

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 14 January 2010

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 14 January 2010

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

Literacy Commission

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5512, in the name of Des McNulty, on the report of the literacy commission. Unless there are a few surprises, we have a little flexibility, so I will not be too rigorous in enforcing time limits—unless I have to be.

09:15

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I express my gratitude to the members of the literacy commission, some of whom are in the gallery, for their efforts in producing the substantial report that Labour has chosen as the subject of today's debate. I also praise my predecessor as Labour's education spokesperson, Rhona Brankin, and our former leader, Wendy Alexander, for their foresight in setting up the commission.

The report was warmly welcomed in educational circles following its publication last month. It brings together findings and evidence from a variety of sources, presents a powerful case for literacy becoming our top education priority and contains a set of recommendations that I hope that members of all parties will support.

In some respects, the report is a wake-up call. It highlights the importance of literacy to economic competitiveness, to social inclusion and to individuals. Despite advances in information technology and the advent of new forms of communication, literacy skills are more vital than ever in the modern world. The inability to read and write renders the internet impossible to use. It is arguable that the more communicative possibilities we create, the more disabling illiteracy becomes.

The report uses international indicators to provide evidence that other countries might be progressing faster than Scotland. That is a disturbing finding, given the lead that Scotland once enjoyed. Historians such as Tom Devine and Arthur Herman have chronicled Scots' contribution to the development of thought across a series of disciplines, including philosophy, economics and mathematics, and Scots' contribution to literature and to the advancement of scientific knowledge and its application in industry, medicine and the social sphere. Since the age of enlightenment, Scots have been noted for breakthrough after breakthrough in a wide variety of fields. Several

explanations have been offered for the influence that Scots and Scotland have had on the modern world, such as economic circumstances, the restless character of the people and religious beliefs, but in my view our education system was the cornerstone of Scottish achievement.

For a long time, the most distinctive features of our education system were its universality and accessibility. Our people were taught to read, write and count. A higher proportion of the population were given opportunities to acquire higher-order literacy and numeracy skills through our schools and universities than was the case elsewhere. Literacy and numeracy were central not just to the school curriculum, but to our definition of the foundation of a good society. That is not to say that the system was always successful; the report rejects the idea that there was a golden age. Many older people lack literacy and numeracy skills, because they were failed by the system. However, the idea that society has obligations to ensure basic literacy for all and to promote higher-order literacy skills widely is one that we can and should embrace, by making a long-term commitment to zero tolerance of poor literacy.

The literacy commission report places literacy at centre stage again. The commission argued that it is unacceptable that thousands of our young people leave school every year with correctable problems that render them functionally illiterate and lacking the basic literacy skills that are needed if they are to function in a modern society. We can no longer tolerate low achievement among youngsters at school for whom there is no physiological or severe learning difficulty barrier that would prevent them from acquiring adequate literacy skills. We must ensure that there is total commitment to a zero tolerance policy on illiteracy and we must put in place measures to ensure that that is achieved.

The commission estimated the scale of the problem and suggested that about 13,000 school leavers each year are functionally illiterate. It provided overwhelming research evidence that the most important cause of correctable poor literacy is socioeconomic disadvantage. There is no doubt that our failure to equip some of our young people to read and write adversely affects their life chances. In the most disadvantaged communities in particular, a significant minority of young people who cannot read or write end up having no job, suffering health problems or getting into trouble through offending behaviour—frequently all three. That is expensive for us, but it is even more costly for them. The proportion of people in our prisons and young offenders institutions who have literacy problems demonstrates the importance of early intervention, not just for the individual concerned but for society. Anything that we can do to ease the frustration and exclusion that results from

illiteracy will pay considerable dividends and must be a key priority.

The literacy commission identified teaching and learning methods that are proven to be effective in acquiring basic literacy skills, even among people who face barriers in doing so. The commission argued that we need to take specific action to remove barriers to the acquisition of literacy skills, especially in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. We know what works; the methods are listed in the commission's report. Surely we can engineer a successful programme.

Our motion suggests that pilot schemes be implemented in areas in which there are the greatest concentrations of socioeconomic disadvantage, to address some of the prerequisites of learning that are identified in the report. Earlier this week, Iain Gray and I visited Lochview nursery school, where two-year-olds from Easterhouse are given the opportunity to learn and play in a warm and welcoming setting, with trained staff. The approach provides a foundation for nursery and primary education that goes a considerable way towards ensuring a level playing field with children from more advantaged backgrounds. It should be a precept that no child should fall behind before they even get into the education system. We need to focus attention on children in the birth-to-three category, because that is the most crucial period in a child's physical and mental development. If we do not concentrate attention on that age group and sort out problems at that point, we will lose those kids.

The commission cited health research that suggests that disadvantage has a physiological impact on the body and affects not only health but brain development. If the circumstances of disadvantage include a chaotic lifestyle, parental drug or alcohol abuse or domestic violence, the likelihood of educational success is severely compromised. We cannot allow such circumstances to blight the prospects of so many children in Scotland. We must intervene to give children who suffer such disadvantage a greater chance.

There is evidence from West Dunbartonshire and Clackmannanshire that the use of techniques such as systematic phonics, coupled with one-to-one support, is effective in developing basic literacy skills among many youngsters who have experienced barriers to the acquisition of such skills. Glasgow City Council and North Lanarkshire Council set up nurture classes, which provide support to youngsters and parents and directly address the fact that many children in the most disadvantaged areas lack the tools to discuss and express their emotions. In Glasgow every school has a literacy champion, who has responsibility for leading literacy development in their

establishment. A programme is being rolled out in early years establishments so that staff are better able to support children who have poor language skills and to assist such children with language acquisition.

Ultimately, we need to decide what we want our schools and early education establishments to prioritise. There are a variety of ways in which educationists measure success or failure. We have league tables of attainment, systems of inspection and other mechanisms that provide information about the performance of schools, nurseries and education authorities. If our priority is that every child who could be taught to read and write should be supported in acquiring those skills, and if the development of such skills is regarded as a core indicator of success or failure in our school system, not just in the most deprived areas but throughout the country, we will galvanise an education system that is faced with competing objectives to pay particular attention to literacy.

It is clear from the report that literacy cannot be addressed only by educationists in schools and nurseries. We must mobilise resources across the board and co-ordinate them effectively, so that the most vulnerable children, who are most at risk of disadvantage, get the support that they need if they are to make the most of their lives. That is the core message of the literacy commission's report.

Delivering basic literacy skills should never be the only objective or criterion against which schools or educational establishments are judged. As the report makes clear, we need to move children beyond basic literacy to help them to engage fully with modern society and the workplace. The ability to apply knowledge, understanding and skills in areas other than the one in which they were acquired is vital. We need critical thinkers—people who can gather, analyse and use information in new ways for a vast variety of purposes. Literacy-related skills can be a passport to success for the individual and a vital resource for employers.

The report calls for a national strategy to set priorities for assisting children to move beyond basic literacy by improving standards of comprehension. I hope that the Government will adopt that recommendation and the others in the report. I have had early indications from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning that he is receptive to many of the recommendations in the report and I understand that he met members of the commission this morning. My message for him is that it is not only about the curriculum for excellence and the way in which things are ordered and organised in the school; he must work with his colleagues across the portfolios and make literacy a national priority. Literacy must become a key priority: the top

educational priority for Scotland and a top priority for the Government.

Given the importance of workplace learning in tackling illiteracy among adults, I hope that the literacy action plan that is called for in the motion will incorporate a strategy for supporting and encouraging workplace learning and that trade union organisations will be among the stakeholders who are involved in discussions on it. In the past, people who left school unable to read and write rarely got an opportunity to acquire those skills later. In recent years, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and its affiliates through Scottish union learning have stepped in to assist with workplace learning through partnership with employers in training for employees and as providers of everyday skills activities. Much of that work has been supported through the Scottish union learning fund and I hope that the fund remains in place beyond the current round, which ends in March 2011.

The Scottish National Party amendment, which highlights the importance that is placed on developing literacy in the curriculum for excellence, is a constructive addition, provided that we are not saying that literacy can be taken forward only in the context of the curriculum for excellence. It is one route and one aspect of the report's message, but we need to go well beyond that.

The Liberal Democrat amendment, which reminds us that illiteracy is not an exclusively urban phenomenon, is also worth while, although I point out that the report suggests that there is no instance in Scotland of a school serving a poor neighbourhood that achieves results comparable with those of schools in the more affluent areas. It is regrettable that areas in which socioeconomic disadvantage is concentrated are typically the same areas—overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, in urban settings—in which we find the highest levels of functional illiteracy.

The commission envisages as a central purpose of testing the provision of diagnostic information about students who are struggling to assist in working out what steps should be taken to help them progress. I am not sure that that is consistent with the Conservative amendment, which seems more concerned with summative assessment and the segregation of children at primary 7 into academic and vocational streams. The commission's version of back to basics—placing emphasis on the acquisition of basic and higher-level literacy skills—is far preferable to the reintroduction of the 11-plus, so Labour will not support the Conservative amendment this evening.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am a little bit confused by Labour's position, given

that Mr McNulty and all his Labour colleagues voted on 7 January 2009 for exactly the same wording as is in our amendment.

Des McNulty: Perhaps Mr Fraser should read carefully the literacy commission's report, which makes an overwhelming case against the approach that he and his Conservative colleagues seek to adopt.

I turn from literacy to numeracy. We know less about how to improve standards of numeracy than we do about literacy, and it is a matter of concern that many teachers feel less comfortable about their own numeracy than they do about their literacy skills. In a global market, companies and individuals face a huge challenge from competitors whose education systems lay great emphasis on the acquisition of numeracy skills.

It was not part of the literacy commission's remit to consider numeracy, but I argue that it is of equal importance. I urge ministers to ask experts for advice on the development and dissemination of numeracy skills, possibly in the context of implementing the curriculum for excellence, and report back to Parliament. The socioeconomic factors that are associated with high levels of functional illiteracy in all likelihood produce poor numeracy too, but we have much less evidence about how to overcome that barrier or boost standards in numeracy more generally.

The core message from Labour is that we want the commission's recommendations to be implemented; we want the Government to implement a literacy action plan in partnership with local authorities and others; and we believe that literacy should become the Government's key priority. I look forward to hearing members' speeches in a debate that I hope will be serious and consensual.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the report of the literacy commission, set up by Labour, and its recommendations on actions needed to support the acquisition of basic literacy skills and the development of higher-order literacy-related skills; calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward as a matter of priority, following discussion with the literacy commission and all stakeholders, a literacy action plan; notes also the successful role of trade unions in promoting literacy and numeracy among adults and the commission's support for nurture groups in primary schools in areas of disadvantage as pioneered by Glasgow City, North Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire, Clackmannanshire councils and others, and suggests that, in order to assist those children facing the biggest barriers, the Scottish Government work in partnership with local authorities serving areas with concentrations of socio-economic disadvantage to implement and assess pilot schemes that can provide continuous and systematic support for families with children in the birth to three age group.

09:31

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): I welcome the debate, as it gives me another opportunity to thank publicly the members of the literacy commission—some of whom are in the gallery—restate the Scottish Government's commitment to continually improve literacy, remind members about the work that is under way and anticipate further necessary work.

I also thank Mr McNulty and the Labour Party for initiating the debate and, indeed, Rhona Brankin and others for establishing the literacy commission. It has been a valuable innovation and its report is of great importance to us. I think that Iain Gray called it a wake-up call, and I hope that the debate will reflect across the parties the concern that the commission has reminded us that, although improving literacy skills is not a new priority for the Government or its predecessors, it is important to refocus from time to time on what needs to be achieved in Scotland. That is what we need to do now.

Reducing adult literacy and numeracy problems is one of the indicators on the Scotland performs website. That indicator is moving in the right direction; in adult literacy, we are making progress. We await the results of a national survey into adult literacy and numeracy levels throughout Scotland. It is the first such survey in more than a decade and will provide an updated baseline to measure progress better.

The Scottish Government and previous Administrations have identified the relationship between literacy and poverty. We have done so particularly in the health inequalities framework and "Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland", our anti-poverty framework. People with good literacy skills are more likely to maintain and enhance their own health and wellbeing and that of their family. They are also more likely to adapt and improve skills, get a job and stay in productive employment. Those are positives that arise out of reducing adult literacy problems in particular.

I am grateful to the literacy commission, which has considered a range of issues independently and come to some important conclusions about how we advance literacy across society. Those conclusions can add to, help to develop, underpin and expand the work that is already going on.

It is important to note—without in any way being complacent—that the need to improve literacy is not unique to Scotland; it is a persistent problem throughout the United Kingdom and internationally. International attainment surveys show that the performance of young people in Scotland in reading and writing compares not

unfavourably with performance within the UK and internationally, although much more needs to be done.

I will start with what is being done. I acknowledge the good work of our nurseries, schools, colleges, communities and libraries—all the individuals and institutions that help people to improve and build literacy skills, whatever age they are. For example, in West Dunbartonshire, a literacy initiative tailored to local circumstances was aimed at transforming the achievement of all children in the four-to-seven age range and eradicating illiteracy in the school population. The programme involved a range of approaches—including synthetic phonics, about which I am sure we will hear more—and resulted in a 6 per cent reduction in illiteracy levels. Also in that local authority area, practitioners from all social studies departments came together to produce resources to help to embed the building of literacy skills into the teaching of history, geography and modern studies, thereby encouraging the idea of literacy across learning.

I am aware of an active literacy programme in North Lanarkshire, with all teachers receiving associated continuing professional development. Teachers are provided with resources to help them employ tactile approaches to phonics and to encourage young people to learn from one another. The programme has sparked cross-authority sharing—pupils from Kildrum primary school recently visited a school in South Ayrshire to discuss their positive experiences.

As Mr McNulty said, I met members of the literacy commission this morning and enjoyed an interesting discussion about its report and recommendations and how it might go forward. The discussion reflected the aims of this Government—certainly my own aims—to drive up standards of learning and teaching to ensure that our young people have the literacy skills they need, and I am in complete agreement with many of the commission's recommendations. I agree that we need to take continuing action to improve literacy in Scotland; that we need sustained commitment from all levels of Government and educational management to improve standards of literacy at all levels; and that all local authorities have a strong role to play and should have literacy plans suited to their individual circumstances.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):

There is clearly a big issue about adult illiteracy and the impact that it has on families. What expectation does the cabinet secretary have that the single outcome agreement process will ensure that literacy is given an appropriate place, not only for children but for adults?

Michael Russell: That positive suggestion from Johann Lamont that the single outcome

agreement process—a developing process that was positively discussed yesterday at the meeting between the Cabinet and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities—can continue to develop so that literacy is one of the issues included within it may well be useful and the local authorities that are not already doing that might wish to do it.

I agree with the commission's recommendations that successful schemes should commence at an early age and use a range of proven teaching methods and that raising higher-order literacy-related skills should be a priority—I will return to that issue.

It is true that there is no agreed definition of functional or basic literacy, but there is a clear understanding of what we as a society need to achieve. Within curriculum for excellence, the acquisition of literacy skills will not only provide every child and young person with the basic skills but help them acquire the higher-order skills of analysis, interpretation of information and evaluation. Mr McNulty's point about numeracy is an interesting one, because there is a sense in which, when we define literacy in that way, we also embrace numeracy and literacy becomes, in essence, the skills that someone requires to function and cope in modern society.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): The term “functional literacy” is central to the matter. In West Dunbartonshire the concept of functional literacy is used as a benchmark to measure progress against, but it seems to me that we are still light years away from recognising the concept of functional literacy. Does the minister recognise the term “functional literacy”? His predecessor did not.

Michael Russell: I do not want to get into what my predecessor or her predecessor or any other predecessor did. I recognise the term, but one of the things that the literacy commission does for us is to extend the terms that we are using in the debate and recognise that there are levels of expectation in society that we need to address. I do not think that we should fall out about the issue. However, I think that there is such a thing as functional literacy, which we need to look at, but the higher-order skills must be there as well.

I will focus on the curriculum for excellence, which is the burden of my amendment. For the first time, in the curriculum for excellence every teacher will have a responsibility for the development of literacy skills and to provide a coherent education from three to 18. The curriculum guidance for literacy is concise, thorough and clear about the outcomes that we want our young people to achieve.

Good teaching and learning in primary schools is the best way to provide the platform from which to improve literacy skills. Literacy across learning will enable secondary teachers to help young people better express their understanding of subjects and better explain their ideas in all they learn. Teachers will be freed up from overprescription—they know best how to teach.

We are introducing new national literacy qualifications from school year 2012-13 to ensure that those skills are formally accredited and recognised. Our expectation is that most young people will be presented for the qualifications at some point before leaving school. The new qualifications will also be available for adult learners in colleges.

Under the curriculum for excellence, young people will therefore learn the fundamentals of reading, writing, listening and talking, including spelling, structure and punctuation and, equally important, they will learn how those skills can be applied critically, across different media. Work is well under way to ensure that there is a detailed underpinning for the curriculum for excellence literacy proposals and I will keep the chamber and Scotland well informed about that.

I agree fully with the commission's view on the importance of a child's early years and the importance of early intervention, not only for literacy but for a child's life chances, future health and employability, all of which are tied up with literacy. That is why we are working with local partners to implement our comprehensive early years framework and the associated frameworks that are aimed at tackling health inequalities and poverty.

Rolling out the child-centred, personalised and multi-agency support in getting it right for every child should ensure that every child gets the required support. We are, therefore, putting into practice Labour's call for continuous and sustained support for families. We are also supporting local initiatives, such as equally well test sites, the family nurse partnership and Barnardo's you first programme. Nonetheless, I am happy to say to Mr McNulty that if more is needed, we will do more, and we recognise that more probably is needed.

Early intervention will mean improved outcomes for each child further down the line, in respect of life chances, health outcomes and educational attainment. Investment in the early years pays dividends for society as a whole, in both social and economic terms.

Developing parents' capacity to be the best parents that they can be for their children and helping them in the vital role that they play is another key. That is why we have developed a marketing campaign—play, talk, read—and a

supporting website, showing parents that they can make a difference to a child's uptake of essential skills.

Reducing class sizes in the early years of primary school can make a contribution to driving up literacy standards. Every child would benefit from smaller classes, in which more time is spent by teachers on literacy and early intervention. In that way, together with providing the right level and quality of nursery provision, we are ensuring that our children are ready to succeed. There is no dichotomy between the good things that can happen and are happening in some nurture groups and the good things that can happen and are happening with smaller class sizes. I want to ensure that that understanding takes place, and that was part of the discussion that I had this morning with the literacy commission.

Des McNulty: The real question is partly a matter of priorities. What is the Government's priority? Is it improving literacy or reducing class sizes? Even more important, is the Government's emphasis on outcomes, in the form of literacy, or is it on inputs, if we are going to talk all the time about class sizes?

Michael Russell: I am very deliberately not talking all the time about class sizes. I have discussed the subject in a paragraph almost 11 minutes into my speech. However, I think that there is a link between having smaller class sizes and increasing literacy. I am happy to say that literacy is, of course, a priority, but the means by which we achieve it can be many and varied.

Johann Lamont: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: No. Sorry, but I would like to finish this point.

The means by which literacy is achieved are many and varied. I accept the literacy commission's recommendations, but I should be entitled to bring to the table other means that I think are important, too. We had a constructive discussion this morning and I do not want the debate to be unconstructive—there is a sort of Pavlovian response when I mention smaller class sizes.

Johann Lamont: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: No, I do not want to take a point from Johann Lamont. It is possible to see a contribution being made by smaller class sizes, just as it is possible to see a contribution being made by nurture groups, for example, as driven forward by Glasgow. Let us be generous in our understanding of each other's positions.

I am conscious of the time and want to bring my speech to a conclusion. This morning, I spoke to

the literacy commission about a number of specific actions in which I would like it to be involved to move the issue forward. I am happy to say now what those actions are. The management board for curriculum for excellence is of great importance in advising me and driving forward the issues. I have asked the board to meet the literacy commission to discuss its recommendations, so that we can embed them in curriculum for excellence. We will take forward that process, and I was grateful for the commission's positive response.

I suggested that the commission meet Graham Donaldson, who is undertaking a review of teacher education, so that he can embed within his review the issue of literacy as a priority. I also said that I wanted to ensure that all teachers would have the opportunity to include literacy in their CPD time, in the enhanced CPD that I communicated to schools last week; literacy should be part of the additional day that we are doing this year, as a taster rather than anything else.

I take Mr McNulty's point about the issue being wider than the curriculum for excellence. I have therefore said to the commission that I would like my officials to consider a range of other issues in the report and we will meet the literacy commission again so that we can package an action plan with it around a range of things, including the curriculum for excellence. I am taking each of those issues seriously, moving matters forward and, I hope, involving members of the literacy commission in that way.

I have already welcomed, and am happy to welcome again, the literacy commission's report. I agree that we should raise standards of literacy for all in Scotland. I await advice from the management board about curriculum for excellence and the literacy action plan, following its discussion with the commission.

I am happy to note the success of the trade unions and others in supporting adult learners. We will continue to work in partnership with the Scottish Trades Union Congress on adult literacy and numeracy.

I have noted the mention that has been made of the role of nurture groups. We have funded three pilots in nurture—in Stirling, West Dunbartonshire and West Lothian—as well as a national training event to promote the nurture approach. There is no dichotomy between that and the aim of reducing class sizes. We need to ensure that we continue to learn from the positive outcomes of on-going work with local authorities and community planning partnerships.

I commend to members my small amendment on the curriculum for excellence. I understand that our amendment is acceptable to Mr McNulty. We

will support the Liberal Democrat amendment, but we will not support the Conservative amendment—

Murdo Fraser: Is that another U-turn?

Michael Russell: Although Mr Fraser might point out that we voted for such an amendment the last time, times change.

I move amendment S3M-5512.2, to insert after “literacy action plan”:

“within the context of the Curriculum for Excellence, which has the aim of raising standards of literacy at every level”.

09:45

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We warmly welcome this debate on a topic that the Scottish Conservatives have long believed is the most important in education. I, too, pay tribute to the work of the literacy commission, the members of which have, yet again, laid bare the true facts about Scotland’s literacy levels among both school pupils and adults and produced a blueprint of recommended policy proposals. Although many of those proposals are not new—in my view, their implementation is long overdue—the breadth of the commission’s membership and experience was particularly important.

I have no doubt whatsoever that parents expect their children to come back from school able to read, write and count properly. Teachers and employers expect that, as does Scotland at large. I also firmly believe that people expect that competency in those basic skills should be gained in primary school, before children make the move to secondary school. For generations, as Des McNulty said, Scotland had a proud record of doing just that, so it is deeply worrying that, by comparison with other countries, we seem to have been slipping back for approximately 10 years.

I know that the Scottish Government will come back and say that the curriculum for excellence will provide a major step forward in imparting literacy because, in the words of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, for the first time all teachers will be involved in teaching literacy. Just what does the cabinet secretary think that teachers have been doing for generations? Why is he so sure that the curriculum for excellence, the principles of which we support, will provide a magic wand to improve literacy when the word “grammar” appears only once in its detailed guidelines?

Michael Russell: Just to be absolutely clear, I neither said that nor believe it. The work that is required to be done to continue to build a curriculum for excellence is what will make the

difference. If Elizabeth Smith and others will join in that work, it will be all the better.

Elizabeth Smith: Cabinet secretary, I am more than happy to join in that work, but the assertion that teachers across the board have never been involved in dealing with literacy—

Michael Russell: I never said that.

Elizabeth Smith: Forgive me, but the cabinet secretary’s words indicated exactly that.

Let me be clear: there is absolutely no need to reinvent the wheel. Many good things have happened in recent years on the equipping of our primary school pupils with the basic skills that they need in later life. However, speak to most primary school teachers and heads and they will say that a more structured approach to literacy teaching is required. They will confirm that the intentions of the five-to-14 programme were good, that many of the accompanying materials were good and that the system was better able to cater for the diverse needs of different pupils. However, despite those good intentions, overall standards did not improve.

Why? Because the five-to-14 programme had too many escape routes. The five-to-14 programme was neither watertight nor sufficiently rigorous in testing reading, writing and arithmetic skills. There was an understanding that teachers would use the tests only when they felt that the pupil had reached a level at which they could pass them or when the teacher wanted to confirm his or her own judgment about the skills of the pupil. Therefore, it was far too easy for different approaches to testing to be used in different parts of Scotland.

Sometimes that happened because heads or local authorities wanted to ensure that the timing of the tests articulated with the publication of their school performance results. Sometimes there was a reluctance to apply the tests on a uniform basis because of the perception that they would be too stressful an experience for many of the children. Critics say that formal testing makes pupils and their parents overanxious. Really? I suspect that parents will be a lot more anxious if their son or daughter becomes one of the 10,000 pupils who leave primary school unable to read or write.

Hugh O’Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Does the member recognise the value of the continuing examination of literacy that is available through the national assessment bank materials, particularly within primary schools, as a means of ascertaining children’s skills in literacy and other subject areas?

Elizabeth Smith: If the member is referring to NAB materials within secondary schools, I think that there are deep concerns about that process—

Hugh O’Donnell: I referred to primary schools.

Elizabeth Smith: Regarding the primary set-up, I think that most teachers are anxious that there should be considerable improvement in the testing process to ensure that pupils are tested against identified nationally agreed criteria. That is what it is all about.

Much has been made—and rightly so—of the success of Clackmannanshire Council and West Dunbartonshire Council in bucking the trend. They have done so because of the highly successful—and, yes, traditional and perhaps old-fashioned—means of combining phonics spelling with rigorous testing, such as the Schonell spelling test or the British ability scales reading test. I challenge anyone, including any Labour member, who disputes that testing works or persists in the assertion that illiteracy is necessarily a problem in areas of high deprivation such that testing should not take place against nationally agreed criteria. That is why most parties in the Parliament agreed to our previous motion. It is disappointing to hear that some have now changed their mind.

I do not accept that stand-alone papers in literacy and numeracy in secondary 4 are the answer, not just because of the reasons that Carole Ford of School Leaders Scotland outlined in a letter to *The Herald* last summer but for the simple reason that S4 is too late. I have no doubt whatsoever that, on the issue of testing, we require not to increase the number of tests but to improve their quality and to ensure that, first and foremost, they are set against nationally agreed criteria. That is why, exactly one year ago, we moved amendment S3M-3164.1, which called for more rigorous testing of reading, writing and arithmetic by the time that a pupil leaves primary 7 and which was supported by all other parties in the Parliament. That is also why I am moving an identical amendment today.

Unbelievably, some argue that we do not need tests at all—an argument that I find extraordinary given what the evidence shows and given the opinion of the vast majority, which is to say 72 per cent, of employers. However, I do not doubt that other things can also help. Where schools have initiated parents advice forums and workshops that help parents to work with the school on supportive work at home, they have proved immensely successful. The high turnout at many of those workshops shows just how many parents recognise the need to address literacy issues as a top priority. Internet sites, as the cabinet secretary said, can be designed to help parents who struggle to find time to visit school to see their child's teachers by providing them with the information in their own home. The literacy commission also made an important point about the scope within the General Teaching Council teacher training programme for improving the skills of teachers in delivering the basic skills to their

pupils. I note that media coverage has suggested that the training should include more about grammar.

I also suggest that some attention needs to be devoted to the skills that are required for the Scottish Qualifications Authority's examinations. Increasingly over the past 10 to 15 years, there has been a move in some subjects towards bullet-pointing of answers and more descriptive comment rather than expansive analytical answers, which allow pupils more scope to demonstrate their intellectual abilities. I suggest that that is one reason why employers so often complain about the poor linguistic skills of their employees. Anything that constrains the use of language is in itself a major obstacle to literacy.

Nothing is more important than literacy, not just in advancing opportunity but in promoting confidence, self-esteem and self-discipline. Far too many people are disengaged from society and the economy because they are illiterate. It is our duty to address that, so nothing is more important than ensuring that we return to tried and tested teaching methods and introduce far more rigorous testing of the three Rs in primary schools.

We will support the motion and the other amendments in addition to our own. I move amendment S3M-5512.1, to insert at end:

“, and, in particular, recognises 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 seven and also to ensure that the qualifications structure better reflects the specific needs of all pupils, whether they wish to pursue courses that are more academically focused or more vocationally focused.”

09:53

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): In speaking to the amendment in the name of my colleague Margaret Smith, I add my thanks to the members of the literacy commission for their work in producing the report, which highlights the enormous problem of illiteracy in Scotland. We want the Government to continue to take action as quickly as possible to address the issues that are highlighted in the report, so it was encouraging to hear the cabinet secretary's comments in that regard.

We understand that literacy levels cannot be changed overnight—that is why we are pleased to support the Labour motion—and it is clear that tackling illiteracy will not be easy. As has been mentioned, even measuring literacy levels can be problematic because there are various ways of doing that and there is no single definition of basic literacy. However, the fact that the issue is complicated must not be used as an excuse for a lack of action.

The Liberal Democrats believe that Scotland must have an education system that ensures that all children reach their potential regardless of their background. We want a system of education that shares our vision of fairness, equality and social mobility. It is worrying that the current system seems to be failing around 13,000 pupils or 18.5 per cent of children a year. In addition, it is extremely worrying, if not surprising, that, as the commission highlights, the number of youngsters who face illiteracy is much higher in areas of social deprivation. We need to address that situation in a serious, constructive and joined-up way.

The literacy commission report concluded that socioeconomic disadvantage is the most important cause of correctable poor literacy. It seems that no school in a deprived area can record a similar level of success to that achieved by almost all schools in the most affluent areas—although we need to be a bit cautious about taking a blanket approach, as to do so creates the possibility that young people who live in an affluent area and who are subject to some of the same social pressures, if not the same economic pressures, that are faced by young people who live in more deprived areas might be missed out.

The report also states that a child's social circumstances outweigh other factors, including the quality of teaching. I question that slightly, given that many of us would agree that an inspirational teacher can play a huge role in turning round the life of a disadvantaged child and mitigating some of the challenges that they might face. However, there are some basic effects that material disadvantage can have on educational opportunities. Overcrowding in houses can mean that there is little or no space for private study. In addition, as Rhona Brankin suggested in her question to the cabinet secretary, the literacy of adults in such families is often equally poor. Even though we might develop methods of giving children literacy skills through the education system, it might not be possible to continue that work in a household in which the parents have difficulty with those issues. Addressing that situation becomes an onerous burden on the education service. We need to find a methodology for doing so, which is quite a challenge.

Another factor to bear in mind, which ties in nicely both with what the report says and with Mr McNulty's comments, is that in socioeconomically deprived families, particularly those with young teenagers, the youngsters often go out to work to supplement the family income, which means that the opportunities for additional education are extremely limited.

At a United Kingdom level, the National Literacy Trust has highlighted the importance of the home learning environment. The upshot of deprivation

and socioeconomic disadvantage is that too many young people with excellent minds who have not been equipped with literacy skills cannot translate that intellectual ability into positive outcomes.

The NLT looked at five key areas of an individual's life: their economic situation, their aspirations, their family life, their health and their civic and cultural participation. In each of those areas of activity, there was a clear relationship between those who had poor literacy skills and those who achieved lower outcomes. Rather than suggest a causal relationship, the data that were collected indicate that low literacy forms part of a cycle of deprivation, which leaves too many people in Scotland—both adults and children—unhappy and unhealthy.

Therefore, we support the key vision of the report, which, as Des McNulty said, involves the adoption of a zero tolerance approach to illiteracy. We recognise the importance of challenging illiteracy, but, although that is at least partly an educational issue, it cannot be addressed only in our classrooms. Although formal education is the predominant means of delivery of literacy, it is clear from the NLT's study, "Literacy changes lives: An advocacy resource", that there are factors beyond that. The role that trade unions play in learning and the provision of services for youngsters with additional support needs such as hearing loss or a visual impairment must be tied into supporting the literacy agenda.

I am concerned that a simple focus on low achievement among schoolchildren for whom there is no apparent barrier to learning and obtaining adequate literacy skills is too narrow an ambition. I agree that that is a good place to start, but it is clear that a huge amount more needs to be done if Scotland is to be a fully literate nation. I hope that we can advance that ambition in what has thus far been a substantially consensual debate.

Given the economic world in which we live, a critical point is that it is not just at an individual level that poor literacy has a negative impact. According to some estimates, poor literacy costs the UK economy between £198 million and £2.5 billion every year. I have not done the Barnett calculation to work out the figure for Scotland—mathematics was never my strong suit.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Don't worry—there is a numeracy debate next week.

Hugh O'Donnell: Thank you for that.

We agree with the report's recommendation that there should be a sustained policy commitment at all levels of government to providing our young people with the best possible start in life. There are concerns that some local authorities are

beginning to look at ways of saving money that involve the removal of classroom assistants, who play a vital role. A school in East Dunbartonshire is cutting the number of classroom assistants by about 50 per cent, which cannot be helpful. The Government needs to look extremely closely at attacks or cutbacks on such front-line services that are made as part of an economic package, because they will have a negative impact on the objectives of the literacy commission and our own general objectives on literacy.

Literacy is a social justice tool, because it widens everyone's access to things that many of us take for granted. It also widens young people's ability to address the challenges that they face in other areas of academic activity. For example—to return to numeracy—it is not possible for someone to deal with a mathematics question if they do not have the capacity to analyse and understand the question that is being asked. Literacy goes much wider than just being able to read.

We will support the Labour motion and the Government's amendment. I look forward to listening to the rest of what has thus far been an extremely positive debate.

