

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 28 January 2010

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 28 January 2010

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

Newspaper Industry

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good morning. The first item of business today is a debate on motion S3M-5620, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on the Scottish newspaper industry.

09:15

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab):

Scotland's newspaper industry is unique, dynamic and diverse, with 17 daily newspapers and countless weeklies. Whether we love or hate our local newspapers, they are vital to the communities that they serve. They are generally trusted by local people and carry information that is relevant to the lives of their readerships, enabling them to influence decisions that affect them where they live. Indeed, all members of the Scottish Parliament rely on local newspapers, and some get a wee bit upset if they do not feature regularly in them.

The article about the application of a new pub licence is linked to the publication of the notice about that licence in the same source, and it is an essential part of our democratic process that people can access information about things that affect them. The death of our newspaper industry would, therefore, be a serious blow to our democracy.

"Every time a newspaper dies, even a bad one, the country moves a little closer to authoritarianism; when a great one goes, like the New York Herald Tribune, history itself is denied a devoted witness."

That is a quotation from Richard Kluger, who was the last literary editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*.

The Scottish Government's proposal to remove the legal duty to inform the public of certain notices, such as planning applications and road closures, in local newspapers is an assault on knowledge and information. The Government misses the point that everyone else is making—that a switch to the internet as a means of informing the public of a road closure or of a change in bin collections or pub licensing will disfranchise the hundreds of ordinary people who do not yet have access to the internet. I wonder whether the Government is aware of the fact that Scotland has the lowest level of uptake of broadband in the United Kingdom, and I ask the

Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism whether he is content that he is standing up for the Scottish interest. The UK Government has already withdrawn the proposal and he should do likewise. Interestingly, the consultation on the proposal is posted on the internet.

The minister will argue that the Government is simply allowing local authorities to make a choice, but let us be clear that it is a choice with consequences. We know that the previous decision to advertise jobs on the internet has not been without its problems. One criticism has been that those who apply for the jobs are the ones who are already sitting at desks with access to the internet, which narrows the field of applicants. If we remove the legal requirement, fewer notices—if any—will be published in our local newspapers. Even those who are addicted to computers will have to seek out a specific web page and trawl for notices. Let us make no mistake: fewer people will see the notices than see them at present, there will be fewer objectors, and the public will be less informed. That is not exactly in the spirit of open government, and I am sure that we will still have the same number of spin doctors to deal with the press.

Our concern for the newspaper industry should be seen in the context of the democratic world in which we live—at least, the one that we strive for. The collateral damage that the proposal will bring in lost revenue will be felt in many different ways, which are interlinked. If any other industry were facing job losses because of a Government decision, there would be an outcry. As we know, the industry has faced troubled times in the past, and there will be more ahead. There is a cyclical downturn and, as we have debated in Parliament many times, there are job losses across the world as newspapers merge in a changing industry. The National Union of Journalists estimates that there have been 2,000 job losses from regional newspapers across the UK since the start of the current financial crisis.

We are witnessing a period of enormous political, economic and social change—20 years ago, there was no internet—and public opinion matters, as it determines how people think and vote. The media industry and all those who deliver news face the challenge of a lifetime as we see the first pilot for Scottish news to protect public service broadcasting. Many newspapers have adapted their business for online publication and, so far, there have been relatively few closures, but that could change. Only 4 per cent of people get their news from the internet, 28 per cent get their news from newspapers, and the majority get it from television. It is important that the greatest number of people see the public notices.

Quality journalism and content are key to a good newspaper industry, and it is self-evident that newsgathering is expensive. Some say that the most truthful part of a newspaper is the advertising, and I am sure that we all have our criticisms of the press. However, we have seen huge job losses in the industry, and many of us have been on the picket lines with the NUJ, arguing the case for jobs.

Yesterday, on a joint platform of journalists, editors and MSPs, we all agreed that the Government's plans would be deeply damaging to the industry—fatal, in fact, to the democracy for which we strive. As the editors said openly in yesterday's meeting, the first thing to suffer when there are cuts is the number of journalists.

The absence of anyone from the Scottish National Party group was noted. SNP members cannot seriously sign up to other motions and then vote with the Government this evening. They have a chance to influence the course of the proposed order, and nothing short of that will do.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I was not at that meeting because our group meeting was scheduled for exactly the same time. That was not our choice. I hope that you will use the consultation process to raise some of your concerns; I will use the consultation process and my speech to raise my concerns. I would have been at that meeting had it been scheduled at a time when I could have made it—it is important to put that on the record.

Pauline McNeill: Some of us saw SNP members attending that group meeting when we came out of our meeting. I say to Bob Doris: if you really think that the issue is important, you should have been at the meeting with journalists yesterday. I do not think that that is a good enough excuse.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members to speak through the chair rather than directly to each other.

Pauline McNeill: Yes, of course. Tonight, SNP members have a chance to show which side of the argument they are on.

It is staggering that the Government states that its aim is to make the information accessible; it is purely a money-saving venture. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities argues that the proposed order allows local authorities only to ensure that there is a mix of notifications in newspapers and online. I think that that will be more confusing for the public, as they will not know where to look for their notices—on the internet or in newspapers.

The most important issue is equality of access. There is no equality of access to the internet in

Scotland—any examination of the facts would lead the Government to that conclusion. According to the Office of Communications, only 60 per cent of Scots have access to broadband and 70 per cent of those who are aged over 65 have never used the internet. I wonder what the minister with responsibility for older people thinks of that—I hope that he will make representations to the Scottish ministers. In Glasgow, only 39 per cent of people have broadband and many people in rural communities do not have the high-speed broadband that they desire. It is important to recognise that people will not read a newspaper online if they have a slow connection—that is the most frustrating thing in the world and they simply will not do it.

Call me old-fashioned, but I do not think that the concept is the same: surfing the internet for notices is not the same as coming across a notice while reading about the issue in a local newspaper. We are told that public information notices will still be available in libraries and all local authority buildings, but I do not think that older people who have never used the internet will suddenly start turning up at their libraries and surfing the internet to see whether there are any notices. I do not think that someone in Scotstoun or Partick will turn up at the city chambers just to see whether there are any notices that might affect them. Notices are much more accessible to people if they can read them in their local newspapers.

The sources for the Government's position on the issue are critical. The case that it has made for the removal of the notices from local newspapers is poorly researched. The Minister for Culture and External Affairs claims that only 2 per cent of the public read notices in their newspapers. That figure was also used by the Cabinet Office in 2007, and the only source that we could find for it—I will stand corrected if I am wrong—was a survey that was carried out by Camden Council. It is very difficult to see where the figure comes from. I can only presume that it is in light of that figure that the UK Government dropped its plans.

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Indeed, the member asked that question of me in the chamber previously, and I quoted the figures provided by the Westminster Government and the Cabinet Office. If the member thinks that Westminster wants to pursue the matter further as part of its digital research, I will gladly take representations.

Pauline McNeill: Perhaps the minister did not hear me and is unaware of the situation, but I have said twice in this debate that, in light of its research, the UK Government has dropped its plan. I call on the minister to do likewise today.

The Scottish Government says that it has a duty to provide value for money. That is true, but it also

has a duty to protect properly the interests of the public who rely on the information provided in public notices. The proposed order is a money-saving venture and does nothing to improve public services. Claims that removing the legal requirement on local authorities to publish public notices in newspapers will improve the quality of information to the public are unfounded. Changes are needed to improve the quality of public notices—we do not argue that the position is perfect, as Robert Brown said in yesterday's meeting—and further work is required to make public notices more accessible and readable. When the Government considers the matter I ask it to go in that direction.

Labour has called for imaginative ideas about how to save the newspaper industry. We argue that a subscription for every 18-year-old to a newspaper of their choice is a good scheme to develop a reading habit and promote access to a genuine mix of reading in a newspaper and on the internet. We want investment in our local newspaper industry, particularly to make it attractive for young people to work in. We call on the industry to make changes. If the Government were to rethink its plan, we would want some of the revenue to go towards training young journalists.

I call on the Government to rethink its plan so that we have a better-informed public and a sustainable newspaper industry and protect the democratic process. We come to the chamber today to make the case that it is fundamental to the democratic process to protect our newspaper industry and allow the public access to quality information. As I said, the UK Government has dropped its plans based on research that shows that they would be detrimental to the public. I call on the Scottish Government to do the right thing today, drop its plans and withdraw the order.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the important role played by local newspapers in Scotland; believes that, in the current economic climate, it is more important than ever to recognise the importance and value of community newspapers; notes that local newspapers provide a forum for expression that enables local people to deliberate on issues affecting their community; notes with concern the Scottish Government proposals to remove the legal requirement for local authorities to advertise public information notices in newspapers; believes that, if this proposal succeeds, it will deny the 38% of Scots who do not have internet access vital information currently available to them in newspapers, will create a democratic deficit and damage the local and national newspaper industry at a critical time; fears that a smaller newspaper industry will dilute quality journalism and training opportunities for young journalists, and calls on the Scottish Government to withdraw the draft Local Authority Public Information Notices (Electronic Publication) (Scotland) Order 2010.

09:27

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): I thank Pauline McNeill for bringing this debate to the chamber. The issue that she has chosen to address is timely and important. It is appropriate that members should have an opportunity to discuss it and, in so doing, augment the consultation process that is currently under way and continue the same approach that we took when taking the Arbitration (Scotland) Bill through the Parliament.

In my contribution, I will address three issues. First, I will outline the reason why the Government is currently consulting on regulations relating to public information notices; secondly, I will restate our commitment to retaining and developing a resilient, vibrant and viable local press; and finally, I will outline some of the steps that the Government has taken and will take to help local newspapers thrive as secure and sustainable businesses.

We recognise, as many people have commented, that the proposed regulations would have direct impact on local newspaper income. Of course, we all know that local newspapers fulfil a vital role in our communities. Indeed, some of the evidence heard recently by the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee has made that clear. Professor Neil Blain of the University of Stirling stated last week, for example, that local newspapers are “part of local history”. He went on to say that

“‘Invaluable’ is not a strong enough word: local newspapers are unique resources.”—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 20 January 2010; c 3092.]

Yet we all know that local newspapers are going through difficult times. Existing business models are rapidly becoming outmoded as new technology and changing consumer tastes all impact directly. Partly as a result of that, local newspaper circulation has been in steady decline over the past two decades, although the picture varies greatly across different titles.

In addition, advertising revenues are being hit hard by the economic downturn and the growth of online advertising. Therefore, the difficulties facing local newspapers go far beyond the possible reduction in revenue from displaying public information notices.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): My point is a simple one—surely a time of recession, on which the minister is concentrating in his speech, is the worst possible point to introduce the regulations.

Jim Mather: What we have introduced is consultation, and consultation is consultation with this Administration.

Let me return to putting the matter in context. The Scottish Government acknowledges that the loss of revenue is a real and pressing concern for local titles, but it is important to make it clear that the future of local newspapers cannot and should not be dependent on their receiving indirect subsidies from local authorities. If advertising is not cost effective, it represents a bad deal for taxpayers. Furthermore, dependence on public sector advertising potentially jeopardises the independence that people value so highly in their local press.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Quite frankly, the issue is not the subsidy. In my constituency, although there is a high level of internet access, people still read the *Deeside Piper* and the *Donside Piper*. They want to make sure that they get information from their weekly newspapers; it is not the subsidy that is important. Does the minister not recognise that members right across the chamber will not pass the order? It would save a lot of time, money and angst if the minister just dropped it now.

Jim Mather: I note what the member says. We are in a process and, as I said, consultation means consultation with this Administration. We all come from local areas where local newspapers thrive and play the role that the member has just outlined. We know that many of them are struggling and we must help them to develop new sustainable business models. Most newspapers are doing exactly that.

For example, myjobscotland, the public sector recruitment portal, has announced media partnerships with six newspaper and online recruitment groups. There is also potential for local newspapers to sell online subscriptions and electronic editions for handheld devices, as many of the major players in the United States and the UK now do. Just this week, the launch of the *Caledonian Mercury* has shown the potential that the web offers for people to develop a new model of newspaper provision. Therefore, we must encourage the continuing evolution and development of newspapers.

New technology provides an opportunity for newspapers not just to survive but to prosper and find new ways of connecting with their readership, widen their readership base demographically, geographically and economically and, in so doing, reaffirm their position at the very hub of their local communities. That is what I am working on in Argyll and Bute—bringing active citizens, proactive communities and sectors of the economy together with local media in the interest of building the local economy together.

The first point to make about public information notices is that the steps that we are consulting on were requested by local authorities—indeed, they

have already been debated and approved by COSLA. The reason is that the Scottish Government and local authorities have a shared duty to provide value for money in public service delivery.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I am concerned about what John Swinney has said:

“The changes we are consulting on will mean councils can use a new public information notice portal instead of advertising in local papers.”

He also pointed out that it would be for local councils to decide. Is the SNP taking a decision that will damage our local newspapers and then leaving councils to take the blame if there is any effect?

Jim Mather: The councils want it. As I said, consultation means consultation with this Administration. We cannot get away from the fact that migrating to an online platform is expected to reduce expenditure by at least 50 per cent, saving councils an estimated £3 million a year. Any such savings would, of course, have an impact on local newspapers, which is a point to which I shall return.

Changing to an online platform would also allow local authorities to spend more money on front-line services, which would bring direct benefits to local communities. Members received a reinforcement of that proposition yesterday in a letter and briefing note from Pat Watters, the president of COSLA. The briefing note restates COSLA's case that the existing system is not perfect at providing information to the public.

Under the draft regulations on which we are currently consulting, local authorities would still be able to use local newspapers for public information notices. The proposed regulations would leave them free to choose the best mix of media to reach people in their local communities, which would include local newspapers, the internet, digital television and registering to receive e-mails and text messages. Critically, that latter medium would allow information to be targeted and delivered directly to the citizen without their having to search for it.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): The minister protests that under his proposals local authorities will have a choice about whether to publish public information notices in newspapers. The problem is that if local newspapers do not survive that choice will not exist. Does the minister acknowledge that that is the key to the argument?

Jim Mather: We are determined to ensure that newspapers continue to exist. I am really keen not to polarise this debate. Intelligent political discussion is about appreciating the complexities

of different perspectives rather than assuming that a single idea is right. *[Interruption.]* Labour members can polarise away, and lock horns if they will, but we intend to take the issue forward. In this Government, consultation means consultation, and we stick with that.

I will outline the Government's next steps with regard to the local press, but first I suggest with respect to my friend Ted Brocklebank, who turned up at the newspaper summit, that he might consider voting against his own amendment before affirming his view that there appears to be little dialogue between the Scottish Government and the sector. He should be aware that I have met representatives from the sector to discuss these and other national issues on six occasions. The First Minister has also been involved.

I intend to hold a summit for local newspapers in order to explore how they can best remain profitable through the digital revolution. The consultation session that I held with national newspapers last February provided useful insights into how those newspapers might adapt, and I now want to engage fully with the concerns of the local press. I will draw on the work that we have done in Argyll and Bute on heightening the appetite of communities and the industry to work together with community planning partnerships. There is potential for local media to help fuel that cohesion with news stories, features, and advertorials that align ever more closely with the local economy to encourage more growth, a larger readership, more advertising and a wider reach.

Today's debate raises issues that are of great concern to the Government, and to all members and our constituents. Local news matters to local communities. However, the future of local newspapers should not depend on an indirect public subsidy that is controlled by politicians. It should depend on newspapers' own business models and, ultimately, on their ability to attract readers and advertisers. The fact that so many local newspapers are still managing to do that in the face of the deepest recession of the post-war period is testament to their resilience and to the potential to carve out a new digital beginning.

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

Jim Mather: I am in my last minute.

I want to help newspapers to build on those strengths, which is why I intend to engage with the sector during the months ahead. We all know that our local newspapers can prosper in the internet age by continuously adapting, innovating, copying what works elsewhere and taking advantage of technological change, and we intend to help them to do so. In the meantime, we will listen to the

consultation responses and to what is said in the chamber today.

I move amendment S3M-5620.2, to leave out from "with concern" to end and insert:

"that the Scottish Government is currently consulting on the future of public information notices; further notes that this consultation is being run at the request of Scottish local authorities and does not close until 12 February 2010, and acknowledges that, as part of the consultation, the Scottish Government is committed to listening to all views and, in particular, those expressed by the Scottish Parliament."

09:37

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I declare an interest as a shareholder of STV, albeit an increasingly impecunious one. I was also a member of the NUJ for many years.

As someone who began his career as a print journalist, I find it particularly ironic that such an invaluable journalistic tool as the web, which gives access to information on a global scale, should now be largely responsible for the disappearance of the jobs of many of the newspaper men and women who stood to benefit the most from it.

As Jim Mather indicated, he hosted a conference this time last year at Glasgow Caledonian University that involved key players in the newspaper industry. As usual, he did a masterly job with his laptop and big screen, noting the views of those who spoke and plotting a narrative that highlighted the many difficulties that face the sector. I believe Sandra White and I were the only MSPs to attend.

Following that conference, Sandra White and David Whitton secured debates on the plight of the industry. However, despite sympathetic noises such as those that we have heard from Mr Mather this morning, what positive action have we seen from the Scottish Government? Holding six meetings during the course of a year sounds like precious little to me.

The Government's recent moves to make it legal for local authorities not to advertise public notices in the press have exacerbated the situation. At a recent meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, Scottish newspaper proprietors spelled out the stark figures of the double whammy that has hit their industry. For the Scottish and Universal Newspapers titles, including the *Daily Record* and *Sunday Mail*, there has been a year-on-year circulation drop of 6 per cent and drops of 30 per cent and more in some areas of advertising.

The managing director of Johnston Press, which publishes the *Scotsman* group of newspapers as well as more than 50 local titles throughout Scotland, conceded that circulation figures had slumped and that his company's Scottish

advertising revenue was nearly £12 million down on the half year, which is 38 per cent down year on year.

All Scottish newspaper groups have identified the importance of public sector advertising, given Scotland's exposure to the public sector. Local authorities spend around £6 million a year on public sector advertising, a figure which goes up to around £10 million if we include the sums that are spent by the Scottish Government.

We on the Conservative side of the chamber deplore any moves on the Government's part to deprive people of the vital public information that is currently advertised in newspapers. Of course we must embrace new technology and new advertising opportunities, but change must be carefully managed. We recognise that governmental recruitment advertising is likely to move to the net, but public notices are quite different.

Many people, especially the elderly, still look naturally to newspapers for public information, ranging from planning applications to road closures and so on. The Scottish Government says that councils will be able to use a new public information notice portal that will improve communication and dialogue with the public. I do not see how that can possibly be the case when, according to the Government's own Scottish household survey, nine out of 10 pensioners and nearly half of single parents and single adults, as well as 77 per cent of couples of non-pensionable age, have no access to the internet in or outside the home.

Even if people have internet access, how will they stumble across a notice that is relevant to them on a portal that would be carrying a bewildering array of such notices? The proposals have not been properly thought through, and it is clear that they have everything to do with Government cost cutting and little or nothing to do with keeping all sectors of the public informed.

Along with the problems relating to advertising and circulation cuts—which, of course, have largely been caused by Labour's recession—the withdrawal of public sector advertising could mean that Scottish newspapers will go to the wall and journalists and other employees will face going on the dole. Given the real threat to the existence of vital local newspapers, and the resultant loss in democratic accountability, we will support Pauline McNeill's motion today.

However, as someone who has been involved in communications of one kind or another throughout my whole working life, I have been underwhelmed by the industry's communications on its own behalf in these difficult times. I have met all sectors of the newspaper industry in Scotland

since I took on this portfolio, and I have tried, through parliamentary and written questions as well as chamber debates, to highlight the problems that newspapers face. Members on all sides of the chamber have raised similar fears. Until recently, however, politicians raising questions about the looming press crisis scarcely made a line in the columns of the very newspapers that they were seeking to save. It was almost as if the newspaper industry believed that, if it did not mention those problems, they would somehow go away.

I sympathise with the NUJ's views that newspaper groups, in getting to grips with the many challenges that they face, have reacted with all the resolution of rabbits caught in headlights. How could their readers and political representatives help them if they were not prepared to help themselves?

To be fair, the situation has changed in recent weeks, and I particularly congratulate *The Courier and Advertiser* in Dundee on its campaign to raise public awareness of the democratic deficit that will arise if local and regional newspapers are denied public sector advertising. In my part of the world, the *Fife Herald* titles, which are part of Johnston Press, have also launched campaigns to raise public awareness on these issues. They come not a moment too soon if we are to bring home to the public—and thus to the Government—the reality of the crisis that is facing Scottish newspapers.

I believe that the media sector in Scotland is at a crossroads. I will briefly address the additional threat that, in the view of newspapers, will arise from the provision of public subsidies to allow independently financed news consortia to provide the public service content on channels such as STV. In my view, the arguments that newspaper groups have put forward against the further subsidising of broadcast news have considerable merit. Nonetheless, the Labour Government plans to trial a number of publicly financed new consortia, including one in Scotland. STV, which, as I have indicated, is under heavy financial siege, will be one of at least three bidders. It is thought that two newspaper consortia will compete against STV for a subsidy of approximately £5 million a year.

Broadcasting is, of course, a reserved matter, and those members who follow such things will note that Ed Vaizey, the Conservative culture shadow, has warned that if a Conservative Government is elected on 6 May—or whenever Gordon Brown can be dragged kicking and screaming to the polls—it will seek to overturn Labour's further steps to subsidise public service broadcasting. We believe that subsidised broadcasting is more than adequately represented by the BBC, and we do not believe that the

commercial media sector should have to face more subsidised competition.

Conservatives believe that the future of regional local broadcasting, and part of the solution to the local press problem, should be a raft of local and city television companies. We were the first to propose a new digital channel—an idea that became the central recommendation of the Scottish Broadcasting Commission—and we believe that that new channel could become the core channel for a range of local and city TV companies. In the meantime, I ask members to support the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S3M-5620.1, to insert after second “community”:

“; regrets that almost a year after the Glasgow Caledonian University seminar on 4 February 2009 on the newspaper industry, organised by the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism and involving newspaper proprietors, journalists, trade unionists and other stakeholders, there appears to have been little further dialogue between the Scottish Government and the sector”.

09:45

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): Those of my generation—and there are a few here—will recall the cult radio series “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”, and the opening scene, in which Arthur Dent is in his dressing gown, lying in front of a bulldozer that has turned up to demolish his house to make way for a bypass. Standing over him is Mr Prosser from the planning department.

“But Mr Dent, the plans have been available in the planning office for the last nine months”,

says Mr Prosser. Arthur responds:

“Oh yes, well as soon as I heard I went straight round to see them, yesterday afternoon. You hadn’t exactly gone out of your way to call attention to them had you? I mean like actually telling anybody or anything.”

‘But the plans were on display ...’

‘On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them.’

‘That’s the display department.’

‘With a torch.’

‘Ah, well the lights had probably gone.’

‘So had the stairs.’

‘But look, you found the notice, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’

said Arthur,

“yes I did. It was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying Beware of the Leopard.”

That may be a rather extreme example, but it highlights a key issue at the heart of the debate.

Making information available is not the same as making it accessible.

As the motion says, as many as 38 per cent of Scots do not have internet access. For them, putting a public notice on the internet is as good as putting it in that locked cabinet in the disused lavatory in the cellar. Even for those who do use the internet, and who could navigate their way to the information if they knew that it was there, the question remains how exactly they are meant to know that it is there—is it, as it was for Arthur Dent, when the bulldozers turn up? The concept of a public notice is surely that it is something that the public will notice.

Although the internet is a great source of information, we have to know what we are looking for. People do not browse the internet in the way that they turn the pages of a newspaper. With a newspaper, we might happen across something of interest to us when flicking through the pages, or a friend or neighbour might spot it and bring it to our attention.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): What percentage of the population reads newspapers?

Iain Smith: That is not exactly the point that I am trying to make. The point that I am trying to make is that people who read newspapers or whose friends read newspapers might come across information in a way that they would not do on the internet.

I cannot think of anyone—well, perhaps one or two—who will routinely check the council website just in case a public notice about something that might affect them has been posted. Local authorities rightly have a duty to publish public notices to inform the public about those issues that might affect them, such as compulsory purchase of land; road traffic orders, including stopping up and temporary restrictions; designation of houses in multiple occupation; environmental impact assessments; planning notices, including the publication of local development plans; and even school closures. Those are not trivial matters, but they are among the things that the Government is proposing will no longer have to be published in the local paper. Instead, they will need to appear for as little as seven days on a council web portal.

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): I share the member’s views about the requirement to publish public notices by councils. Does he agree that it is important that councils publish details of councillors’ surgeries, which are also a public issue?

Iain Smith: That is a valid point.

There is a huge difference between ensuring that information is available by, for example, putting it on the web, and ensuring that the public

are aware of it. I have no objection to a requirement for councils to put copies of public information notices on their websites. It is a good idea. However, irrespective of the implications for local newspapers, the proposals in the order are misconceived, undemocratic and—frankly—wrong. The order should be withdrawn.

Much of the focus of the debate has been and will be on the implications for local newspapers of the loss of income from public notices if the order is passed. Local newspapers are facing the perfect storm. The recession has caused a decline in advertising revenue, especially from property and car ads. Circulation is in decline, partly because of the availability of news from other sources such as the internet and local radio. Costs, such as that of newsprint, are rising. Local newspapers have already been hit by the loss of income from public sector job advertising. They now face a further loss of income from public notices. For many, that will be the death knell. Indeed, a number of titles have already gone and there have been cuts and redundancies in many more.

We are fortunate in Scotland to have a vibrant regional and local newspaper industry. Daily titles such as *The Courier*, *The Press and Journal*, the *Greenock Telegraph*, the *Edinburgh Evening News* and the *Glasgow Evening Times* play an important role in reflecting national and local issues relevant to the communities that they serve. In rural communities throughout Scotland, weekly newspapers such as the *Fife Herald*, the *St Andrews Citizen* and the *East Fife Mail*, which serve my constituency, are an essential source of community news and information.

Local newspapers are also central to the democratic process. It is often only through their pages that there is any debate about how a local council is performing. Often, they are the only place where community views on things such as local planning issues can be aired. The unconvincing briefing note that we have received from COSLA for today's debate talks about making it easier for the press to

"quickly and comprehensively know about and scrutinise what is going on".

It fails to recognise that if the proposals go ahead, there will be no local press to scrutinise anything. No one objects to councils developing a range of alternative ways to inform the public about what is going on in their area, nor do we object to making public notices more comprehensible—in fact, that should happen—but it is not an either/or. Those things can be done without removing the requirement to publish in a relevant local newspaper. That is what will provide value for money, because value for money is about councils making better decisions, and councils will make

better decisions if they ensure that the public are fully informed and able to participate in a way that informs those decisions.

I urge members to support the motion and, once again, I ask the minister to withdraw this ill-conceived order.

09:52

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab):

As members will be aware, the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee has recently been undertaking an inquiry into the state of the local newspaper industry in Scotland. Committee members have been made aware of the serious concerns of those involved in the industry about the future of local newspapers. Those concerns focus on three main and interrelated issues, namely the decline in readership evident throughout Scotland; the impact of web-based news, advertising and selling; and the significant decline in advertising revenue.

With that in mind, it is easy to understand the concerns expressed by those running our local newspapers about the Government's intention to remove the legal requirement for local authorities to advertise public information notices in newspapers. Evidence that was given to the committee highlights the serious impact that losing that income stream would have. Scottish and Universal Newspapers estimates that 7 per cent of its advertising revenue comes from those notices, while Johnston Press receives 12.5 per cent—a critical potential reduction in income when they are already experiencing a substantial decline in their advertising revenue.

That is worrying for a number of reasons. Local newspapers are important local employers, often providing a vital step for journalists who want to go on to work in our national media. That point was highlighted by Michael Johnston, during his evidence to the committee, when he observed:

"The local press is of fundamental importance. The committee may have different views on this, but where would we have been without an Andrew Marr, a Jim Naughtie or a Magnus Magnusson, who all came through the Scottish newspaper scene? We have a fundamental role as trainers and developers of journalists; we are the entry point to the profession."

In addition, it should be remembered that local papers employ more than just journalists. Printers, distributors and administration and finance staff are all affected and threatened by the continued fall in the readership of our local press.

However, although employment issues are important to the local economy and to the individuals concerned, even more fundamental is the issue of democratic accountability and access

to information. That point was made clearly by Michael Johnston, who stated:

"We think that a fundamental democratic issue is involved. ... What happened when the regulations that affect licensing notices were changed provides an alarming taste of what might happen in Scotland."

The minister should note that point. He might be giving local authorities discretion, but the reality of what is happening in Scotland today is as Michael Johnston stated:

"Licensing notices were traditionally advertised in local newspapers. They got good coverage and were well read. There was a change about 18 months ago and all licensing notices were lost to the local press—councils immediately withdrew them. I find that an interesting development in Scotland at a time when the Parliament is concerned about alcohol abuse and the Government has said that that is a key policy area. The concerns are focused on availability of alcohol, who is providing it and where the outlets are, yet it is nigh on impossible for most people in Scotland to know whether a pub is opening next door to them within the next three weeks, because the licensing notices are simply not in the public domain any more."—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 13 January 2010; c 3030, 3018.]

I do not object to Government proposals to use websites to advertise public information notices, but the web alone is not sufficient. By their very nature, such websites will be viewed only by those actively seeking information. At present, information about planning is accessed by people who buy their local paper for a variety of reasons and who may stumble across a planning notice, a road closure notice or a proposal to close a school while looking, as my granny avidly does every week, at the hatches, matches and dispatches. That may seem a trivial point, but it is not. By advertising that information in a local newspaper, councils ensure that a far greater number of people will view it and have the option of acting on it, and not just those people who actively seek such information.

In future, councils might want to consider advertising public notices only on the web, but that time has not yet come. Ofcom's James Thickett told the committee that only 3 per cent of people in Scotland use the internet as their main source of news, whereas 28 per cent of our population use local newspapers. That is despite the fact that most web-based news is currently free, while people still have to pay for their newspapers. Labour's position today therefore rests on a fundamental point of democracy and accountability.

Some may be surprised to hear me arguing in favour of steps to protect our local newspapers. Like many in the chamber, I have suffered from the occasional piece of bad press in our local papers. In fact, I seem to remember that it was more than just occasional around the time of the Monklands accident and emergency campaign.

There is no doubt that that kind of thing is an uncomfortable experience for all of us. However, that is as it should be. Local newspapers are not there to give politicians of any persuasion an easy time. Good local newspapers are there to campaign on the issues that matter most to their readership and to the communities that they work in and serve. I support them in that. I ask the Government to withdraw its plans for the Scottish statutory instrument and to work with us to secure the future of local papers and enable easy access to vital public information.

09:58

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):

I echo Pauline McNeill's view that local newspapers are of great importance and value to the people and present an opportunity to discuss and champion issues that affect local people—all members who have spoken so far have indicated that. However, my view is that the debate is not about whether we support local newspapers but about how local authorities spend their money. The motion makes it clear that Labour would prevent local authorities from deciding what is appropriate for their area in terms of public notices; in my view, the motion is therefore fundamentally undemocratic. Should the Scottish Government succeed in allowing councils to decide, do any Opposition members seriously dispute that Opposition-controlled councils would be among the first to reduce their usage of printed public notices? Opposition MSPs are in danger of being isolated from their local authority colleagues on this issue.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Kenneth Gibson: I will maybe let the member in in a minute, but I want to move on first.

Let us look at the COSLA briefing paper that members received from COSLA president Councillor Pat Watters, who is of course a Labour member. He writes:

"COSLA unequivocally supports the Government's proposed legislation and the consultation process that precedes it. ... The current legislation is 50 or 60 years old and relates to a time when the printed media was by and large the only method of ensuring general public access to such notices. ... COSLA is simply seeking to ensure that the full range of media opportunities can be explored in order to ensure the greatest possible public access to public information notices. ... 'the primary focus in the provision of information is ease of access for the intended recipients'. It would seem unlikely that this objective can be achieved if only one source of media is supported by legislation as is currently the case. ... Local authorities have a duty of 'Best Value' imposed on them by the Scottish Parliament. ... We believe that by using a mix of media outlets, both printed and digital, a saving of £3 million to £5 million across local government is achievable."

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Will the member take an intervention?

Robert Brown *rose—*

Rhona Brankin *rose—*

Kenneth Gibson: I will let members in in just a wee second or two, if they just let me move on. I will take interventions.

Pat Watters writes:

"The legislation means that councils will no longer be required to use only the printed media and enables the use of online publication. The legislation does not require that councils only publish online. ... One example is from Glasgow Gorbals library where there were more than 2500 internet bookings a week compared with 1500 book issues. ... Any older person ... who wants a weekly print out of public information relating to their area, will be able to get that service."

I give way to Hugh O'Donnell.

Rhona Brankin: I thought that you were going to take me.

Kenneth Gibson: Well, you thought wrong.

Hugh O'Donnell: I accept what Mr Gibson said about the use of the internet, but does he recognise the internet offers additionality, not sole provision, and that, if the newspapers do not have that opportunity, we will end up with only the web, which is not readily accessible, as many members have said?

Kenneth Gibson: The point is that no one is going to prevent public information notices from being put in newspapers.

I have been advised that some newspapers charge premium rates for statutory notices, because they know that the local authority must use them. They therefore charge higher than normal rates for PINs. For example, a huge proportion of election budgets is used by small local authorities to publish PINs rather than to run the elections. One thing that will surely come out of this is that local authorities will get more competitive rates for PINs.

We have talked about the decline in newspaper circulation, but evidence to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee showed that one of the main reasons for the decline is that some newspapers are more lively, exciting and interesting than others. Some newspapers have therefore declined by only 1 per cent in recent years, while others have declined by some 24 per cent. The public notices issue will not change that.

I received an e-mail yesterday from Mr Bruce Skivington, who is publishing director of LRE Media Ltd. He said:

"I think this is important in that what is going to decide on local newspapers is the amount of general advertising which presently is on the floor due to Gordon Brown's

recession. ... The Scottish Government is under severe spending restrictions and any saving on public notices could be used more efficiently elsewhere. ... The newspaper industry has done very well over the years, my editors have earnings well above MSPs ... Local newspapers are not going to survive on public notices ... The Scottish Government has a responsibility to the taxpayers".

David Hutchison, who is a professor of media studies, told the committee that newspapers still make profits of around 10 per cent gross, although that was disputed by some proprietors. Professor Hutchison made the important point that, if we do not approve the measure that the Scottish Government has proposed and the notices continue, the Parliament should at least seek

"some kind of reciprocal understanding"

from newspapers, such that we receive

"undertakings on the number of journalists employed ... undertakings on the range of journalists employed"

and, as in Sweden, agreement that at least half of

"editorial content must be unique to the newspaper"

and that

"editorial content must amount to at least 1000 column meters per annum".

He suggests that, if we decide not to progress the measure, we should at least look at what we will get as a Parliament and a society for our money.

On access, if jobs, for example, are advertised in a specific local paper, clearly people other than that paper's readers will not see them. However, through the pilot project, North Ayrshire Council was able to cut its recruitment advertising spend by 65 per cent; Perth and Kinross Council reduced the time taken to hire by almost half; and 90 per cent of surveyed candidates rated the application process as very good.

We are not saying that PINs must be on the net; we are saying that local authorities must have the choice. Local authorities are saying that they will still provide information in libraries and public buildings.

Rhona Brankin: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The member is just finishing.

Kenneth Gibson: Last week, I went to Saltcoats community council and discussed this matter. About 25 people were present and, with one exception, they all thought that the measure was a good one. We should certainly explore the idea. It is about choice.

10:05

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): The press is at the heart of our democratic process. In the constituency that I represent, the *Cumbernauld News* and the *Kilsyth Chronicle* provide a weekly account of the stories that affect local people, and they do so 52 weeks of the year. As we have heard this morning, they and other local newspapers are already under threat from a drop in job, car and property advertising. When news is shifting from the page to the screen, newspapers have to move with the times and technology.

Newspapers are now facing a new threat in the form of the SNP Government and its quest to remove public information notices from the papers and to publish them on the internet instead. We should make it clear that, at the moment, local authorities are free to publish their information notices on the internet—many do. There is nothing to prevent that from happening at the moment.

Fiona Hyslop: This has to be a broad debate about the future of newspapers. However, does the member acknowledge that Labour-led North Lanarkshire Council is part of local government's request to the Government to consider and debate this issue in Parliament?

