintain public confidence going forward.

Stewart Stevenson: Mr Park makes some important points, but I must stress that responsibility for maintaining the bridge lies with FETA. I will, of course, stand ready to support FETA in its work and, if it is useful, I will be part of the team that will take responsibility for engaging with local communities and explaining to them the future of the bridge. I will not supplant FETA's responsibilities, although I agree with John Park's substantive point.

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): The minister's reply to Mr Park is interesting, but the matters that he raises are not likely to have any

effect for several years. A much more immediate problem for bridge users is that FETA plans to replace the expansion joints on the carriageway next year. Does the minister know how long that work will take and the extent of the delays and disruption that it will cause? What will the minister do to minimise that disruption for my constituents in Dunfermline West?

Stewart Stevenson: Clearly, FETA needs to address the condition of the expansion joints to ensure the continued use of the bridge. The opening of a further crossing on the upper Forth will provide some relief, especially for HGVs, given that 80 per cent of HGVs that cross the Forth already use an upper-Forth crossing. I will work closely with FETA to ensure that Transport Scotland and the Government put in place appropriate measures, such as signage, to mitigate the effects of the closures by ensuring that people have adequate notice to plan their journeys. That is in connection with my wider responsibilities for the road network, albeit that FETA is responsible for the bridge.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister undertake to ensure that any announcement or statement that he makes on the matter will cover not only corrosion and wire breakage within the cables but the condition of the anchorage points at either end of the bridge? I understand that there may be cause for concern with the anchorage points, which were the subject of a perhaps speculative press article some months ago.

Stewart Stevenson: As yet, we have no particular reason to be concerned about the state of the anchorage points. Clearly, in looking at the effect of corrosion on the structure as a whole, it is important that we conduct tests to establish whether there are other causes for concern. I am satisfied that FETA is doing the necessary work. We will await the outcome of that research.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): I am grateful for the responses that the minister has given, although I think that Jim Tolson was almost expecting the minister to go out and do the work himself.

Members have referred to the quality of the information that FETA releases, which is important. It is vital that all information is managed correctly, so that commuters and those who use the bridges receive it as quickly as possible. Will the minister have a chat with FETA about how it is managing information release at the moment?

Stewart Stevenson: I am always in the business of chatting with people with whom we work. I talk regularly to members of the FETA board and my officials are in regular contact with them. I am sure that appropriate ways of

communicating with the communities that depend on the Forth road bridge will form part of our next chat.

Mosquito Ultrasonic Deterrents

2. Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has given any further consideration to the licensing and regulation of Mosquito ultrasonic youth deterrents. (S3O-2179)

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): The Scottish Government has not given any further consideration to the licensing and regulation of Mosquito ultrasonic youth deterrents.

Bill Kidd: Does the minister agree that the indiscriminate use of such devices would penalise all young people, including the great majority who are going about their legitimate daily activities, and that the use of such devices must therefore be controlled, to ensure that it is both justified and proportionate?

Fergus Ewing: Plainly, the use of the devices is contentious. Local authorities are best placed to decide what measures should be taken locally to tackle antisocial behaviour. I would welcome representations from Bill Kidd and any other member who wishes to contribute to the national review of our antisocial behaviour strategy, so that we can build up a consensual approach to tackling that serious matter.

Lewis Wind Farm

3. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has received communications from Western Isles Council seeking an urgent meeting to discuss the Lewis wind farm proposal. (S3O-2251)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Jim Mather met Angus Campbell, vice-convenor of the council, on Monday 28 January to discuss economic development in the Western Isles. He could not comment on the specifics of the Lewis wind farm proposal prior to its determination, but he discussed the socioeconomic challenges that the islands face. The Scottish Government wants renewable energy to contribute to the islands' economy, and Jim Mather has agreed to attend an energy summit in Stornoway on 17 March.

Robin Harper: I understand some of the complications to which the minister refers. However, trust in the planning process, especially in relation to certain developments, often hangs by a thread. Will the minister assure me that, to ensure transparency and fairness in the process, the same opportunity to meet ministers to discuss the Lewis wind farm proposal will be offered to other interested parties, including local communities?

Stewart Stevenson: We await a final determination of the planning application to which the member refers. There has been substantial engagement with a wide range of interest groups on this major development. I am sure that that will continue, as it normally does.

Housing Developments (Flooding Risk)

4. Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive why it continues to allow housing developments without sea defences to be constructed on coastal areas where the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has determined that there is a high risk of flooding. (S3O-2217)

The Minister for Environment (Michael Russell): As the member knows, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency provides information on flood risk through its indicative maps and advice on specific planning applications, but it is for those making the decision to take account of that advice and to consider it alongside all other relevant matters when determining whether planning permission should be granted.

Helen Eadie: I know that Michael Russell is a robust minister who is not afraid to intervene if SEPA has got something wrong. Will he intervene in a similarly robust manner if he agrees with me that the Scottish Government's reporter has got it wrong in the case of St David's bay, where the reporter has approved a development application without requiring that appropriate flood defences be put in place? By doing so, they have put homes and people at serious risk, despite SEPA's view that the area is at high risk of flooding and that there should be no development there.

Michael Russell: My robustness is tested in a variety of ways, including by the fact that this is the third time that I have answered the same question from Helen Eadie. I have also had a meeting with her on the subject. I am happy to meet her again and to continue being robust on the matter. I know that she has a strong interest in it, not least because she lives very close to the proposed development. I am happy to discuss the issue with her but, at the end of the day, it is for councils—that included the previous Labour administration in Fife—to make decisions. I will go on being robust in my discussions with the member and I hope that eventually we will reach the end of our dialogue.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Does the minister have information on how many housing developments in areas that are classified as flood plains were permitted during the period 2003 to 2007?

Michael Russell: I am happy to provide that information to the member. There were a substantial number of such developments, as

there always are. Scottish planning policy 7, which deals with planning and flooding, provides a framework for assessing coastal flood risk, so that planning authorities can include appropriate policies in their development plans. [*Interruption.*] Members seem to find the concept of planning against flooding amusing. No one who is faced with flooding finds it amusing. It is important that all the relevant parts of the debate are involved, so that the right decisions are made. If that had been the case previously, we would not have some of the difficulties that we have inherited from previous Administrations.

Parkinson's Disease

5. James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to support people who suffer from Parkinson's disease. (S3O-2227)

The Minister for Public Health (Shona Robison): The Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network is developing a clinical guideline on Parkinson's disease, which will focus on diagnosis and drug treatment. Publication of the guideline is expected in the autumn of next year. NHS Quality Improvement Scotland is developing clinical standards for neurological conditions. I understand that there will be specific standards for Parkinson's disease. Together, those two initiatives will lead to improvements throughout Scotland in supporting people living with Parkinson's disease, their families and their carers.

James Kelly: I am sure that the minister agrees that the work of Parkinson's disease nurse specialists is crucial in managing symptoms and preventing unnecessary hospital admissions. I am sure that she also agrees that there is a national shortage of such nurses, with only 17 covering 10,000 sufferers. Will the minister come back to the chamber with plans to extend that provision, as the current provision is clearly inadequate?

Shona Robison: I understand how highly Parkinson's disease nurse specialists are valued by people with the disease. The number of specialist nurses has increased in recent years. I am pleased that recently, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde took on another 3.5 whole-time equivalent Parkinson's disease nurse specialists. That sets a good example to all national health service boards. Another such example is the work of NHS Dumfries and Galloway on developing with the Parkinson's Disease Society a nurse specialist post. Other health boards are looking to do likewise. I encourage all boards to take a lead from boards that are developing nurse specialist posts.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): As the minister is aware, I am pursuing the establishment of a specialist neurological nurse

post in the Scottish Borders, which would include provision for people with Parkinson's disease. Has the minister been contacted by NHS Borders about the proposal?

Shona Robison: I am not aware of any such contact, but I will follow up the matter and find out what progress is being made. As I mentioned, the NHS QIS neurological standards that are being developed provide us with an opportunity to consider the role of Parkinson's disease nurse specialists. I am happy to have further discussions with NHS Borders and the member on how to take forward the proposal.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank the minister for the detailed replies that she is giving on this topic. She responded positively to the debate that took place on motor neurone disease—another neurological condition—and said that she hoped that specialist support nurses for neurological conditions generally would be provided. Has she made any progress on that general issue?

Shona Robison: The fact that NHS QIS is developing the clinical standards for neurological conditions shows that progress is being made in that direction. However, I am happy to write to the member with more specific details in answer to his question.

Economic Development (South of Scotland)

6. Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what it will do to support and encourage economic development in the south of Scotland. (S3O-2202)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): We place great importance on supporting and encouraging economic development throughout Scotland, including the south of Scotland.

The Government's economic strategy sets out how we will focus on creating a more successful country through increasing sustainable economic growth. The strategy sets out an approach to growth that is cohesive throughout Scotland's regions. Indeed, last week, I invited John Lamont and Christine Grahame to join me at the next textiles sector event, which is scheduled for 18 February. In addition, we will run a south of Scotland economy event, which will include constituency and regional MSPs.

Jim Hume: The restructuring of Scottish Enterprise will see the two local enterprise companies in the south of Scotland being incorporated into one structure that will cover the region but have no say in its development and no delegated authority. The local boards meet for the last time in March. Can the minister unequivocally guarantee that a full transition will occur on 1 April,

so that economic development will be uninterrupted? Further, does he acknowledge that the new structure cannot simply focus on companies that achieve £1 million extra growth a year? Does he recognise the complexity of the economy and the importance of small businesses to the south of Scotland?

Jim Mather: The process is cracking on, and we have every expectation of meeting that 1 April target elegantly. We intend to ensure that we develop the focus that will be required to drive the economy forward. We hope that, in doing so, we will be able to learn from what has happened in other places, which is why we are running the south of Scotland event. For example, in my constituency and in North Ayrshire, we have included lots of other stakeholders and spread the burden. We want to involve business in the regional panels, and that is what we will do, but we will also involve organisations such as the Food Standards Agency, the Forestry Commission, voluntary sector organisations, the National Trust for Scotland, Royal Mail, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage. We want to share the burden as we develop possibilities and ensure that we arrive at an elegant solution.

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): As Jim Hume said, the responsibility for economic development in the south of Scotland currently rests with the enterprise network. Can the minister tell us what organisation will be—in eight weeks' time—the public sector partner in Katalyst Projects, which is the delivery vehicle that was formed to progress the economic regeneration of the Gretna-Lockerbie-Annan corridor? Will it be Dumfries and Galloway Council or the new south of Scotland regional panel?

Jim Mather: If the member had listened carefully to what I said earlier, she would understand that we consider what she is talking about to be silo thinking. We want to bring people together. We want the local authorities and the new Scottish Enterprise south of Scotland region to get together with all the other relevant entities. We are talking about bringing Scotland together, working towards a unifying goal, and using the motivation and the enlightened self-interest of all those organisations to produce a better result for the people of the south of Scotland.

International Sporting Events

7. Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what value it places on international sporting events being hosted in Scotland and in what way it provides support. (S3O-2220)

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): International sporting events

have fantastic potential to showcase Scotland and all that we have to offer on an international stage. The world-class events that we host—both sporting and cultural—demonstrate that we are a dynamic and modern country, and a great place to visit, live, work, study, do business and invest. That is why we fund EventScotland to co-ordinate and provide leadership and support to the drive to secure major events for Scotland.

Karen Gillon: The minister will be aware that the world schools orienteering championships are coming to Scotland in April, which is the first time that any world schools event has been hosted in the United Kingdom. He will, therefore, share my disappointment at the failure of all the agencies over which he has responsibility to provide any support for that event's coming to Scotland. Serious financial shortfalls, in the region of £10,000, are now being faced.

The Government has said that it is open for business. Does that extend to Scotland's sporting young people? Will the minister intervene to ensure that the £10,000 that will ensure that the world schools orienteering championships are held successfully in Scotland in April is made available?

Stewart Maxwell: We value the work of young people and their involvement in sporting events in Scotland, and we recognise their achievements in representing Scotland in the UK and overseas. That is why we put so much effort into supporting them through sportscotland and local authorities. It is clear that the Government is very interested in hosting international sporting events—that was less so under previous Administrations—but I am not aware of the details of the application process relating to the world schools orienteering championships. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

Stewart Maxwell: The results of that process would clearly go to sportscotland and other bodies, such as the local authorities. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Stewart Maxwell: However, I am happy to look into the matter and respond to the member with full details as soon as possible.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-492)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Later today, I will have meetings to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland, and there will be an announcement on the new chair of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth games organising committee. That is one of the steps that must be taken to ensure that those games are a resounding success for the whole of Scotland.

Ms Alexander: I am sure that we are all looking forward to that important appointment.

How many schools does the Scottish National Party Government plan to build during this parliamentary session?

The First Minister: As Wendy Alexander well knows, we have promised to match Labour's school building programme brick for brick, and that is exactly what we intend to do. Far from being able to forecast the future, Wendy Alexander has had difficulties in telling us what has happened with the schools programme in the past. At First Minister's question time on 4 October last year, she said:

"Let me come armed with the facts and figures, which are that the previous Government built in excess of 300 new schools."—*[Official Report, 4 October 2007; c 2466.]*

Actually, it built 173 schools. Wendy Alexander is not for the first time having difficulty with facts, figures and calculations.

Ms Alexander: We have all learned that defence is usually the First Minister's best form of attack. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

Ms Alexander: I return to the issue. Labour delivered the largest-ever school building programme in this country's history. We built or refurbished 328 schools and promised to build 250 more, 45 of which were already in the pipeline at the election. Last week, the Minister for Schools and Skills tried to claim credit for those 45 schools to mask the fact that the SNP Government has no school building programme. The First Minister has been in government for nine months. When will he commission his first school?

The First Minister: The budget, which Wendy Alexander did not support yesterday, includes substantial capital uplift for local councils

throughout Scotland. I noticed that the word “refurbished” crept in when Wendy Alexander was giving statistics, and I think that the phrase is “Attack is the best form of defence.”

Ms Alexander: Let me attack. The First Minister has talked money, but he has not promised 250 new or refurbished schools. In October, he pledged in the chamber, as he has done again today, that he would match Labour’s school building programme brick for brick. Why then have Dumbarton academy and Elgin high school been cancelled, and Portobello high school and Dunfermline high school been put on hold? If building new schools was an issue for the First Minister in October and he has repeated the brick-for-brick pledge today, why will he not name 250 new schools as his target and bring forward the programme?

The First Minister: Let us start with the 45 schools, details of which we have announced since we came to office, but let us remember the additional capital expenditure that has been announced for this year’s financial programme, as well as the additional capital uplift. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order, please.

The First Minister: Let us also remember the consultation on new and better ways of funding our public services, which will finish on 14 March. This is a starter for 10—the not-for-profit distribution method has substantial advantages over the conventional public-private partnership method, the biggest of which is the fact that the profits go back to the community rather than elsewhere, into private hands.

Ms Alexander: The pupils and parents of Scotland want new schools, not lectures on public finance. When it comes to new school programmes, even though the Scottish National Party has done nothing more than complete the programmes that Labour put into development and claim credit for them, the First Minister continues to claim that his party will match brick for brick Labour’s pledge to build 250 new schools. Perhaps he would like to explain to the Parliament why, as the Scottish Parliament information centre told me yesterday, no new Government-funded PPP projects have started development since the election.

The First Minister: Forty-five have already been announced and completed since the election.

I say to Wendy Alexander, as gently as possible, that she is not in a fantastic position to lecture anyone on public or, indeed, private finance. If she had wanted to remove me from office, she had a perfect opportunity to do so yesterday. I can only suppose—from the Labour Party’s almost unanimous abstention on the budget—that she

wants me to continue in office. In the new mood of consensus, let me say that I want Wendy Alexander to continue in office.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-493)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I expect to meet the Prime Minister at the British-Irish Council in Dublin in the very near future. Perhaps I should take Annabel Goldie with me, as she seems to be pretty good at reaching agreements.

Annabel Goldie: There are some offers a girl can refuse. [*Laughter.*]

In 2004, the then First Minister, Jack McConnell, made a statement to the Parliament about the abhorrent abuse that had taken place in residential care in Scotland over a period of decades. The current First Minister addressed the issue in June of last year, when he made particular reference to the report on Kerelaw. This morning, the Minister for Children and Early Years responded to that review, and the Scottish Government now proposes to set up a Scottish truth and reconciliation forum.

Everyone views with revulsion the abuse of children. As I said in 2004,

“when its perpetrators are those who have been entrusted with the care of children, and in whom those children have placed their fragile trust, it is a particularly vile and odious betrayal.”—[*Official Report*, 1 December 2004; c 12392.]

Anything that helps to shine a light through that period of blackness in Scotland’s history is to be welcomed.

However well intended the truth and reconciliation forum is, is the First Minister satisfied that the culture of silence that prevailed and which countenanced the continuance of this depraved and awful activity is being addressed effectively? Will the proposed initiative encourage and support people in coming forward and reporting abuse and fears of potential abuse?

The First Minister: I thank Annabel Goldie for the way in which she introduced her question on an enormously serious subject. I stand by the statement that the Minister for Children and Early Years made to the Parliament this morning, which outlined a well-balanced approach.

I hope and believe that the answer to Annabel Goldie’s specific question is yes. The proposals that Adam Ingram announced will help with the atmosphere of openness and disclosure that is necessary if we are to protect our children, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Annabel Goldie: Although we all agree that the first obligation is to support victims who have suffered the nightmare of abuse, equally we must be sure that in providing that support we do not inadvertently prejudice or jeopardise any criminal proceedings, because, for victims, justice is as important as truth and reconciliation. Can the First Minister assure the Parliament that he has sought and received advice from the Lord Advocate that that laudable forum will not compromise such criminal proceedings?

The First Minister: As Annabel Goldie knows, under long-standing convention I am not meant to say whether I am seeking advice, never mind to disclose specific advice. The statement that the Minister for Children and Early Years made carries the support of the whole Government—it is a well-judged statement. The position in the statement is to address the crimes and the behaviour of the past; that does not preclude criminal action, if criminal action is found to be necessary when the matter goes before the normal judicial processes. However, the minister's statement was also designed to address what we must do in the future to prevent such things from ever happening again and staining Scottish society.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-494)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The next meeting of the Cabinet will discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Nicol Stephen: A Government press release that was issued this week said:

“a new dental school in Aberdeen is a major priority for the Scottish Government.”

The Aberdeen *Evening Express* said yesterday that the First Minister's plan

“looks like it's been drawn up on the back of a fag packet.”

Who is right? Importantly, will the First Minister tell the chamber whether any students at the Aberdeen dental school will have to pay tuition fees?

The First Minister: The commitment to the dental school is comprehensive, and it has been long awaited in the north-east of Scotland. I am surprised about two things: first, that when Nicol Stephen was in office he never gave such a commitment; and secondly, that he has not found it within himself to welcome the fact that the first students will start at the Aberdeen dental school later this year.

Nicol Stephen: The dental school is urgently needed—so are more dentists—in the north-east of Scotland, but there is confusion. People cannot apply through the normal university process; the staffing and accommodation are uncertain; and lecturers in dentistry were told that they could be forced to use videolinks to teach their classes from Dundee. However, for all those problems, does the First Minister agree that the biggest issue he needs to tackle concerns the students? Students in Aberdeen will not be allowed to be undergraduates—they must have a first degree already. That means that the student body will be restricted to people who are prepared to undertake eight years of study instead of the normal five, with all the extra costs and extra debt that that involves.

I have spoken today to the university admissions office, which is unable to guarantee that students will avoid tuition fees. The Student Awards Agency for Scotland has said that it will not pay the tuition fees, as the course is a second degree. Will the First Minister take urgent action to get the advice and support for students changed to ensure that they will not pay tuition fees? Will he ensure that those Aberdeen dental students are not disadvantaged?

The First Minister: I remind Nicol Stephen that this Government is abolishing tuition fees in Scotland. With regard to his detailed questions, Nicol Stephen seems to confuse the transitional arrangements with the long-term position. I would not say that he would do that deliberately, but it is always a suspicion that I have in my mind. He should congratulate the Government on the fact that we will have a dental school in Aberdeen, as opposed to the long years of nothing happening under the Labour-Liberal Executive in which he played a part.

I hope that I can perhaps tempt Annabel Goldie out of the right-wing alliance with the Liberals and the Labour Party on the constitution, and to join me in giving the people of Scotland the right to determine our own future—Nicol Stephen once supported that, but he has reneged on that, too.

The Presiding Officer: I have received a number of requests from members who wish to ask supplementary questions.

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): The First Minister is aware that the Ministry of Defence this week gave the green light to the sale of both the Defence Aviation Repair Agency at Almondbank—which employs 350 people in my constituency—and DARA Fleetlands to the small Canadian company Vector Aerospace for only £17 million. Is the First Minister aware that, less than five years ago, £5 million was invested in Almondbank alone, making the £17 million purchase price look like a bargain-basement

price? Will he and his Government join me in supporting the joint trade unions in their continued efforts to ensure the future security of their members' jobs? What can he do to help in those efforts?

