

# **MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT**

Thursday 12 November 2009

Session 3

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## Scottish Parliament

*Thursday 12 November 2009*

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

### **Clostridium Difficile (Ninewells Hospital)**

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** Good morning. The first item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on the Clostridium difficile outbreak at Ninewells hospital. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions during it.

09:15

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon):** I begin by conveying my sincere condolences to the families of those patients who died in ward 31 at Ninewells hospital as a result of Clostridium difficile. My statement will set out the detail of the events that led up to and followed the outbreak that has been declared by NHS Tayside. It will provide assurances of the steps that the Government has taken and is taking to ensure that the risk of outbreaks is minimised and that, where they occur, action is taken quickly to ensure that all necessary infection control procedures are in place and are robustly applied.

During the outbreak in ward 31 at Ninewells hospital, eight elderly patients were confirmed as having Clostridium difficile infection. Seven of those patients were confirmed as having the virulent 027 strain; the other patient was found to have the 078 strain. Sadly, five patients have now died. Two of them died as a direct result of Clostridium difficile infection. For the other three, Clostridium difficile was a factor in but not the main cause of death. All five patients died in the period between 21 October and 6 November, not over a 10-week period as was, unfortunately, inaccurately reported in the news release that NHS Tayside issued on Tuesday.

I am advised by NHS Tayside that it kept patients and their relatives fully informed at all times. Rightly, initial action has focused on dealing quickly and effectively with the outbreak. Ward 31 is a 22-bed medicine for the elderly ward. NHS Tayside has confirmed that the trigger that is used for declaring an outbreak in the ward is three confirmed cases of Clostridium difficile within a 30-day period.

Setting control limits on case numbers in clinical areas is standard infection surveillance practice. The control limit that is set is informed by historical data on infection prevalence and patient profile in the ward. I stress that, irrespective of control limits, individual cases of Clostridium difficile, when identified, are appropriately managed through infection prevention and control measures, which include the isolation or cohort care of patients. When control limits are met or breached, further investigations take place to establish whether there are links between individual patient cases, to identify the cause of the outbreak and to establish whether additional infection control measures are needed to contain the risk of infection spreading further.

NHS Tayside has reported that three patients were confirmed as Clostridium difficile ribotype 027 positive on 14, 17 and 18 October. Because that number breached the control limit that had been set for ward 31, an outbreak was declared on 19 October and the ward was immediately closed to all new admissions.

As soon as the outbreak was declared, NHS Tayside undertook retrospective investigations, which confirmed that one patient had been identified as Clostridium difficile ribotype 078 positive on 19 September. The case involved a different strain of the infection, so it is not linked to the three cases that triggered the outbreak. However, it has been included in the overall number of eight cases. One further patient was identified as strain 027 positive on 5 August 2009. Although the case was outwith the 30-day trigger period, the fact that the 027 strain of Clostridium difficile had been identified in patients at the time of and subsequent to the outbreak being declared led NHS Tayside to include it in the outbreak numbers. The working assumption at the moment is that the 027-positive patient concerned may have been the index case for the subsequent outbreak, but investigations by NHS Tayside and Health Protection Scotland into the cause of the outbreak are on-going. The outcome of those investigations will be reported to me.

NHS Tayside has confirmed that three further patients on the ward were identified as ribotype 027 positive on 21, 26 and 30 October. There have been no new cases in ward 31 since 30 October.

My officials were notified of the outbreak on 21 October and alerted me to the situation on 21 October; I have received regular reports from NHS Tayside on developments since then. Health Protection Scotland visited Ninewells hospital on 29 October to review the control measures related to the outbreak of Clostridium difficile in ward 31. It advocated no additional control measures, as those noted by the infection control team as being

in place were in line with current national guidance for the management of *Clostridium difficile*, but made recommendations on next steps in relation to the on-going investigation and management of the outbreak. Those are being implemented with on-going support from Health Protection Scotland.

The new health care environment inspectorate, which was scheduled to visit NHS Tayside on 11 November as part of its programme of visits, visited yesterday and will review infection control systems on ward 31. A deep clean of the ward took place yesterday. I have asked the inspectorate to undertake a follow-up visit as soon as possible.

It is essential that the outcome of the investigations that are being undertaken to assess the infection control systems that are in place in ward 31 and in NHS Tayside as a whole are fully understood and that any gaps in relation to current policy and practice are identified and addressed. It is in no one's interest to speculate at this stage on what the outcome of the work will be, but I assure the families of those who have been so tragically affected that any follow-up action that is needed will be taken swiftly by NHS Tayside and the Government, with, I am sure, the full support of the chamber.

It is inevitable that parallels will be drawn between this outbreak and the tragic situation at the Vale of Leven hospital last year. However, it is important to stress that, whereas the Vale of Leven outbreak, which spanned six wards, affected 55 patients and caused or contributed to the deaths of 18 patients, went unnoticed for a period of several months, the outbreak at Ninewells was identified and responded to quickly by NHS Tayside. Nevertheless, the Ninewells outbreak is evidence of the need to continue and intensify the actions that we have taken since events at the Vale of Leven.

Following the Vale of Leven outbreak, we introduced a range of measures to reduce the risk of harm from infection across NHS Scotland. They included implementation of a national health care associated infection action plan to ensure that boards have the necessary policies and practices in place to drive improvements in key areas of governance, leadership and surveillance; the creation of an independent health care environment inspectorate that will undertake a programme of both announced and unannounced visits to all acute hospitals over the next three years; an additional £5 million of funding to pay for extra domestic staff across the national health service; a new target to reduce *C diff* in the 65-plus age group by at least 30 per cent by March 2011; extra funding to enhance local HAI surveillance procedures; full roll-out of an MRSA screening programme by January 2010; local

reporting on hospital-by-hospital performance on MRSA and *C diff* rates, hand hygiene, environmental cleaning and the causes of adverse incidents; additional funding for the appointment of antimicrobial pharmacists to ensure the prudent prescribing of antibiotics at ward level; the introduction of a zero-tolerance approach to non-compliance with hand hygiene policies across the NHS; the revamp of the senior charge nurse role, to give such nurses responsibility for ensuring ward cleanliness; and deepening of the cleaning specification and monitoring framework, to ensure the highest possible standards of cleaning across the NHS.

I am acutely aware that none of the measures that I have listed will do anything to negate the impact of what has happened at Ninewells hospital, but it is worth reflecting on the impact that they appear to be beginning to have in NHS Scotland as a whole. The latest figures published by Health Protection Scotland show that the number of cases of *C diff* in Scotland has reduced by 14 per cent compared with the previous quarter and by 42 per cent compared with the same period in 2008. Rates of *C diff* are now at their lowest since mandatory surveillance began.

I am under no illusions about the fact that the outbreak at Ninewells reinforces the need for us to keep the fight against hospital infection at the top of our agenda. I have said before and say again that reducing health care associated infection is my top priority and the Government's top health priority. We will continue to ensure that all that needs to be done is done and that lessons continue to be learned, to reduce the risk of harm to both patients and their families.

**The Presiding Officer:** The cabinet secretary will take questions on issues that were raised in her statement. We have about 20 minutes for questions.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I, too, express my condolences to the families who have lost loved ones in the tragic outbreak of *Clostridium difficile* at Ninewells hospital.

I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of her statement, but I regret the lack of transparency that has characterised NHS Tayside's handling of the outbreak. The health board claimed that the problems occurred over 10 weeks; the cabinet secretary said that they have occurred over three weeks.

Let us take the cabinet secretary's timeline. Does she agree that patients and their families have a right to know whether there is an outbreak? Why, when cases were identified on 14 October, 17 October and 18 October, was someone apparently admitted to the ward on 19 October, who then went on to contract *C difficile* and

subsequently died? Their family claims that they were not told. Why is the trigger three cases, when it is two cases in other health boards?

We know from the outbreak at the Vale of Leven hospital that the 027 strain is particularly virulent. The mortality rate at the Vale of Leven was 33 per cent, which at the time was the highest in the country. However, at Ninewells, the mortality rate is a staggering 62 per cent. Can the cabinet secretary explain why the mortality rate is so high?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I will try to take Jackie Baillie's questions one by one. First, I reiterate a point that I made in my statement. The reference by NHS Tayside on Tuesday to a 10-week period was wrong. The dates are as I set out in my statement. The error in NHS Tayside's news release on Tuesday was deeply regrettable, and I have stressed to the chairman of the board that accuracy of information relating to C difficile outbreaks or any other infection outbreak is essential. I hope that members will understand that the timeline is as I set it out today.

Jackie Baillie asked about transparency. I make it clear that when outbreaks are identified the absolute priority is to protect patient safety. I know that members will understand that. The initial priority and focus of NHS Tayside was, rightly, on dealing with the outbreak and bringing it under control. Patients and families who were affected were kept fully informed at all times—NHS Tayside has assured me that that is the case.

I make the important point that during the period in question the ward in question was closed to new admissions. Jackie Baillie referred to a case that was reported in the press yesterday of a patient being admitted to Ninewells after the outbreak was declared. I have checked that with NHS Tayside and the information that NHS Tayside has given me is that that patient was admitted to Ninewells hospital on 12 October and was transferred to ward 31 on 13 October. That is the information that I have been given by NHS Tayside.

The triggers for declaring an outbreak rightly vary from ward to ward, because account is taken of the particular circumstances of different wards. Some wards are more prone to C difficile, for example because of the age and vulnerability of patients. Triggers also take into account wards' past experience of C difficile. Therefore, the triggers in some wards will be different from the triggers in other wards. That is standard and recognised infection control and surveillance practice.

Transparency is vital in such cases. I submit to members that there is now greater transparency around C difficile in particular and hospital infection in general than has ever been the case.

In addition to the quarterly statistics that are published we now have bi-monthly hospital-by-hospital reporting, which any member of the public can access on the website—this Government introduced that. NHS boards will also, as appropriate, inform members of the public of instances such as this one. I do not intend to be at all political about the matter, but it is the case that for most of the previous Administration we had no idea how many C difficile cases there were, because the information was neither collected nor published. We are now in a better place. It is right that there is transparency, which allows not just NHS boards but me to be held to account. It is right that there is clear accountability.

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I also express my condolences to the families.

Ninewells is a first-class teaching hospital, which is highly valued by patients and people in Tayside, Perthshire and Fife.

Has prompt action been taken on a new dress code and on dealing with patients' personal laundry at home, as was promised? Given that the case on 5 August might have been the index case, does the cabinet secretary agree that an electronic bed management and infection control system would have captured the alert more effectively?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Mary Scanlon is right to point out that Ninewells is an excellent acute teaching hospital. I do not want to diminish in any way, shape or form the significance of what has happened at Ninewells hospital during the outbreak, but cases of C difficile in Tayside have fallen by around 25 per cent since 2007. That is not good enough, but it is nevertheless encouraging, and I want that progress to continue.

Hospitals and staff follow guidance on dress code and dealing with laundry. I can make the guidance available to members, for their interest.

Mary Scanlon, Jackson Carlaw and other members on the Conservative benches have pursued electronic bed management and I am grateful to them for doing so. As they know, we are piloting different approaches to electronic bed management in NHS boards around the country. We will fully evaluate the pilots and take whatever action we consider appropriate, in full discussion with the Conservatives and other members. I am grateful to Mary Scanlon and her colleagues for continuing to pursue what is an important issue.

**Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD):** I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of her statement. I associate the Liberal Democrats with the condolences that have been expressed to the families of the patients who died at Ninewells.

I hope that the cabinet secretary agrees that public inquiries have a number of roles, not least

of which is to establish the facts and make recommendations. A public inquiry can play an important role in re-establishing public confidence. In light of the further outbreak of C difficile, will the cabinet secretary reconsider the remit of the inquiry that is currently being conducted by Lord MacLean? Will the cabinet secretary meet Lord MacLean to consider amendments to the inquiry's remit, so that when the inquiry's recommendations are published it will be clear to the public that the examination had the opportunity to take evidence on all cases and—just as important—that the inquiry has been able independently to verify that the 12 measures that the cabinet secretary identified in her statement are, in its view, adequate and sufficient to meet needs, not just in the Vale of Leven hospital but in all hospitals in Scotland?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Ross Finnie asked an important question. I established the public inquiry into the situation at the Vale of Leven hospital. Members supported that action, which was the right action to take. Ross Finnie knows that the inquiry's terms of reference, in particular term of reference F, were deliberately drawn widely enough not to fetter Lord MacLean's ability to consider whatever cases of C difficile he wants to consider. I mentioned the on-going investigations into events at Ninewells hospital, and I will reflect further when I know the outcome of those investigations.

As I said to Mary Scanlon, nobody—least of all me—should diminish the seriousness of what happened at Ninewells hospital. However, as I said in my statement, it is important not to lose sight of key differences between the outbreak at Ninewells and other recent outbreaks and the tragic and completely indefensible series of events at the Vale of Leven hospital. At the heart of what went wrong at the Vale of Leven hospital was an outbreak that went unnoticed and unidentified and was therefore allowed to run amok through six wards in that hospital. That affected more than 50 patients and caused or contributed to the death of 18. That situation was significantly different.

That said, it is important to learn lessons of every outbreak. Lord MacLean has the freedom to consider whatever cases he wants to. I will of course continue to reflect as we receive the outcome of the investigations that I have spoken about.

**The Presiding Officer:** We come to open questions. Eight members seek to ask questions. If we are to fit them all in, questions and answers must be relatively brief.

**Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP):** First, I give my condolences to the families of those who died in Ninewells hospital, which is in my constituency.

I welcome the news that the health care environment inspectorate is reviewing procedures. It would be useful to know the timetable for receiving feedback from that.

Will the cabinet secretary take a minute to help patients and potential patients to understand how, despite improving hand and ward hygiene, such bacteria can still infect patients in hospitals around the globe?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Joe FitzPatrick asks a pertinent question. We are right to talk about the progress that has been made throughout Scotland to reduce C diff rates. It is not good enough—much progress has still to be made—but C diff rates have reduced by 42 per cent, as I said in my statement. Nevertheless, outbreaks such as the one that which we are discussing still occur. In the NHS in Scotland—as in every health care system around the world, I suspect—we have not yet eradicated infections such as C diff from hospitals. I hope that we can achieve that but, in the meantime, we must ensure that when an infection such as C diff gets into a hospital, it is controlled and the chances of its onward spread are minimised.

It is clear that NHS Tayside was not successful enough in controlling C diff in Ninewells, because eight patients contracted the infection and—sadly—five of them died from that, as we know. Nevertheless, the board took prompt action to stop the infection's further spread. Our efforts must focus on continuing to improve all the infection control practices that we know minimise the chances of spread.

Ross Finnie referred to the action that I outlined in my statement, all of which is designed to ensure that the action that is taken in the event of a C diff outbreak or any other infection in a hospital minimises spread. We will continue to implement actions and learn lessons so that NHS boards can minimise spread successfully and effectively.

**Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** The cabinet secretary repeated clearly that health care acquired infection is the top priority of her and her Government, yet we have another incident that involves the most lethal ribotype—027. Is she comfortable that HPS, the national agency, took 10 days to turn up at the hospital to give support and advice? Will she confirm now or later that, from 17 October, when the first 027 case was typed, a sample from every symptomatic patient in the hospital was sent for typing?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I will write to Richard Simpson about his last question, because I want to ensure that I answer him fully and accurately.

I will be frank with Richard Simpson and all members. Whenever an outbreak occurs, it is incumbent on me that I do not just defend the NHS



board's actions; I must critically review all those actions. I did that in this case and I will continue to do that as the outcome of the continuing investigations becomes known.

On the basis of what I know, I am satisfied that NHS Tayside acted quickly and responded effectively once the outbreak had been identified and declared. However, we will always look to learn lessons to ensure that we can operate better in the future. I give that assurance openly to Richard Simpson and every member. I will write to him on the detail of his last question.

**Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP):** We all know that C diff is a worldwide scourge. The cabinet secretary has taken the matter extremely seriously—her record speaks for itself, as C diff rates have reduced by 25 per cent in Tayside since 2007, which is good news in some ways. Is there any prospect of further reducing rates? What methods can we use to achieve that? Can we knock the infection out of Scottish hospitals altogether?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** As I said in response to an earlier question, we have not eradicated C diff or other infections from our hospitals. I am not aware of any health care system in the world that has done so. Can we do that? I would certainly like to think so, but experts tell me that that is unlikely, because when we are on top of one infection, another strain or infection will appear—that is in the nature of infection.

We should never ease our efforts to cut down the opportunities for infections to take root in hospitals and we should certainly work hard on an on-going basis—we will never be able to say, “Job done”—to ensure that when infections appear in hospitals, we minimise the chance of spread. All the actions that the Government has taken are designed to do that, but we will not rest on our laurels. A 42 per cent reduction throughout the country and a 25 per cent reduction in Tayside are good but, as I have said several times this morning, not good enough. We will continue to place as much priority as possible on reducing the numbers further.

**Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con):** The cabinet secretary referred to the revamp of the role of senior charge nurses and their new responsibility for ensuring ward cleanliness. What is the status of that programme in the affected ward at Ninewells and at the hospital in general?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** As Jackson Carlaw knows, the senior charge nurse programme is being rolled out throughout the country. I will write to him about the programme's precise status, not just in ward 31, but in all wards in NHS Tayside.

The programme is important. Mary Scanlon has suggested in the past that we should reintroduce

matrons in hospital wards. In many respects, the revamped senior charge nurse role is analogous to the role that the matron used to play, although that term is not used. The aim is to ensure that wards have clear clinical leadership and that the senior nurses who are on duty in a ward at any time have clear power and responsibility to ensure that certain tasks are done. For example, if a ward does not reach the cleanliness and hygiene standards that it is expected to meet, that can be acted on. That is the right direction in which to go and we should continue to roll out the programme and to ensure that senior charge nurses have the authority that patients want them to have.

**Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I am anxious for people in Tayside to be reassured about the safety of all the wards in Ninewells hospital, so I ask for further details on the deepening of the cleaning specification to which the cabinet secretary referred.

Will the cabinet secretary make it clear that the blame does not lie at the door of hospital domestics? We know that funds were made available in April for 45 extra cleaners, but if they do not have the appropriate equipment, they will not be effective. They need mops and disinfectant, not just the washing detergent that they are reported to have received.

**The Presiding Officer:** Briefly, please.

**Marlyn Glen:** It is now reported that stronger disinfectant is to be used. What is used at the moment?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** My response to Marlyn Glen's question about blame is that I am not interested in a blame game about C difficile. Everybody who works in the NHS has a part to play in taking all the right steps to ensure that we bear down on infection rates. I accept openly that the buck ultimately stops with me and I will never shirk from that responsibility. It is my job to ensure that health boards ensure that all staff—whether they are domestic cleaning staff, nurses or other NHS staff—have the right equipment in the broadest sense of the word to do the job effectively.

Deepening the cleaning specification was one action that we took following the Vale of Leven outbreak. As Marlyn Glen knows, when boards' performance is monitored against the cleaning specification, boards generally score highly. I was concerned to ensure that the specification and therefore the monitoring against it were as stringent as possible, so we examined the specification afresh to ensure that it was tougher than it had been and that boards had to achieve higher standards to get pass marks.

We will continue to keep that under review, but we have also introduced an extra, important layer—the health care environment inspectorate—

because one of the other criticisms that have been made is that too much of the monitoring in hospitals is based on self-assessment and self-reporting. The health care environment inspectorate is intended to take an independent view. Its announced and unannounced visits are important and will be able to assure us all that the right things happen in practice. The inspectorate's first report, which was on NHS Forth Valley, was issued earlier this week, as Marlyn Glen will be aware. Anybody who reads that report will be encouraged that the process will be robust and will lead to improvements.

In my statement I mentioned a deep clean of ward 31. That is under way today. Because the process is different from that used previously—it is a steam cleaning process—the deep clean had to wait until all patients were out of the ward, which happened yesterday. That is why the deep clean had to wait until today.

NHS boards must continue to ensure that every aspect of their cleaning regimes is absolutely up to scratch.

**The Presiding Officer:** From now on, I am taking time out of the next debate, so I ask that questions and answers be kept brief.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the crucial information and facts from yesterday's inspection of Ninewells will be shared with other health authorities? Will she give us an indication of the level of specialist training for the extra domestic staff that she mentioned?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** The outcome of all the investigations that I mentioned will be published, as will all the health care environment inspectorate's reports, like this week's report. That is important not only so that other health boards and hospitals throughout the country can learn lessons but so that there is a level of scrutiny by the public, which can be a powerful driver to force change through the system.

It is vital that all cleaners and other domestic staff be given the right training and the right equipment to do their jobs. Jamie Stone will be aware of the cleanliness champions programme, which is designed to ensure that staff across the NHS get the training that allows them to ensure that cleanliness procedures are properly implemented and ensures that they know what the appropriate procedures are.

**Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP):** The cabinet secretary and others may not have heard the Grampian news on Tuesday, when it was reported:

"experts say that NHS Tayside has done all it can to contain this outbreak."

Professor Hugh Pennington said:

"They've taken this very seriously. They've closed a ward. There haven't been any more cases for 10 days—that's good news."

Would it not be more helpful if the Labour Party listened to its own adviser and recognised the good work of all staff instead of criticising in the media all those in NHS Tayside who have done all that they can to contain the outbreak and fight what Professor Pennington calls

"a very cunning and subtle adversary"?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I said in my statement that NHS Tayside has reacted appropriately in responding to the outbreak. I understand that Hugh Pennington offered the same opinion earlier this week when he reflected on the fact that NHS Tayside had taken the situation seriously. That is important, because it is essential that, when outbreaks are identified, quick and effective action is taken. That does not diminish my regret and anger that outbreaks happen at all. We must continue to do what we do and, as we learn lessons from the outbreaks, do more to minimise the chances of them happening in the first place. I assure members, as I have before, that we will continue to do that. I have already commented on the difficulty of eradicating C diff and other infections from our hospitals, but we must continue to work to reduce the chances of outbreaks as well as ensuring that, when they are identified, we minimise the spread as effectively as possible.

**Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab):** Given the gravity of the situation, will the cabinet secretary do more than reflect on the remit of Lord MacLean's public inquiry? Will she direct and require the inquiry to embrace all the outbreaks in Scotland? There have now been outbreaks in Orkney, Elgin and Aberdeen to name a few. That is a tragic situation for us all and we urge her to direct, not simply reflect.

**Nicola Sturgeon:** Although Helen Eadie and all other members are right to scrutinise and, if appropriate, criticise the Government's and NHS Tayside's action, I hope that they are under no illusion about how seriously I take outbreaks of C difficile. As I said to Ross Finnie, I deliberately drew the terms of reference for the Vale of Leven inquiry broadly, in consultation with Lord MacLean, in order not to fetter his and the inquiry's freedom to consider cases other than that outbreak. However, in doing that, it was important that I did not move attention away from the Vale of Leven outbreak because, as I have said already, it was not only an outbreak of C difficile but one that went completely unidentified and unnoticed. That is what led to the scale of the problem at that hospital, and it is in the interest of all those who were affected that the inquiry focuses properly on that. However, it is also right that other examples

be taken into account, which is why the terms of reference are framed in the way that they are.

As I said, I will reflect carefully and, if appropriate, report back to the Parliament on the results of the investigations into what went wrong at Ninewells. I will not shirk from taking whatever action I consider necessary.

## Central Scotland Green Network

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5173, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the central Scotland green network.

09:52

**The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham):** This is an important debate about the contribution that the central Scotland green network can make to the quality of life of people who live in the central belt. I am pleased to be able to set the scene today, and I hope that if any members are as yet unaware of that far-reaching project, they will be a little better informed after the debate.

The network is a visionary and highly ambitious new green space initiative that will deliver an environmental step change for Scotland's central belt. It is a strategic network of woodland and other habitats, active travel routes, green space links, watercourses and waterways. It is also the biggest programme of its kind in Europe, comprising an area four times the size of greater London that stretches from Ayrshire, Inverclyde and Dunbartonshire in the west to Fife and East Lothian in the east. By making a dramatic and lasting improvement to the environment of central Scotland, the green network has the power to transform the lives and livelihoods of more than 3 million people who live there. It will enhance the setting for development and other land uses and will improve opportunities for outdoor recreation and cultural activity.

The network is one of 14 strategic national developments that the Government set out last June in a national planning framework that will guide the country's development to 2030. The key strategic infrastructure that it identifies will enable Scotland to develop its full potential and support the Government's central purpose of sustainable economic growth. That puts the central Scotland green network on a par with, for example, the replacement Forth crossing or the high-speed rail link to London, and we regard it to be as important as those.

The Government's vision is of a healthier and greener Scotland. We want strong, resilient and supportive communities that live in well-designed, sustainable places. We want the people of those communities to value and enjoy their natural environments and to live longer, healthier lives. The green network's vision is to help to deliver those outcomes and transform central Scotland through significant improvements in environmental quality, woodland cover and recreational opportunities.

That transformation will make central Scotland more attractive not only for the 3 million residents but for its visitors, and particularly for its investors. By creating and linking high-quality, accessible green space, the CSGN will enhance biodiversity, help to mitigate climate change, support sustainable economic growth and improve the quality of life of most of Scotland's population. By substantially increasing woodland cover and improving green space, the CSGN will transform landscapes for the region's communities and bring back to life the area's legacy of derelict and vacant land. Furthermore, creating a green network will complement improvements in rail, road and communications infrastructure in the area. In short, the network will make central Scotland a more attractive place in which to live and do business.

Attracting new businesses to central Scotland is particularly important in these economically challenging times, because high-value, high-tech businesses are attracted to high-quality places. We believe that a green network will give the area a competitive edge and that delivering a better environment in central Scotland will help it to compete economically at a European and, indeed, a global level. A successful central Scotland green network has the power to deliver several of the national strategic objectives and make the area healthier, stronger, smarter, greener and wealthier.

The initiative will start by co-ordinating and building on the good work that is already being done by existing green space initiatives, which include the Glasgow and Clyde valley green network, the Central Scotland Forest Trust, the Edinburgh and Lothians forest habitat network, the strategic work of Greenspace Scotland and a large number of more local initiatives. The Labour Party is right to point out that the initiative will require an extensive amount of partnership working across all levels of government and out into the private and voluntary sectors as well.

The initiative will also build on strategic infrastructure developments, such as the millennium canal link and the Falkirk helix. The Edinburgh and Lothians forest habitat network is creating a multifunctional green network linking town and country, which includes proposals for Roslin glen and the Pentland hills. The central Scotland forest and the Forth and Clyde and Union canals are helping to transform the environment between Glasgow and Edinburgh. The Glasgow and Clyde valley green network partnership is taking forward a green space enhancement programme, which includes areas in the Clyde waterfront, Clyde gateway, Gartcosh-Gartloch and Ravenscraig. There is also potential for substantial habitat restoration and

enhancement through the Clyde gateway and the Commonwealth games legacy.

The 19 local authorities in the area will obviously play an important role in, for example, promoting open space networks, facilitating countryside access and developing core path networks. The Scottish forestry strategy contains a commitment to expand and improve the quality of woodlands around settlements and to improve landscape amenity and recreational opportunities. As well as bringing vacant and derelict land back into beneficial use, well-sited woodlands will improve biodiversity and the resilience of the natural environment, helping it to adapt to climate change and absorb CO<sub>2</sub>. Improvements to large-scale ecological networks and habitat connections, including wetlands, will counter fragmentation and assist species migration. Effectively, the green network is not just for humans but for wildlife, which will be able to use the network as well.

Developing strategic footpaths and cycleways will contribute to more sustainable transport networks and expand recreational opportunities beside and between population centres. In that way, the network will help to encourage active travel and healthier lifestyles—a park-and-stride approach to commuting, as it were.

**John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** On improving recreational capabilities, does the minister envisage the CSGN integrating with established regional parks, such as Clyde Muirshiel and the Pentlands?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** I hope that all existing infrastructure, including regional parks, will become part and parcel of the CSGN. We will look for cross-linking where, and with whom, that is possible. There is no reason why the regional parks, where they intersect with the CSGN, should not be part of it.

The main stakeholder bodies are already working together through an interim steering group that is led by Forestry Commission Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage, and supported by the Central Scotland Forest Trust. I have asked officials in those bodies to assemble a work plan that will set out the way forward. We will launch that early next year. A high-level executive board comprising members of the representative bodies is being tasked to take forward the next phase. A chair is being recruited, and I expect to appoint a successful candidate early next year. I intend to take a pro-active role in the new board to ensure that the work translates to real actions on the ground.

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** Can the minister tell me whether British Waterways is involved in the CSGN, given its network of canals in the central belt?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** The canal network and all waterways will be part and parcel of the CSGN. I know that British Waterways has its own ambitious plans. I had an interesting meeting with representatives of that organisation, at which they exhibited their level of ambition. I certainly want to encourage that where possible, because it will bring enormous benefit to the areas in which the waterways are located.

We will ensure that all local authorities in the CSGN are involved. In order to do that, I will host a gathering next year of all relevant councillors. I imagine that it will be quite a large gathering, since they will be from 19 local authorities. However, it is important that they are all brought on board and are embedded in the process. Volunteer bodies, charities and not-for-profit organisations also have a key role to play in helping to turn the CSGN into a reality. In that regard, I intend to host a third sector summit next summer.

As members have heard, a lot is already happening. Of course, the current economic reality means that we will have to make our existing resources go as far as possible. Much can be achieved through more efficient co-ordination and use of existing initiatives and their resources, including the Scotland rural development plan; the smarter choices, smarter places project; regeneration funding; the Forestry Commission's woods in and around towns programme and challenge funding; the repositioning of the national forest estate; the Clyde gateway; and, of course, the 2014 Commonwealth games legacy activity. I hope that just the mention of all those highlights the utter absurdity of the Liberal Democrat amendment.

It will be apparent by now that the CSGN is a cross-sectoral, cross-departmental initiative. The department for rural affairs and the environment clearly has an important co-ordinating role to play. However, as I said at an SNH event here in Holyrood last week, a development of the scale and ambition of the CSGN cannot be achieved by one department alone.

**Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD):** The minister talked about the absurdity of our amendment, but it simply asks the Scottish Government to list the financial commitments that it is making for the CSGN, which must come with a cost. That is all we are asking about. Why does the minister say that that is absurd?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** Because it asks for that information for the entire national planning framework—all 14 projects. It wants the detail in six weeks for projects that might last 30 years. I feel sorry for the Labour Party having had to endure that kind of absurdity in coalition for eight years.

In order for the strategic national development to be fully successful, it will require the good will, commitment and contribution of colleagues from other departments. I was adamant at the outset that the CSGN should not be seen solely as an environmental initiative. Principal responsibility certainly sits with me and my department, but as a testament to the wide-ranging nature of the benefits that will be gained, the Minister for Housing and Communities, Alex Neil, will close this debate. However, that could just as easily have been done by the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, the Minister for Public Health and Sport or any one of a number of others. We all need to work towards making the CSGN vision a reality.

I have asked my officials to intensify engagement across a variety of portfolios. I shall pursue ministerial-level contacts accordingly. For any colleagues who are interested, both the Forestry Commission and SNH are happy to host site visits to show members what is already happening and the scale of what needs to be done in their local areas.

I exhort all members with an interest and locus in the CSGN initiative to work with us in helping to deliver it. We all need to focus on delivering tangible benefits that will improve the environment, economic potential and the lives of people in central Scotland for generations to come.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises and supports the significant contribution that the Central Scotland Green Network can make to the quality of life of the three million people living in the central belt, not just through environmental and social benefits, such as improving habitat networks, enhancing landscapes, mitigating climate change, improving health and wellbeing and stimulating educational and cultural activity, outdoor recreation and community involvement, but also through increasing economic benefits, such as business development, urban regeneration and derelict land restoration.

10:04

**Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab):** Labour has long argued for the establishment of a network of green corridors across central Scotland. It was one of our manifesto promises at the previous election. I welcome the opportunity today for us to help shape the new network. I believe that it is a natural development of the groundwork that we laid over the past decade in, for example, the woods in and around towns initiative and the development of urban forest in central Scotland.

My colleagues on the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee have this year strongly supported the principle of developing and adding to the NPF a national, landscape-scale ecosystem

and land management project. The Scottish Wildlife Trust and RSPB Scotland are right to argue that the issue of scale is important in order to support diverse wildlife opportunities and create healthy biodiversity. Given the success of similar examples across the United Kingdom, it is important that we do not fall behind the superb best practice that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has been involved in elsewhere in the UK.

As Scotland has a long tradition of urban regeneration and the restoration of landscapes that were damaged by heavy or extractive industries, the principle of environmental justice runs through our values. Ensuring that communities that have experienced environmental degradation are given the chance for investment in a much more attractive landscape and quality of life has long been a priority. Clearly, evidence suggests that investment in landscape and environmental infrastructure is good for economic development. Such investment has the capacity to transform and regenerate many areas, such as former mining communities whose economic core was ripped out of them. Our most disadvantaged communities present some really big opportunities. That should be part of the philosophy behind the massive habitat network opportunity that is being developed through the CSGN.