I move amendment S3M-5512.3, to insert at end:

"and make sure that these efforts produce benefits for children from low-income families wherever they live in Scotland."

10:02

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): My belief in the importance of literacy was developed during the many years that I spent as a teacher working with youngsters who were failing to acquire basic literacy skills and my subsequent time lecturing in what was described as special educational needs.

Over a number of years, I saw a significant number of youngsters come into S1 who were not functionally literate and who then had difficulties accessing the curriculum—in the high school in which I taught, the figure was more than 20 per cent of those who were assessed. Those pupils were regarded almost as having learning difficulties, when in fact, for a variety of reasons, they had failed to master functional literacy skills in primary school, where a systematic approach to tackling those difficulties had not been adopted. Many of those youngsters went through the education system failing, fundamentally because they had failed to acquire basic literacy skills.

As someone who saw that at first hand over a number of years and who talked to and worked with the students concerned and their parents, I know the transformational effect that support to acquire basic literacy skills can have, and that is what drives me and the Labour Party. We have a

passion for education and its transformational power, and we believe that every pupil in Scotland has a right to access high-quality education and that every child in Scotland has an absolute right to acquire basic literacy skills or functional literacy.

We know that, despite having one of the highest percentages of youngsters going on to higher education, we also have thousands of pupils leaving school who are not functionally literate. We have 13,000 pupils leaving primary school without functional literacy and a million adults in Scotland who are not functionally literate. That is simply unacceptable, both in terms of the economy and in basic human terms. We know that there are major barriers to Scotland's economic success. From speaking to people in education, teachers, people in business and academics, we know that there is widespread concern about literacy. We have only to talk to parents to know that that concern exists and that there is a recognition of the fact that pupils are being held back.

It is said that, when a job needs to be done well, one should ask busy people to do it. I echo the thanks that have been given to the literacy commission. The members of the commission had one thing in common—a belief in and passion for education and a deep commitment to doing something about it. I apologise for the fact that, when I asked them to do the job, I said that it would probably take six months—I recognise that it has taken something more than that. However, it is a very important and academically robust report, which has come up with a route map for the vision to make Scotland the first country in the world to achieve full literacy.

I give special thanks to Judith Gillespie, the redoubtable chair of the commission, who had the unenviable job of holding together a group of people who are all extremely successful and vocal and who have their own strong views and passions. I recognise that that was not always easy, and I thank every member of the commission.

The report is academically robust and sets out the vision for a fully literate Scotland. Scotland could and should become the first country in the world to banish illiteracy—we must all share that vision. That is not the massive problem that we might imagine; it has been done before.

Members have referred to the work in West Dunbartonshire that was led by Professor Tommy MacKay, who was part of the literacy commission. Over a 10-year project, the pupils in West Dunbartonshire developed functional literacy and, indeed, went on to have higher-order literacy skills as they got older.

The key features of the West Dunbartonshire project were a policy commitment at all levels to

the development of literacy, leadership at all levels, and acceptance and support right across the education system that was shared by parents as well. Importantly, there was also a systematic approach to assessment that identified pupils who were failing to learn to read, which included the screening of pupils at a pre-school stage.

That is what was fundamentally missing from the five-to-14 assessment, and the danger is that it will still be missing from the curriculum for excellence. Yes, there will be formal literacy assessment in secondary schools—we welcome that; Labour called for it in the past—but there will be no progress until the Government accepts that functional literacy must be a benchmark, which is what was accepted in West Dunbartonshire, and it sets that as the level that it is going to get youngsters up to. We will continue to describe pupils' progress as we did in the five-to-14 assessment but, until we recognise the importance of the concept of functional literacy, we will merely continue as we did in the five-to-14 assessment. Sadly, I do not see any change in attitude by the people who are doing the work on the curriculum for excellence.

Michael Russell: I hope that, without saying whether there has been a change in attitude, the member will welcome the fact that, in ensuring that the literacy commission meets the management board, which means that the literacy commission's recommendations are taken into the system, even if there is no willingness now—although I believe that there is some willingness—we are ensuring that the potential exists for that to change.

Rhona Brankin: I very much welcome what the minister has said about the steps that are being taken. Nevertheless, the fundamental issue remains that, until there is an understanding that we must set a benchmark that all pupils will be able to read by the end of primary school and that we must measure their achievement against that benchmark, we will not make progress.

That is fundamentally different from what the Conservatives and Liz Smith are saying. They want formal testing—effectively, a return to the qually, which will serve merely to label pupils. We want something very different from that. We want a systematic programme of assessment that identifies pupils' problems and then forms the basis for the development of a programme.

Elizabeth Smith: Will the member clarify exactly what the Labour position is on the issue? I am calling for nationally agreed criteria for testing, which is exactly what Clackmannanshire did. Does the Labour Party support or reject that?

Rhona Brankin: The Labour Party believes in a systematic programme of diagnostic assessment that informs the learning, that tells us the level that

the pupil is at and that sets out the steps that need to be taken to reduce the barriers to learning for that pupil. That is fundamentally different from the formal testing that the Conservatives are talking about. It is different from what was done in the five-to-14 assessment. Unlike the Tories, we do not want a return to the 1950s; we believe that we need a systematic approach to assessment in primary school that allows us to make the judgment and to demonstrate that youngsters have acquired functional literacy by the time that they leave primary school.

It is not enough for the Government to say that it is meeting the literacy commission, although I welcome that and the steps that are being taken. What we are calling for is not difficult or expensive, although it requires leadership and vision. It is Labour's number 1 priority and it simply must become the number 1 priority of the Government.

10:11

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):

The best way in which to cultivate literacy is to encourage reading and a love of books. For example, in both primary and secondary sectors, time must be dedicated each day to private reading, ranging from 10 to 60 minutes depending on the pupil's age. Alongside that, we must promote a culture of reading and each child should always have the book that they are reading in their school bag or close by them. Built into the curriculum should be opportunities for people to talk about reading. The five-to-14 assessment's emphasis on talk encouraged that, as does the talk element of standard grade English and the group discussion element in intermediate English.

The key is to normalise reading, as it will not be the custom in every home. Children who do not read at home have a much poorer chance of engaging with the curriculum and achieving successful outcomes. That could be done alongside reading initiatives such as DEAR—drop everything and read. A bell could ring in the school once a day or once a week and everyone—from the janitor to the head, wherever they were and whatever subject they were studying—would have to take out a book and read until the bell rang again. That reading spell could last as long as the school saw fit. It is also important that children see adults reading for pleasure.

Reading assessments are important. Regardless of the level they are at, children must be assessed according to nationally standardised criteria, with feeder primary schools sharing assessed work with secondary schools and vice versa. That used to be the norm, but it is not done nearly enough these days. It is important that primaries and secondaries understand assessment criteria in the same way. If we do not

all assess in the same way, with the same application of national criteria, the transition to secondary can be difficult and there may appear to be slippage when there is none. Indeed, that is why there are many difficulties with the transition between primary 7 and the first year of secondary school in a number of cases.

Once a child's stage of development is understood, teachers can set individually agreed long-term and short-term targets for that child with the parents involved as much as possible. A role should be found for parents in overseeing progress towards those targets. When that is not possible, teaching staff could be assigned a tutor group of pupils. A child's progress towards achieving his or her targets should be monitored, and they must be realistic for the child; otherwise, they will not be achieved despite the child's best efforts, and the child could even be discouraged. Literacy evenings in schools encourage parents and pupils to discuss how they can ensure that a culture of reading is developed at home, and local writers could be invited to such events.

The school library must be used across the curriculum in secondary schools, not just in the English department, although that is where it clearly plays a key role. There is no subject in which a library does not have an important role to play, and every school should have a qualified librarian. Primary schools in a cluster could share one between them if they were not large enough to justify their own librarian. Of course, the number of school librarians was reduced under Labour and the Lib Dems. I believe that local government should be encouraged to restore school librarians where they have been removed.

Encouraging children and their parents to join their local library is also important. Reading could be set as a piece of homework to be completed with a parent, even when parents do not value education—a situation that itself must be addressed. As other members have said, there is an issue about generation after generation being in the situation of functional illiteracy.

Reading is important for instilling civic responsibility, too. For example, there could be a readathon, and children could be sponsored to raise money for a charity by having, say, five class hours over a week to read at home. They could be sponsored by the hour, by the book or at a flat rate, and the whole class could gather a sum for an agreed charity. Illiteracy can be solved with imagination.

The findings of the literacy commission must act as a stark reminder of the problems that we face. Only yesterday, at the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, we were advised by a witness that, astonishingly, trainee journalists at Cardonald College in Glasgow often have to be

given remedial classes in basic spelling, punctuation and grammar. That is unbelievable.

Shocking figures in the commission's report reveal that 18.5 per cent of Scots children leave primary education functionally illiterate and that 1 million Scots have literacy problems. The Scottish Government recognises the report's recommendations, such as the creation of literacy plans by local authorities, and is already working actively to promote literacy and numeracy.

We whole-heartedly agree with the call for a sustained commitment to tackling illiteracy at all levels. The curriculum for excellence has three action points in relation to that. First, as a fundamental principle, the focus on literacy and numeracy should be increased and embedded throughout all learning and teaching. Secondly, all teachers—rather than just English and mathematics teachers—will be responsible for improving literacy and numeracy. Despite what Liz Smith said, I do not believe that that was previously a fundamental principle in all subject areas. The Scottish Government is introducing a national literacy qualification, which all children in secondary 3 will take.

The proposals have been heralded by many education experts, including Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, which stated that the

"Curriculum for Excellence proposes to address literacy and numeracy directly, emphasising the need to develop these fundamental skills across the curriculum and to provide formal recognition of progress up to the end of every young person's school career."

The Scottish Government contributes £500,000 a year to the positive behaviour team, a nurture group working alongside local authorities and schools to provide training and support to improve educational approaches and attitudes towards learning. The Scottish survey of achievement will, biennially, measure performance on literacy using a representative sample of pupils from primaries 3, 5 and 7 and secondary 2. At present, the survey is conducted only every four years, but the information will be used for action on illiteracy.

Illiteracy is not confined to the classroom. As other members have pointed out, many adults have difficulties. Last September, the Scottish Government published "Progress in Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland", which sets out goals and directions to improve adult literacy. Central to that is the Scottish Government's learning connections adult literacy team, which provides support and funding in a variety of forms. For example, learning connections funds the big plus campaign to encourage improvements in people's reading, writing and numeracy by their taking up some of the free help available throughout the country.

The community learning and development initiative also plays a pivotal role in combating adult illiteracy. The partnerships in each local authority, comprising representatives from councils, colleges, third sector organisations, Jobcentre Plus and trade unions, help to deliver adult literacy and numeracy. The Scottish Government is investing a further £4 million in the initiative over the next two years to improve skills and boost the community learning and development workforce.

I welcome the work and commitment of the Scottish Government, and parliamentarians from across the political spectrum, in attempting to eradicate the problem of illiteracy in Scotland.

10:18

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab):

The findings of the literacy commission established by Labour may not come as a surprise but the levels of illiteracy highlighted should be shocking to anyone living in 21st century Scotland. We know that the UK can no longer compete in low-wage manufacturing or service industries. The only way in which Scotland can compete in today's economy is to ensure that our workforce is one of the best educated and best trained in the world. It goes without saying that literacy is a prerequisite for that goal. To fail in that effort is to perpetuate inequality and poverty. That is why Labour believes that tackling illiteracy needs to be the number 1 education priority for the Government.

The commission's report highlights the need to target our efforts on those children and young people who are most in need. It also emphasises the need for early intervention. I will focus on those two key features of the commission's report. I will also say a few brief words about the important role played by the trade unions in improving adult literacy.

However, I begin by highlighting the excellent work that North Lanarkshire Council is carrying out in its primary schools. The nurture clubs that I have visited are making a real and measurable difference to the children and parents who attend them. That success was highlighted a few weeks ago in an article in *The Times Educational Supplement*, which highlighted the outstanding work that is being undertaken in St Brigid's primary in Newmains, which is in my constituency. The school is in an area with relatively high levels of deprivation, and as such faces particular challenges. It has piloted the active literacy programme for pupils with additional support needs and was recently praised by HMIE for its literacy work. That work has resulted in significant improvements in national test results. Reading levels improved from 89 per cent in 2006 to 93.4 per cent in 2008, writing levels improved from 66

per cent in 2006 to 85.8 per cent in 2008 and mathematics results improved from 72 per cent in 2007 to 91.5 per cent in 2008. Those results are dramatic and impressive. The improvements are down to not only the hard work of the children but the leadership shown by Karen Somerville, the headteacher, and all of the staff members involved. I hope that members join me in congratulating them on their efforts.

Moving on to early years and early intervention, North Lanarkshire Council is, again, leading the way in Scotland. The council has developed a document, "Effective Early Development and Learning: the critical period from birth to three years", to offer support and guidance to all who care for and work with children under the age of three. It has invested significantly to create stimulating learning environments and has 17 learning centres for children under three in its nursery centres. Children who attend those centres are usually referred by health workers or social services. Individual profiles are maintained for each child and are carried through until the transition between nursery and primary. Those profiles assist in the effective planning of teaching approaches and content for the individual child.

North Lanarkshire also provides services to the under-threes that are open to all. Those include bookstart rhymetime sessions, which are offered in local libraries to parents with young children and seek to encourage parents to read to their children from an early age and to introduce children to books from the start of life. Those sessions are extremely popular, and the children who attend through referral by health or social work are given free books. That is another example of resources being targeted at those who are most in need.

The commission's report highlights the importance of continuous professional development, which it sets out as a key recommendation. Staff and volunteer training must be consistent between agencies, and indeed between private and voluntary sector partners, to ensure that everyone is working towards common goals. Those who are involved in teaching at nursery or primary level must have sufficient breadth of skills to ensure that they can respond appropriately to the individual needs of the child at any stage in their development.

It is important to note that no single method should be used to improve literacy: an approach that uses a range of initiatives will deliver the most improvement. That is why it is important that we consider teaching using synthetic phonics, which is used in North Lanarkshire and is also widely used in Clackmannanshire and other local authorities. Writing, dictation and tactile work using magnetic boards, Plasticine and other media all

have a role to play in improving literacy in our schools.

Sadly, illiteracy is an historical problem, and too many adults still go through their lives impeded by their literacy and numeracy levels. The trade union movement has a proud tradition of supporting people in that position and it is an important part of the education continuum in Scotland. I recently had the privilege of opening the trade union learning centre at Waverley station, which is an excellent example of what an employer—in this case First ScotRail—working in partnership with trade unions can do to enhance the skills and knowledge of staff. It is a win-win situation, because staff and employers benefit from a relatively modest investment of time and resources.

However, as the Scottish Trades Union Congress briefing points out, there is a need for a workplace literacy strategy with a central funding stream that can be accessed throughout the country. My colleagues in the trade union movement are concerned that, at present, access to workplace learning varies greatly across Scotland and is largely dependent on the approach adopted by the local authority's adult literacy partnership. I encourage the cabinet secretary to listen and respond to their concerns.

I welcome the literacy commission's report, which sets out clear ambitions and targets for all of us and challenges us to aim high and make illiteracy a thing of the past. I hope that we can all support that aspiration.

10:25

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP):

I welcome the report of Labour's literacy commission. Indeed, I am delighted to find my Labour Party colleagues so intent on making such a positive contribution to the education debate. I hope that they will be similarly constructive in all our other public policy debates.

I was extremely interested to see the quality of the members that Labour managed to get together for this exercise. For example, the commission included Iain McMillan of the Confederation of British Industry, who was serving on another commission at the time; Lindsay Roy, who was fresh from his by-election victory and who put his considerable knowledge of education to good use; and Ian Rankin, who stepped out from behind the pages of his books to see what could be done to encourage more people to read—of course, there might have been a little self-interest in that, but it was in the service of our coming generations. The membership also included various local authority staff from Glasgow, Midlothian and East Renfrewshire; John Loughton of "Big Brother"

fame; Keir Bloomer, who worked on the curriculum for excellence; Geraldine Gammell of the Prince's Trust; Gordon Matheson of Glasgow City Council; and Graeme Waddell, who provided some real business experience. There was also input on the psychology front from Tommy MacKay, the architect of the West Dunbartonshire literacy initiative and the East Renfrewshire self-declaration study and a past president of the British Psychological Society, and Dr Gavin Reid, who I believe is an expert in the learning challenges caused by dyslexia. The commission itself was chaired by Judith Gillespie.

I pay tribute to the commission for producing a concise report of 24 pages from tip to tail. If more of the documents that we got were as brief, we might save a forest or two. That said, although I welcome the report and the contribution that it will make to the debate, I have a couple of queries that I hope the sponsoring Labour members will be able to clear up, and one small point of disagreement.

Reluctantly, I must take issue with the comment in the introduction that Scotland has "tolerated the intolerable" and accepted the fact that some youngsters leave school "functionally illiterate". I simply do not believe that. A quick search on the Scottish Government website reveals that concerns about literacy rates were raised and action taken as far back as 1999. The actions that Scottish Government ministers have taken since 2007 to improve literacy mirror the efforts made by previous Administrations and their education ministers. Indeed, the literacy commission refers to one of the fruits of the efforts of the first Scottish Executive: the 2001 publication "Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland", which laid the foundations for the subsequent work that has effectively tackled literacy rates in Scotland.

Rhona Brankin: Perhaps I can attempt to answer the member's point. My understanding is that the commission's report does not say that the problem was not recognised in the past; instead, it specifically points out that there have been many attempts to remedy the situation. In fact, millions and millions of pounds have been spent on literacy projects. The key point is that we have not made the difference that we ought to have made, which is why it was felt important to take a fresh look at the issue and to make it clear that it should be everyone's number 1 priority and that a systematic planned approach should be taken throughout Scotland to tackle the problem.

Christina McKelvie: I agree that our nation's education should be an on-going project on which we should all focus. However, I might be able to respond to Rhona Brankin's comments as I develop my point.

It is only fair to recognise the efforts of past education ministers and to pay tribute to their commitment to literacy. I should apologise to the Conservatives for not looking back far enough to see what they did when they were in government, but I am confident that those in the blue corner will be relatively supportive of the collective effort to raise standards.

The commission can be easily forgiven for using a bit of hype to give its points some bite—something, of course, that no politician would ever do, honest. I hope, though, that Des McNulty or one of his colleagues might, in the winding-up speeches, clear up a couple of points of information for me. The commission defines literacy as the ability to function in an adult society, which

“equates to a midpoint between levels C and D in the 5-14 programme”.

Given that, according to the 2005 attainment figures, only 9 per cent of primary 7 pupils failed to reach level C in reading or writing and only 16 per cent failed to reach level D by the second year of secondary school, I was left wondering where the commission got the figure of 18.5 per cent for the percentage of pupils leaving primary school who were functionally illiterate. Unfortunately, the report provides no reference for the figure, so I was unable to check it for myself. The fact is that three quarters of Scotland's pupils reach level D by the end of primary school—in other words, above the level of literacy that the commission wants for adults. While, of course, keeping a weather eye on those who need a bit more help, we should celebrate and applaud such success and congratulate pupils as well as their teachers and parents for hitting that standard. They will only continue to improve throughout their school career.

I would also be grateful if Labour members could clarify the report's claim that 1 million Scots adults are illiterate. Again, there is no reference for the figure. However, according to the 2001 publication mentioned in the report, the figure at that time was 800,000. Also, the Scottish Government labour market statistics show that the percentage of adults with literacy issues has fallen from 23 per cent in 2001 to 14.8 per cent now, due in large degree to the efforts of the previous Administration. However, 14.8 per cent of Scotland's adult population is about 607,000, which is some way short of the million highlighted in the report. As I say, I would be grateful for some clarification to help to inform the debate.

Like Karen Whitefield, I pay tribute to the STUC and the Scottish Union Learning centres for their valuable contribution to developing an educated workforce in order to benefit our nation. Given that, as the Scottish Union Learning briefing tells

us, people with literacy challenges are less likely to vote, it is important and indeed in the interests of everyone in the chamber to ensure that our nation not only is literate but has the support to develop its literacy skills.

I welcome the report's contribution to the debate, look forward to continuing our efforts to improve literacy in Scotland, and congratulate pupils, teachers, parents, the commission and everyone else on their efforts in this area.

10:31

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): Like others, I welcome the commission's work and its valuable contribution to the development and enhancement of literacy in Scotland and I pay tribute to my Labour Party colleagues who commissioned the report.

I know that everyone in the chamber appreciates the significance of literacy—or, perhaps more accurately, the significance of illiteracy. A National Literacy Trust paper by George Dugdale and Christina Clark that eloquently sets out some of the issues refers to a 2002 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which indicated that

“Reading for pleasure has been revealed as the most important indicator of the future success of a child ... and improvements in literacy, at any point in life, can have a profound effect on an individual.”

I am sure that we all agree with that analysis.

In their report, George Dugdale and Christina Clark outline the profile of a literate community. In such a community, individuals are far more likely to participate in its work, are more likely to trust its people and are more likely to perceive it to be safer. Such positive aspects can serve only to enhance the quality of life in any community.

The report also sets out the profile of a literate nation. Such a nation is more likely to vote, the significance of which cannot be overstated; is less likely to smoke and drink—and we are aware of the profound significance of such factors; has better mental health; and has a better skilled and more flexible workforce. Some of those issues highlight why tackling the problem of illiteracy should be the number 1 educational priority of this and indeed any Administration. The fact is that every child who leaves primary school should be able to read, write and count.

However, any literacy policy needs to address three key factors: gender; parental input, which Karen Whitefield mentioned and to which I will return; and socioeconomic factors. On gender, we should not dismiss lightly the differences between boys and girls as far as literacy is concerned. We know that boys at any age are less likely to read.

However, although we need to find ways of engaging them more, we should also recognise that boys' books are pitched at a lower level than are books for girls of the same age. With that in mind, I encourage the cabinet secretary to engage with Learning and Teaching Scotland to review the advice that is given on practice so that it reflects available expert opinion.

There is another issue around literacy that we need to encourage, and on which I hope that the Government will also engage with Learning and Teaching Scotland. We need to encourage better and more significant links with the United Kingdom and the rest of the world, so that we articulate our success with some of the initiatives that have been outlined this morning, and so that we learn from best practice elsewhere in the world. We could do some more work on that.

Karen Whitefield mentioned some of the parental input initiatives. Over the years, the contribution made by some of the good start projects—I am not saying that every sure start project has been a success—has clearly shown the benefits of more parents getting involved with children at a young age. That has a lasting impact on the child, and indeed continues when that child becomes a parent. As a teacher working in a deprived area, over the years I saw generations of families that were failing because the parents were unable to articulate to their children, and when those children became parents they were unable to help their own children to develop. We were cementing in disadvantage in certain parts of the country, which was tragic for those families, the community and the country.

We need to consider socioeconomic issues. The Dugdale and Clark research looks specifically at impacts on the individual. The profile of a person with poor literacy shows that they are more likely to live in a non-working household; they are less likely to have children, and if they do their children are less likely to be successful; they are more likely to live in overcrowded housing; and they are less likely to vote. If we tackle the problem of illiteracy, such families and individuals are less likely to rely on state benefits and more likely to become home owners. They are more likely to be able to engage productively in the workforce and to be able to use the new technology that is increasingly available in every workplace. We know about the negative results of socioeconomic disadvantage and the positive ways in which literacy can address them. We ignore that at our peril.

Socioeconomic issues demand different types of teaching in different areas. Language development will be different in different communities. We cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to the problem. Teaching children who

traditionally have a small vocabulary needs teacher-intensive phonics and vocabulary building, whereas children who come from more affluent households can go with more child-directed work and develop as a result. I say to the cabinet secretary that we should encourage and allow local authorities to allow individual schools to take the approach that is best suited to the children they teach. We can all sign up to that crusade.

I understand Christina McKelvie's point that we should not be negative about what has been allowed to develop in this country, but the truth is that, despite the best efforts of this and previous Administrations, there is clearly a deep-rooted problem in Scotland. If we do not tackle that problem and double, redouble, and quadruple our efforts, in 20, 30 and 40 years we will be having the same debate and failing the same families from the same areas.

10:39

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP):

Sometimes we politicians like to use words or language in a way that softens the difficulties we face; we talk of concerns instead of complaints, and of challenges instead of problems. However, as the Scottish Parliament was founded, the talk was of finding Scottish solutions to Scottish problems, and there can be no doubt that illiteracy is a problem in Scotland. The extent of the problem and the challenges that we face as a result are made clear in the literacy commission's report, and I am happy to join members in welcoming the publication of the report and the initiative that led to it.

As members on my side of the chamber will know only too well, opposition is about more than simply saying no and disagreeing with everything proposed by the Government of the day. Constructive policy development and seeking to find consensus in the best interests of the people who have sent us here are part and parcel of the role, and the fact that we can unite today to support the work of the literacy commission is an example of that.

The report deals with issues surrounding the definition and measurement of literacy, especially identifying the functional or basic levels of literacy that will enable an individual to function in an adult society. It is worth noting that it is not only the Scottish Government that uses a range of indicators rather than one strict definition to measure illiteracy; that is true internationally and in countries where different cultural and linguistic traditions have an impact. We should also recognise that the Scottish survey on attainment will now measure literacy performance every two years, which will allow a much clearer picture to be

built up of the state of literacy in schools in coming years.

It is clear, however, from the report and the wide range of source material upon which it draws that Scotland can and must do better in raising literacy rates. We owe it to the individuals who struggle with poor literacy to give them the best opportunities in life, and to Scotland as a whole, which stands to benefit from an active, confident and literate society that contributes to our economy and culture.

We must therefore examine how best to tackle illiteracy and cultural disadvantage at all levels of society, including in the family unit. The concept of a zero-tolerance approach, which is suggested in the report, demonstrates the kind of focus and effort that will be required to achieve the goal of eradicating avoidable or unnecessary illiteracy.

In its programme for government and key strategies, the Scottish Government does not shy away from the challenge of tackling low literacy rates. Indeed, reducing the number of working-age people who have severe literacy and numeracy problems is a key national indicator. That is also recognised in the curriculum for excellence, which seeks to embed the fundamental principles of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum and in all aspects of learning. That means that all teachers are responsible for literacy, because, as the report recognises, literacy is acquired not just in English classes but in interaction with others and through applying cognition and communication skills in a range of situations and environments.

The Scottish Government has also recognised that with the big plus adult literacy programme. Last year, footballers from every team in the Scottish Premier League—although before my team, St Johnstone, secured its place in the SPL—selected their favourite adult and children's books, which were made available in libraries and learning centres to inspire a love of reading among adults and children, especially those who might not naturally pick up a book for leisure or enjoyment.

Familiarity with books and literature can only help to build a more literate and fluent society. The cabinet secretary will know that I am very supportive of an Edinburgh Napier University project that gives third year publishing students the opportunity to manage the process of publishing by printing new editions of Scottish classics that are out of copyright. The books are then given free to secondary schools, so that great Scottish literature is made more available to pupils. It is a wonderfully simple scheme, and it can only help to promote reading and familiarity with Scottish literature among the younger

generations. It will go some way to filling the libraries that Kenneth Gibson spoke about.

This year's publication is James Hogg's "The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner", which the cabinet secretary described last week as

"one of the ... great unfiled books in Scotland",

although I recently heard that a screenplay has almost been completed. As he said:

"If it is read by a much wider audience in Scotland, there will be a much better understanding of our dual nature in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2010; c 22564.]

Next year's publication, complete with a foreword from the First Minister and Christopher Harvie, is "The Thirty-Nine Steps", and I am sure that it will go on to inspire a new set of youngsters to pick up a good book.

While at university, I did a bit of studying on both ballads, which provided a huge insight into just how important a good story and song have been to Scotland over the centuries. It is no wonder that this small but multiform and infinite country has produced far more than its fair share of literary greats, but with that talent comes responsibility. The literacy commission's report has focused the mind on Scotland's poor literacy rates, and it is the responsibility of us all to ensure that we give every young person the tools to appreciate our history, culture and literature, and to spread their wings to appreciate those same things in other countries around the world.

Later this month, people throughout the world will celebrate the life and work of Robert Burns, one of the greatest literary talents ever to emerge from Scotland or anywhere else. The literacy commission considered in detail the impact of socioeconomic circumstances on literacy and educational attainment, so it is perhaps worth bearing in mind the humble background from which Burns came and the relatively youthful age at which he produced his works. Burns received little formal education but was taught by his father, who was self-educated. That speaks of a belief in the power of education and learning to improve one's sense of fulfilment and wellbeing.

Today, 251 years after the death of Robert Burns, and in the spirit of our bard, who despised unfairness and sought equality, it is our turn to tackle head-on the scourge of illiteracy, inequality and poverty that has plagued Scotland for far too long. I know that the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government have been doing all that they can to ensure that that happens and will continue to do so.

10:45

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): Like other members, I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss in more detail the findings of Labour's literacy commission. I add my thanks to the members of the commission, who did such a good job in a fairly short period, in contrast to some of the long-grass commissions that we have all seen in government. The commission produced an excellent report that shows the passion that its members have for education. I also put on record my thanks to Wendy Alexander and Rhona Brankin, who had the foresight to recognise that the issue was important and to set up the commission to ensure that we have the report that we are discussing.

All members agree that every child deserves the best possible start in life and that early education is absolutely vital to that. We also all seem to agree that, if every child is to achieve his or her full potential, tackling illiteracy must become the Government's number 1 education priority. That is not to be entirely critical of what has been done previously—members might expect me to say that, as former education minister—but we must acknowledge that, whatever was done previously, we still cannot be anywhere near satisfied. A figure was quoted about 75 per cent of pupils reaching a particular stage, but that means that 25 per cent do not reach that stage. We should not be satisfied with that level of progress.

As my colleague Hugh Henry said, in the 21st century it is surely not too much to have the aspiration that every child who leaves primary school should have the ability to read, write and count. The literacy commission report makes a timely contribution and gives us all food for thought. I suspect that most of us will not be particularly surprised by the report's point that areas of social deprivation will require additional resources to address the specific challenges that those communities face. Hugh Henry outlined those challenges in detail. I am pleased that the report recommends early intervention from birth to three years old and that it calls for children with educational, behavioural and social needs to be identified and specifically supported.

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when I was a parent of a child at primary school, I saw for myself how imaginative approaches in areas of social disadvantage can engage people in the wider community with literacy and the importance of reading in the home. As well as having early access to nursery places, parents were invited to our local school for a short series of classes to help us understand the approach to teaching children to read. Parents were taken through a process of trying to learn the basics of the Greek alphabet and the associated sounds to help them

understand what it is like for children trying to match symbols and sounds and build words. That stuck with me.

Many years later, when I became education minister, I was interested in the early developments in various local authorities of a return to the synthetic phonics approach. In 2005, the education department published the results of a seven-year study on the effects of synthetic phonics on children's progress in reading and spelling, which highlighted that children from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds notably improved their performance through that approach and method.

We have heard already about the success in Clackmannanshire. At the end of the seven-year study, children were approximately two and a half years ahead on reading ability. As Hugh Henry said, importantly, boys in particular benefit from that approach. We might well argue that it is more a common-sense approach than rocket science, but it requires adequate time and resources for the teachers, classroom assistants and parents to work with pupils and to pick up problems at an early stage. I was particularly interested in the cabinet secretary's comment, in response to an intervention from Johann Lamont, that he will consider how the single outcome agreements could better reflect the need to have literacy, and ensuring the resources for it, as a top priority for local authorities.

I am sorry that the Minister for Children and Early Years has not been able to remain in the chamber, although I am sure that he has other important business. Perhaps his colleagues will pass on to him a message about the importance of support for literacy among young people who are looked after. The literacy commission report highlights the responsibility that local authorities, as corporate parents, have for the young people who are brought up in their care. It is simply not good enough to continue with a situation in which young people who are brought up in the care system do not receive the same support that is afforded to children who live at home. I hope that that will be picked up on in the single outcome agreements.

Despite our best efforts, the reality is that too many pupils still leave school without the literacy and numeracy skills that are needed for life generally, as well as for the world of work. Kenny Gibson was concerned about the number of trainee journalists who require what he described as remedial education at Cardonald College. I am sure that Kenny Gibson will be well aware of this, but if he talks to lecturers in further education colleges that are closer to his constituency, such as James Watt College, he will hear that they have to provide basic literacy and numeracy support for

young people who want access to social care or policing courses and those who ultimately want to go on and be involved in primary education. I say that not to be critical of the schools or teachers who have worked hard during the process, but simply to highlight the importance of getting it right at an early stage. We also know that many employers have to introduce courses and support for their employees.

We have heard about the importance of the role that trade unions have played through learning in the workplace. That route is often much more easily accessible for people who have difficulty with literacy and numeracy, as they feel more confident approaching their local learning representative rather than having to admit to someone in the management system that they have difficulties. I hope that that will continue.

I am glad that the cabinet secretary has indicated broad support for the commission's recommendations and is prepared to make progress on them. I hope that he will pay particular heed to the part of the Labour motion that calls for pilot schemes for children in the birth to three-year-old age group in the areas of most social disadvantage and that, at an early stage, he will produce an action plan to implement that and the other recommendations in the report.

10:53

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Teachers have, unfortunately, not been mentioned much in the debate, so I put on record my thanks to the many teachers who work very hard, sometimes in difficult circumstances, to deal with not only education issues but social ones. That must be acknowledged. As Hugh Henry said, if we do not recognise the issues for people who live in social deprivation, we will fail the families that the literacy commission and the Parliament were set up to help.