The First Minister: As the constituency member knows, the Government has already been involved in seeking to defend the jobs in her constituency. I welcomed, as did John Swinney, the arrival on site of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defence to consider the issue. After the visit, we made further representations. I was disappointed that a decision was taken so quickly after the meeting, because I did not see how the parliamentary under-secretary could have properly assimilated all the information that she received on the visit.

I am extremely concerned about a number of aspects, but the underlying concern is obviously job security in Perthshire. I join the constituency member in expressing that concern. The normal provisions and support of the Scottish Government will be in place as we seek to co-operate with the trade unions and the workers to advance and protect their position.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Is the First Minister aware that the community on the island of Luing in Argyll currently has no lifeline ferry service because of the industrial action affecting Argyll and Bute Council? Does he acknowledge the distress that is being caused to people on Luing, whose children cannot go to school in Oban, and who have no way of getting off the island? What will the Scottish Government do about that serious situation? What back-up exists for such crucial lifeline ferry services?

The First Minister: As the member knows, a fixed-link ferry project is being appraised. That will be a matter for the local council in the first instance, but I shall consider the matter from a Government point of view and write to the member about his constituency interest.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): The First Minister is aware of just how important the private landlord registration scheme is in protecting constituents such as mine from antisocial behaviour and from rogue landlords who operate, at best, on the margins of organised crime. In the interests of brevity, can we take as read the First Minister's usual defence that the current situation is not his fault? Will he focus on how his Administration will progress private landlord registration?

I want to ask two specific questions. Will private landlord registration be a guaranteed part of single outcome agreements with local authorities? What is the First Minister's specific target for the level of

registration to be reached by this time next year to reassure my constituents that the issue is a continuing priority for the Executive?

The First Minister: Let us consider what has happened over the past year. As I understand it, this Government started with 15 per cent registration, inherited from Johann Lamont's party. The figure is now 55 per cent. That seems to me to be accelerated progress over the past nine months of this Government.

The issue will be part of discussions with local authorities on single outcome agreements. I am reminded of the words of the unnamed councillor in Glasgow who was looking at the general process of the Scottish Government. What did that Labour councillor say? "God bless the SNP Government."

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): What actions will the First Minister's Government take in relation to the forecast unemployment of 123 people when the Tenma mouldings company closes in Cumbernauld in April?

The First Minister: The normal processes of Government to support workers and workforces facing redundancy will move into operation. I assure the member that we will be quite prepared to discuss with him any specific queries on what those processes are.

Scottish Bank-notes

4. Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what representations the Scottish Government has made to the United Kingdom Government to protect the legal position of Scottish bank-notes. (S3F-496)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government was not afforded the opportunity of making representations to the UK Government on its proposal to legislate on the Scottish bank-note issue, as Her Majesty's Treasury made no contact at either ministerial or official level to inform us of what was in last week's consultation document.

The proposals have been buried in a wide-ranging consultation document on financial stability. The Scottish Government—and, I am sure, many others—will respond to that consultation in the strongest possible terms. I know that a wide range of opinion exists, stretching to the former First Minister—my immediate predecessor. This morning, I was delighted to see that he is joining the campaign to save the Scottish bank-note issue and Scottish bank-notes.

Keith Brown: Does the First Minister agree that it is extremely ironic that such an appalling measure has been proposed on the ground of

financial stability, given that the failures of the Labour Government and the Bank of England's regulatory regime mean that taxpayers in Scotland are being asked to assume financial responsibility for a share of the £24 billion debts of Northern Rock? Does he think that it is also ironic that the right of Scottish banks to issue notes is threatened by a Scottish Chancellor of the Exchequer and a Scottish Prime Minister?

In defending the rights of Scottish banks to issue notes, will the First Minister also defend the rights of people to use Scottish bank-notes without hindrance in the rest of the UK?

The First Minister: I remember that I have been invited to sign the *Scottish Daily Express* petition, which Jack McConnell signed yesterday. I will do that later today.

I hope that the issue can unite the Parliament and Scotland. It is ludicrous to suggest that the Scottish note issue, which has continued since 1695, is a threat to financial stability. I worked in the financial sector for some time. Every 20 years or so the Treasury would come up with a scheme that was basically about grabbing money for the Treasury at the expense of the Scottish financial sector and the Scottish economy. I regard the most recent threat to the note issue as a smash-and-grab raid on Scottish bank-notes. I hope that every member will support Scottish bank-notes, realise the seriousness of the situation and rally to the various campaigns to save the Scottish bank-note issue.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): May I tell the First Minister that he is mixing up two issues? The *Scottish Daily Express* campaign is to make Scottish bank-notes acceptable everywhere south of the border. Will he confess that what he has been saying recently represents yet another of his publicity stunts?

The First Minister *rose*—

George Foulkes: I have not finished.

Will the First Minister acknowledge that the real threat to Scottish bank-notes comes not from the Treasury but from independence, when Scottish bank-notes would be replaced by euros?

The First Minister: It is unfortunate that Lord George has not read the European constitution, which respects traditional banking practice—unlike HM Treasury, it seems. A Clydesdale Bank spokesperson said of the Treasury proposal:

"If this were to go ahead, it would force us to consider whether issuing banknotes would be viable in the future, a position we do not want to be forced into."

When I said that I hoped the issue would unite Scotland, I was—obviously—excluding Lord George Foulkes from such national unity. However, I have hope for the future. When one

member voted against the Scottish National Party budget yesterday I assumed that it was Lord George Foulkes, but he had abstained. He is halfway up the road to Damascus.

Fuel Poverty

5. Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to mitigate the impact of the latest increases in gas and electricity prices on the most vulnerable people in our society. (S3F-509)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Ministers have met representatives of the energy industry and the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets and given the clear message that they must do all that they can to protect vulnerable consumers. We will keep up the pressure on companies and on ministers in Westminster. We are sending a clear message that we do not want an energy-rich but fuel-poor Scotland.

The Government is investing £138 million in our fuel poverty programmes between now and 2011. For the benefit of members, I say that we are boosting this year's programme and have already delivered more installations of central heating systems in 10 months than the previous Administration did in the entire year 2006-07.

Michael McMahon: I am sure that the First Minister is aware that Scottish Power has ended backcharging for customers in other areas of the United Kingdom and that he shares my view that that is unfair on Scottish customers who will continue to be in debt through no fault of their own. His Minister for Communities and Sport, Stewart Maxwell, agreed to meet Scottish Power to discuss the issue. Has that meeting taken place? If so, what was the outcome? If nothing has changed, will the First Minister intervene personally to address this urgent problem?

The First Minister: Yes, the meeting has taken place. I will arrange for minister Maxwell to write to the member on the matter. When we are faced by sharply rising fuel costs, we must do all that we can to ensure that energy companies in Scotland match up to their responsibilities to the most vulnerable sections of society. As members know, the administration and regulation of energy companies is reserved to the Westminster Government. That said, no member should be shy about making the point that it would be a huge and disgraceful irony if Scotland were to continue in a situation of energy plenty but fuel poverty.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Is the First Minister aware that one of the lessons that has been learned from the free central heating scheme is that elderly people are either turning off their heating systems or incurring excessive bills

because they do not know—or, in some cases, sadly, forget—how to adjust their system's timings and temperature? The issue is one with which I have some sympathy. Regular checks are needed on the operation of the systems. Will he and his Government work with the gas and electricity companies, and the central heating contractors, to ensure that consumers—particularly older consumers—are properly and regularly supported in making the best use of their systems? I ask that in light of rising fuel prices.

The First Minister: Yes. The point is entirely fair. I will respond to the request from Robert Brown.

General Medical Services Contract

6. Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): To ask the First Minister what outcomes the Scottish Government is seeking to achieve through the new GMS contract negotiations with the British Medical Association. (S3F-510)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We have consistently made it clear, most recently through the "Better Health, Better Care" action plan, that flexible access to general practitioner services is crucial to our vision of a more patient-centred national health service in Scotland.

Like all public servants, GPs strive to offer services to the public in a way that best suits the needs of their patients and recognises the challenges for those at work, those caring for others, and those with geographical challenges in making and keeping appointments. The offer on the GP contract for 2008-09 directly reflects that need for appropriate and flexible access. We continue to have discussions with the Scottish General Practitioner Committee on that important area.

If GPs accept the offer, it would mean additional funding of £19 million in Scotland, including £9.5 million of new money, which will be provided through the spending review, in exchange for around two and a half hours of additional patient access to GPs, per week, for the average practice. I believe—the Government believes—that that represents a fair deal.

Ross Finnie: I am grateful to the First Minister for his detailed response in respect of his aims and objectives for flexible hours. However, does he not agree that the current negotiations on extended and more flexible hours, with which and in which his Government has become engaged, will not achieve that aim? Among others, one reason for that is that the negotiations are based on a GP working on her or his own. Does he agree that the outcome that patients need the negotiations to secure is 24-hour care, with a

resolution of the current unsustainable out-of-hours care provision?

The First Minister: We are also looking at out-of-hours care, but the current negotiations are specifically on the issue of flexible opening. I am aware that one reaction is to say that the terms of the UK deal are not tailored to the needs of the Scottish population. In terms of the UK framework, we are anxious that the result is not a breakdown of communications and, perhaps, the imposition of an arrangement. As we do in all our dealings with the communities and representatives of Scotland, we would much prefer to reach agreement in an amicable manner. Certainly, the agreement in Scotland—with the additional funds that are being pledged in Scotland—will be designed to meet Scottish circumstances.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's comments about the additional £9.5 million for GPs should they accept the deal, which is distinct from the situation in England, where GPs will be penalised if they do not accept. What do patients groups say about the negotiations?

The First Minister: To answer that directly, Jean Turner, who is known to many members and who is the executive director of the Scotland Patients Association, has said:

"Illness does not just happen between the hours of nine and five. There are always going to be emergencies. I welcome this proposal because people do need a more flexible service. Extending doctors' hours has got to be good for patients."

That is a useful quotation to remember. Few would disagree with Jean Turner's response on behalf of the Patients Association.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): If the First Minister answers my question without insulting me, I might be in need of a GP service, although I should warn him that if his insult is too gratuitous, he may be in need of a GP service. I am sure that members throughout the Parliament support proposals to improve access to GPs. Will the First Minister give a specific assurance that the current proposals to extend GP hours will not have any detrimental impact on existing GP services? What is the timescale for implementation?

The First Minister: Of course the proposals will not have an effect on existing services. The services that are being proposed are additional, with additional money. The member will consider that to be a very direct answer. I think that our relationship is blossoming—why else would she, too, have abstained, rather than voted against in the vote on the budget yesterday?

The Presiding Officer: I hope that nobody is in need of a GP after today's First Minister's question time.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

12:31

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Europe, External Affairs and Culture

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is questions on Europe, external affairs and culture. Question 1 is from Michael McMahon, who is not in the chamber, I am afraid. Members are already aware of my views on that. We will move on to question 2.

Expo 2010 (Funding)

2. Tom McCabe (Hamilton South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will honour the previous Administration's commitment to provide funding to ensure an enhanced Scottish presence at expo 2010 in Shanghai. (S3O-2233)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): The planned Shanghai expo will be a huge event and it is important that there is a strong Scottish presence there. Obviously, we expect Scotland to be represented and promoted by the United Kingdom bodies as part of their UK-wide remit, just as they would be expected to represent Scottish interests at other events. On that basis, and on reviewing the commitments that we inherited, we do not see a rationale for an additional contribution from Scotland on the scale that was envisaged.

I have offered UK ministers and ministers from the Northern Ireland Assembly and Welsh Assembly Governments a meeting to discuss the matter further.

Tom McCabe: I can only agree with the minister about the importance of expo 2010 in Shanghai and the fact that Scotland should have a prominent place within it. Expo 2010 is an extremely important event in one of the most vibrant economies in the world, which is perhaps soon to become the most important economy in the world. The rationale behind an enhanced Scottish presence was to ensure that, proportionately, Scotland got more from that important event than other parts of the United Kingdom because of the belief that Scotland contributes more than the rest of the United Kingdom.

On that basis, and given that the exhibition could be critically important to the future engagement of Scottish companies with one of the world's most important economies, I ask the minister to reconsider her decision.

Linda Fabiani: I am glad that Mr McCabe recognises that Scotland contributes more. That is all the more reason for the UK to play its proper part in the promotion of Scotland, given that it is a UK-wide event and Scotland will be represented by UK bodies.

As far as business is concerned, I am looking at refreshing the China plan, which will outline the Scottish Government's aspirations for engagement with China. It will focus on the areas that are relevant to China in which Scotland has a true competitive edge.

Human Trafficking

3. Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with new European Union member states regarding concerns over human trafficking. (S3O-2189)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): The Solicitor General attended the European Union justice and home affairs council in Brussels on 8 and 9 November 2007, at which the council conclusions on the trafficking of human beings were discussed. Representatives of the new EU member states were also present.

Sandra White: Are there any plans to formalise the role of the trafficking awareness-raising alliance—or TARA—in the implementation of the national referral mechanism, given that the current process is police led, which goes against international best practice? Further, what action can the EU or indeed the Scottish Government take against countries that do not comply—or take action to comply—with the convention against trafficking?

Linda Fabiani: There are quite a lot of issues in Ms White's questions. I am pleased to let all members in the chamber know—in case not everyone has realised—that the Home Secretary announced in January that the United Kingdom intends to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by the end of the year. The Scottish Government will work closely with the Home Office to ensure that every possible initiative is taken to protect people who come from the EU countries.

There have been some fairly high-level meetings with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency and Strathclyde Police to ensure that all the work that is identified in the action plans will be considered and that specific steps will be taken to ensure not only that we fully comply with the convention when it is ratified but that, at a local level, we do the best for cities in Scotland. Many concerns have been expressed by many members and we have to

ensure that the needs of the immigrant communities are well looked after.

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): During the world cup, women were trafficked to Germany to be used by men. Given that experience, has the minister had any discussions with the relevant UK ministers and local authorities in Scotland to ensure that men are not able to use such trafficked women during, in particular, the Commonwealth games and the Olympics?

Linda Fabiani: I know that Ms Godman has long been campaigning on these important issues. Discussions about them are going on all the time at official and ministerial level. There was a lot of publicity during that football tournament. I undertake to pass the concerns that have been expressed today to the cabinet secretaries who have responsibility for such issues; at the moment, I am not able to give details of the discussions that have taken place.

Arts Festivals (Rural and Island Areas)

4. Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will outline its policy on the support of arts festivals in rural and island areas of Scotland. (S3O-2196)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): I have a sense of déjà vu, given last night's members' business debate on traditional music, festivals and arts. As Mr McArthur will know, funding for the arts in Scotland is currently disbursed by the Scottish Arts Council. Once I have set the overall budget, it determines which events and organisations it will award funding to. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Arts Council recognises the importance of local festivals in providing access to the arts, bringing communities together and, as has been apparent in Orkney and Shetland during recent years, providing opportunities for the development of artistic talent and the promotion of local tourism. In 2007, the Scottish Arts Council awarded more than £1 million in support of festivals across Scotland.

Liam McArthur: I thank the minister for her response, much of which I agree with. As she said, the Orkney folk festival is a growing success. She will also be aware of the rave reviews being garnered by the revamped Pier arts centre in Stromness since its relaunch. Orkney now has a truly world-class facility.

Will the minister accept that there is a need to ensure that the festivals, venues and artists that are to be found in the remoter parts of the country receive adequate levels of funding so that they can survive and flourish? Does she recognise, for example, the additional costs incurred by the organisers of the St Magnus festival in attracting

world-class performers, particularly orchestras? I take this opportunity to invite the minister to attend the St Magnus festival in my constituency at the end of June. I am sure that she will be hugely impressed by the range and quality of the programme that has been pulled together by Glenys Hughes and her team.

Linda Fabiani: I am always happy to be hugely impressed, although I cannot make a commitment to attend this year's St Magnus festival at the moment, much as I would like to. As I said in last night's debate, I intend to visit Orkney and Shetland sooner rather than later.

I know that the Scottish Arts Council is considering some of the events that are going on in Orkney, and it will probably write to the organisers soon. I recognise the importance of the cultural events that take place all around the country, particularly in rural and remote areas. The Pier arts centre is a mark of that.

I also take this opportunity to say that if the Lewis chessmen were back in their rightful home, that is something else that could be used for the promotion of rural Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The question has encouraged last-minute arrivals. I call Mr Gibson.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I apologise for arriving late.

Many of the festivals that are organised in the islands and remote areas are run by community groups. I would like the minister to take that on board. Will she ensure that the Scottish Arts Council realises that running such festivals in those areas is not a commercial matter and that it is central to our cultural life that they be fully supported?

The Presiding Officer: Apology accepted.

Linda Fabiani: It is absolutely true that we must recognise the cultural and economic benefits of the things that we do, and that it is not always necessary to grant them equal importance.

I will relay Mr Gibson's concerns to the Scottish Arts Council and ask it to respond to me.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The minister will be aware of the very successful Pittenweem arts festival, which last year attracted more than 100 artists to 80 different venues as well as thousands of visitors to the town. Is she aware that during the past four years, the festival has attracted less than £18,000 of public funding? Does she feel that the Scottish Arts Council should have a greater role—or perhaps she could play a role in influencing it—in supporting rural arts festivals of that kind, which do so much to showcase the best of Scottish arts and culture?

Linda Fabiani: If I were able to accept every invitation that I got, my life would be one long holiday—it would be great.

I recognise the concerns that the member has raised and will put them, along with those of Mr Gibson, to the Arts Council and ask for a response.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Given the role of the Scottish Arts Council in funding such festivals, should the minister not be more concerned about that organisation's budget than she is about the Lewis chessmen? It was revealed for the first time in the Finance Committee's report on the budget, through a letter from the minister, that the SAC's budget will decline by £3 million over the next three years, which represents a real-terms cut of almost 10 per cent. Will she explain why that has never been brought to the Parliament's attention and—more important—what effect it will have on the funding of the festivals under discussion?

Linda Fabiani: The culture budget will increase by 16 per cent over the spending review period.

Voytek the Soldier Bear

5. Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has any plans to commemorate and celebrate Voytek, the soldier bear, who served in the Polish army during the second world war and served out his retirement at Edinburgh zoo. (S3O-2191)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): The Scottish Government has no plans to commemorate or celebrate the life of Voytek, the soldier bear.

Members: Aw.

Linda Fabiani: However, I am aware that there is a campaign to ask the Parliament to commemorate and celebrate the life of Voytek. That is not something over which the Government has any say.

Along with the rest of Scotland, we fully recognise the contribution that Polish land forces—including Voytek, who was an enlisted soldier—made to the defence of our nation and its democracy, and we are indebted to all of them for their courage and valour.

Gavin Brown: I gently ask the minister to reconsider her position. Given that an article on Voytek that appeared on the BBC Scotland website received some 400,000 hits, coupled with the fact that there has been talk of a Hollywood blockbuster about the life of Voytek, I ask her to consider the possibility of looking at the issue again from a tourism angle.

Linda Fabiani: Any application that is made to the Scottish Government will be looked at as one of the many applications that we consider.

Scottish Borders (Public Information Broadcasts)

6. Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether the digital switchover in the Scottish Borders will signal a review of the Scottish Government's policy on providing public information broadcasts to people in the south of Scotland currently served by Border television. (S3O-2177)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): I thank Christine Grahame for her question, because it raises an issue that is of concern to many people.

The Scottish Government does not use Border TV because such use can be bought only as an ITV macro package, which means broadcasting to northern England—80 per cent of the population in the Border TV transmission area are in England. Therefore, we use Channel 4 Scotland and Channel 5 Scotland.

The digital switchover programme is a responsibility of HM Government and is being implemented by Digital UK. Scottish Government officials are involved in an interdepartmental working group, through which we are alerted to any emerging difficulties. I have met the managers of Digital UK to discuss potential concerns.

Christine Grahame: I thank the minister for a full and interesting answer, but does she agree that, following the recent announcement of plans to carve up Border TV news and current affairs and to generate output for the region from Newcastle, the time has come to ensure that the people of the Borders and, indeed, the whole of the south of Scotland are provided with programmes that are produced and made in Scotland? Although the changes that have been announced for Border TV might be regrettable for staff in Carlisle, the proposals represent an opportunity to enhance programming for the south of Scotland, by making it more relevant to the people there.

Linda Fabiani: As I have said, I know that people in the Border TV area have strong feelings about the changes that ITV plc plans to make to news provision. I worry that Border TV will be merged with Tyne Tees Television. As yet, ITV has not made an application to the Office of Communications to merge those services. If it does, I will encourage Ofcom to consider the views of local people extremely carefully. The Scottish Broadcasting Commission has already raised the matter with ITV, and ITV has made it clear that it views it as a commercial issue.