Cathie Craigie: Labour-led North Lanarkshire Council is very important to the people whom I represent, but I represent the people of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, and it is more important to me that the people whom I represent get access to what is happening in Scotland and in their communities. In that respect, I am unlike some ministers and back-bench SNP members who sit on their hands time and again, sooking up to the party line and not representing the people.

Public information notices remain vital to people from across our respective communities, because they inform the public about council and Government plans and provide revenue for the papers. There is no doubt that local newspapers are already facing challenges, but now the Government is planning to take even more revenue away from them. It is neglectful and foolish to follow a path that will damage an industry that scrutinises our democracy.

Removing PINs from local newspapers will reduce the amount of information that the public have knowledge of. In the committee, one SNP MSP used the argument that few young people read the newspapers. That might be correct, but it is not the young people I am particularly concerned about when it comes to the democratic deficit; it is the older residents of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth. I am sure that my younger constituents use the internet frequently and get much information from it, but what about those

who do not have access to the internet? We have heard the figures this morning. What about the pensioner who is living on a restricted income and does not have the same resource or access to the internet? Those people look forward to travelling for their newspaper on a Wednesday.

One person at yesterday's briefing for MSPs indicated that reading the local newspaper is a form of recreation, but for many people it is a way of keeping up with what is happening in their local community. Bob Doris's excuse that he was not able to attend yesterday's briefing because he had to attend an SNP group meeting shows that, for SNP members, the party comes before the people they represent.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): The member said that she does not care about young readers of the newspapers. The people who gave evidence to the committee said that newspapers cannot take it for granted that young people will go on to read the newspapers. We have to look at people who are potential readers of newspapers.

Cathie Craigie: I refer the member to the *Official Report*. I did not say that I do not care about young people. It is interesting that no one has jumped to their feet to defend themselves from my accusation that they owe their allegiance to their party rather than to the people.

We must ensure that our communities have access to the local print media, and we must protect the interests of local journalism. Karen Whitefield talked about the training of journalists, and the many journalists who have made their way from local newspapers to the national press.

I firmly believe that my constituents deserve to get the information that affects the communities in which they live. By removing public information notices to the web, many of my constituents will be cut off, and major local issues might be implemented with little public debate. Iain Smith's example in his little play this morning showed us exactly what can happen. It might have sounded a bit drastic, but that is what we are all fearful of.

As other members have said, there are times when we are displeased with the coverage that we receive in our local press. Sometimes on a Wednesday or Thursday, I am tearing my hair out, saying, "I didn't say that," and I am sure that we have all had that experience from time to time. We do not like the slant that the newspapers have put on a story, or perhaps they have not run with a story that we think is important to the constituency. Surely, though, it would not be logical for any of us to advocate the demise of local newspapers. They are integral to our localities and they chronicle the decisions of local councils and of elected members of the Parliament.

The threat to local newspapers is real. The Government's policy is unfair to journalists who are facing job cuts and to those in my constituency who get a lot of information and pleasure from their local newspapers. Unfortunately, I have already lost a local newspaper office. The office of the *Kilsyth Chronicle* was centralised by Johnston Press in Cumbernauld. I understand the difficulties that local newspapers face, and I am grateful that Johnston Press chose to relocate the office rather than close the title.

The Government is trying to save a cheap buck and, as a consequence, it is endangering the public's right to know. I strongly urge a rethink of the policy and I urge SNP back benchers to get off their hands and vote in the public interest.

10:12

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): The contraction of the newspaper industry, particularly the local newspaper industry, concerns me deeply. I have previously raised in the chamber the threat of public information notices being published solely online.

Iain Smith made one of the most important points to be made so far: access to information is the important thing, not its availability.

Everyone in the chamber agrees that the Scottish Government and local authorities should advertise on the internet, but that must only be as a supplement to advertising in print. As Pauline McNeill's motion states, losing the print publication of public information notices

"will create a democratic deficit".

We have heard plenty of figures on that in the debate so far. It is simply a matter of fact that the internet is a less effective communication channel than the local paper. Removing the publication of PINs from the papers will undermine the public's right to know, and many important local issues will pass under the radar without proper consultation or debate. It is that problem of reducing the scrutiny of government that I want to focus on in my contribution to the debate.

Many local papers survive on very narrow margins, and the margins of our national papers are also ever decreasing. As the industry continues to tighten its belt, certain things will, nevertheless, remain: the standard reporting from the wire and verbatim reprints of press releases, comments and blogs—all of the less time-consuming, cheaper stories that can easily fill a few column inches. What could be lost, and is certainly under threat or on the wane in some newspapers, is the art of proper investigative journalism. We are losing journalists. They are paid to question, research, dig out the gory details,

and hold government and public authorities to account.

Let us take last year's expenses scandal. If *Telegraph* journalists had not devoted hundreds of hours to acquiring and analysing claim forms, MPs, secretaries of state and senior politicians of long standing would not have been publicly held to account for their—to be frank—unforgivable abuse of public finances and the nation's trust.

Slightly closer to home, without the investigative journalism by Rob Edwards for an article that was published in the *Sunday Herald* in June last year, we might still be talking about the replacement Forth crossing and not the twin-crossing strategy that we now discuss. His article said that he obtained internal documents that showed that Transport Scotland was being deliberately misleading about retaining the original bridge, to protect "political sensitivities". His tenacity brought that information into the public domain. Such stories are what journalism should be about, but they are labour intensive and therefore comparatively expensive. They will be the first items to be cut when a paper is forced to tighten its belt.

We can all empathise with journalists on occasion—their profession often vies with ours to top the table of people whom the public trust the least. More is the pity for, just like politicians, journalists provide a public good—they can hold public figures to account and shed light on malpractice. By allowing local authorities not to publish PINs in print, the Government places the newspaper industry under additional pressure, which will result in less investigative journalism and therefore less scrutiny of elected officials.

I have time to reflect on a few of the speeches. I congratulate Ted Brocklebank on giving us extremely persuasive figures. Iain Smith's light-hearted but effective speech on the fact that making information available is not the same as making it accessible has been referred to. He also talked about newspapers holding local politicians to account. I was not impressed by the comment from a politician who shall remain nameless that, for our judgment on the debate, we should rely on the evidence of 25 Saltcoats residents.

The minister says that he wishes to support newspapers and that doing so is incredibly important. He says that we should lead them on the way to taking advantage of everything that modern technology offers us, but that is part of the future. To ca the feet from under the newspaper industry when it is under severe threat would be a bizarre misjudgment.

10:17

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I do not support Labour's motion or the Opposition amendment, as they misrepresent—deliberately or otherwise—the continuing consultation on public information notices. However, I genuinely thank Pauline McNeill for giving the Scottish Parliament a platform for debating several issues that relate to the consultation process.

The motion describes the debate about public information notices simplistically at best and polarises the debate between two opposing positions. First, it suggests that the current public information notices arrangement is adequate and should be preserved—at least, that was the suggestion until about 10 and a half minutes into Pauline McNeill's speech, when she mentioned one or two things that could perhaps change. No other Labour member has made a telling contribution in that respect. The second form of polarisation is the suggestion that scrapping the current PINs system would have dire consequences. That is a false polarisation that does not help the debate.

Robert Brown: I want to be clear about the position, so that we know where we stand. Has or has not the Government proposed to change the legal duty on local authorities so that they need not put PINs in newspapers?

Bob Doris: The Government is consulting on that option on the basis of representations that local government has made to it. That is what we are debating.

The public sector should always seek to account for every penny that it spends and it should spend as wisely as possible. Needless to say, that has never been so true as it is in the current economic climate, in which the UK Government has slashed hundreds of millions of pounds from Scottish budgets. I therefore understand why local authorities seek ways to divert about £6 million in cash a year from paying to advertise public information notices to protecting front-line services. I also understand why the newspaper industry is concerned about the financial impact that that could have on it.

As an MSP, I would want to ensure that any shift of public information notices from newspaper advertising to an online portal did not exclude several groups in society. For instance, elderly people are less likely to use the internet than are others. Whereas 80 per cent of working-age people use the internet, only 33 per cent of people aged between 60 and 75 use it. Disparities in internet usage also apply to people who are disabled, who are in ill health and who are from deprived areas. However, those figures are

improving. I should point out that such disparities also exist in the readership of the published press.

Pauline McNeill: Given that 39 per cent of people in Glasgow have broadband access, does that not make the case that we are not ready to switch to advertising on the internet, even with improved figures? The draft order says that switching to the internet should be “no less satisfactory” a way of communication. Does Bob Doris seriously think that local authorities can achieve that?

Bob Doris: It is reasonable to consult on whether local authorities should be given the choice, and that is what we are doing. I will give members more details on that later.

I will contrast the internet usage figures with those for newspaper readership. Of the Scottish population, 67 per cent use the internet. In 2008, Scottish Government research showed that 77 per cent of people use newspapers as a source of local news. However, the staggering point is that only 2 per cent of the public who read newspapers read public information notices—[*Interruption.*] More than anything else, that figure should be a wake-up call on how any level of government attempts to meet its statutory obligation to inform the public about certain matters of public interest. It should also make every MSP wonder about how best to use Scottish taxpayers' money when we try to meet our obligation to inform them.

I hear muttering about the 2 per cent figure, but that is the figure that I have been given—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Bob Doris: That figure is ridiculously low and we must take steps to address it—[*Laughter.*] I hear Opposition members laughing—I thought that they wanted a serious debate. Their heckling will not achieve that and will demean their argument.

I will give an example of where things could be going wrong. If a public information notice that said that a pub in Springburn had applied for a licence extension from 11 pm to 1 am was read by only 2 per cent of readers, would that notice be the best use of public money? No, it would not. As a regional MSP for Glasgow, I rely on several local newspapers and I am well served by the *Springburn Herald* for that purpose in north Glasgow. I would not want such adverts to be placed in that publication to be read by only 2 per cent of its readership.

We need to become more imaginative. Perhaps a newspaper could use spot colour but less space. Perhaps it could advertise a link to an internet site with more information or a telephone number that people could call to ask the local authority to send a leaflet with more information.

Not enough people use, study or access public information notices—the situation must change. The consultation is shining a light on that. I thought that I was here today for a constructive debate, but—to be honest—the Labour Party has let the Parliament down.

10:23

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): Karen Whitefield and Cathie Craigie mentioned the double edge of local newspapers, which can certainly be difficult outlets for many politicians. As a public representative for many years, I have been on the receiving end of withering criticism from local and national papers, but that is healthy—it is a fundamental of the democratic process. Politicians should not seek to use only the outlets that are favourable to them; they need to recognise that local papers play a vital role in keeping the public informed and giving access to information, as Iain Smith and others have said. Anything that damages that function should be opposed. The change has the potential to be a financial dagger to the heart of many of Scotland's newspapers. The people who will be the beneficiaries will be those in power at the local or national level. The danger is that no one will be left to scrutinise and criticise the decisions that are being made. I will come back to that point.

Ian McKee asked who reads newspapers. I have spoken to my local newspapers on the subject—*The Gazette*, a weekly newspaper, and the *Paisley Daily Express*, a campaigning daily newspaper. Anne Dalrymple, the editor of the *Paisley Daily Express* told me that, over the course of a year, over 60 per cent of local people read her paper—a significant number. Indeed, in any one week, something like 55 per cent of local adults read the *Paisley Daily Express*.

What would the loss of revenue mean to such local papers? Scottish and Universal Newspapers has estimated that its group could lose up to £1 million. That is equivalent to the annual revenue of the *Paisley Daily Express*—a staggering and significant amount. Amanda Ramsden, the editor of *The Gazette* and the *Barrhead News* said:

"I can say categorically the plans for changing the law to allow Public Information Notices to be advertised electronically in place of newspapers would be a devastating blow to our titles."

The debate is not only about what newspapers and politicians are saying but, as Cathie Craigie indicated, the duty and responsibility that politicians have to the people whom we represent. What are members of the public saying on the subject? To its credit, the *Paisley Daily Express* took time to go out on the streets and ask. A woman from Glenburn in my constituency is quoted as saying:

"I get all my information from the *Express*, I read it every day. They've already stopped advertising councillors surgeries in the papers so I had to go down to the library to ask the staff there how I could find out about contacting my councillor".

Renfrewshire Council has stopped advertising councillor surgeries; its councillors are now hiding from their public, which is a disgrace. The paper also quoted Paisley worker Carolan Forbes, who had not heard about the Government plans. She said:

"I think it sounds like a very bad idea ... not everyone has access to the internet or uses the internet."

Gordon Barr from Paisley told the paper that he uses the internet easily but that his parents would struggle if the Government's plans went ahead. He said:

"My parents are both well into their 70s and they don't use the internet at all."

Ian McKee: Mr Henry rightly mentions the importance of consultation. Does he feel that it is wrong for the Scottish Government to consult on whether to end the automatic right for public information notices to be put in the press, when it was asked to do so by COSLA, which represents all local authorities?

Hugh Henry: It is a farce to consult on an issue to which there is such overwhelming opposition.

Another of my constituents, who lives in the west end of Paisley, is quoted in the paper as saying:

"We feel it's the thin end for the wedge. They could push through all sorts of planning things without anyone knowing."

That is the critical issue. As well as the financial blow to local newspapers, a huge democratic issue is involved. Those in power, whether councillors or Government ministers, will take decisions and no one will know what is happening. In essence, the Government case is based on cost savings; little consideration has been given to what many believe should be a fundamental part of the democratic process, which is that the information that legislation requires to be communicated to the public should be targeted to give maximum visibility on a cost-effective basis.

Yesterday, I spoke to a journalist who told me of decisions that are being taken "under the radar". In other words, decisions are being pushed through and no one knows about them. If it were not for local newspapers, how would my constituents, whose children are having their school transport removed, know about the decision? The council did not tell them in advance of its decision. Local newspapers were the only ones to highlight the issue.

Without local newspapers, how could my constituents campaign to save libraries that the

council is attempting to close in Elderslie and Johnstone? Those local papers are the only means that people in our communities have of reading about what is going on in the council and of expressing their outrage. The suggestion challenges democracy, which will be under threat if the proposal goes ahead. We need healthy, campaigning and functional newspapers.

10:30

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP):

Like many members in the chamber, I grew up having a local newspaper in the house and I still do. In Inverclyde, where I stay, the *Greenock Telegraph* is an institution. It has a large daily readership; the *Tele* is the main oracle in the area. Over the years, other papers have tried unsuccessfully to break into the Inverclyde market, but times have changed. We now have an online publication, *inverclydenow.com*. It is popular with those who read it, particularly those who commute to work outside Inverclyde, as it gives them a chance to read the news online before returning home.

The national picture mirrors Inverclyde but, obviously, on a larger scale. Times have changed, for better or for worse. For journalists, information gathering is vastly different from what it was even 10 years ago. Similarly, the way in which we receive our news has also changed. Studies have repeatedly shown that newspaper circulation figures are in decline. Indeed, the trends state that they have been in decline for some years.

Let us take the example of our main daily newspapers here in Scotland. Between 2008 and 2009, *The Herald* and *The Scotsman* circulation decreased almost by 10 per cent. The once staple newspaper diet—the Sunday papers—is also in decline. In the same period, the *Sunday Herald* circulation dipped over 12 per cent. Quite a few people tell me that they no longer buy any national paper—daily or Sunday—because they no longer trust anything that is written in them. They say that, although they are sceptical about their local papers, more often than not they buy them.

Karen Whitefield spoke about the declining newspaper readership. Surely that means that fewer people have the opportunity to read public information notices.

During its term in office, the Scottish Government has engaged consistently with all areas of the print media industry. In line with the concordat, that engagement involves consulting the local authorities. Indeed, it was COSLA that requested that ministers introduce the consultation that is the subject of the debate. Yesterday, every member received the letter from councillor Pat Watters, the COSLA president, in which he stated

that COSLA supports the proposals. COSLA recognises that there is a potential saving of at least £2.5 million to the taxpayer that can be invested in front-line services. COSLA also recognises that the consultation—and it is merely a consultation—will not prohibit councils from advertising in their local newspapers. I would be astonished if any council across Scotland stopped all public information notices from going into their local media.

If the end result of the consultation is that the proposal proceeds, the local authorities that spend the money and that have the final say would then make a decision on what they advertise and where. Ultimately, we are talking about devolving more responsibility to local authorities. Local authorities want that; that is why the concordat has been a success.

I have two points to highlight. First, research on public attitudes to broadcasting, undertaken by the Scottish Broadcasting Commission, found that fewer than 50 per cent of Scots trust their local newspaper. Secondly, if the figure is looked at alongside the Directgov figure that 50 per cent of people prefer to access Government and local authority information online, we see a much broader picture than that proposed by new Labour. Indeed, new Labour members have said much this morning to dismiss the proposal. I am glad that Ken Macintosh is in the chamber, as I want to quote a question that he put at the meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee on 20 January. He said:

“For example, Trinity Mirror paid substantial sums of money to its top executives at the same time as it laid off dozens of journalists. The real dilemma for people in the public sector is this: we want to retain the journalists’ jobs and local papers, but—

and this is the key point—

“should local authorities not be allowed to make savings? Should public policy be skewed in a way that boosts the profits of big companies?”—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 20 January 2010; c 3076.]

Those were legitimate questions; I am glad that the member asked them.

I am afraid to say that not all members of the public are totally interested in the work of government—local, national, UK or European. Election turnouts prove that. Not everyone reads public information notices—the figure of 2 per cent has already been cited. People who buy newspapers say that they do so to find out about a range of issues, not to read public information notices.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I am pleased that Mr McMillan liked my line of questioning in the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. Was he also pleased to

hear the answers that we received from witnesses, which suggested—the committee will draw its own conclusions—that this is not the time for the SNP Government to withdraw PINs from our local newspapers? Does he agree with those answers?

Stuart McMillan: The evidence that the committee heard was interesting. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the *Official Report* of its meeting.

As the next and future generations grow up, the way in which they receive news and do research will change. We must be willing to incorporate those generations in any decisions that are made about the future of public information notices. Many of us complain about the seemingly widening gap between the generations. On issues such as this, we must be flexible and willing to adapt to accommodate new technologies and preferred methods of social and informative interaction.

I fully support my local newspaper, the *Greenock Telegraph*. Tonight I will do what I usually do—when I go home, I will read this week's editions—

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: I am about to finish—I have spoken for more than six minutes.

I also enjoy using new media outlets such as *inverclydenow.com*, which has a different perspective on some issues that can be refreshing. I fully understand but am disappointed by the political nature of this morning's debate. I urge the Opposition parties to contribute to the consultation, to propose their alternatives and to take matters forward from there.

10:37

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Out of interest, I have been keeping a note of the number of name checks for local newspapers that members have made; thus far, we are up to 21. I can see all the press releases that will come out. Such name checks are not illegitimate; nor will be the complaints from those of us whose press releases are not published.

In Scotland, there is a tradition of reading newspapers. Newspaper readership has always been higher here than in the rest of the UK. That applies equally to national and local titles. However, we must reinforce the message that many members have already given: we are talking about access to public, statutory information. SNP members, who have been so supportive of the proposal, may review their support if their nomination and candidacy for various elections is published online, rather than in local newspapers.

It is true that the availability of net and web-based media has increased. However, as Pauline McNeill said in her opening speech—other members have made the same point—it is also true that the majority of the population do not use those media. How many of us would rely on Wikipedia as a legitimate information source, as opposed to the Oxford printed version of that information? That is the sort of situation that we face.

By and large, local newspapers do not transfer the statutory notices that they publish in their printed versions to their websites. Even if someone reads a local newspaper online, they will not necessarily get the same information. To get access to notices, they will have to navigate all the single portals that are proposed. With 32 local authorities, it will be impossible for people to find their way through, unless they are avid internet nerds. We have heard the statistics that show that the majority of the population, especially the older population, are not that.

Another point occurs to me from listening to the proposals and the speeches that have been made. This may be slightly unkind to our local authorities, but many of us will remember the famous phrase, "a good day to bury bad news". If a local authority is looking to minimise local campaigns and opposition to school closures and is obliged to publish information only on the internet, through the single portal, how much more comfortable will it be for officials and, probably, the governing party to sneak notices out on the single portal, to minimise the opportunities for parents and campaigners to take action in legitimate, democratic opposition to the proposals? That would increasingly be the case. Frankly, it is a democratic deficit.

There is also potential for people to miss a road closure. I live in Cumbernauld. Notifications about speed restrictions and average speed cameras along the A80 were published in local newspapers all the way along that route. That not only provides information but has a positive impact on driving behaviour and reduces the opportunity for accidents and other unforeseen events. Councils can put statutory notices on their websites, in addition to publishing them in hard copy. However, giving councils leave not to publish notices in hard copy could have serious implications for public safety, especially in relation to the matters to which I have referred.

Based on those principles alone, it is clear from members' speeches that a majority of members are opposed to the proposal. The minister should take heed of the points that have been made, withdraw the order and drop this dead donkey, because it really is dead.

10:42

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): That was a thoughtful speech by Hugh O'Donnell. He said that he had counted 21 name checks. I can give him a few more in my speech, but I will start with one that I doubt any other member will mention—*The Himalayan Times*, which I adopted on my trip to Nepal and in which I even managed to get a front-page story.

I return to more local issues. A number of local newspapers cover my constituency. In alphabetical order, they are the *Ayr Advertiser*, the *Ayrshire Post*, the *Carrick Gazette*, the *Carrick Herald*, the *Cumnock Chronicle* and the *Kilmarnock Standard*. Each of those local newspapers has its own identity—they are all different and take different views on issues. That is absolutely right and proper. If we read the papers, we get a sense of the different communities that they serve. The *Cumnock Chronicle* and the *Carrick Gazette* provide the best coverage of junior football anywhere in Scotland. The *Ayrshire Post* and the *Ayr Advertiser* have taken up a number of campaigning issues, especially around the Gaiety Theatre in Ayr and the closure of Pets Corner.

It is important to note that all the local newspapers that I have mentioned have a skilled workforce and local editors who understand and have built relationships with their communities and are able to work to give local groups and organisations the opportunity to get their message across in the papers. Members have suggested that young people are more used to using electronic media than to reading local newspapers, but yipworld.com, which is a youth project in Cumnock, regularly has a column in the *Cumnock Chronicle*. Information about what is happening is getting out not only to other young people but to the wider community. The *Ayrshire Post* and the *Kilmarnock Standard* have church and school news. Not everyone will trawl for such news online. People are much less likely to have a cup of coffee and relax while sitting at the computer than while reading their local newspaper. As they flick from page to page, they will find things that are of interest and importance to them. We must not lose that.

As Hugh Henry said, local newspapers are also important because they take up issues and campaign on behalf of local communities. It is a real pity that, only this week, South Ayrshire Council did not take account of the call by the *Carrick Gazette* to do the decent thing and hand over ownership of Girvan swimming pool to the local community. Where would residents in East Ayrshire be if it were not for the *Kilmarnock Standard* outlining what the council's proposed budget cuts would mean for them? Not everyone

would have trawled through East Ayrshire Council's web pages to find the cabinet papers and go through every budget line proposal, one by one.

As Pauline McNeill and other members have said, the debate is not just about the content of local newspapers. It is also about the democratic deficit, and about people living in disadvantaged areas: they, too, have the right to information. I was interested to listen to and read the material that COSLA provided. There are many constituents who do not get access to high broadband speeds, or even to broadband at all. That includes at least one editor of a local newspaper in my constituency, who lives in a rural area and is still on a dial-up connection—he cannot even read his own paper online very easily. There are other people in rural communities who do not have easy access to the local library either, because of the lack of a decent bus service, and they might not have broadband access in their homes.

COSLA's written submission suggested that more people are now using mobile phones, so they can get access to information via text messages and so on. That is fine, but it means somebody else deciding what information people might want. That is not good enough. In a community such as mine, many people do not have the latest iPhone with web access—they are not constantly using their phones to look at what is going on via the web; they are on pay-as-you-go systems, to be used for emergencies, because that is what they can afford and budget for. It is important to continue to support our local newspapers and to ensure that information is made available to people from a variety of sources.

I gently say, to the minister and all those on the SNP back benches who have said that the process is only a consultation, that consultations are published with a purpose. I have yet to see a consultation about the possibility of doing nothing. The consultation exists because of a proposed change, and it is clear from the debate that the majority of members do not believe that the proposed change is right. I add my weight to the calls to stop the consultation, reject the proposal, and consider other ways of getting information out to the majority of people who need it.

10:48

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I state my whole-hearted support for the local newspaper industry in Scotland and my firm belief in the important contribution that local papers make to our democracy and society. It is perhaps disingenuous of the Labour Party to present its motion in a way that suggests that the entire future

of our newspapers rests on a consultation by the Scottish Government. Labour members are wrong to suggest that those of us who do not support their motion somehow also do not support our local newspapers.

We support our newspapers and will always continue to do so. I was happy to attend yesterday's NUJ briefing. I make my comments from a point of view where I completely understand the peaks and troughs of being a journalist, as I was made redundant from a newspaper that could not survive in a very crowded market. That situation was awful, and I know that it was tough for many of my colleagues to find alternative employment, as there simply were not the same number of journalism jobs available.

I am one of the thousands of regular readers of the *Carlisle and Lanark Gazette* and the *Lanark & Carlisle Advertiser*, where I can find out about what is happening in the part of the South of Scotland region where I live. I also pay particular attention to the *Irvine Times* and *The Irvine Herald and Kilwinning Chronicle*, as I hold surgeries in the towns of Irvine, Kilwinning and Stevenston. Both papers are an excellent source of information about goings-on in North Ayrshire.

Pauline McNeill: If the member was at yesterday's meeting, I wonder whether she indeed thinks that the Labour motion is "disingenuous". Did she hear the words of the editors and journalists, who said that the proposal that has been made will be damaging to the industry?

Aileen Campbell: It is not a question of "If" I was at the meeting yesterday—I was at the meeting yesterday. The consultation is being conducted by the Scottish Government, and I hope that they feel free to contribute to it.

The best way for us all to support our local newspapers is to buy those that are available. Local newspapers are about more than just public information notices. To be honest, I am not entirely surprised that only about 2 per cent of people get their public information from such notices. People buy their local newspapers for a variety of reasons: to get the football results and local sports round-ups, to find out about their local groups and organisations, to see who has been in court and, generally, to find out what the craic is in the towns and villages that they live in. However, there is absolutely no denying that the newspapers' relative decline is worthy of discussion, investigation and concern.

The Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee thought the same, and took evidence on the issue just last week. The session was illuminating and I encourage members to have a look at the *Official Report*. The evidence painted a

picture that was much broader than the stark terms of associating the potential folding of local titles with a decline in advertising money from public information notices. Of particular note was the evidence from David Hutchison, visiting professor in media policy at Glasgow Caledonian University, who told us:

"even in these difficult times, if you look at the percentage of revenue that goes to profits, you will see that the chain newspaper companies are doing not too badly. Only a few years ago, 30 per cent of revenue was profit. Marks and Spencer had a very good year three years ago when 9 per cent of its revenue was profit. Even today, the latest figures that I have seen suggest that some of the companies, some of whose representatives you have spoken to, are still making rather good returns."—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 20 January 2010; c 3064.]

Newspaper sales might be declining, but it seems that a healthy profit can still be made. Stuart McMillan mentioned the dilemma that the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee faced following questions from Ken Macintosh. We heard about profits and about the desperate need for local efficiency savings. That is a valid point. While newspapers are still in receipt of advertising revenues at the moment, journalists are being laid off, journalist posts are being scaled back and sales are still declining. [*Interruption.*]

We might disagree on some issues this morning, but there can be no argument that the nature of the media and of how we get our news and information is changing. We need to find the trick of dealing with that rationally and to identify ways in which local and national newspapers can respond and react to this rapidly changing climate. The internet will never uninvent itself. It is fast becoming the first port of call for anyone looking for information.

One success of 21st century communicative technology has been myjobscotland, which contains information about more than 12,000 vacancies. It is instantly available to people who are looking for work in these difficult economic times. Furthermore, anyone who looks up a job advert in a local paper is almost always directed to a website anyway. *Caledonian Mercury*, an online newspaper, was launched recently. [*Interruption.*] It aims to provide quality reporting and analysis—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): Order. I am sure that the member does not have an electronic device near her. However, if she does, could she—or one of her colleagues—move that non-existent device?

Aileen Campbell: It is interesting that the journalists involved felt that there was a gap in analysis and quality reporting. Why is that? The Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee heard from the NUJ about the strain and frustration that journalists have been under as

they are given more and more tasks, with more copy to deliver, more instances of cut-and-paste stories, more desk-based research and less time to develop properly constructed, analysed and considered stories that engage with the readership.

That is where the real democratic deficit lies. If the high heid yins in the newspapers are putting their dividends and bonuses before the quality of their product, it means that the people who have been loyal to their local and national titles are not being adequately served with balanced and accurate reporting. Those people are simply not getting the information that they deserve and if they are not being provided with the facts, their ability to make informed decisions for themselves is being eroded. Perhaps some companies need to consider the emphasis that is being put on staffing arrangements. They should perhaps help their journalists, sub-editors and designers piece together newspapers that are vibrant, fresh, responsive and, importantly, relevant to 21st century Scotland.

There is a practical side to the debate that Pauline McNeill's motion does not wholly reflect. For a start, the Government is still consulting on the draft order that Labour is calling on it to scrap. The order itself is not a death knell for some local newspapers. It is a response to requests from local government, and it is the continuation of a policy process that began under the previous Administration to streamline and to provide choices about the way in which public information is communicated in the 21st century.

I have faith in the ability of Scotland's journalists and newspapers to survive and adapt to the changing local, national and global media environment. If PINs remain with newspapers, I hope that there is some way in which the big chain companies can demonstrate that they will invest in journalism and that they can show us just how much they value the papers that they own and the staff who do so much for them.

10:54

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the National Union of Journalists. My membership of that union, for more than 30 years now, and my previous life as a journalist on weekly, evening, daily and national newspapers give me a reasonable insight into the role of newspapers in Scotland.

We have heard the figures from members. The Scots like their newspapers, and we have a distinctive Scottish press. In particular, the Scots like their local newspapers. There are more than 150 titles of weekly papers in Scotland. That is

where people get their local news and—this is important—where a large number of people get their information about what is going on in their community, through council notices about meetings, planning applications, licensing board applications and proposed road closures. There are even notices about when elections are taking place and who is standing. In short, a local newspaper provides a vital local service.

Two paid-for weekly titles cover my constituency: the *Kirkintilloch Herald* and the *Milngavie & Bearsden Herald*—two more to add to Mr O'Donnell's list. They are both owned by Johnston Press, which is a former employer of mine. The *Kirkintilloch Herald* sells almost 11,000 copies every week, with over half of sales in Kirkintilloch itself. However, the readership figure—a key to local newspapers—is actually three times that, at just over 30,000. That means that in Kirkintilloch just under 70 per cent of the population sees the paper. The age profile tells another story.

We have heard much about broadband use and how people get the news from the internet. I am pretty sure that in my constituency a majority of the electorate probably has access to a personal computer. However, it is interesting that the age profile of the *Kirkintilloch Herald's* readership shows that 26 per cent of readers are in the 15 to 34 age group, 36 per cent are between 35 and 54 and 29 per cent are between 55 and 74. The position is much the same for the sister paper, which covers the western side of Strathkelvin and Bearsden. Total sales of the *Milngavie & Bearsden Herald* are just under 6,000, and sales are almost evenly split between the two towns. However, the readership is 16,500. The largest percentage of readers—36 per cent—are in the 35 to 54 age bracket, and 33 per cent of readers are in the 55 to 74 age group. The statistics show the importance of the two local papers to the areas that they cover. They also demonstrate that even when people have internet access they still have a keen desire to read the paper.

Of course, there is a cost to the local authority, which has to place the public notices that I mentioned. It is true that in these difficult economic times the cost of placing adverts has been steadily increasing, as Mr Gibson said and as every member who places an advert for local surgeries in their local paper knows. I agree that local authorities must look carefully at ways of saving money, but I fundamentally do not agree that stopping placing adverts in local papers is the way to do that.

As we heard, the local weekly newspaper is the democratic heart of the community. Local papers are also a trusted source of information, much more so than their daily or national companions.

Indeed, the only other media outlet that comes close to matching the weekly paper on trust for reliable and factual information is the local radio station.

It is in the nature of the media business to be in a constant state of change. We live in the era of 24-hour news on television, free newspapers, hundreds of local radio stations and the internet. Journalists work in all those media and some file daily blogs. That includes many people who started out in journalism at the same time as I did, when all we had was a notebook and pen and a decent shorthand note to ensure that we took down the details accurately.

However, one thing has not changed: advertising remains the lifeblood of the commercial media. When I worked on local weekly papers, the ratio of advertising to editorial copy was about 60:40, and I recall many arguments when the advertising sales people wanted more pages because they had demand for advertising space. Those days have gone, as have many paid-for titles. As Aileen Campbell said, the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee heard that there has been a decline of 20 per cent in local newspapers.

Public information notices take up a large part of the advertising space. In this week's *Kirkintilloch Herald* there are notices about a planning application for a new house, the dates for the next meetings of council education and social work committees and details of surgeries for councillors from North Lanarkshire Council and East Dunbartonshire Council. I was surprised to see that there was even an advert for Bob Doris MSP, which gives his surgery details, to warn people about when he will turn up in their locality. Given that Mr Doris is a consumer, I am sure that he will support our motion—I was surprised to hear him say that he would not support it. Let us hope that the people who turn up at his surgeries tell him to get John Swinney to reinstate the Glasgow airport rail link project—but I digress.

As members said, a person would not necessarily know that a planning application had been made to build a house in a particular location unless the application had been advertised in the local press. People who might be affected by the application that is advertised in the *Kirkintilloch Herald* have 21 days to make representations. If there was no such advertisement in the local press, what would happen if someone who was affected by a proposal and wanted to object to the application did not have access to a computer and had no interest in owning one or in looking up public notices on a PC? They might hear about the application by accident, but they might miss their opportunity to protest. That is undemocratic and cannot be right.

The SNP Government has made much play of its consultation on its plan. We do not have the results yet, but the minister cannot say that he has not been warned. I fear that if the idea goes ahead, the law of unintended consequences will kick in and many of Scotland's local weekly titles could go to the wall. That, too, will lead to a democratic deficit. I like to believe that there will always be a place for newspapers in our media mix. If the SNP wants to contribute to making that the case, it should change its plan now.

11:01

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I declare an interest as a member of the board of the Scottish Review of Books and, I suppose, as a member of a journalistic family that goes back about 100 years. My grandfather ran a paper called the *Motherwell Speaker* and almost went bust as a result of a libel action. I have never quite fathomed what Motherwell politics were like at the time, but they seem to have been lively. It is 50-odd years since, as Kipling said, I sold my heart

“to the old Black Art
we call the daily Press”,

with my first articles as a freelance on *The Scotsman*.

I apologise for my late arrival in the chamber, the circumstances of which suggest that we might learn a bit from local newspapers in other countries, notably in Europe—the area that lies on the other side of the Conservative solar system. My local paper in Tübingen, the *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, publishes local bus and train timetables as they change, as part of a public service. The boundaries between public information notices and the ways in which newspapers can use them to increase circulation are fluid.

I welcome the consultation, because many interesting ideas are coming forward as a result of it, as is clear from the debate. However, even orthodox newspaper coverage is threatened. Long before the proposal that we are debating came up, people were lamenting that notices in local newspapers about local politics and coverage of council meetings were dying out. There have been developments, such as the freesheet, but we do not necessarily want to read about the private life of Jordan every day of the week. There has been a drift from the use of the newspaper as a means of reflecting the freelance world. *The Herald* in Glasgow publishes hardly any articles by freelance journalists.

Speakers from all parties have talked a lot of sense. We are in difficult times, and I would like the issue to be moved forward in some respects. The notion of a portal is significant and has been

welcomed by Governments, and not just by the current Government. I am a user of the internet, which will have more and more readers as time goes on. However, I am aware of the disadvantages of purely visual forms of communication. Members should recollect that a recent report showed that about 25 per cent of the Scottish population has reading difficulties. Among the elderly—a group that I am about to enter—there is considerable need for some sort of oral internet from which we can get information.

At the same time, the funding stream of our printed press has been under constant attack.