What is really exciting and novel about the central Scotland green network is the scale of ambition that it represents. Roseanna Cunningham has outlined the sheer size of the geography that it will encompass. However, as well as considering the economic benefits that such a large network could bring, we should focus on the social benefits—such as enabling people to gain the health opportunities of recreation through walking, cycling and nature interpretation—and the fact that the network will improve the quality of people's everyday environment. Rather than being seen as an add-on, the network should be thought of as being linked into people's everyday lives. In light of some recent interesting research that suggest that proximity to green space is good for people's health, the green network can link into the whole environmental justice agenda, which should be at the heart of the network's philosophy.

As Ramblers Scotland has highlighted, the CSGN provides an opportunity to create a network of paths and cycle routes that link people with home and work, connect communities, and provide safer options for walking and cycling. Given Roseanna Cunningham's comments about every department having its role to play, let me highlight as an example what should happen with our railway network. There should be good, high-quality, safe, secure parking for cycles at every rail station in central Scotland. We know from the

statistics that huge numbers of people drive comparatively short distances to work. The green network surely provides an opportunity to make practical changes to people's daily lives.

Indeed, the network provides us with a radical opportunity. For much of the previous century, central Scotland was transformed—in many ways for the good—by human activity and urbanisation. In transforming our communities and landscapes in the context of climate change, the network offers an opportunity to reconnect habitats for wildlife and to support biodiversity, because the network will have sufficient scale and coherence to make a big difference. Given the projections on climate change and its impact on species, we need to give species opportunities to grow and survive. That must be at the heart of the network.

Existing examples of good practice on the ground can be developed and extended. Those include the work that Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust does in my area, the investment that is being made in our canals, the developments in forestry that are taking place both in central Scotland and further west, and the superb work that is being undertaken by Glasgow and Clyde valley green network. Those examples indicate what could be done when the network is put together. However, it is critical to consider what can be done in future. For example, what are the opportunities for the Antonine wall? We need to go beyond just having a clever rebranding and ensure that the CSGN means more than just the renaming of an area.

Effective co-ordination will be an issue, which is why our amendment highlights the need for partnership working. A host of organisations will need to work together effectively if the network is to do more than just look at the investment that is already being made. Therefore, the Scottish Government needs to answer questions on how the network's designation in the NPF will be underpinned with organisational and financial support, what analysis it has undertaken of the effectiveness of existing structures and how they might be changed, and how the influence of the different partners can be brought to bear to ensure that the network does more than what is already being done.

The role of local government is key. Scottish National Party ministers need to do more than just make an allocation and tick a box in the NPF. The investment in the CSGN does not even begin to compare with the levels of investment that are being made in other NPF projects. We need to consider what each local authority can do to bring to bear resource and activity. Will the Scottish Government renegotiate the single outcome agreements—perhaps the Minister for Housing and Communities can deal with that in his

summing up—in the light of such a key project? If the green network is really to be a national project, what implications will it have for each of the 19 local authorities involved? Given that we already have some really good strategic partnerships—I refer to the Glasgow and Clyde valley strategic development planning authority, the SESplan authority and the Ayrshire joint planning steering group—what will happen with the delivery of local development plans on the ground and how will investment be targeted through local authorities?

Tackling the resources and energies that are needed to transform some of our most degraded landscapes is another crucial issue. How will the work of different Government agencies be tied together? The Minister for Environment referred to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Forestry Commission in her opening remarks, but how will their input be co-ordinated? How will leadership take place? I welcome the fact that Roseanna Cunningham will host a couple of events, but what day-to-day work will build up to those events? We need to hear about not just the headlines but the everyday work that will underpin the network's success.

In addition, a host of environmental charities and voluntary organisations have energy and expertise, as do our local communities. In his winding-up speech, perhaps the Minister for Housing and Communities can say how those will be brought together to influence and direct the network around their own communities. We have been given the headlines, but we have not so far been told how the vision will be tied together. Detail on the strategy is crucial.

I am also interested in hearing from the minister what pump-priming money will be provided by the Scottish Government. Environmental non-governmental organisations tell us that no new money seems to be coming to the network. Given its huge scale, the network will need new pump priming if it is to make a difference.

What opportunities will come from the new paths that will be created? Ramblers Scotland has asked about the practicalities of that investment on the ground. We are told that no new money will be provided for that project. Perhaps the minister can clarify that in his closing remarks.

Given the cuts that are being made in voluntary and charitable organisations as a result of cuts in Scottish Government money, what will happen to the capacity of the different organisations that are involved? Networking cannot be done for free and on the hoof. There must be a co-ordinated effort.

Another issue that has been raised with me is the lack of ability to co-ordinate activity in the

eastern end of the network. How does the minister believe that that issue should be addressed?

How much money will come from the SRDP, in particular for the forestry grants that will be made available within the network? We know that we are massively undershooting our forestry targets year on year. The network provides a key opportunity in some of our most disadvantaged communities to link up urban habitats and to create opportunities. What will be done in practice?

Finally, as we are in the midst of a recession, I make two practical suggestions that I ask ministers to take on board. First, the network surely provides a fantastic opportunity to recruit unemployed young people to work on specific projects. We know that unemployment among young people is shooting up. The network could provide on their doorsteps opportunities to work in a practical way that could be mentioned on their CV. Secondly, spending in the early days should focus on those projects that bring multiple benefits to local communities. We need to build the profile of communities in the network locally, get local people involved and join up some of the investment to tackle the recession. We would like to see joined-up work on the ground and early investment. Could the network have a challenge fund so that local bodies could bid for projects in surrounding communities? We would like ministers to take forward those practical opportunities. I would like to hear the minister's comments on those when he winds up.

The central Scotland green network is a national project that needs national funding, but it also needs community buy-in. We have a fantastic opportunity to tie the two things together to help to build Scotland out of the recession in a way that ties in investment in our environmental networks. I would like to see some answers from the minister when he winds up.

I move amendment S3M-5173.1, to insert at end:

“, and believes that there is a need for cooperation among the Scottish Government, local authorities and agencies and groups working in the area to ensure that maximum opportunities are delivered from the network.”

10:13

**Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** The designation of the central Scotland green network as a national project is to be welcomed and will, I hope, presage a significant and sustained emphasis on improving the natural environment of the 3 million or so people who live within the 19 local authority areas that will be covered by the network. Substantial increases in woodland cover and improvements to green space and outdoor recreation are proposed, with the aim

of improving landscape settings for towns and cities, including bringing back to life areas that face the post-industrial legacy of derelict and vacant land.

The network's inclusion in NPF 2 indicates that the Government considers the economic, health and social benefits of improving the landscape setting of towns and villages to be of national importance. However, the CSGN is quite different from the other national projects in the national planning framework, and will be difficult to deliver coherently and consistently. That is why I welcome the setting up of the partnership group and look forward to the production of its action plan by the end of this year or the beginning of next.

The initiative is to be led by Forestry Commission Scotland and SNH, yet FCS has noted:

"In the absence of new funding sources becoming available, action and efforts on the CSGN will need to focus on providing a compelling vision through a clear and effective strategic plan. This may create some momentum in the short-term but in order to maintain impetus beyond the current year, we will need to find some additional resource—for example through a challenge fund which might be used to exert leverage on resources and secure commitment from local authorities and other sources. Our current assessment is that this would need to be something of the order of £5 million a year and that that might lever an equal amount from other sources."

FCS also said:

"Elevation to National Development status raises expectation. Without additional resources it will be more difficult to deliver quickly something transformational on the ground."

That is why I have lodged my amendment today. I seek clarity from the Government on what its intentions are. The minister's comments are surprising. She is surely not telling us that the Government sets its budget without regard to its strategic plans. All that I am asking for is some information.

It is increasingly evident that good-quality green space contributes to boosting physical activity and mental health, attracting investment and creating places where people want to live. Urban green space can also help to mitigate the impacts of flooding, air pollution and high temperatures, as well as supporting wildlife. It can create an environment that encourages people to choose active lifestyles, including walking and cycling, and encourages children to play outside.

Greenspace Scotland's first report on the state of Scotland's green space gave a snapshot of progress in 20 out of 32 of our local authorities. It is an interesting report that will provide a good baseline for measurement in the future. However, it acknowledges that the full benefits of green

space are contingent on how it is used and valued by people.

Since 2004, Greenspace Scotland has commissioned three surveys of public opinion on urban green space, which have examined the use of green space, public attitudes about it and people's perceptions of local spaces. They show a rise in the use of local green space since 2004, primarily for physical activity and relaxation. In the most recent survey, 63 per cent of respondents said that they used their local green space once a week or more often, which was up from 49 per cent in 2004. Half of those polled could walk to their local green space within five minutes, but that dropped to 39 per cent in more deprived areas.

The Scottish household survey in 2007-08 also included a section on green space. It found that people's level of satisfaction with their green space was positively associated with how they felt about their neighbourhood overall. It also revealed a connection between green space and health, with self-reported health being 10 per cent higher in areas with a safe and pleasant environment.

There is no doubt that good-quality green space aids personal health and wellbeing and contributes to tackling climate change. It will also help us to adapt to some of the impacts of climate change, and, importantly, it contributes to community wellbeing through the creation of a sense of belonging.

Although there are many examples of good practice—at the local authority planning level and from the many trusts and organisations that champion the environment, such as green space trusts, SNH, the woods in and around towns programme, the SWT and the Ramblers Association—far too many communities are surrounded by wasteland or barren stretches of green deserts. There has been a drive for improvement in housing stock, but the setting in which that housing has been situated has not always been improved. Planning decisions have placed too much emphasis on the built environment and have paid scant attention to securing good breathing space between developments. At the moment, central Scotland has a patchwork of green rather than a network.

Greenspace Scotland also asked about barriers to increasing use of green space, and many respondents highlighted concerns about maintenance, lack of facilities and safety. Those issues must be tackled by the CSGN. I would like the CSGN to ensure that communities are involved all the way through the process, and I ask ministers to outline how they envisage them being represented on the network's board. It is not always the case that communities are involved in the design and management of their local spaces, but when they are it can help to build a strong



sense of belonging. Placemaking projects have demonstrated that. Taking into account communities' views from the outset should ensure that the new green spaces meet the needs of all users, and should address safety concerns.

With the growing pressure on council budgets over the next few years, proper consideration must also be given to arrangements for the maintenance of space that is created. I note that the NPF action plan anticipates that, by the end of 2010, there will be a report on the preferred management structures and processes to safeguard the green network into the future. That is essential.

The CSGN is an unusual project to be included in the NPF, but its designation as a national development means that we can expect a level of co-ordination and intervention on a scale that has been previously unknown. That is welcome.

I move amendment S3M-5173.2, to insert at end:

“; notes the view of Forestry Commission Scotland that, without additional resources to invest in the Central Scotland Green Network, it will be difficult to deliver transformational change on the ground, and calls on the Scottish Government to clarify within the next six weeks its funding and delivery intentions for all the national developments in the National Planning Framework for Scotland 2 and how they link to the Scottish Government's current expenditure proposals.”

10:19

**John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** As ever, I begin by declaring an interest as a farmer. I welcome this debate and the Government motion on the central Scotland green network.

The recently launched green network offers a chance to regenerate and reinvigorate a large area of our central belt, and, as we have heard, it could benefit the substantial proportion of Scotland's population who live within the project's boundary. It is certainly an ambitious project, stretching from Ayrshire in the west right through to East Lothian and Fife, and including 19 local authority areas. It is very satisfying to see this concept—which was initially instigated by Ian Lang when he was the Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland—coming to fruition.

The network is currently at a fairly early and formative stage, and it is vital that we seize the chance to ensure that it reaches its full potential for the sake of the environment and the Scottish people. I am sure that the minister will agree that we have a lot of work ahead to make the network a success, but there is a great appetite to achieve that. The economic, environmental and social benefits of the network will be wide ranging, and as part of a well-managed and focused initiative,

those benefits will improve lives and livelihoods across the central belt and the whole of Scotland.

The concept of strong, sustainable growth, which is a key aim of the central Scotland green network, is one that the Conservatives have always supported. We believe that preserving the environment must not be seen as something that conflicts with economic growth. Ultimately, only sustainable growth will guarantee prosperity for ourselves and for future generations. Further, in terms of supporting economic growth, it can only be of benefit to central Scotland to make the area a more attractive place in which to live and do business. Making the most of derelict land and regenerating urban areas will also help to reinvigorate local areas and complement improvements in transport and infrastructure, which will ensure that central Scotland builds on its reputation as a competitive and sought-after place in which to do business.

The network could aid in strengthening and supporting existing regeneration programmes in central Scotland by securing a sustainable, long-term future for disadvantaged areas and by better meeting the needs of the existing community, attracting new residents and helping to improve people's quality of life.

In addition, the network can bring a range of health benefits, with more opportunities to access high-quality green spaces across the central belt for recreation purposes. I am sure that members will welcome the fact that that will offer people more chances for increased outdoor physical activity, particularly as we try to tackle problems such as childhood obesity and mental health issues, as well as trying generally to improve wellbeing.

Of course, numerous existing local green networks, such as the Ayrshire green network, offer residents and visitors a chance to explore outdoor areas of interest and enjoy the natural environment on a more local scale. Projects such as the raised bogs habitat action plan and East Ayrshire woodlands initiative to expand and enhance native and amenity woodlands in Ayrshire already provide opportunities to expand habitat for wildlife, reduce or reverse biodiversity decline and facilitate adaptation to the effects of climate change.

I believe that the whole of Ayrshire should be part of the central Scotland green network, and that the remaining part of South Ayrshire that is not already in the area should be included. I know that South Ayrshire Council would welcome further discussions with Ms Cunningham or Mr Neil in that regard.

However, first, we must make full use of our existing local green networks. One of the benefits

of the central Scotland green network is that it can help to identify current gaps in local provision. Where needs and pressures are greatest, it will be possible to suggest opportunities and priorities for improvement.

To ensure the success of the central Scotland green network, it is vital that it is managed in a joined-up and coherent way. It is essential that it has strong and focused leadership in order to achieve its crucial aims, such as sustainable growth and economic regeneration. We therefore urge the minister to ensure that the process of setting up a new board and appointing a chair is completed as soon as possible.

Conservatives welcome the chance to create the network but—particularly at a time of recession—we are aware of the cost implications and of the need to ensure that the project delivers its returns, which will only be achievable if it is operated as a tightly run ship.

Conservatives note the concerns that were raised by Simon Rennie, the chief executive of the Central Scotland Forest Trust, when he stated at the “Green Networks: Potential for Central Scotland” conference on 30 September that local action and networks can help to deliver the wider aims of the central Scotland green network, but local action and networks alone are not enough to run a truly successful larger scheme, as we have a situation where action is occurring in “discrete boxes”. He suggested that we need a more co-ordinated approach across the whole network area to allow the network to realise its full potential. I urge the minister to take those points on board, and I endorse Sarah Boyack’s comments in that regard.

As the interim steering group moves towards the creation of a first-draft work plan for the network, which it is likely to produce in the coming year, I wish its members every success in their task, and I look forward to scrutinising the plan when it comes before the Parliament for consultation.

Conservatives believe that quality of life and environmental issues must be at the heart of politics, and the central Scotland green network offers us a tremendous opportunity to put that vision into action.

10:25

**Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** I am delighted to speak in the debate, not as someone who lives in the central belt now, but as someone who was brought up in Glasgow. In the street where we lived, we could go to the top of the hill and see the Campsie fells in one direction, and Castlemilk and the braes of Cathkin to the south. *[Interruption.]* It is a fact that people aspire to live in a landscape in which they feel that there

is green space, and green space needs to be closer to where people live than it was to where I lived in the east end of Glasgow.

We can begin to bring together some experience from a Highland perspective that can help the central belt to turn the huge CSGN project into a carbon sink that will also be a lung and an inspiration to people who live in the area. *[Interruption.]*

I hope that we will, by the end of the debate, agree that the CSGN is a long-term project. It is difficult to place immediate emphasis, as the Liberal amendment does, on the money that will be available for forestry and so on. We are talking, in a time of recession, about problems that have been created by the lack of planting not only in the public sector, but in the private sector. Where are the people who should be planting forests on all the land in the central belt that is not owned by public bodies? We should be asking that question in the debate.

**Elaine Smith:** Should we also be asking questions about companies that clear land without gaining permission, and take forests, woods and trees away?

**Rob Gibson:** Indeed we should; that issue features in the national planning strategy document, paragraph 93 of which says that if land is cleared, it has to be replanted, and that the situation must be heavily monitored. That absolutely applies to derelict land.

In recent years, I have spent—

**Alison McInnes** *rose—*

**Rob Gibson:** I ask the member to excuse me while I make this point.

In the past couple of years, I have travelled along the lang wang towards Lanark in the Clyde valley, and from Lanark to the north. I recognise that we have fantastic views and open spaces in the central belt, and new forests that are beginning to seed. We must enthuse people about the natural environment, as we have done in the Highlands. The area around Aviemore, where the ospreys have returned to Loch Garten, is one of the rural areas of the Highlands most heavily used by people. People and wildlife mix perfectly well in many circumstances, and, in order to make the green lung work, we must let people know that they can be part of the natural environment.

People who live in various parts of the huge central Scotland corridor already know those things, but we need to lift up our eyes a little more to see our surroundings and recognise that the area is a great spiritual sink as well as a benefit to the environment.

**Alison McInnes:** Rob Gibson referred to my amendment; is he not interested to know how the CSGN programme, which the minister said was the biggest of its kind in Europe, will be funded and delivered?

**Rob Gibson:** I am certainly interested in seeing the project develop. However, people who want money to be spent should put their suggestions to the appropriate committees during consideration of the budget, and we have not heard such proposals. At a time of tight finances for the Government, we need to debate the issue in real terms. I asked earlier what the private bodies, which are partners in the project, are doing; we want to see more of that.

In order to humanise the landscape, we should consider something like the west highland way. If we are to link parts of the corridor together, we need stories about well-known personalities such as Colin Montgomerie, who is currently walking the west highland way to raise money for a charity. If people can walk from the Ayrshire coast towards East Lothian, they will begin to get a sense that the corridor exists. At the human level, I hope that we will aim to complete that part of the project early on.

**John Scott:** Does Rob Gibson agree that the Ayrshire coastal path networks and the proposed St Ninian's network would be a good starting point for the national network of pathways across central Scotland to which he refers?

**Rob Gibson:** Yes, indeed—I agree that that area in the west is an excellent example of what can be achieved right across the central belt.

I hope that our discussions will not just involve plannerspeak. We need plans and partners, and people who view things in those terms, but if we are to enthuse the public about taking part in the project, we need to raise high-profile issues—as I have done in my speech—to humanise the potential of that fantastic stretch of country across the centre of Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman):** I remind members that they are not supposed to have their BlackBerrys switched on in the chamber. It would be a good idea for members not to bring them in at all.

10:31

**George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab):** It is a great pleasure to be able to participate in the debate, especially as it is led on the Labour side of the chamber by my old—and very good—friend and colleague Sarah Boyack, who has, as I know from experience, been a green champion all her life, since long before she entered Parliament. Members will have heard her keenness and

enthusiasm for the subject from the articulate and able way in which she introduced the debate.

I am pleased that Roseanna Cunningham and Alex Neil are the two ministers who are dealing with the issue, as they are, in my view, two of the most able and articulate members of the Scottish National Party. I am glad that they have at last managed to elbow their way into Alex Salmond's beleaguered Administration.

I look forward in particular to Alex Neil's reply to the debate. The thing that worries me most about the subject that we are discussing today is that it is high on rhetoric, but very low on reality and delivery. That is why I support and agree with the Liberal Democrat amendment, to which Alison McInnes has spoken so ably today.

I cannot see any finance. Roseanna Cunningham said, in her eloquent introduction to the debate, that we will be

"healthier, stronger, smarter, greener and wealthier."

I look forward to all those things. When she launched the campaign publicly, she said that it would be the biggest in Europe and "a step change". Those are huge ambitions, and I agree with and support them, but where is the reality? Where is the beef, as Alison McInnes rightly wants to know?

Forestry bodies are getting no extra money, and local authorities and non-departmental public bodies are being squeezed. I do not see how the Government will be able to deliver, unless it makes the issue a priority.

The rather gauche SNP candidate for Glasgow North East blurted out that the Government was going to spend £9 million on a referendum. Any body that that money funded would be based on unlawful legislation, and there would be no purpose to it at all. It would be a total waste of money, which could be used for this—

**Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** It could be used for Michael Martin's pension.

**George Foulkes:** I am sure that the professor will have an opportunity later on to blurble on—

**Roseanna Cunningham:** He is taking lessons from you.

**Christopher Harvie:** I yield to the master.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask members not to intervene from a sedentary position.

**George Foulkes:** Members can intervene from a standing position, rather than a sedentary position.

The £9 million would be better spent on the CSGN programme—I would support that.

That is my main concern; I will move on to my subsidiary concerns. My first reinforces Sarah Boyack's point that councils need to be involved. We have heard that there will be a gathering of council leaders—everything is called a gathering these days; it seems to be the SNP's in word. I welcome the announcement of that gathering, but we need to know how councils will be involved in practical terms. When Alex Neil replies to the debate, I hope that he will say how they are going to be involved—in partnership, to use the word that was used earlier.

My second subsidiary point is about the boundary. Looking at the map, I completely agree with John Scott—I never thought that I would say that, but on this occasion, I agree with him. I will say a few words on behalf of my good colleague Cathy Jamieson, who at this very moment is climbing in Nepal. She is doing the sort of things that I ought to be doing—walking and exercising. As far as the boundary is concerned, I hope that Alex Neil, who has an interest in the matter, will confirm in his reply that the whole of Ayrshire will be included. That is one of the options, and I hope that it will be agreed to. I am sure that, like me, he would want Mauchline, Auchinleck, Catrine and Cumnock to be involved. Those old mining areas desperately need such development because many of them remain derelict. Just to get Alex Neil completely on board, I add that Dalmellington and—yes, indeed—Patna should be involved as well.

My third subsidiary point is about the Lothians, which do not get a fair deal from the funding that is available. Glasgow, the Clyde area and the central Scotland forest get substantial grants, but east central Scotland gets relatively little. I hope that that will be examined carefully when future funding is made available.

**The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil):** A moment ago, the member argued that he did not know anything about the funding. Now, he is complaining that the Lothians do not get enough money. He cannot have it both ways.

**George Foulkes:** I was talking about the historic funding from the previous Administration, and pointing out that the existing funding is not enough. We need additional funding if the reality is to come anywhere near the rhetoric that we heard earlier from the Minister for Environment.

I know that I have been accused of having some kind of vendetta against Alex Salmond. Well, there might be a bit of truth in that, but as far as the green network is concerned, if we are to discuss the reality of climate change and get people to change their habits and walk and cycle, ministers need to take a lead. Again and again, I see the First Minister travelling from Bute house to the Parliament by car. He used to travel from

Linlithgow to Edinburgh by car even though there is a perfectly good train service. Let us get out and about and use public transport or walk. Let us set an example to the people. Ministers should be first, and the First Minister should be first among equals, in setting that example.

10:38

**Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD):** This is indeed an important debate. Other interesting things might be taking place elsewhere in Scotland at the moment, but for the people who live in the corridor, the central Scotland green network must be the most important item on the agenda.

I will speak particularly about Central Scotland in the political sense, as defined by the Boundary Commission for Scotland, rather than about the wider area. Historically, many communities across the central belt have been generationally damaged by our industrial processes. Sad as it may be, those industrial processes have now changed, moved on and closed down, but in their wake they left levels of dereliction and abandoned and contaminated land with which the people in those communities continue to live. If the ambitious network plan is properly resourced and delivered, it can only be good for those people.

Previous speakers such as Alison McInnes and Sarah Boyack have already espoused eloquently the importance of improving personal wellbeing in those communities, which have at their heart elements of some of the worst personal health. In that regard, the plans must be a good thing.

When I look at Central Scotland as a Scottish Parliament region, I see communities such as Motherwell and Hamilton and vast tracts of ground that are eminently suitable for greening, but that will require resources. I look at the money that British Waterways has invested in the millennium link and the Caledonian canal—some £320 million—and the vast improvement in that environment.

However more important from my perspective is the work of the small community groups throughout the region that are delivering for their own environments. I think about their commitment to local cycleways and pathways. I also think about the plans for the Cumbernauld community park, and about Cumbernauld glen, which is owned by the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The SWT owns some 273 hectares of land in the Cumbernauld area alone. That is a vast resource, but it needs to be used as part of a co-ordinated programme. Otherwise, people will feel isolated. I think that it was Sarah Boyack who said that people must take ownership. Too often, when the communities' plight has been recognised, they have been visited from on high by external experts

who do things to them and for them. It is critical that, as the network grows, the contribution that the communities can make is recognised by non-governmental agencies and local authorities.

We also need to find a way in which to counter the somewhat difficult situations in which local groups almost always find themselves when they take forward environmental plans. For example, I have had representations from a group in Bothwell, which is in the region that I represent. It has identified a derelict piece of land for which it proposes local allotments, a market garden and other improvements to the environment. Unfortunately, the planning regulations are such that sportscotland has objected, because part of the ground on which the group intends to develop that green element was used—some 20 years ago, I think—as a football field. As a statutorily notified organisation, sportscotland has registered an objection, which has brought the whole community's efforts on the project to a grinding halt.

That is just one example. Time and again, in different regions and communities, we find that local initiatives are hampered by contradictory work that is done by local authorities. I appreciate that the minister will be unable to comment on the example that I cited because it is likely to end up on his desk for a decision, so I am not looking for an answer as far as that is concerned, but I cite it as an example of something that ministers and the 19 local authorities that are involved must address. We must not allow that dichotomy to affect local ambition.

I want to add to what Sarah Boyack said about the involvement of young people. A couple of weeks ago, I spent some time with North Lanarkshire Council's restorative justice team, which is doing some really good work with offenders serving community sentences. There needs to be an amalgamation of projects, involving not just the voluntary sector and the statutory sector but other agencies such as the restorative justice team. They must work together to give everyone ownership of the project if it is to be a success.

10:44

**Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of Roseanna Cunningham's motion on the central Scotland green network, which includes a little bit of my vast constituency in Fife. The project offers many opportunities to develop greenways, woodland and waterways.

I am old enough to have been one of those who protested against the stupid closure of the Forth and Clyde canal to navigation in 1962. As a ship

canal that sailing ships could sail on without having to demast, it would have had enormous attraction today. It was closed because at the time people thought that canals were old fashioned and that we could do without them; it was one of those catching up with modernity things that, unfortunately, happened all too frequently in the 1960s.

The prospect of environmental degradation is a real and present danger and might bring tolerable human existence to an end within the next century. However, it is not a new threat. We can go back to Mary Shelley, who in her novels "Frankenstein" and "The Last Man" wrote—from an experience in Scotland, in fact—about science getting back at us. Indeed, she was writing at the beginning of what Patrick Geddes, who I think stands behind all this to a great extent, called the paleotechnic age, in which we had harnessed the power of carbon but did not know how to control it. The age effectively started with the first steamboats on the Clyde. Geddes lies behind this admirable scheme which, along with our airports and motorways, adds to our commercial attractiveness.

One of Scotland's most innovatory successes is Rockstar Games, which sits not half a mile from here in Leith Street. Its "Grand Theft Auto" series, which I believe has reached number 4, has sold 70 million copies worldwide and earned more than £500 million. That extremely ingenious series portrays a highly technologised and motorised universe—parallel to the one that we are trying to mend—in which destruction and greed are the only motivating forces. It is a Hobbesian world in which life is "nasty, brutish, and short". In an interview, one of the cybergeniuses of Leith Street said:

"I make lots of wee people and then kill them."

I have to say that the game itself is quite hypnotic.

I wonder whether the success of that series is one of the reasons for the appalling percentage of people in Scotland who cycle. Statistics released earlier this week that I believe are crucial to this debate show that 2 per cent of our commuters cycle to work, compared with 18 per cent in Denmark. Do we actually prefer manipulating our games consoles to navigating a bike round packed streets?

**Elaine Smith:** Is the member, like me, disturbed at the number of young children who play the game that he has mentioned, and does he agree that it would be far better for their health and wellbeing if they were out accessing green spaces?

**Christopher Harvie:** The member makes my point for me.

Although schemes such as the Scottish green network are important, we have to acknowledge their limitations. Afforestation in central Scotland will consume 1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, but each year our industrial plant emits 32 million tonnes, which means that those trees will catch up with not even a quarter of the increase in pollution. As a result, we need to considerably alter our expectations and, indeed, the whole notion of how we might transform our lives.

That said, if video games were orientated towards tackling environmental problems and raising awareness of the technologies that we need to overcome the world's problems, they might be of great benefit. Perhaps the Minister for Environment should have a word with the cybergeniuses of Leith Street and find out whether, for a couple of video games, they could turn their swords into ploughshares. That might help a great deal.

I conclude with a quotation from what was the greatest Scottish novel of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Alasdair Gray's "Lanark", which is all about the menacing future of the industrial city in a period of environmental collapse. Members might remember that towards the end of the novel Glasgow, or Unthank, is nearly overwhelmed by a tsunami, but is reborn into an eco-future. At one point, Lanark's cheek is

"touched by something moving in the wind, a black twig with pointed little ... grey-green buds ... He looked sideways and saw the sun coming up golden behind a laurel bush, light blinking, space dancing among the shifting leaves."

That image of rebirth—through trees, no less—is a marvellous vision of the sort of green future that Roseanna Cunningham is envisaging. It is also the only future that we have, and we dare not lose it.

10:50

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** Like other members, I am pleased to take part in the debate. I say that not only as an MSP with a central belt constituency but as a member of a party that has traditionally claimed ownership of the whole idea behind the debate. After all, Scottish Labour has long advocated the establishment of a network of green corridors covering central Scotland.

The environment in which we live is important to our personal health and wellbeing and its quality is crucial to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of our communities. The founders of the central Scotland green network have given the Government an opportunity to work with local authorities and other agencies to strengthen efforts to extend and protect green spaces throughout the central belt and to turn ambitious plans into reality. The minister has said as much

and I acknowledge that she is taking things forward in a series of meetings.

However, I make a plea for priority to be given to old industrial towns and areas of high deprivation where, as a member has already pointed out, vacant and derelict land remains a detrimental legacy of our industrial past. Regeneration and restoration are necessary for aesthetic purposes, the feel-good factor and, more important, the attraction of much-needed investment. I am pleased to say that, in my Coatbridge and Chryston constituency, a number of landmarks have grown out of regeneration, developed and maintained thanks to North Lanarkshire Council's commitment and effort. I was heartened to note that in a list of attractions on its website the Central Scotland Forest Trust identifies a few of those areas: Glenboig nature park, North Calder heritage trail, Drumpellier country park and Summerlee heritage centre. It will be very helpful when they are all joined up by the green network.

Coatbridge has an undeniable industrial heritage that the townspeople are rightly proud of, and North Lanarkshire Council has tried to enhance and celebrate that legacy through ventures such as the industrial museum at Summerlee, which was built on derelict ground. Visitors to the museum can see for themselves the excellent way in which it has managed to preserve and interpret the history not only of the local iron, steel, coal and engineering industries but of the people and communities that depended on them for a living. The reclamation of a derelict industrial area in that way not only provides a window into our rich industrial and working-class heritage but generates revenue for the local economy by bringing visitors into the town. I should also point out that it is a first-class visitor attraction that Coatbridge and indeed the whole of Scotland should be proud of.

The museum also has Scotland's only working trams—[*Laughter.*]

**Sarah Boyack:** For the moment.

**Elaine Smith:** Indeed. It also provides good recreational space in the middle of the town. Moreover, Drumpellier country park has already benefited from Forestry Commission investment to improve wildlife habitats and public access and create new paths to enhance community life.

We cannot understate the importance of urban green spaces in communities and their potential impact on quality of life. I note that in its briefing the Scottish Wildlife Trust says:

"A 10% increase in available greenspace reduces health complaints to a level equivalent to a reduction in 5 years of age."

Like many members, I have over the years argued for an end to the erosion of our green spaces,

because I realise that further attrition will undoubtedly be detrimental to communities' sustainability and wellbeing. There is growing recognition of the built environment's impact on our health and wellbeing, and I have spoken previously about the link between obesity and the lack of green spaces. There is little doubt that we can draw a similar parallel with the physical environment's impact on our mental health, and providing a proper network of green areas will, for example, assist general practitioners who might want to prescribe walking as a treatment for certain patients. Good paths will certainly help in that respect.

Other members have said that local people are a valuable resource; I believe that they are the most valuable when it comes to improving our communities. After all, they are the experts and should be fully involved in any decisions that affect the areas in which they live.