The Broadcasting Commission is moving on to the culture and democratic stages of its work, which will include consideration of current arrangements for the provision of network news programmes, whether those arrangements are right for and relevant to Scottish audiences, and whether changes are needed to the structure and funding of ITV licences in Scotland. During a parliamentary debate on the matter, I encouraged members to raise their concerns with the commission. I do so again now.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Does the minister share my hope that digital switchover will lead to more rather than less local television, given the increased amount of space available on the digital spectrum?

In relation to Border TV specifically, does the minister agree that the important thing for the Government to do—although Ofcom is the more relevant body in this situation—is to listen to the views of local people, who value their local, Scottish and United Kingdom identities? Should not the views of local people be paramount in the matter?

Linda Fabiani: I absolutely hope that, generally, the views of the consumer are taken into account. I am encouraging as many people as possible to make their views known because notice has to be taken of those views. Although I hope that digitalisation will have the capacity to work better for consumers, consumers must make their voices strongly heard, as must those who represent them.

International Development Policy (Review)

7. David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish the conclusion of its review of its international development policy. (S3O-2248)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): The call for comments on the international development policy review closed on 31 October 2007. It has taken a bit of time to analyse the responses because a broad range of views was expressed. I am now considering the outcomes in relation to our international development policy. An announcement will be made soon, along with the publication of the refreshed policy.

David Stewart: The minister will be well aware of the growing role of the third sector in Malawi. Will she outline how organisations such as the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations can support their equivalent partner organisations in Malawi to ensure the continued development and strengthening of that sector?

Linda Fabiani: I am delighted to say that I am going to Malawi this Saturday. Among the many

things that I will be looking at is one of the strands that were previously put in place, which is exactly the issue to which the member referred. I think that the member will be quite pleased by the announcement that will be made later today about how we are spending the rest of the money in this year's international development budget. The SCVO does a very good job. One of the ways forward for Malawi is for the country to have an organisation that is able to carry out a similar function.

International Development Policy

8. Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress it is making with its international development policy to ensure measurable and sustainable development in some of the world's poorest countries. (S3O-2169)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): As I outlined to Mr Stewart, the results of the policy review will shortly be made public. I want to build on progress to date and to focus future resources on those in the greatest need, so that we can achieve positive, measurable and sustainable outcomes. One of the reasons why I am going to Malawi on Saturday is to ensure that we take on board what the people of Malawi see as the best options for their country, so that we have a true partnership between Malawi and Scotland.

Alasdair Allan: As the minister will be aware, HIV is endemic in many African countries. What plans does the Government have to work positively in Malawi, where 17 per cent of the population has HIV and where, according to Oxfam, life expectancy is 38?

Linda Fabiani: It is an awful situation. Everyone in the world who is more fortunate should be trying to assist. There are huge issues related to the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. For example, it is estimated that in Malawi, 1 million of the 11 million population are orphans. The United Kingdom Department for International Development does good work in that regard. We should all work together to try to tackle those issues. As I said, some of the issues are huge, and no one should tackle them alone. Therefore, we have continuing dialogue with DFID about how Scotland's contribution can best enhance that work and make a difference where it is necessary.

Education and Lifelong Learning

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I am told that Marilyn Livingstone is unwell, so question 1 has been withdrawn.

Perth College

2. Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP): Before I ask my question, I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, for my mobile phone inadvertently going off. I genuinely thought that I had switched it off before I came into the chamber.

To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Perth College regarding its future. (S3O-2165)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): I believe that Perth College, like all Scotland's colleges, has a bright future in delivering the skills that a smarter and more prosperous Scotland will require. I understand that it has ambitious development plans, but it is for the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council rather than ministers to discuss with the college the funding and other implications of those plans.

Roseanna Cunningham: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the Ministry of Defence's decision to sell off the Defence Aviation Repair Agency facility at Almondbank. She may not be aware of the MOD's consistent commitment to providing apprenticeship places, which are important for Perth College. Will she undertake discussions with Vector Aerospace, which will be the new owner, to ensure the continuation of that apprenticeship programme? It has been an astounding success and is integral to a healthy future for Perth College, which is, of course, also part of the UHI Millennium Institute's bid for university status.

Fiona Hyslop: I am aware of the situation and will encourage all relevant agencies to build on the successful apprenticeship training programme—which, I understand, has provided 20 apprenticeships with Perth College in recent years—so that such effort continues in future.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The minister will be aware of the excellent work that is currently done at Perth College and of its ambitions to get university title as part of UHI, which would bring huge economic benefits to the area, developing Perth as a university town and helping with its bid for legal city status. Will she assure us that the Scottish Government will do all that it can to assist UHI attain university title? We have been waiting an awful long time for that to happen.

Fiona Hyslop: We are keen to support the UHI Millennium Institute in its aspirations for university title and officials continue to work closely with it, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Scottish funding council. Indeed, officials from the lifelong learning directorate recently met senior management from the UHI Millennium Institute and HIE in Inverness.

Education Services (Glasgow)

3. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with Glasgow City Council about education services. (S3O-2229)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): Recent discussions with Glasgow City Council education services have covered a number of important issues, including the welfare rights of asylum seeker children in Scotland and the rising number of pupils with English as an additional language.

Johann Lamont: The minister will recall the importance of the United Kingdom Government's report "Aiming high for disabled children: better support for families", which generated £34 million in consequential for this Administration and made a series of important recommendations about the central role of parents in the development of appropriate services for the families of disabled children. What discussions has she had with Glasgow City Council on the shaping of services alongside parents and how does she expect the matter to be taken forward? What level of support should be provided for out-of-school care for children with special needs, which is a critical service for working parents of disabled children?

Maureen Watt: My colleague Adam Ingram and the First Minister met parents of disabled children recently to discuss those matters. Discussions on those issues, including after-school care, continue.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Has the minister discussed with Glasgow City Council its spending on music education, such as the delivery of the youth music initiative and using traditional music providers, such as Fèis Rois from my region, to ensure even greater stimulus for children in schools in areas of high deprivation?

Maureen Watt: Organisations such as Fèis Rois are good at engaging with schools throughout Scotland. We welcome the input of outside organisations that enhance the curriculum for children.

Early Intervention

4. Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what early intervention measures it intends to implement for vulnerable two-year-olds. (S3O-2212)

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): The early years strategy, which is being developed in partnership with local government and other early years interests, will address the range of services needed to support young children and their families.

Rhona Brankin: The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning said:

"Some people might say that to take a child away from its mother and into nursery aged two is not necessarily a good thing."

Given that the cabinet secretary returned to work after she had a baby, does the Minister for Children and Early Years agree that double standards are being exercised, whereby nursery or child care is available for politicians' two-year-olds but not for vulnerable two-year-olds whose parents are addicted to drugs? Will the minister take the opportunity to tell members whether ministers will pull the plug on the free nursery schemes for vulnerable two-year-olds in Glasgow, Dundee and North Ayrshire? Yes or no?

Adam Ingram: I will not comment at this stage on Rhona Brankin's first supplementary question. I let that pass. However, her second question was a classic example of Labour's misrepresentation of the Scottish Government's position on vulnerable children. Her scaremongering is distasteful, to say the least.

The facts of the matter are as follows. The pilot funding in Glasgow, Dundee and North Ayrshire was always due to end in June 2008. Nothing has been cancelled. The evaluation of the pilots will be fed into our consideration of targeted provision for two-year-olds throughout Scotland, as part of our early years strategy. The pilots are a tiny fraction of overall provision for vulnerable children. Many local authorities already provide nursery places for vulnerable under-threes, as a matter of course—

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): What about Edinburgh?

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Adam Ingram: The local authorities who introduced the pilots might decide to mainstream the services. Of course, they are in a much better position to do so than they used to be, given the flexibility afforded to them by the removal of ring fencing and the record resources that the Government is making available to local authorities.

Free School Meals (Pilot Schemes)

5. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what resources have been allocated for further evaluation of free school meals provision, following the end of the local authority pilot schemes in March 2008. (S3O-2238)

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): The evaluation of the free school meals trial in five local authorities will cover the period from October 2007 to the end of March 2008. We expect to receive the report on the evaluation at the end of July. We have not

allocated resources for further evaluation beyond then.

Pauline McNeill: Can the minister confirm that Government policy is to raise the threshold so that children in families in receipt of working tax credit will be entitled to free school meals? That key measure—*[Interruption.]* I apologise; that was my mobile phone. Will the minister implement the policy this year or next year? I implore him not to wait longer to implement a key measure that will tackle poverty and help low-income families with children of all ages.

Adam Ingram: Pauline McNeill will be aware that the issue is included in the concordat that we have agreed with local government. Subject to legislation being passed, free school meal entitlement will be extended to children in families who are in receipt of maximum child tax credit and maximum working tax credit from August 2009. We hope that that will bridge the gap between the number of children who live in poverty, which is estimated to be a shocking 25 per cent of children, and the 19 per cent who are entitled to free school meals.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): Does the minister agree that we have witnessed one of the most brass-necked displays that the Parliament has ever seen, given that it was the Labour Government that refused point blank to introduce the measures that Pauline McNeill is now imploring an SNP Government to introduce? Can I assure the minister—

The Presiding Officer: No, but you can ask a question.

Tricia Marwick: Does the minister agree that the initial results from the pilot areas in Fife show that the provision of free school meals introduced by the Scottish National Party Government is going very well? Can I implore the minister to ensure that, once the pilots are finished, we continue to take the measures that I know the Government is committed to on child poverty?

Adam Ingram: It is not unusual for Tricia Marwick and me to agree. As I indicated in a previous answer, the evaluation of the free school meal pilots will be based on results and it will come through after the end of March. Anecdotal evidence, gathered on a number of visits that I have undertaken throughout the country, shows that there is tremendous enthusiasm for the Scottish Government's policy, with a tremendous uptake of school meals in primary schools. It is a policy of which SNP members can be really proud.

School Building Programmes (Funding)

6. George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the alternative funding arrangements to public-private partnership

for school building programmes will be made available. (S3O-2219)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): The Scottish futures trust is our alternative funding mechanism to the standard private finance initiative; it will deliver better, more efficient infrastructure for taxpayers. A consultation paper was launched in December, with responses due by 14 March. Decisions will be taken thereafter.

George Foulkes: This Government has been in office for more than nine months. The only new schools that have been approved are those that were already in the pipeline from the previous Labour Administration. Will the minister admit that the Scottish futures trust is a non-runner—a dead parrot? If not, when will it be set up? This year, next year—to echo Pauline McNeill—sometime or, as I predict, never?

Maureen Watt: Our manifesto commitment was to match the then Executive's planned building programme brick for brick. We have agreed to do that, have taken the programme forward and provided the finance for it, which was not in place prior to the election.

There is a genuine consultation under way on the Scottish futures trust and we are not predicting its results. The trust is our alternative funding mechanism and it will deliver better, more efficient infrastructure for the taxpayer.

I remind the member that when voters were consulted prior to the election they most favoured a policy to ensure that all state schools and hospitals were built and run by public bodies rather than private companies.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Does the minister share my concern that there has been no progress since May on three high schools in Fife that have been identified as needing replaced? Nine new schools have been officially opened since May—one by the minister—but they were all built under the previous Labour Administration.

Maureen Watt: I remind the member that the school building programme is a matter for the local authorities. This Government has provided £3 billion extra in capital for investment in schools and other infrastructure.

Schools (Free Milk)

7. Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it intends to reintroduce free milk to schools. (S3O-2200)

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): The Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007 gives local authorities the power to provide free milk in schools. Under the terms of the concordat with

local government, it will be for local authorities to decide whether they wish to adopt that policy.

Local authorities are able to access the European Union school milk subsidy scheme to help them provide free school milk. We support them by topping up that subsidy by in the region of £235,000 each year. We believe that that is a flexible and enabling approach.

Hugh O'Donnell: With only passing reference to the fact that the provision of free milk was ended as a result of Mrs Thatcher, I point out that, according to information that I have from a local authority in my region, six benefit criteria can potentially apply in deciding whether children receive free milk. Has the minister been in touch with the United Kingdom Government about those criteria and the implications of the situation for his answer to my initial question? If so, have we made any progress on those benefit restrictions?

Adam Ingram: The straight answer to that question is no. According to last year's local government finance returns, 28 local authorities provide a free milk scheme in primary schools and, for pre-school, the figure goes up to 31 authorities. I expect local authorities to consider carefully whether they should have a free school milk scheme as part of meeting their duty to endeavour to ensure that schools are health promoting.

Teachers (Assaults)

8. Bashir Ahmad (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to tackle the increase in verbal and physical assaults on teachers in primary and secondary schools. (S3O-2168)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Maureen Watt): The Scottish Government is committed to promoting positive relationships and developing harmonious learning environments in which pupils can learn and teachers can teach without disruption. We are funding a positive behaviour team that helps schools to introduce and embed a wide range of approaches that are aimed at improving discipline in our schools, such as restorative practices and the cool in school programme. In partnership with local government, we will also develop new guidance on promoting positive behaviour and dealing with indiscipline. Our priorities include early intervention, pre-school entitlement, identification of children at risk and the curriculum for excellence, all of which will contribute to ensuring that our children get the best start in life and are included, engaged and involved throughout their school careers.

Bashir Ahmad: As was reported a couple of weeks ago, new figures that have been released show that 11,601 cases of verbal abuse against

teachers were reported last year. Unfortunately, we are faced with a difficult situation. No school, parent or politician wants the number of exclusions to rise but, understandably, teachers who have suffered verbal or physical abuse will be hesitant to work with people who have been aggressive towards them. What does the minister think that we can do to ensure that our teachers feel safe in our schools, while using exclusion only as a last resort?

Maureen Watt: The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that we reduce the number of those dreadful incidents—we want a zero tolerance approach. We will continue to work with local government to develop the best strategies that provide teachers with the support, training and confidence that they need to deal with all levels of indiscipline in schools. Our national surveys tell us that that is what teachers want. We will do that through the development of the new guidance with our partners in local government and through the positive behaviour team. That team works with local authorities in schools to introduce and embed approaches that create calm learning environments and promote positive behaviour. That works—we have seen the impressive results of improved behaviour and a reduction in exclusions in schools such as Tulliallan primary school, which I visited last week.

Free School Meals (West Dunbartonshire Pilot Scheme)

9. Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what early indications there are of the level of success of the free school meals pilot in West Dunbartonshire. (S3O-2185)

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): Early anecdotal evidence suggests that the free school meals trial has been well received by parents, pupils and schools in West Dunbartonshire. We await with interest the findings of the full evaluation of the trial, which we expect to receive at the end of July.

Gil Paterson: I was interested in the minister's replies to Pauline McNeill and Tricia Marwick. Can the minister confirm that the scheme has been very well received in West Dunbartonshire? I encourage the minister to do two things: increase the scope of the scheme, lifting the age limit so that more children can benefit from it; and quickly expand it throughout Scotland because it is so good.

Adam Ingram: As I have indicated, we will extend entitlement to free school meals, subject to legislation being passed in the Parliament, as of August 2009. We hope, subject to the evaluation, to roll out the pilot scheme to the whole of Scotland by August 2010.

Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-1256, in the name of John Swinney, on the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The overall funding to local authorities for 2008-09 was agreed as part of the Budget (Scotland) Bill yesterday. This motion seeks Parliament's agreement to the detail of the allocation of revenue funding to individual authorities as set out in the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008.

The order provides for the distribution of more than £9.2 billion in general revenue grant for local authorities in 2008-09 and seeks agreement for payment of an additional £128.3 million for 2007-08 to support a range of specific commitments that are delivered in partnership through local authorities. I will return to the detail shortly.

Yesterday's agreement of the Government's budget plans for a more successful Scotland signals a new, joined-up approach to public spending in Scotland. It means that the money that we spend will work better, because it will work to deliver on clear national outcomes, across our strategic objectives and in support of the Administration's core purpose. We have been clear that the Government is spending to improve, and we are investing more than ever in local authorities, as we recognise the key role that they play in delivering our strategic objectives.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): If this is a generous settlement for local authorities, why is the cabinet secretary's party colleague in Aberdeen, Councillor Kirsty West, saying that her authority is closing schools because the council has insufficient funding from the Government?

John Swinney: The Government is giving record sums of money to local authorities, each of which must take appropriate decisions. The Government will not micromanage local authorities in the inefficient fashion of the previous Administration; we will take wise decisions to financially support local authorities properly, to allow them discretion to take the required decisions and to work within the framework of the historic concordat that structures the relationships between the national Scottish Government and local government in all our communities.

Since the Government's spending review announcement in November and the publication of

our concordat, we have been working positively and constructively with our local government partners. It gives me great pleasure to update the Parliament today on some of the progress that we have made already. We have heard positive recommendations from all parties on the benefits of the concordat. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and I have already met the presidential team of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to maintain momentum on the work of implementing the concordat. We are well on the way to putting in place single outcome agreements with each council. I expect them to be in order and in place by 1 April 2008. We have been working closely with COSLA to ensure that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008, for which we ask approval today, is the fairest and best package that we can deliver for local government in such a tight financial context.

We are moving forward together to make this a more successful Scotland. We are entrusting local authorities to develop approaches that are right for their local areas. Together, we have created a new opportunity to develop public services that fully and effectively meet the needs of people in their local communities.

In December, I announced the indicative resource allocations for local government, which began the formal consultation period with COSLA on the terms of the settlement. I can confirm today that the final allocations confirmed in the order have been agreed with COSLA.

Over Christmas, some unfounded allegations were made in some quarters about disputes between central Government and local government over the allocation of funding. Desperate claims had been made that the concordat between central Government and local government was unravelling, but nothing could be further from the truth. I assure Parliament today that the discussions that we have had, and will continue to have, with COSLA are a reflection of how well this Government chooses to work with local government. We listened to local authorities' comments and worked with them to ensure that the resources provided in the order are what is fair and best for them.

I am able to confirm that local government will benefit from a package of provision amounting to £11.2 billion in 2008-09, £11.6 billion in the subsequent year and £12 billion in 2010-11. Total funding over the three-year period will amount to more than £34.8 billion and by 2010-11 funding from this Government will have increased by 12.9 per cent from the equivalent amount in 2007-08.

The total provision includes the general revenue funding and the distribution of non-domestic-rate income, which are set out in the order, along with

specific grant funding and other funding where distribution has still to be confirmed, as well as the sums set aside to deliver a council tax freeze.

As I announced yesterday, we considered the Finance Committee's recommendation on the budget to increase funding for police recruitment. Those revisions will be deployed through the police central grant, but there must be close involvement for local authorities, through police boards, in achieving the Government's objectives—and the Parliament's objectives—in increasing police recruitment.

We also listened to the Finance Committee's recommendation to accelerate the business rates reductions for small businesses. The introduction of the bonus scheme will be brought forward and fully implemented a year earlier, by 2009-10, and the phased rollout planned in 2008-09 will be accelerated from 50 per cent to 80 per cent for our smallest businesses. That will provide a direct competitive contribution to the growth of small businesses in Scotland and the vitality of our towns, villages and cities.

The allocations set out in the order as part of the total funding package that this Government will make available to local government will provide the funding required to improve education and the learning experience for our children and young people, expand pre-school provision, reduce class sizes, extend free school meals and give more pupils the chance to experience vocational training. It will also allow councils to provide allowances to kinship carers, increase standard payments levels for free personal care and deliver more respite weeks to support carers. It also funds the essential local services, in a general sense, on which we all depend.

The total funding package also provides support for capital funding to local authorities. As I set out in December, that support will rise to £975 million in 2008-09—an increase of £115 million, which is 13.3 per cent in one financial year. Over the three-year spending review period 2008 to 2011, the total support for capital investment will amount to almost £3 billion for local authorities. That substantial increase gives local authorities the opportunity to increase their investment in their assets, which are central to the delivery of quality local public services such as schools, houses, flood prevention and roads.

I have also announced our proposed allocations to support local authorities to freeze their council tax rates at 2007-08 rates. I am delighted to know that so many councils have already agreed to do so and I look forward to seeing all councils accept our support to lessen the burden on the Scottish public. Some £70 million has been set aside to cover this pressure for 2008-09 and once councils

have set their rates I will bring a revised order to Parliament to allow that support to be issued.

I realise that I cannot give a speech on local government finance without mentioning ring fencing, which has featured so significantly in the debate around the budget. I welcome the Finance Committee's broad support, in its report on the budget, for reducing ring fencing and local authorities' appreciation that less ring fencing means more flexibility and freedom for them in allocating their resources.

I understand the concern about a relaxation in ring fencing, but the Government is putting in place a different arrangement to ensure that we have focus in the work we undertake with local authorities and can assess the contribution that is made by the resources we allocate to local government. That new approach is founded on national outcomes and indicators, and the implementation of the concordat will be central to that approach.

I should also mention the proposal to give the city of Edinburgh capital city status. That will be dealt with outwith the local government settlement, and will inform my contribution to the budget in 2009-10.

As part of its consideration of the order, the Parliament is asked to agree sums of money that are additional to those approved in the 2007 order for funding in 2007-08. Because of additional spending commitments that councils have received over the past year, we are, in this order, seeking Parliament's approval to make available £128.3 million in revenue support additional to that approved in February last year. I am sure that that significant package of additional support for local government will be welcomed by local authorities and, more important, by people in communities throughout Scotland who will benefit from the increased services that the funding will provide.