Pauline McNeill: I said earlier that 70 per cent of people aged over 65 have never used the internet. In view of that figure, does Christopher Harvie think that this is not the time to convert public information notices to the internet?

Christopher Harvie: I will suggest ways in which one can combine internet coverage and partnership with local newspapers. In Germany, there is a public official gazette that the local newspapers can pick up and use as part of their funding. Something like that could be of use here.

As I suggested, we are not simply dealing with print media. We may be overestimating the impact of print media and underestimating the need to use other forms to reach people who are socially disadvantaged or elderly and lack expertise in handling new media. We could also spend a lot more time ensuring that our senior citizens—I stand more or less in the middle of that age group—are helped by back-up from younger people who have the hang of the media. We should always remember Groucho Marx's famous remark on trying to break into a safe. He turns to Chico and says:

"This is easy. A child of three could do it"

and then, about five minutes later, says:

"Bring me a child of three!"

We require an army of children of three that will make our older people capable of handling new media.

Helen Eadie: Will the member give way?

Christopher Harvie: Not at the moment; I am about to wind up.

There is a wider point: we should think through a strategy for the Scottish press as a whole. In papers such as *The Courier* or *The Press and Journal*, we have something much closer to the continental regional paper with its local editions. Something like that will be the way ahead. We can no longer have a tabloid estate in Scotland that, let us face it, is more or less inferior to the German *Bildzeitung*—that is a bit of an insult, I am afraid—and a situation in which, even in our broadsheets,

we do not have the coverage that we require on matters such as the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's inquiry into the banking crisis. If any members have been following the coverage of that inquiry in the media, they will know that it is restricted to the statements of the big bankers and that even the aggressive questioning from my colleague Wendy Alexander does not appear.

Let us consider continental examples. Another thing that I would like to be almost enfolded into our newspapers—

Hugh Henry: Say "Germany".

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Christopher Harvie: We should consider the enormous number of well-produced freesheets from quangos, museums, universities and the like that lack any sort of contested editorial content. Can some of the money that is used for them not be channelled into our public free press and act as a subsidy to effective and percussive journalism?

11:08

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): It is difficult to imagine a more boring-sounding subject for debate than a statutory instrument on public notices in newspapers but, in fact, it is of significant—perhaps fundamental—importance to our democracy and how it operates. There are two strands to that, as the debate has illustrated: first, the public's right to important information that affects them and to access that information; and, secondly, the role of local and national newspapers in keeping us informed.

When the SNP Government came to power, it was regarded as having a certain talent for identifying with public sentiment. It was, people said, much better at mood music than the previous lot. I can only observe that its spin doctors seem to be playing a little bit off tune these days. The SNP ministers are becoming rather notorious for paying too little attention to the details: its Cabinet Secretary for Justice had a bit of difficulty counting to a thousand police officers; its education ministers rather carelessly mislaid a couple of thousand teachers; its Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth clearly does not like airport railway links; and now the Scottish Government has decided that the public right to know about local planning or licensing matters, changes in refuse collections or the like is not terribly important.

Ian McKee: Will the member give way?

Robert Brown: Let me make a bit of progress.

The SNP Government has made its move with exquisite timing, given that the newspaper

industry, like many other sectors, has been hammered by the recession, with sales down 5 per cent year on year and advertising revenues down 20 per cent and more in some sectors.

The minister said—five times, I think, with increasing desperation—that, with this Administration, consultation means consultation. I hope that that gives him a face-saving way of getting out of the dilemma and cul-de-sac into which he has got, but the fact remains that we have before us a Government proposal and, as many members have said, proposals are made not for the joy of it or to spend public money in processing them but with the objective of taking them through the Parliament.

No one denies that Governments have to keep pace with changing technology or that the availability on websites of Government consultations, planning applications, and central and local government information of all kinds has been extremely helpful to the public. Information is power, and placing those things on the internet was about making a lot of information readily accessible, whereas the SNP proposals to take away the requirement on local authorities—a legal requirement, as the motion points out—is about taking away information and limiting power.

A point that has not come out in the debate as strongly as it might is that many public notices are time sensitive. That means that the public need to know about the information at the right time if they are to take action and mount a campaign on a planning notice, licensing notice or school closure, for example. Bob Doris and I stood shoulder to shoulder in opposition to Labour council proposals to close schools in Glasgow. It was important to have the information on them early not late and to avoid the difficulty of people not knowing about them. The daily or weekly paper, but not the web, serves that function.

The point has been made that the people most committed to voting, serving on community groups and raising local issues tend to be older people. Perhaps they have a little bit more time because they are retired but, the older somebody is, the less likely they are to have access to the internet; 89 per cent of people over 75 have never used the internet, although the figures are lesser earlier on. It is not surprising that internet access is also an equalities issue, as a third to a half of those on lower incomes never use the internet.

The other side of the coin is the revenue to newspapers from public information notices. Some people have said that it is not the job of Government to subsidise the media. Neither it is, but one would think that the long and bitter experience of post office closures following the withdrawal of services might have taught us some lessons. If the Government proposal goes ahead,

the loss of revenue could be equivalent to about 300 jobs. We have already seen major restructuring and job losses. It was pointed out to us at the NUJ briefing yesterday that the local newspapers train many of the journalists of the future. I was impressed to see the number of journalists who are employed in some of the Fife newspapers about which we were told yesterday.

In my area, the *Rutherglen Reformer* recently closed its local office and moved its operation into the offices of the *Hamilton Advertiser* and other assorted local papers in Hamilton. I recently had the opportunity to go and visit them to see the operation, which is quite significant. It provides local news to many communities across Lanarkshire, but the loss of public notice revenue would be a significant blow to that organisation, as to many others throughout Scotland.

Many of our local newspapers go back to the early or mid-19th century and have provided a service over those many years. I know of many young journalists in the *Rutherglen Reformer* who went on to become well known, including Ken Smith of *The Herald* and Paul Holleran of NUJ Scotland.

Bob Doris: As a list MSP for Glasgow, like Robert Brown, I rely on the *Rutherglen Reformer* to keep me updated on what has happened in the area. Research shows that only 2 per cent of planning notices and public information notices are read. That might not be a reason to take them out of the *Rutherglen Reformer*, but it could be a reason to review how to make them more attractive.

Robert Brown: Hugh Henry made the point well, in regard to the Paisley newspapers, that the readership of local newspapers is one thing and their circulation and access are another. They retain an important role in putting out public information. We should recall that point. Another important point, which Cathy Jamieson made, is that editors and journalists know their local area.

The motion is important. It deserves the unanimous support of the chamber and, indeed, some thought from SNP back benchers. If I may adapt a phrase known to the minister's party, it is time to send him homeward to think again.

11:15

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This has been an engaging and entertaining debate, not least because of the overwhelming support that has been expressed for the newspaper industry in all its diversity and its ability to speak up on behalf of all communities across Scotland—even in the Himalayas. Cathy Jamieson may be surprised to know that I, too,

was once in *The Himalayan Times*, although I am afraid that I was confined to the back pages.

As Pauline McNeill said at the beginning of the debate, we do not always like what newspapers say about us, but they are crucial to our lives and to the lives of everyone in this country. I will dwell on that point in summing up for the Conservative party, because I believe that the core argument is very much about the democratic process and allowing communities to find both a strong voice and a reliable and regular source of information and news. As many members, including Robert Brown, Robin Harper, Hugh Henry and David Whitton, have eloquently said, this is not an easy age, when the communication process is so sophisticated and highly competitive, but we must address that situation.

When the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee took extensive evidence on two occasions, various witnesses made a very powerful and cogent case for concentrating much of the debate on sources of revenue and the fact that there have been significant falls in advertising for jobs, retail, property and motor cars. For a large newspaper that can mean a reduction in revenue of up to £11 million or £12 million, and for a smaller local paper it can mean a reduction of anything up to £1 million, so it is not rocket science to work out the resulting effect on journalism and jobs in the industry. It is an encouraging aspect of the undergraduate job market that many students aspire to a career in journalism, but that will not be the case if there are far fewer jobs for them to go to because of the collapse of the local newspaper industry, which is often the essential training ground for young novice journalists.

The current squeeze on newspapers' revenue has resulted in staff cuts and reduced resources across the industry, but much of the brunt has been borne by local newspapers, which means that it is often very difficult for them to retain their photographers or part-time contributors and, in many cases, to maintain their premises. I would like to think that that trend can be reversed when the economy finally picks up, but it will not be easy to breathe new life into the industry, especially when there are further worries about the effect of competition from community newspapers and a growing number of local authority publications, which overlap on certain aspects of news and information.

Journalists are, in many cases, having to become experts at a multimedia role, with the inevitable pressure that that brings in respect of training costs and the time that they have to devote to acquiring new skills rather than being out developing stories. As Robin Harper said, the knock-on effect is that fewer journalists feel that

they have time to develop an in-depth knowledge of their local area and to attend local events or court hearings. They therefore have less time for investigative journalism. It would be a huge pity if, as a result of local newspapers losing some of their local identity, there were an even greater collapse in their circulation. That is why the revenue return from advertising is so crucial to the sustainability of the industry, especially for the smaller newspapers, for which, frankly, it can be a matter of being in print or not.

The debate is also about the process of how we receive information and news. As many members have said, it is important to remember that people in different age groups and from different backgrounds will have different preferences. Labour's motion makes the important point that 40 per cent of people do not have access to the internet, and therefore removing the legal requirement for local newspapers to print PINs will cause huge difficulty for many people and be a way of disenfranchising them. That point was fully debated at UK level, including at the Scottish Affairs Committee, and it was decided that there should not be a policy of publishing such notices solely online. Having to make a conscious effort to search the internet, and not always starting from a well-informed position, is not the same as being provided with a news sheet on which the general information pertaining to one subject is put in front of the reader—a point that has been made time and again by those who have provided evidence to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee.

Johnston Press made the strong remark that the Scottish Government could become

“more secretive”

and

“less open”

to

“consultation or debate.”

That is a strong criticism, but nonetheless we have to be mindful of it, because one of the unintended consequences could be that we become less democratic. As Ted Brocklebank said, we have listened carefully to the arguments on all sides, including those of the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism in his opening speech, in which he identified the three principles that he believes underpin his policy. Frankly, I cannot accept that the proposal would work and that it would in any way improve the democratic process in this country.

I again stress that public information notices are a different situation. It is not enough for the Scottish Government to say that local authorities will be able to use a new PIN portal, because that

will bring no benefit to a high percentage of households—often very vulnerable ones—who will not be in a position to access the information.

We firmly believe that the Scottish Government's proposals have not been properly thought through. Like the other Opposition parties, we ask it to have a major rethink. We will be happy to support the Labour motion, and I hope that others will be prepared to support Ted Brocklebank's amendment.

11:21

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I thank Pauline McNeill for giving us the opportunity to discuss this topic. Local newspapers in Scotland have been and continue to be the source of much-needed and appreciated news and information. As David Whitton pointed out, their content is trusted and they are vital to ensuring that the cohesive fabric of our communities is maintained, as they reflect life in each and every distinctive community in Scotland. In many regards, local newspapers are local institutions, but if we see them simply as heritage to be preserved by state subsidy, we do them a disservice. They must be considered as vibrant, independent, private companies competing successfully in a modern market. It is that changing modern market and the new challenges and opportunities of the digital age that must be addressed in the round.

As many members have noted, the challenges facing local newspapers did not just appear in December when the PINs consultation took place. We know, because local newspapers have told us, that the circulation decline has taken place over decades, and that the biggest pressures most recently have been the recession and, of course, access to the internet and digital television, which were on the march well before December 2009.

Cathie Craigie: Will the minister give way?

Fiona Hyslop: I want to develop my point.

It is the core of that decline that must be addressed. That is why I am pleased that Jim Mather will hold a summit with local newspapers to follow on from the discussions that he has been having at national level, and that is why I supported Scottish Enterprise's proposal to focus on publishing when we met earlier this month at the Scottish creative industries partnership meeting, which was chaired by Creative Scotland 2009. It is also why I look forward to the conclusions and, I hope, constructive suggestions later this year from the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee's inquiry. I urge MSPs to accept the invitation from Pat Watters of COSLA to work with local government and the Scottish Government to support local newspapers.

Cathie Craigie: For the minister's information, I work with local government on a day-to-day basis as part of this job. Given that she has eloquently outlined the problems that newspapers face, does she believe that it is right for her Government to put extra pressure on them and to have this useless and probably meaningless consultation process?

Fiona Hyslop: It is far from being a useless consultation; it has flushed out many issues that have to be addressed. Government, at national and local level, has a duty to provide value for money in public service delivery. It is right that we consider steps that local authorities want to take to secure value for money and to release money for front-line services, perhaps to support home helps for the elderly people whom Cathie Craigie is so concerned about.

Rhona Brankin: Will the minister give way on that point?

Fiona Hyslop: No, I want to continue.

Local government has asked national Government to consult on proposals to allow local authorities to have the flexibility to advertise public information notices online rather than just in newspapers. As we have seen, the consultation has provoked strong views. I encourage as many people as possible to respond formally before the consultation closes.

Iain Smith: Does the minister recognise that the concern is not that local authorities can publish information online, but that the draft regulations that the Government has published would remove the requirement on councils to publish that information in newspapers? That is the key issue, not whether councils can use other methods.

Fiona Hyslop: That is exactly why engagement with local councils, which also have not only a responsibility but a desire to help and support local newspapers, is vital. I will come on to the either/or argument in analysing how the debate has developed.

We want to take account of the many issues that have been raised in this debate, so let me highlight just a number of the questions that have been raised. One question is the degree to which restricting public notices to print-only formats could limit democratic participation. A counter-question, perhaps, is whether continuing with a single format monopoly is correct, or indeed defensible, in a multimedia age. I am not sure whether Labour's argument is that the current system is perfect and cannot be improved.

In giving us an intergalactic perspective, Iain Smith highlighted an important distinction between availability and accessibility, which is a crucial issue in the debate. One suggestion is that text

messages could be sent to registered people to draw their attention to any area of interest that they are focused on. In contrast, Karen Whitefield suggested that it is preferable for people to stumble across information rather than have it targeted to them.

An important question is how democracy should work as we migrate to a multimedia and digital age. Given that television can be a far more reliable way of reaching people, issues of access and availability might be addressed by exploring whether PINs might be advertised using digital television. Take-up of digital television is at 91 per cent, which perhaps introduces a different dimension to the debate.

Pauline McNeill: I am sure that the minister will address this point, but I want to emphasise that Labour members' greatest concern is about equality of access. I will not rehearse the figures on that. Is she not concerned at all about the impact that the draft order would have on people who do not, and will not, have access to the internet?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a vital issue, which the consultation must address. The member is absolutely right to raise the issue of inclusion and access—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Fiona Hyslop: However, the consultation will also consider some other fundamental questions. Is it healthy for an independent newspaper sector to be overly dependent on state funding? Does overreliance on council advertising compromise criticism of local councils? Yes, some great campaigning journalism exists, but so does quiet compliance.

Cathy Jamieson confused news stories with public notices, which is very dangerous indeed. Ken Macintosh's line of questioning in the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee was very pertinent: should privately owned newspapers of large profitable companies be subsidised by taxpayers at a time of public sector constraint? Can that be reasonably justified? Kenny Gibson and Aileen Campbell made a strong case that large profitable companies should support and invest in their journalists, in particular trainee journalists, in a climate in which newspapers are still making profits.

Ted Brocklebank made the important point that change needs to be carefully managed. That reflects Pauline McNeill's point that access to the internet—which is perhaps not at the levels that we might expect—is crucial. We all acknowledge that we are in a situation in which change needs to be managed, so we need to concentrate on the pace of change and the activity involved. In

dealing with change, we cannot stand idle in the wings, perhaps paralysed by the norms of the past. We need to work together to manage change and to position ourselves for the future. That is the strongest message from today's debate.

Ultimately, we need a viable future for our newspapers, and we intend to support the newspaper industry to achieve that. We have been criticised for responding to the desire of Labour, Tory, Lib Dem and SNP local authorities to consult on the PINs order, but the proposals are out to consultation. As David Whitton said, we do not yet have the results of the consultation. The consultation finishes on 12 February, so I urge members to ensure that they respond to it.

Ultimately, we need to strive to help local newspapers to develop sustainable business models. Technological change represents a real opportunity to newspapers—and their readers—as well as a threat. Newspapers that provide quality content will still find an audience for both their print and online editions. In doing so, they will be able to remain where they have always been—at the heart of local communities. We want to work with local newspapers to take advantage of the opportunities that they face, but we will serve the Parliament and the people best if we address those challenges collectively by working with the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, COSLA and the creative industries partnership to secure that.

Important issues have been raised in this debate. I reassure all members that, if they read our amendment carefully, they will see that we will listen to the views that are expressed today. I support the amendment in the name of Jim Mather.

11:29

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): It is fair to say that most recent debates in the Parliament have been conducted in the context of the difficult financial circumstances facing the country. It is not surprising, therefore, that this debate on issues facing local newspapers has also been contextualised by the wider economic climate. Now more than ever, it is important to remind ourselves of the value of local newspapers to our local communities, as members have done in abundance throughout this morning's deliberations.

Local newspapers boost the local economy, both through their advertising and their news coverage. They showcase communities, local issues, local people and local businesses. They are needed now more than ever, at a time when our local areas need to retain shops and investment in communities that protects local jobs.

Our local newspapers provide a forum for expression, allow readers to make their voices heard and enable ordinary citizens to deliberate on the future of their community. They encourage civil issue-orientated discourse and they often set the stage for it. Many community newspapers serve as watchdogs that hold elected representatives accountable. They shine a light on local government and keep the local electorate informed.

Throughout this debate, members have duly recognised the publications in their own areas as examples of how that activity is conducted. I certainly know that the *Bellshill Speaker*, *Motherwell Times* and *Hamilton Advertiser* perform that role in my area, where they are ably assisted by the freesheet *Lanarkshire Extra* and *The HUB*. I know that Hugh O'Donnell will be familiar with those titles, so he might want to add those to the tally that—in his thoughtful speech—he said he was keeping.

Hugh O'Donnell: Those bring the total number of titles mentioned to 43.

Michael McMahon: Perhaps the strangest thing about this debate was that Christopher Harvie's meanderings through Germany were trumped by Cathy Jamieson's perusal of *The Himalayan Times*. That probably does not happen very often. I might add that Mr Harvie's grandfather's *Motherwell Speaker* title might not have continued for very long because the *Bellshill Speaker* and *Motherwell Times* already existed.

It is worth noting that most journalists who work on local newspapers live in the communities that they cover. They understand the community that they write for because they are part of it.

With Scotland facing a never-ending stream of bad economic news, it is right for us to recognise the decline in newspaper circulation across the country. Local newspapers have been taking a financial beating. They tell us that these are dark days for their industry, as we heard at yesterday's lobbying event. Amid uncertainty over the economy, the role that local newspapers play is more important than ever, so we must do what we can to address that situation when we make decisions that directly affect them, such as when we consider a Scottish statutory instrument that will result in local government turning off the tap that allows local papers to benefit from the advertising revenue that accrues from public information notices.

Rhona Brankin: Does the member agree that it is appalling to hear the cabinet secretary refer to public service advertising as a form of public subsidy? Does not that demonstrate that the Government has a closed mind on the issue?

Michael McMahon: I concur. Many SNP members' speeches this morning have suggested that the Government has a closed mind. Clearly, in pursuit of ensuring that the despicable con act—sorry, the historic concordat—is kept in place, SNP members have insisted that they are acting on behalf of COSLA. However, I think that COSLA will be disappointed when the draft order falls. The Government will need to explain to its back benchers why it has let down local government if SNP members genuinely believe what they have said in their speeches this morning.

The newspaper is one of the oldest forms of mass media and it holds a number of distinct advantages over other types of media. A newspaper can be read by nearly everyone and in almost every type of condition or location. Although we are undoubtedly moving towards a situation in which the majority—if not almost everyone—have access to their media electronically or digitally, we are not there yet. The vast majority of people in this country still look to their local printed newspaper as the source of local information. Their number far outweighs the number of those who access their information via the internet.

The world of technology is undoubtedly changing the newspaper industry, and will continue to do so. Increasingly, newspapers are moving their services online and are slowly moving to integrate the internet into every aspect of their operations, as many members have noted. Local newspapers may have been slower in doing that than some of their national counterparts, but they are doing so, and some newspapers are preparing for the day when they will publish their work only online.

We can even start to consider seriously the endless amount of news blogs on the web. It is a pity that Mike Russell, who has just joined us, is no longer responsible for the media portfolio, given his expertise in developing networks of bloggers, but Fiona Hyslop will just have to fill his shoes as best she can. She may share her predecessor's enthusiasm for the internet as a vehicle for information dissemination, but she must reconsider her Government's reckless rush to use the web for public information notices. Her failure to do so will have disastrous consequences for our local newspaper network.

I am quite sure that the people who attended the conference at Glasgow Caledonian University that is mentioned in the Conservatives' amendment did not expect that, a year on, they would be offered a summit. They want action. Jim Mather gave us yet more of his PowerPoint and gobbledegook expertise and very little in the way of action.

The argument that if local papers go bust there will be no coverage of what happens in local

government is not scaremongering. A vast amount of academic research points to the importance of an independent local press in disseminating hard-to-get information, mobilising the public and putting pressure on government and business for the public good. That point was made by Iain Smith in an unusually entertaining speech and was rightly highlighted by Robin Harper.

It appears from this debate that the Scottish Government wishes to ignore the important role that an independent local press must play in scrutinising our democratic institutions. There are some who argue that the internet will empower ordinary people to do the task themselves and do it better, but I and my Labour colleagues are not so sure. Even if we recognise that it is inevitable that that day will come, it has not come yet, and the Government's draft order is far too premature.

Our local papers are virtually the only media that scrutinise local politics. Putting their existence in jeopardy in the belief that the internet will enable citizens to become better informed is too high a risk to take in pursuit of the relatively small amount of money that can be saved from local government coffers.

I believe that local papers are a civic asset and that our democracy needs the local information that we get from them. As Hugh Henry and David Whitton correctly said, the pursuit of cost savings cannot be allowed to undermine our local democracy. Today's economic climate demands that political leaders work with the media to help create economically viable ways for local journalism to prosper. That should just make us more determined to ensure that come 5 o'clock, Parliament, by supporting Labour's motion and the Conservatives' amendment, sends out the signal that we know what the right thing to do by our local papers is, even if the Government does not. People will look back to 11:38 and 34 seconds on the morning of Thursday 28 January, when I predicted that the Government's proposal would not come to fruition.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): That concludes the debate on the Scottish newspaper industry. We have finished a few seconds early, but everyone who is required to be here to allow us to commence general question time is present.

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

General Questions

11:39

Scottish Produce (Promotion)

1. Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to promote Scottish produce. (S3O-9343)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): Through the work of Scotland Food and Drink and our enterprise agencies, we actively support the marketing and development of Scottish food and drink at home and abroad. Only yesterday, I launched a campaign that has been designed to make the consumer think about the factors that affect their food choices. In particular, it highlights the importance of fresh and seasonal produce, which, of course, we excel in producing.

Michael Matheson: The cabinet secretary will be aware from his recent visit to Malcolm Allan Ltd—a food production company in my constituency that has been highly successful in expanding its business over recent years and which has benefited from Government support, for which I know that it is grateful—of the potential that exists for that company to grow even further. I am sure that the same is true of other Scottish food producers.

Is the Scottish Government looking at taking further measures to help to support greater expansion of such companies so that we ensure that we continue to develop them to the economic benefit of the communities in which they are based?

Richard Lochhead: The Scottish Government is taking a range of measures to support the development of Scotland's food sector through our successful food policy, which is the first such policy for Scotland.

I greatly enjoyed my visit to Malcolm Allan Ltd in Falkirk, at which Michael Matheson was present. It was a particular privilege to meet Mr Malcolm Allan, who I understand celebrates his 91st birthday in a few days, and the rest of the family who run that highly successful business, which is indeed growing and becoming more successful.

Malcolm Allan Ltd and other companies in Scotland can apply to the Scottish Government's successful food processing and marketing scheme, which helps such businesses to expand,

and can take advantage of the many other measures that the Government is taking.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Although supermarkets in Scotland are making some attempts to sell Scottish produce, there is no doubt that if we could encourage them to do more, for example by selling Caithness produce in a Thurso supermarket or Western Isles produce in the Western Isles—which might seem to be a strange idea to some people—it would make a huge difference to our local farmers and food producers.

Will the Scottish Government consider methods of persuading the supermarkets to go further down the local produce road, which could include tweaking the planning legislation at some future date?

Richard Lochhead: Jamie Stone highlights the importance of our retail sector and our supermarket chains in supporting local produce by stocking more of it on their shelves. That is why we are delighted that there has been, since this Scottish Government took office, a 21 per cent increase in the sale of Scottish brands, not only in Scotland but in England and Wales.

We hold regular dialogue with the supermarket chains in Scotland. Although they now stock record levels of Scottish local produce, they could do a lot more, and we will continue to work with them to ensure that that happens.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Forensic and Fingerprint Services

3. Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it expects to make decisions on the future development of forensic and fingerprint services. (S3O-9293)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The Scottish Police Services Authority is currently engaging with its customers and stakeholders on the future delivery of police forensic services. I expect the SPSA to present final recommendations for my consideration in the summer.

Lewis Macdonald: The cabinet secretary will accept that it is now more than two years since the forensic lab in Aberdeen was first threatened with closure. Why will no conclusions be made public before the summer, given that the SPSA made a commitment as recently as November to produce an options paper by the end of last year? Does the cabinet secretary accept his responsibility for removing as soon as possible the continuing uncertainty that forensics and fingerprint staff in Aberdeen and across Scotland face?

Kenny MacAskill: I am extremely surprised by Mr Macdonald's attitude. The previous criticism was that there had been a rush to make a judgment and that a decision had been taken without proper consultation. We are now in a position in which a process of full consultation and discussion—with Mr Macdonald or anyone else—is under way. The member is a victim of his own success. He wished there to be consultation; consultation is taking place and we will not rush to make a judgment. He should welcome that—after all, it is what he asked for.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary assure the public and the staff that the final decision on the provision of forensic science and fingerprint services to the police forces of Scotland will be based on the need to ensure efficacy in crime fighting locally and not on a desire to reduce costs centrally?

Kenny MacAskill: Absolutely. Account must be taken of those factors. It is clear that financial matters must be considered—we must achieve best value—but the need to protect our communities by ensuring that we prosecute the people who perpetrate crime is at the root of the current process. In addition to Mr Macdonald and the people who work in the labs, another major stakeholder, as Mr Adam well knows, is the chief constable of Grampian Police, which is why we will take on board his views, which clearly have great significance.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I am surprised at the minister's apparent insouciance and lack of awareness of the damage that his Government's lack of transparency on the process is causing to staff at bureaux in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Edinburgh and elsewhere. Can he guarantee that the planned move of the Glasgow office to the forensic services supercampus at Gartcosh will not be used as an excuse to close one of Scotland's fingerprint bureaux or to radically reduce the number of staff?

Kenny MacAskill: We are intent on creating the Scottish crime campus. I am surprised by Mr Macintosh's view; his colleague Mr Baker seems to criticise us for not yet having it constructed. Planning permission has been granted, work is ongoing and it is expected that the campus, which will obviously be the state of the art, will be opened in 2012. The Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency, the chief constable of Strathclyde Police and others have welcomed it. We want to ensure that communities throughout Scotland—not only in Grampian—are safe, especially those in Strathclyde, where we have significant problems.

The Presiding Officer: Question 4 was lodged by Margaret Smith, but she is not in the chamber. The sad thing about that is that I cannot call Ian

McKee to ask a perfectly good supplementary question.

Colleges (Support)

5. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what support is available for colleges to cope with additional demand for places. (S3O-9320)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): In June, we announced an extra £28.1 million to help colleges to offer more places, particularly to young people. That was on top of a 2009-10 budget of nearly £650 million. Over the period 2007-08 to 2010-11, we plan to spend more than £2.5 billion, which is an increase of nearly 20 per cent on the previous four years. That is significant investment that recognises that colleges are central to supporting people and businesses that have been affected by the recession.

Iain Smith: I am sure that the minister would like to join me in congratulating Andy Murray, who has just made it into the final of the Australian open.

Members: Hooray!

Iain Smith: The minister will be aware that none of the extra £28 million that he mentioned went to rural colleges such as Elmwood College in north-east Fife, which have been coping with a considerable increase in student numbers. Elmwood College has had to spread its educational resources more thinly, and it has reduced bursaries to 90 per cent, which means that students are making direct contributions in order to meet the funding shortfall. Will the minister review college funding to remove the current discrimination against rural colleges, which are also trying to cope with youth unemployment?

The Presiding Officer: While the minister is answering that question, perhaps Mr Smith might consider turning off his BlackBerry. I assume that he got the information about Andy Murray from that.

Michael Russell: I congratulate Andy Murray, who is a product of a good Scottish education, although perhaps not a college education. However, I am sure that colleges will take the lesson on teaching tennis skills, if not on switching-off-BlackBerry skills.

Iain Smith's concern for rural colleges certainly strikes a chord with me. Tomorrow, I will be at Barony College to discuss issues that it faces. I commend the rural colleges for focusing—as all colleges in Scotland have done—on the requirements of the recession, for developing new offerings and for ensuring that, although they are under additional pressures, as every college has

been, they are doing their best to cope. We hope to support every college in Scotland to the limit of our ability: we are trying to do that.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Does the minister agree that, with colleges such as Adam Smith College and Carnegie College receiving less than half the money they said they would need to support new students, there will be increased pressure on discretionary funds? Will he therefore commit to ensuring that discretionary funds, such as those for hardship and child care, do not run dry?

Michael Russell: I am always astonished by the ability of Labour Party representatives to demand more expenditure when the Scottish Government's budget is being cut by their party at Westminster. Their performance is astonishing.

I am aware of the pressures on students, which we do everything we can to address. This year, we were able to go even further than we went the year before. We could go further still if the consequences of the recession were not being made worse by the cuts that are coming from Westminster. That is regrettable.

Supermarket Ombudsman

6. Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact it considers a supermarket ombudsman will have on farmers and consumers. (S3O-9352)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government believes that a supermarket ombudsman will deliver fair prices and a fair deal for all in the food supply chain, including farmers and consumers.

Maureen Watt: The fact that the United Kingdom Government has at last accepted the need for the creation of a supermarket ombudsman is a welcome development, but that development will be meaningless if the body is not given the powers that it needs effectively to police the food supply chain. Will the cabinet secretary undertake to make the strongest possible representations to the UK Government to ensure that the body is given all the powers it needs to ensure a fair deal for everyone who is involved in putting food on our tables?

Richard Lochhead: Maureen Watt has made a number of good points. I welcome the belated commitment that UK Government has made. It may have taken it 12 years, and it has announced it just a few months before a UK general election, but we have finally got there—it has agreed to the principle of establishing an ombudsman. I understand that there will be further consultation, and we are waiting to hear more details about the form that the body will take, but it will certainly play

a key role. Since it took office, the Scottish Government has made a number of strong representations to the UK Government on the matter; indeed, on Tuesday this week, I wrote once again to the responsible minister in the UK Government to press the case for action to be taken as soon as possible.

Problem Drug Users (Naloxone)

7. Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the use of naloxone for problem drug users. (S3O-9345)

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): I have asked the national forum on drug-related deaths to develop a national protocol and guidelines on naloxone provision. A short-life working group has been established to take forward that work under the leadership of Carole Hunter, who is lead pharmacist for Glasgow addiction services. The working group aims to have the draft protocol presented for consideration at the next full forum meeting, on 3 February 2010. I will consider the matter further once the forum has delivered the protocol and any recommendations for roll-out.

Anne McLaughlin: The minister will be aware that, if a person is addicted to heroin, for example, their mind will be on getting their next fix, not on a training session on how to use naloxone, and that, if a person is overdosing, it is physically impossible for them to self-administer that life-saving antidote. When the minister is considering the draft protocol in the next few weeks, will he consider finding a way, either by legislative changes or by letters of comfort, to enable friends and families of drug users to access naloxone—which is, after all, non-toxic—and the training that could mean the difference between life and death for their loved one?

Fergus Ewing: Anne McLaughlin has made exactly the right point. Naloxone is used to reverse the effects of opiate overdoses; therefore, we believe that it has the potential to save lives. The member is also correct to say that, for obvious reasons, those who may be subject to overdoses are often not in a position to administer naloxone to themselves to save their life. Under the Medicines Act 1968, no one but individual patients in receipt of a prescription is allowed to administer injectable prescription-only medicines, but there is support for extending the existing schemes. We very much want to consider that matter to try to find a way to save lives where possible.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the minister's response to the issue generally, and particularly his response to the cross-party group on drug and alcohol misuse, which I chair.

On pursuing the provision of naloxone, does the minister agree that deaths following discharges from prisons remain a significant concern, despite the Scottish Prison Service's efforts to educate people? Will he invite the SPS to ensure that every prisoner who has a history of addiction receives information about overdoses before their discharge, and that the SPS will apply any naloxone programme to prisoners on discharge?

Fergus Ewing: I entirely agree with Dr Richard Simpson. We wish to deal with the matter as he specifically suggests. We believe that naloxone has the potential to save lives, which is why I have asked the national forum on drug-related deaths to work on a national protocol. It is important to ensure that prisoners who have been released are given high priority. The statistics show that they are at very high risk of death, perhaps as a result of taking drugs that are much stronger than those that they have been accustomed to during their incarceration. I thank members of all parties for their support for the drugs strategy, which is now being implemented. The work that we are discussing is a key supplement to that work.

Landscape Partnerships (Rural Priority Funding)

8. Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it is giving to help landscape partnerships access rural priority funding. (S3O-9256)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): Rural priorities is a competitive grant scheme that is available to a wide range of different groups, including landscape partnerships. So far, more than a quarter of a billion pounds has been approved under rural priorities to support around 3,600 projects in rural Scotland. Detailed eligibility guidance is available to all rural priorities applicants, and all applicants will have the additional support of rural priorities case officers in their regions.

Elizabeth Smith: The minister will be aware of the many collaborative bracken-control projects in which several landowners are involved, including the Ochils landscape partnership in my region. Those projects often face difficulties when they apply for Scottish rural development programme and LEADER funding. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet the Ochils landscape partnership and look into how the application process can be reformed and simplified?

Richard Lochhead: I have, of course, taken an interest in the proposals that have been made by the Ochils landscape partnership, which states that it

“aims to increase access to the hills and wooded glens of the Ochils, improve the quality of our rivers, restore significant buildings”

and carry out a range of other projects. Because of the diversity of the projects that it has proposed, it is clear that a bit of work has to be done to ensure that it is tapping into the right schemes that are available.

I would be pleased for my senior officials to meet the partnership to discuss how it can do that, and I understand that these conversations have already begun.

Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005

9. Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it considers that the Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005 is being applied effectively. (S3O-9325)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that children are protected from sexual abuse. We will continue to work with police and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to ensure that those who commit sexual offences against children are brought to justice.

Robin Harper: There is considerable confusion arising from the fact that only a small number of people are being prosecuted under the 2005 act, with most offenders being prosecuted under earlier legislation. Given the lack of clarity surrounding the number of children in Scotland who are experiencing sexual exploitation, will the Government commit to funding research to identify whether the paucity of convictions under the 2005 act is due to the situation that I have just outlined, to a lack of offences occurring or even—as Barnardo’s Scotland suspects—to a lack of priority?

Kenny MacAskill: I do not think that the priority should necessarily be further research. I would be happy to meet Robin Harper to explain the position and I explain to the chamber that we believe that it is not simply about the number of convictions—there is a variety of matters to consider.

Operation algebra was remarkably successful and was testimony to the effectiveness of the prosecution service and the police, in particular. Through it, offenders were charged with serious sexual offences—and rightly so. The Crown Office made that judgment on the basis of the heinous nature of the offences. It is not necessarily the case that action is not being taken; it is simply that sometimes a more serious charge is recorded, which does not necessarily mean that the offenders are not also charged with the specific

statutory offences to which Robin Harper referred. Action is taken, but sometimes the more serious charge is what is recorded.

