



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 16 September 2010

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

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[The Deputy Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 09:15*]

Housing Strategy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Good morning. The first item of business this morning is a debate on housing strategy.

09:15

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): As this is an open-ended debate, I thought that I would take the opportunity to update the chamber on where we are with discussions on our document "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas".

It is important that we take a longer-term perspective on housing policy, which means looking not at next year and the year after but at the next 10 years. As we have never totally broken the back of the housing shortage that Scotland has had almost since the 19th century, we should see whether in the next 10 years—and, I should add, against the very difficult background of public sector squeeze—we can do much more than has been achieved in past generations.

We face 10 major challenges in housing, the first and most obvious of which is the budget. As the Scottish Government's chief economic adviser, Andrew Goudie, has indicated, the Government will over the next 16 years lose about £42 billion in real terms from what it would have had if its budget had remained the same as this year's. That is by any stretch of the imagination a very substantial amount of money and the cuts will inevitably affect key services that the Scottish Government delivers.

The next challenges facing housing over the next decade are what I call the population challenges. Scotland's population is going to rise—indeed, the registrar general has estimated that between now and 2033 our population will increase by around 375,000—and although that is very good news for the country it means that over the next 20 years or so an additional 375,000 people are going to require a roof over their heads.

Secondly, household formation in Scotland is currently running at a net rate of 19,000 new households a year. That is not only because of the rising population but because of the long-term trend towards more people living on their own; in any case, the demand created by that 19,000

increase in new households each year must also be met.

The third major population challenge is the ageing population. The registrar general has estimated that in Scotland over the next 20 years or so there will be an 81 per cent increase in those over 75, which requires a special response not just from housing but from the allied services that our older generation requires. It is clear that those three major population developments require significant additions to the housing stock.

The next four challenges are the four targets that the chamber has set over a number of years and on which, I think, we are all agreed. First, there is the homelessness target, under which, by 2012, everyone who is classified as genuinely homeless must be offered secure and permanent housing. Secondly, there is the 2015 Scottish housing quality standard. Nearly 40 per cent of Scotland's social housing is already up to that standard, but that leaves about 60 per cent that still has to be brought up to the same standard, which will require investment of about £2 billion a year over the next five years or so.

Thirdly, there is the target to eliminate fuel poverty in Scotland by 2016. As we know, fuel poverty is determined by three major factors: income; the price of fuel and energy; and housing conditions. Of course, the Scottish Government has most direct influence over housing conditions and by 2016 we have to ensure not only that no one is living in fuel poverty but that no one is in such poverty because of the state of their house, a lack of insulation or warm central heating and so on.

Fourthly, there is the target to reduce carbon emissions in Scotland by 42 per cent from the 1990 figure by 2020. Housing accounts for about 30 per cent of energy consumption and carbon emissions, ergo the housing sector will have to make a very significant contribution if we are to achieve the overall target. Indeed, as our energy efficiency action plan states, work carried out by the University of Cambridge for the Scottish Government estimates that £16 billion will be required to be spent on housing stock to achieve our share of that 42 per cent reduction over the next 10 years. The 2012 target, the 2015 target, the 2016 target and the 2020 target are all huge targets to meet.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): Given the carbon reduction challenge that we face, is the minister able to reassure the chamber that the Government is still treating the Sullivan report as a road map to zero carbon and that it will consult on standards to deliver the 2016 zero carbon target for new build?

Alex Neil: We have already outlined that in our energy efficiency action plan. Moreover, building regulations will be further improved by new regulations that will come in in October. I should also point out that the 2016 target will be largely driven by European directives and that, as a result, we will be obliged to improve building standards further at that time.

Aside from the budget challenge, the three population challenges and the four targets that we have set ourselves, the two other housing challenges that we face can be jointly described as the waiting list challenge. In Scotland's 32 local authority areas, about 200,000 people are currently on the waiting list for a social rented house. We believe that, once duplication, overlap and the transfer element are stripped out, the real figure is that somewhere between 80,000 and 100,000 new houses are required.

However, the waiting list will come under enormous additional pressure not just because of the population challenges that I mentioned but because of the 10th challenge, which I have termed the affordability challenge. Before the recession and the credit crunch, first-time buyers in Scotland required an average 11 per cent deposit to get a mortgage; the average is now around 25 per cent. Indeed, in London the regulators, the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority, are seriously discussing the introduction of loan-to-value rules that would not allow financial institutions to lend on a mortgage without a very substantial—possibly a minimum 20 per cent—deposit.

