

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 3 December 2009

Session 3

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CONTENTS

Thursday 3 December 2009

Debates

Col.

MINISTER	21789
<i>Motion moved—[First Minister]—and agreed to.</i>	
The First Minister (Alex Salmond)	21789
Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)	21790
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	21791
Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)	21792
The First Minister	21793
EDUCATION	21797
<i>Motion moved—[Margaret Smith].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Michael Russell].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Des McNulty].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Murdo Fraser].</i>	
Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)	21797
The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell).....	21803
Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)	21808
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	21811
Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD).....	21815
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	21818
Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	21820
Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP).....	21823
Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab).....	21825
David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)	21827
Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP).....	21829
Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)	21831
Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)	21834
Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP).....	21836
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab).....	21839
Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	21841
Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)	21844
Michael Russell.....	21846
Margaret Smith	21849
QUESTION TIME	21853
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	21862
QUESTION TIME	21873
GETTING IT RIGHT FOR EVERY CHILD	21890
<i>Motion moved—[Adam Ingram].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Karen Whitefield].</i>	
The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram)	21890
Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab).....	21893
Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	21896
Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD).....	21899
Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP).....	21902
David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)	21904
Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP).....	21906
Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)	21908
Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	21910
Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP).....	21912
Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab).....	21914
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	21916
Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP)	21919
Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD).....	21922
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	21924

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)	21926
Adam Ingram	21928
DECISION TIME	21932
LICENSED PREMISES (ACCESS FOR DISABLED PEOPLE)	21942
<i>Motion debated—[George Foulkes].</i>	
George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab)	21942
Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP)	21944
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)	21946
Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)	21947
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	21949
Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)	21950
Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)	21951
The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil)	21952

Oral Answers

Col.

QUESTION TIME	
SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE	21853
GENERAL QUESTIONS	21853
Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route	21859
Carbon Capture and Storage	21860
Carbon Emissions	21858
Education	21857
Glasgow Airport Rail Link	21853
Glasgow Airport Rail Link	21854
Schools (Financial Education)	21856
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	21862
Cabinet (Meetings)	21865
Education (National Debate)	21871
Engagements	21862
Independence Referendum	21869
Prime Minister (Meetings)	21864
Throat Cancer (University of Milan Study)	21867
QUESTION TIME	
SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE	21873
HEALTH AND WELLBEING	21873
Administration of Medicines in Schools	21887
Alcohol Treatment (Disulfiram)	21888
Attendance Allowance (Older Disabled People)	21879
Children with Epilepsy (West Lothian)	21881
Community Care Services (Guidance)	21885
Football	21887
Health Spending (2010-11 Draft Budget)	21874
Housing (Priorities)	21873
Mental Health Services (Voluntary Sector Providers)	21877
Mental Health Services (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)	21880
NHS Aroma Cafe Pilot (Evaluation)	21875
NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (Meetings with Chief Executive)	21886
Patient Transport Service (Remote and Rural Areas)	21882

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 3 December 2009

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:00*]

Minister

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good morning. The first item of business today is a debate on motion S3M-5313, in the name of the First Minister, on the appointment of a minister. Members should note that the question on this motion will be put immediately after the debate, and not at decision time.

09:00

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I am pleased to seek the Parliament's approval of the appointment of Michael Russell as a minister in his new capacity, through this motion in my name.

First, however, I would like to pay tribute to Fiona Hyslop, who—among her many other achievements in the post of Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning—reintroduced the principle of free higher education in Scotland. Restoring the principle that education should be available based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay, is a substantial achievement for any minister, but Fiona Hyslop also played a central role in the delivery of the economic recovery plan. I will give the chamber two examples of that. Earlier this year, she found £20 million of new investment to provide much-needed additional places in our colleges, an investment that was described by Linda McTavish, the convener of the Scotland's Colleges principals convention, as "great news"; and, last month, she announced the latest element of the ScotAction initiative, which allows apprentices to complete their apprenticeship and was described by Andy Wilcox, of the Federation of Small Businesses, as vital for the success of small companies and Scotland's future.

Fiona Hyslop has an enormous amount to be proud of in her role as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning over the past two and a half years.

Michael Russell is a worthy successor to Fiona Hyslop and will bring substantial enthusiasm and panache to his new role. I know that Michael Russell has enjoyed great support from across the chamber in a number of his activities. In yesterday's *Herald*, he was described by a Labour MSP as being "highly competent and intelligent", which Mr Russell suggested was damning him with faint praise. He will bring to his new post the

energy and enthusiasm that he has displayed as Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution. He not only arranged the largest and most successful St Andrew's day celebrations in our nation's history, but he has been instrumental in bringing forward the white paper on the constitution, which was launched on Monday, and ensuring that the people of Scotland have, as this Government believes that they should have, the ability to have a say in their own country's constitutional future.

Fiona Hyslop will take on the culture, Europe and external affairs brief, and will be responsible for liaison with the Westminster Government and Europe. Fiona Hyslop and I have just returned from Brussels, where we held a series of excellent meetings to promote Scotland's interests in Europe. She will be a powerful and effective voice for Scotland in that role.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that Michael Russell be appointed as a Minister.

09:03

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I fear that this morning's debate on the position of Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning will be slightly less exciting than might have been the case, had the First Minister not blinked on Tuesday and made the change that brings us to Parliament now.

I wish Mr Russell well in his new post, although being moved the day after his last major project—the referendum paper—has flopped and having that project removed by his boss must smack rather of his being kicked upstairs. We will not oppose Mr Russell's progress, although I cannot say the same of his referendum, which we will oppose and which is, of course, going nowhere.

Let us not forget the seriousness of the task that Mr Russell now faces. Under the Scottish National Party, Scottish education is in crisis—failure to sustain teacher numbers at the promised level; failure to cut class sizes; failure to provide promised free school meals; and failure to deliver the promised physical education in our schools. The curriculum for excellence is in chaos; the Scottish Futures Trust has brought the new schools programme to a grinding halt for more than two years; and new teachers cannot find posts and many are leaving for greener pastures in England or further afield. All of that culminated last Friday in the complete breakdown of relations between the Scottish Government and local authorities on schools.

Changing the cabinet secretary is not going to be enough. We need a change in policies and approach, but the auguries are not good. In 2006,

Mr Russell wrote in *The Times Educational Supplement* that

“arrogant councils think they know best”

and that

“what Scotland needs less of is self-serving, mealy-mouthed advice from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities”.

Those comments are sure to smooth things over with Pat Watters and our councils.

Of course, Mr Russell’s support for educational vouchers, which he proposed in his book in 2006, might smooth things over with the Tories, although not with the Scottish public. Neither would the public like Mr Russell’s suggestion that they pay for the national health service, so it is just as well he is not the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing—yet.

When the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture failed, the SNP called Michael Russell. When the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning failed, the SNP called for Michael Russell. The way that this Government is going, it might not be long until Michael Russell is moving again. Until then, let us hope that he at least tries to sort out the mess that his party has made of our schools. Scotland depends on it.

09:06

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome this opportunity to make a few brief remarks on the sad demotion of Fiona Hyslop from the Cabinet and the elevation of Michael Russell to be her successor.

It is right that we recognise the contribution, albeit modest, that has been made by Fiona Hyslop to education in Scotland. Just two weeks ago, I warmly congratulated her in this chamber on seeing through Parliament the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill, which implements additional protections for rural schools, a cause that she and I have championed. Beyond that, I think that it is fair to say that she did not have the happiest of times as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, being lumbered by the First Minister with having to implement policies on class sizes, teacher numbers and school buildings without being given the tools or the support to do so.

Indeed, the signing of the concordat with local government—a concordat that no longer seems to deserve the adjective “historic”—meant that poor Ms Hyslop’s hands were tied. Frankly, even the angel Gabriel as education secretary could not have delivered the SNP’s manifesto pledges.

Instead of the angel Gabriel, we now have Michael Russell. Mr Russell is well known across the Parliament and, indeed, Scottish public life for his modest and self-effacing manner, except when it comes to discussing his own abilities. He certainly has a huge challenge on his hands with the education brief and, in the debate to follow, I will be setting out some of the hopes and aspirations that we have for his new office, particularly given some of the interesting positions that he has taken in the past. I am sure that the remainder bookshops of Edinburgh have seen a remarkable uplift in sales of “Grasping the Thistle”, just in time for Christmas.

We should reflect for a moment on the extraordinarily rapid rebirth of Michael Russell’s political career. After all, this is a man who lost his seat in Parliament back in 2003, when the ungrateful SNP membership decided that he was not worthy of a high-ranking position on the regional list. Following his time in the wilderness, he came back to Parliament a mere two and a half years ago, immediately finding himself in ministerial office. Today, his advancement takes him one step further, as he joins the Cabinet. There is, as I am sure that the First Minister is painfully aware, just one more step to go.

Michael Russell’s career to date is a living inspiration to all those who aspire to the top job in politics. It shows them that they should not worry about such trivial concepts as diligence, serving one’s time or loyalty to one’s leader. The fastest way to promotion is to stir, mix, cause trouble and indeed even go so far as to stand for leader against the man who is bound to become your boss. The First Minister should be sleeping in his bed just a little less soundly tonight, now that he has brought Mr Russell into the Cabinet.

We in the Scottish Conservatives wish Mr Russell well in his new appointment. We will be watching his every move with close interest, but not, I suspect, as closely as will his own colleagues.

09:10

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): Politics is a harsh place and being a cabinet minister in charge of a Government department is a hard job, but it was clear that the previous minister could not continue as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. We need a fresh approach on education. In one respect the First Minister was right, as we need a fresh education minister, but it is a matter of regret that he was the last person in this Parliament to know that, the last to admit that, and the last to take action.

Action is needed, so the new minister will be assessed on how he meets these challenges.

Children in primary 7 across Scotland face the start of the new curriculum for excellence next August. Despite the groundwork laid by the previous Administration, teachers tell me that they have still not had the details of the assessments and the exams that they need. That must change.

There are 1,300 fewer teachers in Scotland than there were at this time last year. This Government has fundamentally broken the relationship between central and local government by issuing the ill-considered threats of last week. Nobody believes that the minister in Edinburgh can possibly run every single school. The new minister needs to rebuild that bond of trust and create a working relationship between councils and schools that will help children and teachers. What the new cabinet secretary and the Government should do today is support the Liberal Democrat motion, which gets that fresh start under way.

Mike Russell has no choice but to act, but his track record is not good. As the Minister for Environment, he left the privatisation of Scotland's forests and the crofting bill for his successor to sort out. As culture minister, he has left creative Scotland, the digital switchover and regional broadcasting for his successor to sort out. As constitution minister, we saw on Monday the mess that he has left his successor as the junior minister in charge of the referendum. He has also managed to leave a lower level of support for independence than when he started the job.

I have children in primary, secondary and tertiary education, so let me say on behalf of all Scottish parents that the First Minister needs to make it plain that Mike Russell, as the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, has to sort out the mess that he inherited from his own Government. He cannot leave this one half-finished; he must concentrate on raising standards in Scotland's schools, not lowering them online.

We will propose an agenda for action on education this morning, and we will be back next week, next month and next year to ensure that the change of minister means that there is a change of direction and there is real delivery on education for Scottish pupils, Scottish parents and Scottish teachers.

09:12

The First Minister: I know that the other parties have had a lack of practice in responding to ministerial changes in this session of Parliament, as there have been only three in the past two and a half years, compared with 17 in the first session of the Labour-Liberal Administration and 11 in the second session of the Labour-Liberal Administration. I am surprised and disappointed

that we have not managed to conjure up for the Labour and Liberal parties, in particular, such excitements as late-night resignations, piegate or even calling public service workers expletive deleted. We have not managed to conjure up any of that excitement in respect of ministerial changes.

I am surprised that Iain Gray, when he criticised Michael Russell's work as a journalist and author, did not recall that people do interesting things when they are dumped by the electorate and no longer have a parliamentary seat—after all, he went to work for Alistair Darling when he lost his seat. It was not a strong line of argument for Iain Gray.

In respect of the debate over the past few days, we should remember that average primary class sizes in Scotland are at a new record low of 23.1 pupils. We freely concede that the historic concordat has not permeated its way through every local authority in Scotland. For example, I note that, in its current reduced circumstances, Labour controls only 10 out of Scotland's 32 local authorities, but those 10 authorities seem to have managed to become responsible for two thirds of the decline in teacher numbers in Scotland.

Murdo Fraser may have noticed that I spoke to John Swinney as he was speaking; I was trying to get my facts exactly right when he complained about Mike Russell not being elected to a parliamentary seat. Mr Swinney informed me that he has beaten Murdo Fraser no less than three times in parliamentary contests. In most walks of life, if someone beats somebody else three times, they get to keep them, but Murdo Fraser may continue in his post as deputy leader of the Conservative party.

It was extremely unwise of Tavish Scott to quote an opinion poll—an opinion poll that I have here, which shows the Liberals at their lowest level of support in recorded polling by the MORI organisation.

It is with great pleasure that I support Mr Michael Russell as the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the appointment of a minister, and we now move to the question on the motion.

The question is, that motion S3M-5313, in the name of the First Minister, on the appointment of a minister, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a five-minute suspension, after which we will move to the vote.

09:16

Meeting suspended.

09:21

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: Members should cast their votes now.

FOR

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 58, Against 0, Abstentions 52.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Michael Russell be appointed as a Minister.

The Presiding Officer: I ask members who are leaving the chamber to do so quietly, because we must move straight to the next item of business.

Education

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5334, in the name of Margaret Smith, on education.

09:22

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): This has been a bad week for the Government. No matter how the First Minister tries to spin it, this is a week that he will try to forget. Not only has he lost an education minister, he has lost credibility. His previous threats to resign have been seen for what they were—bluff and hot air. It has not worked out the way Alex Salmond planned it at all, with the launch of a bill that is destined to fail and the end of a cabinet minister who was destined to fail.

In the past two years, education spokespeople of all Opposition parties have come to enjoy our regular Thursday morning double period of nat bashing. Much of that time has been spent trading memories of the 2007 election—memories of promises made and promises broken—but as we entered this week it was the SNP's election slogan "It's time" that stuck in my memory. There was no doubt in our minds that the previous Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's time was up and she had to go. A shoogly peg can hold for only so long. There was no doubt that she had lost the support and confidence of key partners in education, particularly our colleagues in local government, and that what was required was not just a fresh face but a fresh start.

Before I go any further, however, I say that I wish Fiona Hyslop well in her new post. I know that she probably hoped that she would never have to face the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee again, but she will be back to cover the culture element of her new brief. I am sure that she will look forward to that. I do not doubt for a second Fiona Hyslop's determination to improve Scottish education, and it would be churlish not to mention achievements such as the abolition of the graduate endowment and the passage of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill only a few days ago. The problems that have beset the Scottish National Party over education are not simply the fault of one woman. Let us be honest: education may be the subject of this morning's debate, but it is not the only area in which the SNP's promises have not been met. Messrs Salmond and Swinney stand—or sit—before us equally culpable for the failures of the past and for systemic policy failures that are often built around a concordat that cannot and will not deliver.

In wishing the outgoing cabinet secretary well in her new post, I must also welcome the new cabinet secretary to his role. Having had my first brief but constructive meeting with him, I am sure that he will attack his new job with his customary reserve. I am pleased that the new cabinet secretary shares our determination to see his appointment as a fresh start and an opportunity for better working across the Parliament, although I thought that the First Minister rather undersold him by describing him simply as a great party organiser, given that most of us think that we are witnessing a political resurrection akin to that of Lord Mandelson.

We remain committed to finding solutions that work. We welcome the opportunity to debate the best way in which to deliver education services and we will not discount ideas out of hand. We believe that there should be more devolution of power to headteachers, for example. Our main focus will always be on what will help to raise attainment. However, we are as instinctively worried about a policy of privatising our schools this week as we were about the Government's policy to nationalise them last week. We will not attack councils or threaten them with the centralisation and nationalisation of schools and we will not run down Scotland's teachers.

We will not be complacent. We acknowledge, for example, that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report that highlights the class-based achievement gap describes one of the central problems that we must tackle through practical changes. We will seek to compare and contrast our attainments with those of other countries, but we remain convinced that the comprehensive Scottish education system is basically sound. What we must do—and what we will challenge the cabinet secretary to do—is to build on the firm foundations of that system and find ways in which we can make a good system better.

We know that the new cabinet secretary has a track record of thinking the unthinkable, and often publishing or saying it. Councils have already reacted somewhat angrily to his description of them as "arrogant, mealy-mouthed and domineering". Mr Russell could certainly never be called mealy-mouthed. In 2007, some of his more challenging views were deleted from his book "Grasping the Thistle" before the First Minister would allow him to stand. The book is an interesting read, although I have not managed to get my hands on a copy yet, because it is selling like hot cakes. It includes some interesting ideas—the abolition of corporation tax, privatisation of the national health service, an end to universal benefits, education vouchers, and treating children and parents as customers. If Annabel Goldie had

read it on Saturday, the Tories might have been a bit quicker to support our no confidence motion.

However, no matter what the new cabinet secretary brings to the post, the past two years speak for themselves. Teacher numbers have fallen by 2,300, class sizes have reduced so slowly that it would take 80 years to reach the SNP's election target, and greater numbers of post-probationary teachers than ever before are struggling to secure jobs. Instead of commissioning new schools, we have the floundering Scottish Futures Trust, and increases in student support fall woefully short of the dump the debt commitment that was made to Scotland's students and their families.

The SNP's consistent response to any criticism for those failings has been to blame anyone but its own Government. Teacher numbers are down, but that is the councils' fault. Delays with and a lack of clarity about the curriculum for excellence show that teachers need to do more professional development. Class sizes—well, that goes back to the councils again. The truth is that the SNP made promises that it knew it could not keep. In recent months, we have heard time and again, most forcefully last week, that the Government does not employ teachers or deliver services so it cannot be held responsible for failures, but we all know that, when we shared hustings platforms with other candidates in 2007, the SNP did not express any of those caveats on its key populist policies. It said that it would deliver on class sizes, on the maintenance of teacher numbers, on matching school building brick for brick, and on student debt. It centralised the policy, and when that did not work it localised the blame. The historic concordat, which we were told over and over again hailed a new dawn in the relationship between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Holyrood, is surely now just that—historic.

It was surely the previous cabinet secretary's desperate threats to take back control of schools from locally elected councils that signalled the beginning of the end. Pat Watters of COSLA said that some of the "hidden threats" that Fiona Hyslop made were

"a million miles away from the working relationship we thought we had developed."

The breakdown in trust is clear from the First Minister's press release that confirmed the demotion, in which he stated:

"Schools policy has reached a difficult period with our disagreement with many local authorities about their failure to reduce class sizes by sustaining teacher numbers, while we have achieved a new record low in primary school class sizes."

[*Laughter.*] Maybe it is just me, but I do not remember hearing our councils pledging to cut

class sizes. I remember that the SNP promised to do that. We say to the SNP, "The concordat was yours, the class size pledge was yours, and the blame, too, is yours."

The reality is that the Government trumpeted the end of ring fencing but failed to put in place adequate mechanisms to ensure that councils delivered what national Government promised. Nowhere in the concordat did COSLA sign up to maintaining teacher numbers, and in no single outcome agreement is there a commitment to reduce class sizes.

Even when the cabinet secretary acted to try to support reduced class sizes, she did not defend the promise of class sizes of 18 for primary 1 to primary 3; she simply focused on delivering classes of less than 26 in P1, which was a commitment that the previous Executive was well on its way to delivering. That was yet another U-turn from the SNP: a Government that makes so many U-turns that it ends up going round in circles.

Reducing class sizes is surely a policy on which we must and should find common cause. The Liberal Democrats delivered smaller class sizes in government, and we remain convinced of their value, particularly in deprived areas. If we are serious about tackling inequalities—[*Interruption.*] If we are serious about tackling inequalities, we must be serious—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. I am sorry, Ms Smith. Conversations should not take place at the same time as a member is speaking.

Margaret Smith: I appreciate that, Presiding Officer.

If we are serious about tackling inequalities—I say it for the third time—we must be serious about focusing on early years support for those who need it most.

In a debate in 2002, Mike Russell described reducing class sizes as

"the single most important policy."

He told the Parliament:

"To implement our proposals in Scotland, we would need"

3,000 extra teachers, which

"At full operation ... equates to £105 million per year. Teacher training costs would need to be boosted by £56 million over seven years and maintained at an additional £3.1 million thereafter."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2002; c 6170.]

We have yet to see that investment materialise.

We know that in order to achieve smaller classes, we need more teachers. Our 2007 manifesto was clear and costed; we said that we

would increase teacher numbers. The SNP promised to

“maintain teacher numbers in the face of falling school rolls”.

However, official Scottish Government figures that were published last week reveal that there has been a drop in teacher numbers of more than 2,000. Ronnie Smith of the Educational Institute of Scotland was right to say that those figures represent an “emerging crisis” for Scottish education.

The truth is that, on indicator after indicator, the Government has been failing. When Fiona Hyslop was challenged about the Government’s inability to cut class sizes, she continually pointed to improvements in the pupil to teacher ratio, but last week even that figure turned against her. The fall in teacher numbers means that the pupil to teacher ratio has increased. In 2008, it stood at 12.9 pupils per teacher, whereas it now stands at 13.2 pupils.

There is an issue with new teachers, too. In August, the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland’s* probationer survey showed that only 477 of 3,153 probationers who were employed last session have secured permanent teaching posts. That amounts to around 15 per cent, which is a significant fall from 32 per cent since the first survey was undertaken in 2007. More and more newly qualified teachers are stuck at home watching Jeremy Kyle instead of teaching in our schools. The cabinet secretary needs to re-examine that crucial issue. He needs to give new direction to workforce planning, while fundamentally tackling the need for better alignment between national and local Government. We need him to take firm action without delay to avoid a deep and prolonged educational resources recession.

Yesterday, I and other MSPs addressed a lunch time meeting of the University and College Union. I have already taken the opportunity to discuss with the cabinet secretary some of the concerns that the union raised. Although I am sure that none of us believe that it is a good idea to train more teachers than we need or to guarantee a job for all, we are concerned that the Government’s announcements of considerable reductions in the number of teacher training posts are having a huge impact on education departments such as at the Moray House school of education and Jordanhill. I ask the cabinet secretary urgently to consider the impact of a 70 per cent or greater reduction in the professional graduate diploma in education intake at Moray House. If we are at a stage where those courses are at risk, we might find that we are unable to maintain or increase capacity in the future, when the population is set to rise. We urge the cabinet secretary seriously to

consider calls to stagger those substantial training place reductions to even out the impact on capacity and jobs.

We remain committed to the curriculum for excellence, but the teaching profession has real concerns about lack of clarity and information that need to be addressed rather than ignored. The best that can be said of the curriculum for excellence is that it is patchy throughout the country, and patchy in individual schools, particularly at secondary level.

Lindsay Paterson recently said that the current situation with regard to the curriculum for excellence was “confused” and “vague”, and he added that it posed the real danger of turning schools “upside down”. It is crystal clear that if the Government does not take action to rescue the situation, we will have a curriculum for mediocrity rather than a curriculum for excellence.

Those who are preparing young people for exams need the resources and training to be able to deliver the curriculum effectively, and—crucially—parents need to know what the changes to the curriculum and national qualifications will mean for their children. Most parents are totally oblivious to the monumental changes that are coming in Scottish education.

The Scottish Secondary Teachers’ Association has described the vacuum of information that is leaving councils and headteachers struggling to fill the gaps. The vague information that was published about literacy and numeracy and about the new national qualifications during the summer is simply not good enough. Schools are waiting for detailed information and guidance so that pupils are prepared for the changes that are coming in 2014. Teachers are picking up the burden of the SNP’s failure. That is not right, and it is not fair. We need strong and determined leadership from the cabinet secretary in that area.

Although we understand that the cabinet secretary has only just taken up his post, we urge him to return to Parliament in the early weeks of the new year to report in detail on the progress on the curriculum for excellence throughout the country. We are keen to work with the Government on that, but we will not support the implementation of a curriculum for excellence that is substandard and that fails Scotland’s teachers and pupils. The Government must underpin the policy with the resources to deliver the necessary continuous professional development and teachers to make the curriculum work.

However, there is no point in having a curriculum for excellence that is fit for delivery if there are not enough teachers to deliver it.

The Presiding Officer: The member must close.

Margaret Smith: The cabinet secretary must take the opportunity to re-examine the real priorities in education. The Government must accept that providing teachers and books is more important than providing free school meals for families who can afford to pay. The future of a generation is not something to be taken lightly. We will ensure that if the new cabinet secretary does not deliver, he is held accountable, and that if the SNP does not deliver, it is held accountable. We will deliver in opposition on our promises, as we did when we were in government. On our watch, failure will not go unnoticed or unpunished.

I move,

That the Parliament regrets that for the last two years the SNP government has presided over a series of failures on a range of education indicators, including teacher numbers and class sizes; believes that there are fundamental challenges that must be addressed in order to tackle the growing crisis in Scottish education, and therefore calls on the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to take immediate action to rebuild the bond of trust between central and local government and establish a constructive working relationship with local authorities so that schools can deliver the best possible outcomes for Scottish education and young people, to bring fresh impetus to the implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence and the new national qualifications, providing teachers with the clarity, training and resources that they urgently require to implement the changes, and to focus on the key issue of teacher numbers, giving new teachers the career opportunities that they deserve and delivering effective workforce planning for the future.

09:36

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): I have had warmer welcomes, but I approach this task in the constructive and listening manner in which I approach all my tasks.

I pay tribute to my predecessor Fiona Hyslop, who has been a tremendous cabinet secretary. What the First Minister said was entirely true, but I will add something that members should remember. I take exception to only two things that have been said in the chamber. First, Tavish Scott said that he spoke for parents in Scotland. With respect, we all speak for parents in Scotland, and those who are best able to do so are those who have young children and are watching them growing up and working. If Tavish Scott speaks for parents, so did Fiona Hyslop, and she not only spoke for them but acted, worked and delivered for them.

Secondly, I note that there has been great admiration for my writing. I am tempted to issue my collected works. It would certainly make the job of David Maddox and political researchers easier if they had all my texts in one place. It would also make my life easier, as I would hear my words quoted in full, rather than partially. I was, for

example, interested to hear the remarks that I allegedly wrote about COSLA. Those remarks were made in a column for the TESS—I enjoyed my time as a columnist for the TESS over three years—in the context of the closure of rural schools: a programme that was being pursued with some vigour, I am sad to say, by the previous Administration. I am glad, therefore, that my prescience and support led to the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill, which was passed unanimously in this chamber—I regard the campaign on that as a success.

We should now start from where we actually are, not from where people think we are. Since devolution, the Scottish Parliament has demonstrated its long and sustained commitment to Scottish education. The Parliament has a commitment and an ambition to retain our long-standing international reputation for excellence.

As we approach the second decade of this century, we know that our education system works well, but we all agree that we need it to be better if we are to compete with the best in the world. Today, as I speak, hundreds of thousands of children are being taught—and being taught well—by tens of thousands of teachers in thousands of schools throughout the country. Scottish education does its job well. Our job in the chamber is to support it and to help it to do better, and that is the task that I take on with my colleagues.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Will the minister take an intervention?

Michael Russell: One moment please, I want to get going.

Margaret Smith: The minister has been going for three minutes.

Michael Russell: Well, I intend to get going; members should not doubt that.

In 2003, the previous Administration launched its national debate on education, which was supported by all the political parties and the Education Committee. Ambitious ideas were developed and then introduced under curriculum for excellence. We shared an almost unprecedented consensus across Parliament that the principles and values of curriculum for excellence were and are right for our children and young people. They are right for Scotland and they meet our ambition.

What is our ambition? As I have said, it is to have a world-beating education service that draws together pre-schools, schools, colleges and universities, with a commitment to keep moving to achieve the highest standards for those who are within the system.

Of course, there is still work to do, and it is deeply irresponsible of politicians to make a crisis

out of a problem. Using that language debases the work of all those thousands of professionals.

Margaret Smith: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Russell: No, not at the moment.

The evidence shows that this has been a year of successful achievement for pupils and their teachers. Together, they have delivered record exam results. Entries for highers and advanced highers rose by 3.2 per cent and 4.2 per cent respectively, despite falling school rolls. Pass rates at higher and advanced higher level are at a record high. Standard grade pass rates are at their highest since 2000. That is not a crisis.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): If that is not a crisis, and things are so hunky-dory, why was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning sacked from her post?

Michael Russell: Things might not be hunky-dory, but we are not in a crisis.

Members: Oh!

Michael Russell: Well, as everyone keeps saying this morning, I like to use language accurately. We do not have a crisis in Scottish education; we have problems to solve. If Mike Rumbles would like to be part of the solution I welcome him, but if he is not part of the solution he is part of the problem.

I will give some more examples. Latest comparisons from the 2006-07 school year show that in Scotland, 69.8 per cent of pupils achieved the equivalent of a GCSE pass in English compared with 60.2 per cent in England, 57 per cent of Scottish pupils achieved a similar standard in a science subject compared with only 51.3 per cent in England, and 48.6 per cent of Scottish pupils achieved that standard in a modern language compared with only 30.9 per cent in England. We can and must keep improving, but we need to use the right language to describe where we are.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I entirely agree with the cabinet secretary that many schools and teachers are doing a fantastic job. How does he react to some of the criticisms of Scottish Qualifications Authority markers, who say that there is a real problem with some of those pass marks?

Michael Russell: I want to address that and, of course, we will have debates and discussions. I was a member of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee for four years during the first session of Parliament, and I always take such issues seriously. However, I want to ensure that we solve

problems and do not just magnify them for political purposes. That is my aim.

It is quite clear that every sector has a crucial role to play in improving the learning of our children and young people. Preparing a young person for learning begins before they are born, which is why we must not forget the important roles that are played by health professionals, social workers and those who support parents to give our children the best start in life. I look forward to meeting those professionals. I will work closely with the Minister for Children and Early Years, who has done a fantastic job on implementing the early years framework, which we developed jointly with COSLA. We also have to embed the getting it right for every child approach—which we will have a chance to talk about this afternoon—in the work of every professional and practitioner who works with children and young people.

The provision of timely, proportionate and appropriate early intervention is the key principle of additional support for learning. The ASL legislation provides the framework for schools to deliver such support for children and young people.

Robert Brown: How can the Government do all those things with 2,000 fewer teachers? Will the cabinet secretary address the issue of teacher numbers, which is the key issue of the debate?

Michael Russell: Of course I will address the point, and I will do so in collaboration with local authorities. I have started that process. I make this point to Mr Brown, because he is a sophisticated thinker on these matters: we should ensure that we do not always lean on inputs; we must also look at outputs. I am happy to debate the issue with local authorities, in the chamber and elsewhere, and I will do so on the basis that we are delivering better and better education.

I will now address curriculum for excellence. We have heard a great deal of scaremongering this morning, and no doubt we are going to hear more, but I will listen to teachers in the classroom. Yesterday, I was in Inverkeithing, where I had a discussion with a range of teachers in their classrooms. Three of them said that curriculum for excellence is doing just what they want. It is making their job a job that they want to do.

Margaret Smith: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Russell: No.

I go back to what Larry Flanagan, the education convener of the EIS, said in September 2009:

“Curriculum for Excellence offers an opportunity to regain professional control of teaching and learning—a change, certainly, in contrast to the over-prescriptive practice of the

last decade, and a challenge too, but not one that should overwhelm teachers.”

It is right to ensure that professional people have the tools that they need for their job. It is right to encourage and help them to develop. Every good teacher I know—and I know many good teachers—wants the challenges of curriculum for excellence and they want to get it right.

Margaret Smith: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: No. The member has made her point and I want to make mine.

That is why there is a management board of 17 members from the profession, four of whom are from the teacher unions. I will meet them shortly. No major decision on the progress of curriculum for excellence has been made without the recommendation of the management board members, and I will seek their views. In particular, I welcome the involvement of several representatives from the teaching unions, including School Leaders Scotland, in the management board’s qualifications governing group, which will oversee development of the new qualifications, including the literacy and numeracy awards. For the first time since devolution, all teachers will be responsible for improving the literacy and numeracy of all children, and will support their success in gaining those awards.

Of course, I recognise that there are concerns. There must be time to prepare children for the new awards, and we must ensure that the new qualifications are robust and challenging and demonstrate our commitment to raising standards. I will discuss those concerns with the professionals, parents and pupils.

Let us just inject a fact into the scaremongering. I note that the first children who will be presented for the new qualifications are currently in primary 7. There is ample time, commitment and enthusiasm to develop the detail, engage extensively and get the proposals right before the first qualifications are received in 2013. I will not sign off on any proposals until I am satisfied that they will improve national standards and are workable. I will discuss with the profession at every stage. Significant resources are already being provided for curriculum for excellence. It is the future. We should be getting behind it and ensuring that it works rather than trying to undermine it in the way that I have heard it undermined this morning.

Margaret Smith: The cabinet secretary is accusing us of scaremongering, but in my speech I was careful to allude to the fact that it was the EIS, the SSTA and eminent people like Lindsay Paterson who have raised concerns. I was also very clear about the fact that we support

curriculum for excellence, and we do not want it to fail.

The Presiding Officer: Minister, I must ask you to close.

Michael Russell: Then we are all on the same page, so let us ensure that we all work together to get it right. I look forward to that.

I will finish on the issue of class sizes. I am passionately committed to the question of class sizes, not because it is abstract but because it will make a difference. I am certain that we are making progress, and I will continue to drive it forward in partnership with others. That is what we need to do.

We need to have ambition, we need to focus and we need to ensure that we make achievements, but let us use the right language. Across the Parliament, across the sector and across Scotland, there is huge commitment and enthusiasm. We are delivering and we will go on delivering. Let us deliver education for Scotland in the way that the current Government has done and our predecessors did not.

I move amendment S3M-5334.2, to leave out from “regrets” to end and insert:

“recognises the progress of Scottish education under successive devolved administrations; further recognises the need to ensure effective delivery in every education sector in order to continue such progress; believes that the full and active participation of all stakeholders, particularly teachers, parents and pupils, and, of course, local authorities, is essential to achieving the best outcome including smaller class sizes, and agrees to continue to take such issues forward in pursuit of national educational excellence.”

09:48

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I welcome the new cabinet secretary to his position. From previous debates when I shadowed him on the environment, I know that we will have robust exchanges that reflect our political differences. However, I trust that, when we agree, we will be able to work constructively together in the interests of Scottish education across a wide and challenging portfolio.