We always monitor the situation to ensure that the legislation is being used as effectively as possible. However, if it would be of assistance, I would be happy to meet Robin Harper to explain the rationale behind the Crown Office’s decisions and how they are recorded. Although the number of prosecutions under the 2005 act is not great, action is continuously being taken to protect our children. After all, that is one of the major *raison d’être* of any Government of any political colour.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am sure that the cabinet secretary will be aware of the offences that were committed by Ryan Yates, who sought to attack two children in Aberdeen just two days into a sexual offences prevention order. Does he agree that there should be an investigation into that shocking incident to see what more could have been done to restrict Mr Yates’s behaviour and whether, in the light of the incident, there should be a review of procedures?

Kenny MacAskill: Those matters are, fundamentally, for the Crown Office and the police. We are delighted that Mr Yates has been brought to justice. It will be for the court to decide what sentence is imposed. Orders for lifelong restriction now exist: we believe that they are an important tool. We do not comment on individual cases, but judges who impose orders for lifelong restriction because they feel that that is appropriate will have the full support of the Government. I understand that orders for lifelong restriction did not exist when Mr Yates’s previous sentence was imposed. It is now for the judiciary to decide what to do in his case.

Housing Co-operatives (Support)

10. Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports housing co-operatives. (S3O-9334)

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): The Scottish Government supports the work of housing co-ops by investing in the provision of new affordable housing. My recent visit to Easthall Park Housing Co-operative in Easterhouse highlighted the good work of such organisations in their communities. The housing co-operative sector is part of the registered social landlord sector, and individual organisations within the sector establish their own vision and business plan to suit their specific needs.

Linda Fabiani: Does the minister share my dismay that, since the introduction of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, the number of Scottish housing co-operatives has dropped from 45 to 18? Will he confirm that the Government endorses the

housing co-operative as a sustainable and valuable community ownership model and that he will continue to offer support for it?

Alex Neil: We estimate that there are only 14, rather than 18, housing co-operatives in Scotland. The massive reduction in their number is a direct result of the Labour-Lib Dem Administration's efforts in 2001. However, the SNP Government is committed to the principle of co-operation and is encouraging housing co-operatives by giving record support to them and to the whole social housing sector in order to complete the construction of a record number of social houses in Scotland this year.

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-2164)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have a range of engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

With the Presiding Officer's permission, I am sure that the whole chamber will want to congratulate Andy Murray on reaching the Australian open final. [*Applause.*]

Iain Gray: Good news, indeed, which is certainly welcomed across the chamber. There is still difficult news for Scotland on the economy, however. There is hope that we are moving from recession to recovery, but our unemployment rate is still too high. This year, more than any year, the Scottish budget has to be about jobs and the economy. The capital budget is crucial; thousands of jobs depend on it. Will the First Minister publish the full details of current spending plans on capital projects?

The First Minister: The capital projects spending plans are published as part of the budget. We have an extensive capital programme. The difficulty as we look forward is that, when we look at what has been published at Westminster, we see a projected decline in capital spending on public projects of up to 50 per cent. I hope that those are not really the plans of the Labour Government at Westminster. I hope that Iain Gray has made submissions and representations to his colleagues and ex-boss at Westminster and that those have more success than the submission that he made in favour of accelerated capital spending.

Iain Gray: On page 38 of the published infrastructure investment plan is the Glasgow airport rail link. The First Minister has torn 1,300 jobs out of the programme by cancelling GARL. Why will he not show us those figures? Andy Kerr has written twice to John Swinney asking for them, the Finance Committee has asked for them, and we have waited four months for answers to parliamentary questions and have had to resort to making freedom of information requests.

This week, a joint letter was sent by all Opposition parties asking for the figures. Even the Tory budget buddies, who always support the SNP budget, think that it should be a requirement that current capital budget plans be shared. Why the secrecy? Why will the First Minister not show us the figures?

The First Minister: Iain Gray's memory seems to have deserted him. Does he not remember that he ended up supporting the budget for this year and that he was one of our budget buddies? Of course, it took him two attempts to get over the hurdle, but we were delighted to have his support for the budget that we put forward for this year to fight Labour's recession. "Better one sinner that repenteth," is what I say to Iain Gray.

John Swinney will reply in detail to the submission from the other parties. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

The First Minister: Let us not try to release the Labour Party from its obligation to have a look at the budget plans and the infrastructure plans and, above all, to come to the realisation that its Westminster colleagues are planning to slash capital spending by 50 per cent over the coming years.

Iain Gray: We are desperate to look at the capital project plans, but the First Minister will not give them to us because his capital spending programme is a shambles. The Scottish Futures Trust was supposed to fix all that.

The SNP manifesto said that it would build schools, hospitals and bridges with patriotic bonds. Now, even the First Minister's favourite economists, Jim and Margaret Cuthbert, are telling him that the SFT is a disaster. It has not raised a penny; it has not laid a brick. We are paying that Futures Trust £28 million to have meetings about selling off Scottish Water, while building firms are paying off Scottish workers. Will the First Minister just admit that time is up for his Futures Trust?

The First Minister: I agree with Iain Gray—he is desperate, and he gets more desperate every single week.

As far as Scottish Water is concerned, it is our declared intention to have the water industry in the public sector in Scotland. Iain Gray confuses us with an Administration in London that seems content for the public sector not to be involved in the water industry, resulting in higher bills for consumers in England.

Iain Gray mentions the Scottish Futures Trust. Let us take a look at its involvement in the schools programme, the hub partnership, innovations in tax increment financing, Borders rail, the Forth replacement crossing and the non-profit distribution initiative that resulted in my being able to open the new Cults academy in Aberdeen earlier this week.

Jim and Margaret Cuthbert's criticism is that we have not moved far enough away from Labour's disastrous private finance initiative. I rather liked the comment from Ron Hewitt, the chief executive

of Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce, who—if I remember correctly—has been quoted by Iain Gray on several occasions in these exchanges. Ron Hewitt said:

"The SFT has ... a good team of experienced people. It ... is absolutely the right thing to do. It will save public money."

As we know, Labour is interested in cutting Scotland's finance, but rejects proposals to save public money.

Iain Gray: If the First Minister has no intention of selling off Scottish Water, why is he spending £1 million on wages for 21 people in the Scottish Futures Trust to discuss it? It is even more of a waste of money than we thought.

As for the First Minister's schools, I have a list of them here: two thirds of the schools were under construction before he was ever First Minister. If I look at my own constituency to see which schools he is claiming, I find that Dunbar primary school was completed in 2008. My constituents will be a bit surprised at that: the last time I looked, there was an access road, and building that school had not even started. It was planned under Labour, and the SNP has failed to build it.

The truth is that we cannot get details of the First Minister's capital budget because it is a mess. Low Moss prison, the Aberdeen bypass and the Southern general hospital have all been delayed for two years. Scottish companies have been frozen out of the contracts, 1,300 jobs on GARL have been cancelled and 28,000 construction jobs have been destroyed by the Scottish Futures Trust.

Will the First Minister get a grip and take the Scottish Futures Trust out of the budget and put GARL back in?

The First Minister: Iain Gray's question wandered over so many subjects, which gives me so much opportunity for correction. In the interests of time, I will deal with three of them.

Iain Gray argues, despite my previous answer—perhaps he did not adapt his question—that there is a water privatisation agenda. I will quote from the Scottish Futures Trust business plan, which was published in May 2009. On page 18, it states that

"In collaboration with other interested parties"

we will

"work-up, and assess options to increase the efficiency of funding for Scottish Water, whilst retaining public ownership, that could be considered by Scottish Ministers".

What is the point of Iain Gray asking for more information on our capital plan when he will not even read the information that is already openly available to him?

I know that it causes Iain Gray great angst that 251 schools have now opened under this SNP Government. We are heading towards 300, and—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. That is enough noise.

The First Minister: I know that Mary Mulligan forecast that no more schools would be built in West Lothian and opened by SNP ministers, and that Iain Gray was once concerned that Ellon academy would not be rebuilt. Those are in the new plan, as are schools the length and breadth of Scotland. Facts are chieftains that winna ding—and 251 schools is more than Labour achieved in any term of office during the past 10 years.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-2165)

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

Annabel Goldie: The Scottish National Party manifesto could not have been clearer. It promised that every pupil would get

“2 hours of quality PE each week”.

I shall repeat that: every pupil, in every school, every week, would receive two hours of quality physical education. Nearly three years on, the First Minister's Government has failed to deliver that pledge. Two out of three primary schools and five out of six secondary schools are still waiting—abject failure, because the commitment was clear, cast iron and categorical. It was made by the First Minister, so why has he not delivered it?

The First Minister: As Annabel Goldie probably knows, the PE commitment is being delivered through the curriculum for excellence, which is being introduced this year. The Tory survey covered last year. She should not belittle the progress that is being made throughout Scotland. We know that in 2005, when the Labour and Liberal coalition was in power, 5 per cent of primary schools and 7 per cent of secondary schools were achieving two hours of PE. The Tories' survey found that 33 per cent of primary schools and 16 per cent of secondary schools were providing two hours of quality PE. I accept that that is not the end destination of what we are doing through the curriculum for excellence, but even Annabel Goldie would consider that a substantial improvement on what was achieved back in 2005.

As we move forward, Annabel Goldie should join me in commending what has already been done and in looking forward to the achievement of two

hours of quality PE for every child the length and breadth of Scotland.

Annabel Goldie: Unfortunately for the First Minister, patting himself on the back does not count as PE. *[Laughter.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Annabel Goldie: I wish that the First Minister's reply to my question had been even half as clear as his manifesto commitment.

Gavin Hastings has said that we must give every kid an opportunity. He feels that two hours of PE is not too much to ask. With the British Olympics and the Glasgow Commonwealth games just around the corner, this is a golden opportunity to inspire our children. As Andy Murray thrills the nation at the Australian open, it is such a shame that there are no tennis courts at 40 per cent of our councils' secondary schools. I leave it to the First Minister to explain his Government's failings, but will he join Gavin Hastings in supporting a Scottish Conservative initiative to set up a new sporting trust—a charity specifically intended to give more children more sporting chances?

The First Minister: I support initiatives that improve children's life chances, and I consider all constructive suggestions, regardless of where they come from. However, there seems to be something of an inconsistency between Annabel Goldie's attitude to public spending and her attitude to facilities being provided for children. There are many initiatives, and many of them are extremely positive and good, but she will have to accept at some point that there is a correlation between the amount of public money that is spent on services and what we can achieve in schools, hospitals and the range of public services. It is somewhat ambiguous, therefore, for the Conservative and Unionist Party to say, “Cut public spending,” on the one hand, but, “Deliver more public services,” on the other.

The achievements that have been made are not my achievements or those of this Administration; they are achievements that are already taking place across Scotland, where the situation is incomparably better, as far as quality PE is concerned, than it was just a few years ago. I hope Annabel Goldie will accept that, in the curriculum for excellence, part of the commitment is to deliver two hours of PE. I hope she has already noticed that one of the preparations for that is a substantial increase in the number of qualified teachers to deliver that quality PE. Progress is being made. That is the result across Scotland on our report card.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of his Cabinet. (S3F-2166)

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

Tavish Scott: There has been a dramatic increase this year in the number of people who have been turned away from Scottish colleges because there are not enough places. Figures that the Liberal Democrats are publishing today show that many colleges are turning away four times as many applicants as last year and that some colleges have had to reject people for the first time. Many young people's career plans have therefore been dashed. They are being hit twice: with record unemployment, they cannot get a job, and now they cannot get a college place. The First Minister knows that we raised the issue with his Government in November. Today's figures show why action in the area matters for Scotland's future. Will he ensure that next week's budget addresses the growing gap between the number of people who want to learn and the number of places available?

The First Minister: That is a very constructive suggestion. As the member will accept, college funding is increasing in real terms and, in our attempt to address the recession, we targeted additional funding over and above that increase at colleges in areas that were particularly badly hit by the recession. Despite that, as the member identified, there is still the huge danger in the recession that young people are deprived of opportunity. The member knows as well as I do that, although statistics for both youth unemployment and graduate unemployment are extremely serious, those for Scotland are better than those for elsewhere in these islands. However, I agree that one of the focal points and challenges for the budget that we are presenting, even in these straitened economic circumstances, is to identify how we can increase life opportunities for our young people.

Tavish Scott: It is clear that people are trying to get themselves the skills and qualifications that they need. However, North Highland College in Thurso said that it was unprecedented to turn students away because of capacity limits; Oatridge College said that it had never refused admission before, but has had to reject 300 applications this year; Angus College was in the same position; and Carnegie College in Dunfermline has increased the number that it turned away by 800 per cent, from 120 to 904. Does the First Minister agree that action taken by his Government in this budget must increase the number of college places right across Scotland?

The First Minister: The number of college places is increasing across Scotland, as Tavish Scott well knows. However, in a recession, the increase in the number of applicants is even greater than the increase in the number of college places. I believe that this is an excellent point for us to concentrate on in looking at achievements over the past year. *[Interruption.]* I see that members on the Labour benches do not like the idea that people can make a constructive suggestion and get a constructive answer. If they just occasionally made a constructive suggestion, I would be able to give them a constructive answer.

Tavish Scott has made a constructive suggestion and he can be assured that it will be a key priority in relation to increasing even further the number of places and the life chances that are available to our young people in this time of recession.

Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the disturbance at HMP Addiewell in my constituency earlier this week, which resulted in injury to two prison officers. I am sure that he will join me in paying tribute to all the staff at HMP Addiewell. However, we can only minimise, not eliminate, the risk to prison officers, given their very difficult and, at times, dangerous job. Therefore, will he state how the Government will ensure that prison staff, irrespective of whether they work in the public sector or the private sector, continue to receive the support and resources that they need for the job that they do on our behalf?

The First Minister: As the constituency member knows, a disturbance occurred in the Douglas wing of Addiewell in the early evening of Monday 25 January during which two prison officers were injured. The officers were taken to hospital with the injuries that they sustained in the disturbance. Fortunately, neither appears to have sustained serious injuries and both have been released from hospital—indeed, they were released within a few hours. Prison officers quickly brought the wing under control and the disturbance was over by midnight. Approximately 10 inmates were actively involved, and the police investigation is under way. The damage to the prison was minor.

The constituency member can be absolutely assured that this Administration will give total support to our prison officers in maintaining order in our prisons. The fact that the number of such incidents has decreased dramatically over the past few years does not belie the inevitable fact that one incident is one too many. In order to deal with all incidents, this Administration will give our prison officers the maximum support and backing.

Children (Self-harm)

4. Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what efforts the Scottish Government is making to reduce the levels of self-harming among children. (S3F-2176)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We are aware of the extent of the issue and its importance, and we are taking a number of measures to tackle it. We are improving access to both community and in-patient mental health services, and we see increasing the specialist child and adolescent mental health services workforce as key to that. We will be investing £5.5 million more per year in the area by 2011-12, which means an increase in the CAMHS workforce of about 15 per cent.

Prior to 2007, there were no waiting time targets for mental health. We have now taken steps to speed up access to specialist services for those who need it by setting a referral-to-treatment access time target for specialist CAMHS. We have also established a new self-harm working group with our partners to take work forward, in particular on improving training and on issuing guidance on effective measures of prevention and treatment.

Christine Grahame: I thank the First Minister for his detailed answer and welcome that progress. I refer him to last year's Health and Sport Committee report "Inquiry into child and adolescent mental health and well-being". We recognised that some progress had been made towards the Government's commitment to halve the number of admissions of children and adolescents to adult hospital beds. Following that report, what progress is the Government making towards meeting that target, given that the Mental Welfare Commission says that the practice is usually inappropriate?

The First Minister: We expect—I am sure that all members expect—that children and young people who need in-patient mental health care will be looked after in specialist facilities. However, in some cases, young people need to be admitted as an emergency because they are in crisis and their life might be at risk, and sometimes they are admitted to an adult ward. We are working to reduce the number of such admissions. As Christine Grahame rightly notes, the number has been cut by more than 20 per cent since 2007. That figure will fall further with the new investment that is being made in mental health psychologists and other specialist staff, which will rise to an additional £5.5 million per year by 2012. The issue is extremely serious. I note that Christine Grahame acknowledges that progress is being made—and further progress will be made.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Given that more than 7,000 people in Scotland are

treated in hospital each year following episodes of non-fatal deliberate self-harm, does the First Minister agree that access to a universal health-visiting service with regular health and development checks for young children will help to ensure that, where possible, mental health and wellbeing issues are identified in the early years?

The First Minister: That is a very positive suggestion, and I know that Mary Scanlon will support increased access to the range of specialist services, which is supported by the new investment in psychologists and other specialists. I will make sure that she is given a specific reply on her specific suggestion.

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): Is the First Minister aware of yesterday's announcement that Lanarkshire NHS Board will not be going ahead with the 130-bed mental health facility in our area, following the budget restrictions that have been imposed on the health board by the Scottish Government? Is he aware that the facility is desperately needed in our area, which has an above-average incidence of mental health problems? Is he further aware that the facility was included in the original picture of health proposals for Lanarkshire, and in the revised budget following the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing's decision to retain facilities at Monklands hospital? Will he investigate yesterday's announcement and instruct the health secretary to instruct Lanarkshire NHS Board to review the decision immediately?

The First Minister: I am certainly not going back to the disastrous proposals to close the accident and emergency unit at Monklands hospital, which was the mark of the previous Administration.

Jack McConnell makes a specific point about the capital programme in Lanarkshire, and I will give him a specific and detailed answer to that point in writing.

Graduates for Business Scheme

5. David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on Scottish Enterprise's decision to bring to an end the graduates for business scheme. (S3F-2170)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise are committed to providing the right support for graduates to help them into work. Scottish Enterprise commissioned an independent report into the graduates for business scheme, which highlighted concerns about the geographic coverage and consistency of the programme. We therefore welcome Scottish Enterprise's plans to have an alternative programme in place by the

end of June. That will address the issues and deliver even better value for money. That initiative comes on top of the £3.5 million we are spending through the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council in the current academic year to support skills and employability initiatives that focus on work-related learning and placements, entrepreneurship and workforce development.

David Whitton: As the First Minister seeks constructive proposals from Labour members, I will offer some. He said that the report expressed concerns, but the graduates for business programme is successful. It exceeded the targets for companies involved and for participating graduates, more than two thirds of whom went on to take jobs with the companies that employed them under the programme.

The Federation of Small Businesses has written to Mr Russell and Mr Mather to express concern and I have written to Mr Swinney. Do I take it from what the First Minister just said about having an alternative programme in June that the graduates for business programme will continue under the guise of Scottish Enterprise?

The First Minister: David Whitton can take it from my answer that a more cost-effective programme will be introduced by June. He has singled himself out from the rest of the Labour members by making a constructive point. If an independent assessment into a programme's performance suggests that the programme can be improved and that even better value for money can be achieved, is he really saying that that should be ignored and that we should not consider that or try to increase the programme's efficiency? If so, the incredible disconnect between the massive cuts by the Labour Party at Westminster—more cuts are forecast—and Labour's resistance of every attempt by public authorities to obtain better value for money is becoming a yawning gulf that will undermine the credibility of the entire Labour Party in Scotland, despite his attempt to be constructive with his question.

Size of Government

6. Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government considers that, given continuing pressure on the economy, the size of government should be getting smaller rather than bigger. (S3F-2174)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Mr Purvis is well aware of the Government's efforts to deliver smaller and more effective government. We already have fewer ministers and departments and we are working to simplify and rationalise other parts of the public sector and to obtain value for money. The Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill includes

a £14 million—or 5 per cent—reduction in our planned spending next year on core administration costs, which are largely made up of civil service salaries. In that context, it is unfortunate that he and his party are trying to block our efforts through the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Bill.

Our efficiency programme is enabling us to direct resources to front-line staff. That is one reason why, since we replaced the Labour-Liberal Administration and despite the financial restrictions under which we operate, there are 1,336 more nurses, 197 more dentists and 983 more police officers in Scotland.

Jeremy Purvis: The First Minister is aware of the trend for the pay bill for the most senior executives in public service in Scotland to grow. On 5 June last year, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth wrote to ask the chairs of 28 public bodies and Government agencies, including Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Water and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, to invite their chief executives not to take their bonuses this year. On 10 November, I lodged a parliamentary question to ask what response the Government received to that letter. I was due to receive a reply on 24 November, but to date I have not received one. How many of those bodies will not pay their chief executives bonuses this year? Why has it taken more than two months to answer my question?

The First Minister: The central reason why answering the question takes time is that Mr Swinney has no power to instruct people not to take their bonuses. He has no power to instruct and can only request because the contracts were signed by a Government that had Liberal participation.

I and Mr Swinney accept—it is why we have frozen ministerial salaries and the salaries of senior civil servants who are directly under the Scottish Government's control—that asking people in the upper echelons to bear the heaviest burden is exactly the right policy to pursue. The reason why we must ask rather than rule is that the contracts were signed by Mr Purvis's party. Unless the Liberals suggest that we should break those contracts, he will have to wait for his answer until chief executives are kind enough to furnish Mr Swinney with answers to Mr Swinney's request.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I return to what the First Minister said earlier about constructive suggestions. I suggest that he should not back himself into a corner as regards the size of government. We should be talking about effective government and what is needed at the time. What we need right now is a full-time finance minister. That should be the focus of everyone's attention. I urge him—

The Presiding Officer: Question please, Ms MacDonald.

Margo MacDonald: It is a helpful suggestion, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: It is meant to be a question.

Margo MacDonald: I urge the First Minister not to listen to people who say that small is good. Some departments could be made smaller but others need more attention and bigger people.

The First Minister: Neither of us is in a position to say that small is good all the time—I will resist the temptation to pursue that route.

Mr Swinney commands the full range of his brief and does so in an excellent fashion, as he demonstrates time after time.

Margo MacDonald made a constructive point; let me give a constructive answer. Earlier this week, Jeremy Purvis quoted some stats from the Office for National Statistics when he said that civil service numbers are increasing. He forgot to mention that more than 1,000 of the additional civil servants were taken on by the Department for Work and Pensions to deal with the implications for job centres of Labour's recession.

I think it is reasonable—I am sure the Liberal Democrats do, too—that job centres are properly staffed to meet people's requirements. Although the statistics indicate an increase in civil service numbers, it is a necessary increase because of the extent of the Labour Party's recession. Every member in the chamber will support that increase, whether or not they decide to use it mischievously in the statistics or press releases that they put out.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions—and suggestions—to the First Minister.

12:31

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Finance and Sustainable Growth

PFI/PPP Contracts (South Lanarkshire Council)

1. Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what South Lanarkshire Council's financial commitment to private finance initiative/public-private partnership contracts is expected to be in 2010-11 and 2011-12. (S3O-9347)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The estimated annual PFI/PPP unitary payments for South Lanarkshire Council in 2010-11 and 2011-12 are £26.9 million and £27.6 million respectively. Those figures are inclusive of Scottish Government PFI/PPP funding contributions.

Christina McKelvie: Is the cabinet secretary as concerned as I am about the on-going impact on local authority budgets of servicing PFI/PPP contracts? The figures that he has just given for South Lanarkshire constitute a huge burden on the council's available resources at a time when local budgets are being squeezed as a result of cuts from Westminster. Does he agree that it is more important than ever to provide local authorities with mechanisms for infrastructure investment that provide far better value for the public purse than those that were available under previous Administrations?

John Swinney: Christina McKelvie is correct to highlight the fact that the sums for repayment on an annual basis are significant. To put it into context, between this financial year and the next one, I have to find in the Government's budget a new £100 million to support repayment charges for public infrastructure. Those are significant sums of money that have to be planned for in a prudential fashion to ensure that, as well as servicing the costs of PFI and PPP contracts, we and local authorities such as South Lanarkshire Council can provide funding for the essential local services that matter to all the individuals whom we represent.

Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): I am sure that the cabinet secretary recognises the legendary knowledge of Ms McKelvie on matters relating to PPP—see "Newsnight" for further information. Does the cabinet secretary not understand the changes in the make-up of the financial support for local government, which mean that we have gone from 80 per cent support from Government and 20

per cent liability for local authorities to a split of two thirds to one third? That means that local government loses out and therefore that fewer schools may be built. Would he care to address the key point in relation to Christina McKelvie's question? Is it not the case that Barry White, chief executive of the Scottish Futures Trust, Unison, the Cuthberts and Professor Pollock have all said that the mechanism that the cabinet secretary and the Government are deploying is nothing but PPP by another name?

John Swinney: Mr Kerr always gets on to more substantive ground when he moves off the pejorative but, even when he is on the substantive ground, he misses the fundamental differences between the Government's approaches and the PFI schemes over which he presided. The capped equity returns in the non-profit distributing model are a fundamental difference in characteristics between the two models. While Mr Kerr churns out all his invective, he should bear it in mind that significant financial burdens are being wrestled with in the Scottish budget.

To reiterate what I said to Christina McKelvie, from this year's budget to next year's, we have to find £100 million of new resources to pay for repayment mechanisms of the type that she asked about. That should be recorded and recalled in the budget discussions.

Deprivation (Glasgow City Council)

2. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has had with Glasgow City Council regarding the allocation of additional funding to tackle deprivation. (S3O-9297)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): My ministerial colleagues and I have been engaging in a series of meetings with local authority leaders to discuss local government finance. The current local government distribution formula already takes account of needs-based indicators such as deprivation. The recent joint review of the formula concluded that the existing indicators are reasonable and generally a fair indication of need and that they should be retained. All the review's recommendations have been accepted by both the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish ministers.

Pauline McNeill: Is the cabinet secretary aware that, if Glasgow had received an average settlement, it would have received an additional £20 million, and that, if it had received the same settlement that Perth and Kinross Council did, it would have had an extra £51 million? Is he aware that Glasgow's is the worst settlement that any council has received since devolution? Is he really

arguing that it is a fair settlement for Glasgow, given the city's burden of deprivation? Will he reflect on fairness for Glasgow in the future?

John Swinney: The settlement that was arrived at for Glasgow was a direct product of the application of the distribution formula that has been agreed by local government and the Scottish ministers. The member is in no position to single out Glasgow as an example of exceptional treatment. That distribution formula is almost identical to the one that was used until 2007 by the Administration of which she was a supporter. The formula takes into account a range of indicators and arrives at a position of need and distributes resources on that basis. I point out to Pauline McNeill that Glasgow City Council receives the highest per capita funding of any mainland local authority in Scotland as a result of the application of the formula, which takes into account the circumstances of all local authorities in Scotland.

Housing Sector Representatives (Meetings)

3. Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth last met housing sector representatives to discuss the 2010-11 budget. (S3O-9299)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Along with the Minister for Housing and Communities, I met a number of housing sector representatives on 24 September 2009, after the publication of the draft 2010-11 budget. We were able to reassure them that the housing budget over the three years from 2008 to 2011 remains at the record level of £1.65 billion that was set by this Government at the 2007 spending review. We also explained that, in order to increase housing investment in 2010-11, the Chancellor of the Exchequer would require to provide more funding, which he declined to do in the pre-budget report in December.

Mary Mulligan: The cabinet secretary will be aware that outstanding housing debt for councils is continuing to rise. Given that the only way in which that is repaid is from tenants' rents, which I hope we are all concerned about, has he discussed with local authorities the outstanding housing debt and how they will reduce it in order to keep down rents in 2010-11?

John Swinney: As Mary Mulligan will appreciate, the decisions to which she refers are entirely for local authorities to make as independent governing bodies. It is up to local authorities to make judgments about the financial commitments that they make and their ability to service them in due course. That is their responsibility and it would be entirely inappropriate for me to interfere in that process.

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (Meetings)

4. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth last met the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and what was discussed. (S3O-9288)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I attended the meeting of the Scottish Cabinet and COSLA that took place on 13 January 2010. The concordat, the financial climate and climate change were the agenda items for discussion at the meeting. That meeting is part of regular contact with COSLA representatives on a number of issues.

Johann Lamont: When the minister met COSLA, did he discuss the impact of the severe weather on the capacity of local authorities to deliver their services? I understand, for example, that maintenance and care budgets will have had to be used to deal with the immediate emergency that the severe weather created. What will the cabinet secretary do to help local authorities to address, for example, the impact on the regular road maintenance budget of the spending of money to mitigate the effects of the severe weather and the fact that the challenge of maintaining the roads has been heightened by the consequences of the severe weather, such as the increased numbers of potholes?

John Swinney: The effect of the severe weather was discussed at the meeting between COSLA and the Cabinet. The meeting gave the First Minister and the president of COSLA the opportunity to reflect on the high levels of co-operation among local authorities as they addressed, for example, the severe strain on salt supplies, which increased their ability to deal with the difficulties around the country. It also gave us the opportunity to thank the public sector employees who did so much to ensure that vulnerable individuals in our society were properly supported throughout the winter weather. The question of the financial impact was raised by COSLA representatives. We will continue to discuss such questions in relation to the circumstances of local government as a whole and of individual local authorities. Of course, I will share any relevant information with Parliament at the appropriate time.

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (Meetings)

5. Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last met Strathclyde partnership for transport and what issues were discussed. (S3O-9265)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Ministers and officials meet Strathclyde partnership for transport regularly to discuss transport issues across Glasgow and the west of Scotland. I most recently met SPT when I was pleased to launch the partnership's hybrid bus-based mobile travel advice centre outside the Scottish Parliament on 8 December.

Bill Aitken: SPT's decision to axe the short ferry crossing between Yoker and Renfrew is understandable in light of the dire financial conditions that the Labour Government has imposed on us all. Nonetheless, it saddens me that that popular service, which has been with us for more than 200 years, is falling by the wayside. That is also likely to cause considerable hardship to those who use the ferry to commute to work. Will the minister assure me that every possible avenue has been, or will be, explored with SPT prior to the final withdrawal of the route in two months' time?

Stewart Stevenson: The member makes the good point that Labour's cuts are impacting on the commuting arrangements of many people who rely on the ferry.

Just before the board meeting at which the subject was discussed, SPT wrote to our director of transport to highlight some of the issues. We are continuing discussions with SPT, but I make the general point that SPT and councils throughout Scotland have seen increases in their funding that are substantially above the increase—or the absence of one—that the Scottish Government has. We will continue to discuss that matter in a positive way.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): Is it not the case that SPT's budget for next year, which was adduced as the reason for the cut in the ferry service, is at a standstill in cash terms and therefore has been cut in real terms, which is the responsibility—partially—of the Scottish Government?

Stewart Stevenson: SPT, like regional transport partnerships throughout Scotland, relies on subventions from local authorities. In the case of SPT, there is direct money from the Scottish Government but, in any event, we are putting record investment into transport throughout Scotland and local authorities are getting increased sums of money.

Fairer Scotland Fund (Guidance)

6. Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has discussed with the Minister for Housing and Communities proposals

to change its guidance explaining ministerial priorities for the fairer Scotland fund. (S3O-9295)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): As part of the concordat, the ring fence associated with the fairer Scotland fund will end in March 2010, with the sums allocated to local authority areas rolled up within the local government finance settlement from 2010-11 onwards.

To set out the on-going commitment of national and local government to tackling deprivation, we published a joint statement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities entitled "Equal Communities in a Fairer Scotland" in October 2009. That contains a set of key principles, which are built on those underpinning the fairer Scotland fund approach and are focused on prevention, early intervention, partnership working, employability and community engagement.

Michael McMahon: Does the cabinet secretary agree that, regardless of what guidance exists and what priorities he might ever have had for the use of the fairer Scotland fund, he relinquished any ability to ensure that the fund was used for its intended purpose when he removed its ring-fenced status? Will he accept that the proposals that some local authorities are considering to use the FSF to replace core funding gaps are entirely down to his decision and his failure to fund local government adequately?

John Swinney: That is an interesting point from Mr McMahon, which he has made on a number of occasions, about the overall funding settlement for local government in Scotland. I look forward with interest to the Labour Party lodging an amendment, which I have already invited Mr McMahon to do, to improve the local government financial settlement. We will see what comes of all that.

On the fairer Scotland fund, Michael McMahon starts his question from the premise that he is fundamentally not prepared to trust local government in Scotland. That can be the only explanation of the point that he makes. Bearing in mind that, I think, his entire constituency is located in a Labour-controlled local authority area, I think that that raises questions about his respect and regard for his own local authority. I am certainly prepared to trust local government to take decisions in the interests of local communities. In co-operation with my ministerial colleagues, I have put in place guidance on the fairer Scotland fund to address the circumstances but, given the content of the question that he asked me, Mr McMahon has to think about his view of local government.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Can the cabinet secretary reassure

those parts of my constituency that are still benefiting from the fairer Scotland fund, albeit at a reduced rate, about what will happen to area-based regeneration funding in the future? Is there anything in the single outcome agreements or the guidance to ensure that my council, which is a Scottish National Party coalition administration, will still have to dedicate money to area-based regeneration?

John Swinney: I make to Mr Chisholm a similar point, but perhaps not with the party-political invective that I gave to Mr McMahon. I simply make the point that Mr Chisholm's question assumes that local authorities are somehow not supportive of, interested in or committed to local regeneration. In my experience, that is not the case. I discuss with local authorities the various efforts that they are making to regenerate communities and seek to ensure that they have the flexibility at local level to use resources from the fairer Scotland fund and other elements of the core financial settlement to maximise the economic impact of regeneration. We should encourage that process of local democracy and motivate people to carry it out rather than criticising it in Parliament.

Rail Services and Infrastructure (Severe Weather)

7. Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what reports have been received from Network Rail and First ScotRail regarding performance in the operation of train services and infrastructure during the recent period of severe weather. (S3O-9350)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): During the period of severe weather, Transport Scotland received frequent, detailed reports on the operation of train services from both Network Rail and First ScotRail. Transport Scotland officials also met the directors of Network Rail and First ScotRail. The two companies have started a review of their performance during the severe weather conditions so that any lessons to be learned are captured.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: A great number of First ScotRail and Network Rail staff did everything they could to provide as good a service as possible to passengers under exceptionally difficult circumstances during the severe weather that we all experienced at the turn of the year. However, I am sure that the minister, like all MSPs, will have received a number of complaints from passengers who experienced significant travel problems including cancelled or severely disrupted services and fewer carriages on the services that did run. What is being done to ensure that we learn lessons from the process,

particularly on the impact on commuters? What can be done in future to ensure that people can get to work as quickly as possible?

Stewart Stevenson: The member makes a number of important points with which I agree. In particular, staff in all our transport modes made heroic efforts to keep services running but, in the face of the worst period of winter weather for a very long time, some disruption was inevitable.

It might be worth reporting that, between 22 December and 9 January, 88 per cent of trains operated. Yes, there were a significant number of cancellations, but a great deal of the network continued to operate. Truncations were an issue and we had overcrowded trains. At the height of the disruption, some 50 trains were out of action due to the effects of ice and snow or as a result of collision damage due to their hitting stags on the line.

Just today I met the new chair of Network Rail and discussed certain aspects of what we have to learn—indeed, the organisation is very keen to learn lessons. I have also had discussions with First ScotRail. The key area that we will focus on in early course is improving communication to ensure that, if any disruptions occur, travellers can make better plans based on a better informed understanding of what is happening. There are a lot of lessons to be learned—and we will learn them.

Haudagain Roundabout

8. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its preferred option is for improvements at the Haudagain roundabout and when work on this will commence. (S3O-9269)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We will commence improvements to the Haudagain roundabout following completion of the Aberdeen western peripheral route. When the orders for the route have been approved by Parliament—assuming, of course, that they are—consideration of options will be finalised and a decision made on the preferred option.

Richard Baker: If there is no prospect of work on the Haudagain roundabout starting before the end of this parliamentary session and given that Aberdeen City Council's development plans for the Middlefield area are contingent on its preferred option for improving the roundabout being selected, will the minister tell us when the final decision on the preferred option will be taken? I understand that the council expected a decision before Christmas.

Stewart Stevenson: Whether the AWPR proceeds is contingent on Parliament agreeing the

orders that are before us. We will not make a decision until that process has been completed.

I also make the very general point that there has been considerable discussion about the number of crossings over the Don and the approach to redevelopment, all of which have played their part in ensuring that we are equipped to make the decision after the Parliament has taken its view.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The minister might be aware of proposals for further substantial housing and business developments in the Grandholm and Danestone areas of Aberdeen. Will he ensure that the redeveloped Haudagain roundabout has the capacity to cope not just with current traffic levels but with the levels of traffic that are expected if the developments go ahead?

Stewart Stevenson: We have always said that we will take responsibility for raising the capacity at the Haudagain roundabout to meet the needs of the area after the introduction of the AWPR, which of course will take traffic off the existing A96 and A90 through Aberdeen. We will absolutely deliver on that promise.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Does the minister accept that his Government's target date for starting the AWPR is now the same as the previous Administration's target date for completion? In that context, will he agree today to bring forward moves to address the Haudagain pinch-point and get the work done in advance of work on the AWPR?