It is safe to say that, with regard to the acquisition of literacy, we are all reading from the same page and we all want progress, particularly in light of the evidence that we have heard from various quarters on Scotland's international literacy ranking. As many members have pointed out, according to an international study last year, Scotland has gone from 14th to 26th place and England has fallen from third to 19th place. However, in the spirit of clarity and consensus, let us not forget—it has been mentioned by many members, including Cathy Jamieson—that the decline happened over many years and under previous Administrations. I hope that we can give credit where it is due: to the Labour Party in opposition for setting up the literacy commission to address those concerns. Labour is to be commended for recognising the need to better

understand and tackle literacy problems in Scotland. In the same spirit, I hope that we can give credit to the actions of this SNP Government, which, since coming to power has introduced initiatives aimed at improving literacy through support for adult literacy developments and by putting literacy at the heart of the curriculum for excellence, as others mentioned.

Although the curriculum for excellence might have some detractors among members in the chamber, I hope that today's debate will refocus on the need to work positively and constructively to achieve what is best for the people we serve. I note that the report recommends early intervention, with which I agree. I am sorry that Des McNulty is not in the chamber, but perhaps someone will mention to him when he returns my surprise that in his opening speech he mentioned Glasgow City Council, but did not mention the fact that it removed nursery teachers from schools. That was a retrograde step. We must recognise that early intervention is important and that Glasgow City Council should not have removed those nursery teachers.

Hugh Henry: The member spoke about nursery teachers and Glasgow City Council. Does she share my disquiet about Renfrewshire Council's removing nursery teachers from schools?

Sandra White: I seem to remember that when Hugh Henry was the leader of Renfrewshire Council, that matter did not concern him. I will leave it at that and he can take from it what he wishes.

Although the report's recommendations are welcome, as others mentioned, I would like to have seen more input on the reasons for the issue. The report sets out a lot of detail about the situation and how to improve it but, if we are to move forward on tackling illiteracy, we must understand why literacy levels are falling in the first place. That is worthy of a full debate, but perhaps it will suffice to receive a commitment from the education secretary today to include in any future deliberations about literacy the reasons why there are problems.

It is undeniable that we have seen an unprecedented rise in the use of electronic media—I will go on to say why I think that literacy levels have declined, whether because of television, gaming or other areas—and I assert that such media have had a direct impact on children's time and volition for reading, as well as on adults' time for reading with them. That is important because, in our debate on how to address the issues, we must not confine ourselves to the remit of academic and professional attainment, which was mentioned before. In our drive to improve literacy, we must be careful that we do not unwittingly turn young people off

reading so that they see it as a merely academic activity—something to be tested and quantified. Reading has to be enjoyed and we must be mindful of the fine line between testing and encouraging enjoyment. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to leave school without the necessary skills to realise their potential. Studies have shown that many find themselves in that situation because they find it difficult to accept the testing and qualifications structures that make up a large part of the education system. I hope that that is taken on board by the minister and others.

It is important for youngsters to enjoy reading and to see it as a fun activity that stimulates their imagination and makes them want to read even more. It is possible to experience the joy of reading and the tingling sensation of suspense that a good book can bring. I am sure that we can all recall a time when it was hard to keep our eyes open and we knew that we should turn off the light, but felt compelled to read the next page or go on to the next chapter. I am sure that we have all enjoyed telling a story to a youngster who got totally absorbed and carried away. Indeed, as one of the members of the literacy commission, Ian Rankin, admitted, he spent much of his childhood reading comics and it was not until he was older that he started reading books. I am glad that he did so.

It might be difficult to encourage children to go from reading “Charlie and Lola” to “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”, but we must recapture that encouragement if we want to drive up and sustain literacy levels. As I said previously, to address the problem we must understand why those levels are falling. I am sure that today’s debate will go some way towards enabling us to do so.

10:59

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): Like others, I commend the members of the literacy commission. Their work has obviously been hard because the commission report refers to the lack of empirical data on the subject on which to accurately base measurement and comparison and it cites data from the range of sources that it used. It has not been an easy job to pull the report together.

Regardless of what people think of the detail in the commission’s report, it certainly shows that we should not be complacent, but, a bit like Christina McKelvie, I do not believe that we should put out a message of doom and failure either. As Cathy Jamieson and others mentioned, since 1999 this Parliament has recognised the importance of education incorporating functional literacy from nursery schooling right through to lifelong learning. Indeed, in 2006 when the OECD followed up its

2001 international adult literacy survey, the Scotland background paper noted the learning opportunities accessed by adults in Scotland, which prompted envious praise from practitioners in England.

We must have balance in our discussions and in our terminology. As Rhona Brankin pointed out, too often people understand the phrase “functional illiteracy” to mean that people cannot read or write a word or a sentence. The terminology gives a false impression of the subject under discussion. However, we have to recognise the disadvantages that deep-seated functional illiteracy brings to individuals of all ages. As was ably outlined by Hugh Henry, it brings great disadvantages to individuals, families, groups and communities. Hugh Henry referenced the Dugdale and Clark study, which looked in great detail at the effects of community illiteracy. That leads directly to the introductory paragraph to the commission’s recommendations and its call to recognise that socioeconomic issues are the main underlying cause of illiteracy and the need for programmes to address those problems.

Socioeconomic issues underpin so many problems in our society, right across the board: in the areas of justice, education, attainment and many others. Many programmes over many decades have purported to address those problems. I must be getting on a bit because I can think back to urban aid programmes, social inclusion partnerships and so on. As others have said, those programmes have not always been hugely successful. The Labour motion mentions pilot schemes and I make two pleas in that regard. The first is that although a pilot scheme cannot be long term, it should look at long-term solutions to address the problems, which are deep-seated, as Hugh Henry said earlier. We should not undertake pilot schemes, walk away from them and then come up with another initiative; something sustainable has to be done. Many have tried and failed in that regard.

The second plea is that we should not focus too much on attainment in primary schools alone. We have to look at the whole picture because, as the Dugdale and Clark study showed, family and community illiteracy is an issue. If functional literacy or absolute illiteracy is a problem in a family, the child will be severely disadvantaged, so let us look at families as a whole.

Des McNulty: I very much welcome what the member says. Illiteracy is not just a matter for the school to deal with; we have to involve the community planning partnership, the health visitor and other agencies, first in identifying who needs support and then in the design of the support package. Literacy should be one of the outcomes, but many other outcomes are associated with

such support. Does the member recognise that, currently, it costs about £60,000 to put in place a nurture class in a deprived area in Glasgow? That is money well spent and I hope that we can find resources to do more such work in those areas that really need it.

Linda Fabiani: I thank Mr McNulty for that clarification of some of his views. It goes back to what I said about programmes over the years. Nurture programmes by other names have run in areas of deprivation in various parts of Scotland but, sadly, they have run out of funding. They perhaps worked for a year, two years or three years, but then there was nothing. The Parliament has discussed that before.

I emphasise the absolute need for sustainable programmes. We cannot sort these deep-seated issues in two, three, four or five years; it will probably be two, if not three generations before we see the results that we require. We have to think long term. That is why I am glad that there is general cross-party consensus in today's debate. Too often, great things get started, but then opposition for the sake of opposition kicks in and they are stopped. It is extremely important to pledge to work on this issue in the long term.

A very important part of functional literacy is of course literacy per se, or absolute literacy—the ability to sit down with a book, which Aileen Campbell, Sandra White and others mentioned. I thought that the bookstart programme was a great initiative that could be incorporated in the nurture scenario.

Literacy is important to our nation's wellbeing. Reading in English, Scots or Gaelic—in languages of all sorts—is important to our wellbeing and it should always be encouraged. Books should be a huge part of any programme that is developed.

11:06

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the opportunity that the Labour Party has given us to debate the literacy commission's report. Today's motion from Labour, despite being a little self-serving, makes some fair points and, accordingly, the Scottish Conservatives will be pleased to support it.

Labour members should listen carefully at this point, because I will do something that I do not do often, which is praise the Labour Party for the good service that it has done in the formation of the literacy commission and the production of its report. I do not always agree with Judith Gillespie, as I am sure that she will know, but on this occasion I praise her and her colleagues for the sterling work that they have done in preparing the report that we are considering.

The report's headline statistic, which is staggering and deeply worrying—we have heard it repeated many times this morning—is that 18.5 per cent of pupils leaving primary school are not functionally literate. That desperate statistic should worry us all.

The importance of basic literacy cannot be overstressed. Speaking at the Scottish Conservatives education conference in September last year, Professor Lindsay Paterson of the University of Edinburgh said:

"Literacy and numeracy are not merely optional extras: they are fundamental to everything else. You cannot hope to understand science without them. Without these basic skills, you cannot read imaginative literature, or respond to great art or music, or understand where the country has come from or is going to, or hold our politicians to account intelligently."

I am sure that we all agree with those words.

The literacy commission's basic recommendation is that, as a nation, Scotland should make a formal commitment to zero tolerance of illiteracy. I hope that we can all support that. It is a scandal that any child can leave primary education after seven years in the classroom without a basic grasp of reading and writing. We know from our survey of parents' opinions that the great majority of them think that the top priority in our schools should be the teaching of those basic skills.

So, what is to be done? First, we believe that there should be a much greater focus in our primary schools on teaching basic literacy and numeracy. We often have education debates in which regular calls are made for a range of initiatives on what should be taught in schools, whether they are to do with children becoming more active; promoting healthy eating; financial education; greater access to music or art; anti-bullying initiatives; or greater access to Scottish history—and so the list goes on. Of course all those things are important, but we have to remember that the school day is strictly limited and it has not expanded at all in the past 30 or 40 years. The more time we spend teaching all those other things, the less time is available for the teacher in the classroom to concentrate on basic skills. We need to look again at our priorities. Teaching our children to read, write and add up in primary school has to be the top priority. That means that all of us who are involved in education have to exercise a bit of self-restraint when it comes to addressing all those other matters.

Secondly, we have to look at teaching methods. Only last week at education question time, I raised with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning the issue of teaching by synthetic phonics, which has been used in Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire and

which has delivered spectacular results. I do not believe that the Scottish Government should dictate to local authorities or individual schools specific teaching methods, but where there is a proven track record of success, the Government should ensure that all local authorities and schools are aware of the benefits of using synthetic phonics and that the materials are available.

Thirdly, we need to test our youngsters properly to ensure that they have acquired these basic skills. The Scottish Government has proposed testing on literacy and numeracy from secondary 3 onward. In our view, that is far too late in the day. Testing should take place no later than the end of primary 7, so that when a child goes up to secondary school, everyone, from the teacher to the child's parents, is aware of their grasp of these basic skills. Putting such rigorous tests in place would focus minds much more seriously at primary school level on the importance of the three Rs. We believe that that is an absolutely fundamental point.

Just over a year ago, on 7 January 2009, this Parliament unanimously backed an amendment in the name of my colleague Elizabeth Smith, which called for tests of literacy and numeracy by the end of primary 7. Perhaps I should repeat that for the benefit of Mr McNulty: the Parliament unanimously backed that amendment, which was identical—word for word—to the amendment that we have lodged today.

Rhona Brankin: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: Yes, in a second. I am concerned and somewhat disappointed by Labour's U-turn on that vital issue, for which we have had no explanation as yet from Mr McNulty. I will give way to Mrs Brankin, who I hope will explain why her successor as Labour education spokesman has torn up Labour's previous approach.

Rhona Brankin: There has been absolutely no change in the approach. Labour supported that Conservative amendment because it was not specific. After the debate, Mr Fraser's colleague Liz Smith said specifically that it was intended to refer to a final summative assessment of literacy and numeracy in primary 7, which Labour does not support. Labour supports a system of diagnostic assessment throughout primary school, not summative assessment in primary 7. Liz Smith went even further by saying that perhaps pupils should be kept behind in primary school if they failed that assessment. We do not support that.

Murdo Fraser: Rhona Brankin is dancing on the head of a pin trying to find differences between what we support and what the Labour Party supports. The fact is that the Labour Party needs

to make up its mind what it believes on these issues. It is suggesting today that it will reject wording that it supported unanimously just over a year ago. I really think that the Labour Party needs to sort itself out.

Of course, it was not just the Labour Party that supported our amendment this time last year. The Scottish National Party Government did so too. We had hoped that in the year that went by we would have seen the Government make progress on the issue of testing. Despite our getting a lot of warm words from Fiona Hyslop, the previous Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, very little has been done in the past year to take the issue forward.

We had hoped that the new broom that is Mr Russell would be progressing this issue but, alas, it appears that he, like the Labour Party, has performed a U-turn by trampling on his predecessor's legacy and throwing her judgment into doubt. We expected better of Mr Russell. There is time for him to recant before 5 o'clock and we live in high hope that he will come to his senses.

11:14

Hugh O'Donnell: First, I apologise for not being in the chamber when I was meant to be called earlier.

The debate has been interesting and largely consensual. Many members have gone beyond the normal research that they do for speeches in such debates and have made significant contributions; I refer particularly to Hugh Henry's speech. Cathy Jamieson frightened me when she referred to learning Greek. As I have been trying to learn Greek for several years, I felt a chill run down my back. However, the point was well made.

I mentioned in my opening speech one challenge, which is that particularly—but not exclusively—in many socioeconomically deprived communities, many people's experience of engaging with education as children still creates a barrier to their engaging as parents. I have spoken to parents who say, "I didn't like school and I'm not desperately keen on going there with my child," because of the imprint that their experience left on their lives. We need to find a way of extending beyond the formal education system. Members have talked about that—Karen Whitefield referred to the STUC's role in widening education.

Engagement with parents is critical, because the job opportunities that once existed in many socially deprived communities are no longer available. Parents' literacy and numeracy levels need desperately to be raised in order to widen their opportunities to improve their lot in those

communities, because of the literacy demands of job opportunities in the 21st century.

I have an observation about the written media's role in relation to literacy in general and, perhaps, in relation to functional literacy. Several analyses show that the register of our newspapers—the level at which they pitch their pieces—has lowered. It is estimated that the functional reading age for tabloids is seven. That does not give our young people the opportunity to be stretched by engaging, even on screen, with—

Sandra White: Name the newspapers.

Hugh O'Donnell: Despite encouragement from Sandra White from a sedentary position, I will not name the newspapers.

What I said is equally true of some broadsheets. We need to find a method of engaging all of society that allows us to address the challenges that we face.

On a slight tangent, I ask the cabinet secretary to talk with the SQA about how the marking guidelines for qualifications such as standard grades, highers and intermediates operate not only in English but in a range of subjects. As I am sure other members do, I remember that, when I was at school, the history teacher would pull us up for bad spelling. I do not know whether that still happens under SQA marking guidelines, but I have heard anecdotally that that does not, and that marking is pitched differently. If we are to be consistent, that approach must be taken to all subjects.

Kenneth Gibson: I fully agree with Hugh O'Donnell. At a parents' night, I saw an essay by my daughter that contained several spelling mistakes. Teachers thought that they were marking the creativity in essays and that pointing out spelling mistakes would undermine the child's creative potential. Occasionally, we must return to first principles. If an essay contains spelling mistakes, they should be pointed out, so that they can be addressed.

Hugh O'Donnell: I agree absolutely. That ties in nicely with the role of CPD and, probably, with that of teaching institutions that produce our teachers. I hesitate to say it—it is probably a bit risky—but I guess that young teachers who are coming out of our institutions might not be able to mark adequately, as a result of their school careers.

Finally, I urge a little caution. Several members referred to our place in OECD tables and so on. The previous Administration took great pains to do away with the system of league tables for our schools, which create all sorts of unnecessary pressures on schools. We need to be cautious to ensure that using bigger league tables in the same

way does not damage the progress that we are making on literacy.

11:20

Michael Russell: The debate has certainly been constructive, useful and informative. It is not always possible to say that in the chamber. When we vote on the motion and the amendments, we will show some unanimity. I take the unusual step of suggesting that the Tories seek to withdraw their amendment, so that Parliament can take a wholly unanimous view.

It is fairly obvious—[*Interruption.*] If I am allowed to make progress, I will explain my request. I have an open mind about some issues in relation to assessing progress on literacy—some issues in the curriculum for excellence still need to be discussed, for example. Testing and qualifications are different. Teachers have, and will have, a role in assessing each pupil's progress and achievements in literacy and numeracy at all education stages—

Elizabeth Smith: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: Can I finish, please? I am explaining why the Tories should withdraw their amendment; I will be happy to take an intervention when I have done that.

The teacher's role that I described does not mean a national test, but it does mean that teachers can and will use tests as a method of assessment, so there is a debate to be had about that. That was in the vision for assessment, which was published last September. The framework for assessment is due to be published later this month and the management group is consensual about progressing the issue.

If the Tories insist on our voting on their amendment, that will run contrary to the progress that is being made with the curriculum for excellence. It will therefore be useful if the Tories do not ask us to vote on the amendment, but instead wait for the framework to be published, and be part of the progress on implementing that framework. Rhona Brankin is right to say that Liz Smith was—regrettably—overprescriptive after the previous debate. That has changed the atmosphere. If the Tories were to seek to withdraw their amendment, a better debate could be had about the place of testing and assessment in literacy. That would be useful.

Several members have said clearly that they think that literacy should be the number 1 priority. I do not disagree, but the language of Parliament is often the language of priorities. We should try to look beneath that and to understand what we mean. I would rather call literacy a first-cause

issue for how we operate and work in Scotland. Its central importance to encouraging and developing each citizen can be illustrated if we consider the effects of what we might call illiteracy—I use the word broadly and I know that it is not the best term to use, but let us just use it.

It is axiomatic that, without literacy skills, learning and achievement are impaired or negated. That is a serious educational issue, because it puts up an enormous barrier to an individual's gaining from the educational process at any stage. Without literacy skills, participation in society is impaired or negated: we have heard about several examples. Christina McKelvie talked about voting—without literacy skills, participating in the democratic process is difficult. Without literacy skills, participating in digital society is difficult—Mr O'Donnell referred to digital exclusion. That is another reason why literacy should be a first-order issue for us.

Without literacy skills, attention to wellbeing is impaired or negated. I made that point in my opening speech and it remains profoundly true. People who do not have literacy skills do not look after themselves and do not have the tools to look after themselves.

Without literacy skills, employability is impaired or negated. Even if someone without literacy skills manages to negotiate their way through the education system, their employability is very seriously affected.

Without literacy skills, the chance of offending behaviour and repeat offending behaviour is greater. The correlation between figures on illiteracy and on imprisonment and offending is clear. It is a problem that arises when people do not have literacy skills.

Without literacy skills, it is also likely that an individual will live in poverty. That is the case for all the reasons that I have given, and more. Most profoundly of all, without literacy skills, the likelihood is that the individual's children will lack literacy skills. Without literacy skills, people in our society become locked into a cycle of difficulty that leads to impairment in learning achievement, and to exclusion, poor health, poor employability and increased offending behaviour, again and again.

Parliament can agree that literacy is a first-order issue for every politician in Scotland. We need to treat it in that way. That is why, as I said earlier, the work of the literacy commission is important. It draws our attention again to the priorities that we need to have in Scotland and how to implement them.

Rhona Brankin: The cabinet secretary said that literacy is a first cause. The important thing for the Government to say is that literacy is its number 1 priority. As he knows, West Dunbartonshire

Council achieved literacy in West Dunbartonshire without class sizes of 18. I will put the question that Des McNulty asked earlier: is literacy the minister's number 1 priority over class sizes? Class size is an input, not an outcome.

Michael Russell: I regret Rhona Brankin's putting the question that way. I am trying to have a consensual debate. I regard literacy as being central to what we are seeking to achieve, but there is a difference between that and some of the methods by which we wish to raise attainment in Scotland, one of which is smaller class sizes.

I ask members to accept the bona fides that I give on the matter. We are very concerned about literacy; we regard it as important that we take strong action. I accept what the literacy commission said to me in the meeting this morning: leadership and ownership across the political process and within the education system are needed. We have agreed to take matters forward. I have listened very carefully to all the speeches in the debate and I will ensure that my officials bring all the contributions together. We will then consider what more we need to do. We have said that we will sit down with the commission and agree an action plan. I am happy to see debate in the chamber on that. Members should please accept what I say; let us not divide on it.

I turn to some of the important speeches in the debate. On making two references to the curriculum for excellence in her speech, Elizabeth Smith said that it mentions grammar only once. In fact, the guidance on reading and writing is clear in its expectations on punctuation, structure, spelling, vocabulary and accuracy. I regard grammar as being as important as literacy; certainly, it is in the curriculum for excellence.

A number of members mentioned numeracy. We should always use the word numeracy in debates on literacy, but we should remember the way in which literacy at the higher order embraces numeracy. We should ensure that it is folded into our concerns.

Christina McKelvie implied slightly unkindly that, as an author, Ian Rankin might be self-interested in the debate. As an author, I am self-interested, but I am so in exactly the way that Kenneth Gibson highlighted in his useful speech, as did other members. I refer to reading. I rather like the idea that, here as elsewhere, when a bell rings, we should all take out a book and read it. I hope that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee will consider that innovation. I would love to do that.

Ensuring enthusiasm for reading among young people is enormously important. Over the Christmas period, the Scottish Book Trust moved forward on the issue by asking a number of

members what their favourite books are. I know my favourites, one of which I commend to the young people from Moray primary school who are in the public gallery today. It is "The Hill of the Red Fox" by Allan Campbell McLean, who was, of course, a former chairman of the Labour Party in Scotland: I thought that I would make the point before another member did so. That wonderful and exciting children's book had an enormous influence on me. Let us encourage our young people to read by speaking of our favourite books—

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): "Crowdie and Cream".

Michael Russell: I did not hear Jamie Stone's sedentary intervention, but I always regard that as an advantage.

Hugh Henry made the important point that one size does not fit all. There should be flexibility. I am sympathetic to his point on ensuring that individual schools can respond to the circumstances in which they find themselves. We will take forward that point.

Des McNulty spoke about literacy champions in Glasgow. As a result of the curriculum for excellence, the idea is being replicated across Scotland.

The debate has been positive and has shown members' enthusiasm to engage with the issue. I make the commitment that this Government will continue to engage with the issue. I hope that the Tories listen to my appeal for them to seek leave to withdraw their amendment. It would be very helpful if they did so.

11:29

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I, too, welcome the remarkably consensual and constructive nature of the debate. It is remarkable; Opposition day debates are usually rather more fractious affairs. In addition to thanking Murdo Fraser and Elizabeth Smith for their mostly generous comments, I note, and welcome, the cabinet secretary's uncharacteristically magnanimous remarks and the broad agreement that he signalled with the findings of Labour's literacy commission.

Perhaps the most basic purpose of education is to teach our children to read, write and count; a goal that has proved remarkably elusive over the years. The learning of the three Rs is no more than parents should expect of school, but Labour's literacy commission estimated that almost one in five Scottish pupils leaves primary school without being functionally literate.

In today's debate, we have a chance to accept the challenge that the commission laid down: to

work together to make Scotland the world's first truly literate nation. For once, we are not debating resources or—apart from a brief diversion from the cabinet secretary—class sizes, teacher numbers and school buildings. We are debating priorities. We in the Labour Party chose deliberately to take a consensual approach to the subject of literacy. From the speeches from all round of the chamber, it is clear that there is broad agreement on the importance that we should give the subject.

Unfortunately we cannot accept the Tory amendment, as it is not in the spirit of consensus. As Mr Fraser said, almost exactly a year ago—in January 2009—we held a debate in which all parties voted for a similarly worded amendment. I remember distinctly what happened, as does Rhona Brankin. On the day after the debate, the vote was spun—or misinterpreted—in the media to indicate that there had been some form of endorsement to a return to the 11-plus, which was not what we had voted for. In rejecting the Tory amendment today, we want to emphasise that we do not endorse such a move.

Elizabeth Smith: What is it about the amendment that Ken Macintosh voted for last time, but which he says he will not vote for today, that he disagrees with?

Ken Macintosh: It is strange to hear the Tories saying that the difficulty lies with other members when all other members are united and unanimous in saying that we have difficulty with the Tory amendment. If there is a lack of clarity or any confusion, it is in what the Tories mean.

I listened to what Elizabeth Smith and Murdo Fraser said. They talked about testing and expanded somewhat on the issue but without accepting or addressing the fact that their proposals have created broad unease in the teaching profession. It is clear that the profession sees the proposals as a worrying development. The Tories may deny that their proposals are a return to the 11-plus. I believe that the Conservative party is trying to trade politically—just as the UK Conservatives do in respect of grammar schools—to the reactionary few who hark back to those days.

The literacy commission made it clear that there is a role for exams and testing. It said that there is a need for both certification in terms of recognition of achievement and, in the context of this morning's Conservative amendment, diagnostic testing that provides information on a child's progress. I want to make it absolutely clear that, in rejecting the amendment, we are saying that we do not accept a return to the sort of divisive testing at the end of primary school that, instead of liberating pupils, condemns them to accepting second best.

Exams and testing are controversial issues. It is more important in today's debate to keep our eye on the bigger prize: the abolition of illiteracy in Scotland. That needs to happen through successive sessions of Parliament and under politically different Administrations. In the debate, we have shown that we can unite around that common goal. That is not to say that we have no criticisms of current policy, perhaps the most important of which is that there is a need for greater leadership. The Scottish Government has talked about embedding literacy in the curriculum and in all school life. This morning, Mr Russell expanded on the role of teaching those skills through the curriculum for excellence. Ministers often talk about making literacy and numeracy every teacher's responsibility, but the commonly repeated criticism—there is a note of truth in it—is that, if it is everyone's responsibility, it is no one's responsibility.

Time and again, Labour's literacy commission returned to the theme of leadership. It called specifically for national leadership and a formal statement of intent, accompanied by commitment at every level—local authority, education directorate, school and home. As other members have recognised, local authorities such as West Dunbartonshire Council and Clackmannanshire Council have demonstrated what can be achieved if there is commitment and constancy.

I am both pleased and proud that Wendy Alexander and Rhona Brankin took the initiative to establish the commission and to refocus our national attention on tackling illiteracy, but it is now up to all of us to play our part. I repeat my welcome for Mr Russell's endorsement of the commission's findings.

Today's debate is about literacy. However, as many members have pointed out—I refer to Hugh Henry's speech, in particular—it is also about poverty and recognising that we are impoverished by illiteracy both as individuals and as a country. Many of us will be familiar with the 2007 Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development report on the quality and equity of schooling in Scotland. The commission quotes one of the report's central findings, which states:

"Not all schools work equally well in Scotland. But the gaps between are far less important than differences between students. In Scotland, who you are is far more important than what school you attend".

The commission cites evidence that not only confirms that socioeconomic disadvantage is the most important cause of correctable poor literacy, but reveals or provides further proof of the pressing need to tackle the problem. It states:

"The same groups suffer from poorer health, less adequate housing, exposure to crime and violence and lower chances of educational success. These

disadvantages are not merely correlated, they are causally related."

Before today's debate, Save the Children circulated an excellent submission that identified the impact of poverty on educational attainment and which crucially emphasised the importance of addressing illiteracy through anti-poverty measures. It was particularly strong on the role of parents—an issue that the commission, too, flagged up. Schools cannot achieve universal literacy if they are working in isolation.

Both Save the Children and the commission pointed out that we need to engage with families to a far greater extent. We need to encourage parents to support their children's learning, not just by turning up at parent and teacher evenings but by providing a learning environment in the home. Some local authorities, including Glasgow City Council and North Lanarkshire Council, are putting that approach into practice through early intervention programmes, through initiatives such as nurture groups and through targeting resources at disadvantaged families. Karen Whitefield described some of the effective measures that have been introduced by North Lanarkshire Council, which has focused its efforts on those who are in greatest need.

It is vital that the Scottish Government take a more active role in supporting such work by funding and assessing pilots across the country—for example, to help vulnerable two-year-olds and others to achieve their potential. In his opening remarks, my colleague Des McNulty emphasised the particular need for us to focus on the birth-to-three age range. I welcome the Lib Dem amendment, which rightly highlights the need for us to focus on outcomes and to measure the benefits that are to be gained for low-income families.

The literacy commission focused predominantly on children, but our motion and many members who have spoken today have also highlighted the importance of tackling adult illiteracy and the vital role of trade unions. Before I turn to literacy in the workplace, this is a good point at which to emphasise the continuum of literacy. Our goal should be not simply to help children to master the basics but for everyone to be helped to develop as high an order of literacy and comprehension as possible. This morning's Government amendment makes the point that everyone, not just those with impoverished learning opportunities or poor employment prospects, gains from a national literacy programme. For that reason, we are happy to support the SNP amendment.

It is clear that a lack of higher-level literacy skills is a major problem for employers and our economy. As Kenny Gibson was, I was struck by the evidence that Paul Holleran of the National

Union of Journalists and Martin Boyle of Cardonald College gave to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee yesterday on the need to improve literacy skills among trainee journalists. Those young adults have chosen a career that depends on their ability to write, but both witnesses suggested that many students could not spell and had not mastered basic grammar. I hope that Mr Gibson will agree that an encouraging aspect of the evidence was that the Scottish union learning fund has helped the NUJ to establish a literacy course for journalists. Many members will be familiar with everyday skills courses, which are another example of Scottish union learning. Such workplace learning activities help people to understand written and verbal job instructions, to read and understand health and safety information, to understand mortgage interest rates and to help children with their homework. Not having those core skills holds us back, condemns individuals to a life of low-skilled, low-paid employment and damages our economy.

I conclude with a thank you to Judith Gillespie and all members of the literacy commission, many of whom have been with us in Parliament this morning, for their work. I am pleased both by Labour's role in refocusing our attention on illiteracy in Scotland and by the fact that all parties have recognised that the issue can unite us, rather than divide us. Like many Scots, I was brought up with the idea that education and equality go hand in hand. Education is the door to a more egalitarian society. The pursuit of universal literacy could be the key to that door.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:40

Nuclear Weapons Programmes (Barnett Consequential Money)

1. Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what Barnett consequential money would arise from a cancellation of all nuclear weapons programmes by the United Kingdom Government for reinvestment in front-line services. (S3O-9077)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): There would be no direct Barnett consequentials from the cancellation of all nuclear weapons programmes by the UK Government. However, if all the savings from the scrapping of the nuclear weapons programme were redirected to 100 per cent-comparable English spending programmes such as education and health, Scotland would be entitled to approximately £95 million.

Joe FitzPatrick: That is a pretty big number. It is incredible that the Labour Party and the Conservative party are happy to continue spending such huge amounts of public money on weapons of mass destruction at the same time as they are planning to cut budgets for vital services across the board. What further savings could be released if the Trident replacement programme were scrapped? What could Scotland do with our share of that money, if it were allocated across the UK under the Barnett formula?

Bruce Crawford: If the expenditure that is allocated for Trident's replacement were instead apportioned across the countries of the UK on a per capita basis, in theory that could increase by up to £1.7 billion between 2012 and 2027 the resources that are available to the Scottish Government. Such an increase would be almost equivalent to the cost of a new Forth crossing, which is estimated at between £1.7 billion and £2.3 billion. To give another example, if the £1.7 billion were transferred to public sector jobs, it would be equivalent to the amount that is required to fund about 4,000 firefighters, the same number of nurses and 2,000 junior doctors each year between 2012 and 2017. Given the significant financial strain on the public purse, now is the time to order the cancellation of Trident.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am somewhat confused about the Scottish National Party position on Trident. Until now,

various SNP defence spokesmen have always taken the stance that, if Trident were cancelled, all the money would be put into alternative conventional defence spending. If that is no longer the SNP's position, when did the position change?

Bruce Crawford: Murdo Fraser is well aware that I was merely providing examples. It is interesting to look at what Lord Bramall, the former head of the army, said about the issue. He said:

"If the British deterrent comes to be seen more in the nature of a status symbol such as an American Express gold card, rather than as a serious military weapon of war, then £25 billion would be a great deal to pay for something so nebulous and doubtful".

I entirely agree with him.

Permitted Development Rights (Domestic Microgeneration)

2. Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Executive when it expects to lay a statutory instrument relating to permitted development rights for domestic wind turbines and air-source heat pumps. (S3O-9097)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We intend to meet our statutory obligation under the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. We will shortly consult on proposals to extend permitted development rights to micro wind turbines and air-source heat pump installation on domestic buildings.

Sarah Boyack: We have already lost one renewables company because of a lack of progress on planning. Does the minister accept that, given the new UK Government feed-in tariff, which starts in April, planning is now the biggest barrier? On what date will his statutory instrument be laid? I understand that he cannot meet the terms of the 2009 act in that respect. Will he provide us with some clarity on the issue?

Stewart Stevenson: I assure the member that the instrument will be laid in line with the statutory requirements of the 2009 act.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Can the minister clarify, for people who might wish to use such devices, the installation costs and so on of domestic wind turbines, air-source heat pumps and solar thermal and solar voltaic schemes? Exactly what will people have to pay to carry out the intentions of the 2009 act?

Stewart Stevenson: Quite a wide range of costs might be incurred. A small roof-mounted wind turbine can cost as little as £1,500; at the other end of the scale, a 6kW system could cost in the range £18,000 to £25,000. A range of options exist between those extremes. Heat pumps typically cost £5,000 to £9,000. Both types of

installation save significant amounts of money. Heat pumps can save between 30 and 70 per cent on existing bills.