The additional sums include £14.5 million for pre-school education, £33 million for community safety partnerships, £29.7 million for school public-private partnership projects and £15 million for helping parents in disadvantaged areas. The full list of redeterminations to the 2007-08 order is set out in the report to this order.

Before we move to the debate, I will summarise what I am putting before Parliament. The order sets out a record increase in funding for local authorities to allow them to deliver services to their local communities and to allow us to work together with councils to deliver on our national outcomes and commitments for the people of Scotland.

By agreeing this order, we put in place the mechanism to fund local authorities to serve their public as they are elected to serve them. Without this order, we will be unable to give local

authorities their increase in funding, which means that they will need to increase dramatically the burdens on local taxpayers.

I am encouraged by the way in which local government has taken on this seismic shift in its relationship with Government. It has shown its willingness to work with us and to keep up the momentum on the Government's measures. That is why the Government is committed to continuing to work and engage with our local government partners.

This order is an opportunity to ensure that we work together to create a more successful Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008 be approved.

15:07

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): Labour has a proud record of working in partnership with our local government colleagues. After all, it introduced three-year budget settlements, ended the two-tier workforce in local government, replaced compulsory competitive tendering with best value and introduced the power of well-being into community planning, which places our local authorities at the heart of local communities. Indeed, since devolution, under Labour, local government funding increased by 55 per cent.

Much has been said about our relationship with local government. I believe that our direction of travel remains strong and appropriate because we want to protect and deliver for the most needy people in communities. We will continue to do so throughout this parliamentary session.

The minister has quite rightly sought to present the settlement in the best possible light, but we need to get behind the rhetoric, examine the context of the settlement and look closely at comments that have been made about the budget. I am keeping a count of how many times we hear "historic concordat" this afternoon. It has been presented as a fantastic deal for local authorities, but local government itself has simply said that it is the best deal available.

Although Pat Watters said:

"the concordat was probably the best position we could achieve in negotiations",

he also pointed out:

"We told the Government that we would be able to cope if we got closer to £11.5 billion."

Of course, they got £11.2 billion.

He went on to say:

"The further we are from that figure, the more likely we are to hit"

difficulties

"in the three years."

Councillor Watters also said:

"we do not think that it is the best financial settlement but in the circumstances ... we believe that it is the best that we could have negotiated"

The cabinet secretary mentioned the role of the Local Government and Communities Committee. In evidence to that very committee, Martin Booth, the head of finance for COSLA, said that the settlement

"is a lower percentage increase than previous settlements since devolution."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 5 December 2007; c 331-35.]

When asked whether the settlement was below average, Mr Booth replied, "Compared with previous settlements".

In effect, when it is combined with funding for the council tax freeze—which in itself raises very important questions about the way in which the figures have been calculated and presented—this funding settlement represents a centralisation in financial control over local government. Local government is now even more dependent on central Government grants, and the imbalance of funds raised locally and nationally has shifted towards central Government.

The new centralisation is fraught with difficulties at a local level. Indeed, we are already beginning to see serious cuts. Richard Baker has already raised the example of school closures in Aberdeen, and at First Minister's question time today we heard about some of the decisions that are being taken in education: either new schools are not being opened when they should be, or existing schools are being closed.

People have said that ring fencing is a bureaucratic process, but I genuinely worry about the army of civil servants and local government officials who will have to monitor the single outcome agreements. First they will have to define them, then they will have to monitor and review them to ensure that they are being met. They will also be audited by central Government. We have a serious concern about the weight of bureaucracy that will cover the single outcome agreements.

We should not forget that the settlement is the worst since devolution, with growth of only 1.5 per cent for spending on services over the three-year cycle, compared with 5.1 per cent growth in the budget as a whole. Under Labour, the average increase was 4.9 per cent in real terms, which

allowed council tax increases of 1.8 per cent over the same period.

There has been a lot of talk about council tax levels. The Scottish band D level fell below the English average for the first time in 2002-03, and it is now £1,149 in Scotland compared with £1,321 in England. We have to put where we are in context: let us not forget that local government will face sizeable challenges.

There is a black hole in the funding settlement. COSLA estimates that the money available to fund service growth is £175 million over the three years, but £55 million of that has been top-sliced for police recruitment. All the commitments that are set out in the concordat are drawn from the Scottish National Party manifesto and were costed by the SNP at £848 million. Having done some work with local authorities, we believe that that figure should be about £1 billion.

The Scottish Government has failed to cost any of the commitments during the budget process. It has added up a substantial amount of money and tried to present it as enough to deliver the manifesto commitments, but we all know—from debates in this chamber, discussions with local government and ministerial responses on, for instance, class sizes—that the money to meet the pledges simply does not exist.

If we look at this year's settlement and discount from it inflation, the money for the council tax freeze and the growth in capital spend, we see that councils are left with £14 million of growth money. That is £2.80 for each member of the public.

So what will councils achieve? How will they balance their books? How, for instance, will they restore the balances considering the £40 million that was drawn down last year to restrain council tax levels? Mr Swinney says that they will do that through increased flexibility in managing savings of £200 million. When that policy was presented, our assumption was that it would be about allowing councils to invest in front-line services rather than making up for gaps in the past.

There are questions about the desire of Government around the efficiencies. When I was Minister for Finance and Public Services, I was aware of the limitations in cash-releasing savings. Our cash target was 0.7 per cent. Under Mr Swinney and the SNP, it is 2 per cent. We have access to some of the papers that are going before councils, and we are seeing not cash efficiencies but cuts in public services. That is the reality of the budget settlement for our local authorities throughout Scotland.

The efficiency targets are based on some spurious logic. For instance, how can police forces save 2 per cent per annum on costs when staff

costs account for 85 per cent of their budget and they are having to retain and increase the number of police officers? That simply does not add up. If we add police pensions into that dilemma, we see the potential for the budget to fall into crisis. We are told by the police that there will be a £17 million shortfall in 2008-09, a £52 million shortfall in 2009-10 and a further £35 million shortfall in 2010-11. That is a grand total of £104 million in that budget.

Interestingly, the police were also able to tell us, in a letter to Pauline McNeill, that their grant-aided expenditure allocations for pensions are set at £181 million for each of the next three years. How can police officers have access to GAE information that was denied the Parliament? I found that admission interesting, and I believe that we have been denied the figures because, if we had them, we would put the numbers together and realise that the budget is not all that it seems—it is not the perfect world that Mr Swinney presents.

In some local authorities, services are under pressure. Argyll and Bute Council already spends 6 per cent more than GAE and says in its papers on the budget that

"a case is being made to try and secure additional funding for police pension costs",

but even with the highest increase, the council's funding will fall short by £5.75 million in 2008-09 and that figure will rise to £8 million in 2010-11—which is after sizeable efficiency savings of £2.2 million.

We will have more to say throughout the debate. At one level, the budget appears to allow services in communities to develop, to expand and to be invested in, but that is not the case everywhere. Many examples will be given, but I raise again what is happening here in Edinburgh, where the *Evening News* says, "City Charities Face £870K Cash Grab" from the council.

The budget presents challenges. I worry about our communities, about social justice and about our local authorities' ability to deliver on a budget that is tight and is not what the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth presents.

15:16

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): Andy Kerr's speech was measured and thoughtful. If he had delivered yesterday a speech on the shortcomings of the local government settlement and part of the budget, he might have secured more than one vote against the budget. However, we have moved on from yesterday's phase, which was all about heat, and I hope that today's debate will provide more light.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Speak for yourself.

Derek Brownlee: Indeed.

The only aspect of the local government settlement that will capture the public's imagination is the council tax freeze, which is one of the main aspects of the budget settlement that has penetrated the public's consciousness. There are many arguments about the freeze, but I will nail some of the spurious arguments that have been used against it, principal among which is that it will involve horrific distributional sleight of hand by which the rich will gain and the poor will not. All that a council tax freeze will do is hold back growth in the tax.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): I ask Derek Brownlee to contemplate this. Someone who lives in a big house in Morningside and pays a high council tax level will receive a huge freeze—

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Alistair Darling.

George Foulkes: Okay, it could be McLetchie—David, sorry.

We can contrast that person with someone who lives in Pilton and who already does not pay council tax because of their income level. That is the difference that we are pointing out.

Derek Brownlee: I ask Labour members to reflect on this. One of Labour's proposals in the budget process was to abolish water rates for pensioners. I presume that the same effect is true of that policy—would it not benefit people who pay more in water rates more than those who pay less? Is that not exactly the same distributional analysis issue? Where is the logic in making a great stand against the council tax freeze while making a proposal that would operate in the same way, albeit with a different set of charges, although the numbers for that proposal did not add up? The Centre for Public Policy for Regions did a good analysis of all the manifestos at the time of the election—

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): Steady there.

Derek Brownlee: Tavish Scott was not as keen on the analysis of his party's manifesto—and I can understand why.

I recall that the Labour Party promised a 50 per cent reduction in water rates for pensioners, which the CPPR said would cost £75 million. If members check annex A to the Finance Committee's stage 2 report on the budget, they will see Tom McCabe's proposal to abolish water rates for pensioners, which was costed at £75 million. I presume that that is why Andy Kerr, not Tom McCabe, is to chair a Holyrood Communications

conference on Government statistics in the next month.

When we are talking about the council tax freeze, it is important to remember that holding down the council tax is an important measure. The simple fact that people who pay more council tax would benefit more in cash terms is not a reason to oppose the freeze. Of course, the Labour Party has the opportunity to bring the right-wing alliance to its knees and to stop the council tax freeze, because it can always vote against the second local government finance order. Labour can stop that in its tracks. Alternatively, all Labour councillors could reject the inducements in the historic concordat and impose council tax rises the length and breadth of the country, if they chose to.

I want to move on to more fundamental questions about how we chart a course through scrutiny for local government over the next few years. Whatever view one takes on the concordat, things are changing and the scrutiny methods will have to change, too. I am encouraged by the fact that we shall see single outcome agreements by the beginning of April.

We need to get the scrutiny mechanisms for single outcome agreements spot on. The Finance Committee did not, for other reasons, pay a great amount of attention to that in its report on the budget, but it made a number of recommendations on the matter. It is fair to say that the Government's response to some of those recommendations is not particularly promising. For example, we recommended that local authorities should report on major changes in patterns of expenditure. The Government's response was:

"We do not consider this type of reporting to be appropriate and feel it is more important that our focus remains on securing better outcomes".

There is certainly a strong case for focusing on the securing of better outcomes, but it would be interesting to know how those outcomes related to the resources that were put in.

As a Parliament and through the parliamentary committees, we can discuss how we can get the scrutiny mechanisms right. Nevertheless, we need to focus carefully on the following. Local government is asked to carry out certain functions, some of which arise out of statute. Authorities have no choice but to deliver those services. Some of those functions arise from the outcome agreements and will, I presume, be national and common to all councils. Some of those functions will, I presume, relate to local actions that are specific to individual councils. On top of that, there will be other elements that are entirely discretionary. At the very least, in considering how we scrutinise and how local government reports, it would be helpful if we could understand, on an authority-by-authority basis, the extent to which

our councils are spending money on their statutory functions and on the agreed outcomes and how much discretion local authorities have in practice. That is an issue for local authorities as much as for us, but we need to get that right if we are to have meaningful discussions on local government finance in the future.

I ask the cabinet secretary to focus on a point that has been raised by my colleagues in local government. It concerns supported borrowings. Can he give us any detail on whether the allocation method for supported borrowings, in particular, is likely to change over the three-year period of the concordat?

15:22

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): The order will achieve a number of outcomes that Liberal Democrats support. We support in principle the reduction of ring fencing. On the council tax freeze, no one wants to pay more tax, but we want to see the Government's proposals on abolition of the council tax. The cabinet secretary will also need to explain to Parliament how a freeze is affordable without cuts being made to services—an issue to which, I am sure, many members will turn today.

We also support the allocation of additional resources to local councils, although I accept the analogy that Mr Kerr used earlier in terms of the overall balance of the settlement. I am sure that Mr Swinney will accept—not on the basis of my figures, but on the basis of local government's figures—that year 2 in particular will be extremely tight and must, even at this stage, pose serious questions for local government throughout Scotland.

Questions remain, so I ask the cabinet secretary to answer several questions that local councils have raised with me. The questions reflect a broad theme to which Derek Brownlee referred a moment ago, concerning the amount of information that is available and the clarity of the position on numbers, indicators and, especially, outcome agreements. That information is not available as councils set their budgets, which must be a significant issue for all local authority members as they come to grips with a changing financial position. I have raised the matter before with the cabinet secretary and I do so again. I ask him to ensure that the entirely legitimate and fair points that have been put to his department by councils throughout Scotland are answered in detail.

The cabinet secretary said earlier that the changes are significant. If they are significant, surely local government deserves as much clarity as it can possibly have in the budget-setting

process. That is important. Does the cabinet secretary commit to the changes being flexible, or does the Government plan more of a straitjacket on local government? Some people in local government fear that an outcome agreement could be simply a return to ring fencing, but in another form. I am sure that the Government accepts that local councils have democratic mandates and that people vote for different issues at local and national levels. It follows that councils must be given the necessary flexibility, within the outcome agreements, to construct local solutions to local problems.

I am sure that Parliament and its committees will want to scrutinise outcome agreements in depth on that issue when the agreements are published—which the cabinet secretary said would be before 1 April—given that that will affect many of the arguments that all our communities will face about making cuts versus making savings in expenditure. I trust that the cabinet secretary will accept that as an important principle of local democracy; after all, that sits with the principle of reducing ring fencing.

The cabinet secretary will surely also accept that councils are not clear on certain budget areas, including regional transport partnership funding, the strategic waste fund and—this issue was raised with me this morning—flood protection. How can the Government ensure co-operation among councils following the changes to the previous system of a specific grant funding mechanism, which will no longer be available to local government? It strikes many of us who have looked at the new system that, if councils are to work together on issues, such as flood protection, that cross local government boundaries, there must be some way of allowing such co-operation to be built into the process. If those moneys are simply part of the overall settlement, it is not clear to me—nor, more important, to many councils—precisely how councils will be able to ensure that strategic planning over a number of years will be facilitated.

I hate to raise again the issue of efficiency savings—I was roundly condemned by the cabinet secretary for doing so yesterday—but I will have another go. Is the cabinet secretary prepared to accept the reality that not all councils will achieve the 2 per cent efficiency savings that will be expected of them? I accept that councils that achieve the target will be able to keep those sums—I welcome that—but what will be the position for councils that do not hit the target? Will they be allowed to keep cash savings below that target? In budgeting terms, that might not necessarily be an issue in the coming financial year but I suspect that it will be a significant issue for finance directors and local members in years 2 and 3 of the settlement.

On class sizes, although in principle it is perhaps more important today to consider the generality of the order rather than the specifics of policy areas, councils are saying that they have not been given one penny more to meet the national policy. Despite the concordat—which, by my reading of it, is crystal clear on the issue—no new money has been provided to lower class sizes. I presume that the policy will be implemented only by authorities that have a reducing school roll. How will that be addressed in outcome agreements in circumstances in which a council has real difficulties in achieving that?

Finally, the cabinet secretary will know that the distribution formula is of concern not only for Scotland's capital city. If I heard him right, he said that capital city funding would be dealt with outwith the financial settlement: in other words, it will be dealt with outwith the normal distribution formula that local government understands. How will he deal with other councils that have expressed concerns about the formula? I am sure that my good friend and colleague Mr McArthur will mention Orkney in that context, but I know that other councils have similar concerns. I imagine that the cabinet secretary does not plan a complete recasting of the distribution formula—otherwise, he would have mentioned that in announcing the settlement today—but does he plan any changes in that regard?

Overall, it is surely vital that Government does not blame local government for local services issues—that fundamental agreement must exist—but councils are saying that they are £400 million short, so how are they to deal with the tightness of the settlement? How will the Government accommodate the realistic, fair and reasoned arguments that councils are making?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): We move to the open debate, in which speeches should be of a tight six minutes.

15:29

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): It is but a few short weeks since Gavin Brown described me and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth as the new Romeo and Juliet of Scottish politics. How my heart leaped to hear those words. However, love is fickle and often unrequited. In my case, it has been made bitter by the certain knowledge that, in recent days, Mr Swinney has devoted himself not to me but to seducing a mysterious and demanding woman in the east known only as Margo, whom he has wooed assiduously with gifts of a substantially pecuniary nature. Nevertheless, I pledge my undying devotion to the quaint document that has been laid before us, which one

may call the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008.

It appears that 32-nil is the score in terms of the number of councils that have signed up to the Scottish Government's proposals. No matter how many effigies of Councillor Pat Watters he has burned or how many voodoo dolls he has stuck needles into, Andy Kerr has failed miserably to browbeat Labour councillors into rejecting the SNP's local government settlement. Councillors know which side their bread is buttered on, and they will not toe Mr Kerr's now discredited line. That hardly augurs well for him in Labour's forthcoming leadership contest, which is now looming as Wendy Alexander suffers political death by 1,000 resignations or, on today's evidence, by 1,000 First Minister's question times—or even a budget vote or two.

We now know that, for the first time post devolution, the proportion of total managed expenditure will increase, which shows the importance of local government in Scottish National Party thinking and delivers a substantial real-terms increase in funding, with improved flexibility, over the next three years.

George Foulkes: Will Mr Gibson join me in welcoming the statement by the Electoral Commission, which exonerates Wendy Alexander totally?

Kenneth Gibson: To be honest, “exonerates” is a bit far fetched—“lets off the hook” would be a more accurate description of what has happened.

We have heard from Mr Kerr about how councils will struggle financially under the SNP settlement, but he seems to forget that Westminster sets the level of the Scottish block. Until that situation changes by our securing the re-emergence of Scotland as an independent sovereign state, we will always be at the mercy of London to some extent. Of course, our hard-pressed council tax payers, unlike people in the United Kingdom as a whole, will benefit from what the Scottish Government is doing. As the publication of the “Why do we feel so broke?” report reveals, in the past year alone the disposable income of the average family in the UK has fallen from £16,305 to £15,231, after five consecutive years of decline.

As members will recall, recently we have heard much from Labour members about the need to protect vulnerable children. No doubt there will, therefore, be a queue of Labour members demanding the resignation of Councillor Janet Cadenhead, leader of Clackmannanshire Council, after an independent report that was published today condemned its appalling record on services to its most vulnerable children. In the past six months, Labour-controlled Clackmannanshire has also received damning Audit Scotland reports on

best-value performance and its housing and homelessness services, which were called “poor and deteriorating”. In addition, recent local media reports describe the council as being nearly bankrupt, with reserves of only £9,000 remaining for this financial year.

Today’s report from HM Inspectorate of Education highlights flaws in Clackmannanshire Council’s children’s services, including “systematic weaknesses” in monitoring and helping children who are exposed to long-term harm; the highest referral rate to the children’s reporter in Scotland—double the average of comparable authorities; a 33 per cent vacancy rate for children’s social workers, which the local authority

“had not engaged fully with its partners in a collective approach to consider”;

and a lack of joint working with the police, the national health service and other partner agencies. Only Midlothian Council, also under a Labour administration, has received a worse overall report for services to children. Both the deputy leader and social work director of that council resigned in February 2007 as a result.

It is said that a society can be judged on how it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members. Some young people in the care of Clackmannanshire Council have lived without electricity or education for four or five years at a time. That is an absolute disgrace. Labour MSPs have been banging on sanctimoniously about how councils cannot be trusted to run local services and should have most of their spending dictated to them. Now we know why—they have been talking to their own councillors.

On 13 January, Wendy Alexander told the BBC’s “Politics Show”:

“I have no doubt that Labour councillors, indeed Labour councils, have spent their life looking after the homeless, women’s aid, all of these poor, weak, vulnerable groups that we came into politics for. But I frankly can’t have the same confidence that a Conservative-controlled council, or perhaps even an SNP-controlled council or an independent council will, for example, meet our obligation to women suffering domestic violence.”

Perhaps she should have a closer look at her own councils and councillors before maligning anyone else.

Clackmannanshire Council’s leader has let down employees, service users, vulnerable children and the local people. With greater freedom for local authorities comes greater responsibility. That council’s housing services are a shambles and its finances are almost bankrupt. By passing the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008, the Government will allow local government more autonomy and responsibility than it has had for many years. The SNP will ensure that councils that we control are effective and responsible in the

delivery of services. Perhaps Labour should consider doing likewise.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call George Foulkes, I ask members—particularly those who are speaking in the debate—to check that their mobile phones are switched off.

15:34

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): I, too, welcome the debate, because today we can turn to the real consequences of yesterday’s budget. We do not need a crystal ball to make predictions. We can already see the stark reality here in SNP-led Edinburgh. Today, I bring Parliament’s attention to the catalogue of cuts that the SNP-led alliance is proposing in our great capital city. It is clear from John Swinney’s speech that he is living in a parallel universe and is unaware of what is happening around him.