In the four weeks since I became Labour’s education spokesperson, I have met many people across the range of portfolio responsibilities. Although some of them might have been critical of various aspects of Scottish Government policy, almost all of them said that the previous cabinet secretary, Fiona Hyslop, had shown a willingness to listen and had made them feel that she was firmly on the side of the education sector. While she was in post, she demonstrated her personal commitment to taking education forward in Scotland. I wish her well in her new brief, and

hope that the incoming minister will show a similar commitment.

A partisan approach to the debate would be to use the statistics that came out last Friday as a lever to give the SNP Government a good kicking. It is tempting to do that but, given that we have a new cabinet secretary in post, I have decided instead to spell out the things that he needs to put at the top of his in-tray. Labour's amendment highlights what we see as one of the most urgent tasks—retaining in the teaching profession the outstanding young teachers who are either unemployed or scrabbling around for temporary work.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)
(Con): I wonder whether Mr McNulty was here last week at First Minister's question time when, as I recall, his leader rubbished a plan for an early retirement scheme for Scotland's teachers. What is the difference between the scheme that Mr McNulty proposes and the one that the Government talked about?

Des McNulty: If the member listens to what I have to say, I will make that clear.

I have a letter from a constituent of mine who is a post-probationary teacher in which she describes how her life has been put on hold while she seeks work and what impact that has had on her family. Many of her counterparts are unsure whether they will find a job here or be forced to look elsewhere or even leave the profession. In the current economic circumstances, uncertainty over unemployment is not unique to post-probationary teachers, but it cannot be in Scotland's interests to have so many well-trained teachers left without work when we know from the demographics of the profession that they will be needed soon. Currently, 24 per cent of the teacher workforce is aged 56 or over, which is a demographic time bomb that will explode in the none-too-distant future. If we lose a substantial proportion of current post-probationers and impose savage cuts on those who are being offered training places, we could end up with a crisis in education whose consequences would dwarf the problems that we face currently.

There is evidence that many teachers who are nearing the age of retirement would welcome the possibility of early release, given some pension protection. I strongly suspect that a significant number of older teachers are not yet ready for retirement and would welcome the possibility of handing over their full-time classroom responsibilities to a younger colleague, while using their experience and skills in a different way, possibly on a part-time basis. The current winding-down arrangements that were agreed as part of the McCrone deal are very rigid and were designed for different circumstances. Surely,

through negotiations between employers, trade unions and the Government, those arrangements could be made more flexible in the interests of the profession and Scottish education.

The report of the literacy commission, which will be published tomorrow, will highlight strong evidence that targeted one-to-one support for pupils who have difficulty in gaining literacy and numeracy skills, as pioneered in West Dunbartonshire, and the nurture approach that is being practised in disadvantaged areas in Glasgow, provide huge benefits to the pupils and families who have to overcome the biggest barriers in accessing educational opportunities that most children and adults get as a matter of course. If we could draw on the expertise of older teachers to address pupils' needs where they are most pressing, while creating employment for young teachers, surely that would be a prize worth having. We know that we are not making progress on narrowing the attainment gap, which we all want to happen. Surely we should use the skills of the available teaching workforce to make an impact by reducing the opportunity gap while providing young teachers with the opportunity and security that they need to commit their future to Scottish education.

Last week, the Scottish Government suggested that local authorities could capitalise the costs of an early retirement scheme in the form of borrowing, a suggestion that COSLA found unacceptable. My suggestion is for a properly planned and resourced scheme that would be targeted particularly, although not exclusively, at authorities and areas with high concentrations of deprivation and where attainment levels are not as high as they are elsewhere. We need to do the best that we can for children in such areas. Any additional resources that come from the Scottish Government would be used to put teachers' skills to use where they are most needed. Surely we can all support that. There would need to be guarantees that those who are retiring or winding down would be replaced by new teachers.

I am sure that the Scottish Government will want to talk to COSLA about how existing resources are used, anyway. For that reason, I cannot be specific at this point about how much extra resource might be needed to produce a viable and effective scheme. There might well be actuarial benefits in replacing older teachers with newly qualified ones who have 40 years of contributions to the teachers pension scheme ahead of them. However, I am clear that we need to do something to prevent new teachers from drifting away, to apply the skills of the existing workforce in the most effective way and to raise attainment standards where they are falling furthest behind.

The cabinet secretary will want to make progress on class sizes and we share that aspiration. Indeed, nearly all the progress that has been made on class sizes in the past 10 years was made under Labour ministers. However, class sizes should not be the only touchstone against which success or failure is judged. The work of John McLaren has been rightly criticised by some experts over the way in which it made comparisons between the Scottish and other systems, but it is a wake-up call that the superiority of Scottish education over that south of the border or elsewhere in Europe can no longer be assumed. The transition to the curriculum for excellence must be properly managed. The concerns that have been voiced by the ex-president of School Leaders Scotland cannot be swept aside. In particular, from the point of view of secondary teachers, there has been a lack of clarity about what is expected of them in implementing the curriculum for excellence and there are concerns about whether the scheme of assessment, which is due for introduction in 2010, will be ready on time.

Will the cabinet secretary match the minimum funding guarantee that the Labour Government at Westminster has put in place, which has been set at 2.1 per cent for the next financial year and which will protect schools south of the border from the kind of budget proposals that local authorities the length and breadth of Scotland are considering?

There are many other items that I would like to place in the top tier of the cabinet secretary's in-tray. I have not had time to speak about higher education, pre-fives provision or child protection arrangements. I have left out the concerns of the colleges and said nothing about school buildings or kinship care. However, I have set out a serious proposal for consideration and highlighted briefly the most urgent tasks that the cabinet secretary faces. I hope that my approach will be matched by an equally constructive response.

I move amendment S3M-5334.1, to insert at end:

“, and calls on the Scottish Government to introduce a properly planned and resourced scheme for early retirement and more flexible winding down arrangements for older teachers, linked to guarantees that teachers released from the classroom will be replaced by post-probationary teachers.”

09:56

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): For the second time this morning, I welcome Michael Russell to his new position as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. As has been said, Mr Russell is well known for his combative style and it will be interesting to see

how that develops as he tries to make progress with education policy on what we hope will be a consensual basis, although I must say that the signs so far are not encouraging. He is of course no longer employed in his previous task of steering through the national conversation and the SNP's plans for a referendum, but perhaps, without his cybernaut employee blogging abuse all the hours in the day at taxpayers' expense, he was deemed to be no longer properly supported to perform that role.

I will say a few words again about the outgoing cabinet secretary, Fiona Hyslop. It is fair to say that Fiona did not have the happiest time as education secretary, although she did some good work. In particular, I pay tribute to her for introducing legislation to help to protect rural schools, an issue in which I had a close interest. As Margaret Smith said, the failures in education policy were not the failures of the cabinet secretary alone but those of the entire Government. The concordat that was negotiated by Fiona Hyslop's Cabinet colleagues left her without the tools to deliver the wholly unrealistic SNP manifesto pledges. However, we have a new minister and surely it is time for a fresh start. Scotland needs not so much a change of face at the top of education but a change of direction.

The Lib Dem motion details some of the well-known failures in education policy. We know that the policy on class size reductions is unachievable. We have calculated that, on current terms, it will be 2095 before it is delivered. We know that the SNP has been falling down on delivering new school buildings and that the Scottish Futures Trust has yet to fund a single project. We know that teacher numbers are falling, despite the SNP promise to maintain them. More worrying still, we know that, despite substantial increased investment in education in recent years, standards have been flatlining. That point is acknowledged by education experts. We are slipping down the international comparison tables and it is now clear that school education in England is consistently out-performing that in Scotland. The current situation cannot be allowed to go on.

Mike Rumbles: Murdo Fraser's amendment refers to the Swedish model of education, which advocates a voucher scheme. Are the Conservatives in favour of education vouchers and is that what Parliament would be supporting if we supported the amendment?

Murdo Fraser: I was just about to cover the very point that Mr Rumbles discusses. He will notice that our amendment highlights some of the fresh thinking that we have heard from the new cabinet secretary in the past. We are interested in exploring some of those ideas further with the

cabinet secretary. That does not necessarily mean that we are as yet convinced by some of them, but we are open to persuasion.

We need fresh thinking as well as a fresh face. In that context, the appointment of Michael Russell augurs well, given all that he has written in the past about education. I was very interested to see that, in the tour de force that is the now famous—or notorious—book “Grasping the Thistle”, which he co-authored with Dennis MacLeod, Mr Russell was prepared to embrace radical new thinking on education. Let me quote just a few extracts:

“we want to rethink the prevailing Scottish orthodoxy, which continues to hold that health and education – and other services – must all be delivered virtually exclusively by the public sector ... Many commentators have noted the success in Sweden of education vouchers, and the debate about their utility in Scotland would be instructive, particularly if shorn of ideological prejudice.

The consumer – the child along with his or her parents, the young person seeking to go to college or university and the mature student – would be able to choose the best facilities for their particular needs, and be able to force new provision onto the market by means of their purchasing power, provided by the state.”

My particular favourite is:

“Choice and diversity are the hallmarks of a mature and confident society and such a system would ensure the emergence of new types of private provision, which are not seen as exclusive or class ridden.”

Those words are music to my ears and those of my Conservative colleagues.

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

Murdo Fraser: No. I want to develop the point. If I have time later, I will give way.

For some time, we have been interested in the Swedish style of education provision, which allows parents and other providers to set up their own schools. On this side of the chamber, we have always felt that there is a lot to be learned from the small, northern European countries such as Sweden that are part of the fabled arc of prosperity. I am delighted that the SNP now takes a similar view. Of course, the result in Sweden has been to drive up standards not only in the independent sector but in the state sector. Perhaps that is the recipe that Scotland requires.

I raised my eyebrows on reading that the provision could be provided privately, which I assume means by profit-making bodies. Until now, the Scottish Conservatives have believed that there is an argument for allowing new schools to be created by groups of parents, charities and churches and other faith groups, but even we had not accepted that such institutions could be run by private bodies, for profit. We may be sceptical on the matter, but I say to the cabinet secretary that we are open to his persuasive charm on the issue.

Let him come and sell us the idea of private provision of education in Scotland, funded by the taxpayer but run for profit by the private sector, and we will not let our ideological prejudices get in the way of a mature and constructive discussion.

Michael Russell: Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: I would be delighted to hear what the cabinet secretary has to say.

Michael Russell: The member read the extracts accurately, because I was asking for a debate, not advocating an idea. Given that we all want to be shorn of ideological prejudice, will he abandon the ideological prejudice against another thing that makes Sweden so successful: independence? If he will do that, we are moving forward.

Murdo Fraser: I am deeply disappointed that so early in his tenure of office—less than an hour after being appointed as cabinet secretary—

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): He caught you out.

Murdo Fraser: If only he did, Mr Paterson.

The cabinet secretary is already being whipped firmly into line by his new colleagues. Obviously, the First Minister had a firm word with Mr Russell before his appointment. The First Minister must have said, “Renounce all your past beliefs.” Mr Russell is like a latter-day Archbishop Cranmer, being dragged to the stake, renouncing all his past conversions. I am deeply unhappy that the cabinet secretary has taken the stance that he has this morning.

Jeremy Purvis: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): No, the member is winding up.

Murdo Fraser: Given that our amendment uses the cabinet secretary’s words, I am sure that he will have no problem in voting for it. I reiterate the call, which we have made in the past and which has been supported by the whole Parliament, for primary school testing. My colleague Elizabeth Smith will say more about that later in the debate.

The one thing that is clear about Scottish education is that we cannot go on as we are. The appointment of a new minister gives us an opportunity to make a fresh start. We cannot have another two and a half years like the period that has just gone by, in which no progress is made on standards and there are failures in a whole range of policy areas.

I move amendment S3M-5334.3 to leave out from “regrets” and insert:

“welcomes the appointment of Michael Russell to the post of Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning; believes, like the Cabinet Secretary, that ‘choice and diversity are the hallmarks of a mature and confident

society' in the provision of state-funded education and that Scotland can learn from successful models in other European countries such as Sweden; trusts that such creative thinking will not be stifled by the Cabinet Secretary's promotion to higher Ministerial Office, and calls upon him to implement the terms of motion S3M-3164 as passed unanimously by the Parliament on 7 January 2009 affirming the need to ensure that pupils in Scotland are properly schooled and tested in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy by the end of primary 7."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. The opening speakers have used up most of the spare time that was available to us, so members will have to stick to six minutes.

10:04

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):

"Dithering, drifting – whatever you call it - the lack of focus"

from the Government

"is probably going to damage the education of thousands of children".

It continues to show

"a poverty of ambition for Scotland's children."

That is how Councillor Bhatia, the executive member for education on Scottish Borders Council, sums up her feelings, which are mirrored in local authorities across the country, on how education is faring on the SNP's watch.

Sadly, the Government's latest solution seems to be to wrest still more control away from councils. Far from coming as a surprise, the threats of the past week to

"nationalise every school in Scotland"

represent just one more example of the SNP's power grab.

We have seen it all before. The SNP's vision of localism is to turn local government into some kind of puppet theatre, in which local authorities are reduced to doing central Government's bidding but kept as a buffer to take the flak when it all goes wrong. We have seen it with the SNP's idea for a new taxation system—a local income tax in which rates are set nationally—and, all too obviously, we have seen it in the historic concordat that it pushed on local councils when it came into office. The Government says that the concordat is based on "mutual respect and partnership", but that is only as long as councils do what they are told. It is a partnership that restricts councils' control over their budgets and decision making yet imposes unworkable, unfeasible and unwanted demands over their spending decisions.

Michael Russell: I do not recognise that description of the concordat. Does the member think that Liberal Democrat councils and councils in which Liberal Democrats are jointly in power

would recognise it, given their willing signing up to the concordat and their great partnership in it?

Alison McInnes: Indeed. The SNP's default position is always to bluster and blame. A little mature reflection might benefit its members today.

One cannot deny that the SNP has developed a clear strategy. As Margaret Smith said, it is to centralise the power, localise the blame. No doubt it is an attractive strategy for the man who is sat comfortably in Bute house. However, as the past week or so has shown, the strategy cannot last. It is a strategy that will inevitably cause unrest, resentment and downright rebellion among local authorities. Councils will neither accept unreasonable demands within unmanageable constraints nor be bullied, blamed and belittled. Even the most loyal SNP councillors will begin to revolt. They have begun to see that the Government does not have—indeed has never had—the "unprecedented respect" for local government that it claims to have.

Of course, most headlines this week focused on the failures of Fiona Hyslop, but we should all be clear: the SNP's failures on education will not stop just because Mike Russell has taken charge. Everything will not suddenly become rosy just because we have a new cabinet secretary. Things will get better only if Mike Russell commits to overseeing a fundamental change not only in Government policy but in Government attitude.

The relationship between local authorities and central Government has to be rebuilt. The SNP has to regain councils' trust. It also has to begin to demonstrate the respect that it claims to have and look again at the demands that it is making on local authorities in terms of education. It has to appreciate that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution and that headline-grabbing promises do not necessarily equate to practical policy commitments.

Over the past few days, I have spoken to a number of councils about their current situation. The overriding message is clear: councils do not have enough money to meet the SNP's pledges and, even if they did, the money could be better spent on other things.

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): Will the member give way?

Alison McInnes: No. I would like to make progress.

The Government's white elephant pledge on free school meals for all primary 1 to primary 3 children is a classic example of the issue. Instead of investing in areas where a real difference could be made, it prefers to direct councils to spend some of their already overstretched budget on buying lunches for rich kids. "Warped priorities" is

one councillor's succinct description of the policy. In any case, there simply is not enough funding to meet the target. One council warned me that not only is it unable to allocate enough money to deliver the meals but the rest of the schools budget may face future cuts due to tightening finances if it has to maintain the funding that it has allocated.

On class sizes, the Government needs to quickly rethink its attitude. How can it have the gall to criticise local authorities for not making progress towards delivering smaller class sizes in primary schools, when it knows full well that the money is simply not available to do so? One councillor explained the situation in their local authority to me very simply:

"If the government doesn't provide increased funding, then reducing class sizes to 18 is simply impossible. And if the government does provide the extra money that's needed, there is no physical school space available, and no prospect of meeting the target within the Government's stated timeframe of this Parliament."

The scale of the task that the Government is demanding is easy to overlook. One of our smaller councils has calculated that, if it were to reduce all P1 to P3 classes to 18 and provide all the pupils with a free school lunch, the cost would be equivalent to 1 per cent of its total budget for this year. That is before it counts in the cost of improvements to kitchen facilities or expansion of school buildings, both of which would be needed. Things are even more startling when one looks at a large, chronically underfunded authority such as Aberdeen City Council, where the cost of meeting the targets is more like 9 per cent of its annual budget. Clearly, that money could be better spent elsewhere.

The nub of the problem is this: while the Government has spent its time arguing with local authorities, it has forgotten about what is important in education. It has let the curriculum for excellence stall—it has failed to provide the necessary funding and has still not clarified how the curriculum is to be reflected in examinations. Local authorities want to be able to fund the best possible education for their children, but they are not getting the support, funding or freedom that they need from Government.

I truly hope that those developments can be reversed and that the arrival of a new cabinet secretary will herald a change in the Government's education policy. I hope that today the cabinet secretary will commit himself to rebuilding the relationship with local authorities, and to working with them, in a genuine partnership, to correct the problems of the past two years, to review what the real priorities for education in Scotland ought to be and to establish how best to meet them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but there is insufficient time to allow members to go beyond their time limit.

10:10

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In the past 10 days, I have visited Arran high school, Dykesmains primary school and Garnock academy in my constituency, where there are no signs of the chaos and crisis that the Opposition has talked about so melodramatically in recent weeks. What I saw on my visits were dedicated teachers and committed pupils.

Margaret Smith talked about the reduction in the number of teachers in employment, but there are a number of reasons for that. First, due to Labour's recession, from which the United Kingdom is the only OECD country still to emerge, the number of teachers taking early retirement has fallen sharply. That means that fewer places are available for young teachers when they finish their probationary year. I assume that no one would sensibly argue that the Government has powers on taxation and borrowing that would allow us to recover from the recession more quickly, as we would wish to do.

Secondly, as I am sure both Lib Dem and Labour members are fully aware, required teacher numbers must be planned for at least four years in advance for PGDE students and seven years in advance for BEd students. For example, if the Government assessed that it needed a certain number of teachers by 2016, recruitment interviews for those teachers would begin in 2010, training would begin in 2011 and the probationary year would end in 2013. Another three years should be added for BEd teachers. That means that many of the teachers who cannot currently find full-time employment were recruited at the behest of the Liberal-Labour Government, in the years before the SNP came to power. I ask Des McNulty, who has left the chamber, and Margaret Smith to admit that their parties have got their sums wrong. The proportion of probationary teachers in full-time employment fell from 64 per cent in 2004 to 40 per cent before the SNP took over.

Robert Brown: I am intrigued by the member's arithmetical calculations. I hope that he will accept that the previous Executive produced 53,000 teachers. The objective of the current Government was to hold on to those. What has happened to the 2,000 posts that have been lost? How is that fall explained by an increase in the number of teachers who are still in post because they have not retired?

Kenneth Gibson: The Liberal Democrats have some cheek to talk about teacher numbers. Imagine if the £800 million cut that they suggested

be imposed last February had been implemented—what impact would that have had on local government, services and teacher numbers? Because of the rank opportunism of the Liberal Democrats in this area, as in so many others, in the recent Glasgow North East by-election they were defeated by Solidarity and outpolled by more than 2:1 by the British National Party. The party is clearly marginalised and is going nowhere.

Between 1997 and the present day, the UK Labour Government has appointed no fewer than eight education ministers. During its years in power, the Labour Party in Scotland appointed five education ministers, one of whom lasted less than six months. Considering that that rapid transition was during the period 2003-04, would it be fair to say that it was the reason for the rather spectacular miscalculation of teacher numbers that I have mentioned?

Perhaps the Labour Party has forgotten about its rather shameful management of Scotland's education system in previous years. I recall members in the first session of Parliament calling for the resignation of the Labour Minister for Children and Education over the shambolic SQA scandal, in which thousands of Scottish students' exam papers were lost or left unmarked. When the current Government took over in 2007, the Labour Party left 260,000 pupils in schools in poor or bad condition. Instead of attacking the Government, perhaps the Opposition should heap praise on it for removing 100,000 pupils from such schools.

Mr McLetchie touched on the early retirement package that the Scottish Government has announced. Des McNulty's change of heart on the issue is remarkable. On 26 November, he said:

"The SNP Government needs to put new money in for more teachers jobs to get new teachers into work. Experienced teachers play an important role in our schools, not least as mentors for those entering the profession. The scheme will take experienced teachers out of the classroom."

We can see clearly that there has been a U-turn on the issue within a few days.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Kenneth Gibson: I would like to take an intervention from Ken Macintosh, but I cannot, as I have a long way to go. I apologise for that.

Despite the Opposition's narrow and unfounded criticisms of the Scottish Government, it has neglected to mention the many successes, such as the introduction of free school meals. The Liberals did not vote against that measure, but they have castigated it opportunistically again today.

Jeremy Purvis: No.

Kenneth Gibson: I am pretty sure that you abstained on the measure in committee.

Jeremy Purvis: No.

Kenneth Gibson: All right, so Liberal Democrat members do not think that poor and young kids should get free school meals.

We have also abolished the graduate endowment. The Tories promised to do that for almost a decade, before turning turtle and opposing the legislation.

Jeremy Purvis: You have a long way to go.

Kenneth Gibson: Not as long as you have in order to raise your vote above 2 per cent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Members should use full names.

Kenneth Gibson: The only reason why the Liberal Democrats were fifth in my constituency in the previous Scottish Parliament election was that there were not six candidates.

We have provided £30 million extra for university and college students and a £1.25 billion programme of central funding to rebuild or refurbish schools. We have increased the proportion of young people entering further or higher education from 56 to 62 per cent. With reference to higher education spending, which has increased from 3.73 to 3.87 per cent of the budget—by £50 million a year—under this Government, Professor Anthony Cohen, former principal of Queen Margaret University, stated on "Newsnight" on 10 September:

"This Government has I think manifested an extraordinary commitment to the universities since they came to power. The taskforce itself was the closest engagement which any Government in my recollection has had with the universities".

The Scottish Government has an excellent record on education, and the Scottish education system is something of which we should all be rightly proud. Perhaps in the future I should take a closer look at what the Liberal Democrats are saying on some aspects of education. However, I find it difficult to do so, as they are a sore element in Scottish politics.

10:16

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I want to make two central policy points and to analyse some of what has happened recently. I will focus my remarks on teacher numbers and the local delivery of education.

I feel personally the effects of the collapse in teacher numbers that has taken place. In 2003, I was given responsibility, as the Minister for

Education and Young People, for growing teacher numbers, which was not an easy task. I was assisted in that process by Euan Robson and Robert Brown. The then Administration had a clear purpose in trying to grow teacher numbers. With the phenomenon of falling school rolls ahead of us, if we could successfully grow teacher numbers and hold them steady at 53,000, an historic opportunity would open up to cut class sizes, to wrap other resources around kids in need and to give headteachers flexibility to deploy staffing in a way that we had never seen before. I regret that that opportunity appears to have been squandered.

Because we were successful in growing teacher numbers, which was not easy, the collapse that has taken place represents a spectacular failure in public policy. I want to look at why that has happened. In only two short years, the progress of the previous four years has been virtually wiped out.

Fiona Hyslop could have done many things better, but the whole blame cannot be laid at her door. In my view, the principal cause of what has happened is the massive policy error that the SNP made when it became the Administration. It is an error of the whole Government, but Alex Salmond and John Swinney, who masterminded much of what has happened, had a major part to play. The problem is rooted in the Government's approach to the concordat. It was a fundamental error for the Government to invest everything in the concordat, putting all of its eggs in one delivery basket.

I remember well the announcement of the concordat and being told how it would give rise to a new generation of splendid relationships with local government in perpetuity. I turned to the person sitting next to me and said that the arrangement would not last—and so it has turned out. Why has that happened? When the concordat was announced, I knew that delivering national priorities would be difficult. There is a genuine problem for all Governments across the world—not just the SNP Government, the Government of which I was part or the UK Government. Where a Government does not control the means of delivery of its policies from the centre, it has challenges to overcome.

I remember well that, when driving up teacher numbers, I had the complete support of education professionals, directors of education and conveners of education committees. I was bound to have that support, as my colleagues and I were putting money into their service. However, I knew that many council leaders did not share our view of education as a priority—that was just a fact. I got a lot of feedback suggesting that education had done well under the Scottish Administration at the time, and under the Labour Government since

1997, and that it was time for other services to get more cash. That was the view and the belief that was emerging. It was suggested, understandably, that it was time for roads and transport, for street lighting, or for parks and recreation. However, that revealed a massive misunderstanding of what the then Executive was about. It was a national priority for us to improve teacher numbers as the basis for future national success, and we were not going to be thwarted in that endeavour.

Keith Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Peter Peacock: With respect to Keith Brown, I have very little time to develop the points that I wish to make.

Council leaders did not like the financial mechanisms that we put in place to ensure that the cash got to the schools. What would the point have been if I had gone to Cabinet and secured extra money from among colleagues to put into the education budget at the top, if, underneath, money was being shuffled out into other services? There would have been no point in that at all.

If council leaders did not share my priority—they were perfectly entitled not to share it, being elected on a different basis from those of us who serve at the national level—what would the chances be of my delivering the teacher number targets? Without the financial levers and devices to do it, there would be no or very little chance indeed. That was the classic error that the SNP made on coming into Government. It gave away all the levers. Those levers existed for a reason, and they exist in government in most of Europe and the western world.

Keith Brown: Will the member give way?

Peter Peacock: I beg your pardon, but I want to continue and I am running out of time.

That is the root cause of the problem. If the Government has national commitments but no means of ensuring their delivery, it should not expect to deliver them. Changing ministers will not change that situation. A change in policy is seemingly being considered, potentially taking education away from councils, but there is no reason to believe that the civil service will deliver education any better than councils.

I would have little hesitation in changing the methods of local delivery. There are significantly too many education authorities. I would reduce their number and widen the span of command of the best dozen or so really talented local education leaders. I would focus on devolving more powers to headteachers and on the exercise of real discretion where possible. I believe that a case can be made for the 100 per cent funding of core education functions by central Government.

Incidentally, that would bring huge council tax benefits in its wake. That is still possible with local decision making by councillors and, potentially, through councillors working in partnership with others.

Until the Government recovers some of the levers that it requires in order to deliver, the fundamental problems will continue and Mike Russell will not be able to reverse them. Will tensions between local and central Government be created? Yes, almost inevitably. That is not always a bad or wrong thing, but it is something that we must come to terms with. There are international lessons that tell us that Governments require national levers to deliver national priorities.

10:23

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): That was a very thoughtful speech—I wish that I had more time to focus on some of the points that Peter Peacock made.

The motion refers to the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Mike Russell. I congratulate the minister on his appointment and I wish him well. It is important to pay tribute to the achievements of his predecessor, Fiona Hyslop, as other members have already done. During Fiona's time in office, the principle of free education was re-established by abolishing the graduate endowment tuition fee. She delivered the introduction of grants in further education and the extension of higher education to young asylum seekers. We have witnessed the delivery of free and nutritious school meals to children in primaries 1, 2 and 3—and I am worried by the comments from Liberal Democrats about attempts to wreck that. There has also been progress in providing cash for kinship carers, which the previous Executive fundamentally failed to provide. I will not attempt to gloss over the challenges on teacher numbers and class sizes—I will come to those issues. I am sure, however, that politicians of all parties are mature enough to acknowledge Fiona Hyslop's achievements, of which there are many. On a personal level, I thank her for the opportunity to be one of her parliamentary liaison officers.

Despite those achievements, the motion refers to

“the growing crisis in Scottish education”.

I am disappointed that the Liberal Democrats used those words, which I find ill considered and inappropriate. I hope that they will reflect on the use of such words, through which the Liberal Democrats undermine confidence in our education system and ignore the excellent work and commitment of pupils and teachers in schools across Scotland.

Margaret Smith: Will the member give way?

Bob Doris: I apologise, but I do not have time.

I do not believe that that was the Liberal Democrats' intention, but that is what the motion does. Class sizes are at an all-time low, and that has been achieved under an SNP Government.

I will point out the flawed logic of the Liberal Democrat argument as gently as possible with this question: if there is a growing crisis in Scottish education under this Government, how serious was the crisis before May 2007, when Labour and the Liberal Democrats were in power and when class sizes were bigger? Wow—that must have been some crisis indeed. The answer is that there was no crisis in education before May 2007. Of course there was not a crisis, but—

Margaret Smith: Will the member take an intervention?

Bob Doris: I apologise, but I want to fit in all my content.

There is certainly no crisis now. In trying to score a party-political point the Liberal Democrats have overplayed their hand, and they are wrongly and needlessly damaging the reputation of our education system. As I said, I do not think that that was the intention behind their motion, but that is its result.

The motion mentions a need

“to rebuild the bond of trust between central and local government”.

I am not sure what that kind of language is trying to achieve. Perhaps the Liberal Democrats think that Mike Russell and COSLA's Pat Watters should take a blood brothers' pledge to rebuild that bond of trust. I can see it now: Mike Russell could be Huckleberry Finn to Pat Watters's Tom Sawyer in some *Boy's Own* adventure. I make light of the situation for a very good reason. By talking about rebuilding a bond of trust, the Liberal Democrats overegg their argument. To suggest that local authorities, which have all agreed to freeze the council tax for two consecutive years, do not have a working relationship—sorry, a “bond of trust”—with the Scottish Government is clearly nonsense.

It is unfair for councils to be lumped together in such a way. Is the bond of trust broken in East Lothian or Perth, where more teachers are being employed? How about the 19 local authorities where primary school class sizes fell over the past year? Is the bond of trust shattered in East Ayrshire, where there has been a 33.7 per cent increase in the number of P1 to P3 classes of 18 and under over the past year? Of course not. There are 32 local authorities, each of which has its own relationship with the Scottish Government.

Opposition parties should be promoting those relationships, not trying to undermine them.

The Scottish Government hoped that teacher numbers could be maintained in the face of falling school rolls. It has been challenging to work in partnership with local authorities to achieve that. The figures are clear, as are the challenges, and no one is trying to run away from that. Several local authorities could have and should have done better. That is a genuine frustration. However, tabloid headline-grabbing phrases like “education in crisis” and “rebuilding bonds of trust” are just that: they might deliver newspaper headlines, but they do not deliver any form of constructive opposition. I say again: I do not believe that the Liberal Democrats want to use education as a political football. There is a genuine opportunity to engage with the Scottish Government, but the Liberal Democrats’ motion has missed it. They could have provided constructive opposition, but they have chosen not to. I hope that they will reflect on that, as there is a way forward together if they choose, dare I say it, to grasp the thistle.

We have a new education minister, and there are challenges ahead. It would be more appropriate if Opposition parties were positive and constructive. We have to bear responsibilities, as a Scottish Government, and those responsibilities are clear. We must also better match the additional rights that have been extended to councils with their responsibilities better to fulfil their obligations. I wish our new cabinet secretary all the best in that challenging task.

10:29

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I begin by congratulating Mike Russell on his promotion. The new cabinet secretary faces a great challenge to deliver an education system that meets the needs and aspirations of our children and young people, not forgetting adult learners. I look forward to Mr Russell’s regular attendance at the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, and I am confident that he shares the same sense of anticipation.

I wish neither to gloat about nor pay false praise to Mr Russell’s predecessor. The truth is that Fiona Hyslop faced the almost impossible challenge of delivering a range of ill-thought-out policies in a context where many of the levers that were needed to achieve them had been given away. That is without even mentioning issues to do with poorly considered Government spending priorities. In the face of all that, Fiona Hyslop always faced an uphill struggle. The bad news for Mr Russell is that those problems persist and the failure of the Government to deliver on education is less and less tolerated each day by Scottish teachers, pupils and parents.

The amendment in the name of Michael Russell seems to be jarringly at odds with the comments about local government that Fiona Hyslop made last Friday. The Government’s carefully crafted partnership with local government is unravelling by the day and by the hour. Not just Labour-controlled councils but all councils are concerned. That will be a problem for the new cabinet secretary. However, it is important that we work together, where possible, to achieve what we all want: a significantly improved Scottish education system. Where possible, I will work with the Government to advance that cause.

The achievement of real and lasting improvements for Scottish children and young people must be at the heart of what we do. We cannot afford to let meaningless ideological objections to a particular funding policy stand in the way of improving our school estate. The failure to deliver on its pledge to match, brick for brick, the new school building levels of the previous Administration is possibly the greatest single failure of the SNP Government. The Government’s attempts to claim schools that were built by the previous Administration have been bought by no one outside the SNP.

In my constituency, the previous Administration provided additional funding for seven new primary schools and one new high school. More than 20 new schools were built throughout North Lanarkshire. What does the current Government offer to progress, brick for brick, for my constituents? One new high school in North Lanarkshire and perhaps a new primary school at some point in the future—maybe, perhaps, let us wait and see.

Let us be clear. This is not about scoring political points over the SNP, although it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid doing so; this is about a failed school building programme, which is resulting in a two-tier education system, in which some lucky pupils are taught in modern, 21st century school buildings that enhance the community, while other pupils are abandoned by the Government to be taught in substandard accommodation. Why? So that the Scottish Government does not have to concede that its SFT has delivered nothing.

I ask the cabinet secretary to be bold and to step up to the challenge right here and right now. Will he abandon the SFT and use whatever means he can, including public-private partnerships, to begin a new school building programme that will benefit pupils and communities and provide much-needed work for our beleaguered construction industry?

It is unfortunate that the SNP report card on teacher numbers is also marked with a D-minus. As we heard, teacher numbers have fallen by 2,000 during the past two years, which is having a

devastating effect on newly graduated teachers, who entered the profession on the understanding that there would be jobs for them after their probationary year.

It is not good enough for the Government to blame councils for misusing funding that it claims has been provided. The funding arrangements for Scottish councils were devised by the Government. If the arrangements are not enabling the Government to deliver on its policies, that is because one policy—the hysterical concordat—is beginning to turn to dust before SNP members' eyes. I would have thought that Mike Russell looks a little more like Worzel Gummidge, with Councillor Isabel Hutton, COSLA's education convener, as his Aunt Sally.

I am not making a cheap debating point; I am talking about real teachers, who are losing out on real jobs, and about real pupils, who are not benefiting from better teacher pupil ratios. The Government's failure to increase teacher numbers has left in tatters its manifesto pledge to reduce class sizes to 18.

The SNP remains determined to provide free school meals to all primary 1 to P3 children. I think that the money would be better used on universal breakfast club provision in Scotland, although I was struck by the much simpler request of a parent who wrote in the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland* the other week that she wanted her SNP-controlled council to provide her child with a jotter to write in. She would be happy to provide the lunch herself—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry. Your time is up.