Post Office Closures (Lifeline Services)

3. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Executive what progress it has made in exploring ways in which local agencies can help retain lifeline services for communities when a local post office closes. (S3O-9062)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): The Scottish Government has set the strategic direction and overarching outcomes for the public sector through the national performance framework. We expect public bodies to seek ways to work collaboratively with one other and with other partners, notably local authorities, the third sector and the private sector, to deliver continuous improvements in the services that they provide to communities. Community planning partnerships, led by local authorities, are best placed to take decisions at the local level on how best to deliver local public services.

Nanette Milne: In a statement to Parliament, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth said:

"I will have discussions, along with local authorities and other public service providers, on the opportunities that exist to co-locate post offices with other public sector bodies."—[*Official Report*, 23 May 2007; c 86.]

Can the minister tell me how many co-locations have been set up and are now operating?

Jim Mather: I am afraid that I cannot give the member an accurate number, but I can tell her that not only have we had the conversations to which the cabinet secretary committed, but, on 16 June 2009, we had an extensive consultation session with representatives of the sector and the wider array of associated stakeholders and potential allies. We are about to chase that up and ask the attendees, as well as stakeholders who were not present at the session, where progress has reached and how we can proceed.

The Post Office is a commercial entity, and public sector organisations cannot enter into a shared-service agreement with a commercial entity without taking account of procurement and competition rules, which we must observe.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): If local agencies had been able to offer information and advice via the local post office network before the closures, that might have supported the post offices and avoided their closure. Is the same not also true of Government and its functions? Can the minister inform us what services and advice might be delivered via post offices so as to prevent any future closures?

Jim Mather: The short answer is yes, indeed. There is a comprehensive array of options that would allow co-location and a joint use of the asset base. The list is so comprehensive that I am not minded to read it out just now, but I will share with Mr Stone and Mrs Milne the output of the session that we held on 16 June.

HMP Dumfries

4. Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether there are plans to substantially reduce the capacity of HMP Dumfries in the next five years. (S3O-9126)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): No, there are currently no plans for any change to the capacity of HM Prison Dumfries, which remains an integral part of the Scottish Prison Service estate.

Elaine Murray: My question reflects concerns that were raised with me by members of the Prison Officers Association Scotland at HMP Dumfries regarding the construction of new prisons in Scotland, coupled with the Scottish Government's desire to abolish sentences of less than six months, which could render HMP Dumfries surplus to requirements. Given his assurance today, is the cabinet secretary prepared to meet my constituents to offer them reassurance on the matter?

Kenny MacAskill: Absolutely. It was a great privilege to attend once again the Prison Officers Association Scotland's annual conference in Pitlochry. I will be more than happy to meet individual officers in Dumfries. We are committed to a public sector prison service, and I hope that Dr Elaine Murray will welcome the Government's position in ensuring that HM Prison Low Moss will remain a public sector prison and will not be put into the private sector. That has been uniformly supported by the Prison Officers Association Scotland—by members based in Dumfries and in other parts of the estate.

Air Services (Barra)

5. Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): A dh'fhaighneachd do Riaghaltas na h-Alba an daingnich e gum bi seirbheisean adhar Bharraigh seasmhach anns an fhad-ùine.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it can confirm the long-term future of air services to the isle of Barra. (S3O-9070)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We are strongly committed to maintaining Barra's lifeline air services in the long term.

Alasdair Allan: I thank the minister for his categorical reply. Can he further lay to rest press

speculation that Loganair has let it be known that it is "not prepared to bid" for the Glasgow to Barra and Barra to Benbecula public service obligations when they are renegotiated in 2013? Can he confirm that the Government is actively considering at least the option of replacing the present aircraft?

Stewart Stevenson: We are aware of the report that suggested an inaccurate position in relation to Loganair's future plans for bidding for the renewal of the Barra contract. We understand that the report misrepresents the company's position.

Regarding the aircraft, it is clear that the Twin Otters that are currently operating on the service are reaching the end of their life. Viking Air of Canada is producing a Series 400 aircraft, and 40 orders are in place. A number of those aircraft will be available through leasing. We have asked Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd to consider whether it would be appropriate to take responsibility for ensuring that aircraft are available to any operator, whichever it may be, over the long term. In any case, we will ensure that that service is protected.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The minister will be well aware that the Barra service is a classic example of a crucial lifeline service that is kept alive by a public service obligation and the skills of the Twin Otter pilots in landing on the windswept beach, often in severe weather conditions. Does he recognise that the three-year contract for the service could impede operators bidding for the route in future? Will he undertake to hold a review with the aim of extending the contract period, which would give a huge boost to the community of Barra and places beyond?

Stewart Stevenson: The member makes some points with which I am happy to associate myself. I understand that the three-year restriction is related to European rules. However, I will consider whether we could place a longer contract. The availability of aircraft is a key factor. As was the case with ferry provision for the northern isles, we need to ensure that we can provide long-term availability of aircraft. If we are not able to improve the length of the contract from three years, we wish at least to mitigate some of the adverse effects of such a short contract.

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): Barra airport is part of the Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd network. Can the minister confirm whether airport car park charging features in the future of Barra's air services? If not, will he explain to my constituents why the already expensive costs of accessing lifeline air services are to be increased in some islands but not in others?

Stewart Stevenson: The member should be aware that we do not provide car parking at Barra airport, which is very small. Therefore, the issue of car parking charges is not being considered for Barra.

Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al-Megrahi

6. George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what further representations it has received regarding the release of Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al-Megrahi since 10 December 2009. (S3O-9105)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): As I said on 10 December, I have received a variety of representations over recent months regarding the release of Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al-Megrahi. I have received very few since that date.

The First Minister and I have given evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee about the flawed process that led to the United Kingdom Government entering into a prisoner transfer agreement with Libya.

George Foulkes: Does the cabinet secretary recall that he was unable to answer my supplementary question on 10 December? I presume that he has anticipated my question on this occasion, so can he now update the Parliament on the current state of Mr al-Megrahi's health, almost six months after his release?

Kenny MacAskill: Full reports on the medical reports that were provided by the Libyan Government appeared in many daily newspapers. It is in no doubt that this is a dying man. I have to say to Lord Foulkes that it ill befits us, in the name of humanity, to circle like vultures. Mr al-Megrahi is going to die. That is why he was released.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): The cabinet secretary's decision to effect the release was predicated on medical evidence that was prepared in July last year. The point is that Mr al-Megrahi is still with us. Does the cabinet secretary have any reasons, at this stage, for questioning the accuracy of that medical evidence?

Kenny MacAskill: No. I made it quite clear when I released Mr al-Megrahi on compassionate grounds that he might die sooner or later. The evidence that the director of health and care at the Scottish Prison Service provided was that if Mr al-Megrahi remained in a Scottish prison it was likely that he would die within three months. It is a self-evident fact that he has lived beyond that.

It is clear from the medical information that has been provided—and paraded across papers the length and breadth of Scotland and elsewhere—that he has been receiving chemotherapy. That was not recommended by Scottish doctors, on the

basis that it would not tackle the underlying problem. Mr al-Megrahi is doubtless receiving an increase in life expectancy at the cost of his quality of life during his last, few days.

Prisoners (Financial Benefits)

7. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps have been taken to prevent prisoners from benefiting financially from their period in prison. (S3O-9116)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The Scottish Prison Service works closely with partners in the criminal justice system to prevent prisoners from benefiting financially from their period in prison through illegal activity. That close working includes the location of police liaison officers in a number of prisons and SPS headquarters, to allow a rapid and effective exchange of information between agencies.

The Government has closed the legal loophole that was identified by the judgment in *Somerville*, to ensure that a one-year time bar exists for prisoners' compensation claims. However, we continue to face a number of historical and new human rights claims in respect of prisoners.

Paul Martin: It was reported in the *Daily Record* on 4 January that Ashok Kalyanjee has been able to claim a £50 car tax refund from his prison cell and has discussed the possibility of selling his diary. The cabinet secretary might be aware that that is the gentleman who brutally murdered his two young sons. Will the cabinet secretary agree to a full inquiry into the circumstances that have allowed Mr Kalyanjee to claim a car tax refund and discuss selling his prison diary?

Kenny MacAskill: I am more than happy to ascertain whether SPS investigations can elucidate the situation. We have been doing cross-border work on the issue because, given the nature of the media, much requires to be dealt with on a cross-border basis. The Coroners and Justice Act 2009, which received royal assent on 12 November, will permit the recovery of profits obtained by criminals who seek to exploit their crimes, for example by publishing a memoir. The scheme is restricted to serious indictable offences and will be operated by the civil recovery unit on behalf of the Scottish ministers. That shows that the Government, in collaboration with colleagues south of the border, is anxious to ensure that people who seek to build on crimes that they perpetrated can be dealt with. I was happy to work with colleagues south of the border and I am delighted that that legislation is in place.

Scottish Futures Trust (Senior Staff Salaries)

8. David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether

Scottish ministers approved the salaries for the senior staff of the Scottish Futures Trust. (S3O-9135)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): The salary of the chief executive of the Scottish Futures Trust was approved by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth.

David Whitton: The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has form for that; he recently approved a £200,000 salary for the new chief executive of Scottish Enterprise. Now we have a chief executive of the Scottish Futures Trust who is on £180,000 a year. According to the SFT, that is because its staff are

“selected as market leading infrastructure investment professionals.”

If the new chief executive fits that description, can the minister say when he will come up with a funding model that will help us to build more houses, a hospital or two and perhaps even a bridge?

Bruce Crawford: As usual when we talk about the SFT, we hear nothing from the Labour Party but moaning and groaning.

The SFT's 2009-10 business plan set out ambitious and positive objectives, which include support for 13 specific infrastructure projects. The projects are valued by SFT at almost £5 billion and include SFT leadership and management of the £1.25 billion school building programme and the hub initiative. If Labour members took the time to consider the SFT's corporate plan for 2009 to 2014, they would find that it sets out the SFT's approach to increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of infrastructure investment in Scotland. For every £1 that is spent on the SFT over the corporate plan period, at least £7 of benefit to the taxpayer will be delivered. The SFT should be congratulated on that, not mocked for it.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Before we move on to questions to the First Minister, members will want to join me in welcoming to the gallery the chair of the London Assembly, Mr Darren Johnson, and a delegation from the Assembly. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-2126)

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

With your permission, Presiding Officer, I state that the thoughts of all in the chamber are with the people of Haiti at this very difficult time. This morning, I spoke to the lead of the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal in Scotland, Gerry McLaughlin of the Red Cross, to discuss the situation and ascertain what the immediate needs of the component organisations are. Mr McLaughlin informed me that the non-governmental organisations' latest assessment is that the scale of the disaster is even greater than the devastation that the initial reports suggested.

The Scottish Government is considering how best to respond to the situation and stands ready to assist, including potentially by giving financial assistance. The Minister for Culture and External Affairs has called a meeting with the 13 main Scottish NGOs that are involved and active in Haiti to hear about their activities and discuss how best the Government can assist.

The DEC has launched an appeal. The Scottish launch will take place tomorrow in Glasgow. It is imperative that we all do everything that we can to support those organisations and I encourage all members of the public to support that appeal when it is launched tomorrow. The minister's meeting will follow the launch of the appeal and the Scottish Government will contribute and find many ways to help in an extraordinary, devastating international situation.

Iain Gray: Labour members—and, I think, all members—will join the First Minister and his ministers in supporting those efforts to respond to the crisis in Haiti. Our thoughts are with those who are struggling to deal with the consequences of that devastating incident.

One million adults in Scotland—one in five of the population—cannot read or write. That was one of the shocking conclusions from the literacy commission that Labour set up when it reported last month. The commission called for “zero tolerance of illiteracy”. I was pleased to hear the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning support the commission's recommendations this morning; will the First

Minister add his support for zero tolerance of illiteracy in Scotland?

The First Minister: Yes, I will. I welcome the constructive way in which the proposals were made. I am glad that Iain Gray welcomes the constructive response of the education secretary. I am sure that the debate that is taking place and the measures that are proposed in the report will be supported broadly across the chamber.

Iain Gray: One of the literacy commission's important conclusions was that we know how to resolve the issue. Councils such as Clackmannanshire Council and West Dunbartonshire Council have shown that, if we make literacy a priority, we can ensure that every child learns to read and write.

On Monday, I visited the nurture class at Lochview nursery school in Glasgow. Children as young as two were being introduced to books, and parents were being helped to make reading an everyday part of their children's lives. Will the First Minister agree to make that programme happen in every nursery school in all Scotland?

The First Minister: The education secretary is certainly considering that closely and sympathetically. In his response to the literacy commission's report, he demonstrated that, if constructive proposals are made in a genuine way to tackle a huge underlying problem in Scottish society—a problem that has been with us for many generations, as is clear from the statistics to which the literacy commission pointed—the Government will respond constructively. That includes the specific question that Iain Gray put to me.

Iain Gray: I welcome the First Minister's support for moving forward on literacy. In that spirit, it is worth discussing a little more what we do to make that a reality, because the commission discovered that 13,000 pupils each year leave primary school unable to read or write. Those are 13,000 children whose life chances are threatened before they are even in their teens. Therefore, literacy seems to us to be one of the most important things to which we can turn our minds. The commission says that the money that we spend on schools has to be allocated to reflect the priority of improving literacy levels. What will the First Minister do to target resources on ensuring that every child leaves school able to read, write and count?

The First Minister: As Iain Gray knows, many of the commission's key recommendations are already part of Scottish Government policy—indeed, there is a sustained policy commitment from all levels of government, at local and national level. The curriculum for excellence—whose direction is supported around the chamber, whatever the debate about its implementation—contains many issues that are relevant to literacy.

As Iain Gray rightly pointed out, illiteracy can be concentrated by geographical area, by social class and by a range of other factors. The work on dyslexia that is taking place in teacher training in Scotland, which is supported and promoted by Sir Jackie Stewart, makes a substantial contribution to tackling one of the underlying issues. All those issues are being sympathetically considered. Where the measures that are proposed go beyond those that are already in the Government's programme, they are being sympathetically considered for implementation.

Iain Gray: There is welcome agreement and a willingness on both our parts to work together to take forward zero tolerance of illiteracy. I welcome that response to our literacy commission.

In all seriousness, and in the same tone, there is a problem: the First Minister's concordat with local government means that he cannot deliver national priorities in education. We have seen that on class sizes, teacher numbers and school meals. The previous education secretary could not deliver the objectives that she had been set because of the concordat. Zero tolerance of illiteracy has to mean what it says. The issue has to be a national priority for Scotland. What will the First Minister do to lift literacy above the concordat, make it a national priority and ensure that every child, everywhere in Scotland, leaves school able to read, write and count?

The First Minister: We have had such an innovative session finding consensus that I am not going to move beyond the consensus, except to say this: if we are to tackle not only illiteracy but many other issues in Scottish society that are the responsibility of national and local government, that can be done only by consensus, not only in the Parliament but as part of a joint endeavour with parity of esteem between national and local government. I had a meeting with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities yesterday, which included representatives of every political party in local government in Scotland. There was unanimity around the table—including among the Labour representatives, of whom there were a number—that the concordat is the way forward for the relationship between Scottish central and local government and that only together can we address the issues for which both national and local government have responsibility. I know, because he gave some good examples of initiatives in local authorities, that Iain Gray would not want to suggest in any way that local authorities are not as concerned about these issues as national Government is. A return to the days of constant warfare and confrontation with local authorities would not be the way forward. A concordat on literacy will deliver at national and local level, just as that approach will deliver all the

other educational priorities and other vital priorities for this nation.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-2127)

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

Annabel Goldie: Everybody is now aware of the corrosive financial impact of Labour's recession in every walk of life. Today, details of the £72 million annual costs for running this Parliament have been disclosed. Looking at those costs, I think that it is obvious that we, as members of the Scottish Parliament, will have to sort out the essential from the non-essential. Does the First Minister agree that, above all else in these difficult times, the Parliament must set an example of good housekeeping? Does he agree with the Conservatives that we need to cut the cost of running the Parliament?

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): That is not a matter of responsibility for the First Minister.

The First Minister: Shall I do my best to respond on the areas of the question that might be considered as coming within my responsibilities?

The Presiding Officer: As long as you stick to what comes within your responsibilities.

The First Minister: Sticking within my responsibilities, I make the point that all parts of society and all levels of government need to be aware of the extraordinary public spending situation that is coming down the line unless we take avertive action. Annabel Goldie will have noticed, as I did, the change in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's language this week, when, for the first time, he accepted and promoted the severity of spending cuts. Those who have been in denial about that aspect will surely want to take those remarks fully on board. No doubt at some point—in a form that is in order—we will hear more of the Conservative party's plans in that direction, which seem to me to be at best oblique.

Annabel Goldie: Let me clarify for the First Minister that the Scottish Government allocates the budget for the running of this Parliament and that he leads a party that has a member who sits on the corporate body—

The Presiding Officer: That is actually incorrect, Miss Goldie. The Scottish Government does not allocate that budget.

Annabel Goldie: I apologise for any confusion, Presiding Officer.

I infer from the First Minister's response that he now accepts the need for financial prudence in the broad round. I am heartened to hear that. He talked about the chancellor being apparently no longer in denial, but I think that the person whom everyone regards as being in denial is the First Minister, who has consistently refused to explain how he proposes to make budget provision for the inevitability of cuts. He has to stop his ludicrous posturing that a vote for the Scottish National Party will somehow make Scotland immune to Labour's debt crisis. He is living in denial—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Annabel Goldie: The First Minister is the King Canute of Scottish politics, presumably hoping that his wee tartan tootsies will not get wet.

Time and again, the Conservatives have put on the table measures to save the Scottish budget a quarter of a billion pounds a year, but time and again the First Minister has rejected them. What everyone now wants to know—now that he admits that denial is not an option—is whether he gets it. What will his Government do? Does he accept that it will need to spend less?

The First Minister: Actually, King Canute argued the opposite case and tried to prove a point to his advisers. Obviously, my knowledge of English history is somewhat stronger than Annabel Goldie's.

The Scottish Government has put forward a budget for next year, in which Mr Swinney has had to accommodate the first of the Westminster cuts that are coming down the line. I agree with Annabel Goldie's assertion that it is legitimate to describe this—as she does at every opportunity—as Labour's recession because, obviously, the Labour Government has the prime responsibility for the economic and fiscal circumstances in which this country finds itself. What I find more difficult from Annabel Goldie is her lack of detail on the plans of her Conservative colleagues south of the border, who by their own admission in broad terms would expect not only to implement a greater round of cuts than the Labour Party would but to pursue the disastrous policy of implementing public expenditure restrictions when the economy is encountering a fragile recovery from the deepest recession since the 1930s.

As I have had difficulty in finding aspects of Annabel Goldie's questions within my area of responsibility, let me say on public spending that she will be delighted to know that the latest returns from local authorities show that 60 per cent of offenders on community service orders in Scotland have been engaged in clearing the snow in just about every local authority area in Scotland. That

is 10 times greater than the Conservatives' estimate last week.

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-2128)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Issues of relevance to the people of Scotland will be discussed.

Tavish Scott: People at Innerleithen are battling to save one of Scotland's biggest textile mills. The Caerlee mill owners have called in the administrators and 170 jobs are at stake in a town of 2,500 people. My colleague, the local MSP, Jeremy Purvis, is involved in on-going talks and has been briefing the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth. Government must create the space, time and opportunity for new investors and buyers to be secured. The textiles industry in the Borders has been hit hard in the recession and some companies have closed, but those that we still have are rising to the challenge of building new markets and creating new, high-end products. That is why this cashmere company has a future. Will the First Minister commit to getting behind the Scottish Borders textile industry for the future of the Caerlee mill and the 170 jobs that depend on it?

The First Minister: Yes, I will, and I know that the finance secretary will be glad to intervene to do everything he can.

Tavish Scott makes an important point. I believe that we are in a recovery phase from a deep recession, but the recovery is fragile and many companies across Scotland will suffer disappointments and reversals—that was the case in my constituency just this week—as all members will know from their experience. Through its economic recovery plan and its mobilising of efforts to help with such situations, the Government is doing everything within its powers. I will be glad to ensure that the finance secretary takes a personal interest—I am sure that he is already doing so—in the case that Tavish Scott has brought to my attention.

Tavish Scott: Scottish manufacturing figures for the past year are stark—there was a 19 per cent drop in exports—but the five-year trend shows conclusively that the Scottish textile industry has a future and that it can grow and be a success. It is not the right course for people to lose their jobs in such an historic industry or for the Borders to suffer loss after loss when the future could be so bright and promising. Scottish cashmere is a world-beating product. My party has proposed how the Scottish Government can give more support to manufacturing and textile jobs as part of its

budget. Will the First Minister act on that way forward for the industry?

The First Minister: As Tavish Scott will know, we have doubled the availability of the Scottish manufacturing advisory service. I take what he says about the position of manufacturing exports. There has been an extremely deep decline in world trade. As I am sure Tavish Scott does, I welcome the fact that the figures for the most recent quarter, which were released only yesterday, showed the first stabilisation—a modest increase after an extremely sharp decline.

Tavish Scott can be assured that, just as we have done in many areas in tackling the recession, we will mobilise every possible resource of the Government to support Scottish exporters and manufacturing exports in particular. I agree with his proposition—not just on textiles but on a range of manufacturing exports—that Scottish quality and skills can excel in world markets, as so many of our companies do, and I agree with his proposition that key sectors should be assisted to take advantage of that opportunity in the future.

The Presiding Officer: I will take a constituency question from Paul Martin.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): Yesterday, in broad daylight, a man was shot dead outside one of Scotland's busiest supermarkets in the Robroyston area of my constituency. Does the First Minister agree that the time is now right for the Parliament to show leadership by standing up to such unacceptable gangland activities? Will he arrange for the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to meet me and anyone else who has an interest in the issue to discuss how we can take the most effective action to deal with the unacceptable activities of the gangland networks?

The First Minister: The justice secretary will be delighted to attend such a meeting with the member. I know that the member will want to support the initiative on the serious organised crime task force, which is designed precisely to address such behaviour across society. That task force is long overdue, but now that it is coming into being as part of our battle against organised crime, it deserves the support of every member.

The Presiding Officer: I will take a further supplementary from Rob Gibson.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): On Tuesday, the ANM Group announced the closure of the Scotch Premier Meat abattoir in Dornoch, which will result in the loss of 29 jobs, and 18 people face redundancy as a result of the closure of the Highland Country Foods abattoir in Forres. Those are big blows in two small towns. Will the First Minister do whatever is needed to keep those rural abattoirs in my region in play, for example by developing local and organic meat

processing, in line with the aims of Scotland's food and drink policy?

The First Minister: Rob Gibson puts forward some highly constructive suggestions. He will know that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment has already spoken with the managing director concerned. We will take up any and all suggestions to assist.

I suspect that, for many people, the number of jobs involved will not seem enormous, but everyone will appreciate that in a rural area that level of jobs is the equivalent of many hundreds of jobs in other areas of Scotland. The economic impact on a rural area of losing a key facility can be great, so the cabinet secretary will meet Rob Gibson to discuss his positive suggestions and to establish what more can be done.

Jobs Summit

4. Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the outcome was of the keep Scotland working jobs summit. (S3F-2133)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I believe that that event brought together very successfully key partners and agencies in Scotland that have been working hard to mitigate the impact of the economic downturn. Crucially, much of the discussion at the summit turned to how we can accelerate recovery.

Professor Alan McGregor, director of training and employment research at the University of Glasgow, is preparing a summary of the discussions at the summit, which will be made available to all members at the end of the month. It will also be discussed at the next quadrilateral meeting of the Scottish Government, the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and CBI Scotland. The discussions and the report will inform the on-going work of economic recovery and the future refreshing of the economic recovery plan.

Nigel Don: What does the First Minister think the impact will be of the announcement of £34 million to support jobs across Scotland, particularly in the north-east and, more particularly, for those not at present in education or employment?

The First Minister: On the Scottish Government's contribution, we were able to make two highly significant announcements at the jobs summit on Monday. The first was about the success of funding applications by community planning partnerships across much of Scotland, and the second was about the success of applications by local authorities in the Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The £34 million that has been gained from the European social fund and the European regional development fund is highly significant funding that

will assist 28,000 individuals the length and breadth of Scotland to enter employment.

I pay great tribute to the people who were responsible for those highly successful applications, many of whom were at the jobs summit. That their effort in preparing applications for important European funds has met with such success is a tribute to that co-ordinated work, which will touch the lives and improve the life chances of 28,000 of our fellow citizens.

Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): Can I surprise the First Minister by thanking him for holding the jobs summit in my constituency? It was extremely worth while. Was he aware that many of those who attended said that the construction industry plays a vital role in creating jobs in the east end of Glasgow? When Labour was in power, 14 new schools were built or commissioned but, since the Scottish National Party came to power, only one has been commissioned and it will not happen until 2014. In the interest of jobs and, of course, our children, is it not time to step up the school building programme?

The First Minister: I welcome the first sentence and a half of the member's contribution. As she very well knows, we will shortly see the 250th school opening since this Government took office, which is substantially higher than under any previous Administration in this Parliament. The future school building programmes, even in this time of economic difficulty, supported by the Scottish Futures Trust, will be a great inspiration for the pupils of the future.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I thank the First Minister for his comments with regard to my constituency. He will know that one of the consequences of the recession is that the number of people applying for further education and university places has considerably increased. Has the Government assessed the number of young people who are being turned away from further and higher education and from training places? Is he confident that the budget for next year is sufficient to meet that demand, or does he believe that some people will be turned away who otherwise could have had a place in training or education?

The First Minister: I will have a specific analysis done on that question and made available to the member. I know that he will have welcomed the real-terms increase in funding for our college and university sectors. Although I am not somebody who constantly compares performance in Scotland with that south of the border—*[Interruption.]* Well, I tend to take a more international outlook on these matters. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: The member will also be very aware of the publicity over the past few days concerning the extreme funding problems of the university sector south of the border. In the context of the public expenditure restraint that we are going through, I know that he will welcome the very substantial attempt to ensure that our universities and colleges make their contribution to mitigating the impact of the recession, as indeed they will make their contribution to accelerating recovery.

Shoplifting Gangs

5. James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to tackle shoplifting gangs. (S3F-2131)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government is strongly committed to tackling organised crime in all its forms. That is why we have increased the budget of the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency by £4 million in 2009-10 and 2010-11 and brought together the key agencies that are involved in the fight against organised crime in the serious organised crime task force, which I mentioned earlier.

The task force published its strategy in June last year, providing for the first time a comprehensive picture of organised crime in Scotland. To aid it in its work, we are, through the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Bill, strengthening the powers that our police forces can use by establishing new offences to make it easier to prosecute those individuals who organise others to commit crimes and a new statutory aggravation in connection with serious organised crime. I am sure that James Kelly will welcome those measures.

James Kelly: The First Minister will be aware of the BBC investigation revealing that organised crime is behind half of all shoplifting in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, 96 per cent of shoplifters receive sentences of six months or less. Against that background, SNP plans to introduce a presumption against six-month sentences send out a message that Scotland is weak in its approach to the problem. Does the First Minister agree that scrapping that discredited policy would strengthen the fight against organised shoplifting gangs?

The First Minister: First, on shoplifting, in order to support business we are providing funds for the Scottish Business Crime Centre, which is a partnership between business, police and Government to raise awareness of crime and help business to combat it. As I am sure James Kelly is aware, the centre's work includes effective anti-shoplifting initiatives such as retail radio links,

which improve the quality of communication and co-operation between retailers.

On the second part of Mr Kelly's question, people who commit crime must be dealt with appropriately. However, as the BBC investigation indicated, what we are dealing with here is not just the people who commit the shoplifting but the serious organised criminals who lie behind the shoplifting. The whole purpose of the initiatives that have been taken by the justice secretary is to get to those serious organised criminals, who, as a result of bills that are currently in progress, will be seriously dealt with in the justice system. I am sure that James Kelly is not suggesting for a minute that someone who is organising and masterminding serious crime would be sentenced to less than six months. Serious criminals get serious sentences.

Renewable Energy

6. Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): To ask the First Minister what impact the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets' transmission charging regime has on the Scottish Government's renewable energy ambitions. (S3F-2138)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Considering the consensus that has dominated most of First Minister's question time today, I thank the member for his question and note his constituency interest in the matter. The current transmission charging regime unfairly discriminates against Scotland, particularly areas that are rich in renewable resources, such as Orkney, which pays among the highest transmission charges in the United Kingdom.

Scotland has massive renewables potential, with an estimated quarter of the European Union's tidal and wind power and 10 per cent of its wave power. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that Scotland fulfils that enormous potential, unlocking a green energy gold rush. We are actively pressing Ofgem, National Grid and the UK Government for a fairer electricity market and access to the grid for the areas with the greatest opportunity. On Monday, the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism, Jim Mather, will be hosting a meeting between Ofgem, National Grid and the energy generators to press that case, which has the broad support of local authorities throughout those areas, including Orkney Islands Council.

Liam McArthur: As I am sure the First Minister is aware, Ofgem's charging regime resulted in Statkraft pulling out of a renewables development in my constituency last year. In light of that, and the collective ambition to create a renewables gold rush in Scotland, does he share my concern at proposals from National Grid that could double or even treble the cost of putting renewable power on

the grid from 2015? Does he agree that, if implemented, those charges would make investors think twice about renewables opportunities in the north of Scotland and indeed in the islands? What progress has been made on the alternative charging model proposed by Scottish and Southern Energy, Scottish Power, the isles authorities and Scottish ministers?

The First Minister: One piece of news that gives us hope is that, as Liam McArthur will know, we successfully blocked National Grid's proposal last year. However, that does not mean that it will not resubmit the proposal to increase discrimination even more. More disappointingly, it also rejected the unanswerable case that was prepared by councils throughout Scotland and the Government and supported by Scotland's electricity generators.

We are trying to pursue this matter through negotiation, explanation and getting people to understand that, unless Scotland fulfils its renewables potential, the chance of the United Kingdom as a whole meeting its renewables targets will be extremely limited. Enabling areas such as Orkney to take their renewables opportunity helps the whole of Scotland and, as I say, ensuring that Scotland takes its renewables opportunities will make the UK more able to meet its own targets. I have not yet given up hope of getting support from the relevant UK department along those lines.

Liam McArthur should also be aware of a new European regulation passed last summer that is concerned with how discrimination in charging regimes might be impeding the meeting of renewables targets. I discussed the matter with the European Commissioner for Energy in December; we are in correspondence about it and are looking closely at whether it can be another weapon in our armoury to try and get some common sense and fairness into this question of access to the grid.

The Presiding Officer: As the start of First Minister's questions was delayed, I will take a final supplementary from Lewis Macdonald.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Given that, as the First Minister knows, the greatest constraint on renewable generation in the north of Scotland is access to the grid, will he remove any uncertainty and confirm today that his Government has given consent for an overhead transmission line to run all the way from Beaulieu to Denny?

The First Minister: The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism has given a full-line consent as well as asking for mitigation in key areas, which I am sure the energy companies are well able to come forward with.

I know that Lewis Macdonald supports the line. After the questions that he asked at yesterday's meeting of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, some people might have thought him to be a line sceptic, but I see from his question today that he is right behind the energy minister in ensuring that Scotland realises its energy opportunity while being sensitive to the local communities that are involved. Both objectives can be realised and with Lewis Macdonald's support we will advance and ensure that Scotland takes its renewables opportunity.

12:32

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Health and Wellbeing

NHS Highland (Rheumatology Service)

1. Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made in discussions with NHS Highland to ensure the provision of a seven-day rheumatology service in Dingwall providing specialist facilities to the whole national health service board area. (S3O-9079)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I apologise to members for my rapidly disappearing voice. You will be pleased to note, Presiding Officer, that that will lead to shorter answers than normal today.

A review of the rheumatology service across Highland, which includes the Highland rheumatology unit at Dingwall, is currently under way. The review is at an early stage and no decisions have been made. The issue was raised with me at the board's annual review on 7 December, and I have asked the board to keep me informed of progress.

Rob Gibson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that NHS Highland is indulging in sharp practice in using an efficiency savings drive in the mid-Highland community health partnership to remove four of the 14 beds at the Dingwall rheumatology unit while conducting a whole health board review of the service that may take longer than this financial year? Does she also agree that NHS Highland should clarify what efforts it is making to offer relief to as many patients as possible who want to use that well-loved unit, which has welcomed patients from all over the Highlands and the Western Isles?

Nicola Sturgeon: I can inform Rob Gibson that I have received information on the matter from NHS Highland and reassure him that the decision on beds—to which I will return in a second—in no way pre-empts the wider review of the rheumatology service to which I referred.

NHS Highland has made a temporary move, until the end of the financial year, to reduce the number of beds from 14 to 10. It has advised me that the beds in Dingwall were underoccupied, with the average occupancy rate being 70 per cent. Because the service operates mostly on the

basis of planned admissions, it is possible—indeed, it is the best use of resources—for it to operate at near full capacity. I am also advised that the change allows the operation of a new day-case service for patients who need infusion therapy. Currently, those patients have to travel to Inverness.

Members will appreciate that, in the current economic climate, the Government has taken steps to protect the NHS budget into the next financial year. Nevertheless, all NHS boards are required to ensure that they use funds efficiently, which means using funds to deliver the best quality of service to patients. I note the points that Rob Gibson has made and ask him to accept my reassurance that the decisions that have been made in the short term in no way pre-empt the longer-term review.