Stewart Stevenson: Mr Macdonald and I will continue to disagree about the state of preparedness that we inherited when we came into government in 2007. If targets of the nature that Mr Macdonald has referred to were indeed set, they were not matched by any plans that this Government inherited.

Essential Services (North Lanarkshire Council)

9. Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has had with North Lanarkshire Council during the budget process about provision of essential services. (S3O-9306)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Discussions on the budget process are taken forward through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities acting on behalf of all local authorities. The Scottish Government is in regular contact with political leaders in local authorities, including North Lanarkshire Council, as part of our regular dialogue with COSLA on a range of issues including the provision of essential services.

Elaine Smith: Did the cabinet secretary discuss with COSLA the fact that the percentage share of the Scottish Government's budget that is allocated to local government has fallen from 34.7 per cent in 2006-07 under the Labour-led Administration to 33.9 per cent this year? Based on current allocations, the reduction means that North Lanarkshire will lose out to the tune of £17 million. Will the cabinet secretary increase the funding or justify the cut to my constituents who are resisting the closure of Gartsherrie primary school in Coatbridge?

John Swinney: Obviously there is not an awful lot of chit-chat among North Lanarkshire Labour MSPs. If Elaine Smith had spoken to Mr McMahon, he might have shared with her my regular contribution to this debate—which I apologise for rehearsing again today—that under the previous Labour and Liberal Administration the share of the Scottish budget going to local government was falling year on year. It came down from 36.7 per cent in 2003-04 to 33.39 per cent when the current Government came to office.

Thankfully for local authorities and communities around Scotland, this Government has taken a different view and has set about restoring the share of the Scottish budget that goes to local government by reversing the trend of our predecessors and increasing the share each year since we came to office. I am delighted to continue to put that on the record and make sure that everyone listens to that particular point. I will do it with the frequency required to educate the Labour members about their record in office.

Rail Freight (Consultation)

10. Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when Transport Scotland expects to publish the results of its developing rail freight in Scotland consultation. (S3O-9340)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Responses to the consultation will be published on Transport Scotland's website in March 2010.

Jamie Hepburn: The minister will be aware of the existing heavy freight traffic on the Cumbernauld to Falkirk Grahamston line. Given the plans to electrify that line, the long-standing hopes of local people to see an increased and improved passenger service, and the campaigns to create Abronhill and Grangemouth railway stations, will the minister guarantee that increasing freight traffic on the line will not impinge on any possibility of future improvements to passenger services?

Stewart Stevenson: We will be electrifying 350km of track in Scotland's rail network as we

take forward our plans. That is an ambition for railway infrastructure development that has not been seen in my lifetime.

As we increase freight traffic on the Cumbernauld line, there will be issues about timetabling, but there is capacity on the line to allow us to continue to develop passenger services as well as freight. The slots are provided through the usual mechanisms involving Network Rail and all the rail companies in semi-annual discussions.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Did the consultation include consideration of the disruption and disturbance due to noise and vibration, particularly in the night running of freight, which has started in the past few years and affected my constituents along the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line?

Stewart Stevenson: A wide range of issues was covered by the rail freight consultation. The member and I have discussed the issue of night running for freight, which is likely to continue to be an important part of the services that run on that line. The important things are that we protect communities from the effects of that, that mitigation is in place, and that we work with rail freight companies to ensure that appropriate and up-to-date wagons are used that cause little or no disruption. We will continue to do all that.

Rail Projects (Funding)

11. Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what criteria it uses in deciding to fund some rail projects from borrowing via Network Rail's regulatory asset base. (S3O-9282)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): To be eligible for regulatory asset base finance, the expenditure must relate to a project that will create assets that will be owned by Network Rail. Any decision on funding mechanisms is considered on a case-by-case basis and must demonstrate value for money in accordance with the requirements of the Scottish Government value-for-money guidance.

Charlie Gordon: Aside from the irony that the criteria apparently do not include rail projects that were approved via a full act of the Parliament, such as the Glasgow airport rail link, does the minister not see the inconsistency in his criteria, which lead, according to one of his recent parliamentary answers, to spending money that John Swinney claims we do not have on rail projects such as Glasgow crossrail, which I support but which will not stack up without the Glasgow airport rail link?

Stewart Stevenson: Perhaps I should make a couple of points in response to Mr Gordon's comments. In my initial answer, I said

"the expenditure must relate to a project that will create assets that will be owned by Network Rail".

In the case of GARL, it is clear that rebuilding a car park, providing a new nursery and relocating a fuel farm at the airport do not meet that test.

I simply point out that one important feature of regulatory asset base finance that we must recognise is that, like any source of finance, it is finite. Control period 4, which runs from 2009 to 2014, was agreed some time ago. We will of course continue to consider regulatory asset base finance when it is appropriate and delivers value for money.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): The Scottish Government ruled out using the regulatory asset base for the Borders railway and is instead using a private finance initiative variant—a capped profit return, wholly privately financed construction. Will that depend on revenue that is raised on the line? Will the minister give a categorical assurance that ticket pricing on the Borders railway will be no different from pricing in any other part of the network in Scotland?

Stewart Stevenson: The Government expects to contribute to the revenue costs of trains that run on the Borders line, as we contribute to the great majority of lines throughout Scotland. I expect the cost per kilometre on the Borders railway to be substantially similar to that elsewhere in the network.

Boiler Scrappage Scheme

12. Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what it would cost to introduce a boiler scrappage scheme similar to that in place in England and Wales. (S3O-9294)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): A boiler scrappage scheme similar to that which has been introduced in England would cost approximately £5 million over two years.

We already support the replacement of inefficient boilers. Since the launch of our energy-saving loans scheme last October, we have received applications that are worth nearly £480,000 to replace G-rated boilers with an efficient model. Our energy assistance package has supported the installation or upgrading of more than 5,100 central heating systems, including boilers, plus a range of other energy-saving installations for people who experience fuel poverty. Between 6 April 2009 and the end of

November 2009, more than £18.35 million was spent on the programme.

Ken Macintosh: Is the cabinet secretary aware of the experience of East Renfrewshire residents such as Mr and Mrs Stuart, whose broken boiler would have qualified for replacement under the previous Labour Executive's free central heating scheme but no longer qualifies under the Scottish National Party Administration? This year, they received from the United Kingdom Government a winter fuel payment and a cold-weather allowance. If they lived in England, they would qualify for the boiler scrappage scheme, but they have instead had to struggle through the cold spell with an inefficient, expensive and unreliable boiler, with no help from the SNP. What message does the cabinet secretary have for them?

John Swinney: I listened with care to the point that Mr Macintosh made on his constituents' behalf. The measures that I set out in my previous answer show the activity in which the Scottish Government is involved to support measures to tackle inefficient heating systems, to give people the appropriate heating services that they require and to tackle the challenge for people who experience fuel poverty. That is the Scottish Government's approach. We are supporting a range of individuals around the country who are experiencing fuel poverty and who are making efforts to tackle fuel poverty.

Glasgow Airport Rail Link

13. Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how much money has been committed to the Glasgow airport rail link. (S3O-9287)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Although the Scottish Government reluctantly had to cancel the branch-line element of the Glasgow airport rail link project, the project also involves much-needed improvements to the rail corridor between Paisley Gilmour Street and Glasgow Central stations. Those improvements, which are financed through Network Rail, will continue and be completed in early 2012, well ahead of the Commonwealth games in 2014.

The Scottish Government has committed to meeting the total expenditure, which is estimated at £222.59 million, of which £59.84 million had been spent up to 10 January 2010. The total expenditure is a mixture of capital and Network Rail regulatory asset base finance. That will allow the significant investment of the Paisley corridor improvements to proceed, to the benefit of people in Glasgow, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire and Inverclyde.

Andy Kerr: I listened closely to the previous answer from the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. How many projects were committed on the Network Rail RAB allocation in October 2009, when the cabinet secretary decided to axe the GARL project?

John Swinney: The contents of the projects that were involved in the regulatory asset base in October 2009 would be the same as those in the period during which control period 4 was agreed with the Office of Rail Regulation. I cannot recall the date on which control period 4 was agreed.

There are a number of scheduled rail improvements, not least of which is the work on the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme and on lines to the north of Scotland. A variety of improvements are scheduled as part of the Network Rail RAB. The suggestion that the member is driving at is that there is an easy solution, which is somehow to put GARL into the Network Rail RAB. However, in order to do that, other projects would have to be taken out of the RAB. We cannot escape reality. The programme of capital projects that we wish to undertake has to be constrained because of the financial challenges that we face as a country.

Dounreay to Beaulieu High-voltage Power Line

14. Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what work is required to reinforce the Dounreay to Beaulieu high-voltage power line and when it is envisaged that this work will start. (S3O-9337)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Scottish and Southern Energy's plans to reinforce the Beaulieu to Dounreay line consist of upgrading an existing line by stringing a second set of cables onto the existing towers. This work is envisaged to start in 2010, with the stringing of new cables being carried out in 2011 and 2012.

Rob Gibson: I thank the minister for that very positive answer. What new jobs will be created by this work? Will it harness the marine renewables in the Pentland Firth that are at an early stage of development and allow them to reach the transmission system?

Jim Mather: It is very much our intention that the work will harness those marine renewables. It is clear that the Beaulieu to Dounreay upgrade is fundamental in delivering the target of installing 700MW of wave and tidal capacity in the Pentland Firth and Orkney waters by 2020. The scale of the opportunity is highlighted in the "Marine Energy Road Map" produced by the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland. The forum envisages the installation of 1GW of marine energy by 2020—a development that could

generate £2.4 billion of expenditure, of which £1.3 billion would be retained in Scotland. It would also provide more than 2,600 direct jobs in Scotland and up to 12,500 indirect jobs.

Public Service Reform and Efficiency (2010-11 Budget)

15. Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive for what reason the budget for public service reform and efficiency has increased to £23.9 million in the 2010-11 draft budget. (S3O-9275)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The budget takes account of the costs of taking forward a range of initiatives that together will contribute to our overall objective of delivering value for money in our public services. The financial climate makes our pursuit of the agenda more relevant than it has ever been, and that is reflected in the budget.

Cathie Craigie: The Scottish SNP Edinburgh Government has more money to spend this year than any previous Scottish Administration had to spend. I will take every opportunity to repeat that. I accept that the SNP will make choices on where to prioritise spending, but why has the cabinet secretary chosen to prioritise this area for a budget increase when he is cutting the housing and regeneration budget?

John Swinney: I consider myself to be a member of a Government for all of Scotland that serves all the communities, and not a member of an Edinburgh Government—

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Shame.

John Swinney: I have offended the member for Edinburgh West. It just goes to prove that I can only try my best to cheer up everybody.

I return to Cathie Craigie's point on the public service reform budget and wider financial issues. We are entering a period of acute public spending pressure. She does not need to take that from me; she need only read the *Financial Times* on a regular basis—as I am sure she does. Just last week, the *FT* had an interview with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on its front page in which he spoke of the very difficult times that are coming towards us. [Interruption.] I hear Labour members squawking, "It's this budget". We are prioritising public service reform and efficiency because this Administration is prepared to plan for the future, whereas the Labour Administration has squandered resources, wrecked the public finances and made a mess of the economy. We have come to the rescue.

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the efficiency and reform measures that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency is introducing. SEPA is axing five of its seven laboratories, including the one in Dingwall, with the loss of five jobs. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, when a public service restructures, there should be a presumption in favour of basing any retained and enhanced facilities in the Highlands and Islands and other areas outside the central belt? Will he ask SEPA to reconsider its decision to base its two remaining laboratories in Aberdeen and Edinburgh?

John Swinney: I listened carefully to Mr Thompson's point and will draw his remarks to SEPA's attention. I say to the member and to Parliament that in the years to come many difficult decisions about public resources will have to be taken. We will consider carefully the issues that Mr Thompson raised in his question about the laboratory in Dingwall.

Skills Strategy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5619, in the name of Keith Brown, on the skills strategy.

14:56

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Keith Brown): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate on the skills strategy for Scotland, on the very day that the skills and strategy of a young Scot have meant that we have someone in the final of the Australian open. Congratulations to Andy Murray.

Today's debate comes at an important time in Scotland's transition from the economic downturn of the past 18 months to what we all hope will be a strong and sustained recovery. As we seek to accelerate Scotland's recovery and to take the fullest possible advantage of new opportunities as they emerge, it is critical that our skills and training support is substantial, sustainable and flexible.

Even as we see some positive signs, the reality for many Scots firms is one of continuing challenges in sustaining their business. The reality for many Scots is on-going job insecurity. The reality for many of our young people is uncertainty about their prospects. That is why none of us can afford to be slow to react as we move forward into this critical year for our recovery. We must work together to deliver support quickly and effectively, where it is needed most and to those who most need it.

The Government is determined to ensure that we have in place appropriate and effective training and education provision to take advantage of new opportunities as they emerge. That is why we are prioritising skills investment in the draft budget, with investment of more than £2 billion in our colleges, universities and national training programmes. We have already seen the difference that a flexible approach to skills investment can make in tough economic times. Through our ScotAction programme, we have directed some £145 million to support training for work, training in work and training from work to work. We have expanded the modern apprenticeship programme, making available an extra £16 million to create an additional 7,800 opportunities in 2009-10—on top of the 10,700 that were already in place—taking the number of new opportunities to the extremely ambitious level of 18,500. Funding to support those new places has been allocated in the draft budget, to ensure that those who started their training in 2009-10 will be able to continue in 2010-11.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): The minister is aware that a number of apprenticeships have had to come to an end, especially in the construction industry; I think that the figure is about 900. There now seem to be some green shoots of recovery in the construction industry. How is the Government working with the industry to see whether many apprenticeships can be started up again?

Keith Brown: We work closely with ConstructionSkills, which is a strong sector skills council, and regularly meet employers in the industry, who have a good track record on apprenticeships. In addition, we realise that a number of small construction companies may not have the same capacity as larger companies to access apprenticeships, or even to be aware of them and to find out where they are. We have produced a short, direct, simple leaflet for such employers, to ensure that they are able to access apprenticeships. The member will be aware of this morning's very positive news that there is a more positive outlook among construction employers in Scotland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. We are doing what we can in that regard, although there is obviously more to be done.

We have expanded the modern apprenticeship programme, making available 7,800 opportunities in addition to the 10,700. Next year we hope to be even more ambitious, by offering a flexible range of training opportunities to accelerate the recovery.

A key priority group for the Government, the Parliament and the country is, of course, our young people. Too often in previous recessions, young people have suffered most and the effects have continued for them while the rest of society has moved on. Scotland's young people deserve better. We are determined not to repeat that past mistake.

The 16+ learning choices model is our guarantee of an offer of a place in learning to every young person who wants it. Local partnerships, led by local authorities, are working together to ensure that the range of opportunities that is available to young people meets their needs and supports them into further learning and employment.

This year's school leaver destinations return, which was published in November, told a much better story than we might have feared during the recession, with an increase in the proportion of young people going into further and higher education and training. School staying-on rates are also significantly higher than in previous years, which is perhaps not surprising during a recession. However, as we would expect, the proportion of young people going into employment has fallen. This is not the time to take our foot off the gas. If we want to secure a sustainable economic

recovery for the benefit of everyone in Scotland, we must provide the right support where it is needed.

There is no question but that we need to be prepared for the summer of 2010, given that more young people will be coming out of school and college into a labour market that is likely to remain tight. We must all be prepared to support those young people into further learning, training and employment. Our young people must have a flexible range of options in the year ahead, and continuing support to sustain their learning choices. The draft budget puts in place the funding to provide that, and we must all get behind the efforts that are being made to deliver those options.

The Government has been very impressed by the way in which colleges have responded flexibly to increased demands. That remains a priority in the year ahead. Skills Development Scotland's continuing training budget has been protected. When four organisations come together, it is natural that there will be some efficiency savings and those are now being delivered. However, as we have always said, front-line services will be maintained. SDS is well placed to respond flexibly to emerging demand. If the evidence shows that another year of focusing on providing high numbers of modern apprenticeship starts is key to accelerating recovery—we believe that it is—the draft budget provides for that.

Using skills to support growth is not all about money. It is equally important to provide the right support to those who need it most and to ensure that Government and its partners work together to deliver that support as effectively as possible.

As I said, we must be prepared for the summer of 2010. More young people will be coming out of school and college on to the labour market, which—according to every estimate that we have heard so far—is likely to remain very tight for the foreseeable future. We must be prepared to support those young people into further learning, training and employment.

Since coming to power, the Government has had a single purpose: we want to create a more successful country, in which everyone shares the benefits of sustainable economic growth. In the economic climate in which we have found ourselves, the need to focus on doing all that we can to support the economy has never been more important. We understand that skills are a critical element to economic growth in a country such as Scotland. There is a great deal to be said for the work that the former Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning did on skills utilisation, which has now been taken over by the current cabinet secretary. That work aims to

ensure that we get competitive benefits from the skills that we have in our workforce.

For existing businesses to be more successful, we need a large pool of individuals with both the skill set and the mindset to drive innovation and to deliver greater profitability. To attract new investment to Scotland we need a highly skilled, adaptable workforce that can contribute to the success of businesses that choose to invest here. In a public sector that faces huge challenges, we need individuals who can drive up public service productivity to unprecedented levels. It is difficult to anticipate properly the skills that any economy will need in the future, but if we can get it right, the competitive benefits—the advantage over competitors—can be huge.

There is no question but that the Government's approach to skills development and delivery has been tested to the limits in the past year. We are in an unprecedented recession, just narrowly coming out of it in the past few days—at least, that is what the data suggest. Having a single skills agency managing a range of programmes from within a single budget has allowed us to act quickly in response to a rapidly changing environment. Certainly, people who have been involved in the area for a long time tell us that focus on and scrutiny of training and careers opportunities are far greater than they were in the past, as a result of a single agency being in charge.

As I said, our colleges have been hugely responsive to an unprecedented surge in demand and we have acted quickly to support them. We have sustained a positive story on school leaver destinations, and the rate of increase in unemployment has decelerated much more quickly than might have been anticipated a year ago.

However, this is not the time to take our foot off the gas. If we want to secure a sustainable recovery for the benefit of everybody in Scotland, we must provide the right support where and when it is needed. In years to come, I want to be able to look back on how we worked collectively to respond to the recession and I want to be able to take pride in the success of our approach. A flexible approach to skills and training was right before the recession and has definitely been right during the recession. I am convinced that it will be right as we seek to accelerate recovery. I commend the motion to the Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of businesses and employees are critical elements of a successful skills strategy in helping tackle the challenges of the recession and the recovery and believes that the Scottish Government must maintain its focus on developing practical initiatives that

help people and businesses with training for work, training in work and training from work to work.

15:06

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

(Lab): I welcome this opportunity to debate skills again in the Parliament. The Scottish National Party's skills strategy has been rejected twice by the Parliament, but skills should be a priority for the Government. From what I heard from the minister, it seems that a welcome change is blowing through the corridors of power upstairs.

In the amendment in my name, I ask the Scottish Government to

"bring forward early publication of a refreshed skills strategy that takes account of the current economic climate and is backed by the resources necessary to provide appropriate places on Training for Work and Get Ready for Work programmes and the wide range of modern apprentice schemes."

Who could argue against that? Do not Scotland's wealth as a nation and our ability to create a more inclusive society depend solely on productivity and employment? I am pleased that the SNP now realises that skills are essential to both. We simply want to know what the new strategy is and how much more money will be invested in skills. I hope that the minister will tell us that when he sums up, but perhaps we will have to wait until next week.

Recent history shows that support for certain modern apprenticeships was cut in April 2008, when funding for service sector candidates over the age of 19 was withdrawn. Last year in the budget negotiations, Labour pushed through 7,800 additional modern apprentice places, at a cost of £16 million. There has been welcome selective easing of the artificial age barrier, but that is not enough. A stop-and-go funding environment, which is announced in a drip-feed manner, leaves employers and training providers unable to budget and creates huge uncertainty.

Despite the recent welcome fall in unemployment, now is the time to increase and not cut back help. We need to ensure that our young people do not suffer the scarring effects of long-term unemployment—I welcome the minister's words on that score. That is why in this year's budget negotiations Labour has again sought extra resources, to train people who do not have the necessary skills to enter the job market and to add to the skills of people who are working.

Public funding needs to be prioritised towards employability, basic skills and people who face severe disadvantages in the labour market. Not all young people will have the qualifications for a modern apprentice place. Programmes such as training for work need to be extended, to help to bridge the gap that exists, especially in our most

deprived areas. The statistics show that in 2008 nearly 25 per cent of 16 to 19-year-olds in the 15 per cent most deprived areas were not in employment, education or training.

Now is the time to increase help, as the economy recovers. We need to provide support to businesses that give young people a job, apprenticeship or internship. We must not make things more difficult or take away such opportunities. There must be tailored training for a wide range of sectors, to help people to get a foot on to the career ladder and to ensure that employers' demands can be met. Employers need to be central to the skills agenda and systems should be aligned to labour market needs. Businesses throughout Scotland consistently say that they are never properly engaged in education reform. Indeed, according to the Confederation of British Industry, the development of employability should be a core function of education.

I accept that it can be easier to engage with large employers. However, articulating training needs might not be the top priority for many small and medium-sized enterprises, which are concentrating on running their businesses. Workplace training providers should be able to go in and create something suitable for the individual business. It should be a priority to find out what employers need and address specific skills shortages that they can identify.

We must accept that Scotland faces demographic changes that will have an impact on its labour market. More than 20 per cent of the working-age population are aged 16 to 25, compared with 29 per cent who are aged 50 to 64. We need to motivate individuals to make use of the enhanced work and life opportunities that lifelong learning can bring them. Having the confidence and skills to participate and succeed has its own rewards.

I had an informative visit to Skills Development Scotland last week to hear how its corporate plan is developing. Last year, the agency had a budget of more than £203 million and a staff of 1,400. Those are significant resources that should create a revitalised, fit-for-purpose, skills and learning provision, but I say to the minister that, as SDS predicts that there will be a bulge in the number of people seeking jobs and training this summer, now is not the time to cut its financial resources. Indeed, we heard some of that argument at First Minister's questions. I hope that the First Minister can persuade the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to reverse the proposed cut as he puts the finishing touches to his budget proposal before next week's stage 3 budget debate, so that SDS can meet the extra challenges that it knows it will face.

SDS has put together its corporate plan, and the Labour Party agrees with much of it. I particularly concur with its priority groups: young people aged 12 to 19, particularly those who are in need of more choices and chances, many of whom live in our most deprived communities; adults aged over 20 who need new skills to find work; and adults aged over 20 who are in work but need to increase their skills.

I welcome the £1,000 that the Scottish Government is offering companies to take on a new apprentice. However, the scheme is limited to 4,000 places and, to qualify for the cash, the apprentice must be employed between 11 January and 26 March this year. If the take-up is not achieved in that small timeframe, surely the scheme can be extended.

On Monday, my colleague Richard Baker and I visited Macphie of Glenbervie, an independent food ingredients manufacturer that employs 300 people over two sites—250 at its main plant near Stonehaven and another 50 at a plant in Uddingston that was recently taken over. At Macphie, training and personal development are central to the company ethos. All employees are tested to see what type of activity suits their personality and capability. That attention to detail has achieved some terrific results. Among the senior management team are now people who left school with no qualifications but, through personal development and encouragement from the company, have taken on training to improve their skill levels and job opportunities.

It is clear to see that the individual and the company both benefit from that attention to training detail. Many other companies throughout Scotland should follow that example. The Macphie system works. When it took over the Uddingston plant, staff turnover was 90 per cent—I had to look at the figure twice because I did not believe it, but it was 90 per cent—and none of the production staff had any formal qualifications. Now, staff turnover is down to less than 1 per cent and all the staff who work there have achieved some form of Scottish vocational qualification. It is a much happier place to work, and Macphie has shown that, if we put the investment in, we get the return back.

In my constituency, the insurance firm Aviva is establishing links with local schools and the Kirkintilloch campus of Cumbernauld College to develop training opportunities to encourage youngsters into the insurance industry, which is an important part of the financial services sector. Management at Aviva told me that, to start with, it was a bit of a struggle to get their feet in the doors of local schools and the local college, but I am happy to say that that has now been sorted out.

I could go on, as there is plenty more to say, but by now members should have got the picture that the skills agenda needs to be prioritised. We do not need complex skills policies, initiatives and institutions and neither do we want skills to be a political football. We cannot have a top-down approach. We will work with the Scottish Government but a commonsense approach must be taken. It is important for Scotland's future to keep skills at the top of the agenda and it is important that we keep investing in training.

I move amendment S3M-5619.2, to insert at end:

"and, to that end, calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward early publication of a refreshed Skills Strategy that takes account of the current economic climate and is backed by the resources necessary to provide appropriate places on Training for Work and Get Ready for Work programmes and the wide range of modern apprentice schemes."

15:14

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): There can be no doubt about the importance of a skills strategy to the development of a more successful economy and more meaningful and fulfilling opportunities in the education system. It is good to hear that the Scottish Government has provided more assurances on the skills strategy than it did when the original version was overwhelmingly rejected by the Parliament for the simple reason that it did not provide a coherent policy across all sectors.

I listened carefully to the minister's opening remarks and I hope that I can press him to deal with a bit more of the detail, which relates, as far as we are concerned, to two fundamental issues. I hope that we can elicit an assurance in the minister's summing up that the Government will address those issues as a matter of urgency.

Two weeks ago, we had a very good debate on literacy. It would not be appropriate to go over all aspects of that debate again, much as I would like to, but I reiterate our strong belief that literacy and numeracy are the blocks upon which all else must be built. The sizeable amount of money that Scottish businesses have to spend in their training budgets on remedial work rather than on new skills is evidence of how serious the problem is. The Parliament is well aware of our views about the need for more rigorous testing in primary schools, which have been reinforced in the past 24 hours by concerns among primary teachers. I am sure that the Scottish Government has the best interests of our pupils at heart when it comes to the curriculum for excellence, but we simply cannot proceed much further until we have demonstrated unequivocally—on a basis that is both understood and accepted by employers—that

standards of literacy and numeracy are improving. If we can get the balance right between greater rigour in the school exam system and the need to create imaginative and responsible citizens, which is the vision of the curriculum for excellence, we will have a far better chance of fulfilling a successful skills strategy.

However, far more than that is required. If the main appeal of the curriculum for excellence is its desire to tailor the educational experience more towards the needs of individual pupils, by definition we must allow much greater flexibility within the education system. For me, that means challenging the status quo of the comprehensive system beyond the middle years of secondary school—perhaps even beyond secondary 2—since it is clearly not working for many pupils in the last two or three years of their schooling. Professor Howie tried that in 1992 and was shot down for his unorthodox views. He has been proved right, big time, and I have no doubt that we need to make that change now.

Will the cabinet secretary agree at least to examine the case for allowing pupils to engage in formal vocational training while they are still at school—that already happens in several other European countries—and for allowing pupils to leave school at an earlier age if they and their teachers agree that the pursuit of a purely academic curriculum is neither appropriate nor relevant to their best interests? One of the worst things that we can do is to force youngsters to stay on at school in academic classes in which they have little focus and on which, frankly, they waste valuable time when they could be learning a trade or a craft—that should never be seen as somehow inferior to an academic education. It is time to acknowledge fully that far more youngsters would be able to get much more meaningful focus if they could harness their talents outside the academic classroom. Such an approach works tremendously well in many European countries and it would go a long way towards solving the problem of some disengaged youngsters in our society.

Another extremely important aspect of the debate, which forms the second part of our amendment, is the need to ensure that skills training is based far more on the needs of employers than on what can be provided through different training institutions. My colleague Gavin Brown will outline the main details of our thinking on that matter, which has been reinforced by much of the powerful evidence that was submitted to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee.

It is essential that the Scottish Government accepts that it needs to rethink its policy as quickly as possible. I say that not only because of what the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee was told by experts in the field, but because of the

results of good practice elsewhere. Just before Christmas, my colleague Murdo Fraser and I spent a day in York hearing about the progress that had been made by the skills academies in England for exactly the same reason: they had ensured that skills training was demand led. Each academy has a different business model, and they are drawn up according to employers' needs in the different industrial sectors. Each academy also has an employer-led board, and approval of training providers is based on how well they can deliver the training needs of local employers. The structure was very impressive in terms of the quality of training that was provided and the number of students who went on to full-time jobs in a range of industries, and given the fact that skills academies are financially self-sustaining within four years.

The Scottish Conservatives firmly believe that we need to develop a more consistent and coherent strategy on demand-led skills training. We ask the Government to pay considerable attention to that area.

Let me just summarise our position. First, if the overriding objective is to provide a workforce that is fit for the challenges of the 21st century and which allows Scotland to develop her full economic potential such that she can compete successfully in the international community, we must not ignore the concerns that are raised by about one third of employers who say that their school leavers are poorly prepared for work. Secondly, we need to champion vocational training and provide the flexibility that will allow all pupils—not just some—to pursue their aspirations. The Scottish colleges have made huge progress on that, but much more needs to be done to help our youngsters to become career focused and to take an active part in planning their educational futures without the fear of any stigma being attached to them. Thirdly, we must ensure that we have a coherent national framework that involves all levels of training, with neither too much nor too little focus on any one part of the education sector. The national strategy must meet the demands of everyone, especially the employers who, at the end of the day, are the means by which the Scottish working population can find jobs and develop their skills.

I move amendment S3M-5619.1, to insert at end:

“; believes that pupils in secondary schools who wish to do so should have the opportunity to pursue formal vocational training, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that the system is more demand-led and that publicly funded training matches far more closely the needs of employers.”

15:21

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Like everyone else, I welcome the more encouraging economic news of the past fortnight, but Scotland is still in tough economic times. Companies are still getting into trouble and people are still losing their jobs. For many, 2010 will be a year of struggle, whether because they face the financial burdens of unemployment or because they must deal with the emotional stresses that that brings. There is no doubt that the next few years will be challenging. That is why we need to fight back with an upskilled workforce in what is a very competitive world.

We need to work to maximise and improve the skills of Scotland's workforce so that the economy can not only recover but support sustainable growth in the future. I welcome the minister's response to my intervention on the issue of apprenticeships in the construction industry. It is essential that the Government engages with employers and works with key industries, such as construction, to ensure that they work in partnership going forward. There has never been a more important time to invest in skills. It is crucial that employers continue to invest in apprenticeships and in other ways of upskilling the workforce. We need proper partnerships among schools, colleges, employers and Government.

Ideally, we also need a partnership in the Parliament on the issue of skills. That is why it is rather worrying that the Scottish Government's skills strategy has never been approved by the Parliament. When the strategy was introduced in September 2007, it was voted down as inadequate, because it had no targets or timescales and not very much by way of measures of success. It is seriously worrying, when faced with the greatest economic recession in a generation, that we do not have a nationally agreed skills strategy, even though many of the minister's announcements today, such as on ScotAction, are to be welcomed.

We need skills from across the board, from basic literacy to degree-level education and national qualifications. Basic literacy and numeracy skills are essential to an effective and functioning workforce and a successful economy. However, the recent literacy commission report suggests that almost 1 million adults in Scotland have inadequate literacy skills. For that reason, we welcome efforts to tackle the problem through the curriculum for excellence, through testing and through community education for those who slipped through at school level.

We know that young people have been hit hardest by the shrinking jobs market. Graduates and school leavers are unable to find jobs and young people are generally the first to be made

redundant from companies, which often take a last-in-first-out approach. Our young people are bearing too much of the burden of the recession. Experts who have examined the effects of the previous recession have noted that it created an enduring legacy of long-term unemployment for many people.

Keith Brown: Given what Margaret Smith has said about young people, does she welcome the fact that all £28.1 million of the consequential funding was allocated to colleges on the basis that they would target young people in the most affected areas of the economy? Surely that must be a good thing.

Margaret Smith: That is spooky, because I was about to welcome that point later in my speech.

I also welcome the minister's comments about ensuring that we do not have another lost generation of young people at this crucial time. However, it is hugely worrying that the number of young people claiming jobseekers allowance in Scotland has increased by 45 per cent in the past year. We all agree that they should be a key focus of the work that we should be doing on skills.

The minister rightly spoke about the flexibility that Scotland's colleges have shown, but we know that record numbers of students are being turned away from colleges due, to some extent, to a lack of funding. Carnegie College turned away 904 students in 2009 because courses were full, which represents an increase of nearly 80 per cent on the 2008 figure. At Stevenson College Edinburgh, 1,326 students failed to gain a place in 2009, which compares with a figure of 323 for 2008. Oatridge College, which had never previously refused admission to applicants, was forced to turn away 300 people following a 74 per cent increase in applications.

That is why, as part of this year's budget process, we have called on the Scottish Government to expand the number of college places, which would be a direct way of boosting skills in sectors of the economy in which we know that there are skills gaps. Whether in engineering, green industries or social care, giving people the skills and education that they need to succeed should be a positive legacy from the recession. That is why we want to see a significant increase in the number of college places throughout Scotland. We also want investment to be distributed fairly across the country, in rural and urban areas alike.

In June last year, the Government announced a welcome £16.1 million for extra college places, but the allocation focused on colleges in the central belt, where there were high levels of youth unemployment. The Government needs to note that there are pockets of unemployment

throughout Scotland. For example, in October 2009, jobseekers allowance data showed that in Glasgow, which received funding, the Easterhouse area had a claimant count rate of 8.2 per cent. In Dumfries and Galloway, which did not receive funding, the area of Stranraer north had a claimant count rate of 8.8 per cent, and in Highland, which did not receive funding either, the area of Merkinch had a claimant count rate of 8.7 per cent. I could have filled my five or six minutes with the numerous anomalies to which the Government's approach has given rise. I strongly urge the minister to take a different approach if there is to be an expansion in the number of college places in future, which is what we would like to happen.

We continue to be sceptical about the value of Skills Development Scotland, a quango that cost £16 million to set up. We would prefer resources to be diverted into front-line skills services. We also have concerns about the fact that in 2008, the Government removed specific funding for skills for work courses in schools and colleges and the school-college partnership programme by wrapping them up in the concordat. It is essential that local authorities continue to provide such services, but we are all well aware of the cuts that are coming to a council near us. We must ensure that people do not suffer as a result of a postcode lottery, whereby some councils see such programmes as priorities whereas others do not. Such services should be available to young people throughout Scotland, regardless of where they live.

Keith Brown: Margaret Smith said that that money was removed and wrapped up in local government funding. It was not removed, but it was wrapped up in local government funding. That is consistent with our approach—which I think is also the approach of the Liberal Democrats—of giving local authorities the maximum amount of discretion. That money was not removed; it is still there.

Margaret Smith: I think that I said that the Government removed specific funding by wrapping it up in local authority funding. I am concerned that the Government keeps a watching brief to ensure that the funding is used for those purposes, because if it is not, the Government will have to address the consequences further down the line.

Graduates have been finding it increasingly difficult to find employment. I must declare an interest as a mother of four university students, two of whom will graduate in the summer. The economic situation that they will face when they come out of university is very different from the one that prevailed when they went in. I share the concerns of parents around the country who worry

that after four years' hard work, their children might not end up with a job of any description.

We have recently learned that Scottish Enterprise is to scrap the graduates for business scheme, the successful internship scheme that was awarded a new three-year contract worth £1 million only last year. Internships for around 250 graduates a year have been arranged through the scheme, two thirds of whom have ended up being employed by the firms involved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You should be finishing now, Ms Smith.

Margaret Smith: What assurances can the minister give us about how graduate employment will be progressed in the wake of the demise of that fund?

Leigh Clifford, the chairman of Qantas Airways, said:

"Success is down to perseverance, ability, skills and experience, but it is also about being given an opportunity."

We must ensure that all individuals in Scotland, particularly our young people, are given such opportunities.

I move amendment S3M-5619.3, to leave out from "believes" to end and insert:

"regrets the Scottish Government's failure to bring forward a revised Skills Strategy for debate, as was called for by the Parliament in September 2007; further regrets the ongoing confusion, bureaucracy and expense that has been caused by the establishment of the multi-million pound quango, Skills Development Scotland; notes the Scottish Government's removal of specific funding for Skills for Work courses and school-college partnerships and the uncertainty over the future funding of the Determined to Succeed programme; recognises the valuable role of colleges in boosting skills and supporting lifelong learning, education and training, and notes the pressures facing colleges across Scotland due to an increased demand for places."