10:35

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): I congratulate Michael Russell on his appointment as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and I was genuinely pleased to be able to vote for him this morning. It is well known that Mr Russell comes to his new post with interesting baggage. He was an education spokesman when the SNP was in opposition and he was a writer during his wilderness years, when our Parliament was much the poorer for his absence.

Kenneth Gibson: And mine.

David McLetchie: How correct. I will include Mr Gibson too. We are richer for his presence.

As shadow education spokesman, a confident Mr Russell told the SNP conference in September 2002:

"The SNP will introduce class sizes of 18 or below in the first three years of Primary, starting first in the areas of

worst deprivation but with the aim of completing the programme within five years."

Five years, indeed. When it came to the 2007 SNP manifesto, it seems that no one bothered to revise the script, and poor Fiona Hyslop was landed with one of the most ludicrous and unaffordable policies of all time. The policy was rolled out at a glacial pace and, far from taking five years to achieve, was on schedule to be achieved in 2094, just in time for my great-great-great-grandchildren to start school.

There is nothing like a sinner who repents. Sure enough, during his period of reflection Mr Russell articulated a vision of education and society that was much more in tune with my own, in which choice and diversity were celebrated, a centralised, monolithic system was rejected and models in countries such as Sweden were praised as exemplars. The question for the SNP Government on education policy, now and in the months ahead, is whether it will grasp the thistle or gag Mike Russell.

It is ironic that the Government that trumpeted its new relationship with Scotland's councils in its historic concordat declared war on the same councils only last week because of their alleged failures to meet their commitments on teacher numbers and class sizes. If we study the terms of the concordat—that discredited and deceitful document—we learn that it is true that councils acknowledged that

"specific arrangements for local authorities to maintain teacher numbers in the face of falling school rolls"

were in place. Therefore, Fiona Hyslop had a point, but only up to a point, because the policy was unaffordable at the best of times, never mind in the teeth of Labour's recession and against a backcloth of financial retrenchment. With school rolls falling, it made no sense for councils to sustain teacher numbers as a priority, given all the other competing demands on council budgets, such as care for our older and most vulnerable people. Peter Peacock made an excellent speech on the choices that councils face.

The nationally dictated class size reduction policy is dead in the water. Its original architect is Michael Russell, not Fiona Hyslop, and he should acknowledge that and start again, with a programme that is focused on raising standards, improving discipline and expanding the choice and diversity that he professes to admire.

If the cabinet secretary really wants to help councils that are grappling with their education budgets for next year, he should release councils from the equally absurd commitment in the historic concordat to provide free school meals for all children in P1, P2 and P3, including the children of parents who can well afford to feed their children

and have no need of or desire for a state subsidy. Margaret Smith and Alison McInnes were quite right to make that point—as was Karen Whitefield, although if the Labour Party had had the guts to vote the policy down we would not have been landed with this mess in the first place. We should also remember that at a meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, the Minister for Children and Early Years, Adam Ingram, acknowledged that the policy would cost councils £30 million a year. I remind the cabinet secretary that, for £30 million, our councils could employ well over 1,000 teachers and make up the shortfall about which his predecessor complained.

For the SNP Government, there is a clear choice to be made on education policy. Does it continue to follow the Stalinist, centralist model that was advocated by Fiona Hyslop and enshrined in the concordat, under which councils are simply the delivery agents of a nationally dictated programme? Or does it instead look forward to a devo-max education policy—a Scottish education system in which councils do not have a monopoly on the provision of state-funded education and we can consider establishing community school trusts and funding independent providers to enhance diversity in the provision of Gaelic-medium education or Steiner education or to promote Montessori schools, all of which struggle for support or are ignored under the current system?

Until this week, a complacent SNP Government refused to recognise the weaknesses in our education system, which were nowhere better exemplified than in last week's exchanges between the First Minister and my colleague Annabel Goldie, in which Mr Salmond dismissed and trashed the evidence of respected experts in the field on falling standards. That attitude can prevail no longer. This week's events have been a wake-up call to the SNP Government and provide an opportunity for a fresh start that we must seize—or even grasp. I hope that the cabinet secretary will do that.

10:41

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP):

I welcome Michael Russell to his role and wish him well in it. The SNP Government and Fiona Hyslop have a record to be proud of on education. It is a record of achievement and care for Scottish education that far outshines anything that went before under devolution.

Labour's first stab was Sam Galbraith, who ran the examination system into the ground with the SQA farce, thereby doing massive damage to Scotland's education system. Thousands of pupils got the wrong exam results, there was distress for all involved, there were logjams in university

applications and, as a result, there was general chaos.

Then Jack McConnell took over at education but with Europe and external relations added to the portfolio. Wendy Alexander took over lifelong learning from Henry McLeish, but it was lumped with transport and enterprise. It was like a bad episode of a bad soap opera, in which Scottish education was treated with contempt.

When Cathy Jamieson took over at education and the external relations bit was stripped out of the portfolio, there was at least a minister trying hard—if not successfully—to improve the education system, but she still did not have responsibility for tertiary education. After Wendy Alexander's slightly bizarre early morning resignation, Iain Gray took over Labour's mismanagement of Scottish higher and further education until he lost his seat at the election. Cathy Jamieson was then succeeded by Peter Peacock, who was succeeded in turn by Hugh Henry; Wendy Alexander was followed by Jim Wallace and Nicol Stephen.

That made eight Labour and two Liberal Democrat ministers over eight years whose record in the job does not stand comparison with what Fiona Hyslop achieved in two and a half years. I will give members a few examples.

In 1999, Jim Wallace said that the abolition of tuition fees was non-negotiable. He was right, but only once the SNP took power eight years later in 2007. Through eight years of Labour-Lib Dem coalition, university tuition fees stayed on the books, lurking there as the artist formerly known as the graduate endowment. Fiona Hyslop moved to abolish them within one month of taking office and they were gone eight months later.

Labour nearly destroyed our exam system. Not only did the SNP Government save and reform it, but Fiona Hyslop introduced the baccalaureate to give Scottish exams an international comparator and Scots pupils more opportunities.

The Treasury would not change the rules to allow student grants to be paid instead of loans, but the Scottish Government still managed to find an additional £30 million to pump into student support.

The Labour and Lib Dem years were years marked by failure. They were lost years for a generation of Scottish pupils, but the SNP years—though only a quarter of the time the last lot spent in office—have been years of success and achievement. We have delivered the smallest ever class sizes and the free school meals pledge—we should nourish children's bodies and minds. We have delivered on matching Labour's school building programme brick for brick. Karen Whitefield should go and speak to the puppet

master in Westminster about getting borrowing powers to build more schools and perhaps we can get on with it. We have delivered a massive increase in nursery provision, restored free education, improved funding for teachers' professional development and taken action on apprenticeships.

I will take no lessons on delivering in education from the Laurel and Hardy parties who did so much to damage Scottish education and hold back the ambitions of our school pupils. The SNP Government has pumped capital resources into our universities to start addressing the massive backlog of repairs and development that built up under the last lot, introduced the ScotAction package to help apprentices through the tough times as Labour's recession started to bite and sorted out the mess in additional support needs that the last bunch left behind. Fiona Hyslop steered the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill through the Parliament and brought in protection for rural schools.

The SNP Scottish Government has delivered real improvements, real change and real benefits to school education. It has shown that Scottish education can be a world leader again and can give Scottish pupils the advantages that we believe they deserve. All that has held Scotland back is the lack of political will that previous Administrations demonstrated and, now that things are moving in the right direction, we should keep adding momentum.

The small-minded, inward-looking petty point scoring that the motion before us exemplifies sums up what is wrong in Scotland. The ambition and determination to succeed that Fiona Hyslop showed demonstrates that we are moving Scotland in the right direction. She can be proud of what she achieved in education and the Scottish Government can be proud of what has been done to improve education. I am proud to support a Government that will put Scotland first, put Scottish education at the forefront of progressive intent and give Scotland's children the best possible start in life.

10:46

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Christina McKelvie should ask herself: if Fiona Hyslop did so well, why did Alex Salmond sack her?

I will spend a minute quoting Angus Macleod of *The Times*. He said:

"The roots of Fiona Hyslop's demise as Education Secretary in Alex Salmond's government go back to the period leading up to the publication of the SNP manifesto in 2007.

Ms Hyslop knew that ... she ... would be responsible for delivering a series of ... unrealistic ... manifesto pledges.

She knew that grand-sounding promises to abolish Scottish student debt and reduce class sizes in Primary 1 to Primary 3 throughout Scotland verged on fantasy, requiring a level of financial commitment that was simply not available and a four-year timescale that bordered on the ludicrous.

It is said that Ms Hyslop approached Alex Salmond before the publication of the manifesto to tell him this, but her views were brusquely swept aside by a party leader who would let nothing stand in the way of winning an election."

Christina McKelvie: Mike Rumbles made that up.

Mike Rumbles: No. That was a quotation from *The Times* of yesterday.

Knowing that its election promises on education were completely undeliverable, the SNP proceeded anyway. I am convinced that it received many votes from students who believed that it would dump their student debt. Only days before the election, one of my student sons received a glossy brochure from Alex Salmond, in which he promised to dump his debt.

Kenneth Gibson: Go on: tell us whether he voted SNP.

Mike Rumbles: I will answer Kenny Gibson. My son was tempted to vote SNP on the regional list because of that promise, but he saw it for what it was—a simple, but almost fraudulent attempt to get his vote—and voted rather sensibly for the Liberal Democrats. However, I am convinced that many other students were taken in by the SNP's fraudulent promise to dump their student debt.

Fiona Hyslop was duly appointed as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning by Mr Salmond and landed with the job of delivering an undeliverable package. What did the SNP Government do to solve that problem? It decided on its historic concordat with local authorities—which, as a number of members have said, surely must be an historic episode by now. What a wheeze: at a stroke, the Government transferred to somebody else the responsibility for delivering lower class sizes, increased teacher numbers and free school meals for all. Who took over responsibility for delivering these undeliverable promises? It was our local councils.

That, of course, was welcomed by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which was taken in by what seemed to be a fresh approach to local government. Councils were to have freedom, unfettered by the SNP Government, to spend the money that that nice Mr Swinney gave them. In return, they agreed to work towards the SNP Government's impossibly unrealistic education goals.

Unfortunately, COSLA did not see what was happening, which was that local authorities were being given the responsibility without being given the resources to deliver. So, what happened? There has been a loss of more than 2,300 teachers, failure to reduce class sizes and failure on school meals and in preparing for curriculum for excellence. So, with all those failures around her, what did Fiona Hyslop do last Friday? She chose to heap the blame upon our local councils and threatened to nationalise every school in Scotland by taking them under her direct control here in Edinburgh.

For the Liberal Democrats, that was the final straw. On Saturday, out of courtesy, we informed the Government that the Liberal Democrats would lodge a motion of no confidence in the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, to be debated in this debating slot this morning as part of Liberal Democrat business. We were determined to remove Fiona Hyslop from her position and to have a different minister appointed who would take a different approach to tackling the real problems. That was and is our objective, because a different approach is needed.

The Labour Party informed us that it would support our no confidence motion, but I have to say that the Conservatives failed to respond with any commitment to do so. The Government, however, informed us that the SNP Administration would resign en bloc if our no confidence motion succeeded. However, we believed that, for the good of our teachers, parents and children across the country, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, who had shown such appallingly bad judgement, should be replaced. We were very pleased, indeed, that, just two hours before lodging our motion, the Government announced that the cabinet secretary had been replaced after all.

We now have a new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning—Mike Russell. I hope that he will take a very different approach in his new post. I hope that a new working relationship can be struck—he has said that that is his aim—with every partner in education, and that the days of threatening to take central control of our schools are over. However, he faces a first test tonight at decision time, which is whether he will vote for the Tory amendment. Murdo Fraser made it absolutely clear in the debate that the amendment supports the principle of education vouchers based on the Swedish model—*[Interruption.]*

I intervened on Murdo Fraser, and he made it absolutely clear that the Tories support education vouchers, and that is the intent of their amendment.

Murdo Fraser: Will the member give way?

Mike Rumbles: I am in my last 20 seconds.

Before we rush to judgment about the new cabinet secretary, we will wait and see—

Murdo Fraser: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I am sorry, Mr Rumbles, but Mr Fraser has a point of order.

Murdo Fraser: I am grateful, Presiding Officer. Can you tell me how you can ensure under standing orders that, when a member speaks in a debate and patently peddles untruths and misrepresents what another member has said, it is possible for the record to be corrected to ensure that the truth is told?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was not in the chair earlier, so I will need time to look at what happened in the transaction between you and Mr Rumbles. I will look at it and we will report back later.

Please continue, Mr Rumbles, and watch your time.

Mike Rumbles: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The point is that, in the debate, Murdo Fraser confirmed my intervention to the effect that he supports education vouchers on the Swedish model. The key question is whether the SNP will support the Tory position at decision time. We will wait and see whether the SNP will do so: it will be Mike Russell's first test as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning.

10:53

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Nothing is more important for the future of Scotland than the education of our young people. It is especially important to remember that in these increasingly difficult public expenditure times. That priority was reflected in Labour's 2007 manifesto. To be fair to the Government, there were some good education policies in the SNP manifesto as well, especially around teacher numbers. What we have seen, however, is a disastrous failure in relation to those commitments. Of course, we all know that that came to a head last Friday when we heard the shocking figure of 2,000 teachers having been lost and the pupil to teacher ratio increasing rather than going down.

The most important question in today's debate is why the SNP failed to deliver on its promises. Clearly, it is not fundamentally because of Fiona Hyslop, who has some great qualities. I wish her well in her new position, which I have always regarded as one of the most attractive Government posts, particularly on the culture side.

The best explanation for the Government's failure came from Peter Peacock. His speech will certainly repay study by the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, whom I, too, welcome to his post. The fundamental problem is central Government's loss of levers. It has been unable to ensure that national priorities are delivered at local level. It seems to me that the new cabinet secretary needs to address that problem if he wishes to ensure that his and the Government's priorities are delivered.

In the case of the City of Edinburgh Council, the policy failures are now compounded by the budgetary situation. I complained to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth about Edinburgh's settlement last week. The result of that settlement is that Edinburgh has already lost 140 teachers over the past few years but, unfortunately, we have not seen anything yet.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Malcolm Chisholm: I will do so in a minute.

The headline that is being put forward by the City of Edinburgh Council is a 2.5 per cent cut in front-line school budgets for each of the next three years. If the new cabinet secretary is looking for reading, I suggest that he read Edinburgh's department of children and families information pack for councillors. On the consequences of the cuts, it states:

"Schools will be forced to concentrate on core service delivery and this will compromise key areas of the curriculum."

It goes on to say:

"Support for the delivery of the curriculum, including for curriculum for excellence, will inevitably be compromised."

Bob Doris: Malcolm Chisholm would obviously wish for more money for the City of Edinburgh Council to deliver services. From which local authority would he take the money?

Malcolm Chisholm: Obviously, we need a review of local government expenditure. I think that Bob Doris would agree that it looked odd that the average increase for revenue budgets in Scotland's councils was 2.9 per cent, but the increase was only 1.7 per cent for Edinburgh.

There are other interesting things in that council document that the cabinet secretary should look at. For example, free school meals and increased nursery hours will not be delivered, and there are worrying cuts to early intervention and positive action schools.

Many parents have highlighted those concerns to me over the past week or two. I have been to several school councils in that time, as well. The situation has already created an enormous campaign from parents in Edinburgh. However, I

know that headteachers are also very concerned. A meeting of secondary heads yesterday regarded the cuts as virtually untenable. I know that primary heads feel the same.

Further losses of teachers will be the main consequence of the budget cuts in Edinburgh, which is a tragedy not only for teachers but for pupils, too. Again, several teachers who have come to my surgeries recently have been desperately upset because they cannot put into practice their commitment to education. The cabinet secretary should pay serious regard to what Des McNulty's amendment proposes on action to retain outstanding young teachers. I hope that the Scottish Government will support that.

It would be remiss of me in a debate on education not to mention the other big constituency education issue for me just now, which is the proposed closure of two primary schools: Fort and Royston. I am not against school closures in principle, but the council has failed to acknowledge the rising primary school rolls in Edinburgh—they will go up by 20 per cent in the next 10 years—particularly in Edinburgh North and Leith. I hope that, in the next two weeks, the council will reconsider; otherwise, the result will be larger classes and schools in my constituency bursting at the seams. It is a matter of particular concern that two thirds of the revenue savings from the proposed school closures will come from further staff cuts. In that sense, school closures are being used as a further mechanism for reducing staff numbers.

I have concentrated mainly on schools, but some students from Edinburgh's Telford College came to see me last week. They are very concerned about late payment of bursaries. I know that there was an announcement about that this week, but even after that announcement, nobody who starts a course in January will receive a bursary. There are therefore still very serious problems around that. I am sure that my colleague Claire Baker will say more about that quite soon.

10:59

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I join colleagues in welcoming Mike Russell to his new role, and I look forward to seeing him in his new guise at the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. I also join colleagues in paying tribute to the excellent job that Fiona Hyslop did in sometimes difficult circumstances. As others have said, Fiona Hyslop reintroduced the principle of free education to Scotland, reformed school closure procedures to give communities a stronger voice in the future of their schools and presided over the lowest class sizes ever. I look forward to working with her in her new job.

Later today, the Parliament will debate the principles of getting it right for every child. No matter what we agree or disagree on in the course of this morning's debate, we must keep in mind that that must be our aim. We need to get it right for every single child at every point where people rely on local or central Government, whether that is in social care, in the justice system or in education.

The Scottish Government has said that, with the appointment of a new cabinet secretary for education, it wants to introduce a fresh perspective on school education and to find ways of working with local government and all the relevant stakeholders—including the Opposition parties—to deliver the best possible outcomes for children in Scotland. It has been suggested that the Government is considering centralisation of school education services. What the Government in fact said in the light of the statistics—which we all recognise are unacceptable—is that all options should be on the table. That means that greater decentralisation within education authorities is an option as well as greater Government intervention.

It remains the case that the concordat with local government includes a commitment to year-on-year progress towards lower class sizes, on the maintenance of teacher numbers and on the delivery of free school meals. Real progress has been made in some areas. East Ayrshire Council, part of whose area falls within the South of Scotland region, has increased teacher numbers and delivered an average class size of below 18. That shows that, where there is a political will, a way can be found to make such goals a reality.

Of course, in other areas there has been less progress, and everyone involved—both local government and national Government—must ask themselves why. For example, why have local authorities saved £110 million as a result of falling teacher numbers? What has that money been spent on? Why are both the Scottish Government and local authorities burdened with massive private finance initiative and public-private partnership payments because of poorly negotiated contracts from before 2007? Why have the previous Administration's predictions on teacher retirements failed to materialise?

The sky did not fall in on Scotland's education system on 4 May 2007. First mandated by the pre-union Parliament in 1633, Scotland's school education eventually became renowned as being among the best in the world, and we should be proud that we continue to measure our progress against, and constantly strive to achieve, that standard. We are now two and a half years into Scotland's first minority Government and, despite our minority status, we have achieved a

remarkable degree of stability, consistency and delivery in the education sector.

Within its first two years, the Government has announced a new school building programme, whereas it took Labour six years, under the Scottish Office and then under devolution, before it even looked at the school estate. The fact remains that the SNP Government is building more schools—we have lifted 100,000 pupils out of unsatisfactory school accommodation. Since May 2007, 236 school projects have been completed, so we are well on track to complete 250 projects over the parliamentary session. In its last four years, Labour completed just 205 school projects. In the South of Scotland, Carlisle high school enjoyed its official opening ceremony just this week and Larkhall academy will be officially opened in the not too distant future.

At the end of the day, new schools belong not to any political party but to the communities that they serve. The schools are paid for by those communities through their taxes. Thanks to the SNP, people are getting better value for money wherever alternatives to the discredited PFI/PPP system can be found.

A fortnight ago, the Parliament united to pass the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill, which will be vital legislation in protecting school communities especially—but not only—in rural areas. During that debate, I said:

"Parents, local businesses and community members can play a hugely positive role in such schools and ensure that they are more than just bricks and mortar."—[*Official Report*, 19 November 2009; c 21429.]

I stand by that comment. Schools are the incubators of the next generation of citizens and leaders. The young people whom we educate today will become the innovators, scientists and business leaders—and even the teachers and politicians—of tomorrow. We owe it to them to ensure that they have the best possible start in life. Indeed, we owe that to ourselves, because we will depend on those nurses, doctors, mechanics and builders in years to come.

We should start by setting the best possible example in the way we debate education policy. Rather than seeking to score points by claiming school building starts—

Robert Brown: Will Aileen Campbell give way on that point?

Aileen Campbell: No.

Unfortunately, the Lib Dems and some others have chosen to use this morning's debating time not to outline positive ideas on how education policy might be taken forward but—in Margaret Smith's words—simply for "nat bashing". That

approach needs to change if we want to build an education system of which we are all proud.

11:04

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to take part in this morning's debate on education issues, which we have returned to again and again during Opposition debating time. The recent significant drop in teacher numbers prompted not only this morning's debate but a change on the front bench, so let me take this opportunity to welcome Michael Russell to his new role. That role is not without its challenges but, as we have heard, those challenges are of the Scottish Government's own making.

The SNP entered Government with big promises on class sizes, teacher numbers, school buildings and nursery teachers. The First Minister said that the pledge on class sizes would be delivered on by the end of this parliamentary session, but that promise now hides under the cover of the concordat. The SNP promised to maintain teacher numbers to deliver smaller class sizes, but the number of teachers has fallen by more than 2,000. The promise to deliver access to a fully qualified nursery teacher for every nursery-age child has been undermined by a fall of more than 150 pre-school teachers.

The Scottish Government is not delivering on the key promises that it made to the electorate, but Parliament will hold it to account for that. The Parliament's committees have been right to probe ministers about how policies will be delivered, and to question the historic concordat and its value as a method for central Government delivery. The question has always been this: What does the Scottish Government do if local authorities do not deliver? With a new cabinet secretary for education, we might be about to find out.

I will concentrate my remarks on teachers. Many members have expressed concern at the decline in teacher numbers, but there have also been worrying declines at other points on the student's path to becoming a teacher. Figures in a recent answer to a parliamentary question show that the number of graduating student teachers who have been granted provisional registration has dropped by 529 since 2007. Behind those figures lie concerning data on the number of postgraduate diploma in education graduates. Between 2007 and 2008, there was a significant drop—25 per cent—in the number of graduates deciding to pursue education as a career at primary or secondary level. That is cause for concern, because we must attract specialist graduates into teaching and ensure that the most talented graduates consider teaching as a career. The new cabinet secretary must address that issue and

ensure that teaching is seen as an attractive profession and as a career with prospects.

In August, the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland* showed that only 15 per cent of last year's probationary teachers had found permanent full-time employment, compared to 32 per cent in the 2007 survey. I hope that the new cabinet secretary recognises that that must be tackled. We all recognise that new teachers cannot all expect to walk into jobs, but the level of disappointment and disillusionment that probationary teachers face—with only 12 per cent gaining full-time employment—needs to be taken seriously.

The future of Scotland's education sector relies on supporting and training today's young people who might have a talent for teaching. They must not be abandoned in favour of rushed attempts to find short-term solutions. There are real concerns that instead of solving the problem, the Scottish Government's cuts to teacher training places risk storing up problems for the future. In particular, the UCU is concerned that the number of places on BEd degrees will be cut by 40 per cent—that would mean 950 fewer places for graduates to train as primary school teachers—and that places on courses through which people can qualify as secondary school teachers might be cut by 12 per cent. Real concerns exist about the impacts that such policies might have on the teacher training sector, with cuts in teaching budgets and, ultimately, redundancies.

Keith Brown: Claire Baker referred to the need for additional powers over local government. Following on from Peter Peacock's comments about the need for additional levers, can she specify whether that means that the Labour Party supports the reintroduction of ring fencing? If not, what levers would Labour use to force through policy?

Claire Baker: Peter Peacock made an important contribution to the debate, but now that the SNP is in Government, it is up to the Government to come forward with effective levers to ensure that national priorities are being delivered. The point behind this morning's debate—and the reason why the Government has lost a cabinet secretary—is that the concordat is clearly not working or delivering the education policies that Scotland needs.

Recently, the University of Edinburgh reported that the budget for Moray House school of education will be reduced by up to £2.4 million, with the resulting loss of 40 full-time posts. The initial teacher training courses at the University of Strathclyde, the University of Dundee and the University of Stirling also risk being in the firing line. The SNP's approach to the issue risks doing permanent damage to Scottish education. I urge the new cabinet secretary to take into account the

long-term implications of his Administration's rush to reduce the stream of young teachers entering education.

On top of that, as the new cabinet secretary will doubtless be aware, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council is proposing to enforce a 10 per cent cut to the budget that is available to teaching departments at Scottish universities. The data that were returned in response to the Scottish funding council's request for submissions suggest that serious concerns exist about how those deep cuts to a number of subject areas have been calculated. The cuts will affect the lives of lecturers and department staff at universities, and the lives of people who have ambitions to go into teaching, so we are talking about a serious decision that requires serious contemplation of all the options, and detailed research. I urge the cabinet secretary to take the matter seriously and to intervene to ensure that the funding council's proposals are best for the higher education sector and Scotland's wider interests.

As Malcolm Chisholm said, there are still serious concerns about student support and hardship, particularly for further education students. Only this week, the funding council managed to provide only half the funds that had been requested for bursaries and child-care support for FE students.

The policies on which the previous cabinet secretary floundered are still policies of the SNP Government. We have a new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, but the challenges remain. A change of personnel alone is not enough; there must also be a change of policy if we are to provide the education opportunities that our people deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to wind-up speeches.

11:10

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We will leave it to others to write about the political intrigue of this dramatic week, in which not only was the SNP Government told comprehensively to tear up its schools policy and start again, but a cabinet minister was made to carry the can for the much wider failings of Alex Salmond's Scottish Government. In particular, the historic concordat, which was so trumpeted by the First Minister as representing the beginnings of a new and more mature relationship between central and local government, has been blown apart, as Peter Peacock eloquently described.

Although my party is clear that the purpose of this morning's debate is to set out exactly where we think school education should be going, we have also taken the opportunity to send a strong

warning to the First Minister that he will do the greatest possible harm to our public services if he attempts to further weaken the trust within, and the accountability of, our local authorities.

The debate about Fiona Hyslop's failings as a cabinet secretary goes to the heart of what is wrong with the SNP Government, for the reasons that my colleague David McLetchie spelled out, but as Aileen Campbell said, the most important thing now is to identify the way forward. It is all very well slinging mud—perhaps it is good fun—but the bottom line is that teachers, pupils and parents need and deserve meaningful action to improve our schools. They need to know that this Parliament will deliver that improvement as quickly as possible and, in the view of the Scottish Conservatives, that action must not be a decision to retain in any way the status quo.

That is why one of our most important demands is for a firm commitment from the SNP that it will abide by the unanimous will of the Scottish Parliament, as expressed in a vote in January 2009, when it determined that it would undertake to ensure that there would be much more rigorous testing—not more testing, but more rigorous testing—of the three Rs by the time pupils reach the end of primary 7. That was an extremely important commitment for the Parliament to make, and it was based on the overwhelming wishes of parents and teachers, who see improving proficiency in those skills as being the key that will unlock the door to so much in the way of educational attainment. It is essential that that commitment be honoured by the new cabinet secretary.

Even before the SNP took office, there were occasional mutterings from education experts about the poor rate of progress in the educational attainment of too many of our pupils, and about the fact that Scotland was being overtaken in the international league tables. In recent months, those mutterings have, quite rightly, become clarion calls. In September this year, the Scottish Conservatives ran a special schools conference, to which we invited a range of the education experts by whom those clarion calls were made—who, before anyone accuses us of any bias, by no means had Conservative views—to discuss the way forward. They included someone from Sweden, who talked about a system to which we are greatly attracted—for Mr Rumbles's information, it does not use vouchers. It was abundantly clear that, in this country, there is a serious desire for reform. It is glaringly obvious that however one tries to interpret the statistics, overall attainment levels are no better than they were at the start of devolution.

Mike Rumbles: In my speech, before Murdo Fraser made his erroneous point of order, I made

the point that he had indicated that he was in favour of the use of vouchers. He confirmed that.

Murdo Fraser: I did not.

Elizabeth Smith: It is for the Presiding Officer to make decisions about points of order. That is not what my colleague said. We are attracted to the Swedish system of education, but we are not saying anything about vouchers, which do not exist in Sweden.

At our conference, we set out our plans to allow parents to have much more choice about the school that their children attend and, more important, to give headteachers much more control of how their schools are run, especially when it comes to issues such as teacher recruitment, school budgets and discipline. I stress again that those policies are about devolving powers down to the people at the chalkface, which is exactly the opposite of what Fiona Hyslop announced last Friday, in what I think will turn out to be one of the most ill-considered Government announcements of recent times.

Interestingly, the conference seemed to light a touch-paper. Experts such as Lindsay Paterson, John McLaren and Fred Forrester told us that they welcome the Conservative initiative to engage in radical thinking. That reaction was most encouraging; even more encouraging were the utterances of the SNP's David Berry, who is leader of East Lothian Council, who said that there must be much more radical thinking if we are to get schools back on a sound footing. I agree very much with that line, because our second major demand—alongside our demand that testing be sorted out—is that we need an open, objective and radical debate about how to move forward, at the end of which we will find a blueprint for schools that will restore trust among pupils, parents and teachers.

Can we expect the new cabinet secretary to deliver in that respect? Given some of the evidence that Murdo Fraser and David McLetchie cited, we can probably "Russell" up a few more themes. Three years ago, in the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland*, Michael Russell spoke about putting all school management options on the table. He asked:

"would the establishment of charter or foundation schools within some of our cities raise standards because of the benefit of competition and give children in some of our most depressed neighbourhoods a better set of educational and life opportunities?"

Michael Russell: No.

Elizabeth Smith: That is Conservative party policy. Michael Russell asked:

"Could parents successfully set up their own schools?"

That is Conservative party policy. He said that

"The SNP will create units for persistent offenders where they can be educated as well as be assisted to change their behaviour."

That is Conservative party policy. He said:

"we will make vocational education far more accessible to all S3 and S4 pupils".

That is Conservative party policy. He said:

"we will encourage diversity in education".

That, too, is Conservative party policy.

The new cabinet secretary has an excellent legacy of espousing the true values of education policy. I invite him to support the amendment in his name—I am sorry; in the name of Murdo Fraser.

11:17

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): As many members have done, I welcome Mr Russell to his new role as cabinet secretary. In addition, I thank his predecessor for the contribution that she has made to Scottish education over many years. At the weekend, we thought that we would be coming to bury Fiona Hyslop this morning; instead, we have come to praise her. I recognise that politics can be cruel, but regardless of the trials and tribulations that Fiona Hyslop faced as cabinet secretary, not only is she an extremely likeable person but many of us appreciated her decency and her personal commitment to improving Scotland's education system, both in opposition and as a Government minister.

Nearly every speaker has emphasised that the faults and failings that beset our education system are those of the Government as a whole and not those of one minister. More worrying, members have pointed out that the problems have not gone away. The list is daunting: the lack of jobs for teachers; the failure to make progress on class sizes; the inability of the Scottish Futures Trust to deliver even one new building; the danger of drift in the curriculum for excellence; the underresourcing of additional support for learning; the decrease, as opposed to increase, in the number of nursery teachers; the inexcusable delay in providing two hours of physical education a week; the mounting concern about student support; and the growing anxiety over governance and funding in higher and further education. It reads like a grotesque inverse of the SNP manifesto, the Government commitments in which are still dangled tantalisingly in front of the gullible by the First Minister and loyal back benchers. To the rest of us, it serves as a reminder of dashed expectations and unfulfilled promises.

The cabinet secretary has a choice to make. He can develop a new relationship with Parliament—I note that that offer has been extended by all sides—with Opposition parties that genuinely want

to prioritise education and with local government, which wants an open and honest discussion of resources and commitments; or he can use his talents to peddle the same old sophistry, the same half-truths and false assertions of progress. I hope that the minister will grasp the opportunity that is open to him, although, like Murdo Fraser, I note that the early signs are not that good.

The minister opened his remarks, bizarrely, by claiming credit for the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill. Minutes previously, the First Minister had laid that achievement at the feet of the minister's predecessor. Mr Russell went on to complain that his outspoken comments on local government and COSLA—they are a crucial issue—had been misrepresented. Of course, he did not dispute the accuracy of the remarks; he merely said that they had been taken out of context. He wanted the full quotation to be given. He did not want us just to know that he thinks that councils are “arrogant” and “mealy-mouthed”; he thinks that they are “self-serving” and “domineering”, too.

Michael Russell: I am happy to provide a copy of the full article to the member and, when he has read it, I am happy to debate it with him. However, if he cannot be bothered to read the full article, he should not simply refer to two lines from it. That does not do him, or anybody else, any good.

Ken Macintosh: I was trying to be generous, but I suspect that I have touched a raw nerve on day one.

Many members have commented on the relationship with local government—Peter Peacock's remarks on that in particular were insightful and welcome—and have said that that relationship is a crucial test for the minister. How will he develop it? I was worried because Mr Russell continued in the same vein of denial. In his opening speech, his key argument was that there is no crisis. Indeed, he felt so strongly about that that he repeated it three times. We had an early start; I think that he had said it three times before the cock crowed. If there is no crisis, does he accept and acknowledge that the problems that face us are “unacceptable”? That was the description that his predecessor gave following the publication of the teacher employment figures on Friday. To lose 1,000 teaching jobs last year may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose more than 1,000 again this year looks like carelessness.

So far, the Scottish Government's response has been to make matters worse. Cutting £10 million from initial teacher training will mean savage redundancies at Jordanhill and Moray House, and in Dundee and elsewhere. Margaret Smith and Claire Baker made that point. That will threaten the future of those institutions. The Government increased the number of teacher training places by

300 only two years ago. There is now a desperate retraction. In a presentation to MSPs yesterday, the UCU warned us to beware of the long-term damage of short-term political fixes. There is no doubt that if the cuts are implemented, they will damage our capacity to produce the teachers whom we will need in a mere few years' time.

We do not need fewer teachers; teaching posts simply need to be retained. The SNP made a promise about that in its manifesto, which it repeated in the concordat. It is clear that offering financially strapped local authorities the supposed opportunity to take on more debt to pay for early retirement schemes is no solution. As the teacher employment working group proposed, and as my colleague Des McNulty said, the winding-up scheme that is offered to teachers can be made more attractive, but there needs to be a guarantee that the posts will be replaced. Labour has made a specific proposal that could make a real difference and which the profession supports.