NHS Emergency Services

2. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how many people have attended national health service emergency services due to falls during the recent cold weather conditions. (S3O-9094)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Ambulance Service responded to 1,037 cases of falls between 28 December 2009 and 3 January 2010—an increase of 38 per cent on the same period last year. According to provisional management information, between 28 December 2009 and 3 January 2010 there were approximately 50 per cent more attendances at accident and emergency departments throughout Scotland due to falls and fractures than during the same period last year. I thank all the staff who work in the NHS for the fantastic way in which they responded to the recent cold snap.

Jackie Baillie: I hope that the cabinet secretary finds her voice soon. Like her, I pay tribute to all NHS workers for their significant efforts when the number of attendances at emergency services has been at a record high. What additional capacity, over and above the existing planning for winter pressures, has been provided to support the considerable effort that has been made by NHS emergency staff and ambulance staff?

Nicola Sturgeon: As Jackie Baillie will be aware, NHS boards draw up robust winter plans every year. This year, the importance of those winter plans was underlined by the swine flu outbreak, although, as it turned out, the pressure on the NHS over the festive period came from the weather, not the flu pandemic.

The winter plan for each board area sets out how capacity is utilised as demand on the service

increases. There is a range of things that an NHS board will do, should the circumstances require steps to be taken, such as rearranging staff rotas or cancelling elective admissions. I am pleased to say that, outwith NHS Borders, the impact of the weather on elective admissions has been minimal.

In my initial answer, I congratulated NHS staff, and I am glad that Jackie Baillie joined me in doing so. I make particular mention of staff working in accident and emergency departments. Obviously, given the weather conditions over the past couple of weeks, the demand on accident and emergency has been higher than it was in the corresponding week last year, but the performance of accident and emergency departments against the four-hour target is broadly comparable to that in the same week last year. That is a fantastic achievement, and every member of staff who has contributed to it thoroughly deserves the congratulations that they have received today.

Fuel Poverty (Fife)

3. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to tackle fuel poverty in Fife. (S3O-9096)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): The energy assistance package is a national programme to tackle fuel poverty. By the end of November, the fuel poverty programme had helped 2,408 households in Fife. All were provided with energy savings advice; 711 were referred for a benefits check; 783 were referred for a social tariff check; 221 were provided with insulation measures; and 296 were provided with heating system measures.

This year, we have also allocated £120,806 to Fife Council in respect of 377 homes, under the social sector stage 3 stream. That money is funding energy efficiency measures that complement work that is delivered by the energy companies under the carbon emissions reduction target obligation. The home insulation scheme includes 8,955 properties in Fife and, in the first month of operation, the programme of doorstep visits generated requests under the energy assistance package, including 31 benefit checks, 64 social tariff referrals, 109 referrals to CERT or stage 3 of the energy assistance package, and 57 stage 4 referrals.

Claire Baker: I urge the minister to take immediate action to introduce a boiler scrappage scheme, funded through Barnett consequentials, that would give households some £400 towards an energy-efficient boiler. I know that the minister has said that it is possible to do so, and I ask him to make it happen as soon as possible. Why should people who have high fuel bills and old and inefficient boilers have to wait while the minister, uncharacteristically, dithers?

Alex Neil: Without further dithering, I inform the member that, in the energy assistance package, we provide free and discounted boilers, and we will decide whether to extend that generally to a boiler scrappage scheme. However, unlike in the previous Administration, the fundamental guiding principle of our policy on tackling fuel poverty in Scotland is to focus resources on those who are in most need. Based on the recommendations of the fuel poverty action forum last year, we reoriented programmes so that people who are in fuel poverty receive priority in terms of resources and the programme.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): I thank the minister for ensuring that, in Fife, we have had more central heating installations than we had under the previous Administration. With regard to the new boiler and heating systems, I welcome the focus on families with children under the age of 16—a measure that I urged the previous Administration to take when it introduced its central heating system policies.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Question, Ms Marwick.

Tricia Marwick: Following yesterday's welcome news, are there any other groups to whom the minister would like to extend the energy efficiency package in order to ensure that those who are most in need of help are the ones who receive it?

Alex Neil: It is factually correct that, under this Administration, more central heating systems have been installed than were installed at any time under the previous Administration. Last year was a record year in that regard.

I was glad to announce yesterday the extension of eligibility to large families in receipt of the additional element of child tax credit. I have also asked the fuel poverty forum to examine other areas of eligibility. Before Christmas I asked it to consider specifically whether it would be possible to identify households with a disabled adult that are living in fuel poverty, and yesterday I asked it to find out whether it is possible to identify people who are chronically sick—including cancer patients—and living in fuel poverty, to see whether we can extend eligibility for the programme to those groups. I emphasise that only people in fuel poverty in those groups would be assisted.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that Presiding Officers prefer short and succinct questions and answers, to enable us to get as many back benchers in as we can.

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (Meetings)

4. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing last met

representatives of COSLA and what issues were discussed. (S3O-9114)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I attended the meeting yesterday between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Cabinet at which various issues were discussed. In line with COSLA's role as a key partner in the planning and delivery of health and social care services in Scotland, I and the Minister for Public Health and Sport enjoy regular and close contact with COSLA representatives on a number of health and social care issues.

Johann Lamont: Has the minister discussed in her meetings with COSLA the implications of the statement that emerged from yesterday's meeting on the concordat? We were told that there would be

"a step change in the range of services available to elderly people".

Will the minister clarify whether that will end the postcode lottery in the cost and quality of care for older people throughout Scotland? How will that change be evident in the process of single outcome agreements, a troublingly small number of which refer to issues that relate to older and disabled people? Will it end the waiting list for direct payments?

Nicola Sturgeon: As Johann Lamont is well aware, the Scottish Government and COSLA have been working together closely—and, I believe, constructively and successfully—since the start of the current Administration to identify and address many issues related to care for older people. For example, we have worked closely together to ensure proper funding of and consistent eligibility criteria for free personal care. We are working together on a range of issues to ensure that that standard of care exists for people.

Johann Lamont referred to the statement that was issued after yesterday's meeting, but we are not addressing issues only in the here and now—the Government and COSLA are also seeking to address the challenges that are presented by the demographics of our country. We have an ageing population, so the work to reshape services for older people is critically important.

I assure Johann Lamont that I—and the Minister for Public Health and Sport, I am sure—would be happy to meet her to discuss all those issues in more detail. There is between the Government and COSLA a real spirit of working together to ensure that we are providing services for older people that they deserve and have a right to expect.

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary find time to discuss urgently with COSLA—and national health service boards, for that matter—what approach is to be taken to fund the estimated additional £36.3 million that will be payable by Scotland's NHS from 1 April because of Labour's 1 per cent increase in national insurance?

Nicola Sturgeon: Jackson Carlaw raises an important point. I said in response to an earlier question that the Government is working as hard as we can to protect the NHS from the consequences of Labour's recession. That recession hits—and will continue to hit—the NHS and other parts of the public sector hard.

As Jackson Carlaw rightly points out, the implications of the national insurance increase for the NHS amount to almost £40 million, which will be shared among boards throughout the country. My job as health secretary is to work with the NHS over the coming months and years to ensure that it can cope with the tighter financial constraints that it faces—and will continue to face; I gently remind Jackson Carlaw that it is not only Labour but his own party that promises cuts—while continuing to deliver services of the quality that people expect. I thank Jackson Carlaw for raising an issue that has a serious impact on the NHS.

Antipsychotic Drugs (Older People)

5. Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it has taken to reduce the overprescribing of antipsychotic drugs to older people. (S3O-9098)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Special care is required when antipsychotic medication is used in frail elderly people. Doctors should use medication of any type only after careful consideration of the risks and benefits for the patient.

Dementia is a top priority for the Scottish Government, as it is for all parties in the Parliament. We are due to publish Scotland's first ever national dementia strategy in April. As part of that, we are looking into how medicines, including antipsychotic medicines, can and should be prescribed in all care settings.

Rhona Brankin: In answer to my written question S3W-29604, the Minister for Public Health and Sport said that the Government does not collect centrally the number of older people in care homes who are prescribed antipsychotic drugs. Alzheimer Scotland says that up to 14,750 residents in care homes are prescribed such drugs and that an estimated 70 per cent are prescribed them inappropriately. Indeed, a recent report to the United Kingdom Government estimates that an

additional 1,800 deaths are directly attributable to the use of such drugs in the UK.

What is the cabinet secretary doing to ensure that general practitioners comply with part 5 of the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000? Does she agree that there should be mandatory education for GPs and care home staff on the risks and benefits of antipsychotic drugs? Will she agree to make the booklet, "Information for carers—Caring and consent", widely available to the families of those with dementia, whether they are being cared for in a care home, in their own home or in hospital?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am very happy to consider all the points that Rhona Brankin has raised in her question, but I will perhaps reply to her in writing on some of the details. I hope that we can all agree that such issues should not be subject to party-political considerations, as we are all concerned about the needs of older people in care homes. All of us are, or certainly should be, concerned about the implications of the ageing population for the number of patients with dementia in future years. We need to have in place the right level of services for such patients.

On the issue of antipsychotic medication, Rhona Brankin raises an extremely important point. She may be aware that the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guideline 86 provides guidance on the use of antipsychotic drugs for people with dementia. The standards for integrated care pathways for dementia also contain specific standards about the use and evaluation of the benefits of medication. On what is an important and sensitive subject, I can give Rhona Brankin an assurance that the points that she has raised today will be fully considered by the Government.

Energy Assistance Package

6. John Scott (Ayr) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive, given the recent cold weather, what further steps it plans to take in addition to those outlined on 29 October 2009, to reduce the average waiting time for central heating installation for applicants who have qualified for stage 4 of the energy assistance package. (S3O-9059)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): Following discussions with my officials, Scottish Gas has committed to install the enhanced energy efficiency measures for the vast majority of all energy assistance package customers in under 12 weeks and, where reasonably practical, any applicant waiting for three months or more as at 31 December 2009 will have their system installed by 31 March 2010.

Usually, we require that insulation is installed ahead of the heating system, but to limit delays in the cold weather we have instructed Scottish Gas

to install the measures in whichever order is appropriate to the householder's needs.

The snow has made it just as difficult for the surveying and installation engineers to travel to jobs as for anyone else. I want to note my appreciation of the teams that are working so hard to progress installations.

John Scott: I add my appreciation of the work of those teams, which have been working in the most difficult of conditions.

As the minister will know from our previous discussion, I have recently been contacted by a pensioner constituent who, having applied for a central heating installation and been accepted on to the scheme, was left facing the entire winter without any heating in his home. Previously, funding was brought forward to speed up central heating installations for pensioner households whose systems had broken down beyond repair—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A question please, Mr Scott.

John Scott: Will the minister consider what additional steps can be taken to reduce waiting times further and to ensure that priority is given to making certain that no pensioner household in Scotland that is eligible for stage 4 assistance is without central heating over the winter?

Alex Neil: John Scott makes a fair point that no pensioner should have to wait unduly, especially after being accepted on to the scheme. We are taking every possible measure to ensure that that does not happen. I am aware of the case to which he referred, which is very much the exception and not the rule. However, I can tell him that, compared with a 99-day waiting period under the old scheme, we are now down to a 60-day period under the new energy assistance package.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): One of the frustrations of people having to wait for central heating under stage 4 of the energy assistance package is that the same company is involved in delivering stages 3 and 4 of the scheme. I hear what the minister says about turning the normal order of installation on its head, but the people concerned get more than one visit even though the same company is doing the work. The Scottish fuel poverty forum has recommended that those visits be co-ordinated to reduce disruption to constituents, speed up delivery and avoid long waiting times. What measures is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that those visits are co-ordinated while retaining the maximum input to the carbon emissions reduction target?

Alex Neil: I have a meeting scheduled with Scottish Gas, at which I will discuss progress on implementing the measures that I announced in October, one of which is about ensuring that there

is far better co-ordination on the ground to minimise delay. I get a monthly management report on all aspects of the energy assistance package, and the figures clearly indicate that there has been a substantial reduction in waiting times at each stage from approval through to completion. However, I am aware that that is not always achieved, and I and my officials are working with Scottish Gas to further improve the situation.

Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill

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

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the letter of 17 December 2009 signed by all 17 of Scotland's public health chiefs in support of minimum pricing for alcohol, what other support exists for its Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill. (S30-9086)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Our bill is receiving growing support, and minimum pricing is now backed by a broad coalition. As well as all 17 of Scotland's public health directors, other supporters of our policy on minimum pricing include the four United Kingdom chief medical officers, the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing, the royal colleges, the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, the Scottish Licensed Trade Association and the Church of Scotland.

Last week, the House of Commons Health Select Committee published a detailed report on alcohol, which included a clear recommendation for minimum pricing that was backed by Labour and Liberal Democrat members. Today, it appears that the Labour Secretary of State for Health in England may also support the policy of minimum pricing. It is disappointing that some colleagues in this Parliament continue to put party politics before public health, but I remain hopeful that good sense will prevail.

Stuart McMillan: I will add one more organisation to the cabinet secretary's list—Breakthrough Breast Cancer. Breast cancer continues to be the most common cancer among women in Scotland. Each year, 4,000 Scottish women are diagnosed with the disease and 1,000 die from it. Does the cabinet secretary share Breakthrough Breast Cancer's concern that unless action is taken now to reduce levels of alcohol consumption, efforts to reduce the number of women who are affected by breast cancer will be at significant risk?

Nicola Sturgeon: The policy of minimum pricing is part of a package of measures to tackle the problem of alcohol misuse in Scotland. The package has the potential to benefit the country in a range of ways, one of which Stuart McMillan has

put his finger on. Enormous health benefits could flow from such a policy. The number of people who get and die from cancer would be reduced, as would the economic impact of alcohol misuse and the impact on the NHS and other public services.

I believe that there is a broad coalition in favour of a policy of minimum pricing and that the argument for it is progressively being won. When I spoke to Andy Burnham on the telephone this morning, I congratulated him on his position—or, at least, on his position as stated in this morning's *Daily Telegraph*. His comments—which he repeated to me—that the public mood on the issue is changing are completely accurate. The vast majority of people in Scotland believe that it is time to take action on alcohol misuse, and they will not forgive parties that put party politics ahead of public health. On such an important issue, I appeal to all parties to do the right thing when our bill comes before the Parliament.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I hope that the cabinet secretary's voice improves, even if the things that she says do not. As Gordon Brewer said on "Newsnight Scotland" the other night, she continues to make assertions.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is not helpful to make statements on the basis of assertions rather than evidence and that, therefore, the Scottish Government's recent press releases on the topic of alcohol and minimum pricing are unhelpful because they overegg the pudding to make the case? Number 10 has indicated that Labour's United Kingdom policy on the minimum pricing of alcohol has not changed, but that a debate is entirely appropriate. I hope that the debate will continue, without suggestions that it is about party politics, which it is not.

Nicola Sturgeon: My comments are genuinely made more in sorrow than in anger, because I have always thought that Richard Simpson took a principled stance on public health issues, including the issue of alcohol. Indeed, he is on record in the chamber as supporting the unit pricing of alcohol—that is his stated position. I agree with Richard Simpson that we should have a debate on the issue; I believe that it is one of the most important debates that we can have in Scotland at this time. That is why I find it so sad and completely incomprehensible that Labour decided to state its position before the Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill had even started going through the parliamentary process and before the debate had properly begun in the Parliament.

With reference to Richard Simpson's comments on assertions, I repeat that the Scottish Government's views on minimum pricing are not simply the views of the Scottish Government: they are backed by doctors, nurses, the police, public health experts and significant and growing

numbers in Labour's ranks. It is time that Labour took a step back from its fixed position on the issue and decided to join the mainstream in Scotland that is determined to take action on alcohol misuse.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 was not lodged.

Mental Health Services

9. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what actions are being taken to improve services available to people affected by mental health issues. (S3O-9123)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): We are continuing to deliver on our challenging national performance targets, complemented by a range of other activity designed to improve and modernise the provision of mental health services and ensure that quality, integrated mental health services are available for all who need them. This service improvement agenda is a key part of our partnership approach to improving the mental health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland, which is focused on promotion, prevention and recovery.

Pauline McNeill: Is the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing concerned about the increasing number of children suffering from mental health issues who are sent to adult or non-specialist wards? In Glasgow, the number of such children has doubled from 21 to 41. Given that the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland acknowledged the previous Administration's progress towards halving the number of inappropriate admissions by 2011, is she working towards that target? When does she expect progress to be made on the target?

Nicola Sturgeon: I share Pauline McNeill's views on, and concerns about, the issue. The area of child and adolescent mental health services is a key priority for the Government, as is evidenced by a range of action that has been taken.

To address Pauline McNeill's specific point, obviously our aim is to ensure that the right care and treatment are available at the right place and time for young people. We acknowledge that there are still instances when young people are admitted to adult beds, but we are working very closely with national health service boards to address that. As evidence of that, I cite the recent opening of Skye house for young people from the west of Scotland. We are seeing progress in the provision of in-patient beds for young people. The recent opening of Skye house provided 24 beds, which is an increase from 16 and brings the total to 42.

We are working closely with NHS boards in the north and south-east of Scotland around their

consideration of bed requirements to meet local and regional needs. The issue is extremely important, and the Government remains committed to making further progress, building on the progress that has already been made.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): Scotland has one of the highest suicide rates in western Europe; it is almost twice as high as the rate in England and Wales. What actions is the Scottish Government taking to tackle that worrying statistic?

Nicola Sturgeon: Nanette Milne, like Pauline McNeill, raises a very important issue. She is aware that there is a specific health improvement, efficiency, access and treatment target for suicide, which is to reduce the suicide rate between 2002 and 2013 by 20 per cent. That target is supported by key front-line staff in mental health and substance misuse services. We will continue to make progress towards that target, because this area, as is the case with the many other areas of mental health, is extremely important. Mental health, as others have said in the chamber down the years, has for some time been seen as the Cinderella of the health service. I hope that, with the range of actions that the Government is taking, that is changing quickly for the better.

NHS Lanarkshire (Meetings)

10. Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met representatives of NHS Lanarkshire. (S3O-9113)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I meet all national health service chairs regularly. The most recent meeting was on 23 November. The Minister for Public Health and Sport met NHS Lanarkshire on 20 October when she chaired the board's annual review.

Andy Kerr: The minister may recall that I have written to her about a constituent's concern about weight management and gastric banding services in Lanarkshire. I seek simply to appeal to the cabinet secretary in relation to the provision of such services in the west of Scotland. It is clear from her correspondence that Glasgow has a fairly well-developed service. Patients can work their way through the system and, if a gastric banding intervention is required, necessary and appropriate, they can achieve it. However, it appears that, in the west of Scotland, only Glasgow is capable of providing that service. That concerns a number of my constituents. One in particular is concerned about the impact on his emotional wellbeing as well as his physical wellbeing. That clearly worries and concerns him, his family and me.

I appeal to the cabinet secretary to get together with west of Scotland NHS boards to develop a west of Scotland centre and allow people from throughout the west of Scotland to access a well-managed service that has at the end, perhaps, the intervention that my constituent seeks.

Nicola Sturgeon: That is a constructive contribution from Andy Kerr. I am certainly happy to consider that in discussion with west of Scotland boards. As Andy Kerr said, he has corresponded with me on the issue on behalf of constituents for a period of time. It is an important issue. Many people throughout Scotland feel that gastric band surgery would be of assistance to them. It is not of assistance to everybody who has weight management issues, and it is clear that clinical decisions have to be at the forefront of all considerations, but it is important that people in such circumstances have access to the right treatment when they need it.

I give Andy Kerr an undertaking that I will continue to consider the issue, as NHS boards are doing. I am more than happy to continue the correspondence that we have started.

Fuel Poverty

11. Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to tackle fuel poverty in areas of multiple deprivation in Glasgow and across Scotland given the impact that the recent severe cold weather will have on those already in or in danger of suffering the effects of fuel poverty. (S3O-9081)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): The Scottish Government is helping people throughout Scotland to reduce their heating bills and keep their homes warm through the energy assistance package. Anyone can call 0800 512012 to obtain guidance on energy savings or check their entitlement to benefits and cheap tariffs.

Between April and the end of November, some 5,138 fuel poor households had heating and insulation measures installed under stage 4 of the package. That should save them an average of £858 a year on their fuel bills. Yesterday, I announced that we intend to make such help available to even more households. In addition to the families and pensioners who are already eligible, we will extend stage 4 to larger families with children under 16 who get more than the family element of child tax credit.

We are helping people to switch to cheaper energy tariffs and payment methods, which together can save people an average of £300 a year. Many people are eligible for cheaper rates and if they call today they could be on a new tariff within a couple of weeks.

Bill Kidd: What impact would the abolition of attendance allowance have on those who experience the effects of fuel poverty?

Alex Neil: The Labour Government's proposals from London to abolish attendance allowance would be damaging to older people because that would reduce their incomes substantially—in some cases, by more than £70 a week. As attendance allowance was originally intended to be an anti-poverty measure, such a policy would be extremely regressive. It would put more and more pensioners in Scotland into fuel poverty.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Among the poorest people in our society are some whom we often forget—asylum seekers and refugees. Will the minister clarify their entitlement to the various measures that are available? What efforts has the Government made to ensure that they are protected from the impact of cold weather?

Alex Neil: I suppose that it all depends on where those people live and the state of their housing. However, if asylum seekers resident in Glasgow, for example, meet the eligibility criteria, there is no reason why they should be turned down for the programme.

British Sign Language

12. Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to promote the use of British Sign Language. (S3O-9101)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): Like the previous Administration, the Scottish Government has since its inception recognised the importance of British Sign Language for deaf people and taken positive steps to promote it. The British Sign Language and linguistic access working group, which was established in 2000, has been working within a strategic plan to deliver improved access for deaf people. At the moment there is undercapacity to deliver many of the required improvements and in that respect the group has identified various necessary long-term targets, including systematically increasing the pool of available BSL teachers, particularly at advanced levels, and developing a coherent progression route for BSL learners and for the training of BSL to English interpreters. To that end, the Scottish Government is providing from 2008 to 2011 almost £1.5 million to a consortium led by the Scottish Association for Sign Language Interpreters.

Cathie Craigie: I appreciate the need for long-term planning and welcome the Government's continuing commitment to promoting BSL. Has it considered or is it actively considering giving BSL the same legal recognition that Gaelic has?

Alex Neil: The proposal has been discussed with representatives of the BSL community and other groups, but the Government has not taken a definitive decision on the issue. We continue to discuss with all the key stakeholders points arising from the suggestion; indeed, I am quite happy to discuss the matter in more detail with Cathie Craigie in recognition of her particular commitment to the cause.

Hospital In-patients (Nutrition)

13. Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what guidance it issues to national health service boards in respect of the cost of providing a nutritional diet to hospital in-patients. (S3O-9104)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Although the Scottish Government issues guidance to support NHS boards in providing a nutritious diet to hospital in-patients, it is for boards to manage expenditure on food provision at the local level within the overall funding available to them.

Patricia Ferguson: I thank the minister for her answer, but surely the great disparity in costs, which range from around £6 a day in some health boards to up to £36 a day, cannot be accounted for purely by geography or overheads. Given the importance of good nutrition in the recovery process, will the minister undertake to review at an early opportunity the quality and cost of hospital food?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Patricia Ferguson for raising an issue that we will all agree is extremely important. Good nutrition in hospitals is fundamental to patient recovery, and I assure her that we keep all these matters under review.

Some of the variation in the costs of food provision between NHS boards can be accounted for by geography, transport costs and other overheads as well as by the different patient mix in different hospitals. After all, the quality and balance of hospital food must be right; dietary requirements vary greatly according to patient circumstances and hospitals must provide the right nutritional balance according to patient need.

As Patricia Ferguson knows, we have committed to considering the adoption of national nutritional standards for the NHS and local authorities. We are continuing to consider the matter; however, we are awaiting the NHS Quality Improvement Scotland review of its food in hospitals guidance, which is due to be published in April, and will take further decisions when we have considered that report.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (Renal Clinics)

14. Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde patients have complained that renal consultants are seeing fewer patients and that waiting times have been adversely affected as a result of management decisions to relocate clinics from the in-patient unit at the Western infirmary to out-patient clinics at the Victoria and Stobhill hospitals. (S3O-9124)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I am advised by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde that neither the senior management team in charge of renal services, nor the patient liaison team, has received any complaints from patients since the opening of the new Victoria and Stobhill hospitals relating to renal consultants reviewing fewer patients. If Des McNulty has any particular concerns from constituents, I would of course be glad to consider them.

Des McNulty: The particular concern is that consultants are waiting in Victoria and Stobhill hospitals for patients who have difficult transport arrangements to get to those locations. When the patients arrive, in-patient treatment must then take place on a different site. The whole situation seems to me and to them to be extremely wasteful. Will the minister ask NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to review the management arrangements in consultation with the consultants and patients to see whether better arrangements can be arrived at?

Nicola Sturgeon: As I said to Des McNulty, those issues have not been raised with me before today. If consultants have issues about patient flow and management within hospitals, they should seek to consider them with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

With the introduction of the new services at the new Victoria and Stobhill hospitals, the majority of patients are experiencing less travel time to receive their regular dialysis. They are also receiving that dialysis in modern, state-of-the-art, up-to-date facilities. There is an improvement there, but if there are issues such as those that Des McNulty has identified, I am sure that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde will be happy to discuss them further with the consultants concerned.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a little time in hand for the next debate, so I will allow another question. Question 15 has been withdrawn.

Swimming

16. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what value it places on swimming as a way of improving both physical and mental health. (S3O-9060)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Thank you, Presiding Officer. [Laughter.]

The Scottish Government recognises that swimming is an excellent way to be physically active that not only promotes general wellbeing, but reduces the risk of major chronic disease such as coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers.

Jamie McGrigor: Is the minister aware of the threat of closure to the community-owned mid-Argyll swimming pool in Lochgilphead? Does she agree that such a closure would be a disaster for local people? Will she, like me, encourage all stakeholders to do everything possible to secure the swimming pool's future?

Nicola Sturgeon: As I understand it, all stakeholders are working hard to ensure the future of the swimming pool in mid-Argyll. Mid Argyll Community Enterprises is looking at a range of options to secure the pool's future. I understand that Jim Mather, the constituency MSP, is organising a meeting between the council, the enterprise company and other stakeholders, and that sportscotland has been invited to attend that meeting. Swimming is important and the Scottish Government remains committed to supporting, where we are able, the ability of people to take advantage of the sport that has all the benefits to which I referred earlier.

If Jamie McGrigor could not hear my answer, my colleague Hugh O'Donnell suggested that he could read it in the *Official Report* tomorrow.

Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5515, in the name of Alex Neil, on attendance allowance for people with disabilities.

14:58

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): It is worth beginning by reminding ourselves of the importance of attendance allowance and disability living allowance to our older people. Attendance allowance is paid to approximately 1.58 million elderly people across the United Kingdom, including more than 150,000 in Scotland who need help throughout the day, during the night or both. It is a tax-free benefit for people aged 65 or over who need help with personal care because they are physically disabled or mentally ill. Of those 1.58 million people, two thirds are aged over 80. Attendance allowance is not means tested, and it is usually awarded without a medical examination. It is paid directly to claimants who may spend it on whatever they like. The current higher rate of attendance allowance is £70.35 per week, and the lower rate is £47.10 per week.

The vast majority of people who receive the benefit do not currently receive formal care from their local authorities. The amount that is spent in Scotland is of the order of £420 million, which does not include the £30 million that the United Kingdom Government cheated us out of when we introduced free personal care. The care component of disability living allowance is paid to another 2.3 million disabled people—mostly non-elderly people—who meet the same conditions or who need help for part of the day or cannot cook a meal. In Scotland, the figure is 330,000 claimants, 250,000 of whom are under 65 and the balance—80,000—are over 65.

At UK level, the benefits cost £9.2 billion a year, £1.1 billion of which is spent in Scotland and £300 million of which relates to people aged over 65. When those benefits were first introduced under different names in the 1990s—to be fair to the Tories, that happened under a Tory Government—the rationale was simple: disabled people, especially those of working age, typically have lower incomes than non-disabled people, and disabled people of any age face additional costs of living that leave them and their families worse off than non-disabled people with similar incomes. Attendance allowance and disability living allowance were originally intended to contribute to meeting those extra costs and were not specifically to pay for care. In other words,

they were an anti-poverty measure for disabled people, including elderly disabled people.

The potential impact of withdrawing the benefits is frightening. A recent analysis by the Institute for Social and Economic Research in London, a highly regarded organisation, predicted that the removal of attendance allowance would mean that 40 per cent of current recipients would fall below the poverty line. Across Scotland, that would mean more than 67,000 of our most vulnerable people being forced into poverty by a Labour Government. In the constituency of Pollok in Glasgow, which I have picked at random as an example, the number of attendance allowance recipients is 2,900. If the proposals to remove the allowance were implemented, 1,160 of those people would be forced into poverty, which is a disgraceful situation in that already poor constituency.

The story does not end there, because if the ill-thought-out and daft proposals go ahead, they will impact not only on attendance allowance and disability allowance, but on carers allowance. At present, receipt of attendance allowance by disabled people is one of the grounds for receipt of carers allowance by the carer. Ending attendance allowance will therefore make it harder for carers to receive financial support. There are currently—

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Alex Neil: Of course.

Helen Eadie: I am grateful. If the minister and the Scottish National Party feel so strongly about the issue, why is it that only one member of the SNP attended the big debate on the issue in November last year and made only a brief three-line intervention? Has the Government responded to the consultation paper on the proposals and, if so, might we have a copy of that response?

Alex Neil: Rather than deal with that petty point, I ask Helen Eadie why her colleague, the member of Parliament for Kirkcaldy—one Gordon Brown—is the author of the proposals. He is letting down all the poor people in Scotland and south of the border.

As I was saying before I was so unwittingly interrupted, 46,300 people in Scotland currently receive carers allowance and could lose that crucial support in order to pay for social care in England.

Let us look again at the numbers for Pollok, which I have selected at random. The number of people in the Pollok constituency of Glasgow who could lose their carers allowance under the Labour Government proposals is 960. That is a disgraceful situation. It is incredible that an anti-poverty measure introduced by a right-wing Tory

Government might be abolished by an even more right-wing Labour Government in London.

Many of the proposals originate in the Wanless report that was commissioned by one Gordon Brown in 2006. The report recommended that disability benefits that are paid by the Department for Work and Pensions should be reduced to release money to pay directly for social care in England. That is completely different from the situation in Scotland. Despite what Johann Lamont's amendment says, as already pointed out by SNP MPs and MSPs, the Tory spokespeople and the Liberal Democrats' Norman Lamb, the Wanless proposals take no account of the situation outside England. There has been no discussion, no consultation and no commitment on what will happen to what are supposed to be UK benefits in the rest of the United Kingdom if they are to be abolished south of the border.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Would the minister care to describe that as a union dividend?

Alex Neil: I will not rise to that. I am never one for reducing debate to such partisan positions.

I not only refer to the Conservatives and the Liberals but invite members to consider the serious comments that were made today by Inclusion Scotland, which said that it

"continues to view any attempt to withdraw individual entitlement to Attendance Allowance or Disability Living Allowance from disabled people as threatening their financial independence and being completely at odds with the principles of Independent Living. That is a view arrived at through consulting widely with our local member organisations, and individual disabled people throughout Scotland, who are vehemently opposed to the changes in entitlement suggested in the Green Paper, 'Shaping the Future of Care'."

Similar sentiments have been issued by many other groups, including the Learning Disability Alliance Scotland and the Scottish Association for Mental Health.

As many members are aware, we are engaged in a major programme of work in Scotland to reshape our care of older people. We have already debated the subject in this Parliament. That is important because by 2016, the number of people in Scotland aged over 65—which might even include me—is projected to rise by 21 per cent, and by 2031, the rise is projected to be 62 per cent. For those over 75, the figures are 21 per cent and 81 per cent. We estimate that slightly over 40 per cent of total spending by the national health service in Scotland and social work services is on older people.

The philosophy of our measures and their intent are twofold. They are, first, to prevent our elderly population who need those benefits from getting into poverty. Secondly, they are to allow them to

manage their own money through independent living and not have it dictated to them by bureaucrats in local authorities the length and breadth of the country.

The Labour Party has paid lip-service to independent living, but if the proposals go ahead, they will put paid to independent living and they will drive tens of thousands of our older people into dire poverty both north and south of the border.

I move,

That the Parliament notes that the UK Green Paper, *Shaping the Future of Care Together*, published in June 2009, may have long-term implications for vulnerable older and disabled people in Scotland who are eligible for attendance allowance and disability living allowance as it proposes to remove the universal benefits of attendance allowance and disability living allowance and instead redesign the benefit system to meet English social policy objectives and redirect funding to pay for the provision of a National Care Service in England, while failing to give adequate consideration to the position in Scotland, and calls on HM Government to consult fully with the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament, local authorities, NHS boards and other interested parties before proceeding any further.

15:10

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I come to this debate more in sorrow than in anger—which reflects the dispiriting instinct of the party of Government to do what it does best, an example of which was embodied for us in Alex Neil—not because of the critical issues around care of the elderly, which all of us throughout the UK need to address, but because, again, the Scottish National Party is talking about what others are doing, rather than what it will do. It is settling for a bit of misrepresentation, coupled with a touch of scaremongering, mixed up with that signature SNP approach of a trumped-up feeling of self-righteousness. That demeans this Parliament and those throughout the UK who are exercised by and concerned about the issues at hand.