I do not think that any speaker has made this point yet, but I believe that a gendered analysis should be carried out for and incorporated in any regeneration and restoration policy that might be formulated. Men and women experience their communities differently; they have different needs and use their local environment in different ways. I am glad that Alex Neil is responding to the debate, because this important issue comes within his remit. Of course, with our commitment to mainstreaming, it should come within all our remits.

Engagement and co-operation involving the network organisations, the Government, local authorities and community groups will ensure that the network is cognisant of local people's needs and will help to move the network forward by getting councils, which are fundamental to its success, on board.

It is good that Coatbridge was recognised during this year's beautiful Scotland awards. That recognition gave the area a welcome boost and built on the many developments that I have argued for over the years and which our community now enjoys. The minister mentioned meetings with British Waterways. I, too, have had meetings with British Waterways and have urged it to enhance the Monkland canal basin and walkways. It is now doing that, and it has ambitious plans for the future. The long-awaited painting of our railway bridges has also had a positive impact on the quality of life of people in the constituency.

It would be difficult for me to cite tangible evidence that my area has lost out on investment and business opportunities because of derelict industrial space, but as the constituency member for more than 10 years, I am aware that first impressions can be important and long lasting and that they can have an effect. There is still a lot of

unsightly derelict land in my constituency. Further regeneration is needed to enhance Coatbridge and therefore residents' impression of the area.

I am running out of time, but I want to make a particular point. In Havana city in Cuba, the community has been allowed to take over pieces of derelict land—as happens with allotments—on which an organoponics system is used to grow food. Perhaps ministers will consider that approach.

When the minister sums up, will he tell us whether the network will lead to greater protection for existing green spaces? I welcome the network, but urge co-operation and the putting in place of a proper funding package to support the organisations that are involved in delivering such a welcome and ambitious project.

10:56

**Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green):** This is a welcome debate and a welcome initiative and I am happy to be able to speak in the debate.

Almost everything that I might have included in a written speech—which is scribbled out in front of me—has already been said, but there are quite a few important points and areas that merit further discussion. I will address those by going through as quickly as I can what members have said.

Elaine Smith referred to the environment's advantages for mental health. There are excellent examples of how mental health can be improved and assisted, as at the gardens in the Royal Edinburgh hospital and at Redhall walled garden. There is also the work that one or two of our prisons are doing in engaging prisoners in work in gardens and allotments before their release. I say to the Government that Suntrap garden in Edinburgh in particular, which is still open—just—deserves extra funding.

I will deal in reverse order with members who have spoken. I expected Chris Harvie to include in his speech the great quote from Patrick Geddes, "By leaves we live." It is, indeed, by leaves that we live. Without plants, there would be no animal life, including our own. Perhaps I should also refer to Robert Owen, who was one of the first industrialists to realise the importance of a healthy environment not only for workers, but for children. He also had interesting ideas about education. An all-round liberal education was central to the education of children at New Lanark.

The Clyde walkway and the Clyde initiatives are setting an example, certainly in the opinion of the Scottish Wildlife Trust. I should, of course, refer members to my entry in the register of interests, which includes a number of non-governmental environment organisations. The SWT considers

that the Clyde walkway sets a good example of integration and development that should spread throughout not only that region, but the country. The SWT is clear that the initiative is a beginning, not an end. The bulk of the population of Scotland lies within the boundaries of the initiative, but we should think of extending it, perhaps along our railway and cycle networks right through the rest of Scotland.

Hugh O'Donnell referred to greening, how communities can be enthused, and the importance in the future of including communities in planning from the very beginning. In that context, I want to make some observations about things that I am sure are included in people's thinking but have not been included in any lobbying that I have received and were not included in the minister's speech—I refer to the inclusion in the process of education, schools and eco-schools. There is a huge opportunity to include eco-schools and individual council education departments in developments so that people are linked into them right from the beginning. We should not provide something that children get involved in afterwards; rather, children and the community should be involved from the very beginning so that they have a locus in the development.

I will give an example of what can be achieved. Fifteen years ago, in vacant land next to Craigmillar in Edinburgh, BTCV Edinburgh and a number of other organisations—I cannot remember all of them—planted more than 20,000 trees in a weekend. The trees are now up to 6ft or 7ft. I took 80 children from Boroughmuir high school, and we planted 700 trees ourselves in an afternoon. That is what can be done with communities. The Millennium Forest for Scotland Trust, which has already made a considerable difference to the central belt, is a tremendous initiative. We should build on such examples as quickly as we can.

Rob Gibson referred to the private sector's contribution: he was quite right in what he said. However, I would like specific reference to have been made to the Scottish Landowners Federation, which we need to have on side. We also need to consider the implications of the water environment directive, which Sarah Boyack has ably steered, and how river basin management groups can be involved in the central belt and the rest of Scotland.

John Scott referred to sustainable economic development. I was a bit surprised that he did not highlight the importance of incorporating the farming community in developments, because it is clear that its co-operation and that of landlords will be crucial if we are looking for maximum success. I must say that every time I hear the phrase "sustainable economic development" in the

chamber, a little shiver goes down my spine, because we have among us very different interpretations of what it means.

Am I going beyond my time, Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan):** Perhaps the member should draw his remarks to a conclusion.

**Robin Harper:** I am sorry, Presiding Officer.

I have spoken before to the minister about sustainable economic development. If we are going to talk about sustainable economic development and link it to planting and growth of trees, it is about time we upped to 40 per cent our target for Scotland's forest cover. That is not just possible; it would also be an extraordinarily good thing.

Finally, the greenest people in our society are the poorest people in the housing estates. On average, they emit 2 tonnes of carbon dioxide. The most ungreen people are those of us who can afford to insulate our houses and have green bling on our roofs. The average emissions on the estates in which people maintain two cars and so on is 30 tonnes of carbon dioxide. Perhaps we should start to invest in greening by getting trees and good environmental standards into our housing estates and in and around our schools.

I thank you for your patience, Presiding Officer.

11:04

**Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab):** I apologise for missing members' speeches, but I had an earlier engagement that I had to attend.

Throughout Scotland, majestic rivers, forests and a plethora of flora and fauna wait to be explored and enjoyed; its natural environment is envied throughout the world for its beauty and diversity. However, there are issues that we need to tackle; one that I want to highlight is transport links. Limited cycle and rambling pathways, and run-down facilities prevent Scots and visitors alike from making the most of the natural heritage that is on offer.

For my constituents, travel between Edinburgh and Lanark is often an ordeal. I hope that we can rectify that problem with the proposed new Glasgow to Edinburgh rail route and the commitment to have stops at Carluke and Carstairs. However, even trying to get out into the area surrounding Lanark can be a challenge, especially since the deregulation of bus services. It is important that we enable people to make the most of their local communities and the environment around them by developing cycling and walking pathways.



Several of my constituents have expressed their dismay at the number of derelict properties in our communities, which spoil our otherwise pleasant landscape. I hope that the minister will support calls for re-examination of the compulsory purchase powers that are available to local authorities in that regard.

**Alex Neil:** Mr MacAskill and I have requested the Scottish Law Commission to undertake in its new work programme a comprehensive review of compulsory purchase order legislation. My understanding is that the commission has agreed to do that.

**Karen Gillon:** That is a helpful move and I am sure that it will be welcomed in many of the communities that I represent.

Although the transformation of the environment is of course a long-term commitment, action must be taken now to tackle the greening of communities throughout Scotland. The benefits of swift action cannot be understated. Improving health and wellbeing through encouraging physical activity such as walking and cycling could well contribute to the efforts to tackle prevalent Scottish health concerns such as obesity, asthma and heart disease. Other members have mentioned Ramblers Scotland, which has highlighted the potential to develop pathways to benefit Scotland's health and wellbeing.

Boosting opportunities for leisure and recreation does not have to cost the earth, and it can be an investment in protecting our precious Scottish biodiversity for the present and the future. A recent Dutch study highlighted the link between outdoor, or green, living and improved mental health. The potential to build town and village cohesion through the creation of green space in community growing gardens or spaces for play makes sense to me. In previous decades, the Clyde valley was home to many tomato growers and orchards, but that has changed. However, the community is keen to bring back some of that growing potential to the Clyde valley through community orchards and other growing potential. I ask the ministers to provide written advice as to how that can be supported for the communities who are involved.

I have young children, so I appreciate fully the importance of safe places to play. We are lucky in Clydesdale, but other people are not so lucky. The CPO issues are important, because spaces and safe play places could be created if we were able to knock down derelict buildings.

I turn to finance. Many of the communities that we are talking about bear the environmental scars of their industrial past. Regenerating them will be expensive and partnership working is key, but we will also need cash buy-in from all the partners, including the Scottish Government. However, it is

not yet obvious that that is happening. I would welcome further information in Alex Neil's summing-up speech to provide clarity on the funding that has been made available to date. I accept that he cannot make proposals for Governments to come, but I would like to know what the current Government's proposals are on that.

My colleague Sarah Boyack made a suggestion about supporting unemployed young people. I would welcome an opportunity for Sarah Boyack and me to meet the two ministers who are involved in the debate to consider how we can make progress on that as quickly as possible. That would be a positive and practical way of supporting young people in our urban and rural landscapes, where it is not easy to find employment at the moment.

Sarah Boyack mentioned the Antonine wall and Robin Harper mentioned New Lanark. It is not clear from the maps whether New Lanark will be included in the proposed green network, so clarity on that would be welcome. If New Lanark were to be included, we would have three world heritage sites in the area. There would be opportunities to exploit those three sites, which connects to the debate that we had yesterday about the historic built environment. We could develop around those world heritage sites walking and cycling routes that link to other important buildings and natural facilities in the area. We could make connections between walking and cycling routes, as well as driving routes. I hope that ministers will consider that and I hope that we will have joined-up Government that looks across the issues that we have debated this week. I look forward to hearing Alex Neil's response pick up the points that have been raised.

11:09

**Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD):** I am pleased to sum up for the Liberal Democrats. The debate has been interesting and mostly consensual. At some stages, it has been surprising, with George Foulkes praising the two SNP ministers, although I am not too sure how much his tongue was in his cheek. We also had Christopher Harvie's usual romanticism, which takes us to better places. He mentioned the novel "Lanark" and Robin Harper and Karen Gillon mentioned New Lanark, where Robert Owen did great work on the working environment. He did that not only in New Lanark, but across the water in America.

Forestry is close to my heart, not only because I am a former Borders Forest Trust trustee and director and a Forestry Commission Scotland regional forestry forum member, but because I led the successful campaign against the Scottish

Government's unpopular plan to sell off a quarter of Forestry Commission land, which was, thankfully, defeated. I shall refrain from using this opportunity to remind the Government of that debacle. Now that the future of Scotland's forest is assured, we must investigate the advantages of having a dedicated national land use strategy, which the Liberal Democrats have called for on several occasions. That would allow management practices for all land—not just forests—in Scotland to be examined and could lead to substantial improvements across the board.

Although the Scottish Government is undertaking a study of land use in rural areas, it is arguable that now is the time to focus on a wider-reaching land use policy, with intent to act. Robin Harper was correct that farmers should be involved in a wider strategy. Our proposed strategy would implement a holistic approach to integrated land use and would deliver multiple public benefits. As part of a dedicated land use strategy and a central Scotland green network, it would be important to ensure that Scotland's forests continued to offer a wide range of economic, social and environmental opportunities, thereby promoting access and biodiversity and securing a sustainable supply of wood from our forestry sector. The national forest estate can offer far more in public hands than it can in private ones. Furthermore, by choosing to introduce joint venture proposals rather than the leasing proposals, it is likely that the Government will make more money to tackle climate change.

The central Scotland green network strategy covers land from Ayrshire to East Lothian, parts of which, bizarrely, are in the South of Scotland region. The strategy is highly commendable and underlines the importance of publicly or trust-owned community woodlands. It is also a reminder that an urban green space network, with the environmental, social and economic benefits that it brings, is possible with inventive thinking.

There are clear links between the environment, green space, and good health and wellbeing, all of which must be nurtured and encouraged as much as possible. In a Greenspace Scotland survey in 2007, almost 60 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that they can relax and unwind in their local green space, and 56 per cent strongly agreed that it is an attractive space that is safe for physical activity. Greenspace Scotland supports the concept of the central Scotland green network. Its other key findings include the following: that there is a clear positive relationship between green spaces and health, particularly for young and older people; that the value of green spaces for physical exercise is unquestionable; that, on mental health, there is compelling evidence for the restorative effects of green spaces; and that, on

social health, green spaces are some of the few remaining spaces that are available to all.

Walking and outdoor activities are growing in popularity in Scotland and have major benefits to individuals and the economy as a result of the development of outdoor business opportunities. The Scottish Liberal Democrats have long recognised the links between environment, activity and good health. We want to continue to improve access to Scotland's environment. There are forests throughout my area of the South of Scotland—Glentworth in the Borders and the Galloway forest park are examples that spring to mind immediately. Those attractions are hugely important for the local economy and fulfil the objective of creating a healthy population. In Carrifran wildwood, the restoration of ancient woodlands inspires the imagination, and the Borders Forest Trust has recently acquired Corehead farm near the Devil's Beef Tub. That imaginative mix of land uses improves people's experience of visiting the area.

I am particularly interested in economic development through the green network. In the South of Scotland region, it is easy to see how many businesses and jobs are supported by our forests in one way or another. Often whole communities centre on forestry activity—for example, the village of Ae in Dumfriesshire was created for forestry workers in the Ae forest. The situation is different in urban areas in central Scotland and I do not expect new villages to sprout from the ground overnight, but there is no reason why that type of economic benefit cannot be replicated in the central belt.

**Rob Gibson:** Might it be possible to replicate forest crofts in the central belt area? Jim Hume said that he did not expect to see new villages appearing there, but we have small crofts in West Lothian at the moment. Does he think that those could be extended further into the central belt?

**Jim Hume:** It would be most interesting to explore that.

I am glad that part of the focus will be on developing wood using businesses and heat energy projects, which will surely create and support jobs in the sector. I welcome the work of all those involved in the central Scotland green network. I hope that it is a starter that will inspire the rest of Scotland to follow. However, I remain a little concerned that the minister who has charge of the Forestry Commission in Scotland finds it absurd that the Forestry Commission wishes to see what resources will be available to deliver the green network, as Alison McInnes and George Foulkes mentioned. We and the Forestry Commission are not asking for new funds; all that we are asking is, "How?"

11:16

**Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):** I have enjoyed listening to the many interesting speeches in this debate on the central Scotland green network, a project that could, in the fullness of time, make an enormous difference to the lives of many people throughout the central belt of Scotland, and increase the economic prosperity of that sizeable part of the country. Its vision of creating in the next few decades a high-quality green network that enhances people's lives, supports the economy, allows nature to flourish and addresses climate change is bold and exciting. However, to achieve it will require careful planning and investment and co-operative working between many organisations and communities, including local authorities, other landowners and NGOs such as SNH, the Forestry Commission, RSPB Scotland and the Scottish Wildlife Trust—which have interests and expertise in the environment and biodiversity—as well as the many voluntary organisations that have been referred to.

The network must bring together existing partnerships and initiatives. We have already heard about the Glasgow and Clyde valley green network, the central Scotland and Edinburgh and Lothians forests and the Ayrshire green network. It must encourage the further development of such good work and look to identify new areas that currently do not benefit from green initiatives.

The vision is long term, and planning needs early work by local authorities on green networks in order to incorporate the aims of the project in their development plans. The project presses all the right buttons for health and social wellbeing, for the environment, for the economy, for stimulating educational, cultural and outdoor activities and for involving communities. It will also encourage the restoration of derelict sites and urban regeneration. We have no hesitation in supporting the Government's motion this morning.

I agree with the Scottish Wildlife Trust that the central Scotland green network should be seen as a first step towards a national ecological network. Many communities north and south of the central belt would benefit from a similar network. There might not be the same dereliction and deprivation in those areas, but those communities would benefit from the opportunities that would stem from a strategically planned green network. Linked woodlands and other habitats, linked walkways and cycle paths to allow active travel routes, improved landscape settings for developments and more opportunities for outdoor activities would all be welcomed right across Scotland.

**Elaine Smith:** I accept Nanette Milne's point, but does she agree that old industrial areas that

were the workhorses of the industrial revolution have greater need in the process?

**Nanette Milne:** I was just coming to that. I was about to say that it is of primary importance to deliver a better environment for the many people in central Scotland who are currently living in some of the most rundown and unsightly parts of the country, which were created by industrialisation in the past. Their health and life expectancy suffer the effects of deprivation and from the lack of healthy green space such as is readily accessible to most people in my part of the world.

The hugely ambitious plan to regenerate such areas for the benefit of all must be implemented, difficult though that will be in these financially constrained times. I am attracted to Sarah Boyack's suggestion that we give unemployed young people in such areas the opportunity to do constructive work and engage them practically in creating a better future for themselves and their fellow citizens.

I have a bee in my bonnet about allotment gardening, which I see as having a significant contribution to make to a green network. To quote the allotments regeneration initiative, they provide

"a sustainable source of healthy local food, as well as exercise and education for local communities, and an important biodiversity habitat for native flora and fauna. They provide green lungs in built-up areas and access to publicly owned land."

Currently, there are over 200 allotment sites throughout Scotland, around 70 per cent of which are owned by local authorities. They equate to 6,300 plots in all, which falls well short of satisfying demand for them. The waiting list throughout Scotland is about 3,000, with 600 people in Glasgow and 1,000 people in Edinburgh waiting to become plot holders. I would like to see those waiting lists disappear and I am pleased that the minister is committed to doing something about that, as she told me in response to a recent question. There is a good opportunity for the green network to bring together local authorities, health boards and other landowners to examine the potential for developing allotments in their areas, which would greatly benefit their communities.

I grew up on vegetables that were grown on my father's plot and I would like to see many more people benefiting from the fresh produce that I learned to grow and like as a child and the joys of gardening, which have stayed with me throughout my life. I am pleased, in that context, to note that Annabel Goldie championed that cause recently when she visited the Reidhaven allotments in Glasgow North East and commended the gardeners there on setting a good example to us all. I hope that their example will

indeed be followed throughout the central Scotland green network area and well beyond it.

Clear multiple benefits can be derived from a green network. Quality of life and prosperity are inextricably linked with preserving and enhancing the environment and, ultimately, only sustainable growth will guarantee prosperity. The central Scotland green network offers many opportunities for such growth and economic generation on a large and ambitious scale.

**Jim Hume:** Will the member give way?

**Nanette Milne:** I have no time.

To achieve the network's full potential, it will have to be managed and funded in a carefully co-ordinated way that will ensure that local initiatives that are already under way and new ones that are planned now or in the future are linked into the overall network for the benefit of people throughout the central belt. I wish it every success.

11:22

**Sarah Boyack:** Presiding Officer, can I clarify how many minutes I have—is it eight?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Probably nine.

**Sarah Boyack:** Excellent.

At the outset, I comment that, although I think we all know that this is a filler debate, it has drawn together those of us in the Parliament who are interested in building a central Scotland green network. It has enabled us to put our priorities on the table and allowed people to bring out their passion for and knowledge of their own communities. It has also given us a positive opportunity to make demands of the Government.

**Roseanna Cunningham:** For a change.

**Sarah Boyack:** Of course—we are the Opposition.

Such demands have been made in a constructive way and people have tried to use this opportunity to put the Government under pressure, which is our job, and to give the ministers a push to go back to their ministerial colleagues and ask what they are doing to address the agenda. Some of us have been in that position, and I urge the ministers to use that pressure and lever not just to get themselves out of jail today but to make their colleagues play their part.

Some excellent points have been made about funding and priorities. Both John Scott and Alison McInnes spoke in their opening remarks about the need for clarity and greater co-ordination, and Alison McInnes's points need to be replied to in the minister's concluding remarks.

If the green network is to be a national planning framework priority, it needs to be a priority throughout Government; it cannot be just a little badge attached to the project. That means resources, clarity and commitment. I would like to hear about some of that in the minister's winding-up comments.

Rob Gibson was right to ask for a debate about reality and what will be spent. His comments backed up some of the points made by Opposition members. We need more clarity on funding; that is absolutely crucial.

George Foulkes was right to focus on reality, too. It is easy to come up with a title—it is interesting that every single one of us has bought into that title because we can all relate to it—but the green network needs to be a real priority. George Foulkes talked about spending £9 million on a referendum that most of us do not want versus spending £9 million on the central Scotland green network. That is a no-brainer, so I hope that ministers will think about it. They might not immediately be attracted to spending the £9 million on the network, but there would be vast support for it throughout the chamber.

Hugh O'Donnell talked about land around some of our most disadvantaged areas and previous industrial communities. In Motherwell, we could demonstrate the importance of developing derelict land. The new town of Cumbernauld was a vision from the middle of the previous century of using urban planning to create green networks and a high-quality green environment for people who had come out of some of the worst slums in Glasgow, which had been created at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The link between our urban communities and their surrounding areas was made by member after member. The challenge is to get green fingers from the heart of our urban communities to stretch out into rural areas.

Rob Gibson was a bit too quick to dismiss planning ideas. Green lungs are important in helping people in some of our most disadvantaged communities to have a better quality of life.

In the previous session of Parliament, we had the sustainable communities fund, which was aimed specifically at redressing the environmental injustice in the heart of communities that have experienced some of the worst environmental degradation as a result of the exploitation of natural resources. People who lived in communities where the coal, iron and steel industries operated might have had jobs in those industries but, once the industries went, they had a fantastic opportunity to clean up the environment and give their areas new life.

Elaine Smith spoke eloquently about how tackling that environmental legacy and making the most of our industrial history should be a priority. Summerlee heritage park is a fantastic example of reclamation, which should be celebrated as it gives people jobs. If Rhona Brankin had been here, she would have talked about the Scottish mining museum in her constituency. Through such places, our industrial heritage provides a benefit for today's communities. The miners who take visitors around the mining museum and the benefit to places such as Summerlee have to be celebrated.

Elaine Smith also mentioned the green gym initiative, allotments and other green projects, which general practitioners throughout the country are now recommending because their use is beneficial to physical and mental health.

Elaine Smith was right to point to the need for a gender analysis. Statistics show that women have less time and money available to them, so access to green networks, which they can visit and take their kids to, is absolutely crucial. Local access is hugely important. The gender analysis will also show that the issue of personal safety is key and has to be plugged in. I know from talking to people when I walk and cycle that one of the things that puts them off accessing green spaces is lack of certainty about their personal safety.

As ever, Robin Harper spoke eloquently about the need to make environmental justice a practical reality. He is absolutely right. Like Chris Harvie, he also spoke eloquently about the legacy of Patrick Geddes. Patrick Geddes was a polymath; he not only talked about town planning, industrialisation and philosophy but managed to tie it all together in a way that was relevant to his generation. We need to do the same.

The growing support for allotments, which Robin Harper and Nanette Milne talked about, is crucial. There is a real opportunity for us to do something practical that brings alive the climate change agenda and addresses the fact that many families in Scotland cannot afford to buy high-quality fruit and vegetables. The local shop around the corner cannot supply fruit and vegetables at cost, so families have to travel longer and longer distances to centralised supermarkets. Supermarkets have many benefits, such as in cost, but they are not necessarily accessible to everybody and, increasingly, people need cars to get to such retail opportunities.

Members have expressed lots of good and practical ideas. Robin Harper raised the specific issue, which others did not touch on in the same way, of the contribution that farmers and landowners can make; they can play a vital role.

**John Scott:** Does Sarah Boyack think that linking local food networks and food co-operatives with local green networks would be a good idea, given the health issues that she has talked about?

**Sarah Boyack:** I am happy to support that idea 110 per cent. I know that people in my constituency recognise and welcome the opportunity that the farmers market provides. Some of our most disadvantaged communities welcome food co-operatives because they give them a direct link to farming and affordable produce. We need more of that in our communities, so I absolutely agree with John Scott.

Karen Gillon made an excellent speech about the importance of linking our heritage sites. What an exciting idea it is to link the New Lanark industrial world heritage site and the Antonine wall world heritage site with the world heritage site in my constituency. Karen Gillon could not have put it more effectively.

This summer I spent a weekend cycling between Carlisle and Newcastle and saw the economic benefit that that region has been able to get from its world heritage site. The experience of cycling along Hadrian's wall—I hasten to add that I cycled adjacent to the wall, rather than on it—was fantastic. I saw the tourism and industrial heritage opportunities that the region has been able to link together. The last stretch towards Newcastle is all off-road; it is a magnificent cycle run, which is linked to the area's industrial heritage.

There are fantastic ideas in other parts of the UK, and I hope that the discussions that we have had today will give ministers heart to go back and bang on the door of their ministerial colleagues. We will know that ministers are serious about the agenda and the ambition behind the network when they start to answer the specific questions that many of us have asked. The Liberal Democrat amendment asks detailed questions, to which we would like answers. I hope that in his summing up Alex Neil will go some way to answering the detailed questions that Alison McInnes and others have asked.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am afraid that the member should wind up now.

**Sarah Boyack:** We have asked for an initiative on training and employment in the area for young people, which would be a practical result of today's debate. I hope that Alex Neil will take that on board.

11:31

**The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil):** This has been a good debate. Good speeches have been made by members of all

parties and we have learned quite a lot. For example, Roseanna Cunningham and I did not realise that Lord Foulkes was our number 1 fan in the Parliament, nor did we realise that he is joining the 2 per cent of the population who cycle to work—we look forward to that with excitement.

I will deal with some of the issues raised during the debate. A lot of genuine and reasonable points were made, and I have good news on some of them.

I turn first to the issue of young people. We are all aware of the figures that were published yesterday, which show that youth unemployment in Scotland, and indeed in the rest of the country, is at an unacceptably high level. My view is that every one of us should take every opportunity to tackle that and to make an impact on the level of youth unemployment in our society. Therefore, I wholly endorse the comments that Karen Gillon and Sarah Boyack made about trying, wherever possible, to tailor the delivery of the programme to help deal with the problem of youth unemployment.

**Hugh O'Donnell:** It is heartening to hear the minister say that. In parallel with that, will he look at the role of community sentencing and restorative justice in growing the network?

**Alex Neil:** I know that Mr MacAskill is already looking at trying to employ young people who come into the justice system, to make them productive and fit to re-enter society.

My colleague Roseanna Cunningham and I are keen to meet Karen Gillon and Sarah Boyack to discuss practical issues around how we can take forward the youth employment agenda as part of the development of the central Scotland green network. Next month, Roseanna Cunningham will be launching the Forestry Commission Scotland strategy, woods for learning, which sets out how to increase young people's opportunities for learning experiences in woodland and green spaces. That is a good start, which indicates the commitment throughout the Parliament to developing youth employment opportunities.

Several members have referred to the areas that are not covered by the central Scotland green network. John Scott expressed concern about parts of South Ayrshire, George Foulkes expressed concern about parts of East Ayrshire, and Karen Gillon expressed concern about both Lanark and New Lanark. However, the 19 local authorities that are signed up to the programme include South Ayrshire Council, East Ayrshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council, and boundaries have not yet been agreed.

In fact, although it is a central Scotland green network, we do not want to be hidebound by rigidity in our approach to boundaries. We are

open to suggestions about how we treat those areas, as there is a strong argument for tying places such as Lanark and New Lanark into some of the action points for the network so that those communities benefit, too. There is a similarly strong argument for doing likewise in some of the communities that George Foulkes mentioned, which have some of the highest levels of youth unemployment in Scotland. We have an open mind and will be co-operative as we share the agenda of ensuring that as many communities as possible in different parts of Scotland benefit from the programme.

Had the Liberal Democrat amendment called generally for further clarification of, or even detail on, the spending plans for the central Scotland green network, we would probably have been happy to support it. However, we must be careful what we vote for, and the very precise wording of the amendment causes us difficulty. The amendment asks the Scottish Government

"to clarify within the next six weeks its funding and delivery intentions for all"—

not just this initiative—

"the national developments in the National Planning Framework for Scotland 2".

**Alison McInnes:** I am asking what correlation there is between strategic plans and budgets. That does not seem to be unreasonable. No one would expect the Forth road bridge to be realised without proper planning and resource allocation. The minister has said that the central Scotland green network is as important as the Forth replacement crossing. Why should it be treated differently?

**Alex Neil:** With due respect, that is not what the amendment says. First, the amendment is much more precise than that. It imposes a six-week timeframe, but four weeks will have passed before the chancellor makes his pre-budget report on 9 December. Even our budget for next year will not be absolutely finalised until we see the detail of the pre-budget report on 9 December. For example, we are debating whether capital can be brought forward from future years. We do not know the answer to such questions, and it would be extremely unreasonable to expect us to spell out the detail of any programme of this size within two weeks of the pre-budget report.

**Jim Hume:** Will the minister give way?

**Alex Neil:** I am sorry, but I have taken an intervention and need to explain this.

The amendment also asks for details of all 13 of the priorities in the national planning framework. If it asked only for the details of the central Scotland green network, that would be reasonable, but it asks for details of all 13 projects. I had thought that the Liberal Democrats' priority was the green

network, but the wording of the amendment does not reflect what was said in the Liberal Democrat speeches.

**Jim Hume:** Will the minister give way?

**Alex Neil:** No, I am sorry.

**George Foulkes:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** I will take an intervention from George Foulkes.

**George Foulkes:** I was minded to support the Liberal amendment, but the minister has adequately dealt with it and I agree with him that it should not be supported today.

**Alex Neil:** I thank Lord Foulkes for that intervention.

Roseanna Cunningham and I will be happy to write to the conveners of the appropriate committees to set out how and when we can give clarification on the spending plans for the central Scotland green network. We understand members' need for that information, but we must schedule that according to a reasonable timeframe.

The network's board will have its first meeting in January and those who are involved in the board, including the 19 local authorities, must have the opportunity to input into the business plan, including the spending priorities. It would be entirely unreasonable for us to prejudice that situation, which is another reason for rejecting the Liberal Democrat amendment.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to cover the many other points that I wanted to cover. I thank all members for their speeches in what has been a good-quality debate. There has been a wide consensus of opinion and, as a consensus politician, I am delighted to acknowledge that.

## Question Time

### SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

#### General Questions

11:40

#### Gender Violence

**1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has for the 16 days of activism against gender violence. (S3O-8428)

**The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil):** The 16 days of global activism to tackle violence against women are an important time of the year. It is with great pride that I will wear the white ribbon during that period to raise awareness of the issue.

This year, subject to parliamentary timetabling, we will hold what has become an annual Scottish Government debate on violence against women during the 16 days of action. This year's debate will be on the same theme as the 16 days of action: commit, act, demand—we can end violence against women.

**Johann Lamont:** I acknowledge the important work that continues to be done on the issue. However, I am sure that the minister would want the Scottish Parliament as a whole to resist the temptation to become complacent or self-congratulatory on the issue, given the continuing scale and impact of domestic abuse on individuals, families, public services and our economic and social wellbeing. What discussions has the minister had with the women's Scottish Trades Union Congress, which held a successful conference this week, on how the issues can be addressed in the workplace and on how violence against women can be tackled in order to address the broader issue of the gender gap in Scotland and the United Kingdom?

**Alex Neil:** The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing had a meeting with the STUC women's committee yesterday. That specific issue was not raised, but we are happy to meet the committee at any time to discuss the particulars of the 16-day campaign or any of the other issues. Through the national group on violence against women, which I chair, we try to consult every stakeholder on a regular basis to ensure that they have the maximum opportunity for input to the development and delivery of our strategy. I am happy to take on boards the points that have been made by Johann Lamont.

### NHS Boards (Activities of Charities)

**2. Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Executive whether it considers it appropriate for national health service boards to proscribe the activities of independent charities. (S3O-8396)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon):** I am not aware of any cases of NHS boards proscribing the activities of independent charities.

**Ross Finnie:** The cabinet secretary is perhaps unaware that, despite not having received a single complaint about the provision of refreshments for patients, their visitors and staff at Inverclyde royal hospital, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde proposes to impose a model of refreshment provision that has been developed to address inadequacies in the provision in Glasgow hospitals, thereby rendering redundant the local charity, the League of Hospital Friends. Having been made aware of that, does the cabinet secretary share the sense of revulsion that is felt by local residents at the heavy-handed, overbearing and dictatorial attitude of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde towards that highly respected local charity?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I have said previously in the chamber that I value highly the work of organisations such as the League of Hospital Friends. Volunteers do an immense amount of work in the NHS and I am very grateful to them for that. If there are particular details around the issue that Ross Finnie has raised of which I am not aware, I would be happy to have a discussion with him in order to understand fully the point that he is making.

I suspect that Ross Finnie is talking about the Aroma cafe pilot that is being run in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. I have spoken at length in the chamber about the issue. The pilot will be evaluated before any decisions about its roll-out are made. I have also made it clear that, whatever decisions are ultimately made on the Aroma concept, the role of the League of Hospital Friends, the Women's Royal Voluntary Service and other voluntary organisations that work in the NHS should be properly acknowledged and they should be involved in all those discussions.