I had to laugh when I saw the remarks that the previous Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning had made last week on why the education system must change. I am not sure whether a real promise was made or whether there was a diversion, but she said:

“overall, councils have clearly spent over £110 million of funding provided by the Scottish Government for teachers' salaries on other purposes.”

I do not know how many times in the past two years members of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee have asked the minister and her officials to put a figure on exactly what is in the local government settlement for education. Just last month, we went round the houses again on class sizes. However, everything is suddenly clear: the figure is £110 million. I say to Mr Russell that if the Government wants us to accept its arguments that policies such as those on teacher numbers and class sizes are fully funded, we need transparency, not figures that have been pulled from a hat when that has suited.

Keith Brown: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but Mr Macintosh is finishing. Indeed, he should have finished.

Ken Macintosh: Mr Russell has shown his willingness to adopt fresh thinking. I am worried that some of his ideas are too right wing for Murdo Fraser and the Tory party, but I hope that he will continue in a similar vein and that there will be a fresh start in office.

11:24

Michael Russell: I am so overwhelmed by what Ken Macintosh said that I am still mulling it over. I

have heard many bizarre things this morning, but the view that we should respond to the alleged crisis in teacher numbers by going on training more teachers seems to be the strangest that I have ever heard in politics—and I have heard many strange things in politics. I heard some of those things over two or three years when I was a member of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee with Mr Macintosh.

Let us try to take a rational view of what we will all try to do together in education. I hope that what we have heard this morning is, if I may quote, the “end to ane auld sang”.

I am sure that some members want to harp on about issues in education simply because they think that they will get a political bounce out of doing so, but the opinion polls show that the bounce is not there. Therefore, let us now focus seriously on the politics of ideas, and let us try to bring real ideas to the Scottish education debate with some consensus.

Rarely has so much been said in a single morning about the Swedish system of education by people who have no knowledge whatsoever of it. The reality, of course, is that we need new ideas in Scottish education.

David McLetchie: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Michael Russell: No. Let me finish.

Let us start from where we are. I made that plea at the beginning of the debate, and I am making it again at the end. As I have said, hundreds of thousands of young people are being taught well by tens of thousands of teachers in thousands of schools. That is the real situation in Scotland.

There is a local authority delivery mechanism for education in Scotland, and local authorities and the Government have a good relationship. Let us build on that from where we are, and in the process, let us bring in the fresh air of thinking that is shorn of ideology. We need good ideas. I want to refer to one or two of the good ideas that have been given.

I start with Peter Peacock, who made one of the best speeches in the debate. He did so with the tremendous experience that he gained from the job that I am taking on. I hope that I can do that job as well as he did. He opened up the clear divide that exists and talked about whether we should retain tools to direct in relationships with local authorities, or whether we should develop a different relationship with them that relies on a different method, involving mutual respect, to achieve shared objectives. I do not agree with Mr Peacock's argument, but I accept it. Malcolm Chisholm raised the same point well. We need to debate the matter.

We need to bring in fresh thinking and ideas. I heard some fresh ideas from the Labour Party, although not as many as I would like, and one or two from the Tories, many of which I do not like. I am not the father of the Swedish education system, but I am glad about that, because Liz Smith does not even know what it is. I regret that I heard not a single new idea from the Liberal Democrats.

Yesterday, I said that I want to reset my relationship with Scottish local authorities. I also want to reset the relationships in the Parliament between the parties on the issue of education. I have already met the education spokespeople. We will disagree and no doubt there will be endless theatre in the chamber, but I want to ensure that we make practical progress on what we want to achieve.

I want to point up the key issues that we need to progress. Of course, the reality is that money is an issue; indeed, it is always an issue. We have heard again and again from Labour Mr McNulty's plea for more money. If that plea is to be applied to every policy that we discuss, Mr McNulty might start the process by persuading his colleagues south of the border that we need a more realistic assessment of Scottish financing than has been shown by the removal of £500 million. I see that Mr Whitton, who has not been involved in the debate, wishes to comment on that, but I will not let him, because he has not been in the chamber. I want those who take part in the debate to be people who are committed to Scottish education and who want to be involved in the discussions.

I look forward to seeing the literacy commission's report, which I will treat seriously. If ideas come from any political party that have been well worked through and put forward by people who are trying to contribute, I will treat them seriously. I look forward to appearing before the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. Some of the best times that I had in the first parliamentary session were as a member of an education committee that worked well. Its members worked closely together. I also look forward to appearing before the convener of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. Perhaps when I do so, we will move on from her description of me as Worzel Gummidge. I do not mind that she described me in that way, but I suspect that it was not right to describe COSLA's education spokesperson as an Aunt Sally. That was not helpful or productive. However, I accept it when she says that that was not a cheap debating point. Let us move on, and let us have a relationship based on discussing ideas.

I was struck by one or two other contributions to the debate. The issue of post-probationary

teachers is extremely serious. There are a range of reasons why we find ourselves in that position, for example the recession and the cutting of teacher numbers. What local authorities have done is indisputable. There are issues of long-term planning. I am old enough to remember that planning for teacher numbers is a boom-and-bust scenario that has been going on for not one, not two, but three generations. The direct relationship between teacher numbers and class sizes is, of course, another issue.

I am concerned about every individual whose potential is being wasted because they are not contributing their all in their chosen profession. Alas, that does not apply only to teaching. There is great disappointment throughout society at the effects of a worldwide recession that, I have to say, is made worse by political decisions south of the border. However, I make a commitment to work as hard as I can to ameliorate that situation, just as I will work hard with my colleagues Mr Brown, Mr Ingram and others to take forward what I see as the key issues in Scottish education. I will return to those key issues later.

I am not ashamed in the slightest, as David McLetchie hoped I might be, about being passionate about the idea of class sizes. Why am I not ashamed of that? Because there is incontrovertible evidence that in the early years of school, when children are forming their ideas and their abilities, if we teach them in a way that reflects that contact between teachers and children, they move forward faster and further, not just in primary school or in secondary school but in their life chances.

I think that it was Sir Isaac Newton who said that education is not the filling of a well but the lighting of a fire. The job that we must all do in this Parliament, with our collective responsibility for Scottish education, is to light that fire and ensure that young people have the best chances from the start of life, right through. Education is a lifelong process and every individual should benefit. I commit myself to that this morning. I want to do so with the other spokespeople and the other parties in this Parliament. I make that offer. Please do not spurn it. We have had our fun this morning; let us move forward together seriously.

11:32

Margaret Smith: We have had a lively debate, which will no doubt be the first of many. I hope that the cabinet secretary accepts that all members genuinely want to work with him. That is certainly the view on the Liberal Democrat benches.

However, Mr Russell accused us of bringing nothing new to the debate. That is rather unfortunate. He was speaking over my remarks a

couple of times and did not quite hear, but I said that we thought that there was a real argument to be made for greater powers to be devolved to headteachers. We suggested dropping the free school meals pledge and freeing up £30 million for the cabinet secretary to focus on the real priorities for Scottish education. We asked him to stagger the loss of teacher training positions in our university education departments to ensure that we maintain capacity for the population increases to come. I also asked him to refocus on the key issue of smaller class sizes in deprived areas. Mr Russell may come to rely on our support on that issue in the months to come.

Behind the bluster, there is a genuine interest in and hunger for progress on all sides of Parliament. Like others, Peter Peacock was right when, from a position of some experience, he highlighted the difficulties and what are often the different agendas of national and local government. That is the nub of the problem. Peter Peacock made that clear when he said that the SNP

“gave away all the levers.”

That is why the problems that beset Fiona Hyslop are problems that now beset the new cabinet secretary.

The key issue is how the Government deals with local government and how it takes forward a concordat that has failed to deliver not only on policies on which the SNP stood, but on policies for which there is a great deal of support throughout Parliament. Peter Peacock made an interesting point about the Government's lack of ability to deliver, and the impact of that on the cabinet secretary's ability to secure funding for education within the Cabinet. Member after member pointed out that that key issue must be addressed.

I said in my earlier remarks that we want greater devolution of powers and funding to headteachers, and we will be driven to improve attainment. We need to discuss how we deliver education services, and we have heard some ideas on that today. However, it is fascinating to witness the Tories being outflanked on the right by the new cabinet secretary. From my standpoint, it is not only fascinating but slightly worrying. It is also slightly worrying to hear pupils being referred to as customers. Last week, we were concerned to hear the Government threatening to centralise powers over schools.

Liz Smith is right when she says that the status quo is not acceptable. Is it right that in the face of a fall-off of attainment, for example in secondary 1 and S2, we do not address new means of teaching that might assist those pupils? Is it right that we do not give headteachers the tools that they need to improve their schools?

Over the past two years, we have been used to the Government blaming everyone else, so it was slightly refreshing that the first thing that the new cabinet secretary did was to take credit for the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill. He did not even leave that achievement with his predecessor. However, while many of us are focused on the real policy issues and the abiding problems that the new cabinet secretary must tackle, every one of us put on record in some way the achievement of the previous cabinet secretary. Just in the past few days, Fiona Hyslop had support throughout Parliament, not only for the bill but for the manner in which she took it forward. We all wish her well in her new position.

We agree that Scotland can have a world-beating education service. In fact, we acknowledge improved exam results and we are clear that studies suggesting that Scotland is falling behind are open to interpretation. Our focus on issues on which the cabinet secretary must provide clear leadership should in no way be taken as an attack on Scotland's teachers or Scotland's schools. It is completely the opposite.

Keith Brown shouts out "crisis" from a sedentary position. When I used the word earlier, I was quoting from the EIS—the biggest teaching union in Scotland—when it said that the loss of 2,300 teachers in Scotland was an "emerging crisis" for Scottish education. I agree that that represents an emerging crisis for teacher numbers. Michael Russell said that in fact it was more hunky-dory than a crisis. However, I was clear when I said that we will not attack councils and threaten to take away their powers over schools. We will not run down teachers but try to support them. We will build on the firm foundations of a comprehensive Scottish education system that we believe to be fundamentally sound and the best way forward, so that children in all our communities can attain the best out of that system.

I wanted to hear at least an acknowledgement from the SNP that there are concerns. However, instead of listening to the concerns from the EIS, the SSTA, the Confederation of British Industry Scotland and leading academics on progress on the curriculum for excellence, the new cabinet secretary accuses us of scaremongering. That is deeply worrying. If the cabinet secretary is serious when he says that he wants to build a new working relationship with every one of us, particularly the Opposition spokespeople, he must at least accept that when we hear concerns expressed by people who are pre-eminent in their field and who have a particular interest in this most important of portfolios, we, as members of Parliament, will take those concerns seriously. We will take them on board and we will ask the cabinet secretary to work with us to tackle those problems. There are real issues.

Michael Russell: Margaret Smith was not listening.

Margaret Smith: When I focused earlier on the issue of class sizes, which I know is a particular interest of yours—in fact, you could be said to be, if not the father of the entire Swedish education system, the father of the SNP class size policy—I noticed that you were engaged in a conversation. We all do that.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Please speak through the chair.

Margaret Smith: The issue of class sizes is important for the cabinet secretary; it is also an important issue for us. It is important with regard to tackling the disparity between the rich and the poor and between certain areas in our society.

We stand ready to work to improve teacher training numbers and Scottish education. I hope that the cabinet secretary, despite some of the remarks that he has made today, intends to do the same.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Glasgow Airport Rail Link

1. David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

(Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how it responds to the recent statement by six business organisations concerning the importance of the Glasgow airport rail link to Scotland as a whole, its affordability and the case for its reinstatement in the draft budget for 2010-11. (S3O-8722)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I have responded to the letter from the various business organisations to set out this Government's rationale for taking the difficult decision to cancel the branch line element of the GARL project. I have explained that the decision was made in the wider context of the significant budget cuts that were imposed by the Treasury. This Government is willing to make difficult decisions in a time of unprecedented economic and fiscal constraints.

David Whitton: I thank the minister for his answer, but the letter from the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Directors Scotland, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, and Scottish Financial Enterprise sends a powerful message to him to reinstate the Glasgow airport rail link. It says:

"we do not accept that there are insurmountable financial reasons for its cancellation ... In our view, the GARL project is not only desirable but affordable. It has been cancelled only as a result of the Scottish Government's priorities lying elsewhere".

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Question, please.

David Whitton: This week, the Scottish National Party has lost one minister who would not listen. Will the cabinet secretary listen to those business organisations, meet them again and take the big decision of reinstating the GARL project?

John Swinney: I undertake regular dialogue with the business organisations—I do not think that there could be a criticism of a lack of dialogue with them. Of course, I take their views and opinions seriously, but I have to make difficult decisions in the current financial situation. As Mr Whitton well knows, there will be a decline in capital budgets in the years to come.

Mr Whitton quoted a view that the project is affordable, but it is only affordable if other projects are sacrificed. The judgment that the Government has reluctantly come to is that the project cannot proceed because we do not have the resources in the medium term to support its delivery. That is a decision that we have come to reluctantly, but the Government has to face the situation.

I will continue to listen carefully to feedback from the Parliament's committees in relation to the Government's budget and will consider any issues that they raise in that respect. However, I say with respect to Mr Whitton, as I say to Parliament, that members who advance arguments for increasing public expenditure on certain projects must advise me of the things that they are prepared to give up to ensure that those projects can be afforded.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): Is the cabinet secretary aware that Fife Chamber of Commerce has said that the proposal to pay for GARL by reinstating the tolls on the Forth road bridge is idiotic? Does he also agree with the chamber of commerce that, if business organisations and the Labour Party are going to campaign for transport projects, a carefully thought-out plan is required, which includes realistic suggestions for funding, unlike the suggestions that were made by Iain McMillan and Steven Purcell?

John Swinney: As I said to Mr Whitton, I listen carefully to the points of view that are put forward by various organisations. Clearly, this Government cannot do everything that all business organisations want us to do. In the past, the business organisations roundly criticised the previous Administration for not having a business-rate poundage level that was at parity with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. We have that under this Administration, and it is one of the many approaches that we take to support business in Scotland.

I am aware of the criticism by Fife Chamber of Commerce of the suggestion that tolls be reinstated on the Forth road bridge. The proposal to remove those tolls was supported broadly in Parliament—even by the Labour Party, if memory serves—and the Government will maintain that position as part of its budget settlement.

Glasgow Airport Rail Link

2. Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston)

(Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it considers that the Glasgow airport rail link would have a positive impact on Scotland's international connectivity. (S3O-8704)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): A number of factors impact on a country's international

connectivity, foremost of which is obviously that it has airports that provide the service routes and frequency to meet the requirements of the business and leisure traveller.

Mr McAveety: I acknowledge the range of concerns that were expressed in my colleague David Whitton's question about the legitimate concerns of business organisations in our largest city, which take the view that the decision taken summarily to axe the Glasgow airport rail link was the wrong one.

In recognising the importance of the GARL project to the west of Scotland economy, does the minister accept—in the year of homecoming and, in fact, in the week of its final celebrations—that the decision to close all options on progressing GARL reduces the capacity of our largest city to compete in the important business tourism market and, given the current economic conditions, turns its back on the opportunity for 1,300 jobs and more than £300 million of investment, which would be of real benefit to the west of Scotland economy?

John Swinney: I am not sure quite where Mr McAveety is looking in his constituency. If my geography is correct, a substantial investment is going right into the heart of his constituency—or certainly very close to it—through the M74 investment. The M74 project represents a significant investment in the west of Scotland economy, and it is creating many jobs and a lot of economic benefit in the west of Scotland.

If Mr McAveety had taken care to look at some of the opinions that have been expressed by the business community—the six business organisations that have been mentioned do not reflect the whole range of business opinion—he would have seen that many business representatives have commented in the media on the relative ease of getting to Glasgow airport by established transport links and have welcomed the fact that the Government has given priority to a number of areas of capital investment, including social housing in the west of Scotland, which I would have thought would be of benefit to the people who Mr McAveety represents.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Today has been dominated by a new start in education. Will the cabinet secretary imbibe that spirit of repentance and renewal in his portfolio? Will he accept the widespread consensus on the value of the Glasgow airport rail link in improving Scotland's connectivity and engage on a cross-party basis with business, councils and other stakeholders to look openly and positively at the possible funding options for delivering the Glasgow airport rail link?

John Swinney: I have made it clear consistently that I will, of course, consider credible and affordable proposals to deliver the Glasgow airport rail link. I cannot deliver those within the financial framework set out for me by the United Kingdom Government. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

John Swinney: Just in case members did not hear it the first time, I will say it again because it obviously gets them a little bit hot under the collar. I cannot afford this proposal under the fixed financial framework given to me by the UK Government and—I say this just for Jackie Baillie's benefit—the savage cuts in public spending that we are experiencing.

I am perfectly prepared to consider credible and affordable proposals for the rail link and, of course, we have a budget process that provides exactly that opportunity for anybody who wishes to advance such a proposition. As I have said, I will listen carefully to any input and feedback that the committees of the Parliament wish to give me on the issue.

Schools (Financial Education)

3. Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what financial institutions it is working with to improve financial education in schools. (S3O-8686)

The Minister for Schools and Skills (Keith Brown): Learning and Teaching Scotland is working with a range of financial institutions and other organisations to support the financial education of all young people in schools.

Bill Butler: The minister will be aware that over the past 18 months I have been raising concerns about the presence of the Royal Bank of Scotland in the Scottish centre for financial education, which is responsible for providing financial education in schools across the country and whose membership is currently being reviewed.

Given the events at RBS in the past 18 months, and bearing in mind the petulant response of the current RBS board in the past 24 hours to the efforts of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to curb its obscene bonus culture, does the minister agree that, if the Government is serious about improving financial education in Scotland's schools, it has to ensure that RBS is removed from having any advisory role whatsoever?

Keith Brown: As Bill Butler mentioned, he has asked a series of questions on the matter. He will be aware from the answers that were given that a partnership review group was established and will report back to LTS in the middle of next year. The group's membership will not include the Royal Bank of Scotland.

On RBS and its suitability to take a role in financial education in our schools, there has obviously been a substantial corporate failure by RBS in its strategic management, but it is also true that RBS contains a large number of staff whose knowledge and experience enables them to provide young people with up-to-date facts about a wide range of financial products and services and about money management and debt. In any case, membership of the Scottish centre for financial education is a matter for Learning and Teaching Scotland. It is right that we draw on whatever resources we can to ensure that our children have the best possible financial education.

Education

4. Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it is satisfied with Scotland's overall performance in education. (S3O-8659)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): We are satisfied but not complacent. Scotland has a good performance record: in 2009, there were record high pass rates at both higher and advanced higher, entries to higher and advanced higher have increased, and the standard grade pass rate is at its highest since 2000. Two main international attainment surveys show Scotland's performance at well above the international average.

We are determined to drive up standards. That is why we are introducing the curriculum for excellence, which will improve both knowledge and skills through a broader teaching and assessment framework, a new framework for qualifications, and wider opportunities for young people through 16+ learning choices.

Derek Brownlee: I thank the cabinet secretary for that comprehensive answer. I am delighted that he is not complacent, and I welcome him to his post.

Does the cabinet secretary believe that improving attainment and Scotland's international position in education requires increased spending per pupil?

Michael Russell: What it requires is to continue the record investment that the Government has been undertaking. If the member had been present earlier this morning, he would have heard me say not once but twice that improvement in education requires us, as a Parliament, to work together to build a consensus and ensure that we all encourage performance—not undermining developments such as the curriculum for excellence but ensuring that we get them right. I look forward to his participation and that of his party. Indeed, I look forward, I hope, to the participation of the entire Parliament.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): The minister will be aware that the average cut to school budgets in Scotland in 2010-11 is of the order of 2.5 per cent. In contrast, the minimum funding guarantee in England, which provides financial protection for the schools budget, is set at 2.1 per cent for the next financial year. Does the minister agree that his policies and his party's proposals will make things worse rather than better?

Michael Russell: Absolutely not. I will not accept that in the slightest. Our policies are driving forward improvements in Scottish education. When relationships require to be improved in order to improve delivery, that is what will happen.

Once again—and we have only reached question 4—a representative of the Labour Party has demanded more spending. Frankly, it cannot go on like that. If a member of the Opposition, particularly the Labour Party, wants more spending, let them speak to the chancellor about the £500 million cuts.

Carbon Emissions

5. Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it plans to sign up to the 10:10 campaign pledge to reduce its carbon emissions by 10 per cent in 2010. (S3O-8673)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Although we have not specifically signed up to the 10:10 campaign, we have firm plans in hand to go well beyond that short-term goal in tackling the emissions that are associated with our operations.

The Scottish Government already has in place a commitment, which has been agreed with the Carbon Trust, to reduce by at least 20 per cent by 2014 the carbon emissions that arise from the way in which we operate our 18 largest buildings, and to adopt even more sustainable travel practices. Delivery against that target is underpinned by a series of specific, planned projects. We are in the process of agreeing with the Carbon Trust an extension of that commitment to a further 64 buildings, and we are undertaking a review of the Scottish Government's travel plan.

Mike Pringle: I thank the minister for his answer, but I am slightly concerned. As he may be aware, Labour MPs recently voted down an Opposition day motion, tabled by the Liberal Democrats, that called on the Westminster Government to sign up to the 10:10 campaign. The motion was supported by all the Scottish National Party MPs. The Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 has been hailed as world beating. Why is the Scottish Government not prepared to lead the way again in reducing its own

carbon footprint by signing up to the 10:10 campaign? Is it just another case of the SNP saying one thing in opposition at Westminster but doing another thing in government in Scotland?

Stewart Stevenson: It would be helpful if the member had listened to my original answer, in which I delineated a number of the significant changes that we are making. Indeed, I am being decanted out of my office in Victoria Quay so that changes that are part of that programme can be made—we are seeking through the upgrade of lighting in that building alone to deliver a 33 per cent reduction in emissions. A review of the Scottish Government's travel plan will inject fresh impetus in our targets and reduce our emissions from business travel.

We are doing a great deal to live up to the commitments that we all made when we passed the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009—on this subject, we are ahead of the game.

Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route

6. Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what annual provision will be required to meet the costs of the Aberdeen western peripheral route over the next 30 years, if it is procured under the non-profit-distributing model. (S3O-8706)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Subject to confirmation of the final layout of the road following a decision on the public local inquiry process, we will review the cost estimate and establish estimated annual payments to be made over a fixed period, which is yet to be decided.

Lewis Macdonald: I am sure that the minister will recognise that, if the project is delivered even at the figures that were estimated some years ago, the annual payments to be made, perhaps over a 30-year period, will be in the region of £16 million to £21 million.

Does the minister recall John Swinney's address to the David Hume Institute in April this year? In that speech, Mr Swinney criticised previous Administrations for making

"vast 30-year financial commitments of growing scale and growing impact in the full knowledge that the growth years of public spending were coming to an end."

Does the minister recall that Mr Swinney described that type of 30-year payment scheme as "the summit of financial irresponsibility"?

That contrasts with the recent statements from Transport Scotland and the minister's and Mr Swinney's colleague Brian Adam in relation to the procurement of the Aberdeen western peripheral route over a 30-year period.

Does the minister, in the light of his plans for the AWPR, support the view of Mr Swinney or of Mr Adam? Does he have any evidence of private sector partners that are willing to provide the money up front to make the non-profit-distributing model work?

Stewart Stevenson: The NPD model and the plan for it to be used in the AWPR are not new: they were published in our infrastructure investment plan in 2008. When I answered Nicol Stephen's written question S3W-24477 on 10 June, I confirmed that there had been no change on that. The NPD model is entirely different from the private finance initiative model in that it caps the commitments that we have to make. We will, of course, consider exactly how we take the project forward, but there is considerable investor interest in the progression of NPD projects by the Government.

Carbon Capture and Storage

7. Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive, in light of its announcement that any application for a new coal plant in Scotland will need to demonstrate carbon capture and storage on a minimum of 300MW net of capacity from its first day of operation, whether all aspects of the CCS chain will be expected to be working from that first day. (S3O-8669)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Any application for consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 will need to include technically feasible plans to capture carbon from at least 300MW net of the station's capacity. In addition, when consent is given, it will be conditional on the developer submitting information on the consenting and licensing of the whole carbon capture and storage chain that is associated with the application.

We plan to issue our detailed guidance on thermal generation early next year, which will set out our position in more detail. In the meantime, we are working closely with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Marine Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Crown Estate, the Health and Safety Executive and the UK Government in order to develop an integrated approach to the licensing and consents processes that will be required for any CCS project.

The Scottish Government is keen to develop a pragmatic approach to risk assessment and a streamlined approach to decision making that will place Scotland at the forefront of the approach to CCS development. We look forward to continuing those positive discussions with our partners.

Ross Finnie: In the minister's rather lengthy response, it appears that he was describing the technical feasibility to capture carbon rather than

the ability to do so from the first day. That means, therefore, that the plants will just be using a different and stranger variation of the carbon-capture-ready function, which still leaves us in the position that new plants will not have the facility for carbon capture at the point that they start to emit carbon.

Jim Mather: I am deeply disappointed by that. The member is in danger of talking down CCS. A former chairman of Shell is telling us that the industry could be as significant as oil and gas. The industry has huge potential in Scotland with our engineering and academic skills, our geology and oil and gas sectors for enhanced oil recovery, and our utility companies and generators, which are in pole position to win the UK demonstrator competition. I will discuss the issue with the member privately; I need to put him in a positive frame of mind on it.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general questions. Before we move to First Minister's question time, I say to all members, including ministers, that questions and answers appear to be taking on the characteristics of speeches rather than questions and answers.

Members: Hear hear.

The Presiding Officer: There is no need for anyone to applaud; you are all guilty of it. I ask all members to look at their practice.

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-2055)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Later today I will have meetings to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland. I will also speak to Mr Carwyn Jones, the First Minister designate of Wales, to congratulate him on his election and on his declaration of an early referendum on Wales's constitutional future.

Iain Gray: Is it the mark of a man, or the mark of a First Minister, to cast aside one of his own colleagues to save his own skin?

The First Minister: I note that Iain Gray timeously delivered a speech for St Andrew's day on 2 December, in which he said that the Parliament focused too much on personality and process. Perhaps he should have said that the Labour Party focuses on personality and process while the Government gets on with the job.

Iain Gray: Let us focus on education, which is central to Scotland's future. On 5 September 2007, Hugh Henry said that the First Minister

"promised ... that he would reduce to 18 class sizes for primaries 1 to 3",

and asked:

"Can he confirm that his promise will be delivered in the lifetime of this parliamentary session?"—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2007; c 1378.]

The First Minister replied, "Yes, I can". Does he remember saying that?

The First Minister: I recall saying a whole range of things to Hugh Henry, including bemoaning the fact that Labour councils the length and breadth of Scotland do not share this Government's enthusiasm for smaller class sizes. As I reminded Iain Gray only this morning, it is a remarkable fact that although only one third—far too many—of councils in Scotland are under Labour's control, they are responsible for two thirds of the fall in teacher numbers in Scotland.

It was Iain Gray's predecessor who told the chamber that class sizes do not really matter. I think that they matter, this Government thinks that they matter, and the education secretary will bring the fresh thinking that will persuade even the Labour Party that they matter.

Iain Gray: It was the First Minister who said in the chamber on 5 September 2007 that his

Government would reduce class sizes to 18 in the first three years of primary school.

I have in my hand a minute of a meeting of the deans of the faculties of education in Scotland that was held on 2 July 2007. In attendance was senior civil servant Donald Henderson, who revealed the advice that was offered to ministers on the class size pledge:

"The scale of the commitment does not allow it to be delivered in the lifetime of a parliament."

The First Minister told Parliament the exact opposite two months later. I remember that, and I remember the look on Fiona Hyslop's face when he said it, because she knew that what he said was not true. Did he know that it was not true?

The First Minister: As Iain Gray well knows from the concordat, the promise was to reduce class sizes on a year-to-year basis and to show progress on that basis. It is truly remarkable that not a single Labour council in Scotland is prepared to show that progress, although they signed up to the concordat. Luckily, some councils in Scotland are doing the job. Let us look at the figures for East Ayrshire Council, which is under Scottish National Party control. Through increasing teacher numbers, albeit at a modest level, the council has taken advantage of the fall in school rolls to achieve a situation in which more than 40 per cent of pupils in primaries 1 to 3 are in class sizes of 18 or fewer. Perhaps Iain Gray could have a word with his Labour colleagues in council chambers around Scotland, with his back benchers and with his front benchers, such as Jackie Baillie, and try to get them to be as enthusiastic on low class sizes as is every member of the Government.

Iain Gray: Never mind the council chambers around the country—my question is about the First Minister's words in the parliamentary chamber. The First Minister misled the chamber on 5 September 2007. He made a promise that he knew he could not keep and then he left his education secretary to dangle. How must Fiona Hyslop have felt sitting there, tied to a promise that they both knew they could not keep? She sat there for two long years taking the flak for Alex Salmond and, in the end, she was sacrificed to save his neck. Will he admit that she was just the scapegoat and that he is the guilty man?

The First Minister: As I said this morning, Fiona Hyslop has made substantial achievements as education secretary, not least of which are the legislation on rural schools, the apprenticeships initiative, which is helping economic recovery, and the restoration of free education for the people of Scotland. She continues as a valuable member of the Administration.

Incidentally, if Iain Gray is not concerned with personality and process, why is it that Labour

members have called for the resignation of every member of the Administration, with the sole exception being me? At some point, he had better get round to calling for my resignation; then, I hope, we shall face the people and see who they want to be their First Minister.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-2056)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have no plans to meet the Prime Minister in the near future.

Annabel Goldie: For some time now, the First Minister has been desperately denying that there is anything wrong with education in Scotland. In fact, just a few weeks ago, he told me that he put on record his "approval and endorsement" of the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning—poor woman. Obviously, his sacking of Fiona Hyslop is a belated admission that something is very far wrong. Was it the 10,000 pupils who leave school each year unable to read or write properly that made him sack Fiona Hyslop? Was it the 2,000 fewer teachers than two years ago that made him sack Fiona Hyslop? Was it possibly Scotland's below-average global ranking for mathematics and science that made him sack Fiona Hyslop? Or was it none of the above, because he thinks that there is nothing wrong, which begs the question: why did he sack Fiona Hyslop?

The First Minister: It clearly was not the international comparisons that Annabel Goldie cites, first, because those were comparisons up to 2007 and, secondly, because they are not considered on a like-for-like basis. We have said that we needed the changes because fresh thinking was required to try to instil in council chambers around Scotland—all of them—the Administration's enthusiasm for lower class sizes. I have figures, set out by party-political council leadership in Scotland, which show that SNP-led councils have the lowest primary school teacher pupil ratio in Scotland. That is a matter for congratulation. However, perhaps the Liberal and Labour parties should consider that Conservative-led councils—although I accept that there are not very many of them—have the second-lowest pupil teacher ratio of council chambers round Scotland. I hope that Annabel Goldie will join the Administration in seeking to persuade all councils in Scotland to share the enthusiasm for low class sizes that is a mark of the Administration and on which we intend to deliver.

Annabel Goldie: Of course, I believe in genuine devolution of local control to local government; I do not believe in central Government telling local government what to do. Sacking Fiona Hyslop

does not get Alex Salmond off the hook. He wrote the SNP manifesto and concocted the undeliverable pledges, and he must accept that he got it wrong and that we need a new direction for education in Scotland.

What is the First Minister's position? Is it the Fiona Hyslop model of centralised control of education by the state, or is it the Mike Russell vision that "power in education" should

"be transferred to the school and where power lies"

and

"so should resource and the ability to decide",

which is also the Conservative position? In only 48 hours, is the First Minister already at odds with his new education minister?

The First Minister: I watched Michael Russell speak in the education debate this morning, rallying the chamber to his approach to education. [Laughter.]

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

The First Minister: Well, I note that Michael Russell became Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning without a single vote being cast against his appointment. However, even he was beginning to look a wee bit anxious when Annabel Goldie suggested that he might be developing Tory tendencies. He absolutely denies that he will ever go down that road.

In all this brouhaha, let us remember that the average primary class size in Scotland has now reached a record low of 23.1 pupils—an historic low in Scotland. Annabel Goldie and I may disagree on a whole range of things, but I believe that councils have to have discretion across the range of services. I also believe that, when a concordat is made and certain agreed provisions are signed up to, the Government has the right to expect councils—not just some councils but all councils—to hold to the commitment to policy implementation. Lower class sizes are very much in the interests of the Scottish people.

While school autonomy and local discretion are hugely important, this is a national Parliament, and a national Parliament with an aspiration to improve education must find the mechanism to ensure that its policy can be applied across the country. That is exactly the step that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning set out this morning.

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-2057)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Tavish Scott: The First Minister said that he watched on television Michael Russell's first speech as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. In his speech, Mr Russell said that the situation in Scottish education was not hunky-dory, but was not a crisis. What does "not hunky-dory" mean?

The First Minister: It means that Scottish education performs well every day of the week, as Michael Russell said. He was bemoaning the fact that some politicians in the chamber—whether Liberal Democrat, Labour or Conservative—seek to undermine the achievements of Scottish education for party-political advantage—[Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Examination results in Scotland are at a record high and class sizes in primary schools are at a record low. Scottish teachers and pupils are performing well. We have an issue in trying to generate enthusiasm for low class sizes across the council chambers of Scotland. In that regard, we should remember that Liberal Democrat councils are second only to Labour councils in having the highest class sizes in Scotland.

Tavish Scott: Presumably, that all enthusiastically explains why the First Minister sacked Fiona Hyslop. When did he decide to remove her from her post? Was it when the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland* said that five out of six new teachers do not have a permanent job? Was it when teacher numbers dropped by 1,300 in one year, which was the reason that his press spokesman gave the BBC? Or was it when he found out that every other party in the Parliament was sick of the excuses and wanted change? Michael Russell says that this is not an education crisis. What is it? Is it a political crisis? Is having to sack an education secretary a personal crisis for a First Minister?

The First Minister: Tavish Scott was in his place this morning when I pointed out that, when it comes to ministerial changes, this Administration is a sea of tranquillity compared with the musical chairs for which the previous Administration was known. Among those musical chairs was the resignation of Tavish Scott because he could not stomach Ross Finnie's policy on fishing.

When we look at the achievements of Scottish education, which I have listed, Mike Russell's formula seems absolutely correct. Yes, Scottish children and teachers are achieving results every single day, but there is no room for complacency—we all want to make improvements. At last, perhaps, the Liberal Democrats and every

other party represented in the chamber will get behind the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to see whether we can introduce those improvements for Scotland.