Back in October last year, the City of Edinburgh Council proposed a school closure programme with no consultation, no thought of the impact that the programme would have on local communities and no school building programme to compensate. The 22 schools and four community centres that were marked for closure were saved by a powerful force of local parents, unions, community groups and common sense. The SNP and Liberal councillors in Edinburgh went back to the drawing board with their tails between their legs. Sadly, they did so only to concoct an even more damaging plan.

I make it absolutely clear that the previous Labour administration in Edinburgh left £52 million in reserves and that the council has been given a clean bill of health by the independent auditors for 23 years now, so there is no black hole to fill. What I have to relate is a catalogue of cuts that has been proposed by the SNP-led administration. It includes a cut of £468,000 from supported bus routes, which will hit the elderly; a cut of £966,000 from sure start services, which will hit the most vulnerable families; a cut of £850,000 from the community learning budget, so vibrant community centres will be left as empty shells like village halls under lock and key; a cut of £50,000 from a dedicated welfare rights service for people with learning disabilities; and a cut of £27,000 from Waverley Care, which is a vital service that cares for people in the city who live with HIV. That is the reality of what is happening in SNP-led Edinburgh.

I say to Mr Swinney, “So much for your much vaunted historic concordat.” The list goes on and on, but I will mention two particularly distressing areas of cuts in services—home helps and nursery provision. Last year, the Lib Dem and SNP council sanctioned a review of every person in the city who was in receipt of home help; there were 4,000

people in total. So far, 40 per cent of services have been reduced and 21 per cent have been stopped completely. Three of my constituents—one is 94 years of age, one is 97, and one is 104—have had their needs reassessed and reduced by a telephone operator in the City of Edinburgh Council. Their needs were assessed not by social worker or a trained care worker but by a telephonist who is focused on hitting their line manager's cuts target.

I turn to nursery provision. The SNP-led council has cut 320 full-time nursery places, with devastating effects on parents who have just made it back into work or secured a place at college. I have one constituent whose child's full-time nursery place was downgraded to two and a half hours. Her employer's reaction was, "Don't bother coming back to work." I know of another child who lost her full-time nursery place. Her mother is a recovering drug user and, as a consequence, she is no longer deemed to be at serious risk. Instead, we should be giving the mother every support to get back on track, to give her child every chance of a better future. We should not be ripping support away at the first opportunity.

The cuts are a catalogue of shame and should serve as a shot across the bow of any suggestion that the SNP Government cares about social justice, tackling poverty or allowing people to grow old with dignity and respect. I say to Derek Brownlee that in order to provide his council tax freeze—which helps the wealthy, as I proved earlier—the most vulnerable people in our society are going to be hit again and again.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I assume that George Foulkes will condemn his colleagues in Glasgow, who are now in their third year of a council tax freeze, for exactly the same reasons.

George Foulkes: I certainly condemn SNP-led Aberdeen. My colleagues will deal with the point about Glasgow.

I tell Mr Adam, who is a former pupil of the same school as me, that it is not just Edinburgh that sees the ruthlessness of the SNP in government. In West Lothian, although Labour is the largest group, a minority SNP and Tory alliance has put the SNP in power. Not only does it control the executive, but the scrutiny committees, which are meant to monitor the administration, are chaired by executive members. Even Stalin did not control the Soviet Union with such a grip.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): Will the member give way?

George Foulkes: I am in my final minute.

In England, such an arrangement would not be allowed by legislation, and it should be outlawed in Scotland as well. I say to everyone who is rejoicing at Swinney's budget—I mean John Swinney's budget—and who thinks that it is going to mean a great future for Scotland, that they should be afraid: they should be very afraid. Edinburgh and West Lothian show the start of the stark reality of the SNP in power.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have been in trouble today for not addressing ministers appropriately. Will members please remember to address people by their full names?

15:40

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I begin by praising Parliament for passing the first budget by a minority Government in the Scottish Parliament. Without it, today's transfer of money to our local authorities would not have been possible. Without it, council tax payers could have been faced with a 22 per cent increase to deliver services. I will return to the council tax later in my speech.

In one respect, the fact that the budget was delivered by an SNP Government is irrelevant. Because we have a minority Government, different parties with different priorities and perspectives were forced to work together in the best way to take Scotland forward.

I know that the Scottish Green Party will not agree with all the SNP Government's priorities for local government. The passage of the budget yesterday and the transfer of funds to local authorities today will lead to a council tax freeze across—I hope—all Scotland. I also hope that we will use our fragile majority in the chamber to bring in a local income tax to replace the deeply unfair council tax. I am aware that the Greens favour a land value tax, but they know that freezing the council tax makes more likely the alternative that I support and which they do not. However, the Greens did not throw up their hands in despair and irresponsibly threaten to block the budget; they worked with the minority Government to balance the budget towards some of their objectives. For them to abstain yesterday was a mature and principled decision, although I hope for their full support in future years.

Margo MacDonald similarly represented her constituents' interests in a forceful and constructive way and, in the end, supported our minority Government's budget.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Bob Doris: No.

Given Ms MacDonald's track record in the Lothians, I sometimes wish that she would

consider a transfer to Glasgow, although given her prowess at garnering list votes, perhaps not.

I assure the Deputy Presiding Officer that there is no topic drift in my speech and that I will show the relevance of my points shortly. However, I must briefly mention the Conservatives. I am sure that Mr McLetchie, my fellow Local Government and Communities Committee member, will be able to guarantee that there is no rightwards shift in my politics on our subject committee. The Conservatives voted for the SNP budget yesterday, enabling this order to be passed today. They said that the budget is not a Conservative budget, but they searched for common ground with the Government and were able to find it, and so took a mature and responsible decision to support the budget.

What can I say about Labour and the Liberal Democrats? As I intend to stay positive during this debate, I will say nothing whatever about them.

Today, money will be transferred to local government—members will note that it has taken me more than three minutes to refer to the historic concordat between the Government and local government, which is probably a record for an SNP MSP these days. In some ways, the most historic aspect of the concordat is that it was signed at all. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has traditionally been perceived as a Labour-dominated organisation, but it worked with an SNP Government, which it has never had to do before. It has developed an excellent, professional working arrangement and the concordat is the provable result.

The money that we pass to local government today will be better used because of the new arrangements underpinning the concordat and single outcome agreements, and all our communities will benefit as a result. A vast reduction in ring fencing will give local authorities the flexibility that they need to deliver the best services without costly and time-consuming bureaucracy. Local authorities will also be able to keep their efficiency savings for the first time so that they can re-invest in front-line services. If local authorities had had that right under the previous Executive, they would have had an additional £160 million.

Andy Kerr: Does the member recognise that, in the past, every time central Government provided services through local government—for example, free personal care or free bus travel for the elderly—we fully funded our commitments? His party has funded none of its commitments.

Bob Doris: It is a bit rich of Mr Kerr to mention free personal care. It is our party that has increased support for free personal care, which the previous Executive failed to do.

In Glasgow, the city that I represent, the controlling Labour group has said that it will support the freezing of council tax. The extra revenue that such a freeze will give Glasgow City Council is equivalent to a 3.4 per cent uplift in council tax revenue, but it will not cost Glasgow council tax payers a single extra penny. That is because of the additional £70 million that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008 will make available to local authorities.

The Glasgow Labour councillor who, in conversation with a reporter from the *Evening Times* the other day, said “God bless” the SNP might have had his or her tongue stuck in their cheek, but the reality beneath the comments on Glasgow’s council tax freeze is spreading within local authorities throughout Scotland.

Local authorities are able to work with an SNP Government to provide significant benefit for their communities—the concordat is testament to that. Councillors across Scotland are able to put party-political differences to one side and work together for the benefit of all communities. Parliament partially managed to do likewise yesterday: I hope that it will do so again today. However, I genuinely believe that, throughout the budget process, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats have let Parliament down with their scaremongering and negative attitude. I look forward to the order being agreed to.

15:46

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Mr Doris failed to fulfil Derek Brownlee’s hope that the debate would provide more light than heat.

What can the people of the area that I represent expect from the outcome agreement between the SNP-led West Dunbartonshire Council and this SNP Government? So far, we know that West Dunbartonshire, which is the second most deprived area in Scotland, is to lose £2.25 million in real terms from the fairer Scotland fund, compared with the planned spend in 2007-08. It will lose a further £619,000 in supporting people funding, compared with its allocation for this year. Old people will face reductions in, and increased charges for, home care. Children will lose their out-of-school care, educational establishments face reductions in staffing and supplies, and libraries face closure. Those services all appear on the £14 million menu of cuts—or, should I say, efficiency savings—that the SNP Administration published in the autumn, from which it will make its selections in the next fortnight. That is what SNP government means.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Des McNulty: I will let Mr Paterson in in a minute.

In 2006, as a member of the Finance Committee, Mr Swinney agreed that the grant-aided expenditure formula should be changed to take more account of deprivation in the next spending review period but, in government, he has done nothing about that. There is a direct correlation between the lowest increases in grant support for local government and the areas with the highest levels of deprivation. The council areas that will lose out under the Government's funding arrangements are Glasgow, Dundee, West Dunbartonshire, Inverclyde and East Ayrshire—the same litany of places that have the greatest proportion of people living in deprived circumstances and the highest concentrations of need.

How resources are distributed between councils is not the only issue. The priorities that are set by the Government are important, too. This Government's priorities are not about social justice. I am not opposed to outcome agreements, nor am I a defender of ring fencing, although I believe that ring fencing is appropriate in some instances and that Mr Swinney will regret not adopting a more measured and considered approach to reducing it. We will see how that works out.

From his time on the Finance Committee, Mr Swinney will remember that we recommended outcome agreements for a single regeneration fund. The intention was to allow increased local flexibility for targeted spend within a tightly drawn national policy framework for tackling deprivation.

Within that budget, which was vastly smaller than the total local government spend, we insisted that there should be safeguards, including the use of baselines, clear specification of objectives and the use of measurable targets. I remember Mr Swinney and Mr Mather waxing eloquent about those things—I joined in. It is regrettable that Mr Swinney's enthusiasm for tracking expenditure patterns, like his desire to ensure efficiency savings are properly specified and monitored, appears to have evaporated now that he is in government. I remind him of one bit of evidence that we took while we were in the Finance Committee. Voluntary organisations told the committee that they want to play a stronger role in meeting national policy objectives, but that they suffer badly when local government budgets are set, particularly when those budgets come under pressure. They wanted a level playing field and security of funding. However, if we look at the list of proposed closures in West Dunbartonshire, or indeed the proposed closures in Edinburgh that were referred to, we see time and again that voluntary organisations are getting caned.

In Edinburgh, Margo MacDonald has ensured a special sweetheart deal in recognition of the city's capital status. Such a political fix that will go outside the system is highly questionable. Mr Swinney is effectively saying, "We'll write the terms under which we'll give you extra money, and everybody else can go hang." Within a tight budget arrangement, it represents a net transfer away from Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire and other places. The people who purport to represent those areas should be ashamed. By the time outcome agreements are in place in West Dunbartonshire, many long-standing community-based organisations, projects and facilities will be shut, and the outcome agreements will be written without them. The people who suffer will be the poor people, who are most dependent on those facilities and most reliant on what local government and voluntary sector organisations provide.

Gil Paterson *rose—*

Des McNulty: In Clydebank, an area where council services struggle to meet the needs of a client or customer base, and with the second highest level of deprivation in Scotland, the loss of those vital services and projects will have a major effect on well-being. Of course, Mr Swinney will say, "Well, it's local decision making. The councils make their minds up. They set their priorities." I am sure that he and his colleagues will try to deflect responsibility for those unpalatable decisions.

Gil Paterson: Will the member take an intervention at last?

Des McNulty: Mr Paterson and his colleagues will have to accept responsibility for the allocations that they make and for the choices that they are putting in place. I hope that I get the support of SNP regional list members in making the case for West Dunbartonshire. However, when Mr Swinney was due to meet West Dunbartonshire Council, Mr Robertson, the leader of the council, did not even turn up. He was not bothered. So far, the leadership of the council and the regional list members have settled for buttons. That is not good enough for the people whom I represent. In the long term, they deserve better than they are getting from the SNP.

15:53

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): I politely ask Kenneth Gibson and Bob Doris to tone down the compliments just a bit or, come the next election, Derek Brownlee, David McLetchie and I may have some trouble with our membership. I have complimented Mr Swinney a number of times, but I point out to him again that his Government has more money in cash terms and in real terms than

any other Government in the history of Scotland. Can we please stop using the words “tight spending round”? In relation to previous budgets, it is not true. I challenge any SNP member to stand up and tell me that it is true. I will take an intervention at any point in my speech from any SNP member who takes up that challenge.

There are still one or two manifesto commitments of the Scottish Conservatives that have not yet been implemented. I shall mention some of our manifesto commitments on local government. We felt that there should be a commission on local government in Scotland to consider where we can pass power down from Holyrood to councils—what we call localism—where it is far more appropriate. In addition, we said that we should consider those areas in which local authorities can allocate power down to community councils, to try to reinvigorate the community council movement and to ensure that more decisions are taken on the ground, where they are implemented. We hope that the cabinet secretary will take cognisance of that.

We have talked for some time about the Gould report proposal to decouple the local government and Scottish Parliament elections. That would help with some of the issues that arose at the election but, just as important, it would give local issues their day in the sun. Voters would be able to analyse properly how their councils had performed and vote on that basis, while issues could be thrashed out in full view of the electorate instead of being subsumed by the Scottish Parliament elections. I know that the Government is also keen to decouple the elections, and we hope that we will get a final decision on that sooner rather than later.

The Scottish Conservatives support the reduction in ring fencing in the local government finance settlement. That was in our manifestos in 2003 and 2007, and I note in passing that it was also mentioned in an amendment in Derek Brownlee's name in the equivalent debate last year when, once again, we called for a reduction in the amount of ring-fenced money. The facts appear to be that we are moving from about £2.7 billion of ring fencing down to about £500 million. The previous regime was too rigid and resulted in 50 separate reports on 50 separate ring-fenced funds. The changes that have been outlined can give councils flexibility and allow local solutions to local problems.

Andy Kerr: How does Gavin Brown view the single outcome agreements? I understand that they have at least 360 indicators at the moment. That number might boil down somewhat, but a rigorous regime will still be in place.

Gavin Brown: The difference is that there will be one single outcome agreement and report

instead of 50 separate reports in addition to the council's annual report.

I note in passing that Mr Kerr alleged that there was only a 1.8 per cent increase in council tax during his party's time in government over the past eight years, which simply does not add up—the fact is that council tax has actually increased by 60 per cent since 1997.

Having less ring fencing gives flexibility. We must also remember that councillors have the same democratic mandate that we have, and that less ring fencing provides greater accountability. Local government should not simply be central Government's delivery agent. Councils need to act as partners in governing Scotland instead of as servants, which is the position that we had before.

The Conservatives strongly welcome the council tax freeze. It is good, solid, Conservative, right-of-centre thinking that has been taken well on board. However, we question how sustainable the policy will be in future. It will clearly prove extremely popular with the voters, particularly this year, but I ask the cabinet secretary what will happen if and when the local income tax is not supported. There are clear divisions between the Liberal Democrats and the SNP on that tax, as outlined recently by Nick Clegg, who made it clear that the SNP's local income tax is simply not local at all.

It was interesting—or rather, amusing—that when Mr Clegg was up here a picture of Chris Huhne was mistakenly printed in the paper. An even more interesting fact is that nobody noticed or picked up on it, not even Tavish Scott.

We are against the local income tax and question how sustainable the council tax freeze is, but we welcome it strongly for this year. Again we urge the cabinet secretary to consider the Scottish Conservative proposal of a 50 per cent council tax discount for pensioners, which would go some way towards solving the problems and addressing the issues. The proposal would be straightforward to implement and we commend it to the Scottish Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): I am sorry, but I will have to cut the remaining open-debate speeches to five minutes each.

15:59

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Mr Swinney is clearly a revolutionary. I was going to suggest that he is a quiet revolutionary but, given how robustly he has defended not only his budget and the local government settlement but the Government's position over the past several months, quiet might not be the appropriate description. However, he is undoubtedly a

revolutionary. He has brought about a revolutionary change in how the local government budget is arrived at. The concordat is highly significant.

Every year during the past nine years, just before the Parliament was asked to approve the budget and the local government finance order, regular e-mails would appear in members' in-boxes. The e-mails contained briefings from councils and COSLA, which always explained that there was a funding gap—Mr Kerr should take note—between the amount that councils were allocated and the amount that it would cost councils to discharge the additional responsibilities that the Government had placed on them.

Richard Baker: Will the member give way?

Brian Adam: No, thank you.

This year, we have received no such lobbying from COSLA. Indeed, COSLA's leader defended the historic concordat between local authorities and the Government, which is significant.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Brian Adam: No, thank you.

The agreement between local government and national Government is part of the revolution—we are no longer at war.

I commend Mr Swinney for his plan to monitor the new approach through local outcome agreements. It is true that we must wait and see how that works in practice. There is no doubt that all members will scrutinise the new arrangements.

I ask Mr Swinney to go further. There are concerns about the detail of the funding formula, not just this year but in general. Members have suggested that Margo MacDonald, in defending her constituents' interests, has arrived at a special arrangement that is somehow unfair to the good people of West Dunbartonshire, Glasgow and other places. Many members are concerned that funding formulas are unfair.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

Brian Adam: No, thank you.

Lewis Macdonald: Will the member give way?

Brian Adam: No, thank you.

Given Aberdeen's Labour legacy of the highest council tax and among the lowest levels of rate support grant—

Richard Baker: Will the member give way?

Brian Adam: No, thank you, Mr Baker. Do not bother; you might have an opportunity to speak at another time.

Labour's legacy in Aberdeen is a 90 per cent increase in council tax since 1997. During that time, council tax in the rest of Scotland increased by 60 per cent, which was bad enough, but a 90 per cent increase is ridiculous. The increase came about because of the tight settlements that were forced on the city by Labour members and their Liberal Democrat colleagues. This year, for the first time since I became a member of the Parliament, Aberdeen has had a significantly above-the-floor increase—more than 4 per cent, when the floor is around 2.8 per cent. I welcome that.

However, I challenge Mr Swinney to continue his revolution by carrying out a root-and-branch review of all funding formulas in the public sector, so that we can ascertain whether the money that rightly is allocated to tackle deprivation produces an appropriate outcome. If such a helpful review had been done in the past, West Dunbartonshire would not be in the position that it is always in. We cannot continue to take the same approach and produce the same outcomes. Some of us are just as passionate as Mr McNulty is about the rights and wrongs of matters and about addressing the social deprivation that exists throughout our country, but we know that the solutions that were applied in the past have not made a difference. I challenge Mr Swinney to consider the funding formulas, to ascertain whether change can produce better outcomes than we have had up to now.

16:03

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): Councils and their communities and partners are always anxious at this time of year as they await the outcome of funding decisions that will directly affect the provision of much-valued local services. That is not a sensible way of going about things. Local councils ought to be able to determine what they need to maintain and develop local services. That is why Liberal Democrats support the replacement of the discredited council tax with a system of fair local income tax.

Derek Brownlee: Will the member give way?

Alison McInnes: I am sorry; I have only just started.

At first glance, this year's local government settlement might seem to be an improvement, because it provides for the much-heralded council tax freeze—but at what cost? It will be cold comfort six or nine months down the line, when councils will be struggling to cope with the demands that are made of them. Councils will be pulled in two opposing directions. On one hand, they will have to make adequate provision for demand-led local services, such as home care

and special educational needs; on the other, they will have to deliver SNP election pledges that we know were uncoded and unrealistic.

Accepting funding for a council tax freeze this year will make councils ever more dependent on central Government largesse in following years, because they will have raised an even smaller percentage of their total budget directly from their electorate. Any council tax freeze must be fully funded from central Government, and it must not impact on the other budgets for local government services this year or in future years.

The funding package that is on offer is conditional on local authorities' agreement to all elements of the concordat. If they do not agree to everything, they will receive a reduced block grant. Is that new respect for local government?

The budget is opaque, because many budget headings have been rolled up. Perhaps that has been done to hide the fact that there is not enough money to deliver all the things that citizens expect from local government.

I am not a great fan of ring fencing, but the unseemly haste to do away with it, the lack of real dialogue with local authorities and their partners—especially those in the third sector—and the fact that local outcome agreements have not yet been negotiated are causes for concern. More than 40 specific grants have disappeared. The removal of ring fencing might make council budgeting more flexible, but by its nature it will put at risk successful initiatives. Many local community groups have expressed concern to me that budget cuts are looming. We might not find out for some time, but we know that when they happen this Government will refuse to admit the part that it has played.

I have two specific concerns. First, the settlement has no provision for revenue support or level playing field support to continue the school building programme. What a let down that is for the young people, parents and teachers in my home town of Ellon, which, incidentally, is in Mr Salmond's constituency. Plans for a new academy have been knocked back.