I am more than happy to discuss with Ross Finnie any particular points of detail that he wants to pursue.

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** Question 3 was not lodged.

### NHS Medical Staff (Recruitment and Retention)

**4. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what incentive schemes national health service boards have in place to ensure the recruitment and retention of medical staff, particularly in remote and rural areas. (S3O-8423)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon):** A cash incentive scheme is available to NHS boards to support the recruitment of general practitioners in remote, rural and deprived areas. Every GP taking up a post in one of those areas is awarded a payment of £5,000, which is supplementary to the general golden hello payment for GPs. Beyond that, there are no further direct incentives in remote and rural areas. In the longer term, the joint Scottish Government/NHS Scotland medical workforce reshaping project aims to ensure stability and sustainability of the medical workforce throughout Scotland.

**Rhoda Grant:** The minister may be aware that there is a particular problem in NHS Highland with the recruitment and retention of consultants specialising in learning disabilities. That is now a greater problem, following the sad death of Dr Iain White. The minister may also be aware of problems in recruiting and retaining other medical staff, such as dentists and doctors, in remote and rural areas. Will she consider extending the golden hello payments to other forms of staff in remote and rural areas and increasing funding to health boards that find themselves in that position?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I am more than happy to discuss further with Rhoda Grant the issue of learning disabilities—clearly, there are some specific circumstances in that regard.

Funding for NHS boards is increasing. It increased this year compared with last year and, subject to Parliament's approval of the budget, it will increase next year compared with this year. That is in spite of the decrease in the overall Scottish Government budget. It is for NHS boards to consider how best to utilise that funding to meet the needs of their local populations.

I am aware of the recruitment challenges that some boards face, particularly boards that cover remote and rural areas. We are doing a range of work to try to address those challenges, such as international recruitment, the various actions in the remote and rural health care strategy and, most significant, the work that I have described involving a shift from a service delivered by doctors in training to a service delivered by trained doctors, which is the best way of ensuring sustainability for the long term.



That is the work that we should take forward. Although I always consider members' suggestions, my view at this stage is that we should pursue those strands of work to address the challenges that Rhoda Grant rightly highlights.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** I acknowledge the success of the dental facility at Lochshell near Wick, and I thank the cabinet secretary for that. However, does she agree that we still have a problem recruiting and retaining dental specialists such as orthodontists?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I acknowledge that point. As I have said previously to Jamie Stone and other members who rightly raise the issue of access to dentistry generally in Scotland, and to the specialisms that Jamie Stone mentioned, we are making real progress. More people are registered with a dentist than ever before and the number of people on waiting lists is coming down, but we still have considerable work to do. We have followed on the measures that were put in place by the previous Administration to address those challenges and we will continue to seek to address them, because people should have the access to dentistry that they have not always enjoyed in the past.

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** With regard to recruiting and retaining medical staff in remote and rural areas, does the minister agree that innovative training and the implementation of new technologies such as telehealth would make that work even more attractive?

**Nicola Sturgeon:** I agree, and I hope that Mary Scanlon recognises that we are working in both of those directions. In response to Rhoda Grant, I mentioned the remote and rural health care strategy. As Mary Scanlon knows, that covers a number of issues related to how we train staff to better encourage them to take up posts in remote and rural areas. Mary Scanlon is to be commended for the way in which she pursues telehealth issues. I agree with her that telehealth has fantastic potential. I mentioned to her last night that I was in Orkney earlier this week and witnessed its telemedicine diabetes clinic, where someone in Orkney had a consultation with a clinician in Aberdeen. That is just one of many examples of how we can ease the challenges in rural areas through greater use of technology. I look forward to seeing that use of technology increase in times to come.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 5 was not lodged.

## **Older People (Long-term Care Wards)**

**6. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to improve standards of care in long-term care wards for older people. (S3O-8441)

**The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison):** The Scottish Government and NHS Quality Improvement Scotland are leading on a range of initiatives to improve services for older people in the national health service, including those in long-term care wards. Earlier this week, I had the pleasure of opening the Elmview ward at Stratheden hospital in Cupar, which is a good example of the type of facility that can dramatically improve the standard of care in a long-term ward for people with dementia.

**Irene Oldfather:** Despite the example that the minister cited, she is no doubt aware of the high level of dissatisfaction in some health board areas with out-of-date and poor physical environment, standards of care, indignity—including issues around toileting—insufficient activity and occupational therapy services. In the redesign of services for the elderly, does she have any plans for independent audit and monitoring of such care, including the physical environment in which it is delivered? Further to that, is she considering developing a toolkit to dignity-proof care, as suggested by the Royal College of Nursing Scotland?

**Shona Robison:** We certainly expect boards, through their capital programmes and investment in the hospital estate, to do what NHS Fife has done, which is to consider the reprovisioning of long-stay wards. Although the emphasis is on maintaining people in the community, when people require to stay in hospital, their ward essentially becomes their home. It is therefore important that a homely environment can be created, which is certainly what has been done with the facilities in Elmview ward. As we move forward with reshaping older people's services, we will have to consider the issue of long-stay wards as part of future provision. That will very much be part of the debate and discussion.

I am happy to consider the toolkit, and I will write to the member with a response on that issue.

**Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP):** Does the minister agree that it is far preferable that older people stay out of hospital wards for as long as possible? That is why I commend Newbyers village care home in Gorebridge, which provides sheltered accommodation for elderly people. Following on from Mary Scanlon's question, the care home makes innovative use of e-health and telehealth, which suggests that either the minister or the cabinet secretary may wish to visit the facility.

**Shona Robison:** I would certainly be happy to visit that facility. It is always important to highlight good practice and facilities that others can learn from. Although we want to help people to live in the community for as long as possible, there will be people who, because of their profound needs, at some point may no longer be able to do that. It is therefore important that the long-stay wards that we provide are of a standard of which we would all be proud. I am keen to see the reprovisioning of such wards, as has been achieved at Elmview ward in Fife.

### **Ferry Service (Gourock to Dunoon)**

**7. Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take following the European Commissioner for Competition's decision concerning the ferry service between Gourock and Dunoon. (S3O-8385)

**The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson):** We welcome the findings of the European Commission's investigation into Scotland's ferry services. Those conclusions will allow us to secure the future of the Gourock to Dunoon ferry service. I will meet local stakeholders in Dunoon next Monday to explain to them the implications of that decision and to discuss the way forward for the ferry service.

**Stuart McMillan:** As the minister knows, I have a long-standing interest in shipbuilding; I have raised with him in the past the issue of the age of the vessels on the service between Gourock and Dunoon. The MV Jupiter is 35 years old and the MV Saturn is 31 years old. Will the minister open dialogue with shipbuilders in Scotland to give them the opportunity to tender for any new builds that the route undoubtedly needs?

**Stewart Stevenson:** We have already asked Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd to investigate the provision of a vessel for any new operator there may be. Under the European Commission's ruling, the new operator would not be required to use that vessel, but by ensuring that an appropriate vessel is available, we hope to have the widest range of interest. I have spoken to the managing director of Ferguson Shipbuilders regarding the previous tender for the Islay vessel. At that time, the yard did not feel able to tender. The only other yard in the United Kingdom that is interested in such vessels is Appledore in the south-west of England. However, I am keen that Scottish companies should have the maximum opportunity to build new vessels for our ferry services.

**David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** Does the minister share my view that there is demonstrable public support for an unrestricted passenger and vehicle service between the town

centres of Gourock and Dunoon? Can he confirm that Government policy is consistent with European Union regulations, which stipulate that the successful tendering company should provide vessels without frequency restrictions and compatible with the Dunoon linkspan?

**Stewart Stevenson:** We intend to go to tender on the basis of an unrestricted service frequency. One of the bonus findings of the European Commission's investigations was that the restrictions are no longer required. We will be able to subsidise only the passenger element of the service. We are seeking to ensure that any vessel that is brought to the route is compatible with the linkspan at Dunoon, which we are anxious to see come into service.

### **People's Charter**

**8. Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will respond to a request from the people's charter's Scottish organising committee to endorse the charter. (S3O-8446)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** I have received a letter from Elaine Smith on behalf of the people's charter's Scottish organising committee. The letter will receive a formal response shortly, but I will make two points today. First, I welcome some of the charter's high-level aspirations, given their broad similarity to the Scottish Government's economic purpose and strategic objectives. Secondly, I note that the charter is primarily about influencing United Kingdom Government policy.

**Elaine Smith:** Given that some of the charter's aims chime with the Government's aims, does the cabinet secretary agree that it would be logical for the Government to support the charter, which simply sets out a programme for challenging the economic crisis and delivering a fairer society, to put people first? Will he attend the people's charter event in the Parliament on 25 November? That would allow him to learn more about the charter from the trade unions and the Scottish organising committee.

**John Swinney:** If Elaine Smith will forgive me, I will consider her request that I attend the event on 25 November.

I reiterate that the primary focus of the people's charter is on UK policy. At one point, the charter asks that we

"Don't waste billions on a new generation of nuclear weapons."

I agree that that should be a policy priority; I know that Elaine Smith has consistently taken that position, into the bargain. The Government will

consider in detail many of the other issues that the people's charter raises.

### **"Shaping the Future of Care Together"**

**9. John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the possible impact on Scottish local authorities of proposals in the green paper, "Shaping the Future of Care Together". (S3O-8361)

**The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison):** The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing wrote to the UK Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham, on 30 July requesting both an early and detailed explanation of the proposals set out in the green paper, "Shaping the Future of Care Together", and a commitment to give full consideration to the need to take into account the impact on Scottish Government responsibilities. Scottish Government officials subsequently met representatives of the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions on 21 August. They met again on 6 November, joined by representatives from Her Majesty's Treasury, specifically to discuss the proposals in the green paper.

**John Scott:** Figures in local government have expressed concern to me that one effect of distributing care money differently, as proposed in the green paper, will be on the Barnett formula. That has obvious implications for the future levels of funding that may be allocated to Scottish councils. Can the minister expand on the point and offer some reassurance that the budgets of Scottish councils will not be adversely affected if the proposals in the green paper are carried forward?

**Shona Robison:** I recognise the concern to which the member refers. We were keen that discussions should take place because changing the benefits system in the way that is proposed has profound implications for our ability to deliver social care in Scotland. I assure the member that we are putting that point forcefully, to ensure that there is no negative fallout for local authorities or the social care system in Scotland. We will continue to do so.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general questions.

I am sure that members will want to join me in welcoming to the gallery the Hon Bob Sneath, President of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of South Australia. *[Applause.]*

## **First Minister's Question Time**

12:00

### **Engagements**

**1. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-2000)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Later today, I will have meetings to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

**Iain Gray:** Can the First Minister tell us how much his independence referendum will cost?

**The First Minister:** That will be laid out in the bill that is introduced in the Parliament. I hope that the Labour Party will revert to its position of approximately this time last year—Iain Gray reversed it, having previously supported it—of allowing the Scottish people to exercise their democratic right to decide on their constitutional future, as opposed to the Labour and Conservative parties attempting to carve it up for them. *[Interruption.]*

**Iain Gray:** The referendum is meant to be the First Minister's flagship policy, but he cannot tell us how much it will cost. The figure, of course, is around £9 million—the Scottish National Party gave the game away earlier this week. For that kind of money, Scotland could have 300 more teachers or 600 more nursery nurses, or two new primary schools. I know what most Scots would rather have.

While we are at it, how much is the First Minister spending on his national conversation?

**The First Minister:** I am interested that Iain Gray mentioned a figure of 300 teachers. I have here a document from Glasgow City Council, which shows the council cutting, up to September, 308 teaching posts in the city. I have sympathy for local authorities the length and breadth of Scotland that are struggling with the recession and public spending, as the Government is. The difficulty is that Glasgow City Council does not believe in lower class sizes, so when Iain Gray—

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** First Minister, the question was about the cost of the national conversation. I think that you should address that.

**The First Minister:** And the example given was 300 teachers, which is what I am talking about.

The national conversation's cost is equivalent to that of the carve-up between the Labour and Conservative parties in the Calman Commission on Scottish Devolution. When I mentioned that carve-up earlier, there was some interest among

members as to why I did not include the Liberal Democrats. That is because, although the Liberal Democrats were part of the carve-up in the Calman commission, which cost the same as the national conversation, I hope that in future they at least will revert to the idea that the people of Scotland should be allowed to exercise their democratic right to decide—on behalf of the people and not on behalf of the unionist political parties.

**Iain Gray:** As usual, the First Minister has the Colgate ring of confidence but no answer to the question.

In 2007, Nicola Sturgeon said that the national conversation would cost £48,000 and that the rest of the costs would be met from existing resources. I have with me official figures, which add up to £1.8 million. That includes the cost of 13 dedicated staff for the national conversation. A sum of £1.8 million could pay for 58 nurses or a community court to fight crime in Glasgow. It could employ 40 new dentists, with enough change left to be able to have them all round to Bute house to celebrate with a slap-up feed.

What about the St Andrew's day party? How much will the First Minister spend on that?

**The First Minister:** I am delighted to confirm that, thanks to this SNP Administration, there are more dentists working in Scotland than there were under the Labour Party.

I know that, under the Labour Party, the only people who got invited to Bute house were other politicians—predominantly Labour politicians. I do not know whether Iain Gray knows how internal and tedious conversation can be when it takes place only among politicians—I know, because I have to listen to him every Thursday. Sometimes we should let the ordinary people in. That applies to Bute house and it applies to Downing Street. If it came to the choice of inviting a dentist or Margaret Thatcher to Bute house, I would take the dentist any day of the week.

**The Presiding Officer:** I remind all members that personal insults should form no part of questions or answers.

**Iain Gray:** I will provide the answer to my question, as the First Minister does not know it or does not want to share it. The St Andrew's day party will involve £500,000 of fireworks to celebrate an independence white paper that will—frankly—be the biggest damp squib since the joke that he tried to crack a minute ago.

Hard-working Scottish families are worried about their jobs and the roof over their heads. Meanwhile, the First Minister spends nearly £12 million of their money on someone to talk to at

dinner, a conversation with himself and a referendum to which we already know the answer.

**Members:** Oh.

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Iain Gray:** That is £12 million of Alex Salmond's vanity. Enough is enough—cancel the conversation, cancel the white paper and cancel the rigged referendum. For Scotland's sake, will he do that right now?

**The First Minister:** Iain Gray knows the answer to a referendum before it takes place. I remind him that the Prime Minister committed himself at the Labour conference to a referendum on the alternative voting system, which no political party appears to support. If we can have a referendum on the AV system from the Labour Party, why cannot we have a referendum on the constitutional future of Scotland?

I remind Iain Gray that the St Andrew's day celebrations were inaugurated by my predecessor, Mr Jack McConnell. Of course, that was in the days when the Labour Party was under patriotic leadership, as opposed to that of Iain Gray, who purports to know the answer to a referendum before it has taken place.

I have a passing suspicion about the attitude of the Labour and Conservative parties to a referendum. They are against it not because of confidence in the union—how could they be confident in a union that has visited public spending cuts and a recession on the Scottish people? Their caution about a referendum is based on a lack of confidence in the Scottish people. The parties do not believe that their answer will be supported. They are frightened of the people's verdict—hence Iain Gray's reluctance about and opposition to the democratic verdict of a referendum.

### Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

#### 2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con):

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S3F-2001)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** I have no plans to meet the secretary of state in the near future.

**Annabel Goldie:** I will remind the First Minister of what some leading Scottish educationists said recently. In September, Professor Lindsay Paterson of the University of Edinburgh said:

"In mathematics, science and reading, Scotland is mediocre by international standards ... the situation is dismal."

Yesterday, Professor Eric Wilkinson of the University of Glasgow said:

"In Scotland, we are ... stuck in a mud pool ... Scottish education is on a downward spiral".

Just this week, East Lothian Council's leader, David Berry, of the Scottish National Party—for the moment—proposed a radical departure from the traditional system of providing education. Does the First Minister accept the urgent need for a debate on how we provide education, or is his mind closed to those very public concerns?

**The First Minister:** I am all for debate on the future of Scottish education and any other important matter, but I will not accept the running down of an education system—as the Conservatives do continuously—that has delivered record attainment levels and results in exam after exam in recent years. I do not mind the Conservative party running down the SNP and the Government—that is its job as the second Opposition party—but it should beware of running down the attainment of pupils and teachers throughout the Scottish education system.

The proposals in East Lothian represent an interesting public consultation exercise. Why on earth should we be frightened of public consultation or of debate? However, we should undertake that from a position of strength in which we know that there is a huge amount to be valued in the Scottish education system and not run down as the Tories would like.

**Annabel Goldie:** The First Minister may want to sit in his bunker and ignore those who know what they are talking about, but one would have thought that a significant and interesting proposal from someone senior in his own party, such as David Berry, would at least have merited a response from the education minister, the hapless Fiona Hyslop. What did we get? On Monday, there was nothing; on Tuesday, there was nothing; on Wednesday, there was nothing; and today, there has been nothing.

There we have the Scottish Government's contribution to the educational debate. One minister is too busy taking his dentist out to dinner to bother and the other is rendered mute. The conspiracy of indifference from the Government is unacceptable. Alex Salmond must grip the issue. If Fiona Hyslop cannot lead the vital and overdue debate on Scottish education, will he find someone who can?

**The First Minister:** As Annabel Goldie did not want to address the issue, let us nail the attack from the Tories that, somehow, Scottish education is failing pupils and parents throughout Scotland. The pass rate for highers in 2009 was 74.2 per cent, which was a new record. The pass rate for advanced highers in 2009 was 77.8 per cent—another new record. I repeat that there is a huge amount to be valued in the performance of

teachers, pupils and parents throughout Scotland. Annabel Goldie and her party do themselves no credit at all by running down that performance; it is to be highly valued.

East Lothian Council is exploring a proposal to bring primary and secondary schools together in clusters under a community-led board. The proposal is at an early stage but represents an interesting suggestion on the way to improve community empowerment. That seems to me to be an entirely sensible attitude to take to the East Lothian initiative. I know that it is an entirely sensible attitude because it was given to me by Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning.

Will Annabel Goldie accept that Scottish education is doing extremely well in servicing the needs of pupils throughout the country and that the Government's mind is open to local suggestions? A central diktat, as suggested by Annabel Goldie, seems to go in a negative, rather than positive, direction.

**Annabel Goldie** *rose*—

**The Presiding Officer:** We must move on.

### Cabinet (Meetings)

**3. Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD):** To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-2002)

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

**Tavish Scott:** The chairmen of England's biggest football clubs are meeting now to consider whether Rangers Football Club and Celtic Football Club should become part of the most successful league in Europe. Are there not advantages for the Scottish game in the old firm playing in the bigger leagues? Does the proposal not have the potential to bring about greater competitiveness and more interest and to encourage more youngsters into the game in Scotland? Does the First Minister support it?

**The First Minister:** Tavish Scott has the opportunity once a week to question me for things for which I am directly responsible. I enjoy our weekly exchanges but, for all the things for which I am responsible, I ain't responsible for the decisions of the old firm or for running Scottish football. I know that many people throughout the country say, "Bring in Salmond to run Scottish football," but, as First Minister, I will concentrate on our nation's constitutional and economic future. I know that, at some point, I will have Tavish Scott's support and endorsement for our proposals in that regard.

**Tavish Scott:** I am glad that the First Minister raised the economy because—[*Laughter.*] I think that the question is important and do not mind how much other people do not think that. When Rangers or Celtic has a champions league game in Glasgow, it is worth £8 million to the city's economy. The Tories may want to laugh about that, but I will not because I think it important. If the old firm joined a new English league set-up, it would mean a massive game in Glasgow every week. The number of visiting fans and the amount of television and media interest in Scotland would increase. A new league structure in Britain would mean £20 million in TV rights money for the old firm. Managers from Arsenal's Arsène Wenger to Tottenham Hotspur's Harry Redknapp—to say nothing of Alex McLeish, Gordon Strachan and Martin O'Neill—all say that it would be good for football north and south of the border. Is the First Minister's Minister for Public Health and Sport involved in the potential to bring football back to life in Scotland while helping our biggest clubs to develop?

**The First Minister:** The Minister for Public Health and Sport is involved with the Scottish Football Association and other authorities in initiatives to spread coaching and football experience to young people across Scotland. Those are good and highly commendable initiatives that will prepare the ground for a succession and flow of good players in Scotland as well as increase the life and health chances of children in our community. Surprisingly enough, the Minister for Public Health and Sport, like the First Minister, is not involved in running either the old firm or Scottish Football.

In all conscience, I have to say to Tavish Scott that I know that Scottish football brought in Henry McLeish to take a view on matters, but he is a past First Minister. It is not normal—I do not think that it is a good idea—for the First Minister of Scotland, or even the leader of the Liberal Democrat party, to try to run Scottish football. I think that we should leave that to the people who are in charge, let them get on with the job and trust in their wise decisions for the future.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will take a constituency question from Richard Baker.

**Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Is the First Minister aware that more than 1,500 people have signed a petition by the Community trade union to save the Glencraft factory following Aberdeen City Council's decision to cease its funding? When he met Glencraft's blind and disabled workforce this week, what proposals did he discuss to give the factory a future and so retain funding from the United Kingdom workstep programme for disabled people, which otherwise will be lost? Does he agree that article 19 of the

European Union procurement directive should be used throughout the public sector to procure from supported workplaces?

**The First Minister:** I had very good discussions at Glencraft on Tuesday with the unions, the management of Glencraft, Aberdeen City Council and officials from the third sector. A range of things is being examined to take matters forward, as everybody, not just in the north-east of Scotland but throughout Scotland, would like Glencraft to continue in some form and, in particular, would like the people with disability who work at Glencraft to have good life chances.

The financial situation in Glencraft is extremely serious. It emerged at the meeting that the monthly deficit is currently running at £70,000, which is far in excess of the workstep grant that Richard Baker mentioned. In fact, that figure takes the workstep grant into account. Nonetheless, there have been substantial offers of help and support from third sector agencies and, indeed, from some private sector companies. Plans are being worked on that I hope and believe will lead to good outcomes for the workers of Glencraft. In this—and I appreciate the way in which Richard Baker asked his question, which was the right way to do it—I hope that everybody keeps focused on what we can do for the workers in the factory. People are now working hard and the various agencies that are involved are pulling together, perhaps for the first time in many months. I hope to see good outcomes for the workers, who will be uppermost in all our minds.

**Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind):** If I may, I will return to the question raised by Tavish Scott. Glory, glory to the Hibeas, I could say from a partisan point of view, but I urge the First Minister not to take so lightly the position of Scottish football in our economy and our identity, because it is part of the Scottish promotion of what we are. Tomorrow, a member of the Scottish Premier League and a senior official from one of the Scottish clubs are coming here to meet me because they—

**The Presiding Officer:** Can we have a question, please, Ms MacDonald?

**Margo MacDonald:** Yes.

**The Presiding Officer:** Quickly, please.

**Margo MacDonald:** I am looking for the First Minister to wish the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on sport well in its efforts to provide a forum for this discussion.

**The First Minister:** Of course I wish the cross-party group well. Indeed, I had discussions with Henry McLeish on his review of Scottish football.

**Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD):** Really? Henry?

**The First Minister:** Why on earth not? Is Henry McLeish not somebody who should be invited into Bute house for discussions? *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order, Mr Rumbles.

**The First Minister:** I thoroughly agree with having such discussions. I will even, if Mike Rumbles asks me very nicely, invite him into Bute house for discussions.

**Members:** No!

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**The First Minister:** Or maybe I should put that to a democratic vote in a referendum.

I wish the cross-party group well and I wish Henry McLeish well in his study of Scottish football. The Minister for Public Health and Sport is, of course, actively engaged in promoting the game at grass-roots level. I can exclusively reveal to Margo MacDonald that I made a highly successful speech at Easter Road just a few weeks ago, after which I received the applause that has always been accorded to me by Hibernian Football Club.

#### **Rail Services (Scotland to London)**

**4. Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what impact the Scottish Government considers that the return of the east coast mainline rail service to public ownership will have on services between Scotland and London. (S3F-2007)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** The east coast mainline rail service provides a vital link between Scotland and London. I am extremely concerned about the proposals to remove many of the direct services between Glasgow Central and London King's Cross. That service provides 25,000 seats a week to London and is a vital economic link for the city of Glasgow.

**Linda Fabiani:** I am very concerned that Labour's plan to cut Glasgow's rail link to the east coast main line will further disadvantage Scotland. Does the First Minister agree that the energies of Labour politicians should be focused on persuading their London colleagues to stop cutting services to Scotland?

**The First Minister:** There seems to be a strange contrast in the Labour Party position on the matter. I would have said that preserving and protecting existing vital services should be a concern for every party in this Parliament. Political parties and individual members should be very careful not to pick and choose which services they intend to promote or stress. I thought it extraordinary that the London transport minister spent a couple of days in Scotland lecturing the Scottish Government on matters but forgot to

explain that his department was set to axe an important existing service to Glasgow. I think that people see through such double standards very quickly.

**Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab):** Is the First Minister aware that the east coast mainline service from Glasgow regularly stops at Motherwell station, which provides a vital service for those who wish to travel to London from outwith Scotland's two main cities? Will he support me in making representations to ensure that the Motherwell stop continues on that service? Will he join me in expressing support for any moves by North Lanarkshire Council and Strathclyde partnership for transport to develop Motherwell station in a way that ensures more users of the service in future?

**The First Minister:** I am delighted to support the former First Minister in his call. I agree with him about the importance to Motherwell—and, indeed, to other stations—of that vital link. I find myself at one again with Jack McConnell, as I was on the important subject of properly celebrating St Andrew's day as our national day.

**Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** The First Minister will be aware that, as part of the east coast main line service, National Express provided three trains a day in each direction between Aberdeen and London and one train a day between Inverness and London. Those direct links are vital. I seek reassurance from the First Minister that the Scottish Government has made, and will continue to make, representations to Westminster and to the newly established east coast rail company to ensure that those valuable services are protected from the kind of threat that Glasgow seems to be under now.

**The First Minister:** A consensus seems to be breaking out across the chamber that these services are important. Our representations will be strengthened by the fact that they carry all-party support.

Huge investments are taking place in the rail network within Scotland. Dramatic improvements are being made to services not just between Edinburgh and Glasgow but between Aberdeen and Inverness and the central belt. Substantial reductions are being achieved in journey times and substantial enhancements are being made to services. The very last thing that we want while those proposals, measures and investments are being introduced to improve Scotland's internal rail network is to lose vital interconnectivity with London and other stations on the east coast and other lines.

I hope that the whole Parliament will rally behind the representations that are being made. I am sure that such consensus support will make it all the

more difficult to ignore the important economic grounding of the subject of the member's question.

**John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** The First Minister will be aware of the campaign to reopen stations on the east coast main line to bring services to Berwickshire in my constituency. Does he agree that the change of ownership of east coast mainline rail services gives us an opportunity to renew that campaign? Will he commit the Scottish Government's full support to ensure that that part of Scotland once again has rail services?

**The First Minister:** I know that the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change has had dialogue with the member and we will certainly continue that dialogue. Of course we will look for any opportunities, as well as trying to turn back any dangers, in the proposals coming forward.

### Forth Road Bridge

**5. Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister how long the Forth road bridge will continue to operate safely at full capacity. (S3F-2005)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** The Forth Estuary Transport Authority has indicated that, at the present rate of deterioration, restrictions on heavy good vehicles are likely to be required some time between 2017 and 2021. That could happen earlier under some scenarios, but that is the likely timescale.

The Forth road bridge forms a critical part of our transport infrastructure and its closure without a replacement would have a devastating impact on the Scottish economy as a whole. As the member will be aware, the Scottish Government will introduce the Forth crossing bill to the Scottish Parliament very soon. I am sure that the member will take the opportunity to welcome that.

**Charlie Gordon:** If the current repair programme on the Forth bridge achieves its best case scenario, what implications might that have for the Scottish Government's transport capital programme in future spending review periods?

**The First Minister:** When we are contemplating, as the Parliament is about to, an investment of £1.7 billion in a vital transport link, it is important that we should be able to spread capital investment over a period of time—in other words, the Parliament should have borrowing powers to enable us to sensibly manage a capital programme. We are hopeful that, with the changes that I think must take place in the Parliament's capacity to do that, the borrowing powers will make the Forth crossing manageable in terms of the capital programme. I know that Charlie Gordon will be aware of—and supportive of—the obvious

point that, for major, once-in-a-generation capital projects such as the Forth crossing, borrowing powers are essential for the proper management of the capital programme.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I am sure that the First Minister is aware of a recent poll showing that 57 per cent of Scots would prefer the repair of the existing bridge to be prioritised rather than the construction of an additional bridge. Does he accept that there is widespread concern that other transport projects across Scotland simply will not happen if we commit to this single capital project at this time? This is a time when we should be investing in the low-carbon transport infrastructure of the future. Should we not wait until we have fully informed answers on the future of the existing bridge before we make that decision?

**The First Minister:** We have substantial information on the state of the existing bridge. As I outlined in the answer to Mr Gordon's question, we know what the consequences will be if we do not take alternative action. It is sometimes not appreciated that even the closure of the bridge to effect the repairs would introduce substantial economic penalties across Scotland, never mind the estimates about future capacity.

I know that Patrick Harvie has strongly held views. I hope that he will at least be able to support the argument for borrowing powers for the Parliament, which would apply to any major capital project—any that he approves of as well as any that he disapproves of. I know that he will take full advantage of opportunities to make his views known as the bill comes before the Parliament.

### Graduate Employment

**6. Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to support graduates unable to find employment, in light of reports that tens of thousands of new graduates are in this position. (S3F-2012)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Through the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, we are providing £3.5 million to fund skills and employability initiatives focused on work-related learning and placements; enterprise and entrepreneurship; and workforce development.

In addition to university-funded careers services, the Scottish funding council is also providing £27,000 to fund careers advice and job hunting services for final-year students and unemployed graduates.

The latest figures in the labour force survey suggest that graduate employment is proving more resilient in Scotland than elsewhere. For the



year to June, our graduate employment rate is higher, at 86.5 per cent, than the corresponding rate in England and Northern Ireland. Although the Scottish figures show a drop in employment of 0.7 per cent, that is half the English fall of 1.5 per cent and one third of the Northern Irish fall of 2.1 per cent.

**Jeremy Purvis:** Does the First Minister know that unemployment as a whole is, regrettably, growing at a faster rate in Scotland than in the rest of the United Kingdom? The last full-year figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that the number of graduates who are assumed to be economically inactive has gone up in Scotland but down in the rest of the UK.

In May, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning answered a parliamentary question by saying that the Scottish Government had no plans to establish a specific graduate talent pool for graduate employment support similar to that which the UK Government has set up and to GO Wales, which the Welsh Assembly Government has set up. Instead, she said:

"we are monitoring closely the situation on graduate employment."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 14 May 2009; S3W-23555.]

Six months on, what has been the result of that monitoring?

**The First Minister:** In my answer to the member's first question, I gave information about both the initiatives that the Scottish funding council is involved with.

I take issue with the first part of Jeremy Purvis's supplementary question. I do not think for a minute that we can argue that the fact that the situation is worse elsewhere means that it is good in Scotland; any rise in graduate unemployment and in unemployment generally is deeply regrettable and a source of great concern. However, the fact is that the Higher Education Statistics Agency statistics that were published in July 2009—I think that they are the figures to which he refers—show that Scotland has the best record in the UK for graduate unemployment. Five per cent of leavers from Scottish universities in 2007-08 were unemployed six months later, in January this year. In England, the figure was 6.6 per cent; in Wales, it was 6.5 per cent; and in Northern Ireland, it was 6.3 per cent. All those figures are serious, but if Jeremy Purvis cites initiatives that have been taken elsewhere, he should at least accept that the situation elsewhere is even worse than the situation in Scotland, and applaud the initiatives that the Scottish funding council is taking to deal with the situation.

**Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP):** I am sure that the First Minister agrees that graduates are a vital part of our economy. Has he

given any thought to referring the issue to the Council of Economic Advisers for consideration?

**The First Minister:** Yes, I have now, and yes, I will.

**George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. When I saw the *Business Bulletin* this morning I was concerned that the Parliament might be likely to be misled by question 4 to the First Minister. I phoned the office of the Secretary of State for Transport, and he confirmed his statement to *The Herald* earlier this week that public ownership of the east coast main line will make no difference to timetabling decisions, that no proposals for change in the timetable have been put to him and that he makes the final decision. Can you advise me how I can make that correction available to all MSPs and to the media?

**The Presiding Officer:** You have just done so by putting it on the record, but it is certainly not a point of order.

**Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Questions 5 and 6 were excellent questions, but they were asked by people who represent their parties in those particular portfolios. I would like to know what the convention is with regard to who gets to ask questions of front-bench members, as I thought that it was the back benchers.

**The Presiding Officer:** Any member is entitled to ask a question, and I am entitled to select any of the questions to be asked, which is what I did.