15:29

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): So far, there has been a remarkable degree of accord across the chamber. I know that there is always consensus and never a raised voice, a gibe tossed from bench to bench, a cross word or a sly dig here, but this debate has had more "Hail fellow well met" comments than most—except Margaret Smith's amendment, of course, although her speech was a bit more positive. I am sure that she meant what she said in the best, most constructive and friendliest of manners.

It is important to recognise the efforts that everyone has made in trying to close the skills gap in our economy, including those of previous devolved Administrations and Administrations before devolution across what was once a great divide in the political spectrum. We should also

note John Park's efforts in keeping his personal favourite cause of apprenticeships—which is also one of my favourite causes—to the forefront of political debate in Scotland. I say well done to him for that. He and I may disagree on details, but we agree on other things. I am sure that he agrees that we should do what we can to encourage proper on-the-job training, proper apprenticeships and people having a thorough grounding in the techniques of trades. I am also sure that he will be only too pleased to welcome the efforts that the Scottish Government has made over the past couple of years and the effects of those endeavours.

Members may come to the issue from different angles, but we all have essentially the same purpose in mind: to upskill the Scottish workforce to enable people to play an active part in wealth creation—both private and social wealth—in Scotland; to be competitive in the employment market; to help to build social capital; and to create social mobility in our society. The path of sustainable economic development has not been easy to follow recently, with the chill winds of recession blowing from the south, but it is the central focus of the Scottish Government, and we have seen delivery on that since the election in 2007.

As Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop announced and delivered increased funding for the Scottish union learning fund only months into government. That is another cause of mine: John Park and I agree on its importance. That increase in funding has been maintained, and the Government's partnership in learning with the unions has continued to develop. People are learning while in work to improve themselves and their prospects, and thus to improve the society in which they live. That is important to me. I should declare an interest: I was a training officer who supported people in work to gain qualifications. The unions do excellent work on that fund and the Government does excellent work in supporting it. Scotland's Government's support for the unions is providing learning opportunities to union members.

The Scottish union learning annual report for 2008-09 says:

"Through this funding, trade unions are putting sustainable learning infrastructures into place, ultimately making a difference in the lifelong chances of their members."

The fund was established in 2000 and has delivered a legacy that will continue to benefit Scotland for many years to come. Funding was increased in 2008, which the annual report says allowed

"a significant increase in activity from previous rounds."

The report states:

"In the first year of SULF 7, there were 1379 individuals who accessed learning opportunities ... 787 Individual Learning Accounts were taken up and 27 new learning agreements were signed with employers."

The trade unions do a great job in supporting their members' learning, and they should be praised for that, but the Scottish Government should also be praised, as it does a great job in supporting the unions to support their members' learning. Ministers should be specially praised for that.

It was also Fiona Hyslop who moved quickly to set up ScotAction when the need for it became clear. Apprenticeships were supported, apprentices were sponsored in the workplace, and resources were provided to keep as many apprentices in post as possible.

Of course, there is no way to deliver apprentices if there are no employers who are able to take them on. That is why the recession has been so bad for apprenticeships and why we must do what we can to ensure that Scotland is out of recession and building again. It is also why we could have done with an additional acceleration in capital spending, which Iain Gray asked for, and why the small business bonus was important for apprenticeships, because it allowed small businesses to survive and gave them the chance to thrive and take on apprentices.

The skills debate and the provision of skills do not exist in isolation. Without economic growth, we will not have businesses to employ apprentices, never mind skilled workers, and without available and circulating money in the economy, there will be no way for the sole trader—the plumber, joiner or electrician—to survive. On people surviving, I want to mention information that was sent to all members from Carers Scotland and the Princess Royal Trust for Carers on the employment and training challenges for carers, especially young carers in the 16-plus group. In summing up, will the minister give me an assurance that the skills strategy will take into account the challenges experienced by young carers and the carers network across Lanarkshire?

As I said, the debate about skills and their provision does not exist in isolation. We cannot keep pumping borrowed money into the economy—it has to be paid back some time—but now is the time for boosting public capital expenditure. The skills gaps are changing and training provision must change with them. Technology and science are prime examples of subjects in which postgraduate qualifications will be necessary for many employment opportunities, but sub-degree qualifications will be just as important for others. The nature of the beast is changing.

Scotland needs flexibility in our training providers, training delivery channels and employers to deliver skills training for the future. We need the ability to change to match the circumstances that Scotland finds herself in and the political will to make that happen. I believe that we have general agreement on that among the parties. I am happy to support the motion in Keith Brown's name.

15:35

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. My first speech in the Parliament way back in May 2007 was on skills, and I have taken a great interest in the issue since. The economy was a different beast back in 2007, but skills are just as important now as they were then, and probably even more so. It is a matter of regret that the Parliament has yet to unite around a skills strategy, although I recognise that progress has been made since the initial debate in 2007. Primarily through the budget process, but also in other ways, we have found issues on which the Parliament can unite and make progress.

Last year's budget gave us an opportunity to consider closely the challenges, particularly on apprenticeships. I was pleased that the apprenticeship scheme numbers were increased from 7,800 to 18,500. I hope that the delivery of that will come to fruition this year, and that we will achieve a real difference not only in the figures, but for the individuals who will benefit in the next two or three years as they complete their training. The guarantee for redundant apprentices was an excellent proposal from the Labour Party—of course I would say that—and will help to deal with the redundant apprentice figures. Many ideas came out of the apprenticeship summit, so the Government's proposals will be relevant to employers. If we do not deal with redundant apprentices, and if those who have had one or two years' training fall out of the system, their years of training, the public funding and that employer time will have gone to waste. In the current times, it is important that the Government and Parliament unite around measures to support redundant apprentices.

I attended the apprenticeship summit, which was excellent. I suggest to Keith Brown that the Government should consider holding the event annually, and that it could be widened to cover not only apprenticeships but skills and training issues more widely. Many good ideas came out of the summit, and there was a lot of collaboration between public and private sector organisations and between employers of different sizes.

There were several proposals that the Parliament could implement. One suggestion that

the Government has not yet taken up but which it might want to consider for the future delivery of apprenticeship places was about the structure of apprenticeships, specifically the challenges that some industries face in getting school leavers into apprenticeships. For example, training in care, management or logistics is probably more suited to older workers or workers who are already in employment and who are seeking to retrain and upskill. There has been movement on that, but we need further movement and examination. The individual sector skills councils and the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils have done work on that and have identified areas in which there could be movement and on which they would be prepared to work with the Scottish Government to try to find a solution.

We need to do that because, although in the current climate it is important that we support young people who come out of school and give them every opportunity to undertake an apprenticeship, the other reality, which David Whitton spoke about, is that a great number of people are in work but need to upskill and retrain to take the jobs of the future. About 60 or 70 per cent of people who are in work now will be in work in 20 years. We are kidding ourselves if we think that the private sector can take on that challenge on its own and that it will upskill and retrain people so that they can go into new employment. There is a huge role for the Scottish Government and the public sector more generally to ensure that people who find themselves in those circumstances are given the opportunity to undertake adult apprenticeships. Flexibility would certainly help the system.

Elizabeth Smith's amendment raises the important issue of vocational training. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report that was produced in 2007, which we debated in the Parliament, identified that Scotland has many comparative strengths in education, but that one of our weaknesses is in vocational opportunities for pupils in secondary 3 and up, that is, 14, 15 and 16-year-olds. We need to consider that. We must also consider the advice and guidance that is given to young people when they are making major decisions that will impact on the rest of their working lives.

Recently, I met a young female—26 or 27 years old—who was in the final year of her Scottish Gas apprenticeship. She told me that, ever since she was 14 or 15 years old, she had wanted to go into an apprenticeship, but because she was female and was not from the sort of background from which people traditionally go into a technical or industrial job, she was pushed into higher education, which she did not want to go into. When she came out of higher education, she found herself working in a Scottish Gas call centre,

as her degree was pretty worthless for what she wanted to do. Eventually, she got to where she wanted to be, but she is having to pay off debts. If she had been given better guidance and support, and if it had been recognised that young women can go down the same routes as young men, she would now be three or four years further down her career path, and would be in a far better situation.

Keith Brown: We are aware that the preconceptions about apprenticeships that exist, to an extent, among women and employers have to be challenged. We and Skills Development Scotland are responding to a recent suggestion by the construction industry that we should do something about that. Future campaigns will try to tackle that preconception.

On the question of vocational teaching in schools, will the member acknowledge that that is happening in many schools throughout Scotland, especially with regard to motor vehicle repairs and hairdressing and the associated business skills? I take the member's point that we might need to move forward on a more structured basis.

John Park: The challenge has existed for a number of years, and I do not think that there is any disagreement about the fact that not only Government but employers, educationists and others must tackle it. However, there is an issue around occupational segregation, as there is no minimum wage protection in the first year of apprenticeships and many women who go into traditional roles in care and hairdressing, for example, end up being paid £40 or £50 a week, which makes ending their apprenticeship early and going into another job an attractive option. The drop-out rates have been pretty good in Scotland, but not so good in the United Kingdom as a whole.

In supporting the fresh skills strategy, we should debate the issues more widely, because the economic situation has changed. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Christopher Harvie, I remind members that their BlackBerrys should not be switched on.

15:42

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Anyone who has ever seen George Bernard Shaw's play "Man and Superman" will remember the dialogue between Jack Tanner—that Don Juan figure—and his chauffeur, Henry Straker. Tanner asks Henry, "Where did you go to school?", and Henry says, "Holborn polytechnic." Tanner turns to his companion and says, "Would you ever have spoken that way of Balliol college? Holborn polytechnic means something." We have to put over that point strongly, as John Park has just impressively done, to back up the much

welcomed measures that the minister has outlined.

I speak with the brooding figure of Adam Smith and the mass of Adam Smith College behind me in my part of Fife. I realise that Adam Smith College is the key to developing huge wind power arrays in the Forth estuary, which could generate up to 4.7GW of power. Securing that supply depends on our sending out the Henry Strakers who will get the machinery working that will deliver the power. We have done that before; we did it in relation to North Sea oil. Alas, many of the people who were involved in that sector have been outsourced and placed offshore throughout the world. One thing that we have to do in the immediate future is bring those people back to be mentors to the young workers who are moving into renewable energy, where fantastic fundamental research is going on. When the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee went up to see what was happening in the area around Stromness and Scrabster, next to the enormous and ferocious natural force that is the Pentland Firth, we found amazing research going on. We require people who will transform that research into prototype production.

That was well summed up by an old Glasgow friend of mine, who said that what we had on the Clyde were wee men in overalls with a file in one pocket and a micrometer in the other who, if we put them next to a lump of metal for long enough, would build an engine. We require that combination of skill, determination and the best technical knowledge that we have. Unfortunately, the deindustrialisation of our society has led that to break down. I was talking to a friend of mine who was a lecturer at Motherwell College in the 1970s. Then, there were 170 mechanical engineering lecturers, but because of the end of steel production at Ravenscraig that number has shrunk by practically 90 per cent.

Remember this: when it comes to training apprentices, even in a sophisticated system such as the one in Denmark, which members of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee saw, or the one in Germany, which I experienced in Baden-Württemberg—I am acquainted with people in the social democrat movement there—75 per cent of the instruction is carried out in firms' workshops and special training academies. In Germany, notionally, 50 per cent of the instruction should happen in a technical school and 50 per cent should happen at work, but in fact 25 per cent is done in technical schools and 75 per cent is done in the technical academies of, say, Daimler, Voith and Siemens.

We require to give people a much greater degree of such experience. That will be tricky initially, because we are building up the institutions

that will do that, which will take time. How do we do that? I refer to my past as an apprentice in multimedia technology at the Open University, which, of course, was founded by Fife's own Jennie Lee in 1969. How do we supply the hands-on approach, not just to instruct people in new technologies but to enthuse them? We can develop technologies such as high definition television and virtual laboratories in collaboration with advanced technical economies in Europe.

We have to make good the decline in the practical experience, which we were once able to supply in the shipyards on Clydeside, and introduce mentoring by bringing people in from their offshore roles to help young people to understand processes in a hands-on way. We have to make use of the people who come to Scotland as migrants from Europe, who are often very well qualified indeed and capable of communicating their knowledge. We should also use new, sophisticated forms of technical communication.

We also need enthusiasm. On 4 February, I will lead a members' business debate on a friend of mine who died two months ago, John Burnie, who, in his professional role, was a shift manager at Longannet—in other words, he was the man who could have plunged us into total darkness in central Scotland if he had not been up to the job. Otherwise, he built up the Bo'ness railway museum, the contents of which are now worth more than £2 million. He always wanted the museum to be used to give practical, hands-on education to a new generation of people, who would have to be specialised in that area of high-quality, heavy engineering, which we thought we had left in the past but which we have to relearn fast. I think that we have the components to hand. In the debate, we have seen a remarkable degree of consensus emerge. As Tom Johnston is celebrated as saying,

"What men are prepared to do together"—

or what men and women are prepared to do together—

"they can do."

15:49

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): We all agree that, if we are to compete successfully in this challenging economic climate and ensure that we are well equipped to take advantage of the opportunities that are presented by economic recovery, Scotland needs an increasingly skilled population. There is no argument in the Parliament about that. To achieve it, we need a fit-for-purpose skills strategy. My colleague David Whitton's amendment seeks that and I hope that members will support it at 5 o'clock. We need an updated

strategy to meet the needs of Scotland's economy. It is vital in the short term, but it will be just as crucial as we move from the recession to recovery.

Scotland's 43 colleges of further and higher education are crucial to delivering the skills, knowledge and training that we need to ensure that Scotland can compete at the cutting edge and that people have the skills that they need to work and live. I was pleased to hear the minister acknowledge the role of Scotland's colleges this afternoon. In 2007-08, students in the college sector studied for more than 348,000 work-related qualifications. The vocational qualifications that are offered range from those that develop basic skills and employability to higher national certificates and diplomas. We heard from my colleague John Park about the importance of modern apprenticeships and the support that colleges provide through the various awarding bodies.

Increasingly, colleges work with universities to deliver degree courses and with employers and universities to deliver innovative employed-status programmes such as engineers of the future. My local college, Adam Smith College, is involved in that programme in partnership with Forth Valley College and Heriot-Watt University. As we heard, colleges also deliver critical sections of modern apprenticeships, and at present they are keeping in training modern apprentices who have lost their jobs. That relates to Margaret Smith's point. In 2007-08, more than 16,200 students were registered with colleges for training that supported modern apprenticeship, skillseeker or new deal programmes.

Colleges have proven their ability to respond rapidly, strategically and locally to the recession. They have risen to the challenge by helping redundant apprentices to continue their studies, as I said, and they make a significant contribution to the national partnership action for continuing employment by providing the highly skilled workforce that is required. However, I say to the minister that colleges are struggling. The sector has faced mounting pressure over the past 18 months. It has experienced a significant shortfall in bursary funding as well as a sharp increase in the number of applicants, as we heard today. We need to take on board the fact that they also have improved retention rates. We want that, but it is putting pressure on the service. Adam Smith College, which serves the whole of central Fife, received £424,000 in extra funding, but it needed £790,000 just for the provision of bursaries. The Scottish Government must help and must show commitment to the colleges if we are to move forward.

Keith Brown: I take on board the point about support for colleges, but will Marilyn Livingstone acknowledge that, as well as the additional money for student support, which increased by about 9 per cent in the past year, we provided Adam Smith College with revenue support for course provision and capital investment in the new part of the college, which I visited last week? We provided more than £1.5 million to make that happen, which was added to the well-husbanded resources of the college itself. An awful lot of support is going in over and above student support.

Marilyn Livingstone: I accept that. I would not detract from the additional funding or the commitment to Scotland's colleges. What I am saying is that they are now struggling. If we are truly committed to allowing those who need to learn to do so, we need to do more. Adam Smith College has had a new build through funding from the previous Administration and is hoping to develop, particularly to meet the needs of the new energy sectors. I hope that support for that will be forthcoming.

We need a joined-up approach across the sector. If a skills strategy is to work, Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and Scottish Government targets must work in synergy, and I can give the minister a perfect example of where that is not happening. As convener of the cross-party group on construction, I have been made aware of Scottish funding council proposals to cut funding for architecture, the built environment and planning courses in the universities and colleges from £6,400 to £5,000 per student, a reduction of 22 per cent. The construction sector has told me that such a move will make graduate training unsustainable and one can well imagine the impact that that will have on our targets for climate change, housing and, in particular, planning. The one barrier that has been highlighted in all the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's inquiries has been planning and the lack of planners. What will we do to address that? We will cut funding by 22 per cent. Everyone in the chamber wants to support our economy, but such proposals fly in the face of that aim. The Government should consider refreshing the strategy to bring together synergies and ensure that it and its agencies work together for the good of the Scottish economy and the Scottish people.

There needs to be more discussion with skills sector councils, which can play an important role, the trade union movement and industry. As I said, only a joined-up and holistic approach will provide a solution, and I hope that the minister will be able to support the Labour Party amendment at decision time.

15:56

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I am pleased to make a brief contribution to this important debate on Scotland's future skills strategy. The chamber is unanimous in its view of the importance of skills to the Scottish economy's long-term development and the need for a skills strategy that sets Scotland up to take advantage of future opportunities. However, we lack that very strategy and any clear direction to ensure that it is put in place.

There are huge opportunities in Scotland's energy sector in, for example, the development of our offshore wind, wave and tidal energy potential. We also need to deal with Scotland's appalling and abysmal record on house insulation, and jobs could be created now to carry out the necessary retrofitting. However, the skills need to be in place. Such issues have been missed in the debate so far, but they must be addressed.

I also find it rather odd that we have spent an hour debating the skills strategy without anyone mentioning Skills Development Scotland's corporate plan, which was published this week. *[Interruption.]* I apologise—David Whitton mentioned it. However, one would think that it would be the focus of the debate. The fact that it is not perhaps says a lot about Skills Development Scotland, which, I am afraid to say, does not appear to be focused clearly on ensuring that a skills strategy is in place to support Scotland's economic future. Its plan might well refer to the key sectors of the creative industries, financial and business services, energy, food and drink, tourism, life sciences and universities, but it does not make clear how it will find and fill the gaps in skills that need to be filled. We need to start to address some of those key issues and I hope that the minister will give us a clearer idea of how we ensure that Scotland is skilled for the future.

My primary focus in this speech is the potential lost generation, which members have already mentioned. It is of course important that we learn from the past. If we consider previous recessions—

David Whitton: Just before the member develops his point, I should point out that when I talked about Skills Development Scotland's corporate plan—I am sorry that he did not hear me—I highlighted its three main priority areas: children aged 12 to 19; adults over 20 without any skills; and adults over 20 who are looking to develop their skills. Does he agree that those areas are worth prioritising?

Iain Smith: It seems reasonably sensible that Skills Development Scotland's priority should be to develop skills.

My concern is that the pattern of recessions—I am not saying that anyone is particularly to blame for that pattern—means that we will potentially have a lost generation. It is a pattern that I have seen. I had the misfortune to graduate from university during the recession of the early 1980s, when there was a bulge in the number of young people who came out of schools, colleges, apprenticeships and universities with no job prospects. We should be learning from that to ensure that this recession does not also result in a lost generation, and we should do what we can to assist those people. That is why it is important that we address issues such as college place funding. I have been in correspondence with the Scottish funding council and the minister. At question time I asked about funding for my local college, Elmwood College, which has taken on 15 per cent more full-time students this year without receiving an extra penny of funding. As a result, the college has had to spread its teaching resources much more thinly, and it has decided to cut bursary awards to 90 per cent of the full award so that students are subsidising the additional places. Surely that is not acceptable; we must address that issue.

When I asked the funding council why Elmwood College, uniquely in Fife, had missed out, I was told that it was because it did not meet certain criteria that the funding council has put in place. It gives extra investment to colleges that serve more than 10 per cent of activity in a local authority area. Small rural colleges tend not to do that, so there is a bias built in to the system against rural colleges. I am pleased that, in answer to my question, the minister indicated that the Government is considering the issue of rural colleges. It is important to ensure that, just because someone lives in a rural area, they do not face the multiple disadvantages that can be faced in rural areas, such as having no access to college places or the other facilities that are available in urban areas, such as transport. Lack of those things can leave people in rural communities seriously isolated if they are unemployed.

Keith Brown: I would like to give some clarity to Iain Smith's point. The allocation of the consequential money was given to the funding council and it was asked to prioritise its onward distribution to the places that have been hardest hit by the recession. That money was for that purpose and future allocations will not necessarily follow that pattern.

Iain Smith: I understand that point, but the way in which the money was allocated had a built-in bias against rural colleges. Elmwood College is in an area that qualifies under the 10 per cent unemployment criteria, but it did not qualify under the arbitrary rule that it has to serve 10 per cent of students in the college's area. That rule

disadvantages smaller rural colleges for no reason.

When the minister is concluding, could he give us a bit more information about why Scottish Enterprise has decided to discontinue the graduates for business scheme? When he answered the question about that this afternoon, the First Minister suggested that it was the result of an evaluation that was carried out for Scottish Enterprise. I have a copy of that evaluation in my hand and it is dated October 2008, so it is not as if Scottish Enterprise suddenly discovered that the scheme was not working. The evaluation says that the scheme should continue. It suggests that there should be some improvements, particularly in the geographic spread, but it says that it should not be dismantled.

It is important to address the issue of graduate skills. Graduates need work experience but, although many of them are graduating with appropriate qualifications, they cannot get that experience because the jobs are not there. A scheme such as the graduates for business scheme allows them to get that experience and get themselves on to the job market. There is a scheme in Ireland that is very effective at placing graduate interns, and that helps them to get employment and get on to the ladder. There is a serious danger that we will end up with a generation that has left university and cannot get a job or experience, so when the economy picks up, the next generation of graduates will get those jobs and opportunities, not those who are missing out at the moment. I hope that the minister will address that point and give us a proper answer to the question why the graduates for business scheme has been abandoned.

16:04

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am interested in how the communication between all the partners in the process of developing skills has been working. I am also interested to see what progress has been made. It seems to be recognised all around the chamber that after all the upheavals that there were during the creation of Skills Development Scotland, there has been a quite remarkable increase in its activity and work.

The report from Willy Roe shows an increase in the number of modern apprenticeships by more than 70 per cent during the operational year 2009-10, and an increase in individual learning account 200 Scotland learners by 41 per cent. It also mentions partnership action for continuing employment's involvement with 16,331 individuals in that same year. That is part of our attempts to tackle skills development at a time of grave difficulty.

One or two members have mentioned the distancing of skills development from the jobs that are available. The Tory amendment refers to meeting employers' needs, but it is essential to understand that that is only one aspect of what Skills Development Scotland must do. The organisation must work out exactly what the opportunities are in industries to which employers might sign up in due course.

A good example of that is in the work of the Scottish funding council's renewable energy skills group, which has produced a work plan that aligns with the Scottish Government's renewables action plan. Christopher Harvie talked about the potential of renewables. In various parts of the country, it will be essential for people in colleges and so on who develop skills to understand what skills will be required.

I will give a brief anecdote. About 30 years ago, when I was a guidance teacher, we expected the establishment of a chemical processing factory on ground near Nigg in Easter Ross and we discussed with the company involved and with agencies what relevant skills youngsters should develop in schools. The factory did not come about, but the point is that Skills Development Scotland needs to start with schools in having a view of the economy as a whole and aiming at industries that are likely to expand and to require apprentices.

Members, including Margaret Smith, have said that the house building industry has had some problems, but the number of schools, hospitals, roads and railways that are being built means that large parts of the civil engineering industry have been employing and increasingly using our workforce. Throughout the recession, Scottish Water's programmes have not stopped. Scottish Water uses 40 per cent of the country's engineering capacity. Those people are being employed, so the picture is better when put in context with the other issue of who requires skills.

Margaret Smith: I could be churlish and mention the Scottish Futures Trust, but I will not do that. I focused on house construction, because house builders have really experienced the downturn. However, there are welcome signs that that might be about to change in some parts of Scotland.

Rob Gibson: Indeed. Many of us have been lobbied day and daily on the matter; at one point, those of us who are members of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee took evidence on it almost weekly.

Skills Development Scotland's creation involved a period of upheaval. However, at the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's meeting just yesterday, the Scottish Trades Union Congress

deputy general secretary, Stephen Boyd, said that, after the upheavals, Skills Development Scotland is now doing good and positive work. That recognises the reality that Skills Development Scotland is coming into its own.

As I was a careers guidance teacher and I have worked with the careers service, I deplore the fact that about five changes have been made to organisations to restructure that service in different parts of the country. Skills Development Scotland is only the most recent such change, but it has at last brought together the services involved and we should give it a fair wind—I believe that members across the Parliament have a will to do so.

I will concentrate on a couple of important issues that relate to redundancies and so on. Good evidence in the Slims Consulting report for the Federation of Small Businesses shows us that Skills Development Scotland is good at focusing on broad sectors in which skills need to be developed but that small businesses in which redundancies might be made were more difficult to handle. A recommendation of the report that we should endorse is that

“Business support services currently available to small and micro businesses should be reviewed.”

That is part of the refresh process; we will be able to see its development. That was one of four major recommendations in the Slims Consulting report. The key challenges that face small business are twofold: the ability to identify the skills development needs of its people and to help them to find new skills if it has to shed some of them, particularly at this time. I hope that the minister will take that on board.

We have put in place the most extensive and comprehensive skills and employability training in the UK. It may not all be working perfectly thus far, but the record of this Government in skills development and support for vocational training is second to none. We should build on that positive picture and recognise the ways in which it can be fine tuned.

16:10

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to be taking part in the debate. I welcome the consensus view of the chamber that, if we are to achieve economic recovery, skills must be at the heart of the discussion, for both businesses and individuals. Today, Labour is calling for the early publication of a refreshed skills strategy that acknowledges that we face greater challenges than ever before and that we must ensure that we have a responsive skills strategy that exploits fully the potential of Scotland and its people.

This week, we have seen reports that the UK has come out of recession, although we all recognise that the economy is still fragile. We must continue to invest in recovery, an essential part of which is investing in skills. Although unemployment across the UK has fallen, it has risen in some areas of Scotland and, while the unemployment rate in Scotland remains lower than that in the rest of the UK, the situation is concerning. I am sure that the minister appreciates how important it is for the Scottish Government to do all that it can to support jobs and to help people who lose their jobs to get back into employment.

Earlier this week, Jim Mather raised the important issue of credit to companies and welcomed the UK Government's announcement on the issue. That said, it is clear that the Scottish Government has a job still to do to ensure that the necessary resources are in place to deliver programmes such as training for work and get ready for work, as well as the modern apprenticeship schemes.

Like David Whitton, who highlighted the issue at First Minister's question time, I would welcome an assurance from the minister on a replacement for the graduates for business scheme. Graduates often seem to be seen as outside the skills debate, but they need to be as engaged in the lifelong learning agenda as everyone else is. They need to have access to upskilling opportunities. The UK Government has announced a new graduate guarantee under which any graduate who is unemployed after six months will have access to an internship, training or help to become self employed. I am interested in the minister's response on that and to hear the detail of the opportunities that the Scottish Government intends to offer graduates.

As Marilyn Livingstone outlined, colleges play a key role in the economic recovery. They have always been at the forefront of the delivery of new skills. They are ready to adopt innovative responses; being close to business, they can readily meet its demands. Ten years ago, the Scottish colleges biotechnology consortium was set up to develop a skilled workforce to support Scotland's emerging biotech sector. That is an example of forward-looking and responsive planning that delivers the skills that emerging businesses and sectors need. Again and again, colleges are seen to be at the forefront of new sectors such as renewables, as well as leading in the delivery of skills in more traditional sectors, such as the innovative engineers of the future programme, with which the minister is familiar. As the minister knows, the First Minister gave a warm response to the point that my colleague raised at First Minister's question time on the increased demand that colleges are experiencing and which is leading to some colleges having to reject

potential students. Will the minister ensure that any capacity in colleges includes investment in student support?

This week saw the publication of Save the Children's report "Severe Child Poverty in Scotland 2010" in which 95,000 children in Scotland were identified as living in severe poverty. Save the Children stated that the families of those children are £113 a week short of what they need to cover essentials such as bills, clothes and transport. It said that children in single parent households are three times as likely to live in severe poverty as those who live in two-parent households, and that more than two thirds of all children in severe poverty live in families where no adult works.

As part of its response, the Scottish Government has called for increased investment in and reform of the benefits and tax credits system. However, Save the Children made it clear that it is calling on the Scottish Government to do more to be part of the solution. It called on the Government to implement an extension of free child care for low-income parents, to give more support to parents who want to take up part-time work or undergo training, and to target support at those who live in severe poverty so that they can get help to get back to work.

That call is closely tied to the need for a refreshed skills strategy. I think that we all agree on the central importance of skills to the economy. We all want Scotland to compete at the high-skilled and knowledge-driven end of the economy, but we must ensure that we deliver access to those opportunities to everyone and that policies aimed at getting people into employment and reskilling opportunities reach the most difficult to reach in society.

The minister may have seen briefings that members have received from Carers Scotland, which highlighted the difficulties that unpaid carers experience in engaging with skills opportunities. It is important that we are mindful of equality issues when revisiting the skills strategy. We must consider how the learning, skills and employability infrastructure can more effectively support unpaid and young carers. We must ensure that, when developing practical initiatives, we recognise that one size does not fit all and that support that people need to develop their skills—more flexible delivery, increased child care or maximised access and support—is made available.

Barnardo's has also made a contribution to the debate, raising the concerns of disadvantaged young people. It is crucial that employment and training schemes meet the needs of young people who are furthest away from the labour market. There is a danger that those young people, often from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, will miss

out on employment opportunities. They may, therefore, become permanently excluded from the labour market before the age of 25 and develop into a lost generation. Real opportunities are offered by the third sector, the private sector and the public sector working together. As the Barnardo's examples illustrate, those opportunities achieve results in delivering on-going learning and equipping young people with skills that will lead them into work.

I hope that the minister will be mindful of the huge potential of his portfolio to contribute to tackling inequality, meeting the 2010 target on child poverty and getting Scotland back on track to meet the 2020 target of eradicating child poverty. Clearly, that is a greater challenge in an economic downturn, but a refreshed skills strategy that recognises its role in tackling poverty and disadvantage and ensures that opportunities reach out to all communities would be welcome.

We are in a different world from that of 2007, when the skills strategy was first published. Even then, there were concerns that it did not measure up to the task, but the economic challenges that we face now demand even greater focus, effort and—dare I say it?—resources if the strategy is to deliver what it needs to deliver.

16:17

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): I apologise for being unable to attend the opening part of the debate.

There is no doubt but that the future of Scotland depends on the skills that are taught today. It is not only the present that touches us, unlike the "cow'rin, tim'rous beastie" of Burns. If we are to cope with the "cranreuch cauld" of the world economy and to improve the grossly unequal society in which we live, we must be prepared. What better preparation can there be than a broad and solid education, which should include a set of skills with which to earn "barley-bree an paintit room"?

I am proud of our Government's record of investment in skills. Even in the face of budget cuts and recession, the Scottish Government remains committed to increasing spending on lifelong learning by £75.5 million in 2010-11. Scotland's colleges are due to receive an extra £45 million—an increase of more than 9.6 per cent in these difficult times. That is solid evidence of a commitment to education and skills.

The November 2007 target of 50,000 training opportunities was exceeded by 17,000 in 2007-08 and by nearly 20,000 in the following year. Those figures include flexible learning opportunities that were funded through individual learning accounts, as well as programmes such as modern

apprenticeships and training for work. In February 2009, the Government announced £16 million to provide an additional 7,800 apprenticeship places—a 73 per cent increase.

However impressive those achievements are, there is always room for improvement and vigilance. To illustrate that, recently I wrote to the Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning—the unfortunate individual who is sitting at the front of the chamber—to convey the concerns of my constituents regarding CITB-ConstructionSkills. Notably, they were concerned about the fact that the United Kingdom directors of the organisation had run up a large deficit through programmes in England and were taking on extra management-level staff. It was put to me that the UK directors were scapegoating junior employees, such as accountants who were reporting the situation.

Furthermore, I was told that there were plans to make more than 100 front-line staff redundant and that Scotland was expected to take a disproportionate number of those redundancies. My informants alleged the use of what might be described as unscrupulous strong-arm tactics to force people to take redundancy, and that the redundancies would result in Scottish staff having to look after 160 apprentices per head, while English staff look after fewer than 80 per head. I am pleased to say that the minister has met the Scottish director of ConstructionSkills to discuss the situation and has assured me that he will keep a close eye on developments. Nonetheless, it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity once more to underline my constituents' concerns and to strongly urge ministers to continue to monitor the situation. We cannot allow the very effective delivery by the dedicated staff of ConstructionSkills Scotland to be undermined by failures that are outwith their control.

More fundamentally, there is a malaise at the heart of UK society—namely the extreme and destructive inequality that has been highlighted by yesterday's announcement by the national equality panel that the gap between rich and poor is now worse than it was 40 years ago. That malaise can be partly attributed to the way in which we in the UK undervalue the skilled trades, which is corrosive to society in several ways.

Before I discuss that further, I should point out that what we call trades are in European countries generally valued as high-status professions. In Austria, membership of the Federal Economic Chamber is compulsory, so all businesses are represented. Craftspeople and tradespeople sit alongside bankers and economists, and they take pride in the quality and professionalism of their work.

John Park: Bill Wilson is worried about the lack of skills development over the past few years and

how that might contribute to the current economic climate in the UK. Will he acknowledge that the number of apprenticeship places has increased tenfold since 1997, not just UK-wide but here in Scotland?

Bill Wilson: Yes. I certainly recognise that the number of apprenticeship places has increased. That is important, but the point that I was making earlier related to my concerns that, if ConstructionSkills Scotland takes the financial hit that might have resulted from management decisions south of the border, it might affect training. It is fair to raise that point and to urge ministers to continue to monitor the situation.

Status and happiness tend to correlate with relative material wealth and relative pay. However, the top earners in our very unequal society are not as happy as they would be in a more equal society, even if they were earning a bit less. Inequality has been shown to correlate with both individual and societal ills, such as short lives, physical and mental ill health, violence, lack of productivity and substance abuse.

If there is a large gap between the earnings of the people we think of as professionals and those who practise trades, it will be bad in two ways. First, the associated inequality will have the consequences that I have outlined. Secondly, more people will aspire to join the professions and will look down on the trades. That tends to cause society generally to overvalue university qualifications relative to practical vocational qualifications.

Not everyone is equipped for a university degree. There must be equality of opportunity so that people from disadvantaged backgrounds have equal access on the basis of their potential. It is counterproductive to send out the message that someone who does not go to university is somehow a loser. Highly skilled and professional craftspeople see their skills not receiving the respect they deserve, which must diminish pride, motivation and recruitment.

Our economy cannot hope to compete in the world market without constant development and improvement of skills. However, let me make a personal plea and return to a point that I made at the outset about the need for a broad and solid education. Education is not simply about producing well-tuned cogs: it is about democracy and rounded individuals. For most of our history, the value of education was that it allowed the individual to understand, enjoy and challenge the world about him. A high-quality education system that produces balanced and confident individuals who are able to think for themselves is fundamental to democracy.

We must, indeed, work for a competitive and skilled-up Scotland and equip individuals for the modern industrial world, but the value of education is, and should be, so much more than that. Mark O'Neill, director of research at Culture and Sport Glasgow, wrote in a recent issue of the Scottish Association for Mental Health's magazine that research has shown that cultural participation is a matter of life and death.

Education should be about skills and employability, but it must also develop compassion, self-confidence and the ability to understand the complexity of our world.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): We come now to closing speeches. I have approximately seven minutes in hand, so members may by all means extend their contributions a little bit.

16:24

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Had I known that time would be so generous, I would have brought my spinning plates or juggling balls.

This has been an interesting and largely consensual debate.

Margaret Smith: It was until now.

Hugh O'Donnell: Yes, indeed.