Tavish Scott: Mr Salmond is right to say that I resigned over the principle of fisheries policy. When he resigned from the Parliament to go back to Westminster, did he do so on a point of principle?

The First Minister: The point that I was making was that Tavish Scott's was only one of 17 ministerial departures during the first Administration and 11 ministerial departures during the second Administration. The member should, therefore, be delighted by the stability of this SNP Administration, as we work for Scotland on a daily basis.

Throat Cancer (University of Milan Study)

4. Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the findings in the University of Milan study indicating that Scotland has the highest rate of deaths in Europe from throat cancer. (S3F-2059)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government is aware of the study that was undertaken by the University of Milan and is considering its findings. The figures in the study to which the member refers are very concerning, but it should be noted that deaths from head and neck cancers in Scotland have fallen by 13.5 per cent in the 10 years to 2008 and that the incidence of head and neck cancers is down by 6.2 per cent in the decade to 2006. Between April and June this year, 94.6 per cent of eligible urgently referred patients with head and neck cancers were treated within 62 days of referral, which means that the national 62-day target for eligible urgent referrals has been met in three successive quarters.

Cancer is a top priority for both NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government. Our "Better Cancer Care" action plan will make a difference to all aspects of cancer care, including prevention, screening, referral, diagnosis, treatment and support. A range of actions is already in place to tackle the known risk factors for throat cancers and other head and neck cancers, which include alcohol consumption, smoking and poor diet.

Jamie Hepburn: The president of the Royal College of Physicians is quoted today as saying that there is "compelling evidence" that abuse of alcohol and the harm that it causes are linked to price. With alcohol being identified in the Milan report as a leading cause of oesophageal cancer—the incidence of which the World Health Organization estimates will increase by 64.3 per cent between 2000 and 2020—does the First

Minister share my hope that all parties represented in the chamber will put aside political advantage, in the same way as was done for the ban on smoking in public places, and work constructively towards measures that will change Scotland's relationship with alcohol?

The First Minister: Yes, I do. We know that alcohol is a contributory factor in many conditions, including throat cancer. The Administration has never claimed that minimum pricing is a silver bullet. However, as the member indicated, there is a consensus in the medical community that it can be a key weapon in tackling the kind of alcohol misuse that can lead to many dangerous diseases. I call on MSPs from all parties to do the right thing for Scotland's health and to get behind all the proposals in the Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill, especially those that are supported by medical experts, doctors, nurses, the police and the licensed trade. I am glad that not one but two former health ministers in the Parliament have confirmed their support for the bill. As the smoking ban has shown, legislation can play a role in driving the cultural change that all of us agree is necessary.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for accepting that minimum unit pricing is not a silver bullet. The Labour Party accepts the link between price and consumption. However, does the First Minister accept that he could do something now, with which the whole chamber would agree, to improve the mortality rate of those with oesophageal cancer? Does he agree with Ochre, a national charity based in Scotland, that early and accurate diagnosis of that rapidly developing cancer is needed? Will he therefore ensure both that clear guidance is issued to general practitioners on diagnosis of the cancer, so that patients are sent for testing more quickly, and that there is better access to testing facilities, with endoscopy clinics in primary care facilities? I am sure that he will agree that that would have the effect of saving lives now.

The First Minister: Early diagnosis is a key part of the cancer strategy, as Jackie Baillie is well aware. As I indicated in my initial answer—I am sure that she will be delighted about this—the national 62-day target for referrals in cases of the cancers that Jamie Hepburn mentioned has been met in three successive quarters. That is good news that should be welcomed by members across the chamber.

It is not new for the Government to say that minimum pricing is not a silver bullet—Nicola Sturgeon has indicated that on many occasions. Equally, it is not new for Labour spokesmen to say that they think price has a role in the consumption of alcohol. Surely if the Labour Party had other price mechanisms, such as taxation, in mind as a

policy, we might have expected the Calman commission to propose the transfer of powers, which would have given this Parliament provenance over such taxation powers. In the meantime, is it not our responsibility to take action using the powers that we have and to pursue a minimum price policy?

Independence Referendum

5. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government considers that £12 million spent on a referendum is the best use of taxpayers' money in a recession. (S3F-2071)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The moneys to be spent on a referendum will be indicated in the referendum bill that will come before the Parliament. If Scotland chooses, in a national referendum, to increase the powers of the Parliament and to become independent, the many benefits that I can see accruing include this Parliament and this nation not having to contribute £9 million for the House of Lords every year, £32 million for our share of the House of Commons every year or £8 million for the Secretary of State for Scotland every year. That is money that we should invest every year in making Scotland more successful, and it far outweighs the cost of a one-off referendum.

Pauline McNeill: Does the First Minister acknowledge that today's MORI poll puts support for independence at just 20 per cent, and that support for independence is falling? Could that be due the fact that, after two and a half years of a Scottish National Party Administration, the people of Scotland have got a glimpse of the SNP's vision for their country and are rejecting it?

If Alex Salmond, the new member in charge of the referendum bill, cannot persuade respected nationalists such as Jim Sillars and Gordon Wilson about his doomed referendum bill, has he considered the possibility that he might just be wrong? Where will Alex Salmond succeed where Mike Russell has failed?

The First Minister: I thank agent Pauline McNeill for allowing me to talk about today's MORI poll. The real figures published by MORI, as opposed to the fake figures in a Labour Party press release, show that the Scottish National Party is ahead not just in Holyrood voting intentions but in Westminster voting intentions.

On the subject of a referendum, I was generous enough to congratulate Carwyn Jones, who is to be First Minister of Wales, on his election. Pauline McNeill will have heard that Carwyn Jones is an enthusiast for a referendum on Wales's constitutional future. Perhaps that point should be considered. Perhaps the SNP is moving ahead, as

shown in today's MORI poll, because the people of Scotland are wondering why the Labour Party wants an alternative transferable vote referendum in England and a constitutional referendum in Wales but is trying to deprive the people of Scotland of the right to have a say on their own constitutional future.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Will the First Minister confirm that it is still the Scottish Government's intention to find a way to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in the referendum on Scotland's future, unlike that of the Opposition parties, which are refusing to let any voter in Scotland have a democratic say on the constitution?

The First Minister: Of course, a surge in support for the SNP among 16 and 17-year-olds cannot be the reason for our moving ahead in the MORI poll, since they were not counted in MORI's sample.

I hope that the Parliament will decide that 16-year-olds should be entitled to vote on things that affect their future, as will happen in relation to elections to health boards. For the referendum bill, we will have to use the current franchise that is available to people. Nonetheless, I am sure that Aileen Campbell, on behalf of the young people of Scotland, will continue to put forward her argument. From this First Minister at least she will get receptive concern and answers.

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): Does the First Minister now regret not taking up my offer some 18 months ago, before the global economic downturn, of parliamentary support for an early referendum?

The First Minister: I am not certain that this is Wendy Alexander's strongest suit. There is a hopeful aspect to the Wendy Alexander initiative last year, which at the time was loyally supported by Iain Gray. We might come to the conclusion that, if the Labour Party can change its mind twice—as it has done already in this parliamentary session, given that it now opposes a referendum—a third change of mind next year is not beyond the bounds of possibility. I am sure that Wendy Alexander will encourage her colleagues to allow the people of Scotland to have that say on this nation's future.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): At the meeting of the Finance Committee on 9 November, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth whether there was provision in the 2010-11 budget for the referendum. He said that there was not. I responded that he would therefore have to find the money

"by cutting something that is in the budget".

The cabinet secretary responded:

"I would have to make a choice in order to provide for a referendum bill—yes."—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 9 November 2009; c 1654.]

Education, housing, transport and health budgets are protected. From what line in the 2010-11 budget would the referendum costs come?

The First Minister: The cost of the referendum will be in the referendum bill, but if it were to be £9 million, that would be 0.03 per cent of total Scottish Government expenditure.

I have been teasing the Labour Party about its support for a referendum elsewhere. I remind Jeremy Purvis that the Liberals seem to be enthusiasts for a referendum on whether we should be in or out of Europe. Incidentally, they enthusiastically back the new Welsh First Minister in his call for an early referendum in Wales. Why on earth does the Liberal party want to consult the people on everything except the constitutional future of this nation?

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Can the First Minister tell us how many of the contributors to the national conversation online discussion are in fact cybernats who are working for SNP parliamentarians at taxpayers' expense?

The First Minister: There were 500,000 hits on the national conversation website. That reflects a substantial amount of interest. If we consider the relative sizes of the national conversation and the Conservative party, I do not think that the Conservatives made a substantial contribution to the national conversation.

The national conversation engaged the people of Scotland at public meetings the length and breadth of the country. If Murdo Fraser wants to put it to the test, as I understand that Conservatives, including his old friend and sponsor Mr Michael Forsyth, do on a range of issues, perhaps they will join Wendy Alexander in supporting the right of the people of Scotland to have a say on expanding the powers of the Parliament, so that we can tackle all the issues and achieve what all of us would like to achieve for the people of this nation.

Education (National Debate)

6. Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister, following the most recent drop in teacher numbers, what plans the Scottish Government has to hold a national debate on the future of the education system. (S3F-2061)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We should remember that this year Scotland has achieved an average primary school class size of 23.1 pupils—the lowest on record. We must also acknowledge that progress needs to be made on reducing

primary 1 to primary 3 class sizes to 18 or fewer. That is why the Scottish Government is committed to taking a fresh look at how best to reduce class sizes. I have asked Michael Russell, whose post was confirmed by the Parliament this morning, to lead that work. He has made it clear that all stakeholders—particularly teachers, parents and pupils but, of course, local authorities as well—should participate fully and actively in the national debate on education. That is essential.

Elizabeth Smith: Does the First Minister agree with his new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, who said that the debate on school education should be completely shorn of ideological prejudice and should encourage much more diversity in school management?

The First Minister: Of course, prejudice is never part of this Government's approach to any debate, so there will be no prejudice of any kind from us. The ideology that we will have is that the education system should do its best for future generations of young Scots. That is an ideology to which we should all sign up.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Health and Wellbeing

Housing (Priorities)

1. Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what its housing priorities are for the next 12 months. (S3O-8742)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): Over the next 12 months this Government will continue to deliver its wide range of programmes to improve housing for the people of Scotland.

A key element is our record three-year £1.65 billion investment in affordable housing, from which we will ensure that we extract maximum benefit to meet housing need. In addition, we will continue to invest in energy efficiency, tackle fuel poverty, work with our partners to meet the challenge of the 2012 homelessness commitments, help those at risk of repossession and introduce a housing bill that will improve the conditions in private sector housing and protect the interests of existing and future tenants by reforming the right to buy and modernising the regime for regulating social landlords.

Stuart McMillan: The minister will be aware that there are many challenges in private sector housing supply. Only last week, Scotland's chief statistician published revealing statistics for the social rented sector showing that there has been a massive increase in the affordable housing investment programme and local authority home completions. Does the minister agree that continuing with accelerated capital expenditure could play a part in increasing housing supply in the social rented sector in the west of Scotland as well as in the rest of the country?

Alex Neil: I agree with Stuart McMillan on both points. Accelerating capital spending into next year would help us to overcome the problem of recession next year. The statistics announced last week showed a 71 per cent increase in completions, a 300 per cent increase in starts and a 300 per cent increase in approvals for social housing. I regret to say that we have not had a congratulatory telegram from any of the Opposition parties.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the minister on

mentioning the 2012 homelessness target. Is he aware of the comments of Jacqui Watt of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, who has highlighted the tension for housing associations in ensuring that

"all statutory categories of need are catered for",

as well as creating sustainable communities? Will the minister act on the suggestion of the Scottish Housing Regulator, which says that it is

"time for all the relevant agencies to get round the table"

to look at how we can deliver that 2012 homelessness target?

Alex Neil: We already have a 2012 homelessness working party involving key stakeholders and we will extend our discussions to other stakeholders who are not represented in that core group. We will address the issues that Jacqui Watt rightly raised as well as all the other issues to help us achieve our 2012 target, to which we remain firmly committed.

Health Spending (2010-11 Draft Budget)

2. James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has had with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth relating to the 2010-11 draft budget. (S3O-8699)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): In the course of the budget process so far, I have had a number of constructive discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth on the 2010-11 draft budget.

James Kelly: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will agree that it is important to maximise the experience and expertise of national health service staff. Can she explain why the draft budget contains proposals to cut the education and training budget from £157 million to £152 million, thereby undermining the NHS's ability to get the most from its staff?

Nicola Sturgeon: I know that James Kelly is not on the Health and Sport Committee, but if he cares to read the *Official Report* he will read extensive discussions between the committee and me about all aspects of the draft budget.

I can certainly provide James Kelly with detailed information on the training and education budgets. A number of reasons lie behind the change in the budget line, including changes to payments that we make to United Kingdom-wide bodies, but it does not alter the education and training that we deliver within the NHS. I hope that it will reassure James Kelly to hear me say, as I have said many

times before, that we attach a great priority to ensuring that those who work in our NHS and do such a good job have access to the education and training that they need to develop their skills and provide a high-quality service. That is why one of the key aspects of agenda for change, which was introduced by one of my predecessors—I see that he is in the chamber—has at its heart the knowledge and skills framework that ensures that NHS staff have access to on-going development. I hope that that reassures James Kelly, but I am happy to provide him with any further details that he requires.

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): Has the cabinet secretary also discussed the issue of accelerated capital expenditure with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth? Does she share my concern about the recent statements made by the Labour transport spokesperson, Charlie Gordon, that accelerated capital expenditure should be spent on the Glasgow airport rail link, rather than on social housing, as the Government has proposed? Does she agree that that would be seriously detrimental to the supply of affordable housing in Edinburgh and throughout Scotland?

Nicola Sturgeon: I have discussed the issue of accelerated capital with the finance secretary on many occasions. I make it clear to Shirley-Anne Somerville and other members in the chamber that we continue to press the case vigorously with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. There is no doubt that the right thing for the chancellor to do in his pre-budget report next week would be to announce more accelerated capital. That would be good for social housing, not just here in Edinburgh, but right across Scotland, including, I have to say, Glasgow. We will continue to make that case.

The accelerated capital that we have been able to use so far has contributed to the fantastic record on social housing to which Alex Neil referred earlier. There is no doubt that having access to more accelerated capital would allow us to do even more. I hope that all members in the chamber will continue to back the Government in making that call. Hopefully, when the chancellor makes his pre-budget report next week he will show that he has been listening.

NHS Aroma Cafe Pilot (Evaluation)

3. Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when the NHS Aroma cafe concept will be fully evaluated. (S3O-8709)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The Aroma cafe pilot was evaluated in October and a report is currently being drafted for

consideration by the project board. NHS National Services Scotland will then be provided with a recommendation from the project board. A decision on whether to make the Aroma concept available as a choice to NHS Scotland is expected to be taken in January.

Duncan McNeil: Does the cabinet secretary agree that the uncertainty for hard-working volunteers has gone on for far too long? When I spoke to them this week, they said that they had had no such update as outlined by the cabinet secretary.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that Inverclyde royal hospital visitors and staff neither need nor want an Aroma cafe? What they want is the valuable service that is provided by the League of Hospital Friends to be confirmed soon and for the long term.

Nicola Sturgeon: I acknowledge Duncan McNeil's interest in this matter on behalf of his constituents. I will make a number of points in response to his question. First, I have said to him before in this chamber that I value highly the contribution that volunteers make to the national health service—as does everyone in the chamber. I have also commented before on what I consider to be the premature announcement of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde about the roll-out of a concept that had not been evaluated and on which decisions had not been taken.

Secondly, I do not want to pre-empt the decision that may or may not be taken in January, but should the Aroma concept be offered as a choice for NHS boards, it will be just that—a choice—and it will be for NHS boards to make decisions about what they consider to be the appropriate way forward for facilities in their areas.

Thirdly and lastly, regardless of the route that an NHS board opts to take in relation to the Aroma cafe concept, I expect all NHS boards to work closely with volunteers to acknowledge openly and frankly the contribution that they make, in a way that allows them to continue to contribute. I expect all NHS boards, including NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, to have such dialogue and engagement with volunteers, who do a fantastic job for them.

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): I have been encouraged by the cabinet secretary's earlier comment that Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board's announcement was premature and particularly by her saying three times today that the Aroma cafe is a possible choice. I hope that she is aware that at a meeting between the League of Hospital Friends and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde in the summer—after she made it clear that announcements were premature—the NHS board made it clear to the

league that it would not change its mind and that the league should turn its attention to other activity that it might wish to contribute. Does she agree that that is wholly unhelpful and out of kilter with the spirit of the direction that she gave to the board?

Nicola Sturgeon: I have made my views clear. Health facilities Scotland has taken no decisions about the Aroma cafe concept. I have outlined the timescale on which such decisions are likely to be taken. After any decision, the choice will be for NHS boards. I expect all NHS boards to take account of a range of factors before deciding whether to opt for the Aroma concept.

As I have said—I can make it no clearer—I expect boards to engage closely with their volunteers in reaching those decisions and coming to a view on how the contribution that volunteers make can continue in the NHS. Health facilities Scotland has met the WRVS and the League of Hospital Friends to explore how they could work in partnership with Aroma sites. Further meetings along those lines are planned with a range of voluntary organisations.

Any health board must balance several competing objectives, but it is essential that all health boards recognise—as I believe that they do—the contribution that volunteers make. That should be at the centre of health boards' thinking in deciding whether or how to develop the cafe concept.

Mental Health Services (Voluntary Sector Providers)

4. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing last met voluntary sector mental health service providers and what issues were discussed. (S30-8701)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Scottish ministers meet the voluntary sector regularly to discuss a range of issues in relation to its role in delivering the Scottish Government's mental health improvement agenda.

Johann Lamont: When the cabinet secretary last met voluntary sector health providers, did she discuss their fears about the impact of the concordat and single outcome agreements on their capacity to access funding and to deliver high-quality mental health services in communities? She will recall that she promised that an analysis of the implementation of the first round of single outcome agreements would be available in September, but we are still waiting. When will that report be made available, to give those groups confidence? What will she do to address the concern that the membership of

community planning partnerships, which are critical to the development of single outcome agreements, is not sufficiently open and accessible to voluntary sector organisations?

Nicola Sturgeon: Johann Lamont asked about the timing of the analysis of the single outcome agreements. I will provide her with the most up-to-date information on that later, as I do not have that to hand.

I will make several points in response to the substance of Johann Lamont's questions. First, members will be relieved to hear that I will not treat the Parliament to an exposition of the concordat's merits—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): I am certainly relieved, too.

Nicola Sturgeon: Suffice it to say that the concordat brings significant benefits and reflects a more constructive and mature relationship between central and local government. I say—in the spirit of consensus, I hope—that, whether they are in the statutory or the voluntary sector, mental health service providers do an extremely valuable and important job. We must ensure that they are valued and supported in doing so.

I am not criticising Johann Lamont, but the scope of her question was general, which I understand. If she brings to me specific concerns from organisations, I am happy to undertake to meet them to understand and discuss those concerns, so that we can perhaps find a way forward.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care's quality of care services report states that voluntary sector services are consistently graded higher on quality of staffing, care, support, management and leadership than those provided by local authorities. How will the Scottish Government assist the sector to ensure that mental health services are retained and are not cut due to financial constraints?

Nicola Sturgeon: Mary Scanlon makes a good point about the general quality of service that the voluntary sector provides. Of course, that statement contains a huge generalisation, but generally speaking I think that the voluntary sector provides services of a very high standard. Indeed, that is exactly why the Scottish Government has been so active in supporting the sector. For example, over the spending review period, we have provided record resources—in excess, I think, of £90 million—for the third sector in general. It is right to provide such support, but we also need to ensure that, regardless of who provides them, the services that are provided to people, particularly the vulnerable in our society, are of a standard that they have a right to expect. I am sure that all members will sign up to that.

Attendance Allowance (Older Disabled People)

5. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has discussed with the United Kingdom Government the impact on Scotland's older disabled people of changes proposed to attendance allowance. (S3O-8726)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): I have put on record to the Secretary of State for Health my concerns about the limited detail set out in the English green paper exploring the options for the future funding of social care and support. Any reforms to the benefits system by the UK Government will need to give due consideration to the needs of older disabled people in Scotland.

Willie Coffey: Does the minister agree that the decision to exclude Scotland's older disabled people from the consultation on this issue represents a real slap in the face by a Labour Government that is increasingly out of touch with the lives of ordinary Scots? Will she raise that point with the responsible minister at Westminster and secure a commitment to consult those affected in Scotland on any proposals to change UK-wide benefits?

Shona Robison: We have generally been very concerned about the lack of thought given to the impact of such changes to the benefit system on social care delivery, not just in Scotland but in Wales. Of course, a different system operates in Northern Ireland.

As I say, very little thought has been put into it, but the fact is that these changes could profoundly impact on social care services in Scotland, which is why we have been making extensive attempts to have this particular dialogue. Our officials have been discussing the issue with Department for Work and Pensions officials and, on behalf of the ministerial strategic group on health and community care, Councillor Ronnie McColl and I have issued a joint letter to the Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham, expressing our concerns and urging him to consider the views on and concerns about attendance allowance and other benefits that have been raised by the voluntary sector and the individuals in Scotland who will be most directly affected by the changes.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I refer the minister and the member to the minister's written answer of 29 October, which sets out in full the very detailed consultation in which the Scottish Government is engaged. That response is particularly welcome.

Given that the Secretary of State for Health has made it clear that the UK Government has categorically ruled out the use of disability living allowance and attendance allowance in proposals

for the reform of care, does the minister agree that any suggestion otherwise serves only to deliberately confuse the most vulnerable people in our society? However, on a positive note, will she consider what we could learn from the UK Government's proposal for a simple, fair and affordable care system that will allow us to end Scotland's postcode lottery of care?

Shona Robison: I will leave the business of trying to confuse vulnerable people to the Labour Party. That is not how this Government goes about its business.

The issue of disability living allowance for those under 65 has been clarified, but I do not think that it is by any means clear that DLA for the over-65s and attendance allowance are off the table. Indeed, it is clear that one of the proposals is to combine those benefits in the care package. I thought that it would have been more in Jackie Baillie's interest to stand with us and say that any such changes must take full cognisance of the impact on social care in Scotland. I would very much doubt the Labour Party's commitment to do anything for vulnerable people in Scotland if it did otherwise.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 is withdrawn.

Mental Health Services (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)

7. Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how public authorities will be expected to exercise their duties under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights when withdrawing funding from mental health services. (S3O-8737)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Public authorities will continue to work in partnership and use the record resources that they are allocated for health and social care overall to plan and deliver high quality mental health services in Scotland and to meet all legislative and other obligations, including their duties under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Michael Matheson: The minister will be aware that the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is a multilateral treaty that has been ratified by the UK Government. The United Nations committee that is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the treaty recently made a number of recommendations about implementing it more effectively in Scotland, including recognising the need to intensify efforts to overcome health inequalities, and to decrease the number of suicides among mental health patients. How does the Government intend to respond to those recommendations?

Shona Robison: Michael Matheson raises some important questions there. Under our equally well strategy for addressing health inequalities, we are aware of the needs of those who have mental health problems. Specific testing is being done on mental health issues that will, I hope, show us how to redesign services. Also, through the choose life programme, we have put in support to prevent suicide, particularly among those who have mental health problems. Michael Matheson will also be aware of the recommendation of the national confidential inquiry into suicide and homicide by people with mental illness.

We wrote to all health boards commending the recommendations for implementation, and we are keeping an overview of the implementation. I will keep the member informed.

We are also developing a secure and confidential suicide register for Scotland to help us to provide extensive information on what lies behind some of those suicides, and to get a clearer picture of the information that might have helped to prevent them, and might prevent them in future. I am happy to keep the member updated on those developments.

Children with Epilepsy (West Lothian)

8. Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what specialist health services are available to children with epilepsy in West Lothian. (S3O-8727)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): A consultant neurologist from the Scottish paediatric epilepsy network runs regular clinics at St John's hospital, Livingston with a consultant paediatrician who has an interest in epilepsy. West Lothian also has well-defined referral pathways to specialist clinics at the royal hospital for sick children, including ready access to immediate investigation.

Specialist children's epilepsy clinics are held in West Lothian as required, four to five times a year, by a consultant paediatric neurologist and a specialist epilepsy nurse. Specialist epilepsy services also link to the education services in West Lothian to minimise the impact of the condition on school life.

Angela Constance: Epilepsy West Lothian has recently told me that there is only one paediatric nurse who specialises in epilepsy for the entire Lothian region, with a caseload of 900 children. Consequently, only three clinics for children who have epilepsy are held at St John's hospital per year. Although I will write to NHS Lothian about that, how can we best improve provision for children in West Lothian, given the growing number of children in the region and the fact that one in 100 children has epilepsy?

Shona Robison: I know that Epilepsy West Lothian provides a range of important support services; I want to put that on the record. My first answer laid out the services that are currently provided through the clinics and the specialist backup from the royal hospital for sick children. However, I would be happy to write to Angela Constance with more detail about her allusion to the numbers of children who are affected and how they require a higher input than they are getting, if she would like to furnish me with more details.

Patient Transport Service (Remote and Rural Areas)

9. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action has been taken to address problems with the patient transport service in remote and rural areas. (S3O-8664)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government and the Scottish Ambulance Service are committed to working to improve the patient transport service for those patients who are eligible to receive the service. It is the responsibility of national health service boards and regional transport groups, in partnership with other partners including the Scottish Ambulance Service, to develop integrated transport solutions that support access to hospital services for those patients who might not be eligible for the patient transport service.

"Better Health, Better Care" committed the Government to developing a national approach to travel management. To develop such an approach, a health care transport framework has been drawn up to support NHS boards in the planning and improvement of transport for health care. That framework was issued to board chief executives on 27 November.

Mary Scanlon: Sunart community council has raised concern—to put it mildly—about the poor quality of the patient transport service that is available in its community and throughout Lochaber, which has resulted in missed hospital appointments and stress and anxiety for patients. An urgent meeting that was agreed in February with the Ambulance Service took place in June and the patient transport service representative could not even attend the most recent meeting, in November. I ask the health secretary to investigate and intervene on behalf of the patients in Lochaber and throughout the Highlands who are dependent on patient transport.

Nicola Sturgeon: I recognise the sentiments and concerns that lie behind Mary Scanlon's question. In the recent period, the Ambulance Service has been fairly open and frank about the fact that the patient transport service does not

always meet the expectations that patients have for it. Often, when we discuss the Ambulance Service, we discuss the emergency service, sometimes forgetting that most people's contact with the Ambulance Service is through the patient transport service. The Ambulance Service is focused on improving the quality of the patient transport service. In the coming period, the Ambulance Service will set out its strategic plan for the next few years, a core part of which will be how it improves that part of the service.

It is an important, although difficult, point that the function of the Ambulance Service, including its patient transport service, is to transport patients who have a clinical need for transport. Many patients do not have that clinical need but nevertheless need support and help in getting to health care appointments. That is why the Ambulance Service alone cannot deal with the transport issues; it must work in partnership with NHS boards and other transport providers and local authorities to ensure that we have an integrated approach to transport—which is particularly important in remote and rural parts of the country—so that people who have a clinical need are catered for by the Ambulance Service, but those who have a transport need but not a clinical one nevertheless find it easy to access appointments. That is a big challenge and job of work, but the Ambulance Service and other NHS partners are fully engaged in trying to resolve and improve the quality of service.

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): As Mary Scanlon said, there are problems with patient transport in the Highlands and Islands. Does the minister agree that greater co-operation by health boards, councils, the Scottish Ambulance Service and, importantly, the voluntary sector is essential if we are to ensure more efficient and effective patient transport? What is being done, especially in the Highlands and Islands, to ensure that public sector bodies are engaging actively with the voluntary sector?

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree absolutely with Dave Thompson, and I think that Mary Scanlon also made those points. I thank Dave Thompson for arranging the meeting that I had yesterday with stakeholders in the Highlands to discuss how we better co-ordinate to provide better transport. There are no easy answers to the questions. Even in less rural areas, transport to and from health care appointments can be a challenge but, nevertheless, innovative approaches are being used. As Dave Thompson and Mary Scanlon said, it is important that all agencies that have a stake and an interest in the issue, and a responsibility, work together to provide a better and more joined-up approach than has been the case to date.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

The cabinet secretary needs to be aware that people with clinical need are not receiving a service from the patient transport service. She will be aware—as I have written to her and asked her many questions on the issue—that it is difficult to get information on the subject. Will she ask Audit Scotland to consider the cost to the health service of the lack of transport services? There are costs from missed appointments but, even worse, there are the costs of the taxi fares that are being charged to NHS boards.

Nicola Sturgeon: Those are some of the issues that I discussed yesterday in the meeting that Dave Thompson arranged. It is not for me to tell Audit Scotland what work it should do, but I always welcome its work and the outcomes of that work in all areas.

I hope that I made it clear—I have been very open about the fact, as has the Ambulance Service—that the quality and reliability of the service that the patient transport service provides have to improve. The service has to improve for people who have a clinical need for it. If the patient transport service is unreliable, there is a knock-on effect on many other parts of the health service. The Ambulance Service very much acknowledges that and is committed to working to improve the service. In making my earlier point, I did not intend to ignore that point, but it is nevertheless important that we have transport solutions in place for those who do not have a clinical need for transport, so that the Ambulance Service does not have to compensate and, in doing so, reduce the level of service that is made available to those who have a genuine clinical need. It is a big challenge, but I am convinced that the Ambulance Service is determined to meet it and to improve.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Earlier this year, the mileage rate for patient transport service volunteer car drivers was changed from a flat rate of 36.9p per mile to 40p for the first 10,000 miles and 25p thereafter. Volunteer drivers with large mileages are finding that volunteering is becoming less financially viable. Last week, a volunteer driver from Helmsdale gave up driving for the service. The rate may be perfectly sensible in the central belt, but it makes no sense in the Highlands, where huge mileages are involved and we do not have a big pool of drivers. I have written to the cabinet secretary on the matter. I believe that the time has come for an independent inquiry into what is going wrong. We simply cannot afford to lose one more driver in the Highlands.

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Jamie Stone for his continued interest in the matter. Previously in the chamber, I have explained the background to the new guidance on mileage rates, so I will not go

into the detail again today. The thinking and motivation behind the new rates is to avoid people falling into the territory where they become taxable on the expenses that they are being paid. Jamie Stone can roll his eyes, but that is the motivation behind the new guidance.

The issue is of particular note in rural Scotland, but it has been raised with me in Glasgow, too. By and large, the people who are affected detrimentally by the new guidance are those who do over 10,000 miles. I know that this is of concern and that it is an issue. As I have also said in the chamber, we have asked boards to provide feedback on the impact of the guidance in their area. I have given a commitment that, once we have all that feedback, we will review the rates in line with the evidence in the feedback. The review is under way. In the fullness of time and once we have all the information, I will be more than happy to share it with members who, I dare say, will want to give feedback.

As I have said on another issue today, I value the huge contribution that volunteers make, whether it is running cafes in hospitals or driving people to hospital appointments. We have to ensure that we reward those people properly for that, and we are committed to doing that. I am happy to keep Jamie Stone up to date with the progress of the review.

Community Care Services (Guidance)

10. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will issue guidance on the tendering of community care services and the right to direct payments. (S3O-8687)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government issued guidance on social care procurement in 2008. We intend to issue further guidance in the new year. The forthcoming guidance will take account of the duty on local authorities to offer eligible individuals in receipt of a social work service a direct payment.

Malcolm Chisholm: Service users in Edinburgh are extremely concerned and, indeed, angry about the recent retendering of adult social care services in the city. First, will the minister make it clear in her new guidance that there is no requirement to retender where service users are satisfied and content with the service that they are receiving? Secondly, if retendering takes place, will she confirm that service users should be involved fully from the earliest stage? Thirdly, when people ask for direct payments, will she ensure that they have a right to have the payments processed as quickly as possible and to receive a level of payment that makes it possible for them to exercise genuine choice?

Shona Robison: I welcome the City of Edinburgh Council's decision to suspend the tender process, which it will now have independently evaluated. I have asked my officials to seek further detail on the nature of the review.

As I said, we will publish new guidance in February. The guidance will underline the need for local authorities to consult and involve service users and their carers in the design of community care services and the planning process, where services are put out to tender. During the planning process, local authorities must consider the implications of direct payments and how they will ensure that all eligible individuals receive information about their right to receive such payments. I am sure that the member will continue to take an interest in the issue, as will I.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (Meetings with Chief Executive)

11. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when ministers last met the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and what issues were discussed. (S3O-8703)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I met the chief executive and senior team of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde on 19 October, when I chaired the board's annual review. We discussed the board's performance against Scottish Government targets and local priorities. I also met the chief executive when I visited the Southern general hospital on 9 November for the unveiling of the design of the new south Glasgow hospital.

Paul Martin: I draw the cabinet secretary's attention to the original concept of the new Stobhill hospital, which included the delivery of chemotherapy services. Does the minister share my concern that the latest design of the hospital does not include the delivery of such services? Will she make representations to the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, so that it may reconsider its position in respect of the latest design?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am more than happy to discuss Paul Martin's concerns with the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and to report back to him when I have had that discussion. I am delighted that the new Stobhill is open and treating patients. The patients to whom I have spoken who have had experience of the hospital report that they are delighted with the standard of care that they receive there.

Football

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

To ask the Scottish Executive what it is doing to support grass-roots football. (S3O-8715)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government fully supports grass-roots and youth football, as is clearly demonstrated by the investment of more than £4 million through sportscotland in 2008-09. That includes both Scottish Government and national lottery funding that is invested in grass-roots and youth football.

The youth action plan is a 10-year commitment that will provide more than £31 million to support youth and grass-roots football throughout Scotland. The cashback for communities investment has created further opportunities for young people to develop their interests and skills in an enjoyable, fulfilling and supported way. In addition, sportscotland operates a number of funding programmes to which grass-roots clubs and community groups can apply for assistance.

John Park: I thank the minister for that extensive answer. I am sure that the minister is aware of the fantastic work of the Fife football partnership to develop footballing opportunities across the kingdom. Recently, I met coaches who are working on the seven-a-side aspect of the partnership. At present, their main concern is the availability of facilities. Recently, there was some bad news in Fife. Eighteen months ago, Fife Council and various other partners reached an agreement to build an all-weather, undercover, Astroturf facility, at the cost of £4 million. Unfortunately, that will not happen in the near future. Will the minister and her officials intervene on the matter, to see what assistance the Scottish Government can offer Fife Council and the Scottish Football Association to ensure that the centre becomes a reality for the thousands of adults and children who would use it?