12:32

*Meeting suspended until 14:15.*

14:15

*On resuming—*

## Question Time

### SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

#### Justice and Law Officers

##### Criminal Appeals

**1. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive, in light of the recent criminal appeal statistics that show a 34 per cent increase in the duration of solemn appeals, what action it will take to shorten the duration of all criminal appeals. (S3O-8437)

**The Solicitor General for Scotland (Frank Mulholland):** Criminal appeals vary greatly in complexity from case to case. Rightly, the hearing of appeals is a matter for our independent judiciary. It would be entirely inappropriate for ministers to have direct involvement.

**Pauline McNeill:** Does the Solicitor General not think that the huge increase in the time that it takes to hear appeals could damage the Scottish legal system? If appeals continue to take longer than they should, can the Cabinet Secretary for Justice appoint additional judges, which might solve the problem? Why does the Scottish Government think that there has been such an increase in the duration of appeals?

**The Solicitor General for Scotland:** The statistics must be put in context. The vast majority of appeals—79 per cent of them—were concluded within six months. The number of appeals concluded was 2,191, which is more or less the same as that for the previous year—it represents a decrease of 3 per cent. The number of lengthy, complex appeals has increased significantly, and there have been a number of full-bench cases, which tie up multiple judges. The point should be made that judges can proceed to hear an appeal only when the appellant's counsel or legal representatives are ready to present it.

I do not want members to think that the judiciary is unaware of the issue. Measures have been put in place to deal with it. First, the number of days that the appeal court sits has increased significantly. In 2007, the figure was 189; the projected figure for 2009 is 262. Secondly, along with other practitioners, I have noted an increase in the use of written submissions, which focuses argument and allows for detailed preparation by judges. Thirdly, an administrative judge has been appointed to oversee the efficient management of court business, with one judge focused on

appeals. A recent judicial conference was held to address these matters and will no doubt bear fruit.

I am confident, and I anticipate that the judiciary are confident, that the measures that I have outlined will bear fruit. The answer is not always to appoint additional judges, but the Lord President will no doubt give great consideration to that in his discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice.

##### Scottish Crime and Justice Survey

**2. Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what action it will take to reverse the increases in vandalism, violent crime, assault and robbery shown in the recent Scottish crime and justice survey. (S3O-8418)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill):** The reality in Scotland is that overall recorded crime is at its lowest level for nearly 30 years. However, there are areas that continue to give concern, hence the Government drive to tackle both knife crime and alcohol abuse. The Scottish Government is working with the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, local community safety partnerships and others to tackle crime in Scotland. We are investing £13 million through our cashback for communities projects, £1.6 million to support the community initiative to reduce violence in Glasgow and £400,000 in the safer streets programme to deliver crime reduction measures through community safety partnerships.

**Helen Eadie:** Does the cabinet secretary agree that now is the time to introduce Labour's policy of a minimum mandatory sentence for carrying a knife? When he answers, will he bear in mind the stabbing to death of my constituent in Lochgelly—a father who intervened to try to calm a violent situation and was slaughtered on the streets of Lochgelly by a person carrying a knife? Should the message from the Parliament be, "Carry a knife and you go to jail"?

**Kenny MacAskill:** I have sympathy, as does the Government, with anyone who is the victim of crime, especially when a life is lost. On the case to which the member referred, our sympathies go out. A trial is outstanding and it would be wrong of me to comment further.

I stand with the chief constable of Strathclyde Police in considering that the best way of tackling knife crime is by having the severe punishments that we have, by supporting our judiciary, by tackling education to ensure that we deal with matters, by bringing in Ferroguards so that we apprehend people who carry knives, and, ultimately, by leaving the matter to the discretion of the judiciary. Anyone who uses a knife is almost certainly going to go to jail. People who carry knives know that there are severe consequences,

including jail. However, as I said, I prefer the advice and evidence of Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnochan and of Steve House. I stand with the people who make operational decisions on the front line.

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** Does the cabinet secretary agree that the efforts that we all want to succeed are likely to be negated to a considerable extent by his own proposals, which will mean that people who would normally be sent to prison for at least two of the offences to which Mrs Eadie referred will no longer be sent to prison? There will be a presumption against sending such people to prison, and many people who are sent to prison are released, at the cabinet secretary's insistence, after serving a quarter of their sentence.

**Kenny MacAskill:** Yet again we hear the old Tory line about early release. We can only point out that early release was instigated by the Conservatives many, many years ago. It was not Mr Aitken's responsibility, and he was certainly not convener of the Justice Committee at the time, but it was the Tories who brought in early release and it is this Government that is taking action to deal with the situation.

We stand four-square not just behind the people who are in the front line of policing, such as Chief Constable Steve House, but behind the wise decisions that have been made by the judiciary, whether at senator or sheriff level. That is why we allow the judiciary to make the decisions. Although we believe that short sentences do not work, in that they do not tackle the problem of reoffending—we are supported in that direction of travel by a variety of organisations, such as Victim Support Scotland—we have made it clear that if a sheriff thinks that a short sentence is appropriate, they have my full support. I have given that undertaking to Sheriff Raeburn, who argued that some people should get a short, sharp shock, especially in domestic violence cases, when someone needs to be taken out of the household for others' protection. Members on the Government benches were persuaded by that point. We trust our judiciary as we support our police.

### Sex Offenders

**3. John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Executive what steps are being taken to improve the management of sex offenders. (S3O-8367)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill):** Through the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill we will tighten sexual offences prevention orders to impose new, positive obligations on high-risk sex offenders, strengthen the requirements for homeless sex offenders, and ensure that anyone who is subject

to a foreign travel order will have to surrender their passport to the police.

We are also monitoring the community disclosure pilot in Tayside. If it is successful, it will be rolled out nationally.

**John Lamont:** In answer to Bill Aitken in the Parliament last week, the cabinet secretary said that the Government has significant doubts about the value of a system of satellite tracking of people on the sex offenders register, principally because although the technology can show where people are, it does not reveal what they are doing. However, the technology could have a number of benefits, particularly when used as part of a package of measures to improve the monitoring of known offenders. For example, it could be used to identify an individual in the vicinity of a school or similar establishment. Will the cabinet secretary therefore agree to look again at the potential benefits of the technology?

**Kenny MacAskill:** As I said to Mr Aitken last week, on new technology, whether we are talking about satellite tracking or polygraph tests, which Mr Aitken also mentioned, we do not rule anything in or out. We consider what is operating and we learn from other jurisdictions. Polygraph tests are being trialled south of the border.

It is not a matter of agreeing to "look again"; I can assure Mr Lamont that we continually consider such matters. If an approach is shown to be appropriate and cost effective, we will be happy to adopt it. However, as I said, currently the police appear to take the view that the approach that Mr Lamont described would not add to what we have. Should that change, we will be more than happy to act, as we are doing with the Tayside community pilot.

**James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab):** Why, when the justice budget is increasing by more than £7 million in real terms, has the budget for the monitoring of sex offenders been cut by £21,000?

**Kenny MacAskill:** Because we use a variety of methods to monitor sex offenders and do not just do so through the criminal justice directorate. Mr Kelly might not know about how we make up multi-agency public protection arrangements. We have to involve local authorities because of their responsibilities in housing and social work. The Scottish Prison Service is also involved. Other agencies, such as health and voluntary sector agencies, come on board when it is appropriate. The resources for MAPPAs to monitor sex offenders in the community come not just from the justice directorate's budget but from others who contribute in a variety of ways.

If Mr Kelly is so mindful of budget cuts, I ask him to support this Government in seeking to oppose

the £500 million of cuts that Westminster is imposing on it—£21,000 is but petty change in comparison with the £500 million of cuts that we face from Westminster, never mind its further expenditure on weapons of mass destruction.

#### **Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004**

**4. John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what action is being taken to ensure that the full powers of the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 are being used. (S3O-8442)

**The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing):** In March this year, the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland and other key national partners joined together to launch a new framework for tackling antisocial behaviour. That framework confirms our collective determination to put prevention and effective intervention at the heart of our approach.

On 26 October 2009, I visited the Fife equally well project in Kirkcaldy, which is an excellent example of how to put the approach into practice, specifically in tackling and preventing alcohol and drug-related antisocial behaviour. I am sure that the member will join me in congratulating Fife Constabulary, NHS Fife, Fife Council and local voluntary sector partners on their continued efforts to make communities in Fife safer.

**John Park:** I certainly do join the minister in congratulating the agencies that he mentioned on the work that they are doing in Fife.

One issue that I face regularly is antisocial behaviour between neighbours. When I look at my mailbag and the work that my office is doing, I see that Fife Council in particular is not using the full powers that local authorities have at their disposal to tackle antisocial behaviour. Will the minister or his officials engage with officials from Fife Council to find a way forward? I would be more than happy to provide him with specific evidence and to show him some trends in the area.

**Fergus Ewing:** I thank Mr Park for his offer. If he wishes to put to me the specific examples from which he has reached his conclusion, I would be more than happy to consider how to take matters forward. In the absence of knowledge of specific examples, it would be unwise for me to offer any conclusions.

Finally, it is entirely a matter for local authorities whether to pursue the powers conferred by the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004. They are entirely free to do so if they wish, but we will not impose on any local authority the way to ensure community safety in their part of Scotland.

#### **“Joint Thematic Report on the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002”**

**5. Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to take forward the recommendations of Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prosecution in Scotland and Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary for Scotland in the “Joint Thematic Report on the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002”. (S3O-8364)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill):** The serious organised crime task force will discuss what action to take on the report at its next meeting on 8 December 2009. The Scottish Government has allocated an extra £1.2 million to the Crown Office and arranged a funding package of £1 million for the police to recruit specialist staff to boost our capacity to recover assets from criminals. We will continue to do everything that we can to maximise the effectiveness of asset recovery, as we committed to do in the serious organised crime task force strategy that we published on 2 June 2009.

**Elizabeth Smith:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that informative reply. Does he agree that one option that could help to establish a more effective approach towards the gathering of intelligence on the financial assets of criminals would be to amend the 2002 act to ensure that the onus was on the criminals rather than the Crown to demonstrate that their excessive assets had not been obtained as a result of criminality?

**Kenny MacAskill:** The member misunderstands the current legal position. The balance of proof switches in such matters and it is for the individual to show that an asset was from a legitimate source.

We constantly review matters, which is why we will review the joint thematic report. Bill Skelly and others will be involved. Although the presumption switches and the onus is on the individual, that is not to say that there are no difficulties. I recently met the civil recovery unit and officers who deal with specialist and serious organised crime. We know that we have to take further action, and we will examine all the relevant areas. Some of the legislation is devolved and some of it is reserved to Westminster. Where it is appropriate we will take action, and where the legislation is reserved we will encourage the Home Secretary to take action.

The law is as I have described it, but we seek to learn lessons, whether from Ireland or elsewhere.

**Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Does the cabinet secretary agree that funds that are recovered through proceeds of crime legislation should continue to be focused on cashback for communities schemes? What discussions have taken place with police forces on

the introduction of an incentivisation policy, whereby forces would be able to retain a proportion of such funds?

**Kenny MacAskill:** We discussed those matters at the outset of the serious organised crime task force and the cashback for communities scheme. It seems perfectly sensible that some element of providing more money to be able to bring in more money is a good thing, which is why money was allocated to the police in discussions with the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland. Indeed, other funds have been provided to ensure that we can process matters.

The principal aim of cashback for communities will always be to allow our children from disadvantaged or, indeed, not-so-disadvantaged areas to be all that they can be. To ensure that we do that as best we can, we must maximise the resources that are available to strip criminals of their assets and put them back to use for the good of our community.

#### **Criminal Activity (Closed-circuit Television)**

**6. Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what support it can offer to communities wishing to extend the use of CCTV cameras to combat antisocial behaviour and other criminal activity. (S3O-8434)

**The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing):** CCTV can play a significant role in the prevention, detection and prosecution of crime. The Scottish Government is providing record levels of funding to local government and the police service in Scotland to allow them to respond positively to local needs such as the extension of CCTV provision. We will shortly publish the strategic report on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public space CCTV in Scotland, which will help local agencies to make better decisions on the use of CCTV.

**Ken Macintosh:** I hope that the minister is aware of the level of demand for CCTV among our communities. Does he recall—I am sure that he does—the funds that the previous Executive made available to Scotland's ethnic communities to install CCTV at places of worship, with the accruing benefits of peace of mind and improved security? Is he considering granting a further allocation of funds to Scotland's ethnic communities to reduce racially motivated incidents and to give our communities peace of mind and the ability to worship safely?

**Fergus Ewing:** I appreciate and share Ken Macintosh's concern and his belief that CCTV can play an extremely useful role. Indeed, the Solicitor General for Scotland has just advised me that CCTV evidence helped to secure a conviction in a

recent vile, racially motivated murder. I think that we are all agreed on the use of CCTV.

I am also aware of the funding initiative to which Ken Macintosh referred. As he will recall, I explained in my reply to a question by Stewart Maxwell on 18 December 2007 that that fund was set up after the events of 11 September 2001 and that it had been fully utilised.

I understand that the issues continue to be under consideration. The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is taking matters forward. I am pleased to tell the member, if he does not already know, that the First Minister is meeting the director of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, Ephraim Borowski, on 24 November to discuss various incidents of concern about defiling gravestones and other absolutely unacceptable behaviour. I am quite sure that the matters that the member raises will form part of the discussion between Ephraim Borowski and the First Minister.

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** I am sorry, but that must conclude justice and law officers questions. I will allow a few seconds for people to change places.

#### **Rural Affairs and the Environment**

##### **Zero Waste Plan**

**1. Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive when it expects to publish the zero waste plan and how it will work with local authorities to deliver it. (S3O-8439)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead):** The consultation on the draft zero waste plan for Scotland ends tomorrow, 13 November. The Scottish Government will consider carefully the views expressed in all the responses to help us produce a final zero waste plan, which we intend to publish in spring next year. We continue to work closely throughout this process with local authorities, and they will be vital partners in delivering the plan's objectives.

**Mary Mulligan:** I am sure that we all agree that the challenging targets for waste management will be met only if we all work together. What is the view of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment of the suggestion by West Lothian Council to establish a number of fora of local authorities on a geographic basis to encourage the strategic and operational exchange of best practice and, where appropriate, shared services?

**Richard Lochhead:** I agree with the member's sentiments. There is, of course, nothing stopping what she described from happening now. We

certainly join the member in encouraging local authorities to work together as much as possible, particularly in the regional context. I pay tribute to West Lothian Council, because it is the fifth-best performing council in Scotland for household recycling, which is good news. It is well over the 40 per cent target, and it has achieved that early. Local authorities working together is certainly the way forward, and I am in no doubt that that will be a feature of the final zero waste plan for Scotland.

**Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):**

Last Friday, I visited the community food initiative in Aberdeen, which the cabinet secretary launched earlier this year, and I was shown a very large quantity of so-called dry foods, such as pasta, wrapped biscuits and bottled water, which the organisation distributes free to needy groups as a fair share project. I was told that all that perfectly useable food would otherwise go to landfill. Is the cabinet secretary as shocked as I am about that? Will he investigate whether that sort of massive food wastage is a problem across Scotland? If it is, will he work with local authorities to ensure that such food is put to good use in our communities, rather than going to waste?

**Richard Lochhead:** Again, I agree with the member's sentiments. Of course, the Scottish Government has been funding and running the love food, hate waste campaign to try to reduce the waste of good-quality food that costs each household several hundred pounds a year. We have also been working with a number of local authorities over the past year or two on food collection trials, so the issue is certainly high on our agenda. The member is right to highlight it as something that must be at the heart of our zero waste policy.

### **Dairy Industry (Meetings)**

**2. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con):**

To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment last met representatives of the dairy industry. (S3O-8362)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead):** I chaired a meeting of all parts of the dairy supply chain in Edinburgh on 24 September 2009. More recently, on 29 October 2009, I met the president of NFU Scotland to discuss a range of issues, including the challenges facing our dairy sector.

**Derek Brownlee:** Given the difficulties that the sector faces, can the cabinet secretary tell us what actions the Scottish Government is taking to further the cause of an ombudsman for the grocery sector? In particular, has he had any discussions with the Office of Fair Trading or the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs?

**Richard Lochhead:** The member raises a good point about the campaign to establish a supermarket ombudsman, which I believe has cross-party support. Of course, the ombudsman was a recommendation from the Competition Commission after its thorough investigation into the issue, which unveiled many horror stories about how some suppliers have been treated by some supermarkets and large retailers.

I can also inform the member that I happen recently to have had a meeting with the chairman of the Competition Commission, who wanted to discuss that issue with me during his visit to Edinburgh last week. He paid tribute to the Scottish Government for our support for the idea, which I explained has cross-party support in the Parliament. We are concerned by the lack of a positive response from DEFRA. I assure the member that I have made numerous representations time and again to the United Kingdom ministers who have responsibility for the issue, and I will continue to do so in the weeks and months ahead.

### **Marine Regions**

**3. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Executive whether it intends to make it a duty to ensure that the Scottish marine regions cover the whole of the Scottish marine area. (S3O-8400)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead):** The Marine (Scotland) Bill contains provisions to create Scottish marine regions through secondary legislation, which will be subject to an affirmative resolution of the Parliament. I am committed to consulting on the criteria for defining the boundaries of the Scottish marine regions.

**Mike Pringle:** That sounds like not exactly a yes and possibly a no, but I thank the cabinet secretary for clarifying his position. However, his answer will perhaps trouble some in Scotland's coastal communities as well as many stakeholders, who will now be a little uncertain as to whether their area will be deemed worthy of being covered by a dedicated Scottish marine region. Will he attempt to dispel some of that uncertainty by detailing the processes and criteria that will be involved in designating a Scottish marine region, so that any communities that might be affected will at least know what to expect when decisions on a marine region's eligibility are taken?

**Richard Lochhead:** There is a distinction between allowing organisations or local authorities around Scotland who want to do so to apply for their area to be part of a marine region, and placing a duty on the Scottish ministers to establish marine regions throughout Scotland. We

are reluctant to introduce too many duties into the bill because doing so would in effect make it a lawyer's charter and would lead to our being required to establish marine regions throughout Scotland, irrespective of whether there was a case—or, indeed, demand—for doing so. That is the root of our reluctance. For instance, if there were such a duty, we might be required to establish marine regions around St Kilda or Rockall, which could take us into a whole different debate.

I have already given the commitment that we will carefully consult on what criteria should be used to determine whether a marine region should be established in any particular area of Scotland. I give the member that assurance.

**Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** In the marine region that it is hoped will be set up in Highland, has any assessment been made of the impact of the Ministry of Defence bombing range on the special protection area for seabirds in the waters adjacent to Cape Wrath?

**Richard Lochhead:** I am aware of the issue, as a NATO training exercise took place just last month. My understanding is that the MOD works closely with Scottish Natural Heritage when planning such exercises. The MOD also undertakes appraisals showing the environmental impacts both at sea and onshore. However, the member raises an important dimension of the need to safeguard our marine environment from all harmful activities, including those of the MOD. As he will be aware, the MOD has certain rights under existing legislation to conduct such exercises, but we will continue to press the MOD and work closely with the ministry to ensure that safeguards are put in place to protect our environment.

### Flood Defences

**4. Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is able to take with private companies that do not maintain flood defences on our coastline. (S3O-8407)

**The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham):** This is a matter for the relevant local authority, not the Scottish Government. Under the Flood Prevention (Scotland) Act 1961, local authorities have discretionary powers to repair and otherwise maintain in a due state of efficiency any barrier or other work for defence against flooding.

Under the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, most of which will come into effect later this month, it will be for the local authority both to assess whether the maintenance of privately owned defences substantially reduces flood risk in its area and to act accordingly.

**Jim Tolson:** A large multinational company that owns some of the coastline in my constituency has taken more than two years to agree to replace a broken sea valve that is located on its land. The sea valve is suspected of being the cause of repeated flooding in nearby homes. Despite the minister's answer, I hope that she will be able to do something to encourage such companies to respond more timeously when such incidents come to fruition.

**Roseanna Cunningham:** As I have already indicated, the primary responsibility is with the local authority. If the member cares to write to me about the specific issue that he has raised, I will endeavour to establish the background to it and try to work out why there has been a delay.

In general terms, the first ports of call for members on such issues should be the owner, whether the owner is domestic or commercial, and the local authority.

**John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** The minister will be aware that, as a result of climate change, there is an increased risk of tidal surges in the Forth and the Clyde; evidence on that was heard by the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, of which she was, until recently, the convener. Does the minister propose to take any measures—or does she propose to ask companies or local authorities to take any measures—to protect key installations, such as the oil refinery at Grangemouth that represents 30 to 40 per cent of the United Kingdom's oil-refining capabilities, or Longannet power station, from the increased risk of tidal surge?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** The increased risk of tidal surge is a factor in the general issue of flood risk assessment. It is a matter that the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee has considered and which is in our minds.

The member raises the issue of specific large companies and the work that they do. I am aware that Longannet power station wants to make some upgrades and that a flood risk assessment will be carried out as part of that. That would be the normal process by which those matters would be assessed. If the member has any indication that anything other than that is happening, I hope that he will communicate it to me.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 5 was to be asked by Jackie Baillie, who does not appear to be in the chamber. I hope that members will relay my disapproval of that.

**Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Is it in order for any other MSP to ask that question?

**The Presiding Officer:** No, it is not. That is well established.

### **Lamlash Bay (Marine Conservation Area)**

**6. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Executive whether the no-take zone in Lamlash bay is achieving its objectives and what progress is being made with the wider marine protected area in the bay. (S3O-8451)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead):** The objectives of the marine reserve in Lamlash Bay are to protect and enhance biodiversity and to help to conserve and improve scallop stocks to support sustainable fishing. It is too early to say to what extent these objectives are being achieved. Work on possible management measures for the remainder of the bay is on-going. The Lamlash Bay working group is scheduled to meet again on 14 January 2010.

**Patrick Harvie:** It is a matter of disappointment that, almost a year after the wider marine protected area was announced, it is still not in place. Is the cabinet secretary aware of reports from the local community that the dredgers are repeatedly operating in the no-take zone? That is equivalent to the people who are expected to manage and police the no-take zone continuing to dredge it. Have those reports come to the attention of the cabinet secretary? If they are true, what hope do they give us for the future of marine protected areas in Scotland?

**Richard Lochhead:** I will inquire whether my officials are aware of the points that the member raises.

Progress has been made, and I want to pay tribute to the Community of Arran Seabed Trust and the residents of Arran who have campaigned for years for protection for the bay on their doorstep. Their work resulted in the Government implementing legislation. As the member says, there is more to do, and discussions are continuing between COAST and the fisheries interests in Lamlash Bay.

I remind the member that existing legislation includes safeguards around dredging activity and the impact that that can have on the environment. The sector is, therefore, already regulated.

I take on board the member's points. I hope that we can make progress, but we need discussion among the various interests in the bay. It is important that we try to iron out any conflicts and ensure that people are working together towards common aims. I am pleased that there are signs of progress in that regard.

### **Fly-tipping**

**7. Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Executive what

guidance it has issued to local authorities on fly-tipping. (S3O-8433)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead):** The Scottish fly-tipping forum produces guidance on fly-tipping for local authorities. The forum is funded by the Scottish Government and brings together key bodies with an interest in fly-tipping, including the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, police, farmers and the Scottish Government.

**Lewis Macdonald:** What advice would the cabinet secretary give—or anticipate that the forum would give—to councils on the issue of charging for uplift of single large items of domestic waste, such as fridge freezers? There is evidence that such charges can lead to increased levels of fly-tipping, and to items not being recycled when they ought to be, which has consequences for Scotland's ability to meet its national recycling targets.

**Richard Lochhead:** I am sure that all members in the chamber join me in condemning anyone who fly-tips anywhere in Scotland, including in the member's constituency. The legislation gives the authorities powers to prosecute such people, and a great deal of effort is taking place through the fly-tipping forum to collect data on the number of people who are fly-tipping. It is—as the member might expect me to say—largely for local authorities to decide whether or not they charge for uplifts. They would have to take into account the scale of the charge and the impact that it would have on fly-tipping or on any other issue. Each council is in a different situation, and they must decide on the appropriate charges for particular items.

I have no intention of intervening in the right of local authorities to impose a charge or not. It is important that all local authorities—and all authorities—identify the culprits in whichever way possible, and take the appropriate action. So far, up to September this year, the database—which I understand Aberdeen city is not part of—has identified that there have been 16,688 fly-tipping incidents throughout Scotland. That is an appalling figure, and I hope that we can continue the good work that is being carried out to reduce it.

### **Ponies (Hot Branding)**

**8. Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on reports that the scarring of tissue caused by the branding of ponies is not predictable and that numbers are often impossible to read, and the statement by the head of the Scottish Government's animal welfare branch that he had difficulty reading some branded identification numbers. (S3O-8393)



**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead):** Hot branding of ponies is a less effective method of identification than microchipping. It is a painful procedure, and we agree with the British Equine Veterinary Association that it should be phased out. Hot branding of equines is only permitted in exceptional cases in Scotland, and only where a specific authorisation has been issued.

**Bill Wilson:** The cabinet secretary agrees that hot branding does not allow clear identification; the British Equine Veterinary Association and other bodies believe that the pain that it causes is unacceptable and that the practice should be phased out on welfare grounds; and microchipping is a virtually pain-free and reliable alternative that is mandated by the European Union. Does the cabinet secretary therefore agree that it is iniquitous to allow the continued hot branding of Scottish Exmoor ponies, which are not roaming free anywhere whatsoever, when this cruel and unnecessary practice has been outlawed for other species?

**Richard Lochhead:** I assure the member that the position in Scotland differs from that in other parts of the United Kingdom, where no authorisation is necessary to hot brand equines. Hot branding in Scotland is strictly controlled, and limited to a very few animals per year. An authorisation will only be issued in cases in which hot branding is necessary to create a visual identification mark, and where freeze branding is not considered a suitable alternative.

Hot branding is only permitted where horses or ponies are living in a semi-feral state and are not used to being handled. Indeed, only nine authorisations have been issued this year, all for a semi-feral herd of Exmoor ponies that live on the Scoraig peninsula in a remote part of Wester Ross. A microchip cannot be read from a distance and, where horses and ponies are living wild and unused to being handled, it may not be possible to get close enough to them to read the microchip. The practice only happens under very strictly controlled circumstances in Scotland. I hope that that answer assures the member somewhat.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 9 was not lodged.

### Flood Damage

**10. Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what strategy it has in place to support local authorities in dealing with flood damage during the winter months. (S3O-8387)

**The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham):** The overall aim of the Government's flood risk management strategy is

to reduce flood risk by investment in flood protection schemes and flood warning arrangements, which will increase the resilience of people and communities. That will allow them to recover more quickly and easily from the consequences of flooding. Flooding will never be avoided completely, which is why resilience is so important.

**Gil Paterson:** With regard to the implementation of the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, can the minister say whether there has been an uptake of upstream management schemes, which allow flooding in places where little or no damage is done?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** We are in the very early stages of implementing the 2009 act. As I indicated in response to an earlier question, it is not yet fully implemented, so we will have to wait a little while to find out whether, under the new arrangements, some of what Gil Paterson would like to see will happen. The Government continues to consider and develop national policies to ensure that local responders are prepared for major emergencies, but it also wants to lead the development of a national adaptation framework that will provide direction for public service delivery and for understanding and responding to the risks. Some of that work will include the matters about which the member indicates he is concerned.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes question time, but before we move on, I add that I have reflected on Mr McGrigor's point of order, which is an exact example of why the other Presiding Officers and I frown on members not turning up when they are due to ask questions. Other members will have come to the chamber with a view to asking supplementary questions and it becomes a complete waste of their time. That is why we frown on the practice.

We will now move on to the next item of business. I will allow a few seconds for members to change places.

## Community Fire Safety

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5172, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on the future of community fire safety in Scotland.

14:56

**The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing):** The Scottish Government requested this afternoon's debate in order to give Parliament an opportunity to discuss how we can further reduce fires by working in partnership with local government and the fire and rescue services, and to discuss the recommendations in the "Scotland Together" report.

Although the debate takes place against a long-term decline in the number of fire deaths, Scotland regrettably continues to have the highest number of recorded fire deaths per million population in the United Kingdom. Much of the long-term improvement could be due to improved fire safety education as well as to technological advances and legislative changes. In 2007, 43 people died and 1,530 were injured in dwelling fires. That was the second-lowest number of deaths for 10 years. The number of primary fires has fallen by 9 per cent year on year, but more needs to be done.

It is particularly worrying that the majority of deaths occurred in homes in which smoke alarms were absent or had failed. That can and should be addressed through education and free home safety visits. The Scottish Government has directly supported that valuable service through its don't give fire a home campaign, but it is the fire and rescue services that spearhead the drive to make our homes safer. The Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 placed on the fire and rescue services a new statutory duty to promote fire safety and put prevention on an equal platform with intervention. Prevention is now well embedded in every fire and rescue service and in every firefighter, and it forms an integral part of their training.

Home safety visits are the cornerstone of preventive work. Every visit provides invaluable advice and real preventive measures for individuals and their families—I have attended visits and seen that at first hand. The visits form part of a wider approach as each service develops its own activity aligned to local needs. I stress "local needs" because it is only right that fire and rescue services approach their duties in line with the specific risks that are identified in their areas. However, more should be done to ensure that every member of the fire and rescue services can play a part in achieving more visits and raising fire safety awareness.

To better understand how we could improve our poor record on fires, I commissioned, with our colleagues in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, a study into the root causes of such incidents in Scotland. The report "Scotland Together", which was launched last week, was compiled by a study team that was led by Chief Officer Brian Sweeney. It is a wide-ranging review that makes no less than 37 recommendations.

One of the report's key platforms, partnership working, is plainly essential, because no single agency can achieve progress on its own. Colleagues in other areas, such as health and housing, are already working effectively together; I hope that that approach can be extended to include the fire services. After all, we need to work together to develop strategies, share information, work on implementation and think about how action in one area might have consequences elsewhere. Government rightly sets the overall agenda, but we work in partnership with all manner of agencies in the public, private and voluntary sectors and we want these agencies to embrace the partnership ethos even more. That said, safety is as much the responsibility of every individual as it is that of the state, so I will return to personal responsibility.

The Scottish Government will now fully consider each of the 37 recommendations with a view to working with all partners to progress the report's objectives. Today, however, I will focus on two of the primary objectives that were highlighted last week by the study team.

The main contributing factor in the 131 deaths that were analysed in the study was smoking materials, which led to a staggering 40 per cent of all deaths. Although the Government is committed to reducing the health impacts of smoking, it would be unrealistic to introduce controls that stopped people smoking in their own homes, but we can take steps to reduce the fire risk that is posed by cigarettes.

As some members are aware, a certain type of cigarette—perhaps unfortunately known as RIP, or reduced ignition propensity, cigarettes—self-extinguishes when not smoked. Such cigarettes are already mandatory in some states in the United States, Canada and Australia, and there have been calls for their introduction in Scotland. However, because the matter is reserved, we cannot currently legislate for that in isolation. Moreover, we need to take account of the fact that there is no European Union standard for such cigarettes. However, work on producing a standard is under way and is expected to conclude by mid-2010. I am writing to Shahid Malik, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department for Communities and Local

Government, to request that legislation be expedited as soon as the EU standard is agreed.

The second primary objective that I want to highlight is the proposal for a safer Scotland unit. The report acknowledges that, although progress has been made, there is a clear need for public, private and voluntary bodies to work more effectively together. We must all work smarter to better utilise current knowledge, skills and resources.

In view of the report's finding that almost a third of recorded dwelling fires occur in the most deprived areas, it is essential that we focus on and prioritise the most vulnerable people in our society, so fire and rescue services must work closely with social services, housing and health services to target better the individuals who are most at risk.

The study suggests that that work would be most effectively coordinated by the formation of a safer Scotland unit. Chief Officer Sweeney and I believe that the report does not seek to establish a new quango, with the panoply of issues and costs that would be associated with such a move. It is only right that we do not go down that route; instead, I am reviewing the range of existing activities within the Scottish Government and its partners in order to improve the safety of those who are most at risk, and I want to move forward with work that has already been started on a more effective multi-agency approach to fire safety. By bringing together senior officials across a range of portfolios and drawing on expertise from local government, emergency services and other partners, I would make the safety agenda accountable directly to ministers and ensure that the resource that is available for fire safety is focused where it should be, which is on direct preventive action.

Although I have in the limited time available been able to cover only a relatively small part of the report, I should point out that its very breadth points to how we can achieve our shared outcome of fewer fire deaths. In addition, I want the fire and rescue services to look closely at the most effective approach to community fire safety. For example, they clearly need to improve collaboration, share best practice and better align statistical evidence. Audit Scotland has already identified the need for more evidence-based working. That is particularly important as we face unprecedented budgetary challenges.