Councils cannot possibly be expected to take the strain alone when it comes to investing in capital expenditure for schools: they must have support from the Scottish Government. The Scottish National Party must accept that its futures trust model is impractical and possibly illegal, and will almost certainly never take off. The previous Administration got on and built new schools. Unfortunately, confusion and delay are the hallmarks of the Government's approach. What provision is there for new schools in the budget? None whatsoever.

Secondly, the hand dealt to regional transport partnerships is particularly poor. The decision to end direct capital funding to RTPs is deeply regrettable. It will, without a doubt, prejudice their ability to deliver quickly and effectively on already agreed objectives.

At a recent Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee meeting, the cabinet secretary said:

"the strongest and clearest lesson that I have learned about any major transport or other infrastructure project in the brief time that I have been in government is that governance arrangements have to be crystal clear before a project gets under way. If a project gets under way with any uncertainty as to its direction or where the responsibility or power lies, it will be a difficult project."—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 15 January 2008; c 361.]

That makes his decision on regional transport capital grants all the more contrary.

I could not speak in a debate on local government finance without referring to Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council's fair share campaign. Those councils have historically had a poor share of the overall budget. The previous Administration had started, albeit slowly, to turn that around, and the councils were edging towards receiving a fairer share of the Scottish budget. This year, that has been reversed and Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire have received the worst settlement that they have ever had: respectively 85 per cent and 88 per cent of the Scottish average. That is grossly unfair. I ask Mr Swinney to explain how that has come about and to examine the distribution elements within GAE to bring about a fairer settlement.

16:08

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): When Parliament gives funds to local authorities, we also devolve responsibility—now more than ever—for setting priorities. In my constituency in the city of Aberdeen, local government's priorities were clear and consistent over many years: Labour-led local government invested in support for disadvantaged communities, older people and young people at school. Up to now, thanks to Labour policies set in this Parliament, many of those same priorities have continued to be delivered in spite of changes in the political leadership of the city council five years ago. Social inclusion initiatives, home zones, community enterprise and community wardens have continued to make a difference to the lives of thousands of my constituents.

In education, Aberdeen has a tremendous legacy as a result of historically high levels of spending on schools and decisions taken by the Scottish ministers in the previous Administration.

At the other end of people's lives, in providing sheltered housing for older people who are able to stay in their own homes, Aberdeen has also enjoyed the benefit of many years of sustained and substantial investment.

All those services cost money, but they also depend on the vision and the priorities of those who make the decisions. Last week, the SNP and its partners in the administration of Aberdeen City Council confirmed that they will seek to close several city schools, including schools that serve disadvantaged areas such as Tillydrone in my constituency. Monday's *Press and Journal* revealed the financial saving that is expected from the school closures—revenue savings of £2 million a year and capital receipts of £3 million from the sale of school sites. On the same day, the *Daily Record* revealed that Aberdeen City Council accounted for half of all Scottish council spending on external consultants in the past three years, including more than £6 million in the first eight months of the current financial year—with the SNP in charge of council spending.

Politics is about priorities, and those reports tell us a lot about that. Politics is also about vision—it is about the kind of city that the council's elected representatives want. However, the present administration's vision for the future of sheltered housing in Aberdeen appears to be bleak. All 69 sheltered housing wardens throughout the city have received redundancy letters in the past three weeks. According to the Aberdeen *Evening Express* on 25 January, wardens were told that their service

"does not represent effective or efficient use of Aberdeen city council resources"

because they are

"'inactive' for parts of their working hours."

In other words, those who make decisions in the council chamber regard having members of staff who can help, befriend and support elderly residents not as a high-priority social service but as a form of economic inactivity. Cost savings to the council are to take priority over the interests and wishes of residents.

I have mentioned only some of the services in Aberdeen that face real and imminent risk in the coming financial year. The potential losers are those who need public services the most. Of course, that is not the responsibility of ministers alone. It is true that the settlement has left little room for growth, but it is also true that it gives Aberdeen the lowest funding per head of any council in Scotland, a recent misfortune that is set to continue under the Government and which contrasts with the situation when Labour was in charge, when Aberdeen had the lowest council tax of any major city. However, what makes a

difference to service users is what is done with local government funding as well as how much there is.

Local government throughout Scotland has had to cope before with tight financial settlements from ministers, most recently in the 1990s. At that time, the council leaders in Aberdeen set the right priorities to protect the vulnerable and maintain investment in schools. That is not the case today, which is why my constituents will look to the Parliament and to Aberdeen City Council to protect services that parties in the Parliament say they support. When ministers finally reach single outcome agreements, they will be accountable, alongside local councils, for the outcomes for children at school, for older people in sheltered housing and for people who live in regeneration areas. The Parliament will hold ministers to account on that. The budget debate may be nearing a conclusion, but the outcomes debate is about to begin.

16:13

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): There is a little of the after-the-lord-mayor's-parade feel about the debate. Those of us who sat through the full three hours of stage-managed drama yesterday have cause to feel that more than most, so I commend Mr Swinney for putting in yet another opening and closing shift. It is tempting to ask what reservations he has about the competence of his deputies, when today they are not even allowed to sit on the front bench with him.

The tone of today's debate could not be more different from that of yesterday's debate on the budget, as epitomised by Derek Brownlee's offer to Andy Kerr at the outset of his speech of what looked like an olive branch—although, as I am no gardener, it could have been poison ivy. However, as members have rightly pointed out, this debate is important. We are debating the vital delivery of a wide range of key local services throughout the country. In previous debates, and again today, Liberal Democrats have indicated our support for the principle of further lifting local government finance ring fencing. We believe that the principle of increasing the power of local councils and councillors to make decisions about how best to meet the needs of those whom they are elected to serve is sound, but applying that principle in practice is not always straightforward, as I am sure the cabinet secretary would concede.

It is not good enough for Government ministers simply to denounce as scaremongering the concerns that a range of bodies that support some of the most vulnerable in our communities have raised. As I mentioned in yesterday's debate—I reiterate this for Bob Doris's benefit—whether or not someone is scaremongering appears to

depend on which party or organisation they represent, rather than which concerns they express.

Ministers need to acknowledge that there is genuine uncertainty and concern among many groups. In my constituency, those who are involved in supporting people with mental health issues are particularly apprehensive about the consequences of the budget and the settlement. That is a fact. At a different time, however, that point would have been trumpeted in full technicolour glory by many of the members who are now sitting on the Government benches.

It may be that some of the concerns that have been expressed are part of the natural process of positioning with local government and of ensuring that councils resist any temptation to divert funds away from specific local services. I entirely accept that, in many cases, concerns will be allayed in due course. However, the absence of a clear sense of how the single outcome agreements will operate is fuelling those concerns. Derek Brownlee and Tavish Scott, among others, spoke about that.

Ministers are overfond of heralding the “historic concordat” with local government, but it is the way in which the single outcome agreements function—how councils manage the almost inevitable tension between meeting real local priorities and delivering the Government’s grand manifesto promises—that will provide the true test of the concordat’s historic significance. Derek Brownlee was right to highlight the recommendations that the Finance Committee made in its budget process report, to which the Government’s response was rather curmudgeonly, as it was to other recommendations that were made to it.

Back in December, when Mr Swinney first made an announcement on the settlement, I made it clear that, for all the spin and assertion, I did not believe that a proper judgment could be made then, nor even in February, when councils take decisions on their budgets. With due respect to the now absent Lord Foulkes, an objective assessment will be made over the longer term. Our concerns are now on record.

I accept that local authorities, in keeping with many other bodies, will always say that more money is needed, almost irrespective of the generosity of the settlement. However, ministers will be aware of the concerns in my constituency about the disparity in the level of funding for Orkney compared with other island authorities. It will not surprise ministers that the settlement for the next three years, which effectively locks in and exacerbates that disparity, has been met with anger by many of my constituents.

I tackled Rory Mair of COSLA on that point when he appeared before the Finance Committee in December. I asked him about the timeframe for taking forward work to unwind the disparity in funding per head of population between the island authorities. In response, he said:

“Examining the distribution mechanism is such a huge issue that we have said to the Government that we need to give councils certainty of funding for the next three years. We must work during that period to prepare plans.”—*[Official Report, Finance Committee, 4 December 2007; c 179.]*

I would welcome an assurance from the cabinet secretary—as would Orkney Islands Council and my constituents—that he will do everything in his power to ensure that those plans are drawn up as a matter of urgency.

In the meantime, there is the not insignificant matter of the £1 million for Orkney’s internal transport needs, which has been raised with the cabinet secretary by me and by the convener of Orkney Islands Council, Stephen Hagan. I know that the cabinet secretary has undertaken to review the situation. I hope that in the very near future, if not in winding up the debate, he can provide some reassurance that the reduction in Orkney’s budget will be reversed. Without that £1 million, critical lifeline ferry and air services to some of the remotest and most fragile communities in my constituency are at risk.

Liberal Democrats believe that there are many positive aspects to the settlement. The reduction in ring fencing is welcome, as is the flexibility that it will provide councils. However, there remains a great deal of uncertainty about its implementation and immediate impacts. There are few answers for councils on the missing millions from the waste fund, on the management of funding to tackle flooding and on a viable legal alternative to public-private partnerships that will enable schools throughout Scotland to continue to be built and refurbished. There is also uncertainty about the single outcome agreements and how the Government intends to spin its way out of the hole that it has dug by promising smaller class sizes while not delivering a single extra penny to fund that pledge. As we have heard from many members, there are real concerns throughout Scotland that local government is looking down the barrel of damaging cuts to services.

The Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008 is not without its good points, therefore Liberal Democrats will not oppose it. However, given the concerns and uncertainty that I have described, we cannot in good conscience support it.

16:19

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)
(Con): Today's debate has been a much lower-key affair—but also a more thoughtful one—than yesterday's debate on the budget as a whole. When I reflected overnight on the extraordinary outcome of yesterday's debate, I could not help but think that Wendy Alexander and Nicol Stephen are very much like the Duke and Duchess of York—but not so much Andy and Fergie as the “grand old” version who marched them up to the top of the hill and marched them down again.

However, that was yesterday's debate. Today we are debating local government finance. The SNP is to be congratulated on its bold attempt to change the relationship between the Scottish Government and local authorities by ending ring fencing of a significant proportion of the grant allocation. That was also advocated by the Conservatives in our election manifesto and, since the conclusion of the concordat with COSLA, it has been widely welcomed across the political spectrum in Scotland. It is interesting to reflect that the Labour Party's criticisms of the change have become more muted since the local government settlement was announced. Labour's focus has shifted towards achieving clarity in outcomes—a welcome shift in position, which was reflected in the excellent contribution from Des McNulty.

I have no doubt that a council tax freeze is popular. However, it cannot seriously be suggested that the amount reserved by the Government in its budget to recompense councils that agree to freeze their council tax will be sufficient to cover the inflationary increase in council tax levels that we would otherwise have expected. However, that is only one side of the equation. The key question is not whether councils have the finance to freeze the council tax but whether they have sufficient funding from their grant allocations to meet their responsibilities and the obligations placed on them by the single outcome agreements, which have still to be negotiated on a council-by-council basis. That is the great unknown, because the nature of those obligations has still to be clarified.

Today at First Minister's question time, the First Minister told Johann Lamont that councils will be required to achieve a particular target—as yet unspecified—in respect of private landlord registration. That is one tiny part of councils' statutory obligations. Andy Kerr suggested that there might be as many as 360 in the outcome agreements. If there is to be an attainment target for landlord registration, just how comprehensive, and, more important, just how onerous will the other targets and outcomes be? If the outcomes in relation to performance vary widely from one council to another, that might be a fair reflection of

the different needs and priorities of councils and, in particular of authorities' different starting points, but what will it mean for the achievement of consistent standards of service throughout Scotland? Differences in standards are regularly branded in this chamber as a postcode lottery and I have made that criticism in relation to the delivery of free personal care. However, at what point, and in respect of which services, is a postcode lottery unacceptable because we demand a national standard, as opposed to simply being a pejorative term for legitimate differences in levels of service, which should be acceptable to us because they reflect the different priorities of our councils? That is the question that we should ask ourselves.

Richard Baker: Will the member take an intervention?

David McLetchie: No. I am sorry.

In the years to come, experts in public finance will, no doubt, try to analyse the different approaches of the previous Executive and the present Executive to the relationship with local government. That is of far more than academic interest; it will be interesting to note how the Scottish Government manages to initiate a new policy that uses councils as delivery agents without resorting to a ring fence to ensure that services are delivered. That will be a challenge.

It is also legitimate to identify potential liabilities that are clearly not factored into the settlement that has been reached. Quite fairly, the Labour Party has spoken about police pension costs. We might also highlight free personal care, not just in relation to what the Auditor General for Scotland has said, but in relation to the financial consequences that might flow from the Sutherland review and other changes in councils' interpretation and implementation of the law. At present, there is a wide discrepancy throughout Scotland.

When Mr Swinney was in opposition he used to sit up at night worrying about the hundreds of millions of pounds of potential liabilities that councils faced in respect of single status agreements and equal pay claims, but since he ceased to be a member of the Finance Committee and moved into Government, he has apparently decided that the situation is to be tolerated with equanimity and a casual assurance that it is all just up to the councils to sort out.

Then there is the question of inherited deficits. In the City of Edinburgh Council, the new Liberal Democrat-SNP regime inherited from the outgoing administration a £9 million deficit in its children and families account. I have a lot of sympathy for the council but, as George Foulkes pointed out, its response was to try to close 22 schools in the city. Can we now be satisfied that

those schools will be saved, or will the closure plan reappear in modified form?

Those are all legitimate questions at national and local level and I suspect that the Government does not know even half of the answers. The relationship is an evolving one, with the agreements yet to be signed. That is broadly acceptable in the context of a new system and a new relationship and, for that reason, the chamber should approve the order. However, in doing so, we should also remind the Government that we will keep it under the closest scrutiny. The concordat and the outcome agreements are about a shared and not an abdicated responsibility.

16:25

Andy Kerr: I agree with the issues that Mr McLetchie raised and that the concordat and single outcome measures pose interesting challenges. Given the many references to yesterday's debate, today's debate has a bit of a morning-after-the-night-before feel to it. Indeed, Mr Doris made yesterday's speech today, which I found somewhat confusing. Nonetheless, the debate has been a fairly good one. Members have tried to raise issues that relate not only to the order but to local concerns that constituents around the country have raised with us.

In his opening remarks, Mr Swinney spoke of the need for a clear national outcome. We do not have that as yet. We are spending £11 billion and yet we do not understand what the clear national outcome will be. Mr Swinney talked about understanding members' concerns. We want to hear his response to the concerns that members all round the chamber have raised on the deep service cuts that are now taking place.

The SNP needs to inject a bit of honesty into the debate on ring fencing. Its manifesto included commitments in relation to which it said that it would ring fence resources. I found two—on drugs and mental health. However, when it found that it could deliver no more policies from its manifesto commitments, it sold us the whole removal of ring fencing from local government debate. It was unwise to do things at the speed at which it moved on the issue. The single outcome agreements were formulated too quickly. The Government made no policy commitment in its manifesto to end ring fencing in local government services. We find ourselves in the position that we are in today simply because the SNP could not deliver any more of its manifesto commitments.

I turn to the concordat. It contains no resources to reduce class sizes and yet Mr Salmond has told the chamber—as has Ms Hyslop—that all manifesto commitments will be met by 2011. That is not what local government is saying. As Mr

McLetchie said, Government cannot hide from or shirk its responsibilities in respect of the delivery of its manifesto commitments, yet that is exactly what it has sought to do in making the concordat: it has shifted responsibility for delivery to the local level. Whenever a member raises an issue of service delivery or an aspect of Government responsibility, they are told, "Do not worry, it is in the historic concordat. That is up to local government." The Labour Party is not prepared to accept that as an answer. We will study closely the actions of Government on the matter.

We heard some interesting speeches in the debate. I look forward to hearing a serious speech from Kenny Gibson one day; we have not had one thus far. George Foulkes outlined some of his concerns on care services and nursery and school places in Edinburgh. Mr Swinney needs to tell the chamber what his Government will do in response.

Members have rightly described Des McNulty's speech as passionate. Other members made speeches in which their passion on other issues was clear. When home care charges are increased, out-of-school care is withdrawn and real cuts in services are hitting real people, our responsibility is to be passionate in raising those concerns.

In saying that we should not kid ourselves about the so-called tightness of the settlement, Gavin Brown made a good point. Scotland has double the money that we had when devolution began. More resources are made available to the Parliament than was ever the case in the past. Our job as MSPs—which, of course, is also the job of the Government—is to ensure that the money is spent wisely. I am not sure that the Government has done that thus far.

Brian Adam described Mr Swinney as "a revolutionary" and went on to call him a "quiet" man. However, I question a revolution in which we have no idea how £11 billion is being spent and no monitoring system in place. We are facing the sort of dangers that members including Mr McLetchie raised.

I am extremely concerned about the poor settlement that Scotland's six most deprived councils are getting. The settlements reflect neither social justice nor need.

Kenneth Gibson: Mr Kerr talks about the poorest areas. Does he not realise that, in the eight years in which Labour was in power, Glasgow City Council, which has half of Scotland's poverty, actually received the worst settlement? If it received the same share of funding in the current year as it did in the first year of devolution, it would have an extra £102 million to spend.

Andy Kerr: I do not accept that. The council received the highest inland settlement and the

Government directly invested a number of other resources to tackle some of the issues. As was recognised by Iain Duncan Smith's report on Glasgow, some significant measures have been taken to tackle poverty, and many of them were taken by the previous Government.

Lewis Macdonald correctly pointed to the issues faced in Edinburgh, and he also entered into the discussion on a subject that we all share concerns about—outcomes and how to respond to those issues.

When we consider Scotland-wide issues of flooding, PPP and strategic waste management, we see the challenges for Scotland's local authorities in working together effectively to tackle national infrastructure problems without the centrally allocated resources that previously existed. If our local authorities do not sort out those issues, they will face problems, such as sizeable fines from Europe if we do not resolve the strategic waste issues. I am concerned that our approach to funding will lead us into problems.

We have looked at what is happening in councils in Scotland and we see the challenges that they face. Savings have to be made on school budgets, school transport, welfare rights staff and residential care. Councils are closing swimming pools and laying off sports development officers. We also see the lack of resources in the poorest areas in Scotland.

Unlike the Liberal Democrats, we will support the order today. We see the approach as valid, in that local authorities must receive the resources. However, I repeat the commitment that many members have made that this is not all over yet. We must see how the settlement works and we will need to reassure ourselves that the structures that have been haphazardly put in place respond to the needs of communities throughout Scotland.

16:32

John Swinney: Let me begin with Andy Kerr's final remark. There will be nothing haphazard about the arrangements that the Government puts in place to monitor the performance of local authorities and the implementation of the national outcomes. The Government has negotiated a concordat with COSLA that, for the first time, gives an agreed set of outcomes that both local and national Government are trying to achieve together. That will be translated into single outcome agreements, which are currently under development with local authorities. That work will be taken forward in advance of 1 April. I give that commitment to Parliament today, and I am happy for it to be scrutinised because the Parliament should be able to satisfy itself on how public money is spent.

Mr Kerr and others have implied that we are somehow handing over £11 billion with no ability to question how it is spent and what performance is delivered. I simply point out to them that, before the outcome agreements, the previous Administration merrily handed over £7 billion to £8 billion, ring fenced about £2 billion and had no ability to scrutinise the performance that that provided. We will be conducting a more comprehensive assessment of how work is undertaken.

Tavish Scott made a number of points and I will address first the question of regional transport partnerships. I had a constructive discussion with the chairs of those partnerships, and I was struck by their willingness to work with local authorities to bring to a point of agreement projects that have cross-boundary implications. That suggested to me that there is an ability to draw authorities together to a common purpose, and the Government will support such work. The regional transport partnerships provide a good model that can be applied to other subjects.

Mr Scott referred to the distribution formula. The Government inherited the report of the three-year settlement group, which was a joint venture of the Government and COSLA, and I have progressed several changes as a result. We are bringing much change into the system in one go, so it is important to have some stability in the funding formulas. We have provided that so far, but we will continue to monitor the distribution formulas in the period ahead.

Richard Baker: Even in those circumstances, the situation is still worse for the north-east. Aberdeen City Council is bottom of the funding table. Under the previous formula, Aberdeenshire Council was getting closer to the funding average, but under the current formula we are now further away from that.

John Swinney: We have applied the funding formulas that we inherited. Aberdeen City Council is getting—

Alison McInnes: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: Please allow me to deal with the first intervention.

On the basis of the floor calculation, Aberdeen City Council will receive a 4.12 per cent increase in its budget. That is an appropriate development of the funding formula.

I will address Alison McInnes's point about single outcome agreements. She accused me of unseemly haste in getting rid of ring fencing. That argument bewilders me. The previous Government talked about single outcome agreements and removing ring fencing for years,

but it did not happen. I have been criticised for taking decisions too quickly. I am prepared to be accused of that, because somebody must speed the decision-making process over which the previous Government presided, and this Government is proud to have done so.