What we have from Alex Neil is a non-debate about an imagined slight by the UK Government in a Parliament that, with the SNP, is becoming characterised as having a lack of real engagement with the key debates and anxieties of the day. More and more decisions are being taken away from this Parliament and priorities are determined by the ability of ministers to make decisions away from the Parliament, which is reducing it to a place where politicking is the only thing that really seems to matter and where we rather get the sense that ministers are more exercised by identifying alibis than by developing solutions.

This is a week after a number of long cold weeks in which the Scottish Government showed

its extraordinary inability to act in the face of the national emergency that was caused by the severe weather by failing to act in the interests of vulnerable and elderly people who were trapped in their own homes. The most striking feature of the discussion and the debate on that issue was the fact that ministers had obviously not even thought about it and saw no role for themselves in co-ordinating the response as the extent of the problem emerged. Given the Government's default position of talking and not acting, that was perhaps entirely to be expected. Far from caring about older people when it really mattered, the SNP Government was complacent, defensive and absolutely lacking in leadership.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Is the member speaking to the debate?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am aware of what Ms Lamont is saying and I am having a look at it. Ms Lamont, just keep your eye on what you are saying.

Johann Lamont: I certainly am speaking to the debate, rather than to the nonsense that Alex Neil mentioned. Last week, John Swinney was unable to defend his lack of action and the inexplicable and damaging silence of his health colleague Nicola Sturgeon. He claimed that I had missed the mood, but he was wrong. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Ms Lamont, but there is another point of order.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Again, I need to ask whether the member is speaking to the debate at all. She is talking about the weather.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am aware of that. Ms Lamont has been speaking for just under three minutes. I am sure that Ms Lamont is aware that this is a debate on attendance allowance and I am quite sure that you will find that she will come to that. If she does not, I will deal with it.

Johann Lamont: The contention is that at a UK level we are moving to deal with the attendance allowance to the detriment of older people. I simply make the point that we have a Scottish Government that is comfortable talking about that, but which will not address its own failings during the recent, and current, emergency in relation to cold weather. I hope that the Scottish Government will consider appointing an older person's champion for that purpose.

It is important to listen to groups on these matters. I will outline the context—for me—of the debate, explore some of the key issues and perhaps identify a number of areas for action by the Scottish Government. If the Scottish Government believes that there is an issue with

what is happening at UK level, I am sure that it is more than capable of drawing together the views of the people of this country and representing them. It does not require a motion of this Parliament to do so.

Indeed, the SNP's own Minister for Public Health and Sport has already made a commitment to making a joint statement in response to the green paper. The SNP knows as well as I do that there is no decision on action. I assume that it understands the status of a green paper. The Scottish Government has said that it has developed a response. Perhaps the substance of the debate could have been the Scottish Government's response. We could have discussed that, rather than a theoretical position and its view of something that has not yet been implemented.

There are obviously those—

Alex Neil: Will the member take an intervention?

Johann Lamont: Let me make this serious point. It is obvious that some people are concerned about the implications of some policies that the green paper outlines. The consultation is the place to explore those anxieties.

Joe FitzPatrick: Will the member take an intervention?

Johann Lamont: Let me finish my point.

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Joe FitzPatrick has spoken—he should sit down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): Order. Could we have the member who is making the speech speaking?

Johann Lamont: The Scottish Government has misrepresented the debate about attendance allowance and has categorised it in one way, so it finds it difficult to deal with somebody who wishes to explore seriously the policy's implications.

The reality is that green papers are used in the way that the document that we are discussing has been used. It is understandable that ministers wish to consult on potential approaches without being obliged absolutely to pursue them. Shona Robison understands that. When challenged on the fact that the voluntary sector had not been involved in her policy on elderly care, she said:

"it would be dishonest for us to go out with a blank sheet of paper and say to people, 'What do you think?' We need to be able to put down some ideas to gauge and guide that discussion, and that is the stage that we have reached."—*[Official Report, 28 October 2009; c 20547-8.]*

Shona Robison understands the role of a green paper. She makes it clear that the Government's

responsibility is to shape debates and test ideas. That is what consultations are for.

The UK ministers involved have made it clear that they are continuing the process and that nothing has been decided. The motion implies that no discussion has taken place—

Joe FitzPatrick: Will the member give way?

Johann Lamont: I am now addressing the motion—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: The trouble with SNP members is that they think that shouting something loudly makes it true, but what has been said is not true. The debate is serious and people deserve to have it taken seriously, so let me continue.

The motion implies that no discussion has taken place and that Scotland will not only suffer as a consequence of the proposals—

Sandra White: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. It is clear that the member is not taking interventions.

Johann Lamont: The minister made even more explicit the implication in the motion that Scotland will somehow lose funding, which will be directed to care in England. That is why the motion calls on the UK Government to consult.

Consultation is, of course, good. In our debate on elderly care in October, Shona Robison, the Minister for Public Health and Sport, said:

"We are, of course, also working with the United Kingdom Government in the light of its green paper 'Shaping the future of care together'. Given that any changes to the benefits system, particularly attendance allowance, will have profound implications for the way in which social care is delivered in Scotland, that dialogue is important."—*[Official Report, 28 October 2009; c 20548.]*

We recognise the challenge of the issues. According to Shona Robison, dialogue is taking place and the Governments are working together. I am therefore curious to establish what today's debate is about.

The Westminster Government has rebuffed the argument that the proposal will involve a reduction in the moneys that are available to support people's care. The Minister for Housing and Communities should have confirmed that that commitment was made. The UK minister has said that using disability living allowance for under-65s has been categorically ruled out and he has made it clear that those who receive attendance allowance and over-65s who receive DLA will continue to receive an equivalent level of support and protection in any reformed system.

The minister must be aware that a key issue that drives the debate has been the examination of how a national care service for England might be created. We might wish to—I agree that we should—interrogate the implications of that for Scotland. However; we might as seriously ask why the Scottish Government has nothing to say about minimum care standards, a fair charging regime—for which attendance allowance is used—and the reasonable expectation that charges and the care service should be the same wherever people are in Scotland.

From work that Jackie Baillie and others have done, we know that the charging regime varies widely throughout Scotland. It is suggested that the quality of care is as varied. How does the minister propose that we address that problem, given that any consideration of single outcome agreements reveals a lack of priority for the needs of elderly and disabled people?

I welcome Nicola Sturgeon's invitation today to a meeting to discuss those serious issues, but it is depressing that the minister does not recognise their significance, too. What is the Scottish Government doing to develop meaningful self-directed care? I am very committed to the idea of personalised budgets, but it sits ill with any commitment when waiting lists for direct payments are growing and when it is feared that care in Edinburgh is being categorised artificially to reduce support levels.

This is a critical issue. Indeed, it reflects the concern of many that self-directed care is not being developed. The lack of confidence among people who need support and those who care for them is reflected in much of the anxiety about the possible ending of the attendance allowance and the use of the money to develop care packages. That anxiety remains even when the Government has given the assurance that doing so will not mean a diminution in the level of support.

Carers and people who use the services are anxious that none of us is serious about self-directed support. The minister has to answer these questions. Why are there waiting lists for direct payments? Why are payment levels being reduced so that people cannot direct their own care? I am interested in hearing what the minister has to say on the action that is being taken in the concordat to encourage the process. Will there be a step change in services for older people?

I am also anxious to highlight concerns that have been reported to me on the drop in respite provision. Respite is part of the context of the debate; elderly care is not only about charging. Will the minister tell Parliament how respite figures are monitored and what work is being done to ensure that the cut in respite is not being masked by a lack of reference to the length of time that is

offered? One example is in-home care. Carers groups are telling me that people who would have been given two to three hours to have an afternoon away from their care responsibilities are now being told that they can have only an hour or less.

I am aware of the work of the Scottish Government in developing its own proposals on delivery of care for elderly and disabled people. I will flag up a number of issues in that regard about which older peoples groups are particularly concerned. People are concerned about the false connection of volunteers—people who want to support their neighbours—into care packages, making them an obligatory part of a package. There is also the entirely different matter of making the assumption that those who care for their loved ones do so on a voluntary basis.

The Scottish Government has emphasised the importance of telecare, but that cannot be a technological fix for all. In the recent severe weather—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member should begin to wind up.

Johann Lamont: If I may, Presiding Officer, I will finish the point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The original allocation was nine minutes, which I extended a bit because there is plenty of spare time, but I want to spread the time around.

Johann Lamont: I acknowledge that, Presiding Officer.

I am genuinely concerned that the minister's scaremongering may mean that we lose sight of the key issues that every level of government needs to address in terms of care for the elderly. I urge the minister and his colleagues to reflect on them. The debate on how we treat our elderly people is of critical importance and it speaks volumes that the SNP wants to use it as a vehicle to play games. The Government needs need to address seriously the ways in which to develop minimum standards across Scotland and meet the needs of our elderly population.

I move amendment S3M-5515.1, to leave out from "notes" to end and insert,

"welcomes the opportunity afforded by the UK Government's Green Paper, *Shaping the Future of Care Together*, to contribute to the debate on issues concerning the future provision of care services; welcomes moves to address the postcode lottery of care and recognises the need for a similar debate to take place in Scotland, taking into account specific challenges and opportunities arising from a growing population of older people; notes that the consultation on the Green Paper closed in November 2009, and looks forward to ongoing dialogue with the UK Government to achieve shared objectives of ensuring that older and disabled people have fair access to good quality services and support."

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer, Johann Lamont took three and a half minutes to address the motion. She was then three and a half minutes over time. A member who fails to address a motion in that way should not be rewarded.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order. It might be helpful to make it clear that members have to address the substance of motions and amendments. Members have a bit of latitude in bringing in matters that they believe are germane to the topic. Obviously, that can go too far, in which case the Presiding Officer will bring them to a halt.

15:23

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I begin by paraphrasing Johann Lamont: she may come to the debate more in sorrow than anger; the rest of us come both in sorrow and anger.

There comes a time when the lifeblood of a Government begins to ebb away in the full glare of the public eye. So stands the Westminster Labour Government today. Even those who have stood resolutely behind the Government are finding its cack-handed policy too much to bear. How must stand Scottish Labour today? I say that notwithstanding Johann Lamont's spirited defence in the debate. She is a politician who has a personal integrity on the issue—which this policy risks compromising.

At first pass, I harboured suspicions that today's debate, originating as it does from the hand of the multitalented and loquacious Minister for Housing and Communities—a man with an eye ever on the main chance—may have been a well-timed, but typical, nakedly brazen attempt to further undermine the union, a sometime cause of the SNP. How could I have been so uncharitable? An investigation of the facts demonstrates clearly and alarmingly the confusion and muddle at the heart of the Westminster Labour Government. The minister has rightly alerted the Parliament to the immediate and pressing danger of the policy.

Surely the minister is the hero of the hour. The T-shirt says it all—in the minister's words, “non-partisan man”. He is right: in statements throughout last year and, particularly, in the debate in the Commons in December, the policy of the Westminster Government as articulated by ministers was both confused and contradictory. That is not wholly surprising, given that the policy is led by the hapless Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham. He is a man with an eye on the future, so confusion about the proposal is probably his best course of action for the present. On the one hand, he is decorated as one of the last die-hards to stand four-square in the bunker with the

author of this policy, the UK's second-longest serving unelected Prime Minister in history. On the other hand, he is being talked up as the winner of the dubious prize of being the next leader of his party. Being confused must be Mr Burnham's deliberate policy. However, in respect of today's debate that must be inexcusable, given that the wellbeing of so many people throughout the UK is at stake.

The issues arising from the green paper “Shaping the future of care together” are immense, and the financial implications are potentially profound for nearly a quarter of a million Scots who are currently in receipt of vital support. The Government and the Secretary of State for Health propose, to a degree that they are unable to make clear, to chip away piecemeal or wholesale at attendance allowance and disability living allowance to fund a new system of care in England—not so much “Shaping the future of care together” as replacing a system in which recipients of the allowances are in control of how the benefit is spent by one that might more aptly be titled “The state will control the future of your care”. As the minister identified, the proposed changes have the potential to have a profound effect not just on future policy in Scotland, but on the funding arrangements of benefits on which many Scots depend.

Before I turn to the financial consequences, let me be clear about our view of Labour's policy. An extraordinary coalition of organisations and individuals share the Conservative view that it is wrong. They include the Disability Alliance UK, which supports DLA and AA

“as national, non-means-tested benefits paid to disabled people to meet their higher living costs”;

the Royal National Institute of Blind People, which says that it is “strongly opposed” to the proposal; and the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation, which is

“adamant that no one is getting their mitts on vital extra-cost benefits”.

Leonard Cheshire Disability, Age Concern, the Parkinson's Disease Society and others are equally concerned, opposed and dismayed.

Our position on the principle that underpins the policy is clear and unequivocal. To paraphrase Andrew Lansley, the shadow health secretary, we make clear today on behalf of Scottish Conservatives our belief that the continuation, in their current form, of disability benefits that were introduced by John Major's Government, such as attendance allowance and disability living allowance, will give current recipients of such benefits and those who will be recipients in the future an opportunity, on a non-means-tested basis, to gain access to cash benefits that will

enable them to buy a wide range of services such as informal care, family care, support for travel and support for house improvements, based on personal choice and control. People use attendance allowance and disability living allowance to help them, under their own control, to create a quality of life for themselves that helps them to remain independent. It is clear that if we focus narrowly on care needs, we will miss out much that contributes to wellbeing. There is no health without wellbeing, and there is no independence without sustaining people's quality of life.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): Can Jackson Carlaw explain why he is referring to a policy when we are debating a green paper, in which various options are under consideration? Does he know something that we do not?

Jackson Carlaw: Johann Lamont made the same defence, which is pretty thin. If the green paper had been presented to the House of Commons by any political party other than Labour, Labour members would have been first to howl abuse and concern at the fact that the subject was being raised in the first place.

There is another aspect of the authorship of the green paper that needs to be clarified. The present Secretary of State for Scotland, Mr Murphy, was previously a minister in the Department for Work and Pensions. What opinion did he offer to the Secretary of State for Health? Surely he must have understood the implications not just of the policy but for devolved Administrations. Did he fight for Scotland's interests? Does Mr Murphy stand alongside Mr Burnham, not in defence of disabled Scots but in defence of this appalling policy?

Although the policy itself is unacceptable, it is painfully and regrettably clear that its consequences for Scotland were but a footnote in the UK Government's thinking.

The Labour Government at Westminster has form on that, as the minister reminded us—as was the case with the £30 million loss following the introduction of free personal care. We know that the demographics and circumstances of Scotland are such that the total claims for attendance allowance and disability living allowance taken together for over-65s, and claims for each of those benefits for over-65s taken separately, are proportionately higher in Scotland than in England. Abolition of any or all the benefits and transferring the proceeds to an English department lead to a Barnett consequential calculation according to which Scotland's recipients will lose out, given our higher proportional uptake. Taking into account the present system, that is estimated to be a net loss of about £157 million.

What a shambles. What unnecessary confusion. What a shameless health secretary—all bold on the announcement but panicked at the debate in December into a realisation of the consequences of his own policy and the furore that it has caused. Hope is at hand, however, and the minister can rest somewhat easy in his bed: a Conservative Government elected this coming May will not progress the policy.

We support the Scottish Government's motion and we call on all other members to do the same and not to allow themselves to be bullied into being dictated to by a Labour Government at Westminster that has lost touch with the people of Scotland.

Scotland must hope for better. Labour ministers must consult the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament, local authorities, health boards and other interested parties. Their dictatorship is at its end.

15:31

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is appropriate to state for the record at this point that my wife is disabled.

My party welcomes this debate on the future of attendance allowance, a benefit that, we believe, plays a specific and crucial role in meeting the additional costs of living with a disability. People are faced with those additional costs whether they are rich or poor, and the universal disability benefit therefore has a special part to play in meeting people's individual needs. In my party's view, a continuing role for a disability benefit that relates specifically to the additional costs of care, but which is separate from the process for assessment and meeting care needs, is an important part of the system.

The United Kingdom Government's green paper considers the development of a national care service in England, under which it is proposed that some elements of disability benefits, for example attendance allowance, be integrated into the social care funding stream. That proposal raises many questions regarding the implications for Scotland. Unfortunately, none of those questions is answered in the green paper, and that is we are asking them today.

The UK Government has clarified that people who are receiving the affected benefits at the time of reform will continue to receive the same level of cash support. Does that pledge extend to people living in Scotland? What will reform mean for people under 65 who do not yet receive attendance allowance? Will there still be universal entitlement and will people still be free to spend the money on the things that they choose to spend it on?

As we have heard from Jackson Carlaw, similar concerns have been voiced by organisations representing older people and disabled people. For example, Capability Scotland argues:

"If attendance allowance were dissolved into the social care 'kitty', the legitimate concern from disabled people is that these funds would also become means-tested and rationed."

That is the nub of Capability Scotland's concerns.

It is crucial that we ascertain what the proposed changes mean for current and future recipients of disability benefits in Scotland. We also need to know what reform will mean for funding streams to Scotland. There must be no repeat of the situation with free personal care, which has already been mentioned, where changes to the care system here resulted in a funding stream of about £30 million being withheld from Scotland.

In fairness, the green paper acknowledges, albeit very briefly, that any integration of disability benefits funding would affect Scotland. It states that the UK Government will work closely with the

"devolved administrations to reach a shared view on how to ensure the best possible outcomes for all people in the UK."

That is an extraordinarily brief paragraph in a 132-page document. It does not seem sufficient, given the potential of the green paper to make an impact on the lives of approximately 145,000 elderly and disabled people across Scotland. My party, like others, strongly supports calls for greater consultation with all interested parties in Scotland to ensure that relevant concerns are heard and taken fully into consideration.

Scottish ministers must also ensure that they work closely with UK ministers. They must use official channels to engage productively with the UK Government on this important issue. I say to Alex Neil and the SNP Government that they must not use the situation as an opportunity simply to get into a political sparring match with Labour at Westminster. As Jackson Carlaw said, that would take us into the question of the union, and I believe that that is not appropriate.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Is the member aware that dialogue has been going on between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on the issue?

Alex Neil: There has been a monologue, not a dialogue.

Jamie Stone: Opinions differ. I am not in a position to know whether it has been a monologue or a dialogue, but whatever has happened in the past, we must ensure that there is a productive dialogue in the future.

Alex Neil: I inform the member and the chamber that the Secretary of State for Health, Andy

Burnham, informed the Scottish Government of the publication of the green paper only one day before it was published. I do not call that dialogue, discussion or consultation.

Jamie Stone: As we move forward, we must ensure that all the facts are relayed clearly and accurately without causing any undue alarm to those concerned. An SNP news release quotes John Mason MP as saying:

"The proposal to scrap Attendance Allowance to help fill the black hole in the care system south of the border is extremely short-sighted. ... It is extremely unfair that, while bankers enjoy bonuses from the Labour government's billion pound bail out, it is disabled pensioners who will end up paying the price."

That assertion, along with similar ones from the Conservatives, is both unhelpful and misleading.

Many of the individuals concerned are extremely vulnerable. Although there are many unanswered questions at the moment—I agree with what the minister says about that—it is hugely important that no party uses the issue to frighten people and score political points. What is at issue is simply too important for that. Instead, the focus must be squarely on securing a positive outcome for older and disabled people in Scotland.

I look forward with great interest to the rest of the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. As I said earlier, we have some time in hand. If members want it, they can have about a minute and a half more than they were expecting to get. I take it that they can do the arithmetic.

15:37

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I have long been an admirer of Johann Lamont, a woman whom I hold in great esteem and no little affection, yet her speech was the most woeful that I have ever heard in all the years that I have known her in a debate in the Parliament. I profoundly believe that, along with many of her colleagues, Johann Lamont is deeply embarrassed at being attacked from the left by the Conservatives on the issue. That is probably why we have only a beleaguered gang of four sitting on the Labour benches at this time.

I thank Alex Neil for bringing the debate to the chamber. Although the issue is reserved, it is of huge importance to thousands of Scotland's most vulnerable people. The UK Labour Government's green paper, "Shaping the Future of Care Together", is ironically titled considering that the word "together" suggests some sort of debate or co-operation on the matter. As we heard a couple of moments ago, that has clearly not happened. The green paper outlines the UK Government's

plans to create what it calls a national care service that will integrate benefits such as attendance allowance and disability living allowance. However, it has been widely met with criticism, with many people noting that it is nothing more than a cynical attempt to swindle the most vulnerable people in our society out of money that they desperately need, in order to cut Labour's ever-mounting budget deficit.

Over the years, I have, at times, become desensitised to the cold and complacent way in which the Labour Party has often treated the people of Scotland, but I feel that in this instance it has outdone itself. The proposals represent the most appalling attempt to save money by hitting the poorest and most vulnerable—the very people whom the Labour Party claims to represent—harder than anyone else, and I find that shameful. It is no wonder that Peter Watt, Labour's general secretary until 2007, said in *The Daily Telegraph* on Monday, of the Prime Minister's ascent to power:

"There was no vision, no strategy, no co-ordination. It was completely dysfunctional. Gordon had been so desperate to become Prime Minister that we all assumed he knew what he was going to do when he got there. I imagined there was some grand plan, tucked away in a drawer. But if any such document existed, nobody seemed to know about it. Gordon was simply making it up as he went along."

The UK Government's green paper is a sign of that.

On 1 May last year, the former Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, said:

"There have been things that have been done recently which have made me feel ashamed to be a Labour member of Parliament."

I suggest that today we are talking about such an instance. If rules relating to parliamentary language did not prevent me from repeating them, I would quote John Hutton MP's comments in *The Scotsman* of 23 December 2009.

We all know that Labour has become an establishment party par excellence, with 15 unelected lords propping up Gordon Brown's chaotic and deeply divided Government. The fact that Labour is allowing the Royal Bank of Scotland—which is 84 per cent owned by the taxpayer—to hand over £1.5 billion in bonuses while cutting the benefits of those who can least afford such a cut says it all.

Through Labour's waffle and backtracking—of which we had an admirable example this morning and which is supported by an almost total media silence from the house newspapers, which are more interested in vilifying the former ministers who were behind last week's clueless coup attempt by Hewitt and Hoon than in helping to head off the proposed cuts—some things are now

clear. Those who receive money to spend as they see fit, according to their own needs, will no longer receive that money, which they use to cover the extra costs of living with a disability, such as extra fuel, clothing, leisure and housing costs, and to make up for loss of earnings. The recipient may use that small budget to pay for informal services that are delivered by friends and family, such as grass cutting or lifts to the shops. How can the UK Government seriously expect people to believe that stripping attendance allowance from the nation's older disabled people and handing the money over to local authorities to administer will provide a better system of care?

The green paper states:

"People who need services are often the experts in their own care, and the system for the future must respect this."

The utter hypocrisy of the green paper is clear. On the one hand, it argues that individuals are most aware of their own needs and, on the other, it favours the ability of an overly bureaucratic local authority system to assess individuals' needs as it sees fit.

Currently, 168,000 Scots are in receipt of attendance allowance and, for many, it is an essential source of income that keeps them above the poverty threshold. The removal of benefits would have a catastrophic effect on recipients and their families. The Institute for Social and Economic Research predicted that the removal of attendance allowance would cause 40 per cent of attendance allowance recipients to fall below the poverty line. In my constituency, 1,104 people would thus be affected. Receipt of attendance allowance by a disabled person is one of the grounds for the receipt of carers allowance by their carer. As the minister pointed out, scrapping attendance allowance will make it harder for carers to receive financial support. Currently, 97,000 people in Scotland are eligible for carers allowance and 46,300 receive payments. However, they stand to lose that crucial support in order to pay for social care in England.

Outrage at the proposals is widespread. Help the Aged, Age Concern, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Macmillan Cancer Support, Leonard Cheshire Disability and the Parkinson's Disease Society have all expressed concern. Indeed, just this afternoon, I received an e-mail from the Parkinson's Disease Society that included quotations from a host of sufferers who explained how the proposal would affect them. One said:

"The government is behaving like a mugger at a cashpoint. It sees old, frail and disabled people with cash in their hands and thinks 'I'll have some of that'. At least muggers only rob one person at a time."

Our own Jack McConnell expressed his opposition to the proposal by signing Bill Kidd's motion on the subject, and tens of thousands of signatories to a number 10 petition have expressed their outrage. The Labour Party must recognise that the public, the experts and even its own members do not wish it to go ahead with these outrageous proposals, which will impoverish thousands and provide a substandard level of care. The old and disabled people of Scotland deserve and demand better. Is it not about time that the UK Government listened to them? Should not Labour's Scottish front-bench members ignore their London bosses for once and do what is right? We all know that Labour MSPs will, after a modest period of time, turn turtle on the issue of minimum pricing of alcohol on orders from London. Today, there is an opportunity for the worm to turn and to stand up for Scotland and the most vulnerable members of our society.

In case some Labour members do not think that the recipients of the benefits are concerned, I inform them that Carers UK carried out a survey that found that 96 per cent of carers are opposed to the Government's plans.

Elaine Smith: I am curious about whether SNP members are suggesting that no review of the system of care is required. If so, what would they say about the Citizens Advice response to the green paper? It said:

"For many years adult social care services have been struggling to meet the demand that they face. As a result, many people with care and support needs are currently not receiving the services and financial support that they need."

I have some of those people in my constituency.

Kenneth Gibson: I thank the honourable member for Havana north for her contribution, which was a speech rather than a question.

What we see here are proposals to cut benefits. Perhaps the minister will contemplate bringing to the chamber a debate about the plans to cut housing benefit by some £300 million, which have been condemned by Labour MP Frank Field. This is an outrageous set of proposals from the UK Government, and I am delighted that, with the exception of members of the beleaguered Labour Party, everyone in the chamber looks set to unite against it.

15:45

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I am proud to stand alongside my colleague Johann Lamont. She is a good friend and colleague, and someone many members in the chamber would do well to view as a role model. She has fought for and championed the rights of people in the community who are more vulnerable than the rest

of us, and she deserves the absolute support and listening ear of members in the chamber.

I will not tolerate the type of debate that we have had this afternoon, in which bully boys such as Bob Doris and Joe FitzPatrick have stood up and tried to reduce a very serious debate to the sort of behaviour that I used to witness when Militant was active in London. It is ridiculous to bully Johann Lamont for the type of contribution that she was making.

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would like to know whether insults such as "bully boy" are appropriate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was listening carefully to what Helen Eadie was saying, and I will listen carefully to what she says in future.

Helen Eadie: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I must question the veracity of the Minister for Housing and Communities, Alex Neil. Various euphemisms have for many years existed in parliamentary debates here, at Westminster and no doubt elsewhere, but when someone is being untruthful, parliamentary language ranges from "economical with the truth"—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. It is not appropriate to say that other members are being untruthful. I ask Helen Eadie not to go down that route.

Helen Eadie: The minister said very clearly that there is no consultation—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no point in trying—we are not going to have an argument about it. We do not call other members untruthful, regardless of what we may think.

Helen Eadie: I will leave that point, but the facts will speak for themselves.

The Minister for Public Health and Sport, Shona Robison, in her response of 16 September to a question from Tavish Scott, clearly stated that as part of the consultation process she was ensuring the preparation of

"A formal response to the UK green paper".—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 16 September 2009; S3W-26630.]

She also said that the Government was indulging and engaging in the parliamentary process of consultation and that Scottish Government officials were present at meetings with the Secretary of State for Health to debate and discuss the variety of proposals that have been put forward.

We have to consider the whole debate—the big picture. We are talking about reshaping and trying to ensure universal provision for all our elderly people throughout Scotland. That is a growing

population. It is evident from the consultation that there is massive interest in the issue throughout the United Kingdom: there were 91,000 hits on the website and more than 17,500 responses to the consultation. It is an important issue for all who have been involved.

The SNP's motion was prompted by the question of how we pay for what the green paper outlines. However, it is disingenuous of the SNP and the Tories to propose that the debate is only about attendance allowance, because it is about a variety of options for how we are going to pay for the change that is needed in the system. The system is broken and must be fixed.

Joe FitzPatrick: I thank Helen Eadie for taking an intervention. I will ask her the same question that I tried to ask Johann Lamont earlier. Is she personally concerned about the proposals in the green paper?

Helen Eadie: Of course—every member in the chamber would be concerned about any proposals in a green paper.

The debate is about the funding options. A green paper has the status of a consultation paper, but how many members in the chamber have responded to the consultation? One member of the SNP—John Mason—attended the very long debate that took place in Westminster and made one brief, three-line intervention. That does not surprise me, because where were the SNP MPs when it came to standing up for the people of Scotland on minimum pay legislation? We know where they were: only one SNP MP went to the debating chamber to vote for that legislation. That is the kind of behaviour that we have come to expect from the SNP. The First Minister provides a role model for the rest of his colleagues at Westminster: he never attends Westminster debates to ensure that he stands up for Scotland on the concerns that really matter.

When a Welsh nationalist put his questions in that debate, the minister of state was clear in pointing out—as Johann Lamont did earlier—that those who are under 65 will not be affected and will not be included in the financial modelling. In answer to a question from Ann Clwyd, the Secretary of State for Health gave the same answer. He gave a big resounding “Yes”—all the options would be looked at.

It is difficult even to begin to know what the thinking of the Tories is on such a vital policy area. On the eve of the Conservative party conference, the *Daily Mail* had a front-page headline saying “£8,000 to save your home”. Two days later, a spokesman for the shadow health secretary was saying that “top-ups might be required”. The £8,000 figure lasted all of two or three days. We know that the debate on attendance allowance

has been going on for much more than a decade. During the two decades before Labour came into power, the Tory party dismantled social care, promoted private care and cut billions of pounds from the care budget.

Jackson Carlaw much maligns the Prime Minister—my friend and colleague, whom I am immensely proud to work with—but the Prime Minister has been given world acclaim over and over. Meanwhile, David Cameron worries about the digital air-brushing of his image much more than he worries about policy. The nature of how the world is changing is an important point in this debate.

I see that Tricia Marwick is present in the chamber. She has just reminded me of a point that I almost forgot—I am so glad that she is here—about Fife Council, which is run by the SNP and the Liberal Democrats. Under the SNP and the Lib Dems, between December and April Fife Council will provide no respite care. No shower will be installed in the home of my constituent in Kelty, who is just one of those on what is a long waiting list. Some people are now paying £70 extra every week because of the additional charges that have been introduced by the SNP-led Fife Council, which is supported by the Liberal Democrats. I am ashamed that some members in the Parliament think that it is smug to sit and laugh about that. I deprecate the minister for doing that and tell him that it is not a laughing matter that my constituents are being hurt.

15:52

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): I am pleased that the green paper's proposed changes to the provision of attendance allowance for those of our fellow Scots who will be affected by a major change in the delivery of that benefit has been raised as a matter for debate in the Parliament. The proposals might be contained in a green paper, but the fact is that green papers have a habit of developing into white papers and becoming law. It is important that we ensure that, since we were not asked previously, we in Scotland have the opportunity to put our point of view on the issue.

Having lobbied on the issue at every opportunity since the changes were mooted last July, I must say that I am saddened that the media in Scotland have, in general, been painfully slow to make our public aware of the situation. I see that no member of the media has bothered to turn up to observe today's debate from the press gallery.

I am upset about that lack of media coverage because, although the proposed major change to what is an important benefit was consulted on the length and breadth of England, not one Scottish

pensioner, disabled person or organisation was consulted. That is despite the fact that page 104 of the green paper "Shaping the Future of Care Together" states:

"Any changes to the care and support system in England that integrate some disability benefits funding would affect the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, and Northern Ireland".

Obviously, the green paper has been compiled to address the future of paying for care in England, but to pay for that care the UK Government intends to raid the welfare benefits funding for the elderly and the disabled.

Page 103 of the green paper proposes

"integrating some disability benefits such as Attendance Allowance into the care and support system."

That means taking money that is currently paid as a non-means-tested benefit direct to the individual elderly disabled person and putting it directly into care services instead. In other words, the benefit will be scrapped.

It is inconvenient that attendance allowance is a UK-wide benefit, because it means that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have care systems that are different from the one in England, will all be affected as well. The number of people who will be affected is quite staggering. As the minister said, according to the Institute for Social and Economic Research, more than 67,000 of the 168,000 recipients of attendance allowance in Scotland would fall below the poverty line if they did not receive that allowance.

We are told that attendance allowance will not be removed but will simply be delivered in a different way. Rather than applying to the Department for Work and Pensions for a UK-wide benefit, people will apply to their local authority, but where will the extra council staff come from to assess eligibility and to pay out that benefit? How will those staff be paid for? What training will they receive and who will provide it?

Jackie Baillie: My understanding is that there is currently a double assessment—people are assessed separately for attendance allowance and for their services. Even if the member does not support the specific proposal, does he not agree that merging assessments is the direction in which we want to go?

Bill Kidd: I do not think that it will be possible to merge those assessments without an increase in staffing.

How much of the increasingly scarce resources that are available to fund a benefit that is vital to so many people will be eaten up in bureaucracy? The British Government's green paper states, on page 22, that local authorities will be

"the channel for state funding and support"

and will "undertake assessments" of claimants. Therefore, it is fair to say that the duplication across the 32 local authorities in Scotland that will result from the replacement of the current single system will suck scarce resources out of the system.

Members should remember that attendance allowance and DLA for the over-65s are a lifeline for many of our constituents, whether rural or urban. All members have been contacted by such respected organisations as the Royal National Institute for Deaf People and the Parkinson's Disease Society, which have told us that the legitimate fears of people who receive attendance allowance and DLA must be taken seriously by all members of all political parties.