Shona Robison: I am aware that Fife Council recently completed its facilities strategy, which includes multisport developments for which the council is willing to provide some investment. Clearly, additional investment from other interested partners will be required. The council should be—and, I am sure, is—in discussions with sportscotland about the issue. I can write to the member to provide him with an update on those discussions and how they are being taken forward.

Administration of Medicines in Schools

13. Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to review the regulations with regard to the administration of medicines in schools. (S3O-8707)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison):

Although there are no current plans to review or update the administration of medicines in schools guidance, I understand that a short-life working group of the Scottish diabetes group is due to produce a report by the end of December that will include recommendations on how implementation of the guidance can be improved.

Ken Macintosh: I thank the minister for the information that she has provided on the short-life working group. Is she aware of the concerns that parents across Scotland have expressed about the inconsistencies and variation that can affect pupils in schools, especially those with chronic or long-term conditions such as diabetes or asthma? Will she agree to look further at those concerns, possibly with a view to reviewing the regulations, to see whether they can be improved to ensure greater consistency?

Shona Robison: As I said in my initial answer, the focus must be on how implementation of the guidance can be improved. The guidance is fine. It dictates that, if a child has a long-term condition, a health care plan should be drawn up for the pupil, in collaboration with the school, education authority staff, the parents and the board, to ensure that there is the necessary communication and support around the individual child. I am happy to keep the member updated about the outcome of the short-life working group. If it shows us a way to achieve better and more consistent implementation of the guidance, I will be happy to take that forward.

Alcohol Treatment (Disulfiram)

15. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on the programme undertaken by Glasgow addiction services to provide supervised use of disulfiram in the treatment of individuals with alcohol problems. (S3O-8718)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Decisions on the most appropriate treatment for individual patients are taken by clinicians, who determine the most appropriate form of treatment, taking account of the needs and circumstances of each patient. Their aim is to ensure that the treatment package will provide the most effective support for the individual.

The provision of services is for each local area to consider, taking account of local needs, circumstances and resources. It is for individual health boards, local authorities and alcohol and drug partnerships to ensure that appropriate health care services are provided to meet the needs of their resident populations.

Dr Simpson: Will the minister and the cabinet secretary examine the potential for introducing this successful programme of supervised treatment across Scotland as part of the Government's approach to tackling Scotland's alcohol problems?

Shona Robison: I am happy to consider anything that will help. I only hope that Richard Simpson will do likewise, taking the concerns of the medical profession and his colleagues into account regarding their support for minimum pricing. We would all do better if we came to the table on that issue and worked together.

Getting it Right for Every Child

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5335, in the name of Adam Ingram, on getting it right for every child.

14:57

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): There is no more important task than ensuring that we get it right for Scotland's children. They are part of our society now, and they will mould the way in which Scotland develops and performs in the future. We need to create an environment in which children flourish and can fulfil their potential. By "we" I mean all of Scotland. As the 2002 child protection report stated, "It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright".

GIRFEC has a similar high-level objective: improving outcomes for every child and young person. That is a high aspiration, and it will not be achieved overnight, but it is a goal that we must all aim for. The goal was set by the previous Administration and it secured considerable support, but children, families and practitioners all want to know what it means for them. Since we took office, we have been working with partners to turn the aspiration into practical reality, to test it and to show that it can work.

The evaluation that has been carried out reports on the experience of pathfinder projects, especially in Highland. The evaluation report is lengthy and detailed. The message is that, at this stage in the journey, GIRFEC works. GIRFEC means improved outcomes, better information sharing and reduced bureaucracy. It ensures that children's views are heard and taken into account, and it places the child at the centre. Those are all issues that were raised in the report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, "How well do we protect Scotland's children?", which was published last week. GIRFEC shows how improvements can be made in those areas.

To ensure that GIRFEC works, we need joint leadership, commitment, planning and training, building on good multi-agency working. Practitioners and management need to reconfigure how they work into a single planning process across all agencies. That means working in a common language, to capture and share concerns, and engaging with families at every stage. That is major, transformational change, and I pay tribute to all the people who are working through that change.

GIRFEC can make a difference. In Highland, 29 different processes for dealing with children have been distilled into one main planning process. Any

activity is part of one plan for a child. As a result, fewer meetings are required and support is provided more quickly. Further work is under way on savings in the workload of key staff, the number of meetings that are held and so on. A report will be produced in March. However, the initial signs are that one meeting is needed instead of the three or four that were held previously, non-offence referrals from the police to the reporter are down 70 per cent, and staff in health, schools and social work are noting that time is being freed up from writing reports, so there can be more direct work with children. Therefore, there are considerable benefits to be gained. As the ability to share information electronically throughout Scotland comes on stream in about 2011, there will be enhanced benefits.

If the approach is to be fully effective, there must be a common language among practitioners. The wellbeing indicators and the GIRFEC model provide that. The evaluation shows that after an initial period of anxiety and concern, practitioners across all agencies found that the model works well. The approach requires on-going training and use, but it helps to build trust and produces more targeted and better-quality information. It also provides the basis for measuring improvements in outcomes.

The motion and the amendment, which I am happy to support, refer to frameworks and how systems operate. That is right; those are the tools that the Parliament can use to create the environment in which change can happen. However, we must always remember that GIRFEC places the individual child at the centre of those frameworks. GIRFEC is the methodology that delivers the frameworks. It provides a personalised approach to service delivery.

That should mean that the child and their family are involved; that action is discussed and agreed with them; that there are as few meetings as possible; that the help that is provided is co-ordinated and seamless; that they understand why action is being proposed and what it is meant to achieve; and that they understand their roles and responsibilities. The evaluation report notes that that is happening under GIRFEC. Parents feel that there is one team to support them and understand better what is planned. When the wellbeing model is used to explain action, parents appear more willing to engage with and trust services.

There is much more detail in the full report, which sets out the complex interactions across all the services and the journey that has been taken to implement GIRFEC. Further work is needed, including on greater involvement with the adult sector and on extending the reach into the health service, where midwives and health visitors have been the prime focus to date.

The evaluation is of progress to date. Further short thematic reports will be issued during the next four months, drawing on the report that we have published and more up-to-date information, which is being gathered. We need to understand better the impact on longer-term outcomes and how the changes that have been introduced can be maintained.

In spring we will consult on the review of the 1998 child protection guidance. The review is set in the context of GIRFEC. It will bring powerful changes to child protection in Scotland and will build on the years of good work that started with the reform programme. It will embed a multi-agency, child-centred approach to ensuring that our most vulnerable children are identified, supported and, above all, kept safe.

We are developing a national toolkit for risk assessment, in response to what child protection practitioners have asked for and in response to the recent HMIE report. It will be founded on the GIRFEC model and the principles that are working well in Highland and elsewhere. With GIRFEC, we will make a step change in the way that all professionals who deal with at-risk children work with one another, among families and for children.

I commend the GIRFEC approach. Over the coming months, we will encourage community planning partnerships to ask themselves what they are doing to implement it and to secure for their agencies the resource benefits and for their children and young people the improved outcomes that it provides.

On the back of the positive evaluation report, we will produce an implementation guide that draws on the experiences to date of the pathfinders. The guide will set out the various steps and stages that have been found to work; the time needed for and the phasing of the work; and, most important, the tools that have been demonstrated to make a difference.

I am encouraged by the support for the GIRFEC approach from various partners. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has welcomed the evaluation report, the findings of which will provide all authorities and their community planning partners with the foundations to debate the relative merits of GIRFEC and its component parts in their local areas. The Association of Directors of Social Work and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland have both voiced their support for GIRFEC. Time prevents me from quoting others, such as the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, Barnardo's and Action for Children.

Momentum is building in support of change, and we are hugely encouraged by the evaluation, which affirms that the underlying concept of

GIRFEC is right. It can be done. The development work has been progressed. We now wish to move to full implementation and will engage with community planning partnerships throughout Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament supports the Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) approach; commends Highland and the other pathfinder programmes for their work in developing the approach; notes progress under the eCare framework to enable secure, targeted information sharing across Scotland; welcomes the report by the University of Edinburgh on progress to date, particularly with regard to the pathfinder programme in Highland; welcomes Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education's summary report on its first round of multi-agency children's services inspections as providing a clear and comprehensive picture of how children's services are operating across Scotland, and encourages work to further develop and implement the GIRFEC approach as a means of public services and the third sector working with parents and communities to improve outcomes for children and deliver the Early Years Framework, Achieving our Potential, and Equally Well.

15:06

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome this important debate. There is nothing in the Government's motion with which I or my Labour colleagues disagree. However, we feel that a number of important issues need to be taken into account when we examine the success of the getting it right for every child approach, which is why we have lodged an amendment that is an addendum to the Government's motion. I am delighted that the minister has indicated the Government's support for the amendment.

GIRFEC was introduced by the previous Administration. I am sure that most members agree that, although the previous Executive may not win any prizes for coming up with the catchiest acronym, the thrust of GIRFEC was spot on. There was a need to ensure that children's services became more child centred and more focused on outcomes for the child and that they greatly improved the sharing and recording of information.

As members are aware, the GIRFEC proposals emerged from the review of the children's hearings system. The aims of the approach were broadly welcomed and I am pleased that the current Government has continued to pursue those principles.

Large parts of GIRFEC focus on improving the life chances of vulnerable children, although it must be recognised that the words "every child" are important and that the policy must apply to all Scotland's children and young people.

It is interesting to note that many of the issues raised in the GIRFEC evaluation report of early implementation in Highland mirror issues and

concerns raised in the recent HMIE report on the findings of the joint inspections of services to protect children—in particular, the need for multi-agency meetings on the child's plan; the shared use of tools, processes and procedures; and a commitment to proper recording and documenting of casework that is consistent between agencies.

The report on Highland states:

"There is growing evidence that children's needs are being identified at an earlier stage".

However, the recent HMIE report concluded that, in almost half the 30 councils that were inspected,

"The assessment of risks and needs of vulnerable children and families was evaluated as weak or unsatisfactory".

We have referred to that in our amendment because although it is clear that using the GIRFEC approach can bring about the type of changes to children's services that we all want, the Government must accept that, at present, it is not happening in many parts of Scotland. I am sure that the Government will continue to work hard to address that problem and will redouble its efforts to improve matters.

Similarly, the Highland evaluation document concludes that the process of sharing information about children's needs improved during the pathfinder project. However, the HMIE report highlights that that is not the case in a large number of councils. Again, I hope that the Government will take into account that firm action is needed to resolve the problem sooner rather than later.

I congratulate South Lanarkshire Council, North Lanarkshire Council, NHS Lanarkshire and other key partner agencies on their efforts as learning partners. Significant steps have been taken in changing the culture in each of the partner agencies to ensure a common approach that is consistent with GIRFEC.

The evaluation report on Highland recognised that significant resources were provided to facilitate the many positive outcomes that are mentioned in the document. It also mentions the importance of seconded staff, and states:

"The time required for development work, establishing multi-agency links, consultation with practitioners and operational managers, trialling new tools, procedures and protocols, organizing training and reporting on progress was extensive. It is difficult to see how this could have been done across all children's services without staff from different services being freed up to do this on a full-time basis."

Both North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council make similar points on the need for additional staff and, importantly, for training. Clearly, in advancing the GIRFEC approach, the Government must take cognisance

of the resource implications for councils. Too often, partnership working is seen as a panacea for cost savings. GIRFEC must not be used as an excuse for cutting services or jobs.

Given that the initial proposals for GIRFEC arose from a review of the children's hearings system, the minister will not be surprised if I say a few words about the review and the proposals for change. I acknowledge the need to change the children's hearings system. Indeed, I think that most people involved in the hearings system acknowledge that, too. However, it is important that any proposals for change are firmly focused on the wellbeing of the child—an ethos that is central to GIRFEC. I am not convinced that the introduction of any change that would make the hearings system more adversarial would fulfil that aspiration, irrespective of whether it might help to make the system more compliant with the European convention on human rights. I am sure that we will return to that issue when the Government introduces its proposals on children's hearings.

It is worth remembering—the evaluation report points this out—that GIRFEC is not focused solely on children and young people in need of protection or with particular problems, but applies to all children and young people in Scotland. In fact, the executive summary of the report states:

"While some operational managers and key workers in children's services initially thought that *Getting it right* was targeted mainly on the most vulnerable children and young people that perception has now receded and *Getting it right* is now widely perceived to be having a significant impact on universal provision as well."

The aims of improving opportunities and focusing on outcomes must apply equally to children who never come into contact with child protection services. That is why issues such as the provision of youth services, the continued need to modernise and renew school buildings, the promotion of healthy eating and exercise, and provision in the early years should all be seen within the context of GIRFEC.

Within ever-tightening budgets, non-statutory youth services may be seen as a relatively easy target. However, I believe that targeting those services would be folly and would undermine the central aims of GIRFEC. Youth services, including those provided directly by local authorities and those in the voluntary sector that are supported by local government, play a vital role in nurturing and developing our children and young people. They provide positive and constructive alternatives to antisocial and criminal activities and stimulate community spirit.

Whether we are talking about the scouts, the Girls Brigade or groups that are run by council youth workers, such clubs often provide much-

needed respite for children who live in families affected by alcohol or substance misuse, or domestic violence. Equally, workers in such organisations are often the first people to become aware that a problem is affecting a child. GIRFEC rightly aspires to ensure that such early recognition is taken seriously and followed up. Reducing funding to such services would reduce opportunities for early intervention and remove much-needed alternative activities from some young people who are beginning to offend.

I will say a few words about nurture services, which is an approach that is being piloted in North Lanarkshire Council and Glasgow City Council, and which has the principles of GIRFEC at its heart. Nurture services target children in the first few years of primary education who come from families with a range of problems that, from the outset, impact on the way in which the child copes with school. The services provide intensive support for both children and parents in an environment that is quite different from a normal class. The child may spend some or all their time in such a setting, where support is provided by a range of professionals, including teachers, educational psychologists and social workers. The approach is proving very successful, but it is resource intensive.

I welcome the progress in taking forward the GIRFEC approach that is evident in the pathfinder projects. I commend the Government for the part that it has played in continuing the work of the previous Executive, but I feel strongly that, in light of the serious concerns that are raised in the HMIE report, there is no room for complacency. Far too many children remain at risk as a result of poor systems in our local authorities. I hope that the Scottish Government will do all that it can to ensure that we protect those children.

I move amendment S3M-5335.1, to insert at end:

"; recognises the scale of the challenge described in the HMIE report, *How well do we protect Scotland's children?*, which states that almost half of the 30 councils inspected were assessed as weak or unsatisfactory in relation to the assessment of risks and needs; further acknowledges that the report highlights the need for improved information sharing in relation to child protection, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that sufficient resources are available for the effective delivery of the Early Years Framework, *Achieving our Potential and Equally Well*."

15:16

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Conservatives warmly welcome today's debate on getting it right for every child and the continued programme of work to improve services for vulnerable children in Scotland. No one can deny that those issues

deserve a united approach from all the political parties.

GIRFEC is crucial because it promotes certain key principles: the development of a much more local approach to policy making that better reflects the needs of the local community; improved communication between the different agencies that are involved in caring for vulnerable children; much greater consistency in the team that looks after each child; a reduction in the bureaucracy—on which the minister has given us good evidence today—that accompanies the process; and an end to the wide regional variations in the quality of care that is offered.

Therefore, I am particularly pleased to welcome the report on the results of the Highland pathfinder GIRFEC project, especially the progress that has been made on measuring outcomes much more effectively, making improvements in professional practice with better multi-agency working, and developing a more holistic approach to the needs of the child—something that we all agree is one of the most important issues.

There are extremely encouraging signs that those better approaches have led to a reduction in the number of children on the child protection register and an improvement in the educational attainment of the weakest-performing children. Better-integrated planning has meant that a wider range of needs can be met, with a greater emphasis on engaging with young people and more help on handling the transition from care into adult life—a process that can often be fraught with many difficulties.

In turn, there are signs that parents and children feel much more integrated in the process, such that there is growing confidence in the system. As a result of the different agencies speaking a common language, people are more aware of when things are happening and what the processes are likely to involve. Perhaps the most encouraging signs are the likely reductions in cost if problems can be detected at the earliest possible point.

As Karen Whitefield said, although much can be learnt from the progress in Highland, more needs to be done elsewhere, especially in areas that are showing an increase in the number of registrations. We need to pay particular attention to the harrowing cases that are referred before the child is born, and we must not lose sight of the fact that the number of looked-after children has increased every year since 2001.

The GIRFEC evaluation report recognises that change will take time, but central to making that happen is ensuring that staff who are involved in the care of children are engaged in the process of change, even if that means a slight shift in the

culture of what is best practice in child care. Staff must be properly supported. I note that the workload of and burden of paperwork for health visitors and school nurses would be greatly reduced by the introduction of an electronic version of the paper record that was used in the Highland area. That is good news. Additionally, in a period when local authorities are financially stretched, the Scottish Conservatives maintain that far more must be done to utilise the work of the excellent voluntary sector, which is often staffed by people who are closest to the needs of our communities.

A key part of the process will be the reform of the children's hearings system. The Scottish Conservatives welcome the Government's decision to delay the progress of the children's hearing's bill due to apparent flaws in the initial consultation process. We hope that the information that is provided by the minister in the intervening period will help us to address the issues so that we can consider ways of strengthening the system without, as Karen Whitefield said, losing the central ethos that was set out in the Kilbrandon report.

Children's hearings have traditionally brought many benefits to our Scottish justice system, but it is clear that there are issues that relate to representation at hearings and the fact that panel members do not always feel fully supported by their local authority. Credibility within the system is not as strong as it should be, and much more needs to be done to enhance the public's knowledge and understanding of children's hearings and to ensure a more holistic approach by involving the various professional agencies effectively.

It is vital that we respond to the main messages from the recent HMIE report that looked at inspections across Scotland. It found that around a quarter of inspections revealed serious weaknesses in aspects of child protection that increased the risk of harm to children. It is not satisfactory that serious problems were identified in 10 council areas. That shows that much work remains to be done. Improvements are needed in the quality and rigour of assessments and in planning. As we all know, the consequences of such deficiencies can be life threatening. The Scottish Government has stated that it is working with the local authorities that have been criticised to ensure that urgent action is taken. It was good to hear the minister update us on progress, and I look forward to hearing more on the community planning partners.

Members are well aware that, for the Scottish Conservatives, parenting skills remain at the heart of the continuing problems to do with looking after Scottish children. Family breakdown of one sort or

another costs the United Kingdom more than £20 billion a year, and the resulting burden on society, especially on relatives, social work services and our justice system, goes much, much deeper than that. Only this week, key children's charities have produced some disturbing statistics.

We are pleased that the debate is being held and are pleased to support the Scottish Government's motion and the Labour Party's amendment.

15:21

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the opportunity to speak in a debate that enables Liberal Democrats to restate our support for the GIRFEC agenda. As others have done, I commend the Scottish Government for the work that it has done on the issue, which builds on the work of the previous Administration and is very much focused on delivering the best possible services for children.

This crucial issue encompasses a host of professionals, who often work in extremely difficult circumstances. We put on record our appreciation of their efforts. Among the professionals involved are teachers, social workers, speech and language therapists—if I do not mention them, I am not allowed in the door at home—nurses, police officers and everyone who is involved in the children's hearings and child protection systems. We must recognise the excellent work that they do and their continuing work to deliver GIRFEC, which involves the adoption of a personalised approach that is based on the needs of the child.

We must recognise that there are shortcomings. Where systematic, bureaucratic failings exist, they must be identified, worked through with colleagues and addressed to improve the situation. However, the key message is that GIRFEC is starting to work. Positive progress has been made on the numbers of children who are on the at-risk register and there is better multi-agency working. The factors that we have looked at in the context of the Highland report certainly seem to indicate a shift in a positive direction.

I put on record our thanks to the minister and his team for the extremely helpful briefing that they gave to members of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee this week, which I found particularly useful.

There is no doubt that the evaluation overview of the GIRFEC pathfinder project in Highland contained a lot of positive signs. The holding of multi-agency meetings meant that a more co-ordinated approach was adopted and that individuals received a personalised service. I was pleased to note that levels of inter-agency trust were much higher at the end of the pathfinder

phase than they had been at the beginning. That trust, along with a change of culture, will be crucial if GIRFEC is to be successfully rolled out across Scotland.

It is sensible to proceed with a single planning process and shared assessments. It is also sensible to ensure that a common language is used by all professionals so that they can understand one another. It is crucial, too, that information and communications technology is used as effectively as possible so that information can be shared as effectively and quickly as possible.

We were pleased to learn that every child who needed support from more than one agency was allocated a lead professional who was responsible for the co-ordination of services. It is important that families understand and buy into new processes and have their say on the services that are being developed and delivered for their children. That represents real progress, and it must be welcomed as such, but we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. There now needs to be a period of establishing good practice benchmarks to ensure that the initial progress is sustained. The Highland pathfinder report highlighted the fact that there is still work to be done, although the work undertaken in Highland will make the processes elsewhere in Scotland easier to implement.

At the information briefing, I raised the issue of resources. I did so not to have a go at the minister in the typical way, but simply to point out that the pathfinder project had received seed-corn funding that has probably made the process of taking GIRFEC forward slightly easier. It is clear that councils and partner organisations in Scotland will not have that resource. They will have to pull resources from existing resources at what is obviously a crucial time, given the funding difficulties that they face. We received assurances about that from the minister, and I have raised the issue again so that he can put on the record the real possibilities that GIRFEC provides for making potential savings in time and resources. Obviously, the most important issue is the delivery of the best possible services, but the approach would be more attractive to local authorities throughout Scotland if they had concrete examples of where they might make savings in resources, which they are concerned about.

Child protection remains everyone's major concern. In the wake of incidents such as the tragic death of Brandon Muir, it is alarming that a quarter of HMIE inspections revealed serious weaknesses in services. Progress has been made, and HMIE has been quick to point out that there has been improvement, but there are areas in which urgent action is required and enhanced service development must be immediate.

Weaknesses were identified in the report “How well do we protect Scotland’s children?” I am sure that we are all determined to work together to improve child protection services. We cannot say that there will never be another Brandon Muir or Caleb Ness, but we must put in place support resources and systems of working to share information that will reduce risks. In that context, we look forward to the review of the child protection guidance that is due in the spring.

GIRFEC arose from a review of the children’s hearings system. We had concerns about the Government’s initial plans to change that system, and we welcomed the decision to stop, think again and consult more widely on them. A wide consultation is important. We can rightly be proud of the children’s hearings system, which puts the child centre stage—that is what GIRFEC is all about. We want the right reform of our hearings system, and the views of those who work in that system day in, day out need to be listened to and incorporated in any new policy. Change cannot mean centralisation. Keeping children’s panels local, rooted in the community and independent is the best way to protect our children.

Back in September, the Liberal Democrats successfully called on the Government to report back in three months on the action that it has taken to focus attention on children who live with parents or carers with alcohol or substance abuse problems. We would welcome an indication from the minister about when we might expect further information about that.

There needs to be an improvement in risk assessments for vulnerable children. Much of what was covered in the Highland pathfinder report is encouraging in that regard. We know that some children living with parents who are dependent on drugs or alcohol or who have other problems have a dreadful time. Those problems will often stay with those children throughout their lives—they are not just faced in early life but can live with them for ever. That is why we have supported organisations such as Place2B, which addresses children’s mental health needs in primary schools, including Craigroyston primary school in my constituency. We believe that such issues should be tackled as early as possible. Doing so is crucial in taking forward the GIRFEC agenda.

It is vital that services take into account an individual’s specific needs. A one-size-fits-all approach clearly cannot be taken to individual children, and it is possible that what works in one part of the country will not necessarily work in exactly the same way in another. Highland was probably quite a good place to start, as that allowed us to see what has happened in and around Inverness and to take that further. It will also be interesting to see the results of the work

that has been done in Lanarkshire and in other pathfinder projects around the country, particularly in relation to domestic abuse.

There is a need for proper training, quality assurance and staff mentoring, although that must be balanced against the concern of some that the programme is too heavily focused on processes rather than on outcomes. I think that it is fundamentally about outcomes, so I am reassured by the news that is coming from the Highland pathfinder project.

There is now a good level of recognition of the programme, but it is important that it is implemented throughout Scotland as quickly as is feasible.

15:30

Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP): On balance, I agree with the Aberlour Child Care Trust’s conclusions on the evaluation of GIRFEC so far. It states in its briefing that much has been achieved but that there is still a job of work to do.

When it comes to Scotland’s children, there is never room for complacency. The GIRFEC pathfinders give a significant early indication of better outcomes for children. As Margaret Smith has acknowledged, the number of children on the child protection register has fallen; reports are being submitted on time; children are seeing their supervising officers within target times; and the length of wait for adoptive and permanent placements has fallen.

The HMIE report is very much welcome, as it has provided us with the clearest and most comprehensive picture of how child protection services throughout Scotland are performing. It is based solely on the first reports, as opposed to any of the follow-up reports, in which sense it is slightly behind the times. Nonetheless, it has established a baseline from which to test progress.

I noted with interest how the 30 councils had performed across the 18 quality indicators—graded from excellent to unmet—which gave a total of 540 possible grades. There were only 12 grades of excellent and, at the other extreme, 13 of unmet. The bulk of the grades—438—were very good, good or satisfactory, straddling the middle of the range. That is a good start, but we should be aiming for excellence. We should aspire for good, very good and excellent because, to be blunt, even satisfactory is not good enough. It would not be good enough for my son if he were ever in need of care and protection. Why should we not aspire to and achieve the best child protection system in the world? The question remains: how do we do that? We talk about outcomes, but what we actually mean is how we can keep more

children safe and how we can improve their prospects.

I recall the findings of the report “For Scotland’s children”, which said that the children who were most in need of services were those who were least likely to receive them. Although there are issues around difficult-to-engage families, there are also issues around difficult-to-access services. One of the positives to come out of the GIRFEC pathfinder pilots is the fact that the families have reported benefiting from and appreciating the support and care that has been provided through a one-team approach. Of course, we need to look through the eyes of a child to shape the services, but there is no getting away from the fact that, as adults, we must take the responsibility to do what is in the best interest of each child who is at risk.

The importance of universal and core services should never be underestimated. Public pressure and media scrutiny can result in politicians grabbing for the new trend, fad or initiative despite the fact that, in times of crisis, it is more important than ever to invest in and replenish bread-and-butter services. I cannot think of Baby P and others like him without getting angry. His injuries should have been obvious because they were so appalling and were sustained over time. It is correct and proper to focus on the high-profile, extreme cases to learn lessons, but the danger is that professionals and services can focus so much on the extreme cases that they neglect or miss the more numerous situations in which the symptoms and signs of abuse are far less obvious—more subtle but just as damaging. Our focus must be on prevention as well as on investigation.

It should not surprise us that risk assessment is the area that we need to improve the most. Risk assessment is complex: it requires skills, knowledge, experience, instinct and good old-fashioned common sense. It is multifactorial, interdependent with and underpinned by the achievement of other quality indicators, the obvious one being the timely sharing of information. To date GIRFEC has built the foundations for such assessment and, when fully implemented, it should deliver consistent assessment across professional and local authority boundaries and provide a shared language and understanding of risk.

Yesterday, we debated violence against women and many of us commented that gender-based violence is a cause and consequence of women’s inequality. We described it as a human rights violation. I agree 100 per cent with Children 1st that there should be zero tolerance of violence against children in all its forms. Similar to the work on domestic violence and abuse, we need to challenge some of our cultural values and assumptions about children. Children need the

safety and security of boundaries, consistency and routine. I have never subscribed to the view that children should be seen and not heard—many members who have met my two-year-old will say, “Just as well”. We should take pride in raising our children and young people to question, challenge and change their lot in life.

15:36

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)
(Lab): First, I apologise in advance for having to leave the chamber after my speech in order to attend another meeting.

My colleague Karen Whitefield outlined Labour’s position in her contribution. She reminded us that getting it right for every child applies to every youngster in Scotland, including those in early years provision.

I am delighted to take part in the debate because it allows me to return to a topic that I have raised in the chamber before—the free from three campaign run by my constituent Mrs Alexis Stevenson of Kirkintilloch. She came to see me two years ago because she was having a problem getting access to a free nursery place for her son Sam. He was born in the month of September, which meant that he could not access the free funding for a nursery place until the January intake date. When Mrs Stevenson inquired about availability of places she was told that there was no guarantee that there would be a place in January but that she could get one if she paid for a place between September and January. That struck Mrs Stevenson as unfair and she is right—it is unfair. Access to nursery education provided free at three, thanks to a Labour Government, should not depend on what month a child is born in. That is why together we mounted the free from three campaign.

We brought petition PE1116 to the Public Petitions Committee, and it was considered in September last year—I am glad to see the minister nodding in approval. The committee referred the matter to the Government for further consideration. During the consultation we discovered that a number of councils had a free at three policy but had been instructed by the SNP Government to stop pursuing it. Those included Scottish Borders Council, Stirling Council and Shetland Islands Council.

Just in case anybody thinks that the situation does not affect a large number of children, I point out that more than 4,000 youngsters were born in September 2006 and they will celebrate their third birthday this year. Unless their parents have paid for a place they will not currently be getting any nursery education and will not do so until January next year—that is, if they can find a place.

I wrote to Mr Ingram, the Minister for Children and Early Years, to request a meeting. To be fair, he met Mrs Stevenson and me in March this year. It is also fair to say that we were both surprised when Mr Ingram and his officials told us that they were considering two options to improve access. One option would involve introducing an October intake date; the other, and more radical, option would involve three-year-olds gaining funding for free access one month after their third birthday and presumably there being 10 intake dates, missing out the summer months.

Meanwhile, the minister was receiving other letters, including one from Mrs Sheena Nicol, head of St Mary's nursery school in Kirkintilloch, which is one of the most popular in East Dunbartonshire. She wrote to the minister in May:

"I would like to add my voice to the growing discontent with the current structure of Early Years Funding. At the moment the funding starts at the beginning of the term after the child's 3rd birthday for both ante and pre-school children. This can lead to parents being penalised and their choices limited merely due to their child's date of birth.

It is my hope that due consideration will be given to extending the existing funding to begin from a child's 3rd birthday, thereby eliminating the inequality of the current structure.

If granted it would remove the necessity of some parents having to self fund to secure their child's place in nursery."

What has happened since then? Absolutely nothing. Months came and went, and in September—a year after our original appearance before the Public Petitions Committee—I wrote to Mr Ingram again to ask for an update. In his reply, he referred to the 2010-11 draft budget and stated that the options discussed were still on the table, but—and this was a big but—there would need to be re-engagement with local government as it was going to get £174 million less than originally planned.

We know how the SNP has managed to mug local government into paying for a share of the reduction in the health capital budget. It seems that that money will be found at the expense of Scotland's children.

The minister went on to say that the UK Government's proposals to extend free provision to two-year-olds meant that there were complex issues that needed to be resolved.

We have all heard about these famous national conversation events. The minister kindly held one in Bishopbriggs in my constituency last month. Mrs Stevenson went along and asked him for a progress report, but I am afraid that I have to report to Mr Ingram that she was not impressed to be told that the free at three proposal was unlikely to happen in this session of Parliament. It was no so much a conversation as a dialogue with the deaf.

I wrote to the minister again last week to seek clarification and I am waiting for his reply. Perhaps he will be able to enlighten me today in his summing up. Do his proposals have any chance of being implemented—yes or no?

As I said at the beginning, getting it right for every child involves their having access to good quality nursery education—all the experts agree on that. Labour's policy is to guarantee a free place for every three and four-year-old who wants one; places for vulnerable two-year-olds are also in the pipeline. Done properly, that would mean that every child gets six sessions in a nursery, which could make a huge difference when they reach primary school. It is up to the minister and his new cabinet secretary to deliver. The children of Scotland are waiting.

15:42

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): No member in the chamber will argue against the principles of getting it right for every child—who can sensibly take an opposing view? However, it is one thing to support principles and quite another to work out what needs to be done to progress towards that agreed goal. It is even more difficult to put such plans into action and demonstrate how effective they have been in getting things right for more and more children.

I support strongly the research-based initiatives described by the minister. The progress that has been made is recorded in the evaluation of the Highland pathfinder approach. It is always satisfying to witness evidence-based policy being put into action. Nothing that I say today should be taken to minimise those achievements.

Getting it right for every child must start well before those initiatives. Events not only in very early life but even before birth can irrevocably shape a child's future. I will give some examples from my previous work as a general practitioner in Edinburgh. Repeated surveys of my former practice population, which largely covers an area of socioeconomic deprivation, regularly show a much higher perinatal mortality rate—the rate of deaths of babies either around childbirth or shortly after—than the more affluent parts of the city. That is certainly not getting it right for those children, but, to put it bluntly, a dead child gives no further problems of the kind dealt with in the "Getting it Right for Every Child" document.

The statistics show that the problem does not end there. A 2004 profile of south-west Edinburgh showed that the incidence of babies born with a low birth weight—babies whose birth weight is below the 10th centile for their gestational age—was 30 per cent higher than the Scottish average. Given that south-west Edinburgh includes several

better-off districts, it is reasonable to conclude that the picture for my former area was even worse than that.

Why does that matter? It matters because lower-birth-weight babies are much more vulnerable than others. They are more prone to long-term ill health and retarded development, and they need more care in the neonatal period. They are frequently born to women who find it difficult to provide even basic care. Those mothers are often young—the rate for teenage pregnancies in the area is 90 per cent higher than the Scottish average—and unsupported, and they perhaps have physical and mental problems. The care of such babies as they grow up and into adult life demands a huge input from various agencies and is not always successful, so getting it right for those children involves doing what we can to remedy those issues before birth.

What can we do? I will not extend the debate into sex education in schools and the home, contraception for adolescents or similar controversial issues. I will say simply that any effective action that lowers the rate of unwanted pregnancies can only be beneficial. Poor diet, smoking or drinking alcohol in pregnancy and taking recreational drugs are all factors that predispose babies to poor birth outcomes, but all are remediable if vigorous action and support are offered.

Skilled and relevant antenatal care is a must. High blood pressure, vaginal infections and the development of anaemia are all conditions that are amenable to treatment but which threaten a baby's long-term health if they are left unchecked.

The effect of targeted interventions was shown spectacularly as long as 35 years ago in my practice. Public health specialists told us that, of the then 23 council wards in Edinburgh, our ward was fourth from the bottom of the league table for perinatal death; was fourth for the proportion of children with a physical handicap; was third for the incidence of congenital malformations; and had a higher than average rate of children who were taken into care. All our mothers had their babies in the hospital that most of the city used; the only difference was that a much higher proportion booked late and defaulted on their antenatal appointments.