I wish to focus on something that David Whitton and my colleague Iain Smith referred to: Skills Development Scotland and its corporate plan. To be fair, the plan is the closest thing that we have to a revised skills strategy, given that the Government's previous attempts at a strategy were rejected by the Parliament. I was a little perplexed by what seemed to be the coincidence of the corporate plan arriving in our e-mail inboxes at the same time as we saw in the *Business Bulletin* that this debate had been scheduled. Perhaps that says more about my cynicism about how things are done than it says about what happened.

As might be expected from a corporate plan for an organisation that cost £16 million to set up and which pays its chief executive in the order of £125,000 per year, the document is shiny and brimming with managementspeak, but there are one or two bits of vacuous technobabble. The plan has clearly been produced for its audience, but what is strange about it is that the ordinary reader cannot find out what is being done. That is a worry, which the minister needs to address.

The minister should perhaps also have a conversation with SDS about how much of the plan focuses on internet access and the use of digital media. Such an approach might be useful, but if that is the proposed way forward, then I am

concerned that we might lose the impact of direct, face-to-face contact with skills advisers that people are used to having—the careers staff whom we all used to see in school. It is ironic that much of the corporate plan focuses on use of the internet, when the old corporate plan does not appear on the SDS website.

Rob Gibson: I understand what it says in the corporate plan. However, a number of advisers are dealing with PACE issues, for example, through face-to-face contact. It is not a case of using one approach or the other. Does Mr O'Donnell agree that we are developing the use of the internet to help us and to add to the work that advisers do?

Hugh O'Donnell: I would accept that if it were the case that that work is adding to what advisers do, but I understand that SDS is moving careers advisers out of their positions to manage contracts with external providers. I am not convinced that we are using people's skills to the best advantage. Given that there have been wholesale exits of staff since SDS was established, there are serious questions about the skills set in the organisation.

The corporate plan does not give details about problems that have arisen for individuals and employers in our constituencies. Probably members of all parties have encountered issues such as the postcode lottery in training capacity and service provision, which causes major problems for apprentices who are looking for external providers and for employers who want to place people whom they have taken on.

There are major issues to do with how Skills Development Scotland communicates. To some extent, the issue ties in with what the Government does, because I understand that SDS was not advised—even privately—in advance of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's welcome announcement about the £1,000 payment to businesses that take on a new apprentice. As a consequence, employers who phoned SDS after the cabinet secretary's announcement to gain access to the payment were met with blank expressions from staff who knew nothing about it.

Keith Brown: First, I confirm that SDS was informed about the decision well before the announcement took place. On Hugh O'Donnell's point about the coincidence of the timing of this debate and the corporate plan, ministers had no role in the timing of the corporate plan, the decision on which was taken by SDS.

We are trying to ensure that SDS concentrates on activity that helps people back into work. In a much more benign economic environment, SDS would have considered its corporate plan, its forthcoming operational plan and its

communications plan, but it has had to concentrate on what needs to be done just now.

Hugh O'Donnell: I have to accept the minister's assurances on the timing. Far be it from me to suggest that the Government would do anything untoward in that regard.

SDS may have been advised of the announcement, but those who answered the telephones certainly were not. A number of employers have made that observation to me since the £1,000 for a new apprentice—which, in fairness, is welcome—was announced.

It is unfortunate that an organisation that is about delivering a range of important services that we and our constituents are entitled to expect does not seem to have its act together in many ways that have a direct impact on those who seek its services. The corporate plan says that it is about partnership working. The first part of that should be effective communication with all the partners, which include the Scottish Government. I ask the minister to give us some assurances that communication will be improved and that all the partners that are involved in SDS's work, which is vital for our country's continuing success and recovery, are on the same page and working to a joined-up agenda. It is clear to me that that is not entirely the case.

16:31

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): I will focus my speech on the second leg of the Scottish Conservative amendment, which

"calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that the system is more demand-led and that publicly funded training matches far more closely the needs of employers."

I will tackle that call in a specific way by focusing on one industry: tourism. It employs 200,000 people in Scotland and is worth about £4 billion to the Scottish economy. The reasons why I have selected that industry are that it is important in itself, I think that there is a prospect for Government action if I make my remarks specific instead of generic, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee made a detailed study of the industry about two years ago—I note that a number of members who were on the committee at the time are present—and, if we focus on a specific industry, we can use it as a model for other industries.

I accept that Keith Brown was not a minister at the time of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee inquiry, so remarks in which I am critical of Government responses do not apply personally to him. However, I urge him to take on board what I say and to pledge to examine some of the areas that I will ask him to examine.

When the committee examined the tourism industry, our adviser told us that there had been

"significant growth in supply-led training provision."

Evidence was given to us that there were more than 400 publicly funded tourism-related courses in Scotland alone, and that a tiny fraction of people who went through them ended up in the industry. The adviser told us about diminished practical training, which led to employer criticism of students' practical ability and competence when they got into the industry.

We had some remarkable evidence-taking sessions at which we heard from restaurant and café owners. One restaurant owner said:

"I have not been able to make any connection with the colleges in Scotland. On several occasions, I have tried to unravel the mysteries of how to get involved with those who teach in colleges and how I might get their best pupils to want to come and work for me, but that has proved difficult."—[*Official Report*, 20 February 2008; c 418.]

There appeared to us to be a total disconnection between the providers of training and the employers in the industry.

The committee's conclusions were agreed without division, so all the major parties agreed with the statements that I am about to go through. The committee said that skills and training in the tourism industry are

"an area where the current structure is patently failing to deliver. During the course of the ... inquiry, we were continually amazed at the number of examples of companies ... telling us about the problems they face in recruitment and retention, the mismatch between the skills they need and those offered by the graduates from our institutions and the confused state of affairs in terms of what is provided overall."

We also concluded that

"As a first step, the Committee believes that the Scottish Government should organise a review group consisting of leading industry specialists ... and chaired by one such figure. ... This review group should make recommendations to the Minister on the type and number of education, skills and training courses for the future. A starting principle for such a review is a wholesale rationalisation into a model that suits Scottish needs and has industry buy-in."

Those are fairly strong words from the committee. I repeat that there was total consensus, without division, on what ought to happen.

Rob Gibson: It seems to me that where engineering employers have had the biggest effect has been on the boards of colleges, where they have ensured that the courses match their needs. Have tourism employers done the same?

Gavin Brown: The simple answer is that right now I do not know, but I suspect that had that group been constituted as it ought to have been, we might well have had an answer to that question.

A group was set up—I repeat that Keith Brown was not a minister at the time—and it reported a year later. First, the group ignored the starting principle and reason for its existence; it referred to some of the conclusions of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's report, but it totally ignored the starting principle that a review was required for "wholesale rationalisation". There was no involvement whatever by the tourism minister. From what I can see in the group's report, there were no evidence sessions. It was chaired not by an industry specialist, but by the Scottish Government and the co-ordinator of the group was also from the Scottish Government. Most important, of the 22 people on the group, only three were from the tourism industry, so it was not an industry group. The rest of the members of the group were, of course, from national agencies, colleges and the Scottish Government.

The unhappy result at the end of the review and report was that the group concluded that the range of qualifications was not a problem, that the industry was broadly happy with what was going on and that, ultimately, no real change was required. So, an incredible piece of work was done by the industry and by the committee to pull all this together, but the Government's response concluded the complete opposite of what the entire industry and every member of every party on the committee had concluded.

I ask the minister to do several things. First, I challenge him to read the committee report—the relevant part of it; not the entire report—and the evidence that was given at that particular session. I also challenge him to read the Government task group report and, most important, to re-form the group so that it is constituted as it ought to have been. Keith Brown said at the start of the debate that none of us should be slow to react and that every public pound that is spent on skills and training must be appropriate and effective. I challenge him to make a start with the tourism industry and to back up those important words with action.

16:38

David Whitton: There is no doubt that we have had an interesting and informative debate. There is no doubt, either, that members of the Scottish Parliament who have attended the debate are concerned about the need to increase the skill levels of the Scottish workforce and to see the methods put in place to achieve that worthy aim.

The statistics show that we have a lot of very highly skilled individuals here in Scotland but, sadly, we also have a very large number who have no qualifications at all. That is not good for the nation's productivity; indeed, it is one of the main reasons why Scotland's productivity figures lag

behind other OECD countries. We also have a number of individuals who would like to be able to access skills training and a job, but, through no fault of their own, find barriers in the way because of personal circumstances or disability. I would like to mention them, too, as any skills strategy should be able to provide training for anyone who wants it, so that there is an equal choice and equal chance for anyone to improve themselves.

The briefing that we got from the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, which was mentioned by Christina McKelvie, highlighted the plight of Scotland's 660,000 unpaid carers—a number that includes 100,000 young carers. The trust argues very persuasively that those carers must not be left out when it comes to developing a skills strategy. I agree. I am sure that the minister was listening to that contribution.

Many carers try to keep working while undertaking their caring responsibilities—in the United Kingdom, nearly one in eight carers is in that position—but about a third of carers are not employed at all. Of those, more than half say that they would like to be able to take a job. I will not go through all the Princess Royal Trust for Carer's suggestions but, like Christina McKelvie, I commend to the minister its suggestion that the Government consider what Skills Development Scotland and other national bodies can do to maximise access and support for unpaid carers so that they can learn, gain skills and find or maintain employment.

The charity Rathbone—which may or may not be well-known to members—has outlets across Scotland that work with young people aged from 14 to 19 to help them to make positive choices about their future by providing, among other things, get ready for work training. When I visited the charity's premises in Glasgow, the very valid point was put to me that, although the extra investment in modern apprentice places is welcome, too many of our youngsters do not have the standard grades that are required to qualify for one of those places. As a charity, Rathbone relies on donations to maintain its operations and it reported to me that it has experienced some difficulties with funding.

As I said in my opening speech, we believe that support is also needed for training for work and get ready for work programmes. Every employer has a story to tell about young applicants with literacy, numeracy and communication difficulties, which act as a barrier to gaining a job. Organisations such as Rathbone that provide youngsters with those skills need some security of funding if they are to continue to provide those valuable services.

Hugh O'Donnell: I am well acquainted with the work of Rathbone, so I endorse David Whitton's

comments. Given that Rathbone also tries to address the needs of cared-for and looked-after children, does he agree that we must also not ignore that issue, given our various bad records as corporate parents across the country? Does he agree that those young people also need to be included in the skills strategy?

David Whitton: Indeed, I do. It remains a mystery to me—and to many others—why cared-for children do so badly in educational attainment. I cannot understand that and I think that an investigation into the issue is long overdue. Assistance needs to be given to those who find themselves in that unfortunate position.

It is important that we listen to the sector skills councils. I am delighted to see Jacqui Hepburn, who is chief executive of the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils, in the public gallery this afternoon.

Another visit that I made recently was to the Construction Skills facility at Inchinnan, where I watched scaffolders of various ages being put through their paces. Demolition and scaffolding are growth areas, but before any youngster is let loose on erecting scaffolding, he or she will spend six months on placement with an employer to get used to the equipment and to the language of the job. The job has a language of its own—only some of which can be repeated. After their placements, the trainees take their first course at Inchinnan before going back out on the job. A year later, they can return to increase their skill levels further and then go back to work. After another year, they can come back to do the advanced course, which involves being able to erect very complicated scaffolding safely and securely in difficult and awkward positions.

Such jobs tend to attract adult entrants, but that is where an element of unfairness kicks in. If the employee is under 19, the employer will receive £3,500 towards the training costs. If the employee is an adult, the amount is only £1,500. The sector skills council would like to see some fairness dropped into that. Given that we now have so many unemployed adults over 20 who would go into that kind of trade, that issue is worth looking at.

Other examples of excellence in construction skills exist throughout Scotland. Glasgow Caledonian University offers a construction management course—such courses are badly needed, according to the sector skills council—and is the UK's largest supporter of graduates studying environment-related courses. South Lanarkshire College has the UK's largest built environment department, which includes, I am told, a zero-carbon house that is fitted with all the latest energy-saving and insulation equipment. That is a 21st century facility for 21st century training.

However, we could do more. In Northern Ireland, for the past two years people have been able to study a higher national diploma in wind turbine technology. There is surely a lesson for us there.

Let me turn now to some of the speeches that we have heard in the debate. Gavin Brown mentioned the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's report on tourism, for which he and I formed part of the delegation that went to Vienna on a fact-finding visit. I was interested in Elizabeth Smith's remarks about pupils engaging in vocational education at an earlier age. In Vienna, we visited a hotel school, which pupils apply to join at the age of 14. If their application is accepted, they get the kind of training that is apparent in top-quality hotels and restaurants around the world.

Margaret Smith made a very valid point about ensuring that there is equality of treatment between the central belt and other parts of Scotland, and paid particular attention to jobseeker's allowance statistics.

As well as agreeing with Christina McKelvie's comments about the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, I found myself agreeing with her comments about the excellent work that the Scottish union learning fund is doing.

Christina McKelvie: That is a first.

David Whitton: It was a first for me.

John Park, who held the skills brief before I did, called on the Government to consider holding another summit like the successful apprentice summit, in which there would be more focus on skills and training and in which all providers would participate.

Christopher Harvie mentioned Tom Johnston, who is well known in Kirkintilloch where I live, and Marilyn Livingstone talked about the funding council's proposed cut in funding for courses in architecture, the built environment and planning, which could result in a reduction in the number of courses for town planners. As the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee has identified, there is a shortage of town planners that needs to be addressed.

I see that the Presiding Officer is indicating that I do not need to conclude, so I will use the extra material that I prepared. I would hate to leave out my colleague Claire Baker who, along with other members, asked about the graduates for business scheme. Earlier today, the First Minister told me that a new scheme is being launched—in June, I think he said. We would welcome some detail on that, plus any information about what is to happen to the seven people who run the scheme, who face redundancy. Ms Baker also highlighted the difficulties that some people whom Barnardo's trains have in accessing the get ready for work

programme. That is another issue that Skills Development Scotland could look into.

I mentioned the report on tourism, to which Gavin Brown referred, which suggested that Scotland could set up a hotel school and an investment bank purely for tourism, but perhaps those are ideas for another day.

I believe that it is always worth our while to debate and discuss the challenges that Scotland faces in providing our workforce with the skills that are needed to improve the country's productivity and grow our economy. A skilled workforce is a productive workforce. Even in a time of economic difficulty, companies should maintain their investment in training their workers. Lessons can be learned from companies such as Macphie of Glenbervie and Aviva, which I mentioned earlier.

The fact that, on this occasion, Labour has not lodged an amendment that attacks the Government does not mean that we agree with everything that the SNP is doing on skills. We do not. Indeed, we could argue that it is thanks to last year's Labour initiatives that the apprentice summit was held and other ideas such as adopt an apprentice have been introduced. As we say in our amendment, we would like to see a refreshed skills strategy that takes account of the situation that Scotland and its workforce face, and which is backed by the resources that are needed to provide the training places that will equip the employed and the unemployed with the skills that Scotland needs to drive its economy forward. That is why we will support the Government motion and the Tory amendment at decision time.

16:48

Keith Brown: I start by making the obvious point that it has been a good and constructive debate, in contrast to some of the previous debates on the subject. That means that, in general, we have a fairly good consensus on skills, which is important for one reason in particular. Over the past year, we have faced difficult times and we will continue to do so. It is because of the fact that we are in such serious circumstances that many people are struggling. People would not take it well if we were to knock lumps out of one another and make points for the sake of making points, so it is worth acknowledging the constructive manner in which the debate has been held.

The point has been made a number of times in the debate about everyone's desire not to have a lost generation, as has happened as a result of previous recessions. I point out that some of the problems that have been identified, not least by David Whitton, who spoke about people who are extremely hard to reach and bring into the jobs

market, arise from the recession of the early 1980s, which was one the worst. The people concerned may not even have been born then, but we are still dealing with the consequences of that generational change. Of course, that makes it harder to deal with the effects of the recession with which we are now dealing. We are dealing with inherited problems.

I will try to deal with as many of the points that have been made as possible; I apologise if I do not reach all of them.

Liz Smith talked about training being focused on employer needs. We support considerable business involvement in training design and delivery, and we work with sector skills councils in particular. I acknowledge the work that has been done on that by Jackie Hepburn—who is in the gallery—in particular. We work closely with sector skills councils on the design and promotion of modern apprenticeships and on other training programmes and qualifications. Last year, we held a business-led apprenticeship summit, which John Park mentioned, to ensure that we focused on additional opportunities in which business demand was greatest. We would be interested in a further summit this year—John Park mentioned that, too. I take on board his constructive suggestion about having an annual summit, which we will certainly consider. Obviously, that would involve a wider skills and training agenda than there was at the apprenticeship summit last year.

Liz Smith talked about a skills academy. We generally support the idea of a skills academy model if it adds value, avoids duplication and focuses on key areas, but that is not the same as supporting a skills academy in a physical building. That said, we support that model and the employer involvement that it implies.

Christina McKelvie, Claire Baker and David Whitton talked about carers and the representations that all members received relating to the debate. As part of an overall carers strategy, we are developing a young carers strategy for publication in the first half of this year. That strategy will consider young carers in transitions, including those who are seeking further skills development through further education, higher education or employment. It is also worth saying that we provided funding of £200,000 to the Princess Royal Trust for Carers for three young carer initiatives, including a skills development strand. I take on board the comments that were made. We generally support the idea of being as flexible as possible to ensure that we reach that otherwise hard-to-reach group, but the representations that we all received made it clear that some of the problems relate to the benefits system, which sometimes cuts across what we are trying to do.

John Park has made constructive suggestions on adult apprenticeships and being flexible to me and to the cabinet secretary, and we will consider them.

Marilyn Livingstone spoke about the number of architects and planners that we are producing and the money that is going towards that. The issue is quite complex. There are quite a lot of arguments behind the Scottish funding council's treatment of the matter. I am happy to go into more detail in writing to Marilyn Livingstone on why the funding council is doing certain things. If she is still unhappy, I will be happy to discuss the matter further with her.

We have heard what Iain Smith said about rural colleges a number of times before. I intervened to say that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning allocated the additional consequential money to the funding council with the agreement of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, and the funding council takes its own decisions. A number of rural colleges did not benefit from that, but, since then, I have had a number of discussions with individual principals of rural colleges, who have said that, although they did not benefit on that occasion, if the distribution had been done according to a formula, the amount that they would have received would not have made a substantial difference to what we are trying to achieve for economic recovery. At the time, it was about getting the biggest bang for our buck. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will consider each case on its merits in future if there are moneys to be distributed and that he will ensure that we get the best possible response from those moneys. There was no prejudice in any way against rural colleges; the intention was to deal with the areas of greatest need.

Iain Smith also mentioned the graduates for business scheme. That is not within my portfolio, but I am happy to say that, through the Scottish funding council, we are giving £3.5 million to support graduate skills and employability. That support focuses on work that is related to learning and training, enterprise, entrepreneurship and workforce development. Iain Smith will know that an alternative scheme is to come forward by the end of June, which will, I am told, result in an improved offer for graduates, not least because it will be applied more consistently throughout the country.

Claire Baker, who also mentioned the graduates for business scheme, spoke about student support, additional places in college and more investment in facilities. I agree with her points but, as I tried to make clear in my response to Marilyn Livingstone, we have done a great deal in that area already, although we are constrained by

having a fixed budget. Adam Smith College, which Claire Baker mentioned, has received additional money for places—the figure throughout the country was a 9 per cent increase—and additional money for student support. The college has also received an additional £1.6 million to help with a new facility, which several members mentioned. That will be fantastic, because it will bring the best possible facilities for training apprentices and people for the renewables demand that is coming. Additional support has been provided, but we must have regard to the overall budget in doing that. However, I take the points that Claire Baker made.

Hugh O'Donnell made several points about Skills Development Scotland. It is true that the corporate plan cannot provide every possible detail that he would like. That will be dealt with by the operational plan and the communications plan. However, I take on board his points about the call centre and I will speak to Skills Development Scotland about that. I reiterate that the focus for Skills Development Scotland had to be on taking the necessary action to get people into apprenticeships and training and back into jobs. In the body's first year, it would have been wrong for us to have pushed it too hard on documents such as the corporate plan.

Gavin Brown spoke about the tourism industry. I worked for many years in that industry and have an understanding of the problems that he highlighted. However, he will find—he probably knows this in any event—that one of the issues is that wages in the industry tend to be low, which perhaps has a big impact on retention. I take on board the points that he made and undertake to consider them, but it is worth saying that a great deal of work is going on throughout the country. For example, North Highland College has a superb facility in Dornoch that is coming to fruition. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. I am sorry, minister, but there is far too much conversation taking place. I want to hear the minister even if members do not.

Keith Brown: That facility in Dornoch takes into account the needs of catering staff and front-of-house staff, which is an area that perhaps has not been given as much emphasis in the past. It is all very well having fantastic chefs and providing great food, but the front-of-house staff have to be there to provide the service. I take on board Gavin Brown's points and I undertake to read the reports that he mentioned and consider the review group's discussions.

The debate has been constructive. The Labour amendment is very constructive—that tone has been mirrored in the debate—and we are happy to accept and support it. The same applies to the Conservative amendment, which reflects the point

that several members made about the importance of colleges and vocational training. We understand that point and a great deal of work is being done on the issue. We will continue that work and we are happy to accept and support the Conservative amendment.

We are in a serious situation for the country. We had a chance to reach unanimity and show the country that the Parliament is united on the need for a proper skills strategy. Therefore, it is unfortunate that we do not have unanimity because of the Liberal Democrats. Some of the points in their amendment are perfectly valid, particularly that on college places—Margaret Smith will know that we are considering the issue seriously—but there is a carping note. Margaret Smith has never said a truer sentence in her life when she said, “I could be churlish”. I agree with that. I ask the Liberal Democrats to try to ensure that the Parliament has a united approach. I ask them, even at this late stage, to withdraw their amendment, so that we can have that united approach.

I thank everyone for what has been a positive debate.

Equality Bill

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of legislative consent motion S3M-5586, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the Equality Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Equality Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 24 April 2009, to make provision within the legislative competence of the Parliament and to alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers in respect of the public sector duty to promote equality; the hearing of disability discrimination school education cases by the Additional Support Needs Tribunals for Scotland; the arrangements for educational endowments; the power to prescribe qualification authorities in relation to equality, transitional arrangements for single sex educational establishments; a duty on relevant public authorities in Scotland, when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise their functions, to have due regard to socio-economic disadvantage; and reasonable adjustments to common parts of buildings to suit the needs of disabled people who live in those buildings, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Nicola Sturgeon.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of legislative consent motion S3M-5587, in the name of John Swinney, on the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 20 July 2009, to alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers in respect of the civil service and to make provision within the legislative competence of the Parliament and to alter that legislative competence in respect of Convention rights proceedings brought under the Scotland Act 1998 should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*John Swinney.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Energy Bill

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of a further legislative consent motion, S3M-5585, also in the name of John Swinney, on the Energy Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the UK Energy Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 19 November 2009, relating to the disbursement of funds for any future Carbon Capture and Storage demonstration projects that will be the subject of assistance schemes (as they relate to environmental issues), so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*John Swinney.*]

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There are 10 questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S3M-5620.2, in the name of Jim Mather, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5620, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on the Scottish newspaper industry, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

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

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow)(Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North)(Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton)(Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife)(Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland)(Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central)(Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian)(Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians)(Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow)(LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland)(Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland)(Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland)(Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith)(Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth)(Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston)(Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East)(Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill)(Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland)(LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians)(Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale)(Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland)(Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire)(Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland)(Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart)(Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands)(Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian)(Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians)(Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow)(Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South)(Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland)(LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)(Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland)(Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen)(Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride)(Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok)(Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire)(Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy)(Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central)(Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians)(Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood)(Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn)(Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney)(LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston)(Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw)(Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands)(Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland)(LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands)(Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill)(Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde)(Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin)(Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie)(Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland)(Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland)(Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow)(Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries)(Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland)(LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South)(Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife)(Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands)(Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East)(Lab)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale)(LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine)(LD)
 Scott, John (Ayr)(Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland)(LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife)(Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston)(Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife)(Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife)(LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West)(LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South)(LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands)(Lab)

Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)(LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West)(LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts)(Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)(Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 48, Against 75, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5620.1, in the name of Ted Brocklebank, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5620, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on the Scottish newspaper industry, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)

McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)

Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 76, Against 48, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-5620, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on the Scottish newspaper industry, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Glen, Marlyn (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians) (Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 76, Against 48, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the important role played by local newspapers in Scotland; believes that, in the current economic climate, it is more important than ever to recognise the importance and value of community newspapers; notes that local newspapers provide a forum for expression that enables local people to deliberate on issues affecting their community; regrets that almost a year after the Glasgow Caledonian University seminar on 4 February 2009 on the newspaper industry, organised by the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism and involving newspaper proprietors, journalists, trade unionists and other stakeholders, there appears to have been little further dialogue between the Scottish Government and the sector; notes with concern the Scottish Government proposals to remove the legal requirement for local authorities to advertise public information notices in newspapers; believes that, if this proposal succeeds, it will deny the 38% of Scots who do not have internet access vital information currently available to them in newspapers, will create a democratic deficit and damage the local and national newspaper industry at a critical time; fears that a smaller newspaper industry will dilute quality journalism and training opportunities for young journalists, and calls on the Scottish Government to withdraw the draft Local Authority Public Information Notices (Electronic Publication) (Scotland) Order 2010.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5619.2, in the name of David Whitton, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5619, in the name of Keith Brown, on the skills strategy, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5619.1, in the name of Elizabeth Smith, which also seeks to amend motion S3M-5619, in the name of Keith Brown, on the skills strategy, as amended, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-5619.3, in the name of Margaret Smith, which seeks to amend motion S3M-5619, in the name of Keith Brown, on the skills strategy, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Brown, Robert (Glasgow)(LD)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland)(LD)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland)(LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney)(LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland)(LD)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland)(LD)

Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South)(LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale)(LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine)(LD)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland)(LD)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife)(LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West)(LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South)(LD)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)(LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West)(LD)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North)(SNP)
 Aitken, Bill (Glasgow)(Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North)(Lab)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles)(SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton)(Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife)(Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland)(Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central)(Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian)(Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians)(Con)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil)(SNP)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland)(Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland)(Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland)(SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland)(Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith)(Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun)(SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston)(SNP)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth)(Lab)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling)(SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth)(SNP)
 Curran, Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston)(Lab)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland)(SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow)(SNP)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East)(Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber)(SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland)(SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill)(Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West)(SNP)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians)(Lab)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North)(SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands)(SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale)(Lab)
 Glen, Marilyn (North East Scotland)(Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire)(Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland)(Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart)(Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland)(SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands)(Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian)(Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians)(Green)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife)(SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow)(Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South)(Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland)(SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians)(SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland)(SNP)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)(Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland)(Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen)(Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride)(Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow)(SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok)(Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire)(Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy)(Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray)(SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh)(SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central)(Lab)
 MacDonald, Margo (Lothians)(Ind)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood)(Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn)(Lab)

Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife)(SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute)(SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West)(SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland)(SNP)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston)(Lab)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South)(Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw)(Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands)(Con)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians)(SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland)(SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow)(SNP)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands)(Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill)(Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland)(SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde)(Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin)(Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie)(Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland)(Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland)(Con)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland)(SNP)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow)(Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries)(Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland)(SNP)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South)(Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife)(Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland)(SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands)(Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East)(Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East)(SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland)(SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Gordon)(SNP)
 Scott, John (Ayr)(Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife)(Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston)(Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife)(Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Lothians)(SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan)(SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands)(Lab)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Govan)(SNP)
 Swinney, John (North Tayside)(SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands)(SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland)(SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus)(SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow)(SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts)(Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)(Lab)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland)(SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland)(SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 15, Against 109, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-5619, in the name of Keith Brown, on the skills strategy, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of businesses and employees are critical elements of a successful skills strategy in helping tackle the challenges of the recession and the recovery and believes that the Scottish Government must maintain its focus on developing practical initiatives that help people and businesses with training for work, training in work and training from work to work and, to that end, calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward early publication of a refreshed Skills Strategy that takes account of the current economic climate and is backed by the resources necessary to provide appropriate places on

Training for Work and Get Ready for Work programmes and the wide range of modern apprentice schemes; believes that pupils in secondary schools who wish to do so should have the opportunity to pursue formal vocational training, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that the system is more demand-led and that publicly funded training matches far more closely the needs of employers.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-5586, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the Equality Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Equality Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 24 April 2009, to make provision within the legislative competence of the Parliament and to alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers in respect of the public sector duty to promote equality; the hearing of disability discrimination school education cases by the Additional Support Needs Tribunals for Scotland; the arrangements for educational endowments; the power to prescribe qualification authorities in relation to equality, transitional arrangements for single sex educational establishments; a duty on relevant public authorities in Scotland, when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise their functions, to have due regard to socio-economic disadvantage; and reasonable adjustments to common parts of buildings to suit the needs of disabled people who live in those buildings, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-5587, in the name of John Swinney, on the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill, which is UK legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 20 July 2009, to alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers in respect of the civil service and to make provision within the legislative competence of the Parliament and to alter that legislative competence in respect of Convention rights proceedings brought under the Scotland Act 1998 should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-5585, in the name of John Swinney, on the Energy Bill, which is UK legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the UK Energy Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 19 November 2009, relating to the disbursement of funds for any future Carbon Capture and Storage demonstration projects that will be the subject of assistance schemes (as they relate to environmental issues), so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Supported Workplaces

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-5547, in the name of Richard Baker, on supporting Scotland's supported workplaces. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the fundamental importance of supported employment of disabled people in Scotland; notes the challenges faced by supported businesses as they look to secure a long-term future; notes, in particular, efforts to establish a long-term, sustainable enterprise in Aberdeen to carry on the excellent reputation and achievements of the Glencraft factory, which sadly closed in November 2009 after over 150 years of operation, resulting in 52 workers losing their jobs before Christmas; pays tribute to the tenacity shown by the former workforce of Glencraft and Community Union, which have campaigned tirelessly, with the support of thousands of people locally, to see Glencraft re-open and restore sustainable employment for the workforce; congratulates local businesses for helping develop a sustainable enterprise in Aberdeen, while recognising the crucial role to be played by the Scottish Government, local authorities and appropriate agencies in ensuring that any supported business is sustainable, and would welcome greater awareness and use of Article 19 of the EU public procurement directive, which allows public sector contracts to be reserved for workplaces where more than 50% of the workforce is disabled, to ensure procurement through supported businesses wherever possible.

17:06

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): Scotland has a proud history of providing supported employment. Tonight's debate is about how we can ensure that supported employment has a bright future. If, in the 19th century, we could offer employment opportunities to the blind and disabled, we must continue to do so today, in 21st century Scotland.

I welcome to the Scottish Parliament workers from Blindcraft in Edinburgh, Dovetail Enterprises in Dundee, Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft Industries, and Glencraft in Aberdeen. I thank them for being here and I thank their trade union, Community, which has done so much on their behalf—Joe Mann, the deputy general secretary, is also here tonight. [Applause.]

Along with Lewis Macdonald and our local MPs Anne Begg and Frank Doran, I was with the workers at the Glencraft factory on 13 November when the doors were closed. It was a traumatic time after all the efforts that the workers had made to turn their business around and keep their jobs. There had been a workshop for the blind in Aberdeen since 1843, as a result of a bequest by two local women. The decision by the administration of Aberdeen City Council to

withdraw funding and thereby to precipitate the factory's closure dismayed not just the workers but everyone in the city and the north-east. Families and businesses had supported Glencraft over the years by buying their beds and mattresses there, given its excellent reputation for workmanship. They have backed the Glencraft workers: thousands have signed the petition calling for the factory to be saved. What has been particularly inspiring to me is how the Glencraft workers have responded and fought for their factory. They have had an agonising Christmas not knowing what the future holds, but they have campaigned hard to save Glencraft by coming to Parliament in December to bring their petition to the party leaders and to the First Minister.

The issue has been politically contentious in Aberdeen, but I emphasise that members from across the political spectrum have supported the motion—for which I thank them—because we all want to move forward and to have sustainable supported workplaces. Despite the closure of Glencraft and the real challenges faced by Dovetail in Dundee and Blindcraft in Edinburgh, we must realise that there are great opportunities for supported workplaces. Local authorities in those areas must realise that, too. The intervention of the business community in Aberdeen in looking to create a new sustainable social enterprise from the old Glencraft justifies the confidence that there can be a successful future for such workplaces.

There is still much to be done in taking forward the planned successor to Glencraft. We await clarity on how the business model will work, how local and national Government will support it, and how many of the Glencraft workers will be employed. However, there is an important ray of hope.

I hope that the involvement of Bob Keiller and Duncan Skinner of Production Services Network will help make the venture a success, and that Aberdeen City Council backs their ambition by confirming a rent waiver for the new factory, as has been indicated.

However, we cannot always ask business to step in, and there needs to be leadership from the Scottish Government to support supported workplaces. Iain Gray has called for a Scottish Government champion for disabled workers; I hope that the Scottish Government gives that proposal serious consideration. Community has campaigned for such a champion to ensure that officials involved in public procurement apply article 19 of the European Union public services directive.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Richard Baker makes an important point about article 19 of the directive, which allows public

sector contracts to be reserved for workforces where more than 50 per cent of the workers have a disability. Does he share my view that supported workforces such as that of Highland Blindcraft in Inverness are looking for a hand up rather than a handout and that, by using article 19, local authorities throughout Scotland can allow supported workplaces to trade out of their financial difficulties?

Richard Baker: I agree. Article 19 states clearly:

“Member States may reserve the right to participate in public contract award procedures to sheltered workshops or provide for such contracts to be performed in the context of sheltered employment programmes where most of the employees concerned are”

disabled persons. As David Stewart says, there is massive potential for use of that directive, which was implemented in Scottish law in 2006. There is not enough awareness among local authorities of that.

When I wrote to Aberdeen City Council to ask whether it had ever made use of article 19 in procurement, it replied that it was not aware of the article having been used. It then stated that it had not been asked to use it. I am pretty sure that it has been asked to do that locally, but its reply shows the need for the Scottish Government to promote the use of article 19 by Scotland's public agencies and local authorities. That would not only help supported workplaces but be of great value to Remploy workplaces. My colleague Helen Eadie, in particular, has worked on Remploy issues.

As David Stewart says, the ambition at supported workplaces is not simply to continue on the basis of subsidy but to be able to win contracts for work. There is evidence of the success that can be achieved in Scotland at Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft, which has been greatly supported by local agencies and businesses, and of course by local councils. When Glasgow City Council formed City Building from its former building services department, a link was established with Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft that sees major contracts for work going to the organisation. That enables it to employ 250 employees, more than half of whom are disabled, and to offer a wide range of furniture products. City Building's website highlights its reserved contracts and the use of article 19.

Glencraft's experience is evidence that this has been—and indeed still is—a difficult time for our supported workplaces, but with the right support and through the promotion and use of article 19, in which I believe the Scottish Government can play a leading role, more organisations can benefit from the high-quality products of the factories and their workers can be given the opportunity that they seek to work. Every day, the workers overcome obstacles in their lives to achieve that

goal. They do not deserve to have further barriers put in their way. They richly deserve greater support from all of us. I look forward to hearing from the minister what the Scottish Government can do to help to ensure that supported workplaces in Scotland have not only a rich history but a confident future. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I point out that our procedures do not permit interventions from the gallery, which includes applause, I am afraid.

We move to the open debate. Members have an absolute limit of four minutes, given the number of people who wish to contribute.

17:13

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Richard Baker on securing this evening's debate and welcome the Glencraft workers to the public gallery.

The problems of Glencraft in Aberdeen are not new. Since 2000, various councils have been grappling with the problem of grants and subsidies to Glencraft. Because of the straitened times in which we live, and especially the straitened times in which Aberdeen City Council found itself in recent years, the massive subsidies to Glencraft became unsustainable. The annual subsidy of £470,000 from Aberdeen City Council was reduced to £300,000 in 2008-09 with the aim that it would subsequently end completely. The council did purchase and lease back Glencraft's factory in late 2008 at a cost of £1.7 million, but unfortunately Glencraft could not find a way in which to operate without subsidy, so the board decided to put the company into administration before Christmas, which was much regretted by everybody involved.

The company's debts were more than £3 million, which comprised a £2 million share of Aberdeen City Council's pension fund deficit, £400,000 in redundancy packages, £430,000 in Department for Work and Pensions grants that had to be repaid and £330,000 for creditors and suppliers. It was unusual for a local council to have such financial involvement in a business.