I am pleased that Chief Officer Brian Sweeney has indicated that the majority of his proposals can be delivered with no additional funding. The fire and rescue services receive more than £300 million a year to meet their obligations, including their statutory role in relation to fire safety. I am also pleased that the report sets a

context for that investment rather than a wish list for future funding. That is a pragmatic approach that recognises that there are competing demands for funding in a challenging economic climate. Our aim must be to provide education, information and structures to enable people to act responsibly and to look out for their own safety and that of their neighbours, especially the most vulnerable people in our society. Individuals who are unable to help themselves must be a priority for our resources and activity.

All partners will play a crucial role. The skills, knowledge and resources already exist; "Scotland Together" highlights the fact that we must use them to work smarter and more cohesively. I am committed to ensuring that, where practicable, the objectives in Chief Officer Sweeney's report will be taken forward and given full Government support.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Scottish Government's commitment to working in partnership with local government and the fire and rescue services to reduce fires and fire deaths in Scotland and that recommendations in the Scotland Together community fire safety study will contribute to a continued partnership approach to fire prevention.

15:06

**John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** In September, I spoke in the parliamentary debate on the fire and rescue framework. In that debate I paid tribute—as did members from all political parties—to the immensely courageous and selfless devotion of our firefighters. We can never say too much about the job that those brave men and women do every day, or about their ability to take on the changes and the challenges that the service and society have thrown at them in recent years. We should not forget that fire crews risk their lives to save the lives of others.

The Scottish Conservatives welcome the "Scotland Together" community fire safety study. The most striking statistic in Her Majesty's fire service inspectorate for Scotland's annual report for 2007-08 was the 62 per cent increase in deaths over the previous year. That figure is shocking and placed Scotland near the bottom of the league tables on fire statistics in Europe. If there is a way in which we can identify a pattern in fire deaths, we should use it to target people in that group with better education and preventive measures. That is not to say that deaths from fires will be completely eradicated. Accidents will always happen, but we should try to reduce risks wherever possible.

The 62 per cent rise in fire deaths cannot and should not be considered in isolation. Over the past 18 years, the number of fire deaths as a

whole has decreased. The study states that Scotland's fire and rescue service

"must be commended on their significant progress in reducing these events over many years."

That is undoubtedly true. It also states that a single event can have a high impact on the fire death figures because of the relatively low numbers that are involved. It is therefore correct to suggest—as the study does—that we should in the future consider the figures as part of an overall package of statistics.

It is also worth pointing out that comparisons between Scotland and the rest of Europe are not as black and white as might at first be thought. The report gives the example of the Netherlands, which highlights the considerable inconsistencies in how countries in Europe record the data.

That said, the report highlights certain fire trends, which can allow our services to focus on problem areas that are within their control, and consider how best to move forward and establish best practice in working with other authorities, agencies and the third sector. To understand fire trends, we must look more widely than fire safety. Health and social factors are identified as key indicators in identifying individuals or groups that may be at risk from fire. For instance, the study concludes that alcohol consumption, smoking, mental health and issues to do with mobility and being older play significant roles in determining the number of people who die as a result of fires each year in Scotland.

Issues to do with the number of people who live in areas of severe deprivation are shown to impact directly on the number of fire incidents. Given the projected increase in the number of people who live alone and the ageing population, it is likely that Scotland's fire and rescue services will require to direct future strategies, resources and initiatives towards those groups. That said, although the report highlights those issues, it does not say how those factors have impacted on the rise in the number of fire deaths since 2005.

It is also worth noting from the study that Scotland has a higher rate of secondary fires than the rest of the United Kingdom. The estimated cost in 2004 of each fire and rescue service response for a secondary fire is £2,000, which equates to £61 million per year for the Scottish fire service, based on the service attending an average 30,000 incidents per year. Furthermore, that total does not include any other costs that may be incurred—not only financial costs, but the costs to communities and the environment. Although we rightly focus on the need to save lives, we should not forget the financial costs involved.

I will focus on a couple of points. The Scottish Conservatives welcome the study's recommendation for more formal data sharing across agencies in order to identify better those who are at risk, and for measures to create better fire prevention education and to put in place any initiatives that might be needed. In September, when debating the "Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland", I welcomed the fact that the Scottish Government had committed not to micromanage all the services. I highlighted the differences between fire brigades in city centres such as Maryhill in Glasgow and those in my rural constituency in the Borders. However, I went on to say that the report "In the Line of Duty" stated that due to the differences in definitions and recording across the United Kingdom, it is near impossible to create an accurate account of on-duty firefighter fatalities. That, in turn, has meant that there has been very little analysis of the figures or attempts to understand or evaluate the causes.

The "Scotland Together" study has also emphasised the need to create better standardisation and ensure that all the services are discussing best practice, not only in recording statistics from firefighting but across all the areas in which they are now involved.

The need to work with other agencies on fire safety should be given greater emphasis in strategic planning. The study talks about areas where joint working arrangements and local partnerships have worked and are working extremely well. If we have to look at a way of prescribing standards or creating a framework or strategy to work within, let us first look at where these relationships are well developed, what they are doing right and how it can be further rolled out to suit local needs in other areas of Scotland. We should also not forget the possible role of the third sector in this important area.

As time appears to be on our side today, I will raise two additional points. I again raise the issue of the impact that the fire safety regulations are having on bed and breakfasts and self-catering accommodation providers throughout Scotland, but particularly in the Borders and in Dumfries and Galloway. I have raised the issue with the minister in the past. The Presiding Officer, Alex Fergusson, has also raised the matter on behalf of a number of his constituents. The concerns centre around the guidance notes on which compliance and enforcement are based and which are resulting, in some cases, in expensive and unnecessary fire safety measures being put in place that are not proportionate to the risks.

I acknowledge that the regulations were introduced by the previous Liberal-Labour Administration and that the minister has recognised the difficulties that the regulations are

creating for people who are operating in the sector. However, it would be useful to have an indication from the minister about the direction of travel on those regulations as the industry needs some clarity.

**Fergus Ewing:** It might be helpful to John Lamont and to any members who are concerned about the B and B regulations to hear that we will issue in the next few weeks a consultation paper that will include the details of proposed new guidance that will be far less onerous and—I believe—far more appropriate to the level of risk in respect of B and B premises, and which will, therefore, I hope be welcomed by other members and the public.

**John Lamont:** Indeed, I welcome that news from the minister and I am sure that many people in the sector in my constituency and throughout Scotland will also welcome it.

My last point regards costs. The Fire Brigades Union has raised concerns about the cost implications that an increase in fire safety campaigns will have on other services that the service currently provides. The study raised the point that in Scotland we spend less on community safety than does the rest of the UK. The FBU made the important point that fire safety programmes are currently unevaluated and the starting point must surely be to look at how well that work is currently being done, what is working well and what is not.

The dramatic rise in the number of fire deaths has perhaps given us a wake-up call; we need to do more to reduce deaths and injuries that are caused by fire. However, it is a complex problem and it cannot be resolved easily. I hope that the debate will allow us to explore some of the options that might be available to us to make Scotland safer by ensuring that all agencies are working together.

I move amendment S3M-5172.1, to insert at end:

“and calls on the Scottish fire and rescue authorities to consider the benefits of joint working.”

15:15

**James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I thank Brian Sweeney and his team for the great amount of work that they clearly put into producing such a comprehensive report. As the minister said, there is a job of work to be done to explain how the recommendations will be acted on. It is a pity that there are not more members in the chamber for this important debate—it is unfortunate that it has been scheduled for an afternoon when some members might be gathering in another area of Scotland. It is also unfortunate that we have had

only 10 days to assess the report and that the detailed analysis that backs it up will not be published until the end of 2009.

The issue concerns all members. Recently, in Blantyre, which is in the constituency neighbouring mine, a mother and daughter were tragically killed as a result of a fire. The tragic loss of such young lives and the impact on their family and friends bring home the importance of work on the issue. As members have said, although fire deaths have reduced since 1990, they rose by 62 per cent in 2007-08, which is clearly a cause for concern. That should be viewed alongside the fact that the level of deaths is greater in Scotland than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Despite the fact that, relative to the population, there are 30 per cent more fires in England than there are in Scotland, the level of deaths in Scotland is double that in England.

Some of the statistics in the report bear out Scotland's social problems and their link to fire deaths. Alcohol was a contributory factor in 62 per cent of the fire deaths that were analysed and, as members have said, smoking was involved in 41 per cent of the deaths. Of the deaths, 31 per cent occurred in the 15 per cent of data zones that are most affected by deprivation, so there are clear links to alcohol, smoking and deprivation. I see two tasks for us. First, we must address the policy issues that we discuss often in the chamber about the need to reduce alcohol consumption, the number of people who smoke and the need to tackle deprivation throughout Scotland. Secondly, the fire service has a job to do, particularly through fire safety visits, which must target the areas that are affected by those factors.

The report contains useful suggestions. As the minister said, the introduction of reduced ignition propensity cigarettes, which self-extinguish, would reduce the number of fire deaths. We must support work to bring about a European standard. My colleague, the Labour MEP Catherine Stihler, has supported work on that in the European Parliament. The cigarettes are cost neutral to produce and regulations backing them up have already been introduced successfully in New York, Canada and Finland. Another aspect that the report concentrates on is the introduction of sprinkler systems. We had a useful briefing session on that hosted by Alex Johnstone MSP.

**Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP):** On the point about European regulation on fire-safe or RIP cigarettes, the member mentioned that Finland will introduce regulations—it will do so next April. Why do we have to wait for a European directive if countries such as Finland and other countries that the minister mentioned, as well as individual US states, have gone ahead on their own?

**James Kelly:** As was indicated to David Taylor, the MP for North West Leicestershire, in reply to a question, the UK Government is sympathetic on this issue and is moving it forward. The issue is being taken forward within Scotland and within the UK. We must continue to work to establish the European standard.

The report states that the introduction of sprinklers would have saved 80 per cent of the lives that have been lost. There is a cost issue: the sprinklers cost £3,000 to install, which means that they would incur a cost of £7 billion throughout Scotland. It is not practical to proceed with that, but there is a challenge for the Government to consider how it can reduce that cost. Some experts have suggested that sprinkler systems could be installed for as little as £600. As we embark on social housing programmes, it is worth considering making it incumbent on housing providers to include the installation of such sprinklers.

Education is also important. A lot of work is being done on youth engagement in my constituency. Cambuslang fire station runs a number of successful programmes that get school children in and encourage them to look at team work and discipline.

The FBU has made a number of important points that have to be borne in mind. At a time when deaths are increasing, we do not want to see a reduction in front-line jobs. We are all aware of the importance of firefighter safety, particularly after the sad death of Ewan Williamson earlier in the year.

As John Lamont said, we have to be wary of the impact on core budgets of some of the recommendations in the report. There is a job for the minister to do to work all that out.

It is important to look at the evaluation of fire safety campaigns, so that we can ensure that we are getting into the areas that are affected by the high incidence of fires.

The report is important. We have to examine closely the recommendations and how to take them forward. It is important that we make reducing deaths and injuries by fire our priority and that we provide safety and reassurance to communities throughout Scotland.

15:22

**Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD):** I add my support to the author of the report, and to all the firemen and women throughout Scotland who protect us.

As I think we are all agreed, the 62 per cent increase in fire deaths in Scotland over 2007-08 was an alarming wake-up call. I welcome the

findings of the "Scotland Together" report as a valuable blueprint for tackling this vital issue.

Liberal Democrats believe that there needs to be a co-ordinated and coherent approach to reducing fire-related deaths in Scotland through improved preventive education about the dangers, targeted intervention for high-risk individuals and tackling the underlying problems of social deprivation and alcohol, which are often major contributors to that risk.

Fire is of course not a new problem, so such a high increase in the number of fire deaths was really quite concerning. Explanations of the exact cause of that increase in what, in social demographic terms, is a very short period of time have been varied. As the FBU noted in reaction to "Scotland Together", a 3 per cent reduction in the number of firefighters across Scotland "has certainly not helped." Union leaders such as regional secretary John Duffy have highlighted the lack of a co-ordinated direction for the service since the abolition of the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council in 2005.

September's debate on the "Draft Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland 2009" served to highlight the FBU's concern that the framework document fails to provide strategic direction supported by clear and enforceable standards and responsibilities. Although each fire and rescue service must have the flexibility to respond to and meet local needs, it is important that that does not result in a complete lack of consistency, which would compromise services' ability to co-ordinate robust and effective national resilience.

However, this is not the time to attempt to apportion blame. The root causes of fire death are not policy matters but social matters. There is simply no denying the harsh reality that more than half of Scottish fire deaths in 2007-08 involved alcohol and that, as the minister has highlighted, more than 40 per cent were due to materials involved in smoking. I welcome the minister's comments about an EU standard for RIP cigarettes. James Kelly talked about that. Why can we not legislate now? I hope that the minister will answer that question, which Stewart Maxwell also asked. We led the way on banning smoking in public places, and Scotland has the opportunity to lead the way on this issue, too. I am not sure why we have to wait for Europe.

In 2007-08, 53 per cent of fire deaths occurred in single occupancy households, 47 per cent of the victims were over 60 years old and more than 30 per cent of the deaths occurred in Scotland's most socially deprived areas. Those statistics highlight a group of key social demographics that are at risk from fire. The need for targeted interventions aimed at high-risk individuals is emphasised throughout "Scotland Together". Partnership

working is key if people and communities who may be at risk from fire are to be identified. Those who are deemed to be at risk are often known to a number of different agencies in different areas; therefore, greater interagency co-operation is vital. The mention of deprivation and alcohol as two major contributing factors must also not be overlooked. The findings in "Scotland Together" highlight further the gross inequalities that are associated with social deprivation and are additional proof of the devastating impact on individuals and society that Scotland's damaging relationship with alcohol is having.

The co-ordinated strategy of intervention must be reinforced by preventive measures. The Liberal Democrats believe that the Scottish Government should consider launching a new advertising campaign to raise awareness of the importance of maintaining and testing smoke detectors and fire alarms in the home. In 2007-08, it was assessed that 29 lives that were lost in domestic fires could have been saved if working smoke alarms had been present in those premises.

We welcome the recommendations in "Scotland Together" regarding youth engagement programmes as a means of promoting good citizenship and diverting young people away from fire-related antisocial behaviour. I also welcome John Lamont's comments about the current fire safety regulations for bed and breakfast accommodation. Many businesses in my constituency have contacted me about the problems that the regulations create for their bed and breakfast premises. I welcome what the Scottish Government plans to do in the near future to address some of those concerns and problems.

I welcome the findings of "Scotland Together" and endorse its key recommendation for a safer Scotland unit. By fostering a co-ordinated intervention effort between key agencies—including not only emergency services, but social work, health and the third sector—and then reinforcing that effort through improved education, Scotland has the potential to reduce dramatically its number of fire deaths in the home in the coming years.

15:28

**Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP):** Like other members, I thank Brian Sweeney for his extensive report. I also thank the Fire Brigades Union for its extensive response to the report. We have now seen both sides of most of the arguments and are, therefore, in a good position to discuss what the issues might be.

Let us consider the statistics, which can sometimes get in the way. I will make a couple of observations. Sadly, fatalities are the easy thing to

count. They are also, as all parties recognise, the very small numbers in the statistics and show a variability that is sometimes confusing. It would be useful if, in the future, we had statistics not only for the tip of the iceberg, but for the iceberg itself. Having statistics within a comparable timeframe for the number of injuries, rescues and fires would allow us to focus on the general trends of such things instead of having to concentrate on the small numbers, which might be going in the other direction.

The report suggests—we encounter this suggestion often in our statistical analysis in the Parliament—that smoothing out the data over a number of years would remove some of the inconsistencies. I fear that, by and large, that is an illusion. If we were to decide to look at the data on a cumulative basis over a three-year period, we would get a reliable number only every three years. If we were to look at the data over a three-year rolling period, we would merely substitute the variation between 2006 and 2009 for the variation between 2008 and 2009, which would not help much. We need to be careful about the numbers that we quote and what they mean.

Yesterday, like some other members, I had an interesting discussion about sprinklers with Chief Fire Officer Sweeney and Chief Fire Officer Hunter. The clear conclusion that I came away with is that the present specification for sprinklers is probably an overspecification as far as household use is concerned, for the good reason that most sprinkler systems are used in industrial premises or large buildings such as hospitals, where a much higher specification is undoubtedly appropriate. It is entirely clear to me, as a chemical engineer, that there are some interesting engineering challenges involved: there are pressure issues, substantial backflow issues and major issues of bacterial growth in stagnant water. However, it ought not to be beyond the wit of man or woman to overcome them. It would be a good idea for the Government to encourage the engineering profession in all its manifestations to look at ways of coming up with a pretty cheap standard system that could be installed in households, because it is quite clear that such a system would offer substantial benefits to our communities.

It seems clear to me, as it does to others, that RIP cigarettes have major benefits, but I am sure that members such as Stewart Maxwell will speak about those, so I will not dwell on the issue.

The main issue that worries me is the information technology that is available to public services. We have talked about the need for cross-departmental working and partnerships, of which we are all aware. People try to work across borders, if they can. By now, we should be getting

to the point at which public service databases are interactable—if that is an acceptable word. I am talking about databases that can be accessed by other services so that information that is relevant—a lot of which the report that we are discussing points to—is sharable. I do not know to what extent that is the case, but I am mighty sure that the extent to which it is not the case is no longer acceptable.

That brings us back to the relatively recent but important concept of best value. I have a suspicion that every public service thinks that it must install a computer system that offers best value for that service but completely overlooks the fact that how best value can be achieved would best be looked at on a national basis across all public services. That, of course, is a function of Government—it is not something that we can expect individual public services to do for themselves. It requires Government to decide to standardise its IT systems—or at least the databases within them—over a period of time. That is a challenge for Government.

Another issue is the need for the development of a common language to cover terms such as “risk”—which has at least three meanings in the English language—and “deprivation”. If we do not yet have such a common language across the public service, we must address that issue rather quickly.

I turn to alarms. Like others, I was concerned to discover that in a large number of cases, fire took hold without the smoke detector having the desired effect. I do not find that terribly surprising because I have a suspicion that a lot of smoke detectors are still sitting in the cupboard in their box and that quite a number of the ones that are on the wall are in the wrong place on the wall. Moreover, I suspect that an even larger proportion of the ones that are in the right place no longer have a working battery. It would be interesting to know what the statistics are on that. I would prefer some right answers to my guesswork, from which I draw the conclusion that hard-wiring is the only way forward. The challenge—again, it is a challenge for Government, which must lead—is to determine to what extent it is sensible, prudent and good value to insist that, in the right circumstances, hard-wiring be included in building regulations.

**Mike Pringle:** In my speech, I suggested that an advertising campaign is needed. It is about education—we need to tell people not to have their smoke alarm in a box in a cupboard and to check the batteries. Does the member agree that, nationally, we need to do something about that?

**Nigel Don:** I endorse entirely the member's suggestion but—it is not the first time that I have had this conversation, even today—the lesson of

life, which we well understand, is that the people who are most at risk are those who do not listen to education. Part of the problem is that they do not care. The only way of coping with people who will not look after themselves is to provide a fail-safe system.

**Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab):** The member may want to consider the fact that people are faced with choices about how they spend their money and sometimes they cannot afford to replace the batteries. I support the suggestion of hard-wiring.

**Nigel Don:** Of course there is a fraction of the population for whom money is the real issue. Some square batteries are not cheap, so I can see why people might decide not to replace them. I fear that time is against me, so I had better stop at that point.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call George Foulkes, to be followed by Linda Fabiani.

15:36

**George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab):** Thank you, Presiding Officer, for calling me, and for the way in which you did so.

I genuinely welcome the Scottish Government's initiative in arranging this debate on a vitally important issue. I am even more genuinely pleased to follow a thoughtful, constructive speech by Nigel Don, which helped to set the tone for the debate.

I begin by raising a local issue that is of great concern to many people here and beyond: the death of fireman Ewan Williamson, who was based at the Tollcross fire station and died while bravely fighting fire at the Balmoral bar in Dalry Road on 12 July 2009. On that day, firefighters rescued 20 people, including a baby, from the flats above the pub, as a fire raged below. Along with more than 3,000 other Edinburgh residents who have signed up to the *Edinburgh Evening News* campaign, I believe that Ewan should be awarded posthumously the Queen's gallantry medal. His local MP, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, has nominated him, Sarah Boyack and I have written in support and Richard Baker has expressed his support for the nomination. Members who, like me, travel on Lothian buses will have seen that there are posters in every bus supporting the *Edinburgh Evening News* campaign.

I make a genuine request to the minister. So far, he and the Scottish Government have said only:

“The Scottish Government supports an appropriate form of recognition, not just for Ewan but for all our firefighters.”

I hope that the minister can see his way to going further today. Ewan Williamson lost his life saving



lives; many more might be dead now if he had not taken the action that he took. I know that, because of its role in the procedures for dealing with Scottish nominations, the Scottish Government's explicit support could tip the balance. I hope that today the minister will come off the fence and support the nomination.

On the wider issue, I will make one general and two specific points. Like all other members who have spoken, in general I welcome the report. However, I share some of the reservations that have been expressed by the Fire Brigades Union, especially in relation to cutting fire appliances. Such a measure would be short-sighted and unjustified and needs to be considered carefully.

I share the concern that has been expressed at the high level of fire deaths in Scotland, which is puzzling. Many people have puzzled over the matter and wondered why the level is so high—John Lamont covered the point well in his introductory speech. That brings me to the first of my specific points, which relates to the contribution of lifestyles to causes of fires; a number of members have raised the issue. The minister was right to say that 40 per cent of fires are started by cigarettes. Sadly, one of the unintended consequences of the otherwise welcome ban on smoking in public places may be that more people are smoking at home, which results in more fires being started.

**Stewart Maxwell:** I am sure that Mr Foulkes means well, and his theory is interesting, but the facts show that cigarettes have been the major contributory factor in fire injuries and deaths for many years, and were so for many years before the introduction of the smoking ban in Scotland. The introduction of the smoking ban has had no effect in that regard.

**George Foulkes:** I like to think so. I do not know whether Stewart Stevenson—sorry, I mean Stewart Maxwell. That was not in any way meant to be a compliment to or a slur on either Stewart Stevenson or Stewart Maxwell.

Stewart Maxwell might not know that 30 years ago I introduced a private member's bill in the House of Commons, which would have banned smoking in public places. The idea was laughed at at the time. I am glad that we now have a ban and that Scotland took the lead on that. However, I suspect that more people are smoking at home, and that that might make some, if not a huge, contribution to the incidence of fire. We need a further, major effort to persuade people to stop smoking, not just to reduce fire risk but for the sake of their health and, above all, their children's health.

It was noted that legislation on RIP cigarettes is a reserved matter. That area, above all other

areas, is one on which the Scottish Government, the United Kingdom Government and other agencies must work together to make progress and take action. I hope that the minister will pick up on that in his speech.

The chaotic lifestyles of smokers who also take drugs or excessive amounts of alcohol pose even greater risks. More needs to be done to help such people in general, as well as to help to prevent fires.

I want to talk about delays in answering 999 calls. If the fire brigade cannot arrive on time for one reason or another, there can be deaths. Some delays are caused by hoax calls, and I think that all members deprecate the number of such calls that are made. Hoax calls cause terrific problems for the fire brigade as well as for the Scottish Ambulance Service and the police. However, problems are also caused by the use of the 999 number for non-emergency calls. In spite of repeated calls by the Public Audit Committee, of which I am a member, the Scottish Government has failed even to consider the possibility of establishing a national non-emergency number—one suggestion is 111—which would free up 999 for genuine emergency calls. I hope that the minister will think again about the implications of his refusal to consider the matter.

I want to say how much I agree with the Conservative amendment. This is a remarkable day, because I agreed with the Tory spokesman in this morning's debate, and here I am this afternoon again agreeing with the Tories. That is a worrying development—or perhaps it is encouraging to see that the Conservatives, particularly Baillie Aitken, are making such progress.

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** Does George Foulkes accept that we find the development equally worrying?

**George Foulkes:** If not more so, to judge by the worried look on Baillie Aitken's face—I always think of him as Baillie Aitken, because he made such an impact in that role.

We have had a little joke across the chamber, but I want to conclude where I started. The sad death of Ewan Williamson reminds us, above all, of the sacrifice that front-line firefighters make. I hope that it will inject more energy into ministers and civil servants as they deal with the matter, so that we honour the memory of Ewan Williamson.

15:44

**Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP):** Presiding Officer, this is a worrying day, right enough, because I find myself agreeing with both George Foulkes and Bill Aitken.

Scotland needs many things, and improvements to our record on fires and fire fatalities should be near the top of our list. It is important that we all pay tribute to the fire prevention work that is being done by fire boards and Scotland's firefighters. The report makes it clear that there is a long-term downward trend in fire-related deaths in Scotland, and much of that must be due to the hard work of the fire boards and firefighters in preventing fires and persuading people to take responsibility for their own safety. The downward trend is also due to the continuing improvements in the fire service that have come about through hard work and continuous training. We should note that contribution to the overall health of our nation.

However, I pick up on John Lamont's comments, as did the FBU, about the lack of evaluation. Surely we can work towards changing that. I also understand that there is a problem to be addressed in the number of fires that are started deliberately and without concern for others. That must be addressed through the actions of a number of agencies such as our police forces, and the educational efforts of our fire boards.

Looking at the report, I see that there is a bit of an elephant in the room. According to the report, alcohol plays a part in 62 per cent of fire deaths across Scotland. Almost two thirds of all fire deaths are connected to the consumption of alcohol, as far as is known, but the figures might be underreported; in fact, the report speculates that the figure probably is underreported, because there is no requirement on fire investigators to look for evidence of alcohol consumption being related to fire deaths. The figures will report only when there is overwhelming evidence that alcohol consumption was a factor in the fire. We are left to speculate on what the true figure might be; Nigel Don also referred to that when he mentioned analysing the figures from the top of the pyramid down to the base.

I assume that there is no way of determining how many fatalities are caused by a fire that has no link to alcohol consumption. However, the effects of alcohol on a sleeping resident could have played a part in their death. Senses are dulled by alcohol and lack of awareness certainly precludes precipitate action.

I know that my colleague Stewart Maxwell will talk more about safety cigarettes, and they can help, but we do not have such things as safety chip pans, frying pans or toasters, for example.

In addition, the report deals with fire fatalities without taking into account injuries that are caused by fire. It might be rather interesting to see how the breakdown of figures shows up circumstances in which the fire does not result in a fatality. A whole load of injuries might be caused by fires, but we do not have a note of them today. It would be

instructive for us to have that information, so I encourage the minister to consider the possibility of pulling together more information to let us all see the extent of the problem. The Sweeney report majors heavily on joint working and collaboration in prevention, and the alcohol issue cuts across Government portfolios, so it would be useful to have that information. There is no information in the report about fires that cause no death or injury.

**Stewart Maxwell:** I appreciate what Linda Fabiani says about "Scotland Together" not covering that issue. Is she aware that Her Majesty's chief inspector of fire services for Scotland publishes an annual report of fire statistics that includes much of that information? The annual fire statistics provide a range of information about injuries, the number of fires and other such factors. However, Linda Fabiani's central point—that we cannot tell whether alcohol was a factor in a fire—arises because firefighters are not equipped, nor should they be, to assess whether someone was under the influence.

**Linda Fabiani:** I take on board what Stewart Maxwell says, but in a climate in which we talk about the scourge of alcohol in Scotland's society, we must consider the issues across the board. In reporting on fatalities and injuries that have been caused by fire, when we say that a fire death was caused by a cigarette, we must ask whether that happened because the person who was smoking the cigarette was too drunk to know what they were doing with it. Are deaths in chip pan fires caused when someone comes home from the pub drunk and fancies chips?

As I said, the issue is extremely difficult but we must consider it because there are social and financial costs to the individual and to society. The financial aspect includes the costs of replacing possessions, whether or not they are insured, sending out the firefighters and providing accommodation for those who are rendered homeless.

The report makes it clear that Scotland suffers more fires per head of population than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. There must—I should not say "must" because I do not know; that is the problem. There may be a partial explanation for that in Scotland's relationship with alcohol. There are no recommendations in the report on how to address the connection between alcohol consumption and fire deaths. That is understandable, because it is a difficult area for any firemaster or fire board to tread in, as Stewart Maxwell said. However, it is a matter that we must address, a problem that we have to face up to and a social and financial burden that we could do without.

We must address Scotland's unhealthy relationship with alcohol and I support the Scottish Government in its efforts to do that. We may have a related problem that we should also examine: the link between alcohol consumption and fire fatalities and injuries. I urge the minister to investigate what can be done to examine the link between alcohol and not only fire deaths but fire injuries and fires in which no injury or death resulted. There may also be a case for investigating fires that are set deliberately by people who have drunk too much—people who might not dream of doing such a thing in any other case. Is that another result of the booze culture in Scotland and one that puts other people's lives at risk?

I believe that the link between alcohol and avoidable fire fatalities, injuries and damage is worthy of investigation. I hope that the Parliament agrees.

15:52

**Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con):**

The motion highlights the Scottish Government's commitment to reduce fires and fire deaths by working in partnership with local government and the fire and rescue services. I will focus my speech on the wide-ranging issues that were raised with me on a recent visit to Hamilton fire station.

Having met the officers and been given a very helpful and comprehensive briefing on the various worthwhile initiatives that the fire service was involved in—from home visits and school visits to youth and community engagement to courses for individuals with learning difficulties—I spoke to the duty firefighting team. Those firefighters were clearly demoralised about the problems and grievances that they have experienced in recent years. Their passion for the job was evident, but it was equally evident that every member of the team felt disillusioned about decisions and changes that they considered affected their ability to carry out their core firefighting role properly. Those decisions and changes were the result of legislation, initiatives or recommendations, including some from the community fire safety study.

The firefighters' grievances included not having the proper equipment to do the job. It is not practical or safe for individual firefighters to be asked to share a radio. Torches are provided for tunics but not for helmets, where they are required to ensure that light can be used flexibly. The team complained that it had taken 10 years for the road traffic accident unit to acquire a saw, which is essential for cutting vehicles that are involved in road accidents.

The firefighters trial equipment and report their findings but they complained bitterly that their reports are ignored or receive no response. In fact, lack of communication was a general feature. Questionnaires were completed and returned but no feedback or response was received.

Although a number of the team's members emphasised that they had joined the service to be firefighters, they recognised the need for a prevention role and for them to undertake prevention activities. However, it was clear that the team considered that the current balance between ensuring that firefighters have the necessary equipment, training and skills that they need for operational duties and the preventive work that they undertake was too heavily weighted in favour of the latter. They stressed that team training was essential but said that it is being downgraded in favour of individual personal development training on computer, which quite simply cannot address the job's practical aspects. Furthermore, they considered that rope training once a month was not enough.

On the prevention side, the firefighters maintained that the households targeted for fire safety work were not the most vulnerable and were not in need of it, and that better co-operation and information sharing is required with agencies that can direct fire safety activity to the most at-risk households.

The firefighters emphasised that job satisfaction was absolutely zero. For example, the team had arranged to visit a primary school to speak about fire prevention, but they had to go suddenly, leaving the children disappointed, because they were called out to an emergency. A little thought could have ensured that that scenario was avoided and the situation better managed.

The impact of part 1 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and health and safety regulations means that firefighters often face a moral dilemma: when they are at an emergency situation that might involve the loss of life, do they stand aside and wait for the appropriate equipment or person who is specifically trained to arrive, or do they act? They indicated that they would almost certainly act. However, in doing so, they would leave themselves completely vulnerable, with no insurance cover and possibly facing disciplinary action and loss of pension. Furthermore, in non-life-threatening situations, regulations have resulted in firefighters being targeted for abuse, with some onlookers criticising their lack of activity while they are forced to wait for the appropriately trained person or appropriate equipment to arrive.

Clearly, a number of issues must be addressed to achieve the objective of reducing the number of fires and fire deaths in Scotland. I look forward to

the minister's response to some of the concerns that were raised with me at Hamilton fire station.

15:57

**Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP):** I welcome the timely report "Scotland Together" and many of its recommendations on how we can make inroads into our unacceptably high level of fires and fire deaths and injuries. Although we must never be complacent, it is worth pausing to reflect on the fact that the number of fire deaths in Scotland has shown a steady decline over the past 20 years. We should congratulate all members of the fire service on their unstinting efforts. However, despite those improvements, we still have a problem with fire deaths. When I started working for Strathclyde Fire Brigade, as it was then known, in the early 1990s, a fire safety rate of more than 100 a year was the norm. I would therefore rather look at the trend over time than at any single year, irrespective of whether the figure is a record low or a record high.

The report makes a number of positive recommendations, including recommendations that recognise the need for close co-operation between fire and rescue services and other public agencies such as health, housing and social work. I turn briefly to the response to the report by the Fire Brigades Union. I agree with some of the FBU's points, but I was disappointed by its final remark, which was:

"The FBU urges MSPs from all parties to dismiss this report."