I have no time to describe how a group of us altered the antenatal care system to suit our patient group's needs. I say simply that, after five years, our figures for neonatal mortality, admissions to the special care baby unit, premature birth and low birth weight had all fallen to below the Lothian average. The message is that careful tailoring of services can affect outcomes positively, to the benefit of children, mothers and society. It is unfortunate that the figures that I cited

earlier in my speech show that the benefit has not been maintained. I have no time to give a detailed explanation, other than to say that it concerns a shift in focus in the delivery of maternity services away from prioritising safe pregnancies to satisfying more emotional or societal desires.

My message is that getting it right for every child means starting before birth, tailoring services exactly to meet the needs of the women in the communities that are served, and continuing that specific care and attention in the equally vital months after a baby has been born. In that way, the ambitions of GIRFEC might be more easily realised.

15:47

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde (Lab)): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate and discuss the motion. Members are right to highlight the progress that has been made, but we must recognise that the report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education notes several concerns. The report says that 25 per cent of initial inspections identified serious weaknesses in services to protect children. It highlights the fact that more needs to be done to ensure that all families and staff who have contact with children are clear about their requirement to share relevant information quickly and clearly when there are concerns about a child's welfare.

Neither the motion nor the minister mentioned the inconvenient report on child referrals that the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration published about two weeks ago. That report makes horrific reading and should have set alarm bells ringing in the ears of us all, including the Government. While we give out praise today, it might be worth while to clear the air of any complacency.

The SCRA's report reveals that, despite a fall in the number of children who are referred to the SCRA, the number of referrals is still more than 47,000—more than 5 per cent of Scotland's child population. That is the good news in the report; the bad news is that more children under the age of two have had to be placed on supervision orders and emergency measures and that the number of children in such high-risk situations that emergency powers have been needed to prevent them from coming to harm is growing.

The report rightly points out that that trend is against the policy and practice of early intervention, which was designed to prevent and reduce the need for compulsory measures to protect children. Indeed, research confirms that early identification and intervention do not have the desired impact and might well reflect the fact

that more young children are actually at increasing risk.

Adam Ingram: Will the member give way?

Duncan McNeil: Yes, but I ask the minister to be quick. I do not have as much time as he has.

Adam Ingram: At the moment, early identification and intervention are not embedded in our systems. That is what we hope GIRFEC will do if it is implemented throughout the country.

Duncan McNeil: We live in hope but at this point we cannot ignore the SCRA's hard, hard messages.

The SCRA report also highlights specific issues about the power of child protection services to get access to children whose parents are unwilling to engage with them. The matter has already been raised in evidence with the Parliament's Health and Sport Committee, and I, too, have raised it with the minister in this chamber. It certainly does not need an inquiry; it needs the minister and his colleagues to do as much as possible to ensure that social workers get access to children when they need it. We cannot allow this situation to continue or allow parents who are unwilling to deal with the services to become barriers to the protection of children. We have to put the children first.

As far as getting it right for every child is concerned, the fact is that the police are the main source of referrals, accounting for 83 per cent, while the number of referrals from social work and the health service is falling. It might be some comfort if they were only single referrals, but they are repeat referrals. These things are happening again and again. At what point do we stop putting children back into such circumstances?

The SCRA report also highlights failures in permanency planning when the child is removed from the home for their own protection. In one sample, the report found that only 4 per cent of referrals of children under two had any form of permanency planning with a view to removing them from the home. However, 12 per cent of those children had brothers and sisters for whom permanency planning was already under way.

The report's most damning revelation is that, in the past six years, 144 children who have been referred to the reporter have died. Of the 75 children under the age of 15 who died, 30—or 40 per cent—of them did not even reach their second birthday. Of those 30 children, two were subject to supervision requirements at the time of death and 15 had open referrals. The background factors will of course come as no surprise—parental substance misuse, domestic violence, drug withdrawal symptoms at birth and so on—but, tragically, the report admits that the number of

children who died while under referral might have been greater, because no one can bring the facts and figures together and establish the causes and dates of death for those children.

It is a pity that the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has had to go somewhere else and has not been able to follow the whole debate, because in his new role he has a job to do. For those 144 children—and indeed for the future of all our children—he needs to institute an inquiry to find out the exact circumstances in which they lived and died to ensure that we fully understand how to prevent another 144 from dying over the next six years.

15:54

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I am pleased to speak in this afternoon's debate and welcome the Highland GIRFEC report's measuring of outcomes, putting the child's needs at the heart of decision making and ensuring that there is less bureaucracy and improved communication between agencies, which my colleague Liz Smith referred to.

On the back of this morning's education debate, it is worth acknowledging the improvement in the educational attainment of the weakest children. In these financially challenging times, all that can be achieved with potential reductions in cost—as Margaret Smith referred to—and, I hope, the earlier detection of problems.

I particularly commend the action taken in Highland given the tragic death of Danielle Reid in Inverness some years ago. The death of that child highlighted many failings in interagency working and communication. Although we welcome the excellent progress that Highland has made, we cannot ignore the issue that the Labour amendment raises today, acknowledging that the HMIE report said that half of Scotland's councils

“were assessed as weak or unsatisfactory in relation to the assessment of risks and needs”.

This week, the Health and Sport Committee held a discussion on information technology, clinical portals, patient confidentiality, telehealth and telemedicine. Although I note that the SNP motion

“notes progress under the eCare framework”,

there is no doubt that we have a long way to go to embrace, share and utilise the new technologies that will undoubtedly enhance the care and support of people across Scotland. Leadership is sadly lacking on that project, and for too long children and others have suffered as agencies work in their silos, refusing to share information that would lead to a holistic approach to addressing a child's needs. I commend the work done in Highland to address that issue, but

everything that we welcome and commend today can work only when the agencies are aware of the needs of the child or young person.

The Health and Sport Committee recently conducted an inquiry into child and adult mental health services. The report has not yet been scheduled for debate in the Parliament, but it is appropriate to raise some of the issues on the back of some of the points that Ian McKee made. A particular point is the lack of health visitors in Scotland to advise and support parents with young children. In Inverness, after their 15-month immunisation, a child will next see a health visitor at the age of five, when they start school. Without the standard health checks and support, there can be no doubt that many children slip through the net.

An Audit Scotland report from July 2008 stated that 40 per cent of children in Highland waited for more than eight weeks for a first assessment by the community mental health team. Some waited for more than a year. For very young children, we were told, there is a window of opportunity for addressing mental health issues at a certain age. If that opportunity is missed, the consequences are lifelong poor mental health and many other issues. In committee, Dr Phil Wilson pointed out that there is a

“big increase in the evidence base on what works to stop the bad things happening”

and that early neglect, before the age of two, is the strongest predictor for later childhood mental health problems. There is strong evidence that children with problematic behaviour at two-and-a-half years of age are highly likely to end up with major problems later in life. Dr Wilson also told the committee that

“it is possible to predict at the age of three as many as 70 per cent of the children who will end up as in-patients”—*[Official Report, Health and Sport Committee, 25 March 2009; c 1728, 1734.]*

in psychiatric hospitals or in prisons.

For all those reasons, I welcome the GIRFEC approach. However, as Dr Wilson stated, children had been completely forgotten and, as a result, no health visitors are being trained in NHS Highland. Elsewhere in Scotland, the service is patchy, to say the least. Although we can all congratulate and commend GIRFEC, it works only when the children who are in need are identified. Unfortunately, the demise of the health visiting profession means that many more children will not be identified at the early stages and will not get the help that they need.

I am pleased that Adam Ingram is the minister in charge of the programme. He has a proven record of commitment to mental health, given that he chaired the cross-party group in the Scottish

Parliament on mental health in the first two sessions of the Parliament. I am aware of that, because I was his vice-convenor for all those years. I place on record my congratulations to Highland Council, but I highlight the many failings in the system in identifying children in need. I have no doubt that those issues will be given greater prominence when the Health and Sport Committee debate on child and adult mental health services is scheduled in the Parliament.

16:00

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP):
The amendment states:

“almost half of the 30 councils inspected were assessed as weak or unsatisfactory in relation to the assessment of risks and needs”.

Eleven were assessed as weak and two were assessed as unsatisfactory. The two that landed in the unsatisfactory bracket will have taken immediate action to address the problems that the inspectorate identified. The 11 that were assessed as weak will take stock of the report, and the professionals who are involved in the care of children will take steps to make their service better. They are caring professionals who deserve our support. They will accept constructive criticism from the inspectors, because it helps them to do their jobs properly—it helps them to improve the services that they offer and to make things better for children in their area.

As my colleague Angela Constance said, we should aspire to excellence in the service. On the indicator “Children benefit from strategies to minimise harm”, only one council showed weaknesses and none sits in the unsatisfactory category. That is one of the primary indicators—it is not among the secondary indicators that are mentioned in the amendment.

There might be cause for concern over another primary indicator, on which one council has been assessed as unsatisfactory in meeting children’s needs. However, politicians should allow the professionals and inspectors to work together to improve the service. We should wait for the follow-up reports and then take stock. Only then will we see whether the system is working properly.

Resources are available for the services and councils will review their deployment in the light of the reports that they have received so that they can improve their services. I pay tribute to North Lanarkshire Council, South Lanarkshire Council and NHS Lanarkshire for the progress that they have made on the implementation of their GIRFEC pathfinder project. “Pathfinder” is a very appropriate word in that context.

Getting it right for every child is about rebalancing and refocusing support so that it tends

towards the child-centric. The one-team support for families, and greater trust and information sharing between professionals, lead to better services for the child. The programme is a framework for developing multilayered service provision in a simple and easy-to-understand way. The initial results have been impressive and significant indications of better outcomes for children are coming from the pathfinder programmes. There also appear to be social advantages; a welcome consequence of earlier child-centred interventions has been that more time is freed up for social workers to do their job and therefore to take on more cases.

The programme is a continuation of work that was begun in 2004 under the previous Administration. We had waited too long for that work, so it was a welcome step when it was begun, and its further development is equally welcome. The cross-cutting work that the programme encourages knits agencies together in delivery. We should acknowledge those agencies' efforts in that delivery. That applies especially to Scotland's councils, which should get credit for helping to deliver the vision of a safe and supportive childhood for all.

No child is an island, but all children are individuals, which I believe is reflected in the GIRFEC ethos. The early intervention that GIRFEC has facilitated and enabled comes from the enhanced capacity of professionals to gather a holistic assessment of the child using the better information that is available as a result of cross-agency working. That early intervention delivers results. There is evidence across all the wellbeing indicators that progress is being made and that children are reaping greater benefits. Some of that might come from one important innovation, which is that the professionals have turned round service delivery, so that they ask the children who are involved for their views and seek to ensure that the children understand the decisions and the options that are given to them.

No longer will parents and children have to try to find a way of negotiating their way around a confusing system; streamlined services will be delivered. We are talking about wraparound care that embraces the child and the family, ensuring that their needs are met. The involvement of all agencies working together will make it less likely that any child will fall through the gaps.

As a Parliament, we have a duty to work to keep our young people safe from harm and to do everything we can to safeguard them. The framework, together with input from HMIE, will give us the clearest and most comprehensive impression of how children's services are performing across the country. With the report in our hands, we can ask the professionals on the

ground to use it to improve outcomes for children, through improving service delivery. The mutual respect that is created when professionals in their various fields take a considered approach creates an open exchange and a central role for the children who are involved. That policy shift is welcome; it is long overdue.

Praise is due to the ministerial team who started the work in 2004, as it is to the ministerial team who continued the work after 2007. I am pleased to support the motion.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): I call Hugh Henry. You have quite a long time really, Mr Henry.

16:06

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): That was a dangerous exhortation, Presiding Officer.

There is no doubt that, as is wider civic society in Scotland, all members are committed to the principle of getting it right for every child. It is a principle that is based on common sense, a caring philosophy and understanding. The minister is right to talk of the progress that has been made—progress that all parties, those in the previous Administration and this one, supported. He was also right to point out some of the issues that are essential if getting it right for every child is to be implemented effectively. We need joint leadership, commitment, training and a single planning process.

It is also right to pause and reflect on some of the challenges that face us. It would be wrong to dwell solely on all the positive things that are happening and to be blind to the risks and dangers. I was shocked—as I am sure other members were—to hear the statistics that Duncan McNeil articulated. If nothing else, hearing his encapsulation of the figures, which are in the public domain, should make us pause and question whether Parliament and ministers need to investigate the situation further. We heard the horrendous death toll of vulnerable youngsters in this country. We rightly talk of our shock and horror at deaths from drug addiction and say how committed we are to dealing with the problem, but we seem to say little about those 144 children, the plight of whom Duncan McNeil raised. Perhaps a warning bell should be rung on the issue.

I turn to Angela Constance's speech. As she said, there is never room for complacency. She pointed out that only 12 councils were given excellent reports and also, rightly, that satisfactory was not good enough. She would not accept a satisfactory rating for her child. Like her, I would not accept a satisfactory rating for my grandchildren. I am sure that no member would

accept satisfactory for any child who was associated with them.

I repeat what I said in a previous debate on the very point about the HMIE reports that Angela Constance raised:

"If a school were to get a 'satisfactory' report in an HMIE inspection, there would be an inquiry into the school's performance because that would not be good enough. A 'satisfactory' report is barely scraping a pass."

In terms of HMIE definitions, "barely scraping a pass" is essentially a "satisfactory" report. I went on to say:

"I refer to 'The Summary of Indicative Quality Indicator Results from HMIE inspections, 2009', which reveals that out of 30 councils, 16 are barely passing or are failing on the quality indicator that 'Children's needs are met'; 24 are barely scraping a pass or are failing on the 'Recognising and assessing risks and needs' indicator; 17 are barely scraping a pass or are failing on 'Operational planning'; 17 are barely scraping a pass or are failing on 'Leadership and direction'; and 18 are barely scraping a pass or are failing on 'Leadership of change and improvement'."—[*Official Report*, 24 September 2009; c 19945.]

That is not good enough for our children and should not be good enough for anyone here or anyone who has any influence to do anything about it.

There is still a challenge. Members are right to point to professionals' commitment and to the challenging and difficult job that they do. However, we ignore at our peril the damning indication of weaknesses in our system. If we do that, the figures to which Duncan McNeil referred will continue to grow, which is unacceptable.

We need to look at what is happening as a result of our actions. I refer to Parliament collectively—I am not trying to damn the present Administration, because the problems have existed for a number of years. Collectively, we need to do something to achieve more success. What are we achieving from our political and resource input?

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): In the light of the reassurances that I have repeatedly received in Parliament in response to questions about home visiting, and given the figures that Mary Scanlon cited, I am extremely concerned. Does Hugh Henry agree that there is a strong case for the Government to institute a review of the national health service's provision of home visiting, which seems to be failing? It might even want to ask Audit Scotland to become involved in that review.

Hugh Henry: We are duty bound to review any area of activity in which there is a sign of weakness. Home visiting is critical, because often it can pick up some of the weaknesses and dangers that Duncan McNeil highlighted. I hope that ministers will listen carefully to what Robin Harper has said.

Do we spend enough time listening to our children and young people and to the concerns that they articulate? Often, when I speak to teachers and health workers, I hear stories of young children pouring their hearts out about the circumstances that they face at home because of their parents' addiction to alcohol or drugs. Are we listening to them? Do we sometimes brush them off when their behaviour is a bit aberrant, without understanding what is causing that behaviour?

This comes back to Robin Harper's point: are we spending enough money to ensure that we achieve the desired outcome? The voluntary sector in Scotland—as the statutory services are—is under pressure and struggling. There are cuts and redundancies in many voluntary organisations across Scotland, but we depend on high-quality services to make a difference. As the minister and others have said, we need to improve information sharing and to ensure that our GIRFEC principles are at the heart of any proposed legislation.

My final point relates to our children in care, both those who are looked after in foster care and those who are in residential care. For years, we as a society have failed those children. It is remarkable how some survive and, indeed, thrive, but too many are left vulnerable to homelessness, addiction and prison once they leave care. We need to put that issue back at the heart of our commitment and discussion, in order truly to make a difference for every child in Scotland.

16:15

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I rise in support of the motion in the name of the minister. I am heartened by the progress that has been shown in the getting it right pathfinder project in the Highlands. On the surface, good progress has been made. I do not wish to repeat too many of the points that members have made, but I stress the hard work of the professionals who have been involved in the project and of those who are still working outside it. I make no apology for putting those thanks on the record again.

From my point of view, as a member who represents a diverse and scattered Highland constituency, the report "How well do we protect Scotland's children?" and its findings raise slightly different issues that are more specific to rural areas. Many of the findings emphasise that roll-out is more challenging in more rural and isolated areas. That is no bombshell, but it should open our eyes to the specific needs of smaller and more scattered communities.

The report identified weaknesses across the board, to which Margaret Smith alluded in her speech. In addition to the practical issues, there

are strategic challenges, which need to be addressed if roll-out across Scotland, including its many rural areas, is to be successful. Fundamentally, it comes down to whether systems and procedures that have been developed in a largely urban area can operate in rural communities and the remote corners that are peculiar to much of Scotland. Simple things such as the use of information technology can prove to be more burdensome in parts of constituencies such as mine, where we do not always have connectivity and, if we do, it is not always there all day long.

In rural areas, interagency communication, which we have discussed, can often be a challenge and it can be hampered completely by the fact that colleagues will be many miles from one another. They can be kept apart by inclement weather, and sometimes by roads being blocked altogether. The Government needs to ensure that the infrastructure and mechanisms for governance and planning that are currently in place are the right ones—they should ensure that GIRFEC is rolled out effectively and embedded across the whole of Scotland, including the Highlands, which means that it must address as a matter of urgency some of the findings of “How well do we protect Scotland’s children?”.

It is concerning, although perhaps not surprising, that the report concluded that

“Some children and families living in rural areas did not have the same access to services as those living in larger towns or cities.”

I do not pretend to be an expert on what services work best, and how exactly they should be implemented, but I firmly believe that Scotland’s children and young people should have access to appropriate services regardless of where they live. I have made that point in the chamber again and again. That is a challenge for the minister and his team, but I am confident that it is one that they will seek to address. Nothing that I have heard from the minister contradicts that.

That is not the only weakness that has been indicated. There were potential delays for children who were not already on the child protection register. In certain cases, when it was decided that a child could not remain at home, an assessment of the suitability of friends and relatives to provide care was not carried out before the child was placed with them. When a move had occurred, children were not always as well supported as they might have been, and the level of support that was provided to the carers varied. Because of the waiting lists for specialist support services, children have often not received the help that they need quickly enough. We must remember that we are operating in a period when budgets are more constrained and might potentially be contracted

further, with more and more pressure being put on limited resources.

That takes me to some further points that relate to what Hugh Henry said and to what I have just said about limited resources. Members with more time served will recall the playlet that was put on in the old Parliament headquarters during the first session by young carers from east Sutherland. It was about children in school getting a heck of a ticking off by the teacher for not having done their homework. The fact was that, because they were young carers and because of the peculiar awfulness of their home circumstances—looking after drunken parents, siblings or whatever—they were simply unable to complete their studies. I see Margaret Smith and Hugh Henry nodding. That playlet was very moving at the time.

My plea is to remember that the children we are speaking about today all too often become carers at a slightly older age, but still as children. If there is not continuity of support, from the very good efforts that we have heard about from the minister and others today for children who, sadly, become carers, that is the ultimate betrayal. Children need the support to continue into the future.

The Young Carers East Sutherland—TYKES—and the young carers Caithness group are in the same situation with regard to funding. The funding of voluntary sector organisations, such as Crossroads East Sutherland, is very often uncertain. In fairness to the Scottish Government and the minister, I should say that I do not doubt the genuineness of their intent to ensure that worthwhile and thoroughly laudable organisations continue to be supported. That is not easy, but if the minister and the Government consider all such organisations in the round in Scotland, they might come up with cleverer ways of combining finance. The main point is that we must keep such organisations going.

Mary Scanlon: Does Jamie Stone share my concern about the demise of health visiting, especially in his home town of Tain? Health visitors have provided an excellent service there for many decades, but their jobs are threatened and there is no recruitment, so they will not be able to help other people, including young carers.

Jamie Stone: The issue is perhaps not entirely connected to the subject of the debate, but Mary Scanlon makes a valid point. The issue will have been raised with her as much as it has been raised with me and, I am sure, other members in the Highlands. We have not quite got to the heart of why the problem is happening, but Mary Scanlon is right to put it on the record. Even if the minister does not address the issue when he sums up, the matter will at least have been brought to the Scottish Government’s attention.

My party supports the Scottish Government's motion, which is well put together.

16:21

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): Presiding Officer, is there still some leeway in the time that you are allocating to speeches?

The Presiding Officer: There is a certain amount.

Jamie Hepburn: Thank you. In that case, I will declare an interest. I recently became a father—[*Applause.*] The debate seems to have greater relevance for me than it might have had had it taken place a few weeks ago. I place on record my thanks to members—including you, Presiding Officer—for the good wishes that they have expressed, which my wife and I have sincerely appreciated.

I welcome the broad consensus on the getting it right agenda that has been demonstrated in the debate, even though there might be differences in some areas. It should be acknowledged that work on developing the principles behind GIRFEC began before the 2007 election. The Parliament has demonstrated that it is at its best when parties work together towards a common goal.

There is considerable positive feedback on how the getting it right agenda has worked in the pilot areas, in particular the Highlands. We hear much talk about the need for joined-up government, and it is clear that GIRFEC provides a positive example of what that means in practice.

One of the biggest causes of frustration that constituents describe to me is the feeling that complaints and concerns, which are often to do with health and social services, are passed from pillar to post. People are frustrated by the difficulty of making headway in situations that seem intractable. Under the getting it right principles, all the different services and agencies that are concerned with the wellbeing of an individual child are brought together and there is a clear focus on the child's needs and rights. Although a range of providers and agencies continue to be involved, services are presented to the child and their family or carers as a single service, through which it is hoped that the child will be listened to and helped to understand the decisions that affect them. Families in the pilot have reported that they feel that one team supports them and their children.

The evaluation of the pilot in Highland identified other achievements. The proportion of children who are seen by supervising officers within 15 days is now 100 per cent. The length of time that looked-after children wait for permanent and adoptive placements has fallen during the past four years. There has been a significant decrease

in exclusions from secondary schools. Workers are reporting that there is better information, greater trust, more advice and greater capacity for early intervention. Those achievements demonstrate the potential of the GIRFEC approach.

A pathfinder initiative on domestic abuse was undertaken in Falkirk, in Central Scotland, which is the region that I represent. The aim was to inform our understanding at a national level. The Falkirk project was established to address the effect of domestic abuse on children, by intervening at an early stage to provide children who experience domestic abuse with the help and support that they need.

In the report of its June 2009 joint inspection of services to protect children and young people in the Falkirk Council area, HMIE cites the pathfinder as an example of good practice and highlights the way that the pathfinder group,

“comprising staff from police, health, social work, education, the Children's Reporter, Women's Aid and”

the Camelon and Larbert support to parents group,

“met on a weekly basis.”

The report found that

“Support was provided quickly and impact was monitored.

By adopting *Getting it Right for Every Child* ... principles, children affected by domestic abuse and their parents, in the Denny area of Falkirk, were provided with help and support much more quickly when they needed it most.”

That is an excellent example of the GIRFEC principles literally getting it right, so I congratulate those involved on their success and look forward to other parts of the country learning from it as the agenda moves forward.

There is some discussion about the best way to ensure that the agenda is implemented effectively at a national level. There have been calls for fresh legislation, but the Scottish Government's approach so far has been proven correct. The point of the GIRFEC principles is that action be taken on the ground. Guidance, regulations and legislation can achieve only so much; individuals have to put them into practice, and the strategy is about doing that as clearly and consistently as possible.

As the motion makes clear, getting it right for every child means ensuring that all aspects of public policy that affect young people work to the same principles. It means ensuring that the goals of the early years framework, the poverty reduction strategy and the approach to tackling health inequalities are also joined up and put child wellbeing front and centre.

Getting it right for every child means not simply protecting children from harm but actively investing in their future potential. That is why I welcome the Government's continued commitment to rolling out free school meals. All parents want their children to have the best possible start in life and the best possible education. Ensuring that our younger pupils are provided with sufficient sustenance for a day's learning is important. That is why I was disappointed by the remarks of the man who would be king of Labour in Scotland—Steven Purcell—who has called into question the need for free school meals. I trust that that stance is not shared by his colleagues in the Parliament. The need to ensure that our children are sustained was illustrated starkly by the depressing cover story in the recent edition of *Third Force News*, which reported that 10 per cent of children who are admitted to Yorkhill hospital are malnourished. That such a thing occurs in the 21st century is a salutary reminder of the work that is to be done.

Parents also want their children to be educated locally—in their communities and among their friends—by teachers who have the knowledge and experience that come from working in that community. That is why I have been concerned by proposals to close schools and nurseries in North Lanarkshire—proposals that I will work against.

As I said in my introduction, we often hear about the need for joined-up government. Sometimes the expression can sound like the kind of jargon that it is supposed to represent a move away from but, when we consider the success of the pathfinder projects, we see that joining up the services that are delivered by local and national Government, as well as the third sector, is eminently achievable.

I agree that the frightening statistics that Duncan McNeil laid out—as Hugh Henry rightly stated, they are shocking—demonstrate why we must not be complacent about getting it right for every child. When we get it right for every child, the benefits are felt throughout society. Part of the human impulse is to seek better for our children; getting it right for every child can be a key component of achieving that. If children can avoid health problems and a propensity to crime or antisocial behaviour, and if they can lift their heads and aim for the highest educational attainment and excellence throughout their lives, that will reduce costs elsewhere in the community and raise standards across the board.

I hope that, from getting it right for every child, we will soon reach the day when we—politicians, the Government and society as a whole—get it right for every person in Scotland and make our country the best that it possibly can be for future generations to inherit.

16:29

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): Liberal Democrats have always supported the getting it right for every child policy. That is not surprising, because it touches on elements of Liberal philosophy that are dear to us. One element of that is the idea of concentrating the solution to a social problem on the individual and building that solution upwards rather than creating a solution for the cohort, because doing that would not get the right answer.

I congratulate Parliament's most recent father, Jamie Hepburn. I do not wish to discourage him, but I must make an observation. For those of us who had the benefit of a good upbringing and who enjoyed support from our parents and others, and who brought up our own children with that background, the phrase "cutting the umbilical cord" is a bit of a myth. However, for those who have not had the benefit of such a background, cutting the umbilical cord is not just an act that takes place at birth: it is the removal of the very necessary support that is so vital to children. That is why we are having this debate.

I discern no disagreement on the GIRFEC principles in the chamber at all; our concerns are about how we take GIRFEC forward and what lessons must be learned, even from the pilots and some of the reports that have been mentioned. The two reports that have been specifically referred to—although Duncan McNeil referred to a third—are instructive. The University of Edinburgh report refers to focusing on outcomes. I advise the minister that some organisations have given reports on outcomes to members. Organisations such as Aberlour Child Care Trust are concerned that, while getting the structures right was correct, the emphasis is perhaps too focused on process—they believe that we must consider outcomes. It is therefore welcome that the University of Edinburgh report is very much focused on outcomes in the way that Margaret Smith and Liz Smith mentioned in their opening remarks. There is much to be learned from that approach—which, of course, is wholly consonant with what the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning said in his speech this morning.

The HMIE report is equally vital. It makes absolutely clear to every one of us that there is no room for complacency. Although it does not specifically address all GIRFEC issues, it highlights elements that need to be addressed. I make clear to the minister the Liberal Democrats' whole-hearted and total commitment to progressing and applying GIRFEC. However, without intending to be negative, we say to him that a number of issues must be addressed and that he and the Government must satisfy Parliament on them.

We all know, of course, that GIRFEC came out of the review of the children's panel system, as a number of speakers have said. If that system is to be reformed, the Liberal Democrats want the reforms to be compliant with the European convention on human rights. However, if the drafters of the new legislation focus on the GIRFEC principles, we have great difficulty in believing that they will end up offending ECHR principles. For the life of me, I cannot see how that would be possible. I am glad that the minister has taken away the earlier, slightly misguided proposed reforms of the children's hearings system. I hope that a version will return to us soon that applies the GIRFEC principles.

Of course, the first, elementary principle of GIRFEC is the involvement of the child. Again, I say to the minister that we support that, and we know that he does. However, we should be aware that some people are rather concerned that the greater involvement of children in decisions about themselves is not entirely evident. The reports of the national residential child care initiative, which were published on Wednesday, identified that more than one third of looked after children are not aware of their care plan or what it contains. The principle of why they need that is not disputed. Evidence has been brought before us that must be addressed.

Similarly, we totally support the development of early intervention. That element has probably occupied most time in this debate. I was very interested in the remarks of my colleague Margaret Smith and of Elizabeth Smith and Ian McKee on focusing on and understanding the fact that early intervention really means early intervention—indeed, it might mean intervention in the families of individuals who are about to give birth.

The recent Scottish Children's Reporter Administration report that Duncan McNeil referred to focused on another aspect that we must be careful about. However, I am bound to say to him that we Liberal Democrats view that report as a clarion call to apply the GIRFEC principles more quickly. Duncan McNeil did not suggest that the SCRA report was a criticism of GIRFEC, but he raised a number of serious issues that need to be dealt with. Having read the SCRA report, the Minister for Children and Early Years must respond by ensuring that the GIRFEC pilots are rolled out.

Of course, early intervention must deal not only with children who live with alcohol or substance abuse but with the earlier stage, where potential parents live in such circumstances. Having that focus at the earliest possible stage is a matter of real concern.

Finally, we support Mary Scanlon's point about child and adolescent mental health services—

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that I must hurry you.

Ross Finnie: The issue is highlighted in the Health and Sport Committee's report on that matter, which I hope the minister will respond to constructively. I hope that the Government will pick up the issues that are pertinent to the implementation of GIRFEC.

The Liberal Democrats will support the motion. We hope that we will receive reports from the minister on continued and rapid progress in implementing GIRFEC.

16:36

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): When I saw that a debate on GIRFEC was scheduled for this afternoon, I wondered why we were having another debate on the subject just short of three months since our previous debate. Certainly, this afternoon's debate stands in marked contrast to this morning's rather more lively kick-around on education policy. Nonetheless, the debate has been valuable and, if anything, might prove to be more important in the long run than our debate earlier today.

We have heard some excellent speeches from different sides in the debate. In particular, I was struck—as I always am—by Duncan McNeil's speech, which brought to our attention some startling and sobering statistics about the high mortality rate among young children who are under referral. His comments should be a wake-up call to us all, but I particularly want to hear from the minister, when he winds up the debate, what action he intends to take to address the issues that have now been brought to the Government's attention.

The Highland pathfinder report was mentioned by several members—Mary Scanlon went into it in some detail—including the minister. In his opening speech, he set out some of the pathfinder project's successes, especially the important outcome of a reduction in the number of children on the child protection register. From my reading of the report, a key success of the Highland pathfinder project has been the reduction in bureaucracy, which has allowed professionals to spend less time writing reports and attending internal meetings and has freed up more time for direct work with children. Another outcome is better information sharing, with a move away from using paper records, which are terribly time consuming and hard to access, to keeping electronic records. That has also reduced the burden on staff. Therefore, I very much welcome the minister's commitment to implement

the GIRFEC programme throughout Scotland on the back of the successful pilot in the Highlands.

The important role of midwives and health visitors was mentioned by the minister and by several members, including Dr Ian McKee, who highlighted the important role that they play in dealing with low-birth-weight babies. On Monday, I met members of NHS Tayside's community midwifery service at Perth royal infirmary. I should perhaps declare an interest, in that my family has recently—albeit not as recently as Mr Hepburn's family—utilised the midwives' excellent services. From my encounter with them, I discovered an extremely interesting point about midwives' level of contact with families—both mothers-to-be and new mothers—in the home. Given that GPs now perform very few home visits and none at all out of hours—the situation has moved on considerably from perhaps a generation ago, when many GPs were familiar, through home visits, with the environment in which their patients lived—the few health professionals who still visit people in their homes include midwives and health visitors. That contact with families in the home enables those health professionals to identify, at an early stage, likely problem areas and potentially vulnerable groups.

We have heard a great deal about the importance of early intervention. Mary Scanlon mentioned the consequences of the neglect of children under two, which is a crucial factor in poor health outcomes later in life. Given that we understand the importance of early intervention, we must be able to identify the problem areas, which is why midwives and health visitors play such an important role. As my Conservative colleagues have said on a number of occasions, we support additional investment in health visitors and think that we should protect the investment in midwives, on whom more and more responsibility is being placed. They are doing a vital job, but they need to be properly resourced.

There has been some discussion of children's hearings, about which Karen Whitefield and Elizabeth Smith raised concerns. I agree with Ross Finnie, who welcomed the withdrawal of the Government's initial proposals on the children's hearings system. We look forward to engaging with the Government when it brings new plans to update and reform that system.

I was struck by the excellent points in the briefing from Children 1st, which I read in advance of the debate, two of which I want to highlight. First, it states:

"The Scottish child protection system does not need more strategies or tick boxes around child protection. Instead it needs the resource, training and confidence to allow professionals to make good, supported decisions that are in the best interests of the child."

In other words, we must focus on resources and training. Secondly, there needs to be

"Stable and adequate funding for the voluntary sector, particularly for services which provide therapeutic support after abuse".

We all know—because we have debated the issue many times—that serious times are coming for the public finances and that serious cuts will have to be made. The temptation, particularly at local government level, is to let the voluntary sector bear the brunt of those cuts in the first instance. That is what often happens, because councils want to preserve core services and direct employment. Children 1st asks us to ensure that we do not put the voluntary sector in the firing line and that we safeguard the vital services that it provides.

We will support the Government's motion and the Labour amendment, which makes the important point that the HMIE report showed that

"almost half of the 30 councils inspected were assessed as weak or unsatisfactory in relation to the assessment of risks and needs".

That was referred to by Karen Whitefield and elaborated on by Hugh Henry. We must put that right. I hope that we can now begin the process of ensuring that our councils are up to the job of protecting our most vulnerable children.

16:43

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie)
(Lab): It has been an interesting debate, in which there have been many significant speeches by members of all parties.

It seems to me that the Labour amendment acts as a valuable counterpoint to the Government's motion, which highlights the achievement of consensus around GIRFEC and some of the good things that have emerged from the Highland pathfinder report. It is important to consider those positive points in the context of the concerns that were expressed in the HMIE report, which said that the ability of planning to meet the needs of vulnerable children was weak or unsatisfactory in 10 council areas, and which gave 13 local authorities similar ratings on their assessment of the risks and needs of vulnerable children.