Labour is all over the place on the issue. Over the years, the United Kingdom Government has wanted to get rid of supported workplaces. Indeed, some years ago, we were all involved in trying to keep the Rempoy factory in Aberdeen open, a campaign which, I have to say, was successful.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Does the member accept that the Rempoy factory is open because of a decision by the Labour Government that was welcomed by all parties at the time?

Maureen Watt: As I said, we were successful in securing the future of the Rempoy factory in Aberdeen, although the same cannot be said of Rempoy factories in the rest of the UK, very many of which were closed. Aberdeen was saved—and rightly so—but the fact is that the UK Government's long-term aim is to reduce the number of supported workplaces.

The Parliament should pay tribute to the Scottish Government, the First Minister, Aberdeen City Council, business and the local community on progressing matters and allowing us to see a future for Glencraft. We should also pay tribute to the willingness of Bob Keiller and Duncan Skinner of PSN to get involved and help to provide a future for such an important supported workplace in Aberdeen.

Like Richard Baker, I hope that article 19 of the public sector procurement directive will be considered in more detail. However, we must also ensure that Aberdeen City Council and its council tax payers get best value. I am sure that PSN's expertise and assistance will be invaluable in helping Glencraft to become profitable and to secure its long-term future, and I hope that everyone in the chamber will congratulate Aberdeen City Council on agreeing this afternoon not to charge Glencraft rent this year at a cost of £225,000—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member must conclude.

Maureen Watt: That will go a long way towards securing the company's future.

17:17

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): A number of years ago, when Labour was preparing for the 1997 election in the hope of forming the next Westminster Government, I had the good fortune to work with the then shadow disability minister Tom Clarke MP on our party's manifesto for disabled people and employment. At the time, some said that the Government had to choose between supporting sheltered employment and assisting access to mainstream jobs for disabled people. Tom Clarke rejected that view and concluded that, given the wide range and variety of disabilities that such workers had to face, we should support disabled workers in specialised workplaces and in the wider labour market. That approach remains the right one.

On 31 May 2007, in my first oral question to Jim Mather after he took ministerial office, I asked him to meet management and unions at Rempoy to discuss what the Scottish Government could do to help the factories in Aberdeen and elsewhere to achieve a sustainable future as supported employment providers. I was delighted that the

minister agreed not only to meet me but to involve management and unions in discussions on promoting the use of article 19 of the public sector procurement directive across Scotland. That approach was helpful; indeed, the commitments that John Swinney gave to Helen Eadie last year showed that the exercise was worth while, in particular the objective that

“every public body should aim to have at least one contract with a supported factory or business.”—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 24 April 2009; S3W-22484.]

However, we must go beyond setting aims and objectives to achieving that result.

That is where we need a Government champion for disabled workers, who would ensure that public bodies deliver on the objective that they have been set. I am delighted that the Scottish Parliament has been the first body in Scotland to place a contract under article 19, but it must not be the last. Agreeing that the use of article 19 is desirable is a vital first step, but it is the Government's job to ensure that it is delivered.

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): I am sure that Lewis Macdonald agrees that the Remploy workers in Wishaw have, like Remploy workers across the whole country, responded well to the difficult choices that the management has had to make in recent years and that they are still determined to make a success of the company and its production. Does he agree that one way in which action by public agencies in Scotland could be encouraged would be to name and shame the councils and other public bodies that are not using article 19? Perhaps the Scottish Government could take that suggestion on board.

Lewis Macdonald: It is a positive suggestion, and I hope that the minister will respond to it.

The minister has made the right noises about social enterprises, but sadly those noises have not always been matched by the right outcomes. The minister will recall the case of aye can in Aberdeen, in which he intervened at the point at which the council threatened it with closure and he looked to create a social enterprise to give that supported employment provider a future. Sadly that did not happen and, as we look at the case of Glencraft, it is important that we do not see the same disappointment of the hopes that have been raised by support from central and local government for the creation of a Glencraft 2. Ministers have encouraged the workforce so far, and they must stick with the project until it is up and running. If they do so, they can help to make a difference.

I began by mentioning Aberdeen Remploy in my constituency. That factory is now leading the way in the Remploy brand in piloting a social enterprise model. It is doing so with the full support of United

Kingdom ministers and in tandem with plans for a recruitment branch to get disabled people into mainstream employment. As Tom Clarke recognised, that twin-track approach is the right way forward. I hope that ministers will also give it their practical support in word and deed, so that places such as Glencraft and Remploy can continue to serve a useful function into the future.

17:21

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I, too, congratulate Richard Baker on securing the debate. I warmly welcome the representatives from Scotland's supported workplaces who are in the gallery this evening.

The need to provide meaningful work and to integrate people who have disabilities, learning difficulties or mental health problems into society and the economy of Scotland has never been significantly debated. I believe that much more could be done to expand that area through the development of new ventures or the expansion of existing projects.

As the briefing from the Scottish social enterprise coalition shows, the issue of supported environments is complex. People who are disadvantaged, for example through disability, will find it very difficult to secure meaningful employment. Supported work environments such as Glencraft and Remploy offer jobs to people who would simply not get a job elsewhere. They also offer a much higher level of meaningful employment than is available to that group of people in the conventional jobs market. People in such work feel safe, benefit from peer-group association and receive on-going support—all critical factors in ensuring social inclusion.

The campaign to reopen Glencraft through a new venture, Glencraft (Social Enterprise) Ltd, which will provide sustainable employment for the workforce, has been supported by many people in north-east Scotland, and I am pleased that, through joint working, it has been possible to find a positive solution. Specifically, it is important to note the painstaking work that has been done by Aberdeen City Council, Scottish Enterprise and the Aberdeen-based energy firm PSN. I also congratulate the council on its offer to allow the new venture to operate rent free for its first year. I wish all who are involved well in taking Glencraft forward and developing a viable future to sustain employment for as many staff as possible.

The north-east has many great social enterprise success stories, including Wood Recyclability near Pitmedden, which provides meaningful employment in a workshop environment for 45 adults with learning difficulties and minor physical disabilities, and the Bread Maker in Aberdeen,

which provides work and training for 27 adults with learning disabilities, supported by a staff of 13 people and a group of volunteers who give their time freely. I may say that the products of both enterprises give excellent value to their appreciative customers, as have the products made by Glencraft over many years.

The motion refers specifically to

“greater awareness and use of Article 19 of the EU public procurement directive, which allows public sector contracts to be reserved for workplaces where more than 50% of the workforce is disabled”.

I believe that that can be used to help to develop additional opportunities, and I hope that all public sector organisations, including the national health service, the Scottish Prison Service, local authorities, police forces and the Parliament, will investigate the opportunity to actively support such contracts while satisfying the criteria for best value, which is, of course, vital.

The recession has shown how vulnerable many businesses are—especially those that have a charitable or social enterprise element. In the recession, many have experienced a decrease in or loss of funding. The coming financial period will be difficult for many businesses, voluntary organisations and social enterprises. I hope that a sustainable Glencraft venture can be developed to employ as many former employees as possible.

I congratulate all those who are involved throughout Scotland in supporting the work of supported workplaces. I hope that the minister will tell Parliament what steps the Scottish Government is taking to assist the development of new ventures or the expansion of existing projects.

17:25

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I add my congratulations to Richard Baker. I also particularly congratulate the employees of sheltered workplaces and Community union representatives who are in the public gallery on forcing the issue on to the political agenda, confronting us as politicians and ensuring that action has been taken. They are to be commended for that tireless work, from which many people will benefit.

A danger is that such debates can sometimes be soft and involve kind words and expressions of concern—having heard Maureen Watt’s speech, I exclude her from that. In fact, the debate is tough and we should be obliged to confront it, because it is about real people and real discrimination. Government at every level is obliged to find solutions to that.

Unemployment levels among people with disabilities are a scandal. We are talking not about

doing people a favour but about meeting an obligation and entitling people to achieve their potential. We need to shift from simply expressing concern about the position in which people find themselves to finding ways of delivering. Maureen Watt gave us a load of explanations for why things could not be done. We should listen to people who have solutions, capacity and talents but who have been denied opportunities.

Sometimes, a false debate takes place about whether we are in favour of sheltered, supported workplaces or mainstreaming access to employment. Given the unemployment levels among people who are disabled, I understand why anxiety is felt about a shift to mainstreaming, because mainstream employers have fallen down on the matter, as has the public sector. The notion is also held that we can have only supported workplaces or mainstream employment, but it is possible to move from a supported workplace into a mainstream workplace—that is a huge opportunity for people.

I ask the Scottish Government to recognise in its mainstream thinking what it says about its obligation to people with disabilities. What does it say in its skills strategy? Such documents do not happen by accident. I am concerned that Scottish Enterprise as now recast has no responsibility for people and place. The consequence of that for disadvantaged groups and communities is evident, but that also applies to people with disabilities. Such strategies will not operate simply through the market; political will is required at every level.

The Government’s priority is the economy. We must show where people’s needs and entitlements are placed in the economic strategy. Equality must inform every Government priority. That is why I and others maintain the critical importance of having a champion for disabled workers at the table when an employment or economic strategy is discussed.

I congratulate Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft Industries in my city and City Building on embracing the notion of using the European legislation. RSBI has done critical groundbreaking work with young disabled people. It runs a yearly school vocational programme to provide more than 30 schoolchildren with special learning needs half a day’s training per week as part of their curriculum. At the end of the year’s training, they receive a Scottish vocational qualification. We cannot measure the confidence that that gives those young people and the opportunity for them to be role models for other people with disabilities in the issues that they face.

We are examining the challenge to us from the people in the gallery and in our communities about how we ensure not just value for money but value

for people. I urge the minister to take that challenge in his response.

17:29

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I, too, congratulate Richard Baker for securing tonight's debate on an important matter, and I pay tribute to the tenacity and resilience of the Glencraft workers. I am very pleased that the private sector has rallied round to help and that Aberdeen City Council will continue to lend support by offering a rent waiver for the next year.

Everyone has the right to work, and to do work that is meaningful and rewarding. It is therefore essential that meaningful training and work be provided for people who have disabilities or health conditions. Ideally, people should where possible be supported, through training and the gaining of practical work experience, to move into mainstream employment. That said, there will always be a role for supported workshops.

Alongside the more traditional large workshops, such as Remploy in Aberdeen and Dundee and Glencraft in my area, the north-east has a strong social enterprise sector. Many social enterprises provide meaningful work for people with disabilities. Off the top of my head, I can think of the following enterprises that are close to my constituency office: Benchmark in Ellon; Can-Do Community Recycling in Fraserburgh; Wood Recyclability in Pitmedden; Rosie's Cafe in Aberdeen; and—right next door to me in Inverurie—Fly Cup Catering, where I can pop in for a cuppa and a fine piece.

There are also many new and exciting initiatives such as the Bread Maker in Aberdeen, which Nanette Milne mentioned. The Bread Maker—this year's winner of the social enterprise Scotland award—is an artisan bakery and coffee house that provides meaningful work and training for adults with learning disabilities. It provides work for 27 apprentices who achieve shared goals in creating and selling a range of innovative top-quality hand-crafted bread, rolls and confectionery in a high-quality environment and providing them for sale in a warm and welcoming environment with the highest standards of customer service.

There are many more such examples in the north-east and across Scotland, all of which operate differently but all of which have the same aim: to provide a safe and supportive work environment for people who would otherwise struggle in the job market. That additional support is costly to provide for all those businesses, which makes them immediately less profitable. For some, the added difficulties of trading during a recession can be the last straw. We need to look at ways of supporting these valuable enterprises. I

am absolutely certain that the support that they provide is invaluable to our society. During the current recession, when job opportunities are scarce, it is particularly important to protect and develop those work opportunities.

I add my voice to the calls on the public sector to make greater use of article 19. If even a tiny percentage of public sector contracts were to be earmarked in that way, the result would be such a boost to the sustainability of social enterprises. The public sector could make its money work twice as hard. Surely that is something that we all want to happen. Both Remploy and the British Association for Supported Employment believe that that would deliver a clear community benefit.

As Social Enterprise Scotland outlined in its briefing,

"just as consumers are increasingly aware that they can achieve more for their money by investing ethically or purchasing fair trade products, so public bodies must engage in strategic procurement to add value to the communities they serve."

As John Lamont said:

"By examining 'value for people' rather than just value for money, they can achieve added value through purchasing decisions. By changing existing public spending practices and shifting the onus on to locally focussed businesses with wider social and environmental aims, longer term financial gains can be achieved."

John Swinney has stated that it is Scottish Government policy that

"every public body should aim to have at least one contract with a supported factory or business."

I am therefore disappointed that so little progress has been made. Only one contract has been let over the past two years under that provision. In his response to the debate, I ask the minister to say what he intends to do to ensure greater take-up of the article 19 provision. Will he advise how many local authority single outcome agreements mention such contracts and tell the chamber about any discussions that he has had with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the matter?

I would like to close with a few quotes—what better way in which to understand the value of supported work—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: One quote will have to do.

Alison McInnes: Only one quote? I will close there, Presiding Officer.

17:34

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I, too, welcome the debate and congratulate Richard Baker for achieving it. I also congratulate Richard Baker, Lewis Macdonald and others for the

support that they have given to the campaign. I know of the support that they have given to the Community union and others in taking forward the campaign.

As other members have said, because of the work that Community has done on behalf of its members, we are in no doubt about the importance of these jobs and the visibility of the campaign. As we have heard, Joe Mann, its deputy general secretary, is in the public gallery. We are assured of Community's support for the campaign—support that comes from the top of the organisation. Its work is being taken forward at Scotland level by John Paul McHugh and regional director Heather Meldrum. They are in the Parliament regularly, reminding us of our obligations and duties as MSPs.

I note the wider work that is being taken forward by the likes of Unite and GMB; I know that John Moist and Lyn Turner from those unions are here this afternoon. Significant work has been done across sheltered workplaces under the union learning agenda, as part of union learning fund projects. Unions play a unique role in helping workers who have been detached from learning opportunities and, perhaps, from workplace development opportunities, to engage in a way that they could never before have dreamed of. In the Parliament, we do not always acknowledge much of the work that goes on behind the scenes; it is right that we do so in this evening's debate.

Much has been said about community benefit clauses, especially article 19. Jack McConnell suggested that we name and shame local authorities that have not looked at article 19 with any seriousness. I have done a bit of work on the issue and have written to all local authorities to ask them about their use of community benefit clauses. The response has been patchy, at best. I have received responses from about 24 local authorities, so there are eight that we could name and shame straight away. The response has been positive in some cases. In the interests of government efficiency, I am more than happy to provide the minister with the information at the end of today's debate.

When things work and are done well, we need to do more of them. In Scotland, we spend £8 billion or £9 billion every year on goods and services. In the current economic climate, people will be asked not just what those goods and services deliver but how far they reach into their communities and workplaces and how far they make a difference to people's lives. Article 19 is a classic example of what we can do.

I have been lucky enough to visit RSBI and have seen first hand what can happen. This afternoon we had a debate on skills. Two big issues that were raised in that debate were vocational

opportunities for 14, 15 and 16-year-olds trying to get into the workplace and how we can expand apprenticeship opportunities. RSBI is doing that for disabled workers. It is going into schools and working with young people to ensure that they get opportunities in the workplace, and that progression into the workplace is normal for them. It is working with young people to ensure that they have apprenticeship opportunities and gain skills that will stay with them throughout their lives. There is much that we can learn from RSBI and sheltered workplaces more widely. I hope that the union campaign has cross-party support, not just this afternoon but when we leave the chamber and move on.

Finally, much has been said about having a champion for disabled workers. We undoubtedly need one. Perhaps the minister will consider raising the issue in the Cabinet at the next available opportunity. It would be fantastic if we could agree on that today and get an appropriate response from the Scottish Government. It is about releasing our people's potential. If we do not do that, Scotland will not be the country that we all want to see.

17:38

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie)
(Lab): I begin by declaring an interest. I am an unpaid member of the board of the Wise Group, an organisation that gets unemployed people into work. Like other members, I congratulate Richard Baker on securing the debate.

Understandably, in the context of what has happened to Glencraft, the debate has focused on the north-east, but it has a wider application throughout Scotland. Along with Trish Godman, I was a member of Strathclyde Regional Council, which in the 1990s had to face up to a similar situation affecting Blindcraft. The problem was the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering by the then Conservative Government, which took away the possibility that had existed in local government of giving disabled workshops a favoured status in the provision of bedding and other supplies, such as furniture, which Blindcraft provided. In Strathclyde, we managed to find a model that worked and continues to work. It was important that that model survived local government reorganisation because, having been sustained by Strathclyde, it had then to be sustained by other local authorities. I am proud of the process that has secured a long-term future for Blindcraft and other, similar organisations. Those organisations should not be treated simply as absorbers of grant funding. They can never compete on a fully commercial basis, but our obligation is to lift part of the playing field so that it is in effect made level for them—so that they can

operate as commercial organisations in a financial context that acknowledges the reality of the people whom they are trying to support.

We are not trying to get organisations such as Blindcraft and Glencraft to give us the lowest deliverable commercial price for their products; it is a combination of a good commercial price and the social benefit, which provides a way, in all conscience, to support disabled people in society. Like Lewis Macdonald, I pay tribute to Tom Clarke, the disability minister in the incoming Government in 1997, who made progress on many issues in this area and did a terrific job on behalf of disabled people.

Not every disabled person requires supported work. Many disabled people require personal support to allow them to get into the mainstream workforce, which is a positive thing that we should be doing, but there are some people with disabilities for whom that is not an option. For them, the best option is a supported workforce in which they can feel secure and can make a productive contribution. I have inherited a Remploy factory in my constituency that does just that, and it functions very well. However, the factory is always under pressure and under threat. People are always asking the same questions, such as, "Could we not get this cheaper from somewhere else?" They probably could get what the factory produces more cheaply somewhere else, if they use a purely commercial basis. That is not the sort of playing field that we should be on, however. We need to level the playing field up, acknowledging that people in supported workshops deserve a fair crack of the whip. We should ensure that their organisations can operate in a commercial context, but on a fair basis.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: At this point I am prepared to accept a motion without notice to extend business by up to half an hour in order to complete the debate.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Richard Baker.*]

Motion agreed to.

17:42

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Richard Baker on securing a debate on a very important issue. I welcome our visitors in the public gallery. As a lifelong trade unionist, I welcome the involvement of the Community union.

My first experience of Remploy was when I did business with it. In my first career, in the detergents industry, I bought production and packaging services from the organisation. At that point, I formed a strong and positive impression of

the business—albeit that that was somewhere south of here, as members will appreciate.

I agree with Johann Lamont that, across society, the level of employment of people who have disabilities is deplorable. We must acknowledge that. We can understand how we got here—I will come back to that—but it is not acceptable. As a society, and as leaders in society, we must do something about it.

We must also be clear that it is no good expecting private industry suddenly to come along and do all the right things, particularly in the present environment. That is unrealistic and will not happen. We need to look to other models. I am, therefore, delighted that there may be an opportunity for Glencraft with PSN in Aberdeen. I note this afternoon's decision of the finance and resources committee of Aberdeen City Council, which, as I understand it, is to do something about Glencraft's rent. That move goes very much in the right direction but, as the council has yet to set and complete its budget, we should perhaps hold our breaths.

I congratulate everybody who has got involved. The First Minister has been involved, and Aberdeen City Council has taken the issue very seriously, led by Sue Bruce.

I return briefly to the economic background. We must be careful not to point the finger in the wrong direction. As I understand it, Aberdeen City Council has been supporting this worthy and worthily supported organisation at a level of about £470,000 a year over many years—about £7 million over the past decade. We all know the difficulties that Aberdeen City Council is facing—I am not here to rehearse how we got here—but when there is pressure on the existing budget, never mind next year's, with no reserves worth speaking of, we have to take a long and hard look at what is being subsidised. It is no surprise that the council has had to change its position.

Richard Baker: I have tried to seek consensus during the debate, but I think that Nigel Don should acknowledge, as Des McNulty did, that political will is needed if the important organisations that we are talking about are to be supported.

Nigel Don: I thank the member for making that point.

In addition to what I said about the economic background, I point out that Aberdeen City Council has been subsidising—from the Scottish budget—an organisation whose work reduces the DWP benefits that are paid out by Westminster. This is not an argument about independence; it is simply a recognition that, given that the council is saving Westminster money that would otherwise be paid in benefits, we might ask whether Westminster

should provide—throughout the country—the subsidies that are required. I do not want to get lost in the numbers, but the sums involved turn out to be roughly the same. We should consider who benefits from Aberdeen City Council subsidising supported employment, and we should be prepared to return to the issue.

On article 19, experience has taught us that the issue is difficult. I read the report of a Westminster hall debate a couple of years ago, in which it was clear that the UK Government had thought that Remploy could be restructured and could take on article 19 work. However, that has not materialised. We must acknowledge that it will be difficult to make that happen.

17:46

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): I convey to Richard Baker members' appreciation for his securing the debate.

I declare an interest. Blindcraft has often had depots in north-east Glasgow, and when I was a young scavenger for various items for go-karts and bonfire night, staff were always helpful and ready to provide offcuts and fabric remnants. Members might remember the great story by Bill Naughton, "Spit Nolan", about a boy and his fantastic go-kart. The Blindcraft staff were so helpful to us in the early 1970s that I think that we almost matched Spit Nolan's achievements.

In the late 1990s, I was rewarded for my endeavours as a youngster. Along with Des McNulty and other members, I was involved with the reorganisation of local government and the new Glasgow City Council, and as leader of the council I was delighted to support a commitment to regenerate the process for supported workshops and to try to ensure that there was a partnership approach with the structure that predated City Building. Although the relationship was sometimes turbulent behind the scenes, it was worth while and the partnership has gone from strength to strength.

I mention that because the nub of the debate is how we engage political will and find practical solutions that use whatever legislation or framework exists. On the proposal to use article 19, I do not think that any member would demur. However, the issue is the reality of using article 19 when big budget decisions must be made, particularly in the current budgetary climate, in which local government's experience is similar to our experience in the reorganisation period.

It is important that organisations that run supported workshops are flexible—I think that they are. They also need to diversify, but they need help to do that. We must try to support them in that regard.

I hope that the minister will discuss with Cabinet colleagues the wonderful opportunity that the Commonwealth games present for the east end of Glasgow. A substantial amount of public money will be spent, alongside the injection of funds from the private sector. The aim is to build 1,500 new homes and a 120-bed care unit for the elderly. There will be other support facilities in the vicinity. With a bit of will, it strikes me that the minister could convene an action group of interested parties to explore options around supported working, as part of the discussions about the games legacy. The reality is that 2014 is only four years away. We need to do that work now if we are to maximise the benefits from the games. A targeted approach to training and development would also bring benefits. I am involved in that issue with local councillors in the context of the legacy document that Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Government have jointly supported.

If we want the games to have a successful legacy, as well as to be a successful showpiece event, we must ensure that young people have an opportunity to contribute through supported workplaces. Perhaps the jewel in the crown should be a commitment on that. If we are really serious about it, why should we not aim for the gold medal standard that 2014 can give us? Perhaps, if we have a champion now, we can be champions in 2014.

17:50

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate Richard Baker on securing the debate and thank the people who are in the public gallery for their hard work and involvement, particularly Community, the union that has supported the Glencraft workers through some difficult times.

I will raise a couple of questions about areas that do not have the kind of sheltered employment and supported workshops that have been successful elsewhere. I was interested to read through the list of the different locations where such facilities operate. I already knew that there were none in my constituency, but I had thought that there might be some in the wider area of the south-west. I say that so that the debate is not entirely focused on the north-east. The matter needs to be addressed strategically throughout Scotland. If there are approaches that work well, why not replicate them?

Let us examine the realities for people in situations and areas where such opportunities do not currently exist. My constituency office is based in Cumnock community college, where there is a project that is the legacy of something that the local authority started some time ago with the intention of providing employment opportunities for

people with learning disabilities. That project has now become the college's responsibility. The difficulty is that, because of its funding mechanisms, the college must show progression, but some of the people who are attending courses through the project have already been through the courses, and may go through them yet again, without the opportunity to move on to fulfilling, proper employment. I do not blame the college or the local authority for that, but the danger is that those people have been forgotten in the process. If that is happening in my constituency, I suspect that other people throughout Scotland are in exactly the same position. With the right support, they could take up employment opportunities and not be confined to repeating the same process over and over.

I have seen the benefits of a number of social enterprises throughout my constituency, including operations run by organisations such as May-Tag in South Ayrshire, which found it extremely difficult to secure on-going funding, Momentum Scotland and Rehab Scotland. Most recently, East Ayrshire Carers Centre opened Dalmellington house, a hotel that not only provides an opportunity for carers to get respite but is run as a social enterprise that provides good-quality training for young people in the hotel management and hospitality industry. We ought to support such innovative ideas.

I have a question for the minister, which other members have raised, on article 19. Jack McConnell has suggested naming and shaming the authorities that are not using article 19, and others have suggested at least identifying them. The issue with identifying them is that we have to monitor them and know which they are. What work is the minister doing on that? To follow up on Alison McInnes's point, what can the minister do to encourage not only local authorities but other public sector bodies to use article 19 and show that they have done it?

17:54

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I, too, add my congratulations to Richard Baker, Lewis Macdonald and John-Paul McHugh, the Community union and the members of Glencraft who are in the gallery. I also congratulate my colleague John Moist—I was a union official in the GMB for a number of years and have worked with him for many years—and Lyn Turner from Unite, who is also in the gallery.

What makes me angry is the fact that this issue has been going on for a long time. We had a debate in the Parliament in my name in 2007, just before the change in Government, when Allan Wilson was Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning. We also had petition PE1036, in

the name of John Moist, which called on the Parliament

"to urge the Scottish Executive, in partnership with Remploy and other sheltered workshop employers, to promote employment opportunities for disabled people by reserving local authority and/or government contracts to supported businesses, as permitted by EU Article 19 on Public Procurement."

The question is what the Government has done to address the issue. We must bear in mind the mammoth purchasing power that exists in the NHS and in many Government departments. It strikes me that, as has been said before, there is a need for nurses' uniforms, prison officers' uniforms, police uniforms and fire service uniforms. Why are some of those contracts not reserved? When the Government has money to spend, our political will must be directed towards ensuring that some of the contracts go to sheltered workshops. That is the nub of the argument.

People who are disabled are not asking for handouts or grants; they are asking for the dignity of taking home a wage packet at the end of the week. That is what they want above all and that is what they should be able to get. That is also why I have given a commitment, over the past 10 years, to work with John Moist and Lyn Turner of Unite and the Community official John Steele, who has just retired.

By not getting our act together, we have done a disservice to everyone who works in sheltered workshops across Scotland. It is no longer any good for the minister to say, "We have only just taken over." The SNP has been in government for three years. I have raised questions with the minister, he has had meetings with my colleagues John Moist and Lyn Turner and he has answered parliamentary questions. We want to know what the minister will do. Has he called a summit of public sector procurement management? Has he called a summit of his own officials, given them a clear and direct line and told them what he wants done? That is the job of a Government minister.

I was gobsmacked and angry—almost as angry as I was when I heard what Maureen Watt said—when I learned today that a civil servant had said in their response to a letter, "Well, is it really appropriate in these straitened times to be reserving contracts specially for disabled people?" This is all about attitude, education and training. The minister must ensure that his officials truly understand what article 19 of the European Union public procurement directive means. It does not wash with me that we have to keep coming back to the issue.

We are always keen to read about the discussions between COSLA and the Scottish Government. COSLA and the Scottish

Government produced a useful joint briefing on supported employment. Way back in 2007, they called for a strategy and a national framework, and asked for a working group to be developed and established by 2008

“with the aim of reporting by 2009/10”.

None of that has been done. The minister has to get a grip of the situation and he has to help disabled people throughout Scotland, not by giving them handouts but by giving them employment opportunities.

17:58

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): Some excellent speeches have been made. I congratulate Richard Baker on securing the debate. The fact that so many of us have stayed to listen and speak shows the interest that there is in this issue in the Parliament. The sentiment with which Helen Eadie finished is the one that we need to capture: it is about action.

I agree with Lewis Macdonald that people with disabilities need a range of employment choices. They also need a range of training opportunities, so that those employment choices can be a reality. Over the years, supported employment has been vital in giving people who have talent and skills a crack at getting a job when traditional industry would not have looked at them.

I can look around my constituency and see a host of social enterprises that are an important part of our economy and which provide a variety of opportunities for people. The Cyrenians organics recycling enterprise ticks every box in this Parliament: it provides work-based training for vulnerable people, who start off a long way away from the labour market and end up being capable of employment and getting decent jobs. Such an approach is more expensive. The enterprise takes on 50 trainees a year, but although it pulls in charitable money, there is a need for public sector cash to help. Other social enterprises in my constituency include the Engine Shed, the Garvald bakery and the Soap Company Ltd, whose shop is on the Royal Mile just up from the Parliament. They all provide high-quality goods and services and high-quality training and learning experiences for people, who can then move on.

Only this week, I heard of another fantastic social enterprise in my constituency that has been given a lifeline of an extra month. On 23 December, the staff were told that the place would shut the next day, but we have managed to get a stay of execution for a month. The social enterprise in question is a community cafe that trains up people with disabilities and gives them experience of cooking and serving. That

experience must be kept, so I hope that we are able to use that month's stay of execution.

There are pressures on budgets, but there is also a cost in getting rid of such supported employment and training opportunities. The cost is that the people involved will not get the chance to be economically active and to support their families. They will not get the chance of dignity. To pick up Nigel Don's point, the opportunity that we gain from keeping people in employment is that fewer people will need to take up benefit so more of that UK money will come through the Scottish Parliament. There is a win-win if we can just construct things correctly.

In Edinburgh, there are real concerns about Blindcraft, which was set up in 1763. There have been many economic crises since 1763, so surely we cannot let the current recession sound the death knell for that organisation. I understand that 63 per cent of those who work for Blindcraft are blind, registered blind or disabled. They do a proper job. They create products that people want to buy, such as beds and mattresses. We must be able to use article 19 of the EU public procurement directive to allow public sector procurement—in addition to private sector procurement—to give such companies the chance to compete and to market themselves. Ministers must have a role in that regard. Surely universities, prisons and other bodies issue public sector contracts for items such as beds and mattresses.

Like other colleagues who have asked specific questions, I am keen to hear from the minister what the Scottish Government is doing through its procurement policies. There is clearly a role for monitoring and supporting social enterprises by sending out a leadership message to local authorities. Ministers need to ensure that local authorities do everything that they can to make the money work by considering public benefit opportunities when they enter into best-value contracts. Ministers have a leadership role not only in the £33 billion to £36 billion that they spend in the taxpayer's name, but in the wider public procurement policy.

I hope that the interest in tonight's debate will send a clear, cross-party message that we would like to see action. Perhaps if we can have another debate in a few months, we will be able to hear that some positive action has been taken.

18:02

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): I congratulate Richard Baker on his balanced and comprehensive motion and for the speech with which he opened tonight's debate. I welcome the people from Glencraft, Blindcraft and other organisations who are in the

public gallery. I also welcome the first-class speeches that we have heard tonight. To respond to them all in seven minutes will be challenging—we could spend several hours on the issue, as there is a lot to go into.

The fundamental point for us is that our whole-hearted support for the third sector is absolutely central. We have given unprecedented support to the third sector, which has risen to the challenge by bringing much new thinking into the Scottish economy. That thinking has been translated into action in social enterprises in every town and village in Scotland. We are all aware of the excellent products from supported businesses such as Blindcraft, Remploy and Glencraft; many of us sleep in comfortable mattresses that are supplied by such firms. In the north-east in particular, many thousands of heads are laid on Glencraft products. Those products compete with the best of the market and are bought because of their quality.

This is the world of social enterprises: real businesses that do not distribute profit to shareholders but invest in social outcomes that include creating new life chances for people. Such businesses recognise that people with disabilities want to do real jobs as full members of the community.

I will pause there to respond to some of the excellent speeches that members have made. Perhaps the key points in Richard Baker's speech were about article 19 of the EU directive and the experience of Glasgow works, which we know is willing to help Glencraft. Richard Baker pointed out that article 19 is being used to win contracts, which is excellent. As members will know, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government are working specifically on article 19 and we are more generally working on public sector procurement reform. The public sector procurement advisory group is very much focused on that issue.

Jack McConnell made the point, in the lee of Lewis Macdonald's excellent recap of Tom Clarke's dual strategy—which I utterly endorse and think that it is a strategy that should instinctively be adopted in Scotland—that we could name and shame public bodies that do not use article 19. In the medium term, I am more inclined to prefer broadcasting what works, although I intend to follow up on John Park's kind offer of data that will enable us to move forward.

I was also taken by Johann Lamont's comment on the need for an evidence-led approach that involves looking at the data and putting a tangible case. I also completely buy Des McNulty's comment about a level playing field and the need to build a blend of commercial and social values.

Johann Lamont: Will the minister commit to the use of article 19 by, for example, saying that he will guarantee that in the Southern general hospital development, a number of the contracts will be reserved?

Jim Mather: We will look at every option. That is the message that I took from Frank McAveety, who made a point about the legacy from 2014. I am genuine when I say that we will look at every option. The debate has struck a chord.

A thought that Alison McInnes triggered in my mind is that, at this moment in time, we have a key opportunity, given the additional money that exists in the third sector and the fact that the social enterprise model is coming through. We can blend the existing strengths of supported businesses and article 19 more effectively with what we do through community planning partnerships, the single outcome agreements and the private sector investment that is being provided in the case that we are discussing.

Supported workshops have been through substantial change over the past few decades and there are many examples of supported businesses that have survived by modernising their business practices and tuning their products and services to meet the evolving needs of customers and the market. The full story of Glencraft has still to be written, but it looks as if its original structure, as an educational trust rather than a business, is no longer right for modern times. That is no one's fault: there was no failure or error other than an inability to see the future as clearly and as early as some other supported workshops have managed to do. However, according to RSM Tenon, the liquidators, Glencraft left £3 million of debt. More poignantly, as the motion states, its closure resulted in 52 people losing their jobs in the week before Christmas, in an extremely difficult financial climate.

What is happening? A lot of effort has gone into helping Glencraft make the vital transition from an educational trust that was not much different from the one that was set up in 1843 to a modern social enterprise. For the past two years, officials of the Scottish Government, key figures in Aberdeen City Council and some of the best people in Aberdeen's social enterprise world have been working on a package that would ensure transition to a new social enterprise model.

By mid-2008, all parties were agreed on the need for a fresh start for Glencraft that was built around the new social enterprise model. Funds would be needed, but Glencraft sat on a site of considerable value. New products would be needed, but there were several strong social enterprise partners who wanted to work on that. However, despite those factors, the changes did

not happen. The old Glencraft ceased to trade in November last year.

Now, after the evident distress, which we all regret, there is the prospect of a new beginning. Bob Keillor and Duncan Skinner of PSN have come forward with a plan. The proposed business plan sets out how a new venture, Glencraft (Social Enterprise) Ltd, could be set up to build on the work of the previous company. It would retain charitable status and employ as many former staff as possible. PSN would continue to be involved to ensure that the new social enterprise would benefit from the continuing involvement of a highly successful private sector company. The First Minister has given his full support to the efforts that all those partners are making to advance the potential new business venture.

However, there are still many hurdles to overcome. The motion refers to article 19 of the EU public procurement directive. To my mind, that is not a hurdle, but has the makings of a real asset for businesses such as Glencraft. However, addressing funding, dealing with controls on state aid, getting the right people on the board and finding the right management are all still at the hurdle stage. The partners who pulled together the transition package 18 months ago are working closely together and we fully expect an outcome of which we can be proud.

At this stage, it is right to let PSN and its partners get on with the project. In so doing, we must recognise that they are not alone. I put on record our admiration for the effort that the Aberdeen community has put into the initiative, which is not surprising, given that for 150 years, Glencraft was run using the talents and support of local people. Today, it is local people who are building the new venture. The council—in particular, its new chief executive, Sue Bruce—has been very much to the fore, and local social enterprises have offered substantial help and are expecting a new member in their stable in the shape of the new Glencraft.

However, the workforce deserves most praise. They have shown fortitude, resilience and a willingness to be part of the new beginning. The First Minister has recently met the staff on several occasions, and he immediately picked up on the fact that they have commitment and skills and are waiting to contribute to a community that wants to help them. They will continue to receive our support, and all the messages that I have been given today in this fulsome debate will be fully considered when I write things up.

Meeting closed at 18:10.

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