I do not believe that the report should be dismissed out of hand, because it makes many worthwhile points. It is right that we should look at reports with a critical eye, but we should not dismiss this report as suggested. I particularly welcome the report's proposals on sprinklers and the introduction of reduced ignition propensity cigarettes, to which I will return in a moment.

In Scottsdale, Arizona, in the USA, sprinklers were made mandatory in all new buildings in 1986. More than 53 per cent of the city is now protected by sprinklers. There have been no fire deaths in buildings that are covered by sprinklers, while there continue to be deaths in buildings without sprinklers. I am convinced that the introduction of domestic sprinklers would make a tremendous difference—my colleague Michael Matheson will cover that in more detail.

I will concentrate on a recommendation in the report that I believe could easily be overlooked but which has the potential to have the most immediate and greatest impact on fire safety rates of any of the recommendations: the introduction of RIP cigarettes. I am glad that the minister paid close attention to that issue. I thank the compilers

of the "Scotland Together" report for giving me the opportunity to talk about that issue and I thank the FBU for its support on the matter. I also thank the Chief Fire Officers Association in Scotland for acknowledging, in its parliamentary briefing, the work that I have done on RIP cigarettes.

As other members have said, over the past few years in Scotland around 41 per cent of fire deaths have been caused by smoking materials. That means that four in every 10 fire deaths are attributable to smoking. However, I take the very serious point that Linda Fabiani made about the impact of alcohol on many of those deaths.

New York state was the first state to make RIP cigarettes the only cigarettes that can be sold. It was followed by Canada in 2005 and by Vermont, Illinois, New Hampshire and California in 2006. They will be joined by North Carolina in January 2010. Soon, 99.8 per cent of the US population will be protected from cigarette fires. Australia will introduce a similar measure in March 2010 and Finland will become the first European country to adopt such a measure in April 2010. As I pointed out in my intervention during Mr Kelly's speech, it is perfectly acceptable for individual American states and European and other countries to introduce such measures, so I am at a loss to understand why the UK has not introduced legislation.

In the four years before the measure on RIP cigarettes was introduced in New York state, 167 deaths were caused by smoking materials. In the four years following its introduction, the equivalent figure was 113 deaths—a decrease in fire deaths of 54, or 32.34 per cent. In other words, fire deaths fell by one third after the introduction of the law on RIP cigarettes. Between 1999 and 2006 in Vermont, smoking materials were the leading cause of fire deaths—they were responsible for 19 per cent of such deaths. In the two years since the introduction of the law on RIP cigarettes in Vermont, there have been no fire deaths attributable to smoking materials.

Why has a law on RIP cigarettes not been introduced here? It cannot be due to lack of knowledge, as such laws were first introduced in the US some years ago. Over the past five years, I have lodged five motions on the issue of RIP cigarettes. The first was in April 2004 and the latest was in June this year. Although progress has been made over those five years on people's acceptance of the idea, I am disappointed—to say the least—that no law has yet been introduced in Scotland.

It is doubly disappointing that the UK Government has known for some years about the potential of RIP cigarettes to save lives. In a September 2009 letter to all chief fire officers, Sir Ken Knight, who is the chief fire and rescue

adviser to the Department for Communities and Local Government, talks about research into RIP cigarettes that was carried out in 2004. He states:

"This research estimated that had cigarettes in the UK conformed to the US standard, introduced in New York in 2003, the number of smoking-related fires would have been reduced in that year by nearly two thirds."

His letter goes on to say that RIP cigarettes

"could potentially reduce the number of fire deaths and injuries by up to 68%, meaning that in the UK, in 2007, up to 75 lives could have been saved."

The question why the UK Government has failed to introduce such a vital and life-saving measure, despite knowing its potential to cut dramatically fire deaths and injuries, remains unanswered. It is for UK ministers to explain why, years after New York introduced such a measure and five years after that research was carried out, people in the UK are still dying needlessly from fires that are caused by cigarettes.

When John McKay introduced his private member's bill into the Canadian Parliament, which resulted in a requirement for RIP cigarettes, he said:

"Cigarette companies have known for years how to eliminate death and injury by changing the density of tobacco and/or making modifications to the paper. They don't do it because they don't have to do it. There is no requirement to force tobacco companies to make fire-safe cigarettes."

He was right when he said that seven years ago. In Scotland, we can see the impact of what he talked about and what failure to legislate for the introduction of RIP cigarettes has meant. Similarly, ASH Scotland has stated:

"It is scandalous that tobacco companies have failed to make their products less of a fire hazard. They have had the technology to make fire-safe cigarettes for almost 20 years and yet failed to market them to avoid costly law suits. This shows their callous disregard for public safety".

The tobacco companies will not introduce fire-safe cigarettes unless they are forced to do so. There is no voluntary route to such a measure. Legislation must be enacted as soon as possible so that we too can dramatically cut our stubbornly high rate of smoking-related fires rates.

16:04

**John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD):** Like many people in the chamber, I am delighted that we are having this debate on community fire safety, because anything that we are able to do to help to reduce the sad incidence of fire deaths in our community is to be welcomed and supported with all the means that are available to us.

I am sorry to say that, some years ago, I experienced the trauma of fire in my home. I

should say that it was caused not by smoking or alcohol but simply by the negligence of a young heating engineer. I am glad to say that I did not become homeless. Due to the grace of God and the ingenuity of my wife—two good people, you will understand—the fire was brought under control quickly.

Did we learn lessons from that? Indeed we did. The first lesson was that it is important to read the instructions on the fire extinguisher before being overcome by the smoke. Many people who have an extinguisher in a corner never read the instructions. However, when it is dark and there are fumes and smoke in the room, the instructions are difficult to read.

We also learned that, even after the fire extinguisher has been made to work, there are only 15 seconds in which to direct it to the base of the fire, which is not always possible to find in a darkened room, especially when there are only 15 seconds in which to do so. However, I am sure that people learn these little things with the experience of life.

Brian Sweeney, the chief officer of Strathclyde Fire and Rescue, who has been mentioned a few times today, was commissioned by the Scottish Executive—under the auspices of Fergus Ewing—to examine and report on how the number of fire deaths and related hazardous incidents could be reduced in the home. "Scotland Together", the resultant report, was published recently. It examines not only the causes of death but proposes ways to tackle those causes and reduce the sad incidence of fire-related deaths. It highlights the need for a co-ordinated and coherent approach to tackling fire-related deaths in Scotland. It mentions deprivation and alcohol as being two major contributing factors that must not be overlooked. I wonder whether we might make too much of that finding, as I am sure that there are other contributing factors as well.

The findings highlight further the gross inequalities that are associated with deprivation, which have been mentioned today already, and supply additional proof of the devastating impact on individuals and society of Scotland's damaging relationship with alcohol. That is, perhaps, a dramatic statement, but there is a lot of truth and merit in it.

Other health and social factors, such as mental health problems and mobility issues, are also highlighted as key indicators when identifying individuals or groups that might be at risk from fire. People do not always know that they are at risk until they are overcome.

Ministers, the emergency services and partner agencies must work together to tackle the root

causes of these problems and deliver preventive solutions if we are to make a lasting difference.

Targeted interventions are important. In my area, the Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service has visited all buildings to which the public have any access, examining fire safety arrangements and suggesting ways of meeting fire safety obligations.

The more that fire brigades get involved with schools, youth groups and organisations across the country to advise people of the dangers that they face in their daily activities, the better.

I am proud to say that we in the Liberal Democrats welcome the emphasis on youth engagement programmes as a means of promoting good citizenship and diverting young people away from antisocial behaviour. The more the youth teams get involved with the groups and organisations in their localities, the more information young people will have, and the more they will realise the dangers that fire presents to them.

We have heard quite a bit about the challenges around smoking, and it has been suggested that we tackle the issue in a co-ordinated way to combat the single largest cause of fire fatalities in Scotland. I am glad that members' criticism of cigarettes did not incorporate any criticism of my beloved pipe; I do not know whether pipe smokers are exempt, but we certainly exercise a degree of caution.

The Scottish Government should consider a new advertising campaign to raise awareness of the importance of maintaining and testing smoke detectors and fire alarms in the home. In many homes—I have seen it time and again—the battery has been taken out of the smoke detector to energise one of the kids' toys, especially at Christmas time when batteries run flat. There is little point in having a smoke detector or a fire alarm on the wall if it is not operational. We should introduce a regulation to insist that all smoke detectors are wired to the mains electricity in the building. That would ensure that no matter how often the battery was removed, the detector was still operational.

**Stewart Maxwell:** I am sure that John Farquhar Munro is aware that hard-wired smoke detectors are the norm in new buildings. On his point about the batteries in smoke detectors, although regulation and advertising are always useful, I will give members a practical suggestion. I change the smoke alarm battery at least once a year for my older relatives—I will not call them elderly—as it is awkward for them to do so and, if left alone, they would not do it. All of us, individually, can do that for our older relatives.

**John Farquhar Munro:** That is good advice, because it is difficult even for adults with all the facilities to change the batteries with ease, and older people can find that particularly difficult. I will support anything that is done to ensure that all smoke detectors are hard-wired into the house wiring.

16:13

**Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab):** This is an important debate. Day and daily, people throughout Scotland are faced with the devastating reality of fire. George Foulkes brought home to us the risk at which our firefighters place themselves to provide us with our safety. The death of the young firefighter in Edinburgh has impacted not only on that city but throughout Scotland, and I associate myself with George Foulkes's comments about recognising that young man's sacrifice at a UK level.

As other members have said, the increase in fire deaths in the wider population in 2007-08 is startling. We also need to recognise that, above and beyond that, many people are injured physically and mentally and sometimes bear the scars for a lifetime from the fire that they have been through.

We need to focus resources better to ensure that we prevent as many fires as possible. It is clear from what other members have said that there are major socioeconomic factors that impact on fire death and injury.

I appreciate the points that Linda Fabiani made about alcohol. We cannot get away from the fact that, when people have had a drink and they come home, they sometimes want something to eat. Perhaps they foolishly put on the chip pan or frying pan and then go through to the living room and fall asleep. The rest is left to unfold in tragic circumstances. We need to understand better how alcohol impacts on fire deaths and injuries in Scotland.

Many others have mentioned partnership working, which is key. One group that is important in that regard is the fire boards, because they are made up of local elected members who know their own communities. They are linked to local authorities and are often involved in the voluntary sector in their local area. They are therefore ideally placed to be at the heart of ensuring that that co-ordination and information sharing takes place. That will be important if we are genuinely to tackle the socioeconomic factors that influence fire deaths and injuries.

In the development of partnerships, the other important group is the fire service staff. If we are serious about walking the walk and talking the talk, rather than just talking the talk, we must use the

knowledge of our fire service staff to best effect. We must learn from the experience of the men and women who make up our fire service. We must move forward in collaboration with them to build the best and most effective programmes to prevent further deaths and injuries.

I commend the work that is done in schools. We should not underestimate it: one of my boys took part in a session at school recently and when he came home he was keen to ensure that we all knew what he had learned and what we needed to do. He wanted us all to learn about making a safe route out of the house. For some of our hard-to-reach groups, that peer education is an important part of the work, given the way in which children badger their parents and make them listen.

I also commend the work that is already being done. I will speak briefly about one area that I represent. The volunteer firefighters in Leadhills have undertaken an impressive programme of work in the village, going to each and every household and providing the families with the advice and information that they need to avoid fires and information on planning a route out of their home should a fire occur. In villages such as Leadhills, which is quite isolated from the wider population, response times will always be longer than those in more urban areas, so fire avoidance and safe routes out are vital.

In my constituency, there is no slack. There are no spare vehicles, and I would be concerned if the partnership programme was seen as a cost-cutting exercise or a move of resources away from the fire service that affected its ability to respond to fires and other emergencies when they occur. With the best will in the world, there will be fires, and the fire service must be able to respond quickly and effectively to emergency situations. I would like it to be able to respond more quickly than it does in some of our rural communities, so I want to see more resources rather than fewer for some of the areas that I represent.

On a slightly different issue, as the M74 runs through the centre of my constituency, I am acutely aware of the need for specialised kit and training to deal with incidents that might happen there.

I welcome the recommendations on domestic sprinkler systems and the points that Nigel Don made about hard-wiring. We have all been in the situation when the battery runs out and the smoke detector goes "beep, beep, beep". We take the battery out, maybe we do not have another one, and so we forget to put a battery back in. We need to avoid that situation as much as possible.

There is merit in publicity programmes, which are important, but hard-to-reach groups will not always be reached by such programmes. It is

often those with the most chaotic lifestyles who are the most vulnerable to the risk of fire. I say to Nigel Don that I am not convinced that they do not care. It is just that they have so many other things going on in their lives, and so many other challenges to face, that their smoke alarm does not always factor in that lifestyle. We need to be more imaginative about how we reach those groups. As I have said, children will be crucial in that work, and we should also try to get into the networks of other local authority agencies and health boards.

With more and more people choosing to stay in their own homes as they get older and have to live with age-related illnesses, the issue of mobility is going to come into sharper focus. Stewart Maxwell is right to highlight the practical measure of changing the batteries of elderly relatives' smoke alarms but, of course, not every old person has family who will do that for them. Perhaps another area of partnership working might be to ask home care staff to check the batteries of smoke alarms annually and ensure that the equipment is working effectively.

Firefighters are indeed brave people. I have previously highlighted in this chamber the sickening and unnecessary attacks that happen in many of our communities and for no reason whatever to these people, who go out every day to save lives. I hope that we in the Parliament can continue to collaborate on ensuring that such attacks are seen as completely unacceptable and are minimised and that we can support our fire service workers, who, after all, will be there to save us on the very day that we need to be saved.

I commend the motion to the chamber.

16:21

**Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP):** Earlier, the minister mentioned the approach that is now being taken to fire safety regulations for bed and breakfasts. Having made representations to him on the matter, I put on record my thanks for the way in which he has handled it. There are a limited number of bed and breakfasts in my constituency, but the owners of these establishments very quickly raised with me their concerns about the apparent heavy-handedness of the new regulations. The minister's pragmatic approach, which included convening a cross-party group to discuss the matter, has resulted in a more proportionate application of the regulations and is exactly the type of response that members across the chamber should expect when they raise concerns with ministers.

A number of speeches in the debate and, indeed, the report itself illustrate the complexities of trying to reduce the number of fire deaths in

Scotland. As members have pointed out, significant progress has been made in the past 10 to 20 years. However, the figures for Scotland remain stubbornly high compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, and we need to do more to bring the numbers down even more.

Like other members, I very much acknowledge that Scotland has an extremely professional and highly skilled fire service that we can rightly be proud of. However, I think that people too often overlook the job's real risks and perhaps think that it is not quite as dangerous as it actually is. In that respect, Lord Foulkes's speech about the sad loss of the firefighter Ewan Williamson illustrated the real dangers of the role.

The minister will be aware of my long-standing interest in fire sprinklers. Indeed, a number of years ago, I sought to introduce a member's bill to encourage the installation of fire sprinklers in a range of properties. I have to confess that, when I first made the proposal, I got almost the same reaction as Lord Foulkes got 30 years ago when he tried to introduce a bill to ban smoking in public places. Many people laughed at me and wondered why big ugly things like sprinklers should be installed in domestic premises; after all, they would only soak everything when they went off.

Most people perceived domestic fire sprinklers as being like industrial fire sprinklers, and I recall many people questioning the logic of my proposal. However, having pursued the bill, I welcomed the fact that the Scottish Executive at the time took on roughly 80 per cent of my proposals and introduced new fire regulations through the Building (Scotland) Act 2003 to provide for fire sprinklers in properties such as residential homes and sheltered housing. When such places are built now, fire sprinkler systems must be installed in them. When I go to primary schools, I am often asked to talk about one thing that I have done in politics. In reply, I often refer to the fact that I will be able to lie in my nursing home bed, point to the ceiling and say, "I helped to make sure that these places are a bit safer by having fire sprinklers installed in them."

An overly cautious approach to fire sprinklers has been taken in Scotland and throughout the UK, although experience in Scotland, the UK and internationally clearly shows that fire deaths simply do not happen in domestic premises with fire sprinklers installed in them. Given the stubbornness of the high numbers of fire deaths in Scotland, we must be prepared to take a much more robust approach to introducing such things.

Some fire services in Scotland have taken a much more enlightened position on fire sprinklers than others. Central Scotland Fire and Rescue Service, which covers my constituency, has always been proactive in pursuing and

encouraging their introduction. When architects are looking to build new houses or buildings, for example, Central Scotland Fire and Rescue Service is often willing to compromise on fire safety regulations, building control and so on if fire sprinklers are installed. That often allows architects much greater flexibility in designing buildings.

The problem is that not all council building control offices are prepared to offer such flexibility with the fire service. Given that the report recognises the value of fire sprinklers, I hope that it will result in fire services in Scotland having a more consistent approach to encouraging their use in premises where that use is appropriate. The ministerial advisory group could have a role in encouraging fire services in the country to take a much more consistent approach.

I fully recognise the cost implications of introducing fire sprinklers in premises on a retrospective basis, but we could make clear progress on introducing them in new-build properties. Specifically, the Government could intervene in new-build council and publicly owned buildings. We are still building schools and hospitals with no fire sprinkler systems installed in them. Let us keep in mind that, when we lose a school as a result of a fire, we are left with the disruption that is involved in all the children having to be relocated to other schools. We should have regulations that mean that fire sprinkler systems are installed in all new-build schools. If they are installed when schools are being built, our public infrastructure will be much more effectively protected.

Central Scotland Fire and Rescue Service asked for a sprinkler system to be installed in the new hospital that is being built in my constituency, but the health board and the public-private partnership company refused. We should be clear: all new hospitals should have fire sprinkler systems installed in them.

The sprinkler challenge is set out in the report. A big part of it is to change public perceptions about sprinklers. I hope that the Government will consider what it can do to address the misconceptions that many people have about domestic sprinklers.

16:29

**Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD):** The debate has been a very good one and there have been some excellent contributions. I put on record my appreciation of two of them, from Michael Matheson and Stewart Maxwell, two of our colleagues who have track records on these important issues.



I pay tribute to the excellent work done throughout Scotland by the men and women of the fire and rescue services; we owe them an incredible debt of gratitude. George Foulkes reminded us of the tragic death of firefighter Ewan Williamson. Over the past few days, we have been remembering those who have sacrificed their lives for us in wars. It is no bad thing for us to remember today the dangers that firefighters face on our behalf and the sacrifice that Ewan Williamson made on behalf of the people of Edinburgh. I certainly agree with George Foulkes that he should be awarded posthumously a Queen's gallantry medal—those comments were very well made.

The Chief Fire Officers Association Scotland tells us that the cost indicator for fire deaths is £1.55 million per fire fatality, but we know that the cost is far higher than that. In my 14 years as an elected representative, my most upsetting case has been on behalf of a constituent who lost her entire family, including her four children, some years ago. The consequences have lived with that woman ever since; it is a tragedy beyond words for her and her family.

Progress has been made over the past decade, but it is shocking that people living in Scotland are twice as likely to die in a fire as people living elsewhere in the UK. The fact that deprivation and alcohol are two of the major factors in the disparity is equally if not more shocking. Several members have highlighted the importance of lifestyle issues, and a number of partner bodies can play a part in addressing those issues. I put on record that I think that local authorities have a key part to play, as some practical issues might be taken into account. For example, I highlight to local authorities that, when they are clearing areas for demolition and a small number of tenants or homeowners are left within the buildings, those buildings and the tenants and owner-occupiers are at particular risk.

The fact that 81 of the 131 fire fatalities in the home are identified as involving alcohol is further proof of the devastating impact of our country's relationship with alcohol. A number of members—John Lamont, Linda Fabiani and others—have rightly highlighted the issue.

Brian Sweeney, the chair of the group that carried out the community fire safety study, said that he believes that the vast majority of fire deaths are preventable, which should give us some cause for hope and is clearly a call to action for Government and the Scottish Parliament.

We read in the study and have heard during the debate about a number of ways in which we can move forward. Nigel Don made a very good contribution on sprinklers; he put forward the possibility of reducing the specification for

sprinklers in households. Michael Matheson also made some very interesting points about sprinklers, and he is right that the public perception of sprinklers must be tackled. There is also an issue about alarms. I have to put my hand up, as someone who has a couple of rental properties, and say that we must hard-wire those devices into rental properties. That is an important safety measure and we should look to extend provision beyond what is provided for in the current regulations.

We agree with the minister and with Chief Fire Officer Sweeney's report that prevention needs to be on an equal footing with intervention. Crucial in that is the fact that resourcing needs to be maintained for both approaches. Mike Pringle and others have rightly raised FBU concerns at falling numbers of firefighters and appliances at a time of increased fire deaths.

As with many issues, prevention and early intervention are both key; it is vital that action is targeted at high-risk individuals—that is emphasised in the report's recommendations. It is clear that issues such as mobility, disability, mental health, alcohol and smoking impact greatly on a person's vulnerability to fire. High-risk individuals will be known to a number of agencies, so improving interagency co-operation is crucial. We agree that there is a need for greater joint working and data sharing, we welcome the minister's comments about a safer Scotland unit, and we will support the Conservative amendment on joint working.

It is a positive sign that the number of accidental fires in homes is falling, but the rate is still worryingly high. Outreach and community work is an important tool for fire and rescue services, whether it is at pride marches, local galas or whatever. I have come across members of the fire and rescue services in many different locations, and the work that they do is to be recognised and welcomed.

We welcome the work that is done in our schools. The cost to the Scottish fire and rescue service of dealing with deliberately set fires is about £61 million a year. Tackling those fires takes firefighters away from dealing with potentially more serious incidents or from carrying out vital preventive work. With every reduction in such fires that we achieve, we can shift more resources to preventive measures and to tackling accidental fires. We therefore welcome the emphasis on youth engagement programmes as a means of providing alternatives to young people and promoting good citizenship. Such programmes give people an idea of the consequences of their actions. As part of a restorative justice programme, Strathclyde Fire and Rescue runs courses for young people who have an abnormal

fascination with fires, in which firefighters get fire setters to face up to the consequences of their actions. Such programmes are to be welcomed and supported.

We have heard that a staggering 40 per cent of fire deaths result from accidental fires involving smokers' materials. We therefore support action on the introduction of reduced ignition propensity cigarettes, which are designed to self-extinguish. They cost the same to produce as normal cigarettes and legislation mandating their production and sale elsewhere has proved successful. We welcome the minister's comments on that and give our support for such measures here. I hope that the cross-party support that the minister has received on the issue will give him the power to make progress on a UK basis.

I welcome the motion.

16:36

**Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con):** In what has been an entirely consensual debate, all members have praised the fire services. We have been extremely fortunate that the basis of the debate has been the excellent report that was prepared by Brian Sweeney. We have also had an important contribution from the Fire Brigades Union, through the documentation that it provided.

The fire service plays a vital role in the preservation of community safety and public health. Firefighters deal with a multitude of emergency situations, ranging from fires and chemical spills to road traffic accidents and floods, en route to saving lives and property. We are greatly indebted to them. Sometimes, as George Foulkes eloquently set out, those situations end in tragedy. I join him in his tribute to Ewan Williamson and I hope that the appropriate recognition is provided, although sadly it will be posthumous.

Regrettably, fire safety is a very real issue in Scotland. Although, on average, the number of deaths has decreased since 1990, we must remember that, as illustrated by the 2008 Scottish community fire safety study, there was a 62 per cent increase in fire deaths in Scotland for the fiscal year 2007-08. Members have commented that Scotland suffers higher rates of fire deaths, accidental dwelling fires and secondary fires than the rest of the United Kingdom. Secondary fires are defined as those that involve refuse, derelict buildings, vehicles and grass or heathland and generally do not pose a risk to life. However, they are not without financial cost to the community and they are not extinguished without risk.

The issue that mainly concerns us is the death, largely in domestic fires, of so many of Scotland's citizens. The prevalence of fire-related incidents is

strongly influenced by a variety of health, economic and social factors. As has been said, those include alcohol consumption, smoking prevalence and the insatiable urge that some people have to get the chip pan out late at night after consuming a considerable amount of alcohol. We must recognise and insist that everyone has a degree of personal responsibility. People must acknowledge that such actions have risks, not only for themselves but for their families and neighbours. However, we must also acknowledge that social factors come into play in some cases. The frequency of fire-related injury or death is much higher among the lower socioeconomic groups.

Of all accidental dwelling fire deaths, 31 per cent occurred in the 15 per cent most deprived areas in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. Forty per cent of such fires occurred in social rented housing. Disturbing social factors have also been discovered in relation to the number of fire-related incidents in Scotland. Forty-seven per cent of all accidental dwelling fire deaths involve people aged 60 or older. In many cases, the alarms were not functioning, which adds a degree of urgency to the point that Stewart Maxwell made about the replacement of batteries. Where the elderly are unable to access the battery in order to replace it, someone should do it for them.

Karen Gillon dealt with the importance of fire safety particularly in areas that are more remote than others from fire services. If it is going to take quite a long time for the firefighters to arrive, it is imperative that the people who live in the area have a more heightened state of alert with regard to potential fire risk.

Other members made exceptionally interesting contributions. Stewart Maxwell demonstrated a degree of expertise, which I think he garnered in a previous occupation, in dealing with the question of sprinklers. Mr Matheson talked about that in somewhat greater depth and also demonstrated a considerable degree of expertise, if I may say so.

Although sprinklers are highly desirable—and I heard what Mr Matheson had to say about their installation in new-build properties—there is still a significant cost in respect of existing properties and even in new builds. However, the issue is worthy of examination and Mr Matheson was certainly correct to bring it before us.

We have to get across the message that fire is dangerous. It is appalling that firefighters should sometimes find themselves under attack by those who light fires deliberately and who resent the operation of the fire service in trying to put out bonfires, on Guy Fawkes night and at other times of the year, when they are dangerous. We have to get across the message that attacking firefighters is totally unacceptable.

I am attracted by the idea that, in schools, we should make children wiser as to the risk of fire and underline for them the importance of fire protection.

Like John Farquhar Munro, I suffered a small house fire last summer, which was caused, believe it or not, by a heater that had not been on for years and in which a great amount of ooze and other debris had accumulated. I did not realise that that presented a fire risk.

This has been a consensual debate. A number of interesting ideas have been raised and I look forward to some of them coming to fruition in the years ahead.

16:42

**Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I join all those who have acknowledged the work of Brian Sweeney and his team in drawing together their comprehensive study into fire deaths and injuries.

The key question has been why there are significantly more fire deaths in Scotland than there are in the rest of the UK. The overall trends of fires and fire deaths are down, but they are still far too high and too many families in Scotland still suffer the devastating consequences of fire fatalities. That is why, as the motion states, there must be partnership working by all the agencies in our communities to prevent fire deaths, damage and injury.

At the centre of the report is community involvement by our fire services. We should always look to see what more can be done to prevent fires, as well as ensuring that our firefighters are properly supported in the courageous work that they do in tackling fires when they occur.

The debate has been good and there has been broad consensus. I share George Foulkes's angst about agreeing with Bill Aitken, which for some of us is an occupational hazard. Mr Aitken made a good speech again today.

The debate follows other good debates that we have had on fire services. However, we should return to the issues that we have discussed today. The debate has come rather soon after the publication of the report and we still await the publication of the supporting evidence. I hope that the minister will agree that today's debate should be only the first debate on some of these issues.

The key issue is how we make progress on the challenges that have been identified. There will be important work for the ministerial action group to do in overseeing that. I hope that the minister will return to Parliament to update us on the progress that we hope will be made—I am pleased that he

is confirming that he intends to do that—and give us another important opportunity to debate these issues.

Other members have spoken in detail about the key recommendations in the report, and we have heard some well-informed speeches about the need for additional community safety initiatives to promote fire prevention awareness. I have discovered that we have such initiatives in schools and even in nurseries. The information is also available through home fire safety visits.

We must ensure that that prevention work is properly targeted at those who are most at risk of being the victims of fires. Again and again in the debate, members have referred to the link between deprivation and the risk of fire accidents, with all the problems that are associated with smoking and alcohol misuse. Linda Fabiani and Karen Gillon spoke of the link between alcohol misuse and the causing of fires, as well as the issues around cigarettes. With James Kelly, I hope that progress can be made on RIP cigarettes through a collaborative approach by the minister and the UK Government. I think that there will be consensus that we want to see progress made on that issue.

It is not just public sector and local government agencies that have a role to play in a collaborative approach; voluntary organisations have a key role to play. Bill Aitken mentioned that 47 per cent of accidental fire deaths involved people aged over 60. The Lightburn Elderly Association Project—LEAP—is a voluntary sector organisation whose hands-on project involves its staff who go into older people's homes also checking whether they have smoke detectors. That is one example of a programme that could be productive. Mike Pringle, too, spoke about the number of lives that could be saved through having proper smoke detection in homes. The issue has, quite rightly, been raised that more smoke alarms should be hard-wired. Nigel Don spoke about that. There is consensus on which I hope we can move forward.

Stewart Maxwell and Michael Matheson spoke in detail about the need for sprinkler systems. The report identifies the importance of fire and rescue services working with the building standards division to improve fire detection in the home. The progress that can be made on the installation of low-cost sprinkler systems should be an important part of that collaborative work.

Another theme that runs throughout the report is the need for improved training in community safety and home fire safety advice, and for the adoption of new common models for community safety initiatives. As John Farquhar Munro knows, we need to undertake more high-profile educational initiatives. We have often said in these debates that we want more integrated and common

approaches from fire and rescue services throughout Scotland, and that logic must hold with fire prevention, too. We must share best practice throughout the country, with local agencies working properly together and targeting effectively those people who are at most risk of being victims of fire.

The report also goes into the sometimes thorny issue of common data collection methods in assessing success and creating new performance targets. It is important that we are able to assess performance, but it is also important that we have the right targets. Cross-party concern has been expressed previously in the chamber on the question of response time targets. I have no doubt that we will return to that issue. Karen Gillon was right to talk about the importance of response times in emergency situations.

I met the FBU yesterday. I was told that it had wanted a greater emphasis in the report on firefighter safety. That must be a consideration in whatever work follows on from the report. In his excellent speech, George Foulkes spoke of the brave sacrifice of Ewan Williamson, whose bravery reminds us of the need to have firefighter safety at the heart of our fire and rescue services and whatever work we undertake on the structures and policies in these areas. I associate myself entirely with George Foulkes's request for Ewan Williamson to receive the Queen's gallantry medal. I am sure that that hope is echoed throughout the chamber. Whatever changes are made to the service, the goal of improved safety for our firefighters must always be central.

The other key concern is about resources, which Karen Gillon touched on. The report does not shirk from pointing out that its recommendations will require to be properly resourced, and it is quite right to do so. We, too, want the recommendations to be properly resourced but, again and again, the report says that resourcing will come from the core budgets of our fire brigades and, in some cases, of partner agencies. We believe strongly that investment in the appropriate measures should not come at the expense of front-line firefighters but should be additional to investment in the crucial life-saving work that they carry out in emergency situations.

I would welcome the minister's views on that and on how we can take forward the vital work that the report identifies. I hope that Parliament will have the opportunity to discuss the issue again. We have had an excellent debate, and it is clear that a broad determination exists among members to bring about a Scotland in which we are better at preventing fires and have far fewer fire deaths.

16:50

**Fergus Ewing:** It has, indeed, been an extremely useful and positive debate. It has also been one in which we have had some revelations about the narrow escapes of John Farquhar Munro and Bill Aitken from domestic fires. I am pleased to hear that an alliance of the good Lord and Celia Munro secured John Farquhar Munro's continued presence with us. My good friend is very welcome, and we thank both the parties involved. I am pleased to hear that the good Lord is looking over Bill Aitken as well—I was not aware that that was the case, but we have been put right.

There are 8,082 firefighters in Scotland, of whom 4,477 are whole time, 3,013 are retained duty system firefighters and 492 are volunteers. Let us remember the role that retained and volunteer firefighters play. There are nearly 400 fire stations and 800 emergency response vehicles. The fire service, to which £331 million of public money is devoted, has attended 112,000 incidents over the past year. A great deal of effort is put into training our firefighters, principally at the national college in Gullane, where 390 firefighters have undertaken basic training since 2007. Over the same period, 800 fire and rescue personnel have attended specialist training. The Scottish Government invests £6 million annually in training. In the past year, 49,703 home fire safety visits have been made in Scotland and 95,000 other community fire safety activities have been carried out. The record of the work that goes into protecting our communities is huge and impressive. Like all other members, I pay tribute to all those involved, especially the firefighters on the front line who provide services that keep us safe and offer reassurance to our people.

I will deal with as many of the points that have been made in the debate as possible. I begin by giving Richard Baker an assurance that is not in my script—in fact, I do not have a script. I assure him that I will report back to Parliament on how we make progress on the issues that the report identifies. In addition to today's debate, we recently had a debate about the fire and rescue framework. Next month, we will, I hope, have an opportunity to debate Paddy Tomkins's report on water safety. It is my intention that the ministerial advisory group, which is due to have its next meeting in February, will consider all those issues. That timescale seems to be appropriate, although we have not reached a decision on that. I am happy to engage with spokespeople from all parties and all MSPs on the issues, which go way beyond party politics.