Hugh Henry was right to point out that only 12 local authorities received excellent ratings, which, given how HMIE prepares its reports and uses its rating system, gives significant cause for concern. Almost a quarter of inspections found serious weaknesses in aspects of child protection that increased the risk of harm to children.

Duncan McNeil was right to point out that that follows a report by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration that found that one in 20

of all children under two across Scotland was referred to it last year and that a growing number need to be placed on supervision requirements for their protection. He also gave us the very striking figure that 144 children who were known to the children's reporter had died. Those statistics are striking. We have in GIRFEC a framework to progress child protection, but those statistics serve as a valuable reminder that we have a huge amount to do. A lot needs to take effect if we are to improve child protection in Scotland.

The situation is not getting better, although that is not necessarily the fault of the authorities. The circumstances that give rise to children needing protection—they may have alcohol-abusing or drug-abusing parents or parents who have serious behavioural problems, or different factors could have accumulated that place them at risk—seem to be increasing in society. In particular, such problems seem to be increasing in areas with the highest levels of multiple deprivation.

That is why it is a bit of a shame that the pathfinder report that has been published is on what is happening in the Highlands. The approach would have been more balanced if we had reports on some of the other pathfinder areas—on West Dunbartonshire, Falkirk, Edinburgh city and Dumfries and Galloway. That would have given us different perspectives from areas around Scotland. West Dunbartonshire, which is probably the area in that group with the greatest deprivation problems, has excellent services, particularly for care leavers and people who are going through the care system. That happens by dint of significant emphasis, the development of services and resources being made available. Such an approach needs to be emulated and replicated throughout Scotland if we are to achieve the same outcomes that West Dunbartonshire and other areas have achieved.

The HMIE report is crucial, because it gives us a systematic way of analysing the picture across Scotland. I was a wee bit concerned when I looked at the remit of the new chief inspector of HMIE and found that their responsibilities relating to the area of inspection that we are discussing did not appear to be explicit. I am not sure whether that was an oversight or a misunderstanding, but I serve notice to the minister that if the Government's intention is to withdraw HMIE from that area of inspection or work, the Labour Party will not support that. I hope that the minister will respond clearly to that point. It is vital that HMIE maintains its role in and responsibility for inspection in the area and that we can count on its good offices to ensure that child protection vigilance is maintained at a high level.

There are many interesting issues around child protection. Members have talked about health visitors, low birth weights and services that need

to be brought together, which is a key aspect of GIRFEC. We know that many children who are at risk are not identified early enough. Early identification and early registration of children who are at risk are needed. The process must be followed through and maintained by all the agencies. Somebody must take responsibility. Whenever something goes wrong, we start to consider who should have accepted responsibility, and it is often the poor social worker who is at risk in such circumstances: they are accused of negligence or unprofessional practice. Members and the responsible authorities know that such problems exist. We must support the people who are asked to accept responsibility by giving them the appropriate resources and a clear indication of what is expected of them, and by ensuring that an identification system is properly in place. We cannot blame people after the fact for things that go wrong if we do not will the means to ensure that things do not go wrong. There may well be particular cases that involve individual malpractice by social workers, but we cannot blame individual social workers if poor results are a product of systematic neglect or of the system not working properly.

We need assurances from the Government that the good intentions that are expressed in GIRFEC and the framework that is being established will be replicated in the systems that exist to ensure child protection; that the system of inspection by HMIE will be maintained; and that the Government's aspiration in that system—which it will make achievable—is not for satisfactory grades, but for excellent grades throughout the country.

16:50

Adam Ingram: It has been an interesting debate. Karen Whitefield, Liz Smith, Margaret Smith, Hugh Henry and, latterly, Des McNulty have highlighted the weaknesses that the HMIE summary report identified in our child protection system across Scotland. There are generic weaknesses, especially around risk assessment and information sharing. However, I hope that I reassured members, in my opening speech, that those issues are being addressed. New child protection guidance will be forthcoming in the new year, which I hope will improve performance dramatically.

I reassure Mr McNulty that the second round of HMIE inspections is currently under way. I emphasise that the inspection process in Scotland is extremely robust. The inspections are proving to be a catalyst for improvement. The first two reports that we have received back in the second cycle of inspections—for Orkney and Aberdeenshire—have noted a significant shift, of the type that Mr McNulty and Mr Henry were

looking for, from satisfactory to good. That is encouraging, and the inspection process will continue.

Margaret Smith asked for further information on children who are affected by parental substance misuse. A written update on those issues, along with others, is being prepared and I intend to circulate it to MSPs once we have had a meeting with child protection committee chairs on 16 December. Margaret Smith can look forward to receiving that information before Christmas.

David Whitton, who is unfortunately no longer in the chamber, failed to mention that the situation that he described regarding access to nursery education derived from regulations that were introduced by the previous Administration. I intend to fix that problem before the end of the current parliamentary session.

Today's debate has reflected the fact that children's services are a complex area. Every member would support action to improve the lives of Scotland's children, to ensure that they are healthy and happy, that they stay safe and that they are not hindered in achieving their potential in life. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. I ask members who are entering the chamber to respect the fact that a debate is going on.

Adam Ingram: It is more difficult to work out what that means in practice. Each child is an individual—I heard what Mr Finnie said on that front—and each child will have a different experience of growing up and coming into contact with different services. So, how can teachers, social workers, police officers, health workers and youth workers ensure that each boy and girl gets a personalised, consistent experience that is focused on the delivery of what is best for them?

Again, the answer seems simple. Our practitioners need to work together. They need a shared set of values and principles. They need to share information about the children with whom they work, and they need to intervene as soon as possible when they see something starting to go wrong. That was mentioned in some of the speeches this afternoon. Angela Constance pointed out that we should not wait for crises to happen before we intervene, and Duncan McNeil also made that point vigorously in his remarks.

Mary Scanlon highlighted the need for early identification of needs and emphasised the important role of health visitors. I agree, although I do not recognise her description of the situation in Highland, with health visitors being phased out. The latest information that I saw was that health visitor numbers were increasing in the latest statistics.

On Ian McKee's points about midwifery services, under the GIRFEC pathfinder projects, midwives act as a named person. They work with the mother to identify any problems in pregnancy that are likely to impact at birth or in early life. The midwife works to put a plan in place even before birth. The health visitor then takes up that plan, and we hope that we can get GPs involved as well. Murdo Fraser made the valid point that GPs are perhaps not as involved as they ought to be in our child protection systems.

Mary Scanlon: The point about health visitors is included in the Health and Sport Committee's report on its inquiry into child and adolescent mental health services, during which we were given evidence that no health visitors at all were being recruited in Highland.

Adam Ingram: I would certainly want to discuss that issue further with Mary Scanlon. The Government has set up a modernising community nursing board and we are looking to develop our community nursing, which would include health visitors, in the coming months.

The methodology of GIRFEC will help us to bring about early identification. The other week, in Edinburgh, I heard examples of practitioners from public services—

The Presiding Officer: Sorry, minister. Could we have a bit less noise in the chamber, please? There is a debate going on.

Adam Ingram: I heard examples of work that involves practitioners from public services and the voluntary sector. I acknowledge Liz Smith's points about the important role of the voluntary sector in dealing with children and families. Through the use of the GIRFEC model, the language and planning processes, the practitioners have begun to make a real difference for the children concerned. One child who had been facing a range of issues including antisocial behaviour and poor school attendance over several months had just completed a full week of attendance and was engaging with services. That was a real step forward for that child.

Duncan McNeil: The recent report by the children's reporter identifies 144 deaths in the past six years. Does the minister agree that that is a shocking figure that deserves our concern and should be investigated so that we can put the situation right?

Adam Ingram: I certainly agree with Duncan McNeil that it is a very striking figure. My understanding is that we do not have information on the causes of death or how the figure relates to the general population, but I agree that it is worth investigating and finding out more about the issue.

Another issue that was raised in the debate is information sharing. That requires some sensitivity. We must balance our duty to protect the wellbeing and welfare of the child with their right to privacy. There will always be differing views on where the line should be drawn. Where child protection is concerned, information must be shared. We are working with practitioners to develop practices that make sense and are workable where the concerns are less intense. Hopefully, our e-care system will also enhance our services in that regard.

The Presiding Officer: You must close please, minister.

Adam Ingram: Okay.

We have come a long way, but the journey is far from over. We will continue to work across a range of fronts with the aim of getting consensus next year on what will best support the GIRFEC approach.

I support the motion in my name. As I indicated earlier, I also agree with the amendment from the Labour Party.

The Presiding Officer: Since I took the chair about an hour ago, a number of speeches have been interrupted by BlackBerry or mobile phone signals. Members should know by now that, according to the code of conduct, those items of equipment should be turned off in the chamber. I therefore find the fact that some members—they know who they are—have been using them quite blatantly this afternoon somewhat discourteous.

I also refer to the point of order that Murdo Fraser raised. In fact, I cannot refer to it, because, as he probably knows, it is not a point of order in that I am not here to adjudicate on the accuracy of what is said during exchanges. However, the points that he raised are now in the *Official Report* and therefore on the record.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): We come to decision time. There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, in relation to the debate on education, if the amendment in the name of Michael Russell is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Murdo Fraser will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-5334.2, in the name of Michael Russell, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5334, in the name of Margaret Smith, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

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

Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 47, Against 72, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5334.1, in the name of Des McNulty, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5334, in the name of Margaret Smith, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

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

ABSTENTIONS

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 59, Against 47, Abstentions 15.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5334.3, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which also seeks to amend motion S3M-5334, in the name of Margaret Smith, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

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

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)

Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 15, Against 106, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S3M-5334, in the name of Margaret Smith, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

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

ABSTENTIONS

Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)

Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 57, Against 50, Abstentions 14.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament regrets that for the last two years the SNP government has presided over a series of failures on a range of education indicators, including teacher numbers and class sizes; believes that there are fundamental challenges that must be addressed in order to tackle the growing crisis in Scottish education; therefore calls on the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to take immediate action to rebuild the bond of trust between central and local government and establish a constructive working relationship with local authorities so that schools can deliver the best possible outcomes for Scottish education and young people, to bring fresh impetus to the implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence and the new national qualifications, providing teachers with the clarity, training and resources that they urgently require to implement the changes, and to focus on the key issue of teacher numbers, giving new teachers the career opportunities that they deserve and delivering effective workforce planning for the future, and calls on the Scottish Government to introduce a properly planned and resourced scheme for early retirement and more flexible winding down arrangements for older teachers, linked to guarantees that teachers released from the classroom will be replaced by post-probationary teachers.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5335.1, in the name of Karen Whitefield, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5335, in the name of Adam Ingram, on getting it right for every child, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-5335, in the name of Adam Ingram, on getting it right for every child, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament supports the Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) approach; commends Highland and the other pathfinder programmes for their work in developing the approach; notes progress under the eCare framework to enable secure, targeted information sharing across Scotland; welcomes the report by the University of Edinburgh on progress to date, particularly with regard to the pathfinder programme in Highland; welcomes Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education's summary report on its first round of multi-agency children's services inspections as providing a clear and comprehensive picture of how children's services are operating across Scotland; encourages work to further develop and implement the GIRFEC approach as a means of public services and the third sector working with parents and communities to improve outcomes for children and deliver the *Early Years Framework, Achieving our Potential, and Equally Well*; recognises the scale of the challenge described in the HMIE report, *How well do we protect Scotland's children?*, which states that almost half of the 30 councils inspected were assessed as weak or unsatisfactory in relation to the assessment of risks and needs; further acknowledges that the report highlights the need for improved information

sharing in relation to child protection, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that sufficient resources are available for the effective delivery of the *Early Years Framework, Achieving our Potential* and *Equally Well*.

Licensed Premises (Access for Disabled People)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-4618, in the name of George Foulkes, on the barred campaign goes nationwide. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates the Barred campaign, led by Mark Cooper, which seeks to improve the accessibility of licensed premises for disabled people across Edinburgh and now Scotland; recognises that the campaign has been adopted by Capability Scotland; looks forward to the campaign's development and future successes, and believes that no one should be barred from accessing a pub or club or receive a poorer standard of service because of a perceived disability.

17:07

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): I am most grateful to have the opportunity to bring the issue to Parliament's attention, especially as the debate falls, most appropriately, on the international day for disabled people. We will discuss the accessibility—or, more appropriately, the lack of it—of licensed premises, but I will first say a word or two about the barred campaign's pioneer, Mark Cooper. I am honoured to have known Mark as a friend for some time. I am glad to see him in the public gallery and am sure that we all welcome him.

Mark has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, and has had a particularly difficult time in the past few months. On completing his degree at the University of Aberdeen, he applied for and obtained a prestigious job with Lehman Brothers in New York and was due to start there on the very day when the bank collapsed. That was a tragedy. For several months thereafter, he was unemployed, but his great and wonderfully positive manner and his sense of humour have always prevailed. His spirit and his determination to fight inequality and discrimination are astonishing. I am sure that those who know him and have met him agree.

That spirit brings us here today. Mark was one of those who were kind enough to help me with my rather ill-fated campaign for the rectorship of the University of Edinburgh. I thank Dr Richard Simpson for his support. I am sure that Ian McKee would have supported me if he had had the opportunity. On the night when the result was revealed after two long weeks of constant campaigning, I took my campaign team out for a drink—or three—in one of Edinburgh's establishments. As Mark was coming, we made a conscious effort to go to a pub with street-level

access. Even the most able-bodied members—I am not one of them, but some of them are seated around me—will appreciate from their jaunts up the Royal Mile to Waverley station that the twists and cobbles of Edinburgh's old town are difficult enough to navigate, let alone the stairs and steps that are involved in reaching shops, offices and pubs above and below ground.

I go back to that evening celebration. We had settled for an hour or so when Mark needed to use the facilities. He was frustrated to find that the establishment had, as is the case in many other pubs in Edinburgh and beyond, no disabled toilet, that the facilities for all customers were downstairs and that there was no lift. There was no alternative for Mark but to leave with a friend and go 200yd up the road to the next establishment, where he had to rely on the bar staff's good will to let him answer the call of nature. On that day, the barred campaign was born.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): I agree that Mark Cooper's work in raising the campaign's profile and getting us all involved has been outstanding. Where does the campaign go next? Should we think about compulsion or should we simply encourage pubs to change and improve their facilities?

George Foulkes: I am grateful to Sarah Boyack, who has been very helpful in this campaign. We are not talking about compulsion. The campaign's original emphasis was to help to identify and promote through the City of Edinburgh Council's website establishments with facilities for the disabled. In other words, the approach would be more carrot than stick.

Mark Cooper took his campaign to the council with a very powerful and eloquent presentation, in which he argued that it was his intention not to penalise pubs that were unwilling or unable to make the necessary adjustments, but to increase awareness of accessibility issues. For most of us, it is easy enough to decide whether to go for drinks with friends; however, for Mark Cooper and people in similar situations, all sorts of considerations have to be factored in. All he has sought to do is to ensure that, when he plans a night out, he can look up a website and find out whether the bar that he and his friends plan to go to is accessible. Can he get in the front door? Can he go to the bathroom? Is there enough space between tables for his wheelchair?

While we are on the subject of wheelchairs, I think that it is worth reminding ourselves of a members' business debate on the quality of state-provided wheelchairs, which was initiated by my good colleague Trish Godman just over a year ago following a Quarriers report that showed that 50 out of 105 surveyed national health service wheelchairs were not fit for purpose. I am sure that

Mrs Godman will confirm this, but I understand that, a year on, very little progress has been made and wheelchair users throughout Scotland are still very much concerned about the issue.

Although the City of Edinburgh Council was initially reluctant, it soon accepted that Mark Cooper's request was very simple. In the run-up to his council deputation, he established a Facebook group, at which point we began to see the potential to turn a local and personal issue into the national campaign that we are discussing this evening. In just a few days, the Facebook group grew to more than 700 people and now stands at well over 1,000. Wheelchair users and non-wheelchair users alike e-mailed in to back the campaign and to congratulate Mark on highlighting an issue that was long overdue being in the public spotlight. His campaign has been so successful that it has been adopted by the national organisation Capability Scotland, for which, I am glad to say, Mark is now working as its press and campaigns officer.

Capability Scotland plans to take the campaign to a new level in the coming weeks and months by proposing an amendment, which I am hoping and willing to sponsor, to the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill. The amendment would require licensees to produce, as part of their operating plans, an access statement of compliance with part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. I hope, Presiding Officer, that the Parliament will at the appropriate time have the opportunity to debate the amendment, the principle behind which will be that no person should be barred from accessing a pub or receive a poorer standard of service because of a disability.

Let me be clear: Mark Cooper is not anti-pub. Quite the reverse is true, in fact. He loves them. He accepts that the licensed trade is struggling at the minute and understands that adaptations can be either expensive or impossible to make due to planning regulations or listed-building restrictions, so he wants to work alongside the licensed trade and local authority licensing forums to improve, where possible, accessibility of pubs and clubs and to get the right information about the accessibility of venues into the hands of disabled people.

With Parliament's support, the barred campaign can empower disabled people to make informed choices about where they choose to relax and socialise, and ensure that they have the best possible independent lifestyle.

17:14

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): I thank George Foulkes for having secured tonight's debate, and

for speaking so well on a serious issue that affects a significant proportion of our fellow citizens across Scotland.

Be that as it may, when most people visit their local pub or a city centre venue or a nightclub—that is what they call discos now—they do not give disabled access, toilets or other facilities a second thought. Unfortunately, neither do some of the owners of those establishments, until they are challenged on the issue, which Mark Cooper is doing. Under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, there are duties of liability on service providers who offer goods, facilities or services to the public, whether they are free or paid for.

An example that has been quoted is of the bar manager refusing to serve a deaf man because he thinks the man is drunk. The man explains his deafness and his hearing aids are clearly visible, but he is nonetheless refused and is shown out of the pub by the bouncer. Under the DDA, the owner of the bar is liable to be charged with discrimination. Furthermore, if the man's hearing friend remonstrates on his behalf and finds herself barred for doing so, she also has a claim for damages from the licensee.

However, as Mark Cooper has said, there are other ways of achieving justice than going through the courts, even if they can be challenging. I heartily congratulate Mark on his initiative and determination in finding the right people to approach and going ahead with his campaign in a logical and reasoned manner. I know that he has the strong support of Capability Scotland, this nation's largest disability rights organisation, and I know that he will also have the support of all in the Parliament, across all parties, as a result of his tireless campaigning for the publication of a good pub guide that includes information about establishments that are wheelchair friendly and have disabled access and disabled toilet facilities.

To that end—and although I come from Glasgow—I congratulate the City of Edinburgh Council on agreeing with Mark's campaign and including on its licensing portal a list of accessible pubs and clubs. I am sure that we will all, in any way we can, support Mark's efforts to persuade other local authorities to follow Edinburgh's encouraging lead.

Disability discrimination is a blot on Scotland's landscape, and it needs to be tackled wherever it is encountered. All local authorities should follow Edinburgh's lead by writing to their licensees, reminding them of their obligations under the DDA, and ensuring that they are followed.

I have only water in my glass, but here's to Mark Cooper and Capability Scotland for working to make Scotland a more civilised place in which to live.

17:17

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I, too, congratulate George Foulkes on securing the debate and, more important, I congratulate Mark Cooper on his determination and perseverance.

The barred campaign is all about improving accessibility for all patrons of Scotland's pubs. Disabled access to pubs affects pubs in Edinburgh and all parts of Scotland. Mark Cooper's success has been widespread. I am always impressed by people who have Facebook group memberships of more than 700, and I understand that Mark's group has 1,000 members worldwide.

The need for disabled access is universal. In the chamber last year, during the debate on the Disabled Persons' Parking Places (Scotland) Bill, which is now an act, I related a story about a constituent of mine. I will do so again, because his story is also about access. My constituent is a disabled driver who, due to the nature of his disability, required to park in the marked disabled bay right outside his front door so that he could access his home. Now I pause, and introduce members to his neighbour. He was a man who, for reasons best known to himself, decided that he should regularly park in that disabled bay. He caused untold misery for my constituent, who became afraid to leave his home in case his bay had been taken by the time he got back. Naturally, I asked the council for help, but it could do nothing. Equally, the police could do nothing because the bay was advisory, and they were unable to enforce it. Not one to be deterred, I put the neighbour on the front page of the local newspaper for two weeks running, but still he would not move.

My illustration might be about disabled parking, but this is a wider issue about access to shops, facilities, and the other things that we all take for granted.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Does Jackie Baillie agree that some accessibility issues are about the attitude and the discrimination that underpins the fact that somebody would use a disabled parking bay or be hostile towards disabled people? I have experience of a pub being hostile to people who were not wheelchair users, but who were perceived to be different because of their disability.

Jackie Baillie: Johann Lamont is absolutely right. We need to challenge the underlying discrimination and the attitude that does not recognise us all as equal. The story about my constituent demonstrates the hardship that can be faced by members of society who have a disability. Many daily actions that those of us who do not live with disabilities take for granted can create an incredible challenge in the daily lives of

those who have disabilities. Even going out at night with friends can be a challenge when one is bound to a wheelchair.

Some pubs have disabled access to their premises, but do not have a disabled toilet. We heard that Mark Cooper encountered such a situation last February. By all means, people can pop in and have a drink or two—I suggest to George Foulkes that it should be only that—but when it comes to using the toilet, they are out in the cold. If a pub has disabled access but no disabled toilets, disabled patrons are forced to abandon the pub where they started their drink, perhaps in favour of another pub with a disabled toilet although, if we are honest, in most cases they will not find anything suitable. That is embarrassing and it can ruin an otherwise enjoyable night out with friends.

That was Mark Cooper's experience, but rather than sit back and accept it, he decided to campaign for change, for which he should be applauded. I am conscious that one in five people in Scotland lives with a disability. There is absolutely no reason why that substantial number of the Scottish population should be limited in the pubs that they can visit because of a lack of disabled entrances, disabled toilets or both. The campaign, working alongside the licensed trade and local authority licensing forums, seeks to improve the situation and I am sure that they will make the necessary changes.

The proposed amendment to the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill that George Foulkes mentioned would introduce a requirement for access statements. That is worth considering, as it just might encourage new pubs to make adjustments to their premises to make them more accessible for all. I hope that the Scottish Government will support such an amendment, as it would eventually make it easier for disabled people and their friends to go out to socialise in a pub. It would certainly take some of the guesswork out of a fun night out, although, as we would always say in the chamber, with drinking only in moderation.

17:22

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I, too, congratulate George Foulkes on obtaining the debate and on bringing the matter before the Parliament. I have always found George Foulkes to be a convivial and congenial man, despite the political differences that sometimes come between us, and I know that Capability Scotland and Mark Cooper have a sound advocate on the matter that we are discussing. I congratulate Mark Cooper, with whom I have been in correspondence, on his approach. He has approached the issue with moderation and with no lack of humour,

sometimes of the self-deprecating type. That is exceptionally effective because, when one receives approaches in that moderate manner, one gives them the fullest consideration.

One interesting feature of the campaign is that the points that have been made are reasonable and are argued in a reasoned manner. We have frequently seen in the Parliament that there is no better way of destroying a good case than by overstating it. Mark Cooper has certainly not made that mistake, because his campaign seeks recognition of the difficulties that a significant proportion of the Scottish population have, but at the same time he is not demanding the impossible. He has been realistic.

Jackie Baillie touched on the point that we can do something in respect of new build or newly adapted premises. The case can be argued that such premises should bear in mind the difficulties that disabled persons might have with access, particularly to toilets. It is not beyond the wit of architects and those who plan the layout of these premises to achieve that.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): It might be worth while for the chamber to consider the possibility of wheelchair users being part of local licensing forums. In my area, I work with a wheelchair group that is effective in advising Clackmannanshire Council on changes to roads and so forth. The group also advises on planning applications, on which it is consulted.

Bill Aitken: That could be considered.

The problem as I see it is one that Mark Cooper anticipated. I refer to established premises, some of which have been in situ for many years. They were designed during a time when wheelchair users—sadly and unfortunately—did not even consider the option of going out for a refreshment. As George Foulkes said, many of those premises were designed with a drinking and eating area at ground-floor level and toilets on either a downstairs or upstairs level. That is a problem for licensees, given that the cost of adapting such premises is considerable. I say that particularly at a time when the licensed trade, like everyone else, is going through serious difficulties.

It is to Mark Cooper's credit that he recognises the potential for difficulty. The submission that he has made is moderate and reasonable. I look forward to the continuation of the debate. I have written to Mark to indicate that I would like to see the draft of his proposed stage 2 amendment to the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill. I know that his proposal will get full and sympathetic consideration at stage 2.

17:27

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I congratulate George Foulkes on bringing the motion before the chamber. His speech was the sparkling contribution that we have come to expect of him. I hope that he and his colleagues send the First Minister a recording of the speech; I think he would enjoy it enormously.

The toilets in the establishments that we are debating can be tricky for someone to use, even if they are non-disabled and even before they have had one or two refreshments. I had cause to avail myself of the facilities in an establishment in my home town, during which time a wee birdie came to sit on the gutter outside the window. Without thinking, I bent forward to look at the birdie and—unfortunately—my posterior came into contact with a red-hot radiator. I made quite a lot of noise—indeed, I had to reassure the dentist next door that an assault or murder had not taken place. If I find such facilities difficult to use, just think what they are like for the disabled.

As colleagues know, my wife is disabled. She is not wheelchair bound, but she has lost the use of one side, walks with some difficulty and uses a stick. I have seen the disappointment on her face when we have visited a pub or other similar establishment and she has had to admit defeat and say, “I cannot go down there.” I am talking about simply getting into the premises, let alone going to the toilet. That is shocking. We all want to let the disabled feel that they can play a full role in life. No one should be home bound; people should not be trapped and unable to go out simply because they are disabled. I speak with some knowledge on the subject.

Today is international day of disabled people, which is precisely why it is a pleasure to join in the debate. Mark Cooper is in the public gallery, which is an honour and pleasure for each and every one of us.

Members who were elected to the Parliament in 1999 will recall that one thing that made me passionate about constructing this building—and the reason why I served on the Holyrood progress group—was that I could not countenance the Parliament going to the Royal high school. That building was absolutely hopeless in terms of toilet and other facilities for the disabled. Goodness knows, the facilities were bad enough in our temporary premises up the road. The need for good facilities for the disabled was one thing that drove me forward to complete the building, so—I am going to blow my trumpet—it is with some pride that I add to the welcome that other members have given to Mark Cooper as he watches the debate from the public gallery.

Of course, if we think about it, we realise that one of the most disabled-friendly bars the length and breadth of Edinburgh is not far away from this chamber. I trust that after this debate Lord George Foulkes will entertain Mark Cooper to a moderate refreshment in that most disabled-friendly of bars.

I conclude this short speech by offering a word of advice to anyone who uses the disabled toilet next door to the members’ bar—for God’s sake, do not mistake the alarm string for the light string. I have done so, and it proved extremely embarrassing. I congratulate Mark Cooper and George Foulkes from the bottom of my heart on bringing a most important motion to the chamber.

17:30

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I, too, congratulate George Foulkes on securing this debate. In my political life, I have always thought it a good idea to follow his sage advice; that certainly applies to his support for the barred campaign.

I know that nowadays we generally encourage people to be abstemious when enjoying a night out—we may have strayed from that at times in this debate—but it does not follow that people should be unable to enjoy a sociable night in the some venue as others simply on account of their disability. I congratulate Mark Cooper on his campaigning work on the issue. George Foulkes and others have already paid him fulsome tribute for that, but of course we expect nothing less than determination and success from graduates of the great University of Aberdeen. I am sure that Robin Harper will agree with that.

Jamie Stone: Oh!

Richard Baker: I hear a St Andrews man complaining—he should recognise reality.

It is also right that we congratulate Capability Scotland on its support for the campaign.

I have met Mark Cooper to discuss the barred campaign. As Bill Aitken said, he has made a persuasive case for the measures that he proposes. When he described to me his experiences of trying to enjoy a night out with his friends but being frustrated by access issues, I recalled an exercise that Anne Begg, the MP for Aberdeen South, conducted some years previously. She went out in Aberdeen to see whether bars and clubs had considered access issues and whether she, as a wheelchair user, could get into them. She found that, in a number of instances, she could not. It is a shame that, some years later, that is still the case in a number of establishments. We really should be making better progress.

I do not underestimate the pressures to which the licensed trade is subject at the moment. Mark Cooper has highlighted them, but what he proposes should not be too onerous. The proposals involve a change to the law so that landlords must consider accessibility before being granted a licence; licensing standards officers carry out access surveys; and, crucially, access information is made available to disabled people so that, at the very least, they can make their plans around the places that have appropriate accessibility. As Bill Kidd said, the City of Edinburgh Council has already taken a lead on the last point.

I do not think that Mark Cooper's ambitions are too much to ask. It is right that he seeks action not only from the licensed trade but from licensing authorities. Some are already making progress; we must hope that others will follow. He has said that he wants to work with the licensed trade to achieve the goals that he has set out.

I agree with Mark Cooper that the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill may provide an appropriate legislative vehicle for progress on these matters. However, it is a controversial bill and the issue should be left for less consensual debates than tonight's. I am sure that there will be cross-party support for the campaign and look forward to hearing from the minister what support the Scottish Government will give it to enable it to achieve its laudable goals.

As Jackie Baillie said, equality of access is a fundamental principle that applies to all areas of life, whether it be the workplace, public services or the provision of opportunities for recreation and enjoyment, which should be an important part of anyone's life—even if they are rarely part of mine, given that I am a father. The campaign raises an important issue of equality; that is why all of us should support it tonight.

17:34

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I, too, congratulate George Foulkes on bringing this motion to the chamber this evening, and Mark Cooper on the qualities that he has displayed—and not just over the past months or years. He went not only to a fine university—the University of Aberdeen—but to a fine high school, Boroughmuir.

I am proud to say that, before Mark arrived at Boroughmuir, I arranged for 15 redundant wheelchairs to be delivered so that some sixth-year pupils could spend a day moving around the school in them in order to report on how ready the school was to become wheelchair-user friendly. I do not know how effective the report was at the time, but the school eventually became relatively

wheelchair-user friendly—I hope Mark would agree with that.

I will pick up on a couple of issues that other members have raised. Dr Richard Simpson made an important point that I wish to take further. On the representation of disabilities at all levels, it would be worth the Government finding out in which areas it would be appropriate for disabled users to become statutory consultees, with particular regard to the architecture of public buildings, including schools.

Jamie Stone: Does the member acknowledge that we consulted the disabled lobby when we built this building?

Robin Harper: Yes, indeed. Jamie Stone will remember that well, as he was on the Holyrood progress group in the early days of the building.

As Jackie Baillie said, people can find it embarrassing to go into a pub to find that the necessary facilities are not there. Perhaps pubs could be encouraged right now to do what might eventually become part of George Foulkes's amendment to the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill, which would require pubs to show, externally, exactly how disabled-user friendly they were in every respect. Perhaps if logos, the appropriate symbols or tick boxes were used, people would know what restrictions there were.

I close by congratulating George Foulkes and Mark Cooper once again on bringing the subject to the Parliament's attention, and I hope that we hear a positive response from the Government.

17:37

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): I, too, congratulate George Foulkes on securing this important debate. I join members in congratulating Mark Cooper, too. It is clear from the barred campaign that Mark is a man of courage—and anyone who goes on a pub crawl in Edinburgh with George Foulkes has to be a man of courage. I commend Mark for his robustness in doing that.

The barred campaign has had a very positive impact, in that it has secured an undertaking from the City of Edinburgh Council to perform an access survey of all licensed premises in the city. I am further encouraged by Edinburgh's commitment to turn that information into a guide concerning accessibility and relevant facilities. The council should be congratulated on doing that.

However, the barred campaign is not just about Edinburgh, local authorities or pubs and clubs. In her intervention, Johann Lamont made an important point about attitudes, and the campaign is indeed about raising awareness and changing attitudes. It is amazing: I am astounded by the

negative approach of some people, even in this day and age, towards people with a perceived disability—and by their treatment of them, let alone their attitude. We must all join together in doing everything that we can to change attitudes, to raise awareness and to make life much more civilised and tolerable for those people who have a disability, be it a physical disability or a learning disability.

As the minister with responsibility for disability issues, one of my key objectives is to enable far more people with disabilities to live independently and to decide their agenda for their lives, rather than having it decided for them. A key part of that is that people who have a disability should be able to partake in the social life of the nation as well as anyone else can do. Independent living must be a central focus of how we develop disability policy in the 21st century.

I have not met Mark Cooper. I offer him and George Foulkes an invitation to an early meeting, to discuss how the Government, including in its dealings with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the numerous agencies for which the Government has responsibility, can help.

George Foulkes: I am grateful to the minister for his positive suggestion, and I am sure that Mark Cooper and I would be delighted to meet him at an early opportunity.

Alex Neil: That is excellent; I look forward to that. We should have a wide-ranging discussion, because it is clear that organisations such as VisitScotland, which promotes Scotland, should do their level best to ensure that disabled people have the same access as other members of the community have to the facilities that we promote.

In my meeting with George Foulkes and Mark Cooper, I want to discuss the amendment to the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill that George Foulkes proposes to lodge. I am 100 per cent behind the motion, but there is a problem with such amendments, because equalities legislation is reserved. Even though George Foulkes would be seeking to amend licensing legislation, I am led to believe that there might be a problem because the amendment would have an impact on equalities legislation. Of course, if reserved laws need to be changed I will be happy to raise the matter formally with ministers in London. Ultimately it is for the law officers and the Presiding Officer to decide whether the provisions in an amendment are within the jurisdiction of the Scottish Parliament, but I am sure that we do not want to miss an opportunity to do something because of a problem to do with a reserved matter.

It is extremely important that we talk to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which

has the lead responsibility for the implementation of disability equality legislation in Scotland. In the context of the equality duty, which will incorporate the disability duty, there are areas in which the Government can perhaps help to achieve the objective that we all share. There might be ways of achieving the objective that we have not yet identified. As I said, I am keen to work with George Foulkes and Mark Cooper, and with the EHRC and others, to consider what we can do within our jurisdiction—with a view, I hope, to our jurisdiction in the area eventually being extended.

For example, we now have licensing standards officers in Scotland. Although they have no statutory duty in relation to disability, I am sure that it would be useful to make them aware of the need for enhanced facilities for disabled people in licensed premises. There is an awful lot that we can do by increasing awareness and trying to change attitudes, as well as by making changes to legislation, if such changes are appropriate.

The motion that George Foulkes lodged has the Government's total support and we will do anything that we can do practically to make life more civilised, more fair and more equal for disabled people in Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:44.

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