Elaine Smith: I point out that it is also stated on page 104 of the Government's document:

"We will work closely with all three devolved administrations to reach a shared view on how to ensure the best possible outcomes for all people in the UK."

I hope that that reassures the member.

Bill Kidd: It would reassure me if the consultation had taken place in Scotland at the same time as it took place in England—that would have made me much happier. It is a bit late to consult people after the fact.

We were elected to act as the voice of people who have serious concerns about such serious issues. We must look seriously at the potential effects on the incomes of, and the provision of care for, the elderly and the disabled. We must also take account of the position of their carers, whose benefit, insubstantial as it is, is dependent on the cared-for person being eligible for attendance allowance.

Members should also remember that it is not only those who currently receive attendance allowance who will be affected; those who would be eligible for it in the future stand to be affected. As has been said, on 22 October last year, the Secretary of State for Health at Westminster, Andy Burnham MP, told the national children and adult services conference:

"I can state categorically that we have ruled out any suggestion that DLA for under-65s will be brought into the new National Care Service."

From that it can be inferred that the DLA care component of payments to people who are over 65 or who will turn 65 could be at risk. He must address that issue, which means that someone who is under 65 and who presently receives DLA would not benefit from any transitional payment after their 65th birthday but would have to reapply for attendance allowance to the local authority that was administering it and would have to be reassessed.

As the saying goes, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." The attendance allowance benefit works well in Scotland.

Johann Lamont: Will the member give way?

Bill Kidd: No. I am nearly finished.

It is disgraceful that our elderly and disabled should have that benefit tampered with without consultation or prior notice—as has happened in this case—purely as a by-product of changes to the care system in England. I would not like to be the politician or candidate who has to sell that one to the electorate either at the Westminster elections this year or at the Scottish Parliament elections next year.

16:00

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): This is a strange debate to have on the very important issue of support for disabled people and the future of care. The topic is a green paper—it is not a firm proposal—that was subject to consultation last year, when anyone could have submitted a response. I was beginning to wonder whether anyone had read the green paper, so I was pleased that Bill Kidd was able to quote some bits of it.

The Scottish National Party seems to suggest that the green paper is going to impose changes on devolved services, without any input from the Scottish Parliament. After 10 years of devolution, I doubt that anybody in the chamber would sit back and do nothing if there was any suggestion that Westminster intended to impose changes on devolved areas of policy, such as social care. However, the Government is not doing that.

Sandra White: Elaine Smith referred to consultation. However, as has already been said, and as I know from reading the green paper, the 36 consultations all took place in England. If there was nothing to hide, why did they not come up here to Scotland and go to Wales and Northern Ireland to consult people?

Elaine Smith: Anyone could have responded to the consultation. In fact, we are interested to know whether the Scottish Government did so.

Nothing will be imposed on this Parliament. Even the Tories, all these years on, are now big fans of devolution. Today, they certainly seem to be in coalition with the SNP on this issue. However, they are not averse to spinning scaremongering stories to suit their narrow political agenda for the general election. I have here a copy of a letter from Andy Burnham to David Cameron, to address David Cameron's claim that the Government is going to cut disability benefits. Andy Burnham asked David Cameron to

"withdraw your pernicious and misleading campaign, designed to prey on the fears of the most vulnerable in society."

I hope that he does that.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Can Elaine Smith confirm that, of all the options that are canvassed in the green paper, the only ones that have not been specifically rejected by the Government involve the scrapping of attendance allowance and disability living allowance? That is a fact.

Elaine Smith: I do not think that it is a fact. There are three options on the table, and the Government has said that it will discuss further any moves in that regard. The implications for this Parliament will be discussed with this Parliament. It is therefore simply wrong to say that the green paper is anything other than a discussion paper, so I am not clear what we are debating today and why we are debating it. The minister's opening remarks served to confuse the issue further, because he is wrong if he is indicating that it is a done deal.

I hope that the minister is not being confused by some members with regard to the Personal Care at Home Bill, which will allow the UK Government to provide free personal care in the home for all people in England with the highest needs. It is a wee, one-clause bill that will end the postcode lottery for the most vulnerable in England. Surely the nationalists cannot object to that kind of improvement for people south of the border. It would be breathtakingly hypocritical if we attempted to interfere in legislation that is under the jurisdiction of Westminster and deny people a free care package that is already available here.

It would be helpful if the debate was about clearing up misconceptions about attendance allowance in the green paper, but it is not, is it? The debate is about the SNP yet again using Parliament's time to snipe at Westminster. We need to know whether the Government submitted a response to the consultation. If it did, why is a copy of it not available at the back of the chamber? If it exists, why is it that the Scottish Parliament information centre could not find it when I asked about it? We would like to see it. Further, have ministers sought meetings with Westminster Government ministers to discuss specific proposals and explore whether in the longer term changes will be needed to devolved responsibilities?

Capability Scotland has called on both the UK and Scottish Governments to reassure disabled people who are worried about their benefits being stopped, because of the misinformation, scaremongering and hype on the issue. Capability Scotland has pointed out that the green paper sets out many different policy options and that we need

to be clear about what the implications will be for disabled people in Scotland. It expects the UK and Scottish Governments to clarify that. It is clear that some of the concern arises from alarmist rumours. Due to that, Capability Scotland has felt it necessary to reassure people. I quote from its response:

"We understand that the way the Green Paper has been reported on some websites may lead people to assume that after the consultation period ends, their disability benefits will stop. This is not the case. If you get Attendance Allowance at the moment, there will be no changes within, or at the end of, the consultation period."

There is very little chance that we will see legislation on proposals to reform Attendance Allowance before the next general election and there will be transitional protection for current disability benefit recipients. This means that if a disability benefit is amended or phased out, existing recipients of that benefit retain their entitlement to it."

It is important to make that point. If any changes are made, that will be the case.

I would therefore expect any responsible devolved Government to address scaremongering, denounce it, give people the correct information, and not add fuel to the fire. Will the minister now commit to doing that, rather than panicking people by picking a fight with Westminster when there is no need for confrontation? Sensible discussion should be taking place.

Of course people will be wary of change. I am always wary of what any Government—not just the SNP Government—is up to when it talks about change and modernisation. Sometimes that is because I look at policy with socialist eyes: the modernisation of public services can often be a euphemism for privatisation. However, any sensible person has to recognise that, much of the time, change is genuinely required to make services better and more fit for purpose.

I am not sure how much time I have left, Presiding Officer.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Twenty-five minutes.

Elaine Smith: Good.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have a minute or so.

Elaine Smith: In its response, the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated:

"The Commission congratulates the Government for moving the agenda forward. The current system is unsustainable and is already failing thousands of the most marginalised and excluded members of society. Some fundamentally hard decisions need to be made to achieve long-term solutions, and they can only be made through debate and consensus."

I made that point earlier to our SNP colleagues. Those decisions should not be made through conflict, misinformation and scaremongering.

Citizens Advice Scotland makes that point as well. I used its response earlier in an intervention.

The SNP Government really has to stop sniping and start acting responsibly on the issue. I hope that it is listening to members' speeches and that it will take the opportunity that the green paper affords it to inspire a reasoned debate on care issues in Scotland. The reality is that many of the most marginalised and excluded members of our society are not benefiting from the current system. We have to change that, but we should do it through debate and consensus.

Our objective must be to ensure that older and disabled people get good-quality care and support. That should be the most important issue that comes out of the debate and should be what we are all trying to achieve for people in Scotland. The scaremongering around the issue, whatever its source, really must stop.

16:08

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): For the benefit of Labour members, let us remind ourselves what the green paper proposes. It sets out proposals for a new national care service to provide long-term care for older people in England. That is not scaremongering. It says "in England". Never mind Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. The only mention of those is relegated to the back of the green paper.

It saddens me that someone who says that she has socialist principles—Elaine Smith—is sticking up for the green paper, white paper or whatever colour it is. I say that because I would like to remind Labour members that it did not matter whether it was a green paper or a white paper that Tony Blair took to Westminster when the Scottish people said, "We do not want to go to war with Iraq." The Labour Government still did that, regardless of what people said. I ask Labour members whether it would have mattered even if we had been able to take part in the consultation process. Would the Westminster Government have listened to us? Will it listen to us even now?

Elaine Smith: Will the member take an intervention?

Sandra White: I would like to carry on with my speech.

As we heard, the proposed changes to attendance allowance in the UK Government's green paper might affect more than 150,000 people throughout Scotland. That is not a number to be trivialised, glossed over or dismissed out of hand, and it is shameful that some members on the Labour benches appear to be keen to do that.

The questions that the proposed reforms throw up are worthy of debate; in fact, it is vital that the

Scottish Parliament has that debate to inform the public how these changes might threaten their livelihoods and to make the UK Government aware of the chamber's stated position.

Johann Lamont's amendment is flatly contradicted by the House of Commons library's own research into the proposed changes. The amendment refers to a "postcode lottery". The research states that

"disability benefits are popular because they provide a universal entitlement which does not depend on where a person lives".

The research also cites the welfare rights expert Neil Bateman, who

"argues that it would be 'catastrophic for millions of the poorest and most vulnerable' if Attendance Allowance or DLA were diverted to fund social care"

and raises concerns about

"the future of 'passported extras' such as Carers allowance, and the danger of a 'postcode lottery' replacing the existing 'standard, national, transparent and legally enforceable criteria' governing social security benefits."

That last comment should be of interest to members, particularly Johann Lamont.

Jamie Stone: Although I do not disagree with Sandra White's point about funds being diverted to social care, I wonder whether she agrees that in this kind of debate members on all sides of the chamber should be careful not to denigrate social work departments and councils per se, because they, too, are part of the public sector. I wish Michael Matheson were in the chamber, because I know that, as a former social worker, he would stand up for the profession. I am simply making a caveat.

Sandra White: Jamie Stone is absolutely right. However, I was not actually denigrating anyone; I was simply making the point to Labour members and to Johann Lamont in particular that their amendment is totally skewed and that the House of Commons research note says the opposite of what they are saying. I also remind Mr Stone that these conclusions are not mine; they are the views of the House of Commons library and experts in the field of welfare provision. Johann Lamont is not in the chamber, but I want to put on record that I would be happy to give her a copy of this research so that she can better inform not only herself but the rest of the Labour Party about what is happening.

It is hardly surprising that these proposals have met with real opposition from Scottish society and the various organisations that represent the wide range of people who are likely to be affected. At my surgeries, at meetings of elderly forums and so on, people who have supported Labour all their lives—in other words, Labour's core vote—have approached me to express their concerns and

worries about these changes. They are angry at the attitude of their Labour representatives and are looking for people who will stand up for them and ask the questions that the Labour Party is so unwilling to ask. The UK Government might have acknowledged the need to explain these reforms and engage with people who have concerns or who might be affected by the changes, but the Labour Party in the Scottish Parliament does not seem to think that it should talk to people and find out what they think about what is going on.

As for the consultation process that has been much lauded by Helen Eadie—who has also left the chamber—and other members of the Labour Party, I accept that a public consultation and a series of 36 stakeholder events were organised between last July and October to give stakeholder audiences the opportunity to learn about the green paper, to share responses and to meet and question senior policy officials. However, as I said earlier, all 36 events were held in England; not one took place in Scotland. That is an absolute disgrace.

Perhaps a member of the Labour Party might in one of their speeches, in summing up or whatever, explain why people in Scotland have been sidelined, ignored and not consulted and are, as usual, expected to bear the brunt of funding social care in England. Even though the UK Government has explicitly stated that the changes will affect the whole of the UK, I fear that we will hear nothing. Also, the Labour Party keeps telling us that the Scottish Government has been consulted, but we now know from the minister that it has not been informed at all. Perhaps when she is summing up, Jackie Baillie will be able to tell me different. I am sure that she will come up with something. It is simply not acceptable to propose the changes without holding one single meeting to discuss their effects with the people who will be directly affected, while it is deemed necessary to hold 36 meetings in England alone.

I would also be interested to know how those meetings were funded. Were they funded by the Benefits Agency? If they were, that would mean that Scottish taxpayers paid to inform people in England of changes while being denied that information here in Scotland. We should know that.

While we are talking about those who are directly affected by the changes, we should take a moment to think about those who will be indirectly affected—those who dedicate their lives to caring for others. Thousands of people save the social care services millions of pounds a year, and we should not forget that, at some point in our lives, most people will know or will become a carer. The proposed changes to carers allowance will directly affect the people who put their lives to one side to

care for others, because currently their allowance depends on the people they care for receiving attendance allowance. That is one more reason why the proposals are ill-thought-out and potentially very damaging, and why the UK Government must commit to engaging seriously with stakeholders not only in England but in Scotland before attempting to take its proposals any further.

The Labour Party opposite has been told often enough, so it must know that the proposals have met real opposition throughout Scotland and that, despite assurances from Labour, all is not clear and all is not well. I would like to get my message across to the Labour Party here and at Westminster that it cannot pull the wool over the Scottish people's eyes any more.

16:16

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I am wondering whether there is some quicksand in the chamber today, because the longer the debate goes on, the more Labour members seem to be sinking away. Only two are left in the chamber, and I am quite concerned about their wellbeing.

I declare an interest in today's debate. My mother and father are in receipt of attendance allowance and carers allowance, so this is a real family situation for me.

Most people should be sympathetic to the idea of reforming the benefits regime in England and Wales to provide better services for those who are most in need: I know that I am. However, any increase in social provision must be paid for somehow, and whether the scheme is affordable will be the UK Government's main consideration when deciding whether to implement its policy. Numerous areas of Government spending could be curtailed to increase that provision. I will not make party-political points about the things that I would cut, but we are certainly starting to get a full picture of the Labour Government's staggering past and present waste. Parliament needs to send out the message today that when the UK Government goes looking for cash to pay for any new schemes, it should look elsewhere, because this Parliament will fight to protect the dignity of up to 168,000 Scottish elderly disabled citizens whose income is being put at risk by the UK Labour Party.

We are talking not about luxury items but about the most basic level of financial support for many people who are leading considerably more difficult lives than many of us lead. It does not matter how hard the two Labour members who are in the chamber at the moment try to dress up the proposals, they will take money away from Scottish pensioners. It could not be clearer.

Labour Party interests and the interests of Scotland's most vulnerable citizens are in direct conflict. It is simply not decent to come to the chamber and pretend that the green paper is anything other than a stated intention to scrap attendance allowance, and to save money by paying less to those who are in need in order to commit to higher expenditure and social care provision in England and Wales. Labour seems to be saying that somehow it will not really affect Scotland. How can that be? Where is the detail to support such claims? It is certainly not in the green paper.

What about the knock-on effects? In the city of Glasgow area that I represent, there are more than 8,400 carers allowance claimants. If attendance allowance is a required benefit for claiming carers allowance, will that knock out the other benefit? What about informal care arrangements with family members and friends? Where is the recognition of the enormous efforts of those unpaid carers when attendance allowance payments barely cover additional expenses?

The only thing that seems clear in the green paper is that Labour is getting rid of attendance allowance. I say that because I have not heard one Labour MP or MSP rule it out. If the paper is a consultation, let me hear someone on the Labour benches rule out scrapping attendance allowance—now is their opportunity. I see that two more Labour members are with us, but the quicksand seems to have been replaced by tumbleweed and silence. As I said, the only thing that is clear in the green paper is that Labour wants to get rid of attendance allowance, which I believe is wrong.

As Labour members have refused to rule it out, they must think that I am wrong and that I am misinforming people. Therefore, they think that Age Concern, Help the Aged, the Royal National Institute of Blind People and Leonard Cheshire Disability are wrong and are misinforming people. That is if we believe the Labour argument, but I do not accept or believe it. According to Labour, the Institute for Social and Economic Research must be wrong, too, when it says that the measures could force 40 per cent of attendance allowance recipients below the poverty line. Even the former First Minister Jack McConnell must be wrong. My goodness, he was wrong on many things, but on this one he is certainly right.

Let us not beat about the bush: it is not good enough simply to say that we do not yet have the full detail—we know enough. The UK benefits system is infamously cumbersome and inflexible. If some members were not so dogmatically opposed to the Parliament having control over the tax and benefits system, we might get a real debate on how the proposals would impact on

Scotland. As the system stands, I can see no workable way for attendance allowance to be removed while simultaneously protecting the income levels of people who currently receive it. It is not clear from the green paper how any Barnett consequential from social care spending in England will come to Scotland. We are not even sure whether the Scottish Parliament would be able to reinstate any lost income.

A similar situation has arisen with the Scottish Parliament's policy on kinship care. The UK tax and benefits system has not been flexible enough to allow us to top up the income of vulnerable people who are kinship carers using our Scottish block grant. If we did that, the UK tax and benefits system would take it away. The system is inflexible and cumbersome and we have no way of knowing whether it will be any better under the robbing of attendance allowance that the Labour Party proposes. I doubt very much that it will be.

Jamie Stone: Can we look at the wider context of what the member is saying, which is that, if money is withdrawn from disabled people in Scotland—however it is done—they are unable to spend that money in the local economy? That surely has as much of a hit in Bob Doris's constituency as it does in mine. The spend from such people supports local businesses and therefore benefits the wider Scottish economy.

Bob Doris: I completely agree with Jamie Stone. That is a perfect example of the unintended knock-on consequences of taking money away from the poorest and most vulnerable people in Scotland. That is why I hope that this afternoon the Conservatives, Lib Dems and SNP will oppose Labour's plans to take money away from the most vulnerable people in our society.

Elaine Smith: Does the member recognise the comment in the green paper that

"Whatever the outcome of the consultation, we want to ensure that people receiving any of the relevant benefits at the time of reform would continue to receive an equivalent level of support and protection under a new and better care and support system"?

Is the member suggesting that, if the decision is taken to end attendance allowance—although that is only subject to consultation, as he said—people who currently receive it will cease to receive it?

Bob Doris: Oh jeez—where to start with that? Elaine Smith specifically talked about people who currently receive attendance allowance, thereby saying that no one else will be able to get it if the allowance is scrapped. If Elaine Smith had listened, she would know that I clearly outlined that, given the UK tax and benefits system, it is not possible to give the guarantee that she mentions. I certainly will take no assurances from a UK

Government that guaranteed me that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

I have one further key point, which is that all the devolved Administrations and the UK Government, irrespective of which party is in power, have to work together closely before even a green paper is produced, because a domestic decision by the UK Government for England will have a knock-on effect in Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Likewise, a domestic decision in Scotland will have knock-on effects for the UK tax and benefits system. It is scandalous, stupid and outrageous that there was no consultation with Scotland or the Scottish Government. We should support the Government's motion and chuck out these abhorrent Labour plans.

16:25

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): It is always a joy and a pleasure to engage in an intelligent debate and I look forward to my next opportunity to do so. I say that because, notwithstanding the seriousness of the issue, it was a piece of party-political mischief, six months out at the most from a general election, to lodge the motion. Equally, it was a piece of kite flying by the Labour Party at Westminster to publish a green paper, not that many months ago, when, if the polls are any guideline, it is questionable whether it will be in power to apply any part of it.

This has not been a particularly rational debate, although one or two good points have been made. The representations that we have received about the debate from across the disability sector clearly indicate the level of misunderstanding and the lack of clarity in the green paper, the responsibility for which lies firmly at the door of the Westminster Government. When the Westminster Government puts such a document into the public domain, it must get its act together and clarify exactly what it is talking about. It seems to me and, based on what other members have said, it seems to many others, that that has not been done effectively, efficiently and consistently. That is not good enough. It is not good enough that people feel, rightly or wrongly, that they are under threat as a result of a document that has been published by the Government of the day.

Jamie Stone made some very good points in his speech and, in particular, in his recent intervention about disabled people's spending power.

My concern about some of the comments made by Labour members is that the phrase quoted from the green paper about the provision of a service of an "equivalent level" takes us away from the independent living agenda. It means that we will take away from people the right to make decisions about their life, their expenditure and their social

activity and even decisions about employing the staff that they want. It is surprising that that has come forward, even as a proposal, from a Labour Government—albeit one that is probably in its death throes. That is not acceptable.

To take this money, however it is configured, and give it to our local authorities, when across Scotland people have to wait—in some cases for two or three years—for independent direct payments to be authorised by local authorities, is not a recipe that will enhance in any way, shape or form the ability of disabled people to make decisions about their lives. In the 1980s we moved away from a situation in which people were in institutions and their lifestyles were directed by organisations. Any alteration to how these benefits are given as an entitlement to disabled people that means that they will be at the behest of either bureaucrats or even more politicians is not acceptable. That is the debate that we should have been having rather than the party-political knockabout to which, sadly, it descended.

Johann Lamont: I take that serious point about how we deliver on the rhetoric that we hear throughout the chamber and elsewhere and how we make the personalisation of care real. Does the member think that there is a difficulty in developing a care service that establishes minimum standards and reasonable charging throughout Scotland? To what extent does that mean that we would have to cut across the individual role of local authorities?

Hugh O'Donnell: There has to be a national care standard, but I am not sure that there can be a one-size-fits-all approach to delivering it. Care has to be person centred and based on the needs of the individual, but there have to be minimum guidelines and a benchmark against which the service is delivered, so that the individual can see whether they are getting what they would recognise as the minimum standard. There has not been quite enough leadership in driving forward that agenda—I am not referring exclusively to the current Administration, although I am tempted to do so.

I cannot say a huge amount about the debate that is positive. It has provided some entertainment but, regrettably, it has not succeeded in taking forward the agenda in a serious way. It has not done this chamber or the public perception of our understanding of how serious these issues are for disabled people a great deal of justice.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): At this stage, we have six minutes in hand, so, to be fair, I offer each of the remaining closing speakers up to an extra two minutes each. I call David McLetchie, who has up to eight minutes.

16:31

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)

(Con): We should start by acknowledging that, as Labour members pointed out in the debate, a green paper is, first and foremost, a consultation document that is issued by a Government and which might, as this one does, set out a number of policy options for discussion. Green papers are in essence political toes in the water—they are designed to test the temperature. In that respect, they stand lower in the hierarchy of Government publications and pronouncements than, say, white papers, which are more in the nature of statements of policy and proposals for legislation.

However, although green papers may canvass a number of options, they do signal a direction of travel. It is interesting to note from this green paper that, of the five options canvassed, those that remain under consideration and have not been specifically rejected by the Government would all involve, in one way or another, the scrapping of attendance allowance and disability living allowance for the over-65s. I refer Elaine Smith and Helen Eadie, who disputed that point, to the impact assessment that accompanies the green paper, which, in relation to the options and their funding, states:

"The estimates make a number of assumptions, including that funding from some disability benefits, for example Attendance Allowance, could be drawn into the care and support system to deliver a new and better offer".

It is a matter of debate whether it would be a new and better offer, but there is no doubt whatever that the scrapping of these benefits is a key part of all the options under consideration.

As we have heard, for people in Scotland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, the proposals will have profound consequences—nearly a quarter of a million Scots claim the benefits that may be scrapped if the proposals are introduced here. As members pointed out, for most of those claimants the benefits constitute a major part of household income. They are a direct cash benefit that gives those claimants control over expenditure on their care needs. Alex Neil generously acknowledged the role of the previous Conservative Government in introducing these benefits and their importance as an anti-poverty measure. Bill Kidd was also quite right to praise their value.

It is precisely because the green paper is a consultation document that I am appalled to find that Her Majesty's Government failed to consult in advance the Scottish Government on the implications for Scotland, so that all the options could have been considered by everyone in the United Kingdom at the same time. Given the history involving this Parliament and Government and the relationship between attendance allowance and free personal care, one would have

thought that the lesson would have been learned by now. To be frank, it is little short of a disgrace that such an approach comes from the Labour Party and the Labour Government, which are supposed to be committed to maintaining the United Kingdom.

The green paper was published in June. In the same month, we received the Calman commission's final report, which discusses at length Scotland's place in the United Kingdom economic and social union. Calman points out that "social protection is financed by UK-wide resources."

He says:

"This seems to us to be a fundamental part of the Union, and the evidence is that Scottish people wish it to continue."

Hear, hear to that. He also says:

"There has to be a common understanding between the Parliaments in the Union about the services that constitute the welfare state—the most important of which will be health care, care for the elderly and education—and on what basis are they supplied—substantially free at the point of need."

Hear, hear to that. However, in the very same month as the Calman commission's report was issued, the United Kingdom Government published a policy paper that discusses changes that have profound implications for that social union, and for the balance between payments to individuals through the reserved system of welfare benefits and care services that are delivered to the same people through the Scottish Government and our local councils, under devolution. The paper contains no discussion whatever of the implications for Scotland of that profound change in the benefits system and makes only the scantiest reference to Scotland, as Jamie Stone said.

Labour should hang its head in shame at that omission. Nothing is particularly wrong with Johann Lamont's amendment; the problem is that it is months late. Scottish Labour has—frankly—fallen down on the job. Her Majesty's Government was responsible for initiating the discussion through the joint ministerial committees and the other organisations and institutions for co-operation between Her Majesty's Government and the Scottish Government, so that the proposals could be considered in the round.

Is it seriously suggested that attendance allowance and disability living allowance could be scrapped in England but retained for Scottish claimants? Does Labour seek to dismantle the whole concept of a UK-wide social welfare and benefits system? If that is not Labour's intention—I hope that it is not—why were the proposals not properly discussed with the Scottish Government before the green paper was released, to see

whether a common approach north and south of the border could be achieved?

We Conservatives might not have liked the common approach that might have emerged. As Jackson Carlaw said, Conservatives oppose any proposals that entail scrapping the allowances and oppose the transfer of funds from direct payments to individuals into funding of service provision. However, the proposals should at least have been discussed between the Governments beforehand and Scotland should not have been excluded or merely considered belatedly as an afterthought.

I regret to say that Her Majesty's Government has done the union no favours with its casual attitude to this important issue. Thankfully, that Government will soon change and we will have a Conservative Government in the United Kingdom that respects the role of the Scottish Government and of the Parliament and will involve our institutions fully in discussions on important policy issues that—as in this case—clearly have consequences for devolved and reserved responsibilities. David Cameron has made that pledge and his Government will most certainly honour it.

The Presiding Officer: In redistributing time, I find that I have a little more for Ms Baillie than I thought. I can offer her 10 and a half minutes.

16:39

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I think that that is truly wonderful, Presiding Officer, but I am not sure whether the rest of the Parliament necessarily agrees—[*Interruption.*] I hear Alex Neil from a sedentary position performing as the pantomime dame, which he does so well in the chamber.

I will start with something that Alex Neil said. In all the heat of the debate, we need to remind ourselves of the scale of the challenge that we face. Scotland's 65-plus population is projected to rise by 21 per cent by 2016 and 62 per cent by 2031. For those who are 85 and over, the projected rise is 38 per cent by 2016 and 134 per cent by 2031. I look forward to seeing many of my colleagues in that age group.

Not only are those statistics staggering in nature, but they represent a huge challenge for us as policy makers here in Scotland and across the UK. Just as the debate has been initiated in Scotland so it has also, rightly, been initiated across the UK, hence the green paper, "Shaping the Future of Care Together". We need to work together to meet the challenges and to maximise the opportunities that arise from a growing elderly population. The challenge is no different in Scotland than it is in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The SNP Government contends that somehow it has not been consulted, but I know that there has been regular dialogue between both Governments. These things go on, ordinarily, behind the scenes. They are about the smooth running of government; it is essential that they occur. The Scottish Government should consider its answer to a question from Johann Lamont on the very issue of the consultation. The answer was made by Shona Robison, who said:

"A high level, policy-based response to the UK green paper, *Shaping the Future of Care Together*, is being drafted by the Health and Community Care Delivery Group. The membership of this group includes the following organisations: COSLA, Association of Directors of Social Work, City of Edinburgh Council, Perth and Kinross Council, NHS Dumfries and Galloway, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, NHS Lanarkshire, NHS Lothian, NHS Health Scotland and the Care Commission. The draft response will be signed off jointly by Scottish ministers and COSLA.

The UK Department of Health has an extensive interactive consultation running on a dedicated website. Any individual or interest group in the UK can post comments and responses to the consultation up until it closes on the 13 November. I understand that Scottish voluntary organisations are fully aware of the paper and that some of them may be responding to the consultation."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 29 October 2009; S3W-27948.]

The response is helpful. It shows on-going dialogue not only between officials but at ministerial level and between organisations across Scotland. Guess what? The Scottish Government appears to have made a submission. I say "appears" because I had some difficulty finding it—more of that in a minute.

I say to Sandra White that I would take a dim view if the UK Government were to consult on the future of care services. The last time that I looked, care services were devolved. They are a matter for this Parliament and for us to consult on.

Sandra White: Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: No, I will not.

Sandra White: Will she take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: Hold on a second.

I welcome the fact that Shona Robison is consulting on the matter. That is absolutely the right thing to do. It will ensure that we have the right approach in Scotland and that we feed into the process. Before collective amnesia sets in, I am sure that the minister will have the good grace to accept that there has been, and continues to be, substantive consultation on the matter, including on a range of issues. The point is an important one.

I am disappointed that the Scottish Government appears not to have published its response. I hope that Alex Neil will give a commitment to do that. I

managed to obtain a copy of the letter that the minister sent to the UK Government, although I am not sure that it is the accurate, final version. Not surprisingly, in the letter, the minister is considerably more measured in tone. He says:

"We fully recognise and respect the need for a long-term review of social care and support ... there is a need to explore options for potentially radical changes to the long-term funding of care and support in the UK to ensure that it is 'fair, sustainable and unambiguous'".

That is right, but it is important that members know about, debate and contribute to Scottish Government proposals.

In his contribution, Alex Neil outlined the scale of the challenge that we face, just as I did at the outset of my speech. However, he did not say how we will meet the challenge, what services people can expect and how we will pay for them. I would have much more respect for the minister—as I would for many members in the debate—if he had come to the chamber to outline what he will do about the postcode lottery of services for older and disabled people in Scotland. He should also have said how we will deal with the challenges that we face in all our communities across Scotland. Will he tell the chamber why, for the same service of equal quality, someone in one local authority area is paying £30 a week while someone in a neighbouring area is paying £300 a week? Why are people who are desperate for a direct payment languishing on waiting lists, which are growing? Those are the real challenges for which I accept responsibility; the Scottish Government, too, should do so.

I say to Jackson Carlaw that the Labour Government has led the debate on the implementation of the personalisation of care. We recognise, as he did in his contribution, that services do not define people: personalisation is much wider and is about how people live their lives. That remains at the heart of our proposals for care of older people and those with disabilities. It is incumbent on all of us, irrespective of party, to come up with proposals to meet such future challenges.

As ever, Alex Neil mounted a robust and loud defence of attendance allowance. Many of us come to this debate recognising absolutely the value of the attendance allowance and the disability living allowance to those who are older and have disabilities. Members are right to note, as David McLetchie did, the difference between a green paper and a white paper. It is early days, and a range of options are being considered. I believe that the UK Government has made its position clear. However, I am astonished at the level of quite disgraceful scaremongering that is coming out of both the Tories and the SNP. I pay tribute to Jamie Stone for his measured speech, in

which he made the point that we should not scaremonger on this issue because we are affecting directly the real fears of people who are in receipt of benefits.

The Secretary of State for Health has ruled out categorically using DLA for under-65s and has made it absolutely clear that those who are currently receiving attendance allowance and those over 65 who are receiving DLA will continue to receive an equivalent level of support and protection in any reformed system.

David McLetchie: Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: Not on this point, as I want to deal with a comment by Bill Kidd. I am sorry that he is not here, because I want to acknowledge that he has a real commitment to the issue and to say to him respectfully that no decisions have been made. I expect the UK Government to reflect on people's concerns—concerns that have been expressed in many different ways, not just in the chamber but outwith it.

The SNP position is inherently dishonest. I would like the minister to address the issue of why, quite explicitly, councils across Scotland are increasing charges for care services. Helen Eadie highlighted the situation in Fife. I offer West Dunbartonshire as another example. Some people in receipt of care services there may now pay as much as £30 per week more—each and every week. Those are people on low incomes. The target is, quite explicitly, people's additional incomes, such as attendance allowance and disability living allowance. Councils are looking to levy charges on those in receipt of benefits to pay for services. Will Alex Neil stop that practice? He argues that it should not happen at UK level, but it is happening right now, on his watch, in local government in Scotland.

Then we had Bob Doris. I always listen to him with interest, because he never disappoints—he has a single transferable demand for independence. If we have independence, everything will be rosy, but there was not one word about how the SNP will deliver for Scotland's older people.

I have spoken at length and am grateful for the time that I have been given. Finally, I would like to comment on the tenor of the debate from some members on the Scottish Government benches, which has been extremely disappointing. Elaine Smith made an informed contribution when she said that scaremongering from whatever quarter must stop. She is absolutely right. Conducting the debate in the way in which we have seen it conducted by some members this afternoon diminishes the MSPs concerned and the Parliament, and ends up generating an awful lot of heat and very little light. It might have been a

better use our time today to debate how we can meet the challenge and opportunities that are presented by the significant increase in the number of older people in Scotland. Scotland would have thanked us for that.

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister to wind up the debate. Minister, you have until 5 o'clock.

Sandra White: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I did not wish to interrupt Jackie Baillie's speech, but I bring this matter to your attention and ask for clarification. By my reckoning, I do not believe that Jackie Baillie addressed the motion in her speech. I never once heard anything that—

The Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order, Ms White, with great respect. You are eating into the time that the minister has to wind up.

16:50

Alex Neil: This has been a good debate, in general terms. I do not agree with Hugh O'Donnell's point—it is perfectly legitimate for this Parliament to have a debate and express concerns on behalf of the people of Scotland, including those who would be directly affected, as to the potential consequences of the green paper should its provisions be implemented.