Alison McInnes: My intervention is about the cabinet secretary's reply to Mr Baker's intervention. The cabinet secretary said that he just applied the funding formula. If that is the case, why has the budget of Angus Council, in his constituency, moved from 97 per cent to 115 per cent of the Scottish average?

John Swinney: That is because of the application of the funding formulas, to which various factors apply, not the least of which are debt charges. I gently remind Alison McInnes that her party has more stake in the running of Angus Council than my party has nowadays, so I hope that she was not implying any inappropriate application of the distribution formula in that unwarranted intervention.

Des McNulty made a passionate speech about his constituents in West Dunbartonshire. I know how passionately he cares about all the implications of deprivation for people's lives. However, I must ask him who has been running Scotland for the past 10 years. Who has run West Dunbartonshire Council for many of the past years? Who has presided over a process that led the Accounts Commission for Scotland to undertake a two-day hearing at West Dunbartonshire Council to criticise how that authority has been run over many years? Yes—my party has taken over responsibility for that council, but the challenges and the mess that have been inherited from the Labour Party will not be solved overnight. Reading out a list of purported cuts that the council has not decided on is—to be most charitable—at least premature and at worst scaremongering.

That leads me to Lord Foulkes—scaremonger-in-chief in the chamber. Before any speech that he makes on a public platform, we should all be counselled to be afraid—be very afraid. A point was made about PPP support for school projects. The Government has added to the local government settlement for 2007-08 £29.7 million to support school PPP projects, and that is what the Government will deliver.

Finally, I pass on the happy news that North Ayrshire Council became today the first authority to freeze the council tax. It is a Labour minority administration.

Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Prescribed Documents) Regulations 2008 (Draft)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-1306, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, which is the draft Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Prescribed Documents) Regulations 2008.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): With great pleasure, I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Prescribed Documents) Regulations 2008 be approved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Time limits for the debate will need to be adhered to strictly.

16:40

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Yesterday, I welcomed the fact that the Scottish National Party Government had finally come round to the Conservative point of view on the need for substantial cuts in business rates for smaller businesses. I said that we welcomed that tax-cutting conversion. I did, however, point out that the SNP has a long way to go on a lot of other issues. Sure enough, less than 24 hours later, one such issue has come along in the form of these regulations, which impose an SNP property tax on Scotland's housing market.

The SNP members are not the only guilty men and women in that respect, however, as the single seller survey is a policy that was inherited by the present Government from the previous regime. Regrettably, it is a legacy that the SNP has accepted enthusiastically. The party that promised in its manifesto to cut red tape ditched that pledge as soon as the new ministers slid into the back of their ministerial limousines, and no one is more culpable in that respect than the supposedly pro-enterprise Mr Mather.

The single seller survey was the subject of a pilot study that was initiated by the previous Government—whose members have all deserted the chamber, so ashamed are they of the so-called evidence base for the policy. An extensive advertising campaign in the pilot areas was intended to attract 1,200 sellers to test the merits of the scheme. As it turned out, only 74 such surveys were undertaken in the whole of Scotland, and only one of those was in Edinburgh although that was the most vibrant property market—and, in that case, the house did not sell. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that, for the purpose of the pilot projects, the single seller surveys were free. The

Government could not even give them away, yet it persisted with its plans to make them compulsory. To its discredit, the SNP has tamely followed suit.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): Does the member not accept that those who participated in the pilot projects stood to lose the most if the proposed scheme went ahead, which is why the pilot projects did not work?

David McLetchie: The pilot projects did not work because people saw no value in this bogus policy.

On the basis of the Government's figures, the present single seller surveys will cost between £360 and £520. They will enrich the surveying profession—the annual income of which, in survey fees, is projected to double to more than £83 million as a result of the introduction of the single seller surveys—and confer precious few benefits on either buyers or sellers. For example, the single seller survey is designed to solve a problem of multiple surveys that no longer exists and which the marketplace has resolved through the increased use of subject-to-survey offers. The impact of the proposed new surveys will also be felt most keenly by the less-well-off sellers, as the Scottish Consumer Council has pointed out. In committee, the minister made great play of the fact that the surveys will benefit first-time buyers; however, as we all know, first-time buyers quickly become first-time sellers, so it will not be long before they, too, feel the pain.

It is, frankly, naive to expect that buyers will rely on a seller's valuation alone. They will want to commission their own valuation to support higher bids in a competitive marketplace and a bigger mortgage application. The proposed new measure will also result in a delay in properties' being brought to the marketplace and a reduction in the number that are put up for sale on a speculative basis, which it is estimated constitute up to 30 per cent of the properties that are on the market at any one time.

Those are all excellent reasons why the Parliament should vote against the regulations today. However, I add one more. The property market throughout the United Kingdom is at a tipping point from which Scotland is not immune. Prices are, at best, holding steady if not falling, and the situation could be a heck of a sight worse by December, when the regulations will come into force. Confidence is fragile and this is absolutely the wrong time to burden the marketplace with more regulations and compulsory charges of this nature.

The regulations are born out of a policy that was discredited from the start and should never have been enacted by the Parliament. Today is our

opportunity to kill it off, and we should grasp that opportunity with alacrity.

16:45

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I welcome the single seller survey, which is an excellent idea. If I may, I will cut to the chase by mentioning one of its most positive aspects. Many first-time buyers are attracted to view a property based on an asking price of, say, £100,000. When they then obtain a basic valuation for which they need to pay, they might find that the property is worth £150,000 or £160,000—a sum that they could not possibly pay. The only people who win in such a system are the valuers, as it does no good to sellers of property to have an artificially low asking price. The property market in Scotland should not require first-time buyers to face an outlay for a valuation to see whether they can afford a property.

David McLetchie: If the valuers are the only people who benefit from the present system, how is it that, according to the Government, the fee income of the valuers will double under the system that the member supports?

Bob Doris: I will be interested to see the detail of those figures, but I am sure that Mr McLetchie knows very well that lawyers, solicitors and valuers always win. However, the new system will put in place some safeguards.

Let me mention a second safeguard under the new system. At the moment, many people get only a basic valuation done. Constituents of mine have found out that they must pay a quarter share of a £230,000 bill for roofing repairs. As first-time buyers, they had no idea before they moved into the property that they would be liable for that because they got only a basic valuation. What protection was there for my constituents? None whatsoever. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Prescribed Documents) Regulations 2008 will put that protection in place.

Let me mention a further protection that will be provided. Not that long ago, I was a first-time buyer of a property to which adaptations had been made before I moved in. At one level, the property that I bought after a basic valuation was quite simply a pig in a poke. I was fortunate that the adaptations had been carried out safely and to good standards, but I had no comeback on them. However, some constituents have not been as lucky. That protection must be available for everyone.

It has been pointed out that the pilot schemes were unsuccessful, but compulsory implementation is sometimes required to achieve a Government objective. This is one of those

occasions, and that is why we must pass the legislation today.

Finally, how could Mr McLetchie possibly oppose the energy report that will be required under the regulations? It is essential that we ensure that fuel poverty is tackled and that we increase the energy efficiency of properties. If a property's value comes to be measured by its energy efficiency, that is somewhere that we all want to be.

I urge members to vote for the motion.

16:48

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I intend to be brief, not least perhaps because the Minister for Communities and Sport may be as discomfited by my support as I am in giving that support to him. However, as this is an important issue, I want to underline the Labour Party's support for the Scottish statutory instrument that the Government has made. Of course, the instrument will simply continue the important work that was done in the previous parliamentary session on housing and sustaining communities. That work goes beyond any Government and was given recognition by the housing improvement task force.

The Tories' opposition to the proposal is not new and the arguments that they have deployed to support their position are not new either. One difficulty with the way in which the market currently works is that it disadvantages first-time buyers by involving them in multiple surveys. Artificially low upset prices can also draw first-time buyers into considering the purchase of properties that they could not possibly afford. The Tories' arguments about the pilot were well rehearsed at the time, but the evidence of the pilot simply shows that a voluntary approach cannot work.

Perhaps the most critical issue that needs to change in our communities is the way in which people approach the purchasing of a house. As more people take on ownership of their properties, it must be a concern for all of us that they may do so with less thought than they might give to buying a coat. The new process will ensure that people are given information about the property that they are buying and the challenges that it will involve. The process will also give people a better understanding of the worth of what they are buying. We must be committed—as the housing improvement task force was—to ensuring that people understand the importance of the responsibilities of home ownership and maintaining a property. If we want to sustain communities and ensure that people do not buy properties that they cannot then maintain, we need to tackle the serious problems that exist.

If there are market issues, surely the supporters of the market on the Conservative benches will tell us that the market will adjust, especially as people will have more information when they make purchases. The minister has committed himself to monitoring the policy as it is rolled out, which is an important reassurance for people. We will support the Government on this matter at decision time.

16:50

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): For a change, Liberal Democrats congratulate the Government on building on the good work of the previous Executive and introducing the home report by December this year. The report will allow buyers of homes to make better-informed decisions on what, for many, will be the biggest purchase of their lives.

First-time buyers will benefit most from the policy. As Bob Doris said, those individuals will no longer have to commission surveys for homes that they are only considering buying, which will save them about £150 a time. The seller survey will give buyers a complete picture of the home that they are about to buy, including details of the condition of the property, an energy efficiency rating and a valuation. The inclusion of a valuation is one of the least commented-on elements of the home report, but I hope that the fact that an independent valuation of houses will be carried out before purchase will help to quash some of the exponential growth in house prices that has occurred in recent years and will rein in prices.

The previous Executive and the current Government must be congratulated on the manner in which they have introduced the home report, which contrasts with the approach that has been taken at Westminster. The Government down south has botched and bungled the introduction of home information packs, costing the taxpayer at least £20 million to date.

Finally, I wish to comment on the linkages between poor health, the environment, sustainability, poverty and housing. With fuel poverty rising in Scotland in recent years and our homes accounting for one third of carbon emissions in Scotland, I hope that the energy efficiency report that is included in the survey will help to curb Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions and make a contribution to tackling climate change.

16:52

The Minister for Communities and Sport (Stewart Maxwell): It may surprise many members that I welcome David McLetchie's request to speak against the regulations, as it gives me yet another opportunity to explain to him

and the Conservative party what every other party represented in the chamber debated and voted for when the Housing (Scotland) Bill was considered by the Scottish Parliament more than two years ago.

The regulations are not just about the single survey; rather, they introduce a package of three documents to the house buying and selling process. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 requires that the seller, or the agent of the seller, must make a copy of prescribed documents available to prospective buyers on request. The regulations introduce three documents: the single survey and an energy report prepared by a chartered surveyor, and a property questionnaire completed by the seller.

The single survey contains an assessment by a surveyor of the condition of the home, a valuation and an accessibility audit for people with particular needs. In all the discussion that has taken place, Mr McLetchie has failed to mention the fact that for the first time accessibility audits will be available. That means that people who are vulnerable, older people and disabled people will have information about homes that they wish to purchase.

David McLetchie: Does the minister not think that, if someone is disabled and in a wheelchair, it will be pretty obvious to them from their own eyesight whether a property is suitable? A £500 survey is not needed to tell people something that they can see with their own eyes.

Stewart Maxwell: With due respect, it is rather unfortunate that Mr McLetchie seems to suggest that all disabled people are in wheelchairs. The situation of many people who are disabled and have mobility and other problems will be enhanced greatly by the provision of an accessibility audit with the survey.

The energy report contains an assessment of the energy efficiency and environmental impact of the home, and recommends ways in which to improve its energy efficiency. The report will be prepared by a chartered surveyor as part of the survey inspection. The surveyor will also will be able to provide, without the need for a further inspection, an energy performance certificate that meets the requirements of European Union legislation. The seller will get both the report and the certificate from one inspection of the house for one fee.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. There are too many conversations going on.

Stewart Maxwell: The property questionnaire will be completed by the seller of the home. The information that it contains about the home will be useful to buyers.

Together, the documents will comprise a home report, which will give prospective buyers reliable, professional information about the condition, energy efficiency and value of a house before they decide whether to make an offer for it. That is the critical point, because, almost unbelievably, that is not what homebuyers are used to at present. Some 90 per cent of buyers in Scotland rely only on a mortgage valuation report, which contains a valuation but little information on the condition of the property.

Mr McLetchie suggests that, with offers subject to survey, the market has resolved the problem that the single survey tries to address. He claims that offers that are made subject to survey make the single survey unnecessary. However, let me explain why that approach fails to cut the policy mustard.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order. There are still too many conversations taking place in the chamber.

Stewart Maxwell: The housing improvement task force report of 2003 said that the primary objective of the single survey was to give sellers and buyers better information than they currently get about the condition and value of the house. It said that better-informed homeowners are more likely to undertake maintenance and repair work, which helps to address the £5 billion of disrepair in Scotland's private sector housing stock.

The phrase "offers subject to survey" is a misnomer. Most people still get only the cheapest form of inspection that is available—a valuation report, which the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors does not even class as a survey. Offers subject to valuation, as the approach should be called, fail to meet the primary driver behind the introduction of the single survey. Offers subject to survey are a market reaction to the problem of multiple valuations, which, in hot markets, is a serious problem in Scotland. However, addressing multiple valuations is not the primary driver behind the introduction of the single survey but is a secondary concern.

The home report will enable the market to operate with informed buyers and sellers. Frankly, I am astonished that a Conservative would disagree with that. It is clearly common sense. The Scottish National Party—like, it seems, every other party except the Conservatives—believes that buyers and sellers of houses in Scotland should have detailed information about the condition and value of the house before offers are submitted and not as an afterthought. The single survey will achieve just that.

The Presiding Officer: Order. Once again, there are too many conversations taking place in the chamber. That has been mentioned three

times now. Could we please hear out the minister in relative silence?

Stewart Maxwell: Mr McLetchie raised a number of issues in his opening speech. He said that the regulations will impose a property tax, and he has also used the phrase “a stealth tax”. That is a good soundbite, but it is absolute nonsense. The regulations introduce not a tax on property but a fee for producing a solid, detailed piece of information so that people who are making the biggest purchase of their lives—and taking the biggest financial decision—have full and proper information before they take the decision and not after they have made a blind offer, which is what the Conservative party seems to support.

Mr McLetchie mentioned the pilot scheme. As other members pointed out today and in committee, the pilot failed in the sense that he tries to interpret it. There were not thousands or even hundreds of users of the scheme. However, it succeeded in showing that we could not introduce a voluntary scheme for a home report and single survey. It also showed that we cannot have two separate schemes operating at the same time in the same marketplace. That is why it is necessary to introduce a mandatory scheme.

Mr McLetchie's comment on the cost was also incorrect. His intervention on Bob Doris was on that point. There will be a cost to the single survey, but he was comparing apples with pears. We will not be supplying a valuation for the cost of the single survey. Buyers will get something much better, with much more detail and information. Of course, the cost will be much less than the one that Mr McLetchie gave. He is taking the cost of the single survey and ignoring the fact that nine out of 10 sellers are also buyers, who will save money when they buy their next house. The cost will be the money that someone spends on their single survey, minus what they would have spent on surveys on the properties they try to buy.

Bob Doris mentioned artificially low upset prices. Removing that practice from the system is one of the main drivers behind the scheme. I agree with Johann Lamont on the issue of monitoring the policy. We gave that commitment in committee.

The home report package has been thoroughly considered and discussed with the key stakeholders. In my view, the regulations mark a major step forward in the process of implementing a significant improvement to the house buying and selling processes in Scotland. All the consumer organisations support the proposals. Which? and the Scottish Consumer Council support the consumers. We are on the consumers' side. Clearly, the Conservative party is not.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S3M-1315.2, in the name of David Stewart, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1315, in the name of Michael Russell, on commercial forestry, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that amendment S3M-1315.1, in the name of John Scott, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1315, in the name of Michael Russell, on commercial forestry, as amended, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-1315.3, in the name of Jim Hume, which seeks to amend motion S3M-1315, in the name of Michael Russell, on commercial forestry, as amended, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-1315, in the name of Michael Russell, on commercial forestry, as heavily amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Parliament, mindful of the Scottish Government's purpose to achieve sustainable economic growth, acknowledges the contribution that forests and woodlands make through timber, tourism and direct and indirect employment, and recognises the need to support the continued development and expansion of the commercial Scottish forestry sector and the competitive and developing industries which it underpins; and further notes the significant role that Scotland's woodland plays in the mitigation of climate change and the conservation of biodiversity; welcomes the firming up of the 25% target for forest coverage, planted in ways and using techniques which will contribute to carbon capture; further welcomes the fact that the majority of this additional planting is likely to be established through grant aid to the private sector, and supports efforts to increase the biodiversity value of all forestry in receipt of public funds, in particular new schemes which enhance habitats for key native species such as the capercaillie and the Scottish crossbill; further recognises the role that forestry can play in helping to meet Scotland's renewable energy targets through biomass generation; welcomes the work of the previous administration on promoting the biomass sector through the highly successful Biomass Support Scheme, and calls on the Scottish Government to maximise the opportunities for growth, jobs and sustainability offered by the expansion of the biomass sector in Scotland by delivering the previous administration's Biomass Action Plan.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-1256, in the name of John Swinney, on the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)

Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

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

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008 be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-1306, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Ahmad, Bashir (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)

Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 106, Against 16, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 (Prescribed Documents) Regulations 2008 be approved.

Edinburgh Park Railway Station

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-1118, in the name of Margaret Smith, on Edinburgh Park railway station. It will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament commends the continuing economic contribution made by Edinburgh Park not only to Edinburgh's economy but to Scotland as whole; congratulates the park on its numerous green initiatives encouraging employees to choose public transport and ease the heavily congested road system surrounding the park; understands that a comprehensive public transport infrastructure is integral to the further growth of this area; considers that there should be clarification as to exactly why Edinburgh Park may not be included on the main Edinburgh to Glasgow line until 2016, forcing employees travelling from the west to travel on to Haymarket Station before doubling back on themselves; acknowledges that, in order to increase connectivity across Scotland, improve business links with Glasgow and aid environmental initiatives, Edinburgh Park must be included on this line as a matter of urgency, and believes that Edinburgh Park must be included as a stop on the Glasgow to Edinburgh mainline without further delay.

17:05

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank everyone for attending tonight's debate, particularly as it is in the graveyard shift before the recess. I also thank colleagues who signed my motion.

Although, at first glance, it might seem that the debate focuses on Edinburgh and, in particular, west Edinburgh, the issue at stake affects not just people in the central belt but people throughout Scotland. West Edinburgh is at the heart of much of Scotland's economic prosperity. It is the home of Edinburgh airport and the Royal Bank of Scotland's headquarters and is at the epicentre of major transport infrastructure improvements such as the new Forth crossing and the trams. It is an economic jigsaw puzzle, of which Edinburgh Park is a crucial part.

I believe that there is a strong case for a stop on the Edinburgh to Glasgow railway line at Edinburgh Park station. Many of us believed that we were tantalisingly close to achieving that last year, but there has been a lack of clarity on why Transport Scotland and the Government have not taken the final step and delivered that as soon as they could.

Councillor Jenny Dawe, who is the leader of the City of Edinburgh Council, was right when she said:

"Edinburgh Park is at the heart of Scotland's key growth corridor and is of national significance to our economic well being."

Every day, 30,000 people commute to the area and there is scope for that figure to increase by 40,000 to 50,000 in the next few years. Twenty-one of the country's top companies operate there. It is Scotland's fourth largest economic area, after the centres of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, and it continues to expand—new offices and hotels are planned.

The debate is not simply about having an extra stop on some commuter train services. It is about widening access for the central belt's 3.2 million residents to a key business centre and to job opportunities; it is about increasing direct connectivity between our two major cities, Edinburgh and Glasgow, thereby increasing their competitiveness in Europe; it is about continuing to attract major international businesses to develop their operations here in Scotland; and, crucially, it is about providing a successful business park for those ventures to locate in, rather than the green belt of west Edinburgh.

I have campaigned for a halt at Edinburgh Park on the Edinburgh to Glasgow main line for many years, since before the station was built. I have lodged parliamentary questions on the subject and have met ministers, Network Rail staff and others to discuss it. I thank the representatives of Transport Scotland, Network Rail, TIE and New Edinburgh Ltd who met me in advance of the debate.

Edinburgh Park station, which opened in December 2003, was built at a cost of £4.5 million by New Edinburgh Ltd and the City of Edinburgh Council. The New Edinburgh Ltd partnership jointly invested in the construction of the station on the clear understanding that it would be included as a halt on the Edinburgh to Glasgow main line in the future, but there are still no direct services to Glasgow.

In June 2006, the then Minister for Transport, Tavish Scott, asked Transport Scotland to establish how stops on Glasgow services at Edinburgh Park could be facilitated. It was hoped that issues to do with the impact on the timetable and so on could be resolved by the time the December 2007 timetable was issued. I believe that First ScotRail and Network Rail were instructed to plan on that basis, pending a final decision. There is a need for clarity on why those stops have not been provided and on what progress is being made to improve services to Edinburgh Park station.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): What percentage of trains between Edinburgh and Glasgow does the member propose should stop at Edinburgh Park?