One issue that has been raised in the debate is reduced ignition propensity cigarettes. Paragraph 5.49 of Brian Sweeney's report says:

"it is possible that up to 36 lives could have been saved had Reduced Ignition Propensity cigarettes been mandatory ... since 2005."

That underscores the point that has been made by members of all parties, which I detect has cross-parliamentary support: that we should have safe cigarettes in Scotland as soon as possible.

Margaret Smith graciously acknowledged and many other members alluded to the fact that Stewart Maxwell has campaigned on such issues for many years. In an articulate and comprehensive fashion, he gave us estimates for the number of lives that have been saved in New York, Vermont and other places where standards are in place, and he quoted from politicians who suggest that the tobacco companies are able to tackle the problem but must be forced to do so. That is unfortunate, but I suspect that it is the reality of the matter.

The issue has been raised by members from all parties, including Labour members. I reassure Mr Maxwell and all other members that the Scottish Government believes that RIP cigarettes should be introduced. I have been assured that that is also the UK Government's view. I wanted first to gauge the Parliament's feelings in this debate, but I will now write to Shahid Malik, my counterpart in the UK Government, to seek a meeting with him on how best we can take the matter forward. We should do so as swiftly as possible. There is no reason why we in Scotland cannot lead the way, no reason why we cannot work in co-operation with and with the full support of the UK Government, and no reason why lives should not be saved in Scotland and south of the border.

The second main issue that was raised throughout the debate was sprinklers and smoke alarms. The issue is covered in the report, to which I now return. Brian Sweeney made the key point that currently it costs around £3,000 per household to install a sprinkler system. That huge cost is the root of the problem that has been identified. Plainly, we are unable to spend £3,000 per house; so far as I have noticed, that kind of money is generally available only to banks. However, the sprinkler challenge has been issued and will be taken up. It is a technical matter on which the UK Government has done work. We are committed to analysing all the research that has been conducted both in the UK and abroad to determine whether a low-cost sprinkler system could be economically and technically viable.

Reference has been made to particular types of properties. Mike Matheson concentrated on that issue in his speech, and it was touched on by Margaret Smith and other members. Sprinkler systems are already a mandatory requirement for specific new properties such as care homes, sheltered housing and high-rise flats. I inform

Margaret Smith that, from April 2010, the provision of fire detection equipment in new-build properties will be extended to the provision of an additional smoke alarm in the principal habitable room and a heat detector in the kitchen. I was reading from a script there, to ensure that I got it right.

**Margaret Mitchell:** Given that the minister is almost in his last minute, will he address specifically the issues that were raised with me at Hamilton fire station? If he is not able to do so in depth today, will he accompany me to the fire station to hear the concerns at first hand?

**Fergus Ewing:** It is difficult to see how one could refuse such an invitation. However, the member should raise the issues first with Strathclyde fire and rescue service. Karen Gillon highlighted the work of fire boards, which exist to provide democratic accountability and scrutiny of the work that fire services do. Firefighters need to and do continuously train and develop their skills. The use of computers is a perfectly acceptable approach to supporting skill development and competency. I am happy to pursue the issues further with Margaret Mitchell, either in the way that she described or by other means.

We value the contributions that we have received from the FBU, many of the points that it makes, the forthright representation that it provides and the help that it gives to the Scottish Government. A number of chief fire officers—I could not identify all of them—are at the back of the public gallery; I thought that the collective noun might be a sprinkling of chief fire officers. I thank them for the work that they have done. In particular, I thank the team who produced the report: Paul Stewart, John McGarvey, Cathy Barlow and Kirsty Bosley. Of course, I also thank Brian Sweeney for bringing forward the report, which has enabled this highly positive debate to take place.

## Decision Time

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-5173.1, in the name of Sarah Boyack, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5173, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the central Scotland green network, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S3M-5173.2, in the name of Alison McInnes, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5173, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on the central Scotland green network, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

**FOR**

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)  
Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)  
Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)  
Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)  
Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)

**AGAINST**

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)  
Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)  
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)  
Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)  
Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)  
Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)  
Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)  
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)  
Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)  
Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)  
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)  
Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)  
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)  
Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)  
Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)  
Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)  
Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)  
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)  
Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)  
Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)  
Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)  
McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (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)  
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)  
Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)  
Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)  
Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)  
Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)  
Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)  
Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)  
Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 13, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S3M-5173, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, as amended, on the central Scotland green network, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to.*

That the Parliament recognises and supports the significant contribution that the Central Scotland Green Network can make to the quality of life of the three million people living in the central belt, not just through environmental and social benefits, such as improving habitat networks, enhancing landscapes, mitigating climate change, improving health and wellbeing and stimulating educational and cultural activity, outdoor recreation and community involvement, but also through increasing economic benefits, such as business development, urban regeneration and derelict land restoration, and believes that there is a need for cooperation among the Scottish Government, local authorities and agencies and groups working in the area to ensure that maximum opportunities are delivered from the network.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S3M-5172.1, in the name of Bill Aitken, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5172, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on the future of community fire safety in Scotland, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S3M-5172, in the name of Fergus Ewing, as amended, on the future of community fire safety in Scotland, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to.*

That the Parliament notes the Scottish Government's commitment to working in partnership with local government and the fire and rescue services to reduce fires and fire deaths in Scotland and that recommendations in the Scotland Together community fire safety study will contribute to a continued partnership approach to fire prevention, and calls on the Scottish fire and rescue authorities to consider the benefits of joint working.

## Debt

**The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):** The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-5081, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on Citizens Advice Scotland's debt findings. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament welcomes the new research findings by Citizens Advice Scotland that set out the barriers and problems faced by vulnerable groups such as lone parents, older people, young people and sick and disabled people in Scotland in relation to debt as well as creditor behaviour; notes that the findings show that four in 10 clients have gone without essentials in order to try to cope with their debt, while one in four clients has borrowed further credit to pay existing debt; notes that two fifths of debt clients reported being pressurised or harassed by their creditors; further notes that two thirds of debt clients said that they would consider going bankrupt in order to manage their debt; believes that schemes such as the Low Income Low Asset (LILA) scheme and the Debt Arrangement Scheme (DAS) should be made fully accessible to debtors who are stuck in a cycle of debt and that the £100 fee for accessing the LILA route into bankruptcy should be abolished as only one in five clients said they could unconditionally afford it; further believes that more affordable mainstream credit should be made available to low-income groups; commends the work of the Citizens Advice Bureau in Dumbarton and bureaux across Scotland in providing free, impartial and confidential frontline advice to all who need it, and would welcome the provision of sustained funding for agencies such as Citizens Advice in order to address the growing demand for such advice.

17:03

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I am pleased that so many members have chosen to stay in the Parliament when there are other attractions in Glasgow as we speak.

I congratulate Citizens Advice Scotland on its report "Drowning in Debt" which was launched this morning. I am sure that members of all parties agree that CAS plays a vital role in helping us to shape social policy. Its influence on that agenda is in no small part due to its ability to translate the experiences of the people who come through the doors of citizens advice bureaux in communities throughout Scotland into changes and innovations in policy. I thank CAS and all bureaux in Scotland for their work.

Let us consider the substance of the report and some of the headline information. Debt among citizens advice bureau clients has increased by a staggering 50 per cent since 2003. Average total debt stands at £20,193. What the motion says bears repeating: four in 10 clients have gone without essentials to try to cope with their debt; one in four clients has borrowed further credit to pay existing debt; two fifths of debt clients reported being pressured or harassed by creditors; two

thirds of debt clients said that they would consider going bankrupt to manage their debt. There is no doubt in my mind that the current financial climate is also having an impact.

We know from previous reports that CAB debt clients in Scotland have a lower income than people in other parts of the United Kingdom and that their income is below the Scottish average. It is undoubtedly more of a challenge to service a debt if income is low. Debt disproportionately affects lone parents, older people, the disabled and long-term sick, as well as those on low incomes.

We know that relationship breakdown is a significant feature among debt clients; it has the attendant problems of a drop in income, increased responsibility for bills and the need to balance the pressures of care and work that we know too well. It will come as no surprise to many members that children cost money too, but the financial consequences go beyond providing for the child. Parents might end up with more limited work options, perhaps through working part time, and they might have to pay for child care and much more besides. That all combines to lower income and, potentially, to raise debt—and it is all much more acute for lone parents.

The report shows that one third of the survey participants had an illness, impairment or other health problem. Some had a mental illness, others a learning disability. It also shows that their incomes were generally lower, which underlines the fact that debt has a disproportionate effect on the most vulnerable people in society.

We can just about begin to imagine the impact that debt has on households with low incomes: they struggle to make ends meet, are unable to make payments to service their debts and get into a spiral of despair. The stress and depression that that causes is all too evident. The report tells us that a client with a monthly income of less than £400 owes an average of £52 for every £1 of income. It is little wonder that they are stressed when they have to choose between essentials such as putting food on the table for the family and paying off significant debts.

I will say a word about creditor behaviour. Twice as many clients have been threatened with informal debt recovery action—not formal, open and transparent action through the courts. The informal action is under the radar and unpleasant. I have had constituents who were hounded at their homes and work, not just by letter—bad enough though that might be—but by telephone and yes, even personal visits. The level of aggression and harassment is unacceptable. We must recognise that the overwhelming majority of people do not choose to get into debt; they would quite like to pay it off and balance their accounts better. The

level of harassment of people when they have nothing is entirely unacceptable.

**Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):** I endorse everything that the member has said. Does she also appreciate that there are organisations that are now preying on vulnerable people by asking them to sell their home for rent back? I understand from constituents that that is a shocking development. Will she commend the Office of Fair Trading, which will announce new guidelines on toughening up that area?

**Jackie Baillie:** I absolutely agree, and associate myself with the member's remarks.

We had a huge briefing that described the varying impacts on different groups of people who find themselves in debt—young, old, lone parents, those on lower incomes—and I will leave it to other members to develop those points; I will spend my remaining time talking about my local CAB in Dumbarton and what I believe should be the forward agenda for the Scottish Parliament and, yes, the Scottish Government—I am delighted to see that the minister is in a good mood with us this evening.

Dumbarton CAB dealt with £713,000 of debt last year. That is a significant figure, but it tells me that, this year, the number of debt cases has increased by a staggering 70 per cent—and we still have a quarter of the year to get through. That leads me to my first suggestion to the Government: it should increase support for debt advice services, and resources should be targeted at areas that experience the most disadvantage. With something like a 70 per cent increase in Dumbarton alone, never mind throughout the country, that is essential if we are to provide people with quality advice.

Last year's Scottish budget contained additional funding of some £1 million due to decisions that the UK Government made. It would be extremely helpful if that was continued, especially as the need is getting greater.

The low income, low asset scheme—LILA—and the debt arrangement scheme also need to be much more accessible. I strongly believe that the £100 fee to access LILA should be abolished. It is plain daft to expect that people with multiple debts who are struggling to cope will pay a £100 entry fee to the scheme. I know that the minister will consider that proposal carefully. He should be aware of the overwhelming support that there would be for such a move.

There are also recommendations for the UK Government on tighter regulation of creditor behaviour, inappropriate access to credit, improved protection against creditor harassment and ensuring that mainstream credit is affordable,



which includes considering the social funds. CAS will raise those issues with our colleagues at Westminster and I am sure that it will get a positive hearing.

I commend Citizens Advice Scotland's report to the Parliament. There is much that we can learn from it and I hope that the minister will be positive about many of the recommendations that emerge from it.

17:11

**Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP):** I congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing the debate and recognise her continued commitment to tackling poverty, social deprivation and debt since she entered Parliament. I should also declare an interest as a member of the board of Central Borders Citizens Advice Bureau and, although it is some years since I was in legal practice, I was on the duty roster for several years during that period as visiting solicitor at Portobello CAB. Therefore, I have a degree of coalface experience, although it is perhaps a little out of date.

Debt problems—whether they arise through job loss, marital breakdown, poor wages, foolish spendthrift ways or ill health—have always been high on the list of client problems in the CABx, as is evidenced by the substantial report that Jackie Baillie mentioned. To state the obvious, the recession can only have made matters worse. Of course, the poorer somebody is, the less they can afford credit but the more they need it. Although I recognise the attractions of bankruptcy, it should not be entered into lightly, as there are repercussions for many years, even after discharge.

I thank CAS for its helpful briefing pack and, in particular, for drawing attention to the following statistics. One that I did not expect is that older people have the highest levels of debt of all age groups, owing an average of £26,000. The levels of debt in that group have increased by 50 per cent in the past two years. We are talking, of course, about multiple debts.

As Jackie Baillie said, creditors are becoming more forceful and taking less account of whether the debtor can afford to pay—not infrequently when the debtor has been seduced into accepting credit arrangements that were completely unaffordable from the start.

I mention in passing, as I have before, the hazards of enticing advertisements for consolidating debts. As the old saw says, if it is too good to be true, it is too good to be true. Unfortunately, these days we start from the premise that debt is natural—it is okay. Gone are the days when my mum condemned anyone for

buying on tick. From cradle to grave, many of us are in debt to someone at some time—from the moment when the lone parent has to borrow to buy a buggy, perhaps even to the cost of cremation.

The chill wind of recession is not only personal but national. Our banks are bust but we cannot let them, unlike ordinary debtors, go to the wall. Piled on to our own debt is the £16,700 that each of us has loaned to the banks. It is grim indeed. I understand that, if somebody on average earnings owed the same amount, it would take them 28.5 million years to pay it off. The lower somebody comes down the income pecking order, the less room they have for manoeuvre and the more their borrowing is not for the nice things but the necessary.

What can we do within the Parliament's limited capacity? I say again that we need a far greater push to publicise credit unions. Just the other day, I had a constituent in my office who was up to his ears in money problems and borrowing at eye-watering interest rates. He had never heard of credit unions. I have now put him in touch with Capital Credit Union, but there is no branch in the Borders. It is unfortunate that there are few in Scotland.

Some of the banks that are floating on our money should recycle any bonuses not to directors but to our schools and youth groups so that financial education is given the profile that it needs. Perhaps some of their directors should have attended such classes themselves.

I congratulate citizens advice bureaux, whether in the central Borders or anywhere else, on the very important work that they do and on remaining dedicated and creative in accessing funding. Even in these straitened times—perhaps more so now—I hope that the minister will look at the funding issue in local authorities and elsewhere and keep a careful watch on it, because timeous, informed intervention for an individual can save them a great deal of cost in terms of grief in their life and, indeed, a great deal of subsequent cost to society.

17:15

**David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con):** Like other members, I welcome tonight's debate, which was initiated by Jackie Baillie at the end of what I suspect has been a long day for her. I admire her stamina in kicking off this morning on the vexed subject of hospital-acquired infections and concluding our day's deliberations by leading this discussion on another serious and important topic affecting people in Scotland, namely the rising tide of personal debt. I, too, thank Citizens Advice Scotland for the excellent debt briefings that have been prepared for members on a

general and constituency basis to highlight the work of CABx across our country.

In the first session of Parliament, we had to deal with the controversial issue of poindings and warrant sales as a method of recovering debts and work out a humane alternative to that process that was fair to both debtors and creditors. I stress fairness to creditors not because of any great love for banks or finance houses but out of a recognition that the availability of credit drives the engine of our economy. It is essential that personal credit remains available to people in lower-income groups to assist them in managing their lives. If we do not have a fair balance, the sources of such credit will dry up, and the poorest in our society will suffer most as a consequence.

I had the pleasure of serving on the all-party expert working group that was established by the then Scottish Executive to come up with the proposals that were set out in our report "Striking the Balance: a new approach to debt management", which was published in July 2001. Those proposals led to the enactment by Parliament of a statutory debt arrangement scheme, the new diligence of attachment to replace poindings and warrant sales, and the expansion of money advice services and Government funding support for them through the Scottish Executive as well as Her Majesty's Government.

That was my parliamentary introduction to debt issues, but it has not stopped there, because I am a member of the Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee, which is considering the Home Owner and Debtor Protection (Scotland) Bill. The bill focuses on the issue of home repossession by creditors and the law relating to sequestration and voluntary trust deeds and the sale or disposal of a family home in those contexts. Parliament as a whole will be able to debate those issues later this year at stage 1, so I will not prejudge the committee's conclusions. Suffice it to say that, in my parliamentary experience, just as the poor are always with us, so is the subject of debt.

Citizens advice bureaux provide an important money advice service to constituents who get into financial difficulties. I commend the work of the many professional staff and the many hundreds of people who give voluntarily of their skills to assist clients in resolving those problems. Of course, as MSPs, we are no strangers to debt problems: witness the number of people who come to our surgeries with financial difficulties, as Jackie Baillie recounted. However, what I find striking in my experience is that those financial difficulties arise not so much from debts that are thrown up on credit cards, mortgages or personal loans, as from debts and liabilities that are incurred as a result of

overpayments of tax credits that are assessed through the tax credit office or errors in child support assessments or entitlements to housing benefit and council tax benefit.

It is my experience, which I am sure is shared by other members, that the intervention of an MP or MSP gets results for the constituent. Our intervention elevates the case to a complaint section that is usually staffed by a more senior official who is tasked with responding to the member on a fast-track, VIP basis.

From a member's standpoint, that is gratifying, particularly if it can help to root out an error that has been entrenched in the system and lead to the reduction or elimination of a liability that has been causing a constituent a great deal of stress. However, in many cases, we simply need a clear explanation about why a particular liability arises. Often, such an explanation has been sought in vain by the constituent over many months, when confronted with computer-generated letter after letter that bear no obvious relationship to one another and in which the calculations and assessments are often difficult to follow.

That is why we can do a great deal to assist Citizens Advice Scotland and its bureaux not just by funding and supporting their work but by reducing their workload—and our own—through raising standards of customer service and customer care in the public bodies, agencies and councils for which we have responsibility. The standards of service that we as members receive when acting on behalf of constituents should be the standards of service that constituents receive in the first place. Achieving that would be a great step forward.

17:21

**Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD):** I add my congratulations to Jackie Baillie on her motion and on securing this evening's debate. I also congratulate Citizens Advice Scotland on its very detailed "Drowning in Debt" report.

The debate provides a welcome and timely opportunity to highlight the tremendous work that citizens advice bureaux do in every constituency and region throughout the country. It is also a chance to acknowledge the extent to which the bureaux are a victim both of their own success—with many more word-of-mouth referrals—and of the difficult economic circumstances in which we all currently find ourselves.

Earlier this week, I visited my local citizens advice bureau in Kirkwall. I try to visit regularly, although I am conscious of the need to avoid making a nuisance of myself, given the bureau's large and increasing workload. I consider myself very fortunate in my relationship with the local

CAB team. In keeping with the rest of the CAB network, the depth and breadth of the expertise on hand in the Kirkwall bureau is highly impressive. The team have certainly helped me in my work, but a more important point is that they have helped many of my constituents who are struggling to deal with a wide range of debt issues for the reasons that David McLetchie mentioned.

More often than not, those who present to the CAB are, as other members have said, the most vulnerable people in our communities. They include young people, the sick, those with disabilities and, of course, older people. Help the Aged and Age Concern have highlighted the specific problems that face older people, who are—as Christine Grahame said—saddled with the highest average debt but stuck on low, fixed incomes with limited means of raising extra money to pay back their debts.

As this week's report lays bare, debt is increasingly what prompts people to seek help from their CAB. The Citizens Advice Scotland briefing on the workload of the Orkney CAB is extremely disturbing, but I have no doubt that it faithfully reflects the breakdowns that have been provided to members across the country. In the case of Orkney, the average debt level is around £19,500. When one considers that, like many parts of the Highlands and Islands, Orkney suffers less from unemployment than from underemployment and low wages, it is clear that the risks are not just to those who are unfortunate enough to have been laid off.

Another striking feature of the picture that has been painted—this seems to apply nationwide—is the complex nature of people's debt problems, which often involve multiple creditors and the threat of repossession. That puts added pressure on CAB staff, who must then spend much more time trying to disentangle the web of debt that has been built up. With growing numbers of people approaching the CAB for help, that extra time is not easy to free up.

In the case of the Kirkwall CAB, if not in all bureaux, the problems of space—in particular, the availability of discreet meeting room facilities—is also a serious and worsening problem. Orkney Islands Council is to be congratulated on its efforts to work with Voluntary Action Orkney to identify more suitable premises for the CAB and the other third sector bodies that do so much to underpin public service delivery in the islands. However, the truth is that a solution cannot come soon enough, given the pressure on CAB staff and volunteers.

Although it might seem perverse to argue for more CAB staff given what I have just said about space constraints, I echo the comments that others have made about the valuable contribution that has been made by the credit crunch funding.

In the Kirkwall office, that funding has allowed an administrative assistant to be taken on, thereby freeing up the more experienced staff to deal with the increased caseload and more complex cases. Given that there will be a lag as we come out of the recession, I agree with others that that pipeline of support should not be simply shut off next March.

The complexity of the cases is an inevitable consequence of the way in which many people have sought to manage their debt problems. What is not inevitable and what is absolutely unacceptable, as Jackie Baillie and Jeremy Purvis made clear, is the way in which some creditors choose to pursue those debts. Aggressive and repeated harassment of people who are already under extreme stress is a tactic that is far too often deployed. Some constituents of mine have been encouraged to pay back debt by loading it on to their credit cards. Such harassment simply cannot be allowed to continue, and there appears to be a case for looking again at regulation in that area.

Similarly, attention needs to be paid to the way in which mortgage-to-rent schemes operate. They offer people scope to manage their way out of serious debt problems and, importantly, keep them in their homes. However, the process can be time consuming and bureaucratic and the information that is gathered is often out of date by the time that it is collated, which forces debt advisers to go back to square one, with the consequence that further debt is incurred. I hope that the minister will agree to consider that matter.

It would also be helpful if the minister would agree to consider the threshold values for eligible properties under the mortgage-to-rent scheme. I understand that they can be set at unrealistic levels, with the result that entire areas are effectively excluded from the scheme.

I am grateful to Jackie Baillie for allowing me the chance to put on the parliamentary record my appreciation of the work that Geraldine Ferguson, her staff and the volunteers do on behalf of many of my constituents. That recognition is long overdue. I hope that the views that are expressed across the chamber this evening ensure that this essential service continues to enjoy the support that it needs to meet the increased demands that are placed on it during these challenging times.

17:26

**Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab):** Like my colleagues, I congratulate Jackie Baillie on the timely and important debate that she has secured. I also want to add my thanks to Citizens Advice Scotland for the hard work that it has done to do research and produce policy briefings not only for today's debate but consistently over the years. It

has ensured that we are informed not only about the national picture but, crucially, about the local constituency issues and about what is actually happening in our communities.

The choice of words for the title of the report—"Drowning in Debt"—is good, as that phrase sums up the helplessness, the despair and the sense of going under in a sea of debt that people in that circumstance must feel.

The services that the CAB network provides are absolutely vital. From a visit to my local CAB office in Gorgie-Dalry, I know that the number of people seeking help is substantially up on last year. I record my thanks to the volunteers and staff for keeping that service going, even though they are under pressure. Although I do not want to exaggerate the situation, it is clear that the combination of recession and the steady loss of jobs in the financial and banking sector in Edinburgh is taking a severe toll on many households. The number of job vacancies is half what it was this time last year. We know that the unemployment rate is going up, as well.

Clearly, many people are struggling to keep their heads above water. Statistics show that the key vulnerable groups are those who are already on low incomes, for whatever reason. Those people simply do not have savings to fall back on to get them through hard times. People who are in negative equity are now not able to sell their house, settle their debts and move to the rented sector. That choice is simply no longer available to them. It is a deeply worrying time. Jackie Baillie's motion is extremely well written and she spoke eloquently to it. I agree with her that it is vital that people who are already in debt are not ruled out of receiving financial assistance on the ground of a lack of money. To a lot of people, £100 does not sound like a huge amount of money, but to someone who is already in debt, £100 could be a completely insurmountable barrier. I hope that we can add our weight to that of those who are lobbying to change that situation.

As I have said, by the time that people seek help, they are highly likely to have already exhausted their funds and any help from family. It is human nature to try to survive. However, for some people, it has become impossible to cope. We need to work together to try to ensure that our CAB network is robust, properly funded and capable of helping people to the level that they need.

In Edinburgh, people who are in debt are likely to have five debts each. They are also likely to have more debts than the Scottish average, and those debts are likely to be complex and require face-to-face support from money advisers on, most likely, more than one visit to a CAB. Those

tough cases take up a disproportionate amount of time.

I have written to ministers—not Alex Neil, but his predecessors—to urge them to provide more support for people who are in financial crisis. I know from my experience over the years that when we have lobbied the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government, amounts of money have been provided, and last year's credit crunch money was hugely welcome.

However, I sound a note of caution. The debt money that was allocated to Scotland last year was—although welcome—distributed in such a way that it disadvantaged the CAB network in Edinburgh. A couple of years ago, the Edinburgh network was pulled together, and the five offices were united as one organisation. That has ruled them out of being able to apply as individual CAB offices for grants and bursaries, and—crucially—for the credit crunch money. The city's network therefore received an allocation that in other parts of the country would have gone to only one bureau, whereas it had to cover five bureaux in Edinburgh.

I met representatives from the CAB network in Scotland last year, and I made representations to ministers. I understand the variety of pressures that were placed on what was—although significant—not a huge amount of money. If more money comes to us this year, which I would strongly welcome, I urge the minister to examine the distribution formula and to add his weight to that of those who are seeking a fairer distribution method, to ensure that Edinburgh does not lose out in the way that it did last year.

17:31

**Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green):** In a recession, I can think of no organisation that needs and deserves support more than Citizens Advice Scotland. It deserves not only the amount of support that it has received in the past, but the greater support that it will need to provide the increased services that are required at such a time. I congratulate Jackie Baillie on bringing the debate to Parliament, and I echo Sarah Boyack's call for greater support for citizens advice bureaux.

We can borrow money at single-figure interest rates, but the poorest people in our society borrow money at exorbitant interest rates, which are quite legally applied—they can borrow £100 at an interest rate of 250 per cent. The good side is that they get a guarantee that there will be no increase in the interest and that they have a reasonably long fixed period in which to repay the money. They sign a document to say that they will pay £250 for the £100 that they have borrowed. It is

absolutely disgusting, and we should not allow that type of loan to be offered. We also still need to do more to pursue loan sharks for their illegal operations.

Age Concern Scotland and Help the Aged in Scotland have issued a detailed and helpful briefing on the subject, and I hope that members will forgive me if I read one bit of it verbatim. The briefing states:

"Debt among older people can be tackled in a number of ways. We welcome the range of recommendations made in the *Drowning in Debt* report, particularly in terms of curbing aggressive lending tactics and ensuring that lenders adhere to strict standards of responsible lending. As the recession has demonstrated, this is as much in the interest of lenders as individuals looking to borrow money."

Tak tent, major banks in America.

The briefing goes on:

"Financial advice and education from an early age is also important in creating a culture of responsible borrowing and is essential in helping people struggling with debt",

and that

"For older people in particular there should be an emphasis on maximising incomes, which for most pensioners means ensuring that they are claiming all the benefits to which they are entitled. If all eligible pensioners were receiving Pension Credit, no pensioner in the UK would have to live on less than £130 a week, considerably more than many pensioners survive on today. This is still substantially below 60% of the UK median weekly income of £236".

The briefing continues by stating that

"With as many as 41% of eligible pensioners not claiming Pension Credit, as many as 45% not claiming Council Tax Benefit and up to 18% not claiming Housing Benefit across the UK, the beneficial effect that automatic benefit payment would have on pensioners' finances is significant. We would like to see the UK Government introduce a scheme whereby benefits such as Pension Credit and Housing and Council Tax Benefits are paid to pensioners automatically. The Department for Work and Pensions and HMRC departments already hold the information required to process these benefits automatically—all that is required is the political will."

Members of the major political parties, as they like to call themselves, should be lobbying their colleagues at Westminster on the issue, because it is such a no-brainer. It is obvious that providing pensioners with information and encouraging them to do the simple act of claiming what they are entitled to will help an awful lot.

17:35

**The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil):** I join everyone else in congratulating Jackie Baillie on securing this evening's debate and on her excellent introduction to it. As Christine Grahame and others have done, I acknowledge Jackie Baillie's long-term commitment to helping people who are in poverty and other vulnerable members of our society.

As the Minister for Housing and Communities, I also pay particular tribute to the citizens advice bureaux throughout Scotland and the overarching body Citizens Advice Scotland. Many professional people work for and provide professional advice through citizens advice bureaux, but we should also acknowledge the volunteers who work in bureaux the length and breadth of Scotland. Their commitment is to be commended.

The debate has been helpful. There is no dispute in the chamber about the fact that debt is an increasingly significant social problem in Scotland. The information that is provided by Citizens Advice Scotland in its various reports is extremely helpful. As Liam McArthur pointed out, the data that are available are not comprehensive, so I am glad to say that the Office for National Statistics will later this year publish the results of a wealth and assets survey, which should help to show the causes and incidence of debt problems in our society as part of that wider survey.

I want to address in my reply some of the issues that have been raised during the debate—particularly, but not exclusively, those that were raised by Jackie Baillie. I will try to be as helpful as possible. An on-going joint review by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government is examining the range of welfare advisory services that are available in Scotland and we anticipate that the group's report will be published before Christmas. We hope that it will inform the debate on how we can improve the range of advice, and its delivery, throughout Scotland. That relates not just to Citizens Advice Scotland but to Money Advice Scotland, local authorities and many other organisations.

I want to say a few words about the support that we provide. We core fund Citizens Advice Direct, which I visited last summer and which provides a helpful service in support of the wider work. We part fund the National Debtline, and we have provided Citizens Advice Scotland with an additional £1.1 million to increase the availability of advice in response to pressures that the recession is putting on our citizens and advice agencies. That money has been allocated across Scotland and has increased the overall capacity to provide general advice, but it has also helped us to provide some specialist support, particularly on issues such as potential repossession and debt that is associated with home ownership.

**Jackie Baillie:** That money has indeed been welcome and it has been used productively. Because everybody is seeing that increasing demand coming at them, we are desperate to know whether that funding will continue in the next financial year.

**Alex Neil:** We will be in a position to make final decisions on that once we see the pre-budget

report on 9 December, which I hope will confirm our overall budgetary position for next year. I assure Jackie Baillie that Fergus Ewing and I, as the two ministers who are primarily responsible, will do everything we can to ensure that the resources are put in place, as far as possible, to cater for the increased demand, because we recognise the importance of that, as we told the Local Government and Communities Committee yesterday.

If I may say so, it is better to invest in front-line, up-front rehabilitation services to help people before they get into too much debt or have to apply for bankruptcy, sequestration or whatever. I totally agree with Jackie Baillie's point.

I hope that our consultation on improving access to the debt arrangement scheme, which will close on 18 December, will come up with some interesting recommendations. The Accountant in Bankruptcy's review of the scheme, which includes the operation of LILA, will also help to inform policy. It would be extremely helpful if, as part of those reviews, people could present evidence on issues such as the £100 barrier; after all, the purpose of the reviews is to find out what further action needs to be taken. Moreover, the Government bases its policies on evidence and we will certainly examine and respond to any evidence that is submitted.

As some debtors are still unable to access debt relief, we have accepted the debt action forum's recommendations, including proposals for a new route into bankruptcy—the certificate of sequestration. The measure is included in the Home Owner and Debtor Protection (Scotland) Bill, which is currently being considered by Mr McLetchie and his colleagues.

**Christine Grahame:** Is the minister going to say something about credit unions, which are so often overlooked? I would certainly like to hear what he has to say.

**Alex Neil:** As I was about to say, credit unions play a vital role in helping people not only to manage their finances but to avoid getting into debt in the first place. It is much better for people, particularly people on low incomes, to borrow money from a credit union than from characters such as those to whom Robin Harper referred. I am glad to say that, in his time as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, my colleague John Swinney has very much supported credit unions. Of course, some of them will be able to access the additional funding for third-sector organisations that has been made available this year and which has already been set out in the draft budget for next year.

Although, all in all, an awful lot of work is going on, much more can be done. For example,

councils could intervene much earlier with people who are getting into difficulties with rent and council tax arrears. Instead of simply waiting and then having to set sheriff officers on such people, some local authorities could learn lessons from the rehabilitation practices of some of the major banks, which in recent years have made great advances in this area. Now, if people get into arrears with their mortgages over two or three months, the banks are intervening with appropriate advice and general support to stop them getting into further debt.

I had much more to say but, as always, I have run out of time. I have listened—and will listen—to what members have to say and will pass on to my relevant ministerial colleagues the points that have been made in tonight's debate. Whatever additional action is required to tackle the problem, we are certainly prepared to take it.

*Meeting closed at 17:43.*

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