In addition to being a legislature, we are the platform and the voice of Scotland. Today, we have been acting as the voice of Scotland in saying that if the proposals go ahead in the form in which they have been presented by the Labour Government in Westminster, they will be highly detrimental to our older citizens in Scotland, and indeed south of the border. Although I am a nationalist, I am concerned about poverty south of the border as well as north of the border.

We should not forget that the purpose of the debate is to ensure that we defend the living standards and rights of our elderly citizens, in this case vulnerable elderly citizens who are disabled and who require a certain level of benefits to maintain a decent standard of living. Nearly a fifth of pensioners in Scotland are still living in poverty, much of which is concentrated among disabled pensioners. Anything that could make that poverty even worse must be resisted and fought against enormously strongly.

I say to those who accuse me of scaremongering that it is not me, the Scottish Government or any speaker who has expressed concern about the proposals today who is doing that. The best way to ensure that nobody is scared would be to withdraw these proposals.

I will deal with some specific points about consultation. Let me run through what has

happened. First, the Scottish Government got less than 24 hours' notice of the publication of the green paper from Andy Burnham, the Secretary of State for Health, who of course is now in favour of minimum pricing for alcohol.

Secondly, when the consultation was carried out, not one event was held north of the border, whereas 26 consultation events were held south of the border.

Thirdly, the green paper and its contents have been the subject of two meetings at official level. Our officials reported back to us that at no time were representatives of the UK Government prepared to discuss the proposals' policy implications. The meetings indeed took place but, from our point of view, they were extremely unsatisfactory and certainly not informative.

It is significant that the green paper is signed by seven secretaries of state: Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper, John Denham, Ed Balls, Tessa Jowell, the Lord Mandelson, who signs everything these days, and Liam Byrne. It is noticeable that there is no signature from the Secretary of State for Scotland. If Scotland was included in the UK Government's thoughts, why is the signature of the Secretary of State for Scotland not on the document?

The Labour Party has spoken about the need for a dialogue. That has been our point all along—we have sought to have a dialogue, but it has ended up being a monologue because the discussion has been all one way, from us. What Jackie Baillie demonstrated was that the Scottish Government has consulted extensively in Scotland on its policy. However, with respect, I say to her that the Scottish Government is not just another consultee; we are the Government of Scotland. That means that we should have been consulted before the green paper was drafted and published. We should have been consulted on the consultation and on the consequences for Scotland and the people whom we represent. The UK Government says that it is a green paper but, as we know from experience, green papers have very big white edges.

Mr McLetchie highlighted effectively the fact that, ultimately, every option includes the abolition of attendance allowance and DLA for the over-65s in Scotland. The UK Government has not told us what will replace attendance allowance in Scotland. Is it to be abolished in Scotland as well as in England? If so, what will happen to the money?

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Neil: No.

We know that the last time we dealt with such issues, the UK Government cheated us out of £30 million a year and then asked us to trust it. How can we trust people who cheated their own Government in Scotland out of £30 million a year? They have not told us whether there will be means testing for what will replace attendance allowance and DLA or what the Barnett consequential will be. We know that Andy Burnham changed the baseline figures for health in the budget last year in order to reduce the consequential for Scotland. The guy then asks us to trust him and his policy.

Jackie Baillie: Will the minister take an intervention?

Alex Neil: No, I will not take an intervention. If the front-bench speakers from the Labour Party would not address the motion, why should I take an intervention from them? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Alex Neil: We are promised the equivalent of attendance allowance and DLA, but what is the equivalent of attendance allowance and DLA? Does it mean £70 a week still going into the pocket of each poor pensioner who is disabled? Does it mean the DLA money still going into the pockets of the poor pensioners? Does it mean that people will still get the carers allowance that the poor pensioners are going to be denied? We do not have any answers to those questions. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. There is too much noise.

Alex Neil: As Jackson Carlaw said, the Scottish Government has approached this policy issue in a way that is about social policy, not the constitution. It is social policy, poverty, pensioners and the disabled that we are concerned about. What really gets me about the proposals is that we have a so-called Labour Government stripping the most vulnerable people in our society of vital income and benefits. To paraphrase a former leader of the British Labour Party, we have the grotesque sight of a Labour Government—a Labour Government—scuttling around with green papers, white papers, budgets and bills so that it can deny our pensioners the income, the pensions and the benefits to which they are entitled. Harold Wilson once said that the Labour Party is a crusade or it is nothing. After 13 wasted years, it is nothing.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): We come to decision time.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-5512.2, in the name of Michael Russell, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5512, in the name of Des McNulty, on the report of the literacy commission, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5512.1, in the name of Elizabeth Smith, also seeking to amend motion S3M-5512, in the name of Des McNulty, 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)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (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)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)

Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (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)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 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, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 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)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

ABSTENTIONS

MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 15, Against 102, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5512.3, in the name of Margaret Smith, also seeking to amend motion S3M-5512, in the name of Des McNulty, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-5512, in the name of Des McNulty, on the report of the literacy commission, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament welcomes the report of the Literacy Commission, set up by Labour, and its recommendations on actions needed to support the acquisition of basic literacy skills and the development of higher-order literacy-related skills; calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward as a matter of priority, following discussion with the Literacy Commission and all stakeholders, a literacy action plan within the context of the Curriculum for Excellence, which has the aim of raising standards of literacy at every level; notes also the successful role of trade unions in promoting literacy and numeracy among adults and the commission's support for nurture groups in primary schools in areas of disadvantage as pioneered by Glasgow City, North Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire, Clackmannanshire councils and others, and suggests that, in order to assist those children facing the biggest barriers, the Scottish Government work in partnership with local authorities serving areas with concentrations of socio-economic disadvantage to implement and assess pilot schemes that can provide continuous and systematic support for families with children in the birth to three age group and make sure that these efforts produce benefits for children from low-income families wherever they live in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5515.1, in the name of Johann Lamont, seeking to amend motion S3M-5515, in the name of Alex Neil, on attendance allowance for people with disabilities, 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)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 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)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 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)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 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)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 43, Against 75, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-5515, in the name of Alex Neil, on attendance allowance for people with disabilities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 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)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 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)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 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, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 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

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)

Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 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)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 73, Against 45, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that the UK Green Paper, *Shaping the Future of Care Together*, published in June 2009, may have long-term implications for vulnerable older and disabled people in Scotland who are eligible for attendance allowance and disability living allowance as it proposes to remove the universal benefits of attendance allowance and disability living allowance and instead redesign the benefit system to meet English social policy objectives and redirect funding to pay for the provision of a National Care Service in England, while failing to give adequate consideration to the position in Scotland, and calls on HM Government to consult fully with the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament, local authorities, NHS boards and other interested parties before proceeding any further.

Lesmahagow Jubilee Hall

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-5098, in the name of Aileen Campbell, on save Lesmahagow's Jubilee hall. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern plans by South Lanarkshire Council to close and sell the Jubilee Hall in Lesmahagow; notes that this concern is shared by many members of the local community, the Community Council and various groups and users of the hall; believes that the Support the Jubilee Hall fun day, held by hall users on 31 October 2009, will further demonstrate the concern and opposition to the decision that exists locally, and considers that the hall continues to play an important function in Lesmahagow and is an important part of the town's heritage that should be preserved.

17:05

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Many folk from Lesmahagow have been unable to get to Edinburgh today because of the snow, but they are watching the debate online.

The Jubilee hall in Lesmahagow is a fine old building that was completed around 1830 and sits proudly on a brae just off the main thoroughfare through the town. The hall is geographically and symbolically at the centre of the community, and the fight to save it has been one of the most significant local campaigns in which I have been involved since being elected in May 2007. I am proud to have the opportunity to bring the issue to the Scottish Parliament chamber today.

The issue of the role and future of community halls throughout Scotland is not unfamiliar to the chamber. Indeed, in 2006, my colleague Andrew Welsh led a members' business debate on the challenges that are faced by village community halls. Many members will be aware of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations halls for all campaign and petition to the Parliament following the 2007 election.

The points that have been made on those and other occasions about the role of community halls in general apply specifically to the situation of the Jubilee hall in Lesmahagow. Local halls provide a focus and location for all kinds of events and services that give an area its character and sense of community. Indeed, my recent wedding reception was held in a village hall, which provided a characterful backdrop to my celebrations.

The Jubilee hall is no different, and the huge range of groups and societies that use and meet in the hall include the young farmers group, the mother and toddler group, the badminton club, the

drama group Class Act and the male voice choir, to name but a few.

In mid-2008, South Lanarkshire Council undertook a review of all its community facilities. As a result of that review, the council's executive committee decided to declare the Jubilee hall surplus to requirements and invest instead in the nearby Fountain hall, which has lain mothballed since before it was acquired by the council at a cost of more than £500,000.

As far as I am aware, the council's review made little or no effort to discuss with community groups in Lesmahagow and users of the Jubilee hall their requirements or their opinions about the future of facilities in their town. Many of the user groups that I have spoken to since feel that way. Given the long list of groups that currently use their local facility, I am sure that members appreciate why the community and I find the council's conclusion that the hall is surplus to requirements a bit odd.

It was at a concert by Lesmahagow's male voice choir in March 2009 that the impact of the hall's closure began to hit home. The choir genuinely feared that their performance, which had been held annually in the Jubilee hall and enhanced by its wonderful acoustics for many years, would be the last to take place in the venue. As a result of the growing sense of unease among the various user groups and the community council about the hall's future, I decided to carry out a survey of local opinion on the proposals.

The results were overwhelming in every sense of the word. Out of 2,071 surveys that were distributed, 361 were returned—a rate of more than 17 per cent, which can be considered very good for that type of exercise. Eight-five per cent of respondents said that they disagreed with the proposal to close the hall, and 86 per cent said that they did not believe that the Fountain hall was a suitable replacement.

Perhaps the most important responses to my survey were the individual comments and memories that more than 200 respondents took the time to share with me. Those testimonies demonstrated not only the affection in which the hall is currently held but the role that it has played throughout the town's history.

One respondent had memories of using the hall on various occasions stretching back over 55 years. It has been the scene of wedding receptions and anniversary celebrations, dances and parties, and sports tournaments and village shows. Some of the respondents responded with comments such as these:

"The council will leave a huge void if the closure goes ahead";

"please do not tear the heart out of our community";

"my mother and father held their wedding in the Jubilee in 1982";

"the Jube is a huge part of this village and I don't feel it is up to the council to disregard the villagers' feelings on this matter";

and

"closing the Jubilee Hall could threaten the very existence of the Male Voice Choir".

That is emotional stuff—and no wonder, because members of the community feel helpless, ignored and upset that the hall that they use and love is deemed to be surplus to requirements.

Perhaps one reason why the hall occupies such a special place in the hearts of so many people is that, although legally the hall is owned by the council, many feel that it belongs to the village. However, the Jubilee hall is different from the many community halls that are in the hands of trusts or charities in that it is owned by the local authority. That ownership is what has led to the current predicament. Although constructed in the mid-1800s, the hall was to all intents and purposes gifted to the village in the 1950s. A freedom of information disclosure to my office from South Lanarkshire Council confirms that the trustees of Lesmahagow public hall—as it was then known—gave part of the site to the district council of number 2 district of the county of Lanark on 1 January 1951, with provisions in the title and previous deeds requiring the site to be used as a public hall. Irrespective of whether those deeds are still legally enforceable, South Lanarkshire Council has a moral duty to respect what is an important part of the town's heritage.

When the town's amateur dramatics group, Class Act, brought down the final curtain of its annual pantomime show late last year, there were tears both on stage and in the hall as many realised that that could literally be the final curtain if the closure goes ahead in the next few months. The hall's stage, lighting and back-stage facilities are much valued by all the groups that use it as a performance space. There is no guarantee that viable alternatives exist. It would be a tragedy if a hall that is so well used was closed, essentially on a whim, at a time when such facilities are so badly needed and are lacking in many other parts of the country.

Indeed, in recent months, the hall has been the venue for an informal football academy that has been set up by a young local man with coaching skills who was otherwise unemployed. Ironically, he struggled to find evenings to fit in his football academy, as the hall was so busy. He is providing recreation and exercise for local young people that keeps them off the streets and keep his own skills in top condition while he looks for more permanent work.

It is only fair to acknowledge that 13 per cent of respondents to my survey agreed with the council's proposal to close the hall. They expressed concerns about the accessibility of the hall and its current state of repair. However, I believe that neither of those problems is insurmountable. A solution is certainly well within the funds that are currently spent or budgeted for the proposed alternative facility.

My motion refers to the fun day that was organised on Hallowe'en last year. That was a superb event that provided another example of how well used and loved the hall is, and it served as an opportunity to raise further awareness among local groups about the closure plans. During the day, each of the different user groups ran a stall or activity, which was attended by families and individuals of all ages. I was delighted to spend some time talking to the folk at the event and to hear at first hand some of the stories and memories that were reflected in my survey responses.

I know that it can be difficult for other members to participate in members' business debates when the motion refers to such a local and particular issue, but I believe that the story of the Jubilee hall contains lessons for the maintenance and development of community halls throughout Scotland. I hope that the future of the hall is not settled and that South Lanarkshire Council can be persuaded to rethink its decision to close the hall. If not, I hope that, at the very least, the community will be given the opportunity to see whether it can play some role in the hall's future, whether through a community buyout or some other alternative. It would, I repeat, be a tragedy if the facility was lost, especially if the building was demolished or converted for another use beyond recognition.

The middle of a recession during a property slump is not the time to dispose of such an impressive asset, but the building is more than simply an asset. It was a gift to the council. Although the council might believe that it has the legal right to sell the building, it certainly has no moral right to do anything other than maintain the site for its original purpose: a community hall that is still at the geographic, social and cultural heart of the community that it serves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate, in which speeches should be of four minutes. In view of some of the names that appear on my screen, I should perhaps remind members that they are meant to address the motion, which is fairly specifically about Lesmahagow's Jubilee hall.

17:13

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I take part in this evening's debate in place of the local member, Karen Gillon, who is unwell and therefore unable to participate in the debate as she would have liked. She appreciates the concerns of some sections of the community.

I hope that Aileen Campbell will not be too critical if I make some technical errors about the local facilities in Lesmahagow, as my knowledge of the town is fairly superficial. I have visited Lesmahagow on only a small number of occasions—in my early adulthood, when I was a football referee who officiated at matches in the Lanarkshire league games that took place there. For that reason, I will try to be brief, which I am sure will also not disappoint Aileen Campbell and cause her no unnecessary delay in sending out her press release—if she has not already done that.

Although my knowledge of Lesmahagow itself is not extensive, my understanding of the general nature of the issue is. The decision behind the debate highlights what I consider to be the very judicious manner in which South Lanarkshire Council—and most other local authorities—generally deal with budgetary constraints. Although we would all prefer to conserve buildings that play significant roles in the life and heritage of our local communities, and which have added value in our rural communities, the financial realities of sustaining public facilities within budget allocations mean that difficult decisions must be made in the pursuit of cost effectiveness.

From the cursory knowledge that I have of the situation, it is clear to me that, although Lesmahagow might well suffer the loss of a much-loved public building, the town will benefit from significant public investment. The council's financial input will ensure that any loss of the Jubilee hall would be compensated for through the refurbishment of the Fountain building, which will have a main hall with sound and lighting equipment and a demountable stage, a multipurpose room, two other large public rooms, a fully fitted kitchen plus storage and a fully fitted bar plus storage, as well as a children's soft play area, which will be created on the floor above the Bank of Scotland offices.

Additional public facilities will also be provided when the town obtains the new-build Woodpark primary school and the new-build Milton primary school, which have completion targets of May 2010 and July 2011 respectively. Access will be provided to sizeable gym halls and dining rooms for community use. In addition, community facilities are available in the town's new high school.

I regret that Lesmahagow may be about to lose a much-loved public amenity, but it is only fair to say that South Lanarkshire Council is planning to ensure that current and future generations in the town are well catered for in the years ahead. If the debate is to be about more than giving Aileen Campbell a press release, I look forward to hearing how the minister will provide additional resources to the local authority to meet the cost of preserving the Jubilee hall or facilitating a community buyout.

17:16

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): I congratulate Aileen Campbell on securing the debate.

There are a few facilities that turn a group of buildings with people living in them into what we would recognise as a community. Schools are one such example, as they allow people to come together for the common good of the kids' education. Play parks, which host interaction not just for children but for adults of all ages, are another, as are post offices, which I hope it is now realised provide a vital anchor point for many communities.

Community hospitals provide local care where people live. If we look a little deeper into the South of Scotland region, we find that Dumfries and Galloway NHS Board's consultation includes a preferred option that would lead to the closure of five of the area's community hospitals, which could leave members of communities with great distances to cover, even though there is currently no public transport that would be suitable to allow many of those people to visit their relatives. The strength of local opposition to those national health service proposals is overwhelming.

I ask the Presiding Officer to give me time, as I am getting to my point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will not give you much more time, Mr Hume—come on.

Jim Hume: I hope that members of all parties will join the campaign to save those hospitals.

Another facility that is important when it comes to defining a community is a community hall. In that respect, Lesmahagow's Jubilee hall is no different from any other community hall in the rural parts of Scotland. It provides accommodation for many activities, such as parent-and-child activities, dance, badminton, keep fit and even functions, including, I am glad to hear, wedding functions. Unfortunately, my invitation to Aileen Campbell's wedding seemed to get lost in the post—I have complained to her about that before. Although I did not make it to her wedding, I am glad that she used a local hall for the reception.

In addition, any community hall is the perfect place for drama to develop. Many of our finest actors and actresses have cut their teeth in local halls, and I am sure that we would all agree that many of our fellow MSPs show an amazing wealth of dramatic prowess, which in some cases might be due to participation in amateur dramatics in a local hall at an earlier stage of their lives.

Like Aileen Campbell, who has been extremely active with the Jubilee hall, in particular, I have a long history of supporting local halls. I was the secretary of Yarrow hall for around seven years. However, since 2007, there has been a question about how hall funding can continue. Back in the autumn of 2007, in answer to my question, Richard Lochhead, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, stated that funding would be available through the Scotland rural development fund and European LEADER funding, which is welcome and useful in many communities. However, as we know, such funds are limited and not easy to access, and there is great competition for them.

Access to funding is the key. It is well known that, under the single outcome agreement, it is the responsibility of local authorities to decide whether to keep open various facilities. There is no doubt that they are difficult decisions and that authorities must prioritise to ensure that provision is maintained at a time when there is pressure on all budgets. I accept that local government has the final decision, but central Government must acknowledge the need to keep our communities thriving. The Government must address the issue of red tape when communities and businesses apply for development funds to enable them to access available funding.

Aileen Campbell: I wonder whether the member realises that what I got back from my FOI request showed that South Lanarkshire Council had identified more than £1 million to refurbish the Fountain hall.

Jim Hume: I had not realised that, but I am glad to hear it. I also wish the Lesmahagow community well in their campaign to save the Jubilee hall.

It is well known that, once a community provision goes, it is very difficult for it to return. Options such as using local schools can help with provision, but they are second best; schools are primarily for education, which must be their focus. I make a plea to South Lanarkshire Council to ensure that it looks carefully at ways of not closing the Jubilee hall and of keeping that heart of the community open for business.

17:20

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I join Jim Hume and others in congratulating Aileen Campbell on

securing this most important members' business debate. At first sight, and even perhaps at second sight, it may seem a little presumptuous for me to take part, because the Jubilee hall is not in my constituency. However, I have chosen to speak because I feel passionately about the need to rebuild our sense of community in Scotland. How can we do that if, as in the case of the Jubilee hall, we rip the centre out of communities?

From what Aileen Campbell and others have told me, the Jubilee hall is similar in many ways to hundreds of buildings throughout Scotland. Some are a little dilapidated and perhaps old-fashioned to our modern eyes, and in need of a lick of paint or for some diseased wood around the windows to be replaced. However, like the Jubilee hall, such buildings are the throbbing, living heart of the community and the vehicle for amateur dramatics, netball, carpet bowls, the Boys Brigade, social functions and 101 other sociable activities. However, like the Jubilee hall, such buildings all over Scotland are at risk of being closed down and replaced by inferior facilities or even none at all.

In my own constituency, Loanhead town hall, like the Jubilee hall, is over 100 years old. It was a drill hall in its early days: between 1914 and 1918, scores of soldiers marched the few yards from the hall to the railway station on the journey to France, from which many never returned. As in the Jubilee hall, local functions took place in Loanhead town hall, including the children's rehearsals for Loanhead gala day. However, it has now been closed by the council, despite a request from the Loanhead community to be allowed to take it over. Some functions could be transferred to the nearby primary school, but that was built under the private finance initiative scheme and access is restricted, which has meant that no local groups now meet there in the evenings and a pensioners club has had to pack up altogether. The council has offered far-away Penicuik town hall as an alternative venue, but that is not practical for many functions.

I live in Colinton, a suburb on the fringe of the city of Edinburgh, where the only central meeting place is the church hall—our own version of the Jubilee hall—which is used every night by community organisations. However, it is owned by the church, not the greater community. Who knows what its future will be and what financial pressures will dictate? There is an empty school that would serve well as a community centre, but, of course, it has had to be sold off to balance the council's books. Lots of community activity used to take place in the school, but, as in the case of Loanhead town hall and the Jubilee hall, those activities have dried up. A few miles way in Longstone, the much-used Saughton prison officers club also finds its coat hanging on a shoogly nail.

I am well aware of the pressures that councils such as South Lanarkshire Council are under, and the temptation to save money by disposing of buildings such as the Jubilee hall must be enormous. However, if we lose the heart of our communities, we will gradually but inevitably lose those elements of support that a community can give to those in its midst who are less fortunate. A community in which every family just looks after its own interests ceases to be a community altogether, and the result is even greater expense on social services and other services down the line.

Let us therefore protest about the closure of the Jubilee hall, Loanhead town hall and all other community centres up and down the country that face closure. We destroy that precious fabric at our peril.

17:24

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): I do not wish to sound like a belated Grinch, but I have to say that I do not congratulate Aileen Campbell on introducing this evening's debate, because it should properly be taking place in the chambers of South Lanarkshire Council. The elected members of the council and the officers who provide them with information have a better overview of the situation. That is in stark contrast to Ian McKee, who failed to reflect on the fact that there is substantial investment in another facility in the locality—£1 million of investment in the Fountain hall. My colleague Michael McMahon set out some of the facilities that will be available to people.

Members' business debates should be focused on issues that are either less contentious or more within our ambit as members of the Scottish Parliament.

Ian McKee: I am interested in what Andy Kerr says. How does he explain the response to the questionnaire that was put out? A majority of people who responded were against closure of the Jubilee hall, despite the magnificent facilities that he describes at another venue.

Andy Kerr: I do not dispute that the Jubilee hall is a fine old facility that the community holds dear to its heart. I hope that, in time, the building that we are in, albeit that it is currently almost new, will have such memories and affection among the members and the public who attend it. Buildings are about the people who use them and the memories that people have of them. The fact is that we change our buildings. Whether they are hospitals, schools or anything else, they develop a life of their own through the involvement of the community. The important thing is not the bricks and mortar, but how people use facilities. Of course, things will change.

Difficult decisions are being made. I do not seek to undermine or devalue the feelings of the community for their facilities, but we must also recognise that we need to move forward and change as time progresses and as resources get tighter. We need to make tough decisions about how we see things. That applies to town halls and other facilities throughout the country, as well as to our hospitals and schools.

Aileen Campbell: Groups that are trying to use the alternative proposed sites are finding it difficult to get used to them. There are difficulties with accessing the schools in the village and groups believe that the Fountain hall does not have the facilities—for example, a stage for the male voice choir, the young farmers' pantomimes and all the other amateur dramatic groups—that they need.

Andy Kerr: I will try to deal with Aileen Campbell's point along with Ian McKee's point about her consultation. I argue that the questions that were put in that consultation elicited a predictable response. I am more reassured that the council is undertaking a consultation exercise in the community. The council will be able to respond to that consultation in the full light of the investment that it proposes for the Fountain hall facility.

Again, I do not seek to undermine or undervalue people's concerns. I praise the community for its passion and its desire to protect the Jubilee hall, but let us also understand that, in difficult times, despite a Scottish Government budget that is growing year on year and despite the fact that the Government has reduced the share of local government expenditure year on year—

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): Nonsense.

Andy Kerr: I say to the minister that the facts are in the Scottish Parliament information centre to evidence that. However, let us not get lost in a discussion about numbers, because the debate is not about that.

Councils throughout the country have to make difficult decisions. I understand the concerns, but the council has a responsibility to ensure that it spends the hard-earned cash of people throughout South Lanarkshire on the facilities that best provide services for the future, and which support communities.

Again, I say to members that the matter is about the appropriateness of the debate within the council, which is the correct place to have the discussion. It is about the need to make decisions in difficult times and the recognition that, despite growing resources here in Scotland, local government is feeling the pinch and difficult decisions require to be made. Over the years, any new facility such as the Fountain hall, where a

£1 million investment is proposed, will develop its own life, its own experiences, its own memories and its own passion in the community.

Whatever happens, I wish the community every success in whatever facilities it has available to it. I hope that they will be used to the maximum benefit of the community.

17:28

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I wondered whether you were speaking to me when you mentioned that the debate should be specifically about Lesmahagow. I will go on to explain my interest in the matter, but first I congratulate Aileen Campbell on securing the debate and allowing me to go down memory lane.

I have not moved from Glasgow to Lesmahagow or South Lanarkshire, and I did not receive one of Aileen Campbell's questionnaires. For the benefit of members and those in Lesmahagow who are, I believe, watching on video, I explain that many years ago—and I do mean many years ago—I and others from urban areas in Glasgow had the great pleasure of going to Lesmahagow and the Jubilee hall courtesy of our local churches, our Band of Hope and sometimes the Salvation Army. I do not know the village well now, but I certainly knew it well then. When I saw Aileen Campbell's motion, I rummaged through my suitcases for my old pictures of Lesmahagow Jubilee hall, which confirmed my memories of ma, pa and the bairns with their prams, the big tea urns and the huge breadboards of sandwiches and buns.

I was sad to hear about the plans to close the Jubilee hall; after all, as the motion says and as people have told me, it is an important part of the town's heritage, so I cannot understand why it cannot be saved for future generations, not just of people from Lesmahagow but of people who might visit the town, as I did so many years ago. Indeed, the fight to save the Jubilee hall might well bring in tourists.

I am not sure why this is a contentious issue—I have to say that I could not quite understand what Andy Kerr meant in his speech. Of course, I stand to be corrected, but when I tried to find out what was going on in Lesmahagow the people there told me that there had been no consultation on the proposal to close the hall. Where in South Lanarkshire Council's plans is the proposal mentioned? I certainly acknowledge that, as Aileen Campbell, Michael McMahon and Andy Kerr have made clear, this is a council issue—it is not, I should add, even a Glasgow City Council issue.

Although South Lanarkshire Council has bought the Fountain hall for £500,000 and has allocated another £1 million for refurbishment, it has itself

admitted that the building is not suitable for all the events that already take place in the Jubilee hall, and it has suggested to the groups that will be without certain facilities that they can use local schools instead. As Aileen Campbell and the people to whom I have spoken have said, that cannot happen if, for example, examinations are taking place.

I have to wonder why some of the £1.5 million that is to be spent on the Fountain hall cannot be used to refurbish the Jubilee hall, which has been around for a lot longer but has better changing facilities, a stage and so on. It is one thing to tell people that the Fountain hall will have all those facilities once it is refurbished, but surely if it ain't broke, we do not need to fix it. The council should say to the community, "Right, we've spent £500,000 on this building, but we're going to have to spend another £1 million on refurbishing it. Would you rather see that £1 million spent on the Jubilee hall?" I am sure that the Jubilee hall could easily be brought up to modern-day standards with only a fraction of that money, leaving perhaps enough money to turn the Fountain hall into a facility for, say, youth groups.

Finally, have the people in Lesmahagow thought about submitting a petition to the Public Petitions Committee to allow community representatives to give evidence and bring to light issues surrounding the Jubilee hall, the Fountain hall and whatever else? I do not know the answer to that, but I am sure that Aileen Campbell will tell me after the debate. In any case, I believe that the way forward is for the people in the town to get a petition together, if they have not already done so. I am sure that Aileen Campbell and other members will give them all the advice that they need in that respect.

17:33

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Bruce Crawford): I congratulate Aileen Campbell on raising the issue of the provision and development of community facilities, which can be so vital to communities throughout Scotland. I also pass on my best wishes to Karen Gillon; I hope that she gets well soon. I should also say that I admired the research that Ms Campbell carried out for the debate. She certainly displayed considerable knowledge and understanding of the past deeds of the Jubilee hall.

I agree with Andy Kerr that this is clearly a decision for South Lanarkshire Council. That is as it should be. However, I will not get drawn into commenting on Mr Kerr's other spurious contentions about local government funding because I am sure that the people in Lesmahagow who might be listening to or watching this debate on the internet want the central issue to be dealt

with as seriously as possible. South Lanarkshire councillors are, however, the democratically elected people who are on the spot and have access to all the information that is needed to take such a decision.

Michael McMahon: I totally agree with that point, given which, does the minister agree with Sandra White that the best place to take a petition on the issue is to the Public Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament? That is an important aspect of the democratic process, but would a petition not be better taken to South Lanarkshire Council?

Bruce Crawford: If the member had waited a little, I was going to add a caveat to what I said. I noted with interest Michael McMahon's contribution to the debate. I think that it is the second time this week that I have heard him, as the Labour Party spokesperson on local government, making a bid on Government coffers. I look forward to Andy Kerr bringing those issues to us as part of the budget process.

Members' business debates are an important dimension of democratic scrutiny in Scotland. This is where I disagree with Andy Kerr. If people feel for any reason that their voices are not being heard locally, whatever form the local consultation was in this case, it is good that their MSPs can raise their concerns in the Parliament. That is what members' business is meant to be about: local issues that are important to the people in the communities that members serve.

I whole-heartedly agree with Aileen Campbell when she talks about the important role that community facilities can play in bringing people together and creating a sense of identity in our towns and villages. As other members have done, I can reminisce about the times that I spent in local halls, whether it was the scout hall, or the record hops that I attended in the local church hall, or the youth facilities that I used in other places. I know that I am giving away my age by mentioning record hops.

Our community empowerment action plan, which was launched jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities last March, makes it clear that we as a Government value what communities can achieve for themselves when they are supported to work together. I am pleased that South Lanarkshire Council's single outcome agreement recognises the benefits that the voluntary sector and voluntary action can bring, including communities running services and facilities for themselves. There might be opportunities in that for the Jubilee hall people and those who support them.

The Government strongly believes in the importance of community facilities in supporting

community empowerment, particularly in rural areas. We back up our belief by providing funding through rural community development grants, supporting the development of other assets such as schools—which Jim Hume dismissed perhaps a bit too lightly—and, increasingly, exploring and supporting the benefits of community asset ownership.

The rural priorities scheme under the rural development programme has invested about £5.5 million to develop rural community facilities, including village halls. In Coalburn in South Lanarkshire, which is only 3 miles from Lesmahagow, we have committed nearly £40,000 to the Coalburn Miners Welfare Charitable Society for the upgrade and improvement of its community centre, which provides facilities for nearly 50 community groups each week. Groups from mothers and toddlers to special needs and pensioner groups will benefit from improved access through a new porch and access ramps. I admired the amount of detail that Michael McMahon gave on the new facilities that will be provided in Lesmahagow. For a man who did not know much about the issue, he demonstrated a great deal of knowledge.

In addition, through the LEADER rural community programme, we have made available £57 million in the period 2007 to 2013 to be directed at sustainable community-based projects, including rural community facilities. The aim is to increase the capacity of rural communities and business networks to build knowledge and skills, and to encourage innovation. To date, more than £2 million has been invested in 600 projects and a further £15 million has been committed to local community projects throughout Scotland. That demonstrates that, through those schemes, whether LEADER or the Scottish rural development programme, local organisations have the opportunity to access resources to make a difference for the communities that they serve.

We believe in the potential benefits of community ownership of assets, although care is needed because some facilities will be liabilities rather than assets and not every community group has the necessary desire or skills to own a local hall or building. We are investing £0.25 million over two years in the Development Trusts Association Scotland to ensure that we share good practice and support local authorities and community groups to understand the costs and benefits of community asset ownership.

If it will help, I am happy to direct Scottish Government officials to speak with people from South Lanarkshire Council or community groups about the work that DTAS is doing on our behalf. The work is in the early stages and there are plans for a national seminar in the spring. I am happy for

representatives from South Lanarkshire to attend that event. Make no mistake: when community ownership of assets is done right, it can have remarkable results, and the Government is happy with that approach.

I understand that officials in South Lanarkshire Council are committed to continuing to speak with local groups about the provision of community facilities in Lesmahagow. I welcome that commitment and strongly encourage the council to think creatively and boldly about the future of the Jubilee hall and how the community might be involved in shaping it. Opportunities have come up through the Big Lottery Fund growing community assets programme. That fund is now closed, but the Government is involved in discussions about possible opportunities for a successor fund, which might yet provide opportunities to access funds to help restore halls such as the Jubilee.

I thank Aileen Campbell for giving us the opportunity to debate this important topic. I wish all the people of Lesmahagow the best in their ongoing efforts to help their community thrive.

Meeting closed at 17:41.

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