Margaret Smith: I ask the member to let me continue; I will not necessarily come up with the solution.

In response to a parliamentary question that I asked last September, the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change said:

"Airdrie to Bathgate trains from Glasgow will stop at Edinburgh Park from 2010. It will take a few years longer before the necessary infrastructure, including the Dalmeny chord, will be in place to provide capacity for additional services on the Edinburgh to Glasgow route via Falkirk that can stop at Edinburgh Park. The full programme will be completed by 2016".—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 25 October 2007; S3W-4797.]

As with many other issues, it would be helpful if more detail could be provided on what parts of the programme will be delivered and when.

Edinburgh Park station is served by trains to Bathgate, Dunblane and Newcraighall. Edinburgh Park visitors and commuters who wish to travel to or from Glasgow must either change at Linlithgow or Polmont, or travel into Haymarket and back out to Edinburgh Park, which adds an average of 20 minutes to their journey.

Around 80 per cent of staff at Edinburgh Park travel to work by car—no doubt the number will increase in the years to come. However, the 2007 passenger survey showed that 1,500 rail journeys a day are being undertaken by people using Edinburgh Park station, and that use of the station is increasing year on year, with an average increase between 2006 and 2007 of 26 per cent in the morning peak and 21 per cent in the evening. Edinburgh Park's travel plan is ambitious in trying to get people out of their cars and reduce the figure for car use to 49 per cent by 2013. I hope that the Government is committed to doing everything it can to help.

It is not just about more convenient and sustainable travel, though. It is about the economics of taking forward the work of the Glasgow-Edinburgh collaboration project and the councils at either end of the M8 to ensure that Edinburgh and Glasgow can compete on a European stage.

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): Given the move to get faster journey times between Edinburgh and Glasgow, does the member have any information on how long the journey would take if an extra stop were added? Currently, intermittent trains stop at different stations. Is she suggesting that they should all stop at Edinburgh Park or that one train an hour should stop there?

Margaret Smith: There are different opinions about the length of journey time. Faber Maunsell has come up with a draft report, and is doing some work that suggests that the westbound journey

time would increase by 30 seconds and that there would be no increase in the eastbound journey time. The minister is shaking his head—he is going to tell us that the figures that he has been given by Network Rail suggest an increase of between two and three minutes. I know that Network Rail has been working on other timetabling issues on the Edinburgh to Glasgow route, and it might say that two to three minutes would be added. There is a difference of opinion about the impact on the timetable. There is probably also a difference of opinion about whether some of the intermittent services stopping elsewhere along the route could be taken away, certainly between now and the completion of the Airdrie to Bathgate improvements in December 2010. That could be considered.

This is an important area. As well as the Airdrie to Bathgate scheme, which will mean that there is a direct link between Edinburgh Park and Glasgow, there is the interchange between trams and trains to Edinburgh airport. It would be useful if the minister could give us more detail on that and the work that has been done on feasibility.

I accept that there are concerns. What we have here is what we might call the Edinburgh Park conundrum. There is probably no one in the chamber who does not accept that a strong economic case can be made by the business park, which is one of the best and most important business parks in the country, for a direct stop on this important line. The balance in the conundrum is what the disbenefits would be. It is a question of getting that balance right. There have been disappointments over the years since the park was opened. At different times, people believed that the service was about to be delivered, but that has not happened.

The Faber Maunsell report indicated that, if there were a direct service, 900 more passengers a day—approximately 200,000 a year—would use the rail service at Edinburgh Park station. That is 900 people whose cars would not be adding to the congestion and the queues on the M8 and on the fringe of the most congested part of our capital city. Findings from key businesses in the area show that 85 per cent of surveyed staff would use the station if it was included in Edinburgh to Glasgow services.

I am not saying that this is an easy situation, and I am not saying that there is only one answer. What I am saying is that my campaign, which is backed by many other local MSPs, also has the backing of key business leaders and people such as the convener of economic development at City of Edinburgh Council, Councillor Tom Buchanan, who says:

“It is vitally important for the city’s economic wellbeing that EP is fully integrated into the mainline rail network. As

one of Europe’s leading business locations, EP has seen massive growth over the past 5 years, outstripping even the economies of China and India.”

Edinburgh Park is one of Scotland’s success stories, and I think that it can benefit not only Edinburgh but Glasgow and the central belt more generally.

As I said, 21 of our largest companies are based at Edinburgh Park and they back the campaign for a stop on the Edinburgh to Glasgow line. They include BT, AEGON Asset Management, HSBC, Miller Developments, Oracle and Menzies Distribution.

By adding a stop on the line, we can reduce congestion, increase rail passenger numbers and modal shift, improve the local and national economies, contribute positively to co-operation and connectivity between our two major cities, encourage the expansion of office space and hotel development at Edinburgh Park rather than in west Edinburgh’s green belt and, in so doing, deliver economic and environmental benefits for the whole of Scotland.

I hope that the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland will recognise the need to add a stop as a priority for immediate action, rather than waiting for a further three years to take any action.

17:15

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate and commend Margaret Smith for lodging the motion and bringing the debate to the Parliament. It raises an important issue. There are clearly many benefits to having trains stop at Edinburgh Park, but there are many questions to be asked, such as the one that I asked her in my intervention. David Whitton put forward a fairly similar idea in his intervention.

I suspect that there is clear agreement across the parties on the earlier parts of the motion. It is absolutely right to commend the economic contribution that Edinburgh Park has made to Edinburgh and Scotland. Margaret Smith mentioned a range of companies that are based there, and I suspect that there will be many more in the future. Members will also all commend the green initiatives that Edinburgh Park has put in place.

I am sure that we are also all agreed that trying to connect Edinburgh and Glasgow better is an excellent idea. Better connectivity could create a powerhouse economy for Scotland, but the question on which we must focus is whether what the motion proposes will create better connectivity between Edinburgh and Glasgow. That is at the heart of the issue.

The most important point is to look hard at what effects the proposal would have on the Edinburgh to Glasgow line, which is the flagship line for First ScotRail. It is the most important line connecting our two largest cities, so it is important that we bottom out exactly what effect adding a stop would have on it. I have not read the Faber Maunsell report to which Margaret Smith referred, but I have seen a précis of it, which suggested that journey times would be increased by 30 seconds in one direction and not at all in the other. I would like to look into that a lot more deeply.

I am no expert in physics, but it seems to me that it makes no sense to suggest that it would make no difference to slow down a train for minutes, stop at a platform while passengers get off and others get on and then try to get up to speed again after that. That defies logic and physics. To say that it would only be 30 seconds seems to me to be fairly tight. The journey time for a Glasgow train that stops at Croy and Lenzie seems to be about five minutes longer than that for a train that does not stop at either. Therefore, without getting into the science of it, I think that the suggestion that the difference would be perhaps two or three minutes makes sense. That is an important point to bear in mind.

That said, if adding the stop increases the journey time by two or three minutes, there could still be a compelling case for stopping some of the trains between Edinburgh and Glasgow at Edinburgh Park. The purpose of my intervention was to find out whether Margaret Smith had a fixed view on that. From what I heard in response, I suspect that she does not.

I am particularly interested to hear about the additional 900 passengers a day that we think would take advantage of the service. It would be really interesting to find out at what times of the day they are most likely to travel. My guess is that 890 of them would probably travel in rush hour in the mornings and evenings, so there is a pretty strong case for stopping one or two services at Edinburgh Park over that one-and-a-half-hour period in the morning and the evening. That would cut down congestion and would be a worthwhile service. The few times that I have been to Edinburgh Park station, I have been the only person there and felt pretty lonely on the platform, so my guess is that there is probably no point in stopping the trains there during most of the rest of the day and that the service ought to resume as normal then.

The motion is good and it is a good debate to have. However, the word that I do not like in the motion is "urgency"—it says:

"Edinburgh Park must be included on this line as a matter of urgency".

We need to do a lot more homework as a matter of urgency and then consider the issues. However, I am persuaded that it is worth stopping some of the trains, though certainly not most of them, at Edinburgh Park.

17:19

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I thank Margaret Smith for securing the debate.

We should all use sustainable transport more often and depend less on our cars. It is increasingly important that we do so. It is not easy to bring about significant modal shift, but it is always easier to encourage people to use trains than to encourage them to use buses—it is even easier if people are offered a service that means that they do not have to change trains and double back on themselves.

In my region we have few opportunities to improve train services without first putting in place significant new infrastructure. The infrastructure at Edinburgh Park has been provided, so I find the transport situation frustrating. Edinburgh Park is on the main line and trains run through the station, so the simple and cheap solution is for the trains to stop there, as people want them to do.

Sustainable transport solutions depend on getting planning right. Workplaces should be easily accessible by public transport and we should use existing transport corridors to best advantage. That is why planning authorities regularly insist on green travel plans when major developments are proposed. The Edinburgh Park development was approached in the right way: a major employment centre was developed alongside a mainline railway, and the Miller Group, CEC Holdings and the City of Edinburgh Council worked together and invested a significant sum—I think Ms Smith said that it was £4.5 million—in the railway station in 2003. People understand why New Edinburgh Ltd feels let down. It delivered what was asked of it at no small expense and expected trains to stop at the station by 2007.

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): For clarity, the total cost was £4.5 million and New Edinburgh Ltd's contribution was £1.5 million.

Alison McInnes: I thank the minister.

Transport Scotland said that there are no plans for mainline services to stop at Edinburgh Park station in the foreseeable future. It is important that we do not allow a simple but effective public transport improvement to slip through our fingers. I do not accept that the impact on journey times would be so great as to create problems for some service users. A balance must always be struck between the provision of ever-faster express trains

and the provision of services for commuters. Like Mr Brown, I am keen for mainline services to stop at Edinburgh Park, at least at peak rush hour.

As Ms Smith said, an independent study concluded that passenger numbers would increase by 200,000 in the first year if mainline trains stopped at Edinburgh Park. I agree that we should urge the Government to work closely with Transport Scotland and First Scotrail, to ascertain what progress we can make as soon as possible.

17:22

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I thank Margaret Smith for securing the debate.

The provision of a mainline service that stops at Edinburgh Park station is a matter of urgency. The longer people drive to Edinburgh Park rather than take the train, the more likely it is that they will form an ingrained habit, which it will be difficult to change.

In Australia, when big new housing and business developments are built, transport is put in place first, so that it is ready for the people who will work or live in the development. We do not have such a wise approach to planning, but we should consider adopting that approach.

The argument about journey times seems almost irrelevant. If the Government is keen to reduce our impact on the environment, a three-minute delay seems an extremely small price to pay for getting people out of their cars and on to trains—especially if we are talking about 900 people per day.

On the London underground, trains run safely at 2.5 minute intervals, because there is an advanced signalling system. In France, Germany and Italy, trains travel at double or more the speeds that our trains do and at fairly short intervals, because those countries use an advanced signalling system, which we in our wisdom have refused to introduce, simply because it is expensive. Our approach has been bizarre. I know that signalling is not the responsibility of the Scottish Executive and that an advanced system would have to be introduced throughout the United Kingdom, but the minister would do transport in not just Scotland but the whole of the UK an enormous favour if he lobbied for Network Rail to invest in the continental signalling system. The system would enable us to double the number of trains on our tracks and trains would travel at higher speeds and more safely.

Our current signalling system is Victorian; it has semaphore signals and lights. On the continent, the advanced radio and radar system ensures absolute safety and is loved by drivers. The

drivers in Scotland to whom I have spoken would love such a system to be introduced here.

17:25

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): It seems like a long time ago, but I remember that when I was the transport minister, I was very interested in Edinburgh Park station because, as Margaret Smith rightly said, tens of thousands of people do not have an easy option to get to that area from across the central belt. The potential number of passengers that could access Edinburgh Park needs to be considered urgently. Therefore, I congratulate Margaret Smith on securing the debate.

The area has South Gyle station, so it is not without a railway station with routes, but there is a fundamental need to consider the options and how we can increase the capacity of railway access to the whole area around Edinburgh Park, including the Gogar area. The new trams will come along soon, so there will be opportunities to do that. Now is a good time for the minister to sit down and take a comprehensive look at the opportunities in the area.

We face challenges if we are to tackle congestion not only in Edinburgh and the Lothians but in the whole central belt. The points that Robin Harper made are crucial to the debate. It is not only about congestion on our roads; it is also about congestion on our rail network. I know from travelling between Edinburgh and Glasgow and down from Stirling that the tricky point is getting access to Haymarket and Waverley stations. The limits to capacity there raise a fundamental problem that is worthy of examination. If there is any delay, the trains all tend to back up.

The Glasgow to Edinburgh connection is the flagship connection in Scotland; it is vital for connectivity across the country. David Whitton's point is valid in the context of the debate. Whether a stop causes a delay of one minute, two minutes or 30 seconds, we already have a line that has not sped up for years. The challenge is to re-evaluate connections across the central belt as the basis of the whole rail network. Now is a good time for the Scottish Government to go back to first principles. We need a Glasgow to Edinburgh express option, which will be challenging to achieve—even getting four trains an hour to fit the current timetable is challenging for the rail network. There is a great need for an express service between the two cities, but there is also the issue of connecting all the commuter towns in between. David Whitton is right to say that we cannot afford to do one at the expense of the other. The challenge is that the line does not currently have the capacity easily to deliver on those requirements.

There is also the minister's commitment to electrify the Glasgow to Edinburgh railway route. Although we would welcome that, it should be part of the mix in this discussion.

Also relevant to strategic railway network access is the other key Edinburgh to Glasgow railway route: the long-distance trains that run from London through to Glasgow Central station. That line is underutilised. It is a very fast route and a pleasant one, because the trains are longer and nowhere near as busy as they are on the Edinburgh to Glasgow line, but there are hardly any trains on it, so it does not meet commuter demand. Trains on that line could give different connectivity on the other side of Glasgow, from Glasgow Central down to Ayrshire. That issue should be examined.

I am less concerned on this occasion to take pot shots at the minister, although I will be happy to do so on another occasion. The key point this evening is that there is agreement across the chamber that the issue needs to be looked at urgently. There is no quick fix but, to come back to Margaret Smith's point, the station was built to enable the maximum possible access to Edinburgh Park, which it does not currently deliver. That is the context in which we should debate the issue.

17:29

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I add my congratulations to Margaret Smith on securing a debate on this important topic. I do not intend to detain members for long, but I add my support to the call for Edinburgh Park station to be integrated into the rail network as soon as possible.

Edinburgh Park is in my region of Lothians. Almost daily, I and countless other people are delayed by enormous traffic jams in the area. Many of those traffic jams are caused by people who are going to and from Edinburgh Park in their cars. Anything that we can do to change the situation so that they use public transport, including trains, is to be supported.

I have heard two main objections to doing something about the present situation. The first is that we would add to the journey time of trains between Edinburgh and Glasgow. There has been some debate about how long that delay would be, but 30 seconds is not realistic—trains need to slow down and speed up, so we would not manage that time even with Japanese underground-style train packers.

Margaret Smith: Gavin Brown was correct: we have seen only a snapshot of the Faber Maunsell report and we have only some of the interim results, so we do not know what is behind the figure of 30 seconds. I guess that the suggestion

is that journey time could be made up on other parts of the network. Like most others, I believe that getting a train to stop and allowing people to get on and off in 30 seconds would probably be a superhuman feat that would be beyond even Stewart Stevenson.

Ian McKee: I do not know about that, but it is generally accepted by members that three minutes is a reasonable ballpark estimate. I am told that the trains need to go to Glasgow or Edinburgh and turn round within two hours to get maximum efficiency, which would still be possible with a stop of three minutes at Edinburgh Park. The effect of adding three minutes to the journey time of people going between Edinburgh and Glasgow would not be all that great, particularly in view of the fact that some of those people then take another train back to the station that they went through 10 minutes earlier.

A second objection is that, by increasing journey times, we would increase the likelihood of delays and cancellations throughout the network. It is difficult to assess that argument's value, so I go along with the suggestion of Gavin Brown and others that we should have what we might call a pilot study, with some trains stopping at the time that they are most likely to be needed and with monitoring of the effect on efficiency. It is a bit slack just to accept that the whole system would collapse if we added three minutes to a train journey without finding out whether that is the case.

Climate change demands that we get cars off the road. We have a super brand-new station that is badly used but has a busy train line through it. We should do everything in our power to get trains to stop at the station as soon as possible. I ask the minister to give credence to that in his summing-up speech.

17:32

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Welcome to the rail enthusiasts club—that is clearly what we are tonight. I thank Margaret Smith for securing this debate on an interesting subject that is of key importance to the local economy. I agree absolutely with Sarah Boyack that we must consider the long-term interest—it is why I am interested in ensuring that we maximise our investment at Edinburgh Park. To respond to her point about city centre to city centre times, we have the objective of getting those down to about 35 minutes, which we believe is credible, through incremental rather than fundamental change.

David Whitton: My constituency stands on the railway line—in fact, the railway is the dividing line between my constituency and the next one. Many

people travel from Lenzie to Croy and then on. Will the minister consider carrying out an analysis of the number of people who travel from Lenzie and Croy to Edinburgh Park and the number who travel to Edinburgh Park from Falkirk, Polmont and Linlithgow? That could lend the fast service from Edinburgh to Glasgow some scope to stop at Edinburgh Park, because it might then not have to stop at Falkirk, Polmont and Linlithgow and we could improve the commuter service from those places.

Stewart Stevenson: I will return to David Whitton's point, which is reasonable.

Edinburgh Park will probably be the hotspot for economic development in central Scotland in the coming years, building on the substantial growth that has already occurred there. There are huge workforces and the area is an important economic contributor to Edinburgh and beyond. The rail element, which came through the opening of Edinburgh Park station in December 2003, involved a big joint venture and substantial investment.

At present, four trains call at Edinburgh Park each hour. It is probably advisable for people who are coming from the west to change at Linlithgow. That—rather than going to Haymarket—adds approximately five minutes to their journey.

I will highlight one fact that might give us some insight. Some class 158 trains go from Dunblane to Edinburgh—class 158s also operate on the main Glasgow to Edinburgh line—but only one service stops at Edinburgh Park. By coincidence, the journey time difference is three minutes. That is not to say that one cannot consider other measures to bring the time difference down, but it gives us a feel for the idea that the stop is likely to add three minutes. Our objective is to get frequency on the Edinburgh to Glasgow line up from four trains an hour to six an hour. That would give us substantial scope to address some of the needs of the west of Edinburgh in the longer term.

There has been some discussion of the number of people who use Edinburgh Park station. The number that I have is 1,000. Margaret Smith has 1,500, but let us not fall out over that. She has suggested that 900 more people could use Edinburgh Park. The important point is our belief that there is a £60 million value for every minute we can get off the journey time between Edinburgh and Glasgow—£60 million per minute. If services stop at Edinburgh Park, that creates an advantage for the people who get off there, but a disadvantage—which we can measure to some extent—for those whose journey is lengthened. The trick is to get the balance right. The number of people who use Edinburgh Park is relatively modest compared with the 30,000 a day who commute to the area—in that sense, we are

tapping only a small part of the potential for travel to work at Edinburgh Park—and the 20,000 a day who travel between Edinburgh and Glasgow.

We need to understand what the potential is, which brings us to the important point that we do not have sufficient information about the unrealised potential for travel to work at Edinburgh Park. There have been several attempts to get information. I have asked officials to be more proactive on the matter and to engage directly with businesses in Edinburgh Park, so that we can more properly understand where people are coming from to work there.

The Airdrie to Bathgate line will provide the direct connection between Glasgow and Edinburgh Park, when that service is implemented in 2010. We have good connections from Polmont and Linlithgow to Edinburgh Park, and from Bathgate more generally, but that leaves the question of connections from Falkirk High relatively unresolved. I hope that improved information will help us to understand what we can do in that regard. The issue is complex; there is an interlocking set of advantages and disadvantages that we have to examine carefully.

Margaret Smith: If I can pull together the mood of the meeting, it seems likely that people might, in the short term—before the changes with the Airdrie to Bathgate line—accept the benefits of an occasional direct stop being opened up, possibly in the intermittent way that has been talked about. Has that suggestion been modelled by Transport Scotland or Network Rail?

Stewart Stevenson: Modelling is an imperfect science and, at the moment, the indications are that the disbenefits significantly outweigh the benefits.

Robin Harper talked about signalling, which is a big constraint on our ability to improve the network. There is a lack of signalling engineers, as we have seen elsewhere. In 2015 or thereby, the European signalling system—a moving block system, which will improve capacity—may come in. As one increases speed, the gap between trains has to increase, so the capacity of the line is reduced. The issue is complex.

I thank Margaret Smith for initiating the debate. We are moving towards having more stops at Edinburgh Park. I am open to considering every opportunity to draw forward the point at which we can increase stops there, but I believe that Edinburgh Park will undoubtedly be a very important part of our future rail system. I worked for 20 years at Sighthill and I wish that I had had the station at that time.

Meeting closed at 17:40.

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