Such a move will have two consequences. First, those who previously would have been first-time buyers will no longer be able to buy because they will be unable to raise the deposit. Many of them will go on the waiting list for a rented house, at least until they can save up the money. In other words, the pressure on first-time buyers will make the waiting list longer.

The second consequence, which we have seen in the past two years, is that the lack of demand from first-time buyers as their number in the marketplace declines causes the rate of new-build construction in the private sector to reduce significantly.

Before the recession hit and before the credit crunch, we relied for about 12.5 per cent of the funding and support for our social housing programme on section 75 agreements with the private sector. That support has pretty well dried up in the past couple of years and is unlikely to return en masse on a reasonable scale for a significant number of years.

While we have large waiting lists, additional pressures will be applied, because of the new

affordability rules and the market situation for first-time buyers.

As we all know—Mr McLetchie might dispute it—primarily as a result of the impact of the right to buy, the stock of rented housing in Scotland is at its lowest level since 1959, although we have the biggest building programme for the past 10 years.

We face 10 major challenges. It is clear that, no matter who wins the election next year, we must come together as a Parliament to face up to those challenges and do what we can.

I will outline activities that we are proactively pursuing. In the overall strategy, our number 1 priority is new build in the private and rented sectors. The private rented sector has a bigger contribution to make. I hope that my colleagues to the right—both Mr Finnie and Mr Johnstone—will join me in trying to persuade the current United Kingdom Government to do what the previous Government refused to do, which is to extend to the housing sector the tax incentives in the real estate investment trust regime and the venture capital regime that are available to commercial property developers. That could bring significant additional investment into the rented housing sector in Scotland.

We are considering other possibilities. We must do two fundamental things.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): The paper, "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas", says:

"expenditure on support for home ownership remains relatively small, the tax advantages enjoyed by home owners continue to be substantial and act as a brake on the growth of the private rented sector."

If the minister had the powers of a proper Parliament that he likes to talk about, what steps would he take to eradicate

"the tax advantages enjoyed by home owners"

and level the playing field?

Alex Neil: The new UK Government has already started to do that by increasing capital gains tax to 28 per cent, which has a direct impact on private sector housing investment throughout the UK. It is obvious that Mr McLetchie must support—

David McLetchie: Will the minister give way?

Alex Neil: I am sorry—I am running out of time; I have only 10 seconds left.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can take the intervention if you wish.

Alex Neil: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Our strategy must be to make the maximum use of the money that will be available to us, to make it

go further. We must also consider bringing other sources of capital into all aspects of housing. Last year, eight housing associations received a major injection of low-cost loan capital from the European Investment Bank that totalled £70 million. This year, next year and the year after, we will go back to that bank for such relatively cheap loan capital with good conditions.

We are also talking to pension funds, because my strong view is that we all contribute to pension funds. Strathclyde pension fund is one of the biggest pension funds in the country. If we persuade the pension funds to provide the capital that we need to build social housing, we will be able both to build such housing without charging excessive rents and to give the funds a reasonable return over a long period. That would bring significant new sources of capital into the system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should finish now, minister.

Alex Neil: We are taking a range of other measures to make the existing money go further and to bring in new sources of capital. I will be happy to elaborate on that in the debate.

09:29

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): As always, I warmly welcome the opportunity to debate housing. However, I had a couple of concerns about the debate. The first was that the visit that is taking place in the city might overshadow our debate. Those of us who are complete housing bores might think that the debate might not attract the interest that it deserves. The second was that the minister might use his time to read out a travel diary of his trips around Scotland in the summer months.

To be serious, I recognise that the minister took considerable time in the summer to visit housing projects and developments. I know that he can always talk, but I hope that he took the opportunity to listen on those visits, too. Many of us used the recess to listen to people throughout the country talking about the housing challenges, some of which the minister outlined.

I acknowledge that a number of new houses have been built under the affordable housing investment programme in the past 12 months. The minister referred to supply challenges. I welcome those new houses, as I am sure do the people who live in them. However, I would have been surprised if the number of new properties had not increased, given that my colleague Alistair Darling, the former chancellor, allowed the Scottish Government to bring forward an additional £120 million of funding. I am only sorry that the Scottish Government could not show the same

commitment by filling the gap that that left. When the budget this year has £140 million less, that will not mean record numbers of new houses, although we still need them. The number of new starts is already beginning to fall.

I move on to finance issues. Providing funds to support a housing strategy is crucial, but there are other issues, which I hope to have time to discuss. I welcome the Scottish Government's consideration of alternative sources of funding—the minister referred to some at the end of his speech. They include the European Investment Bank, bond funding, institutional investment and a housing investment bank. I firmly believe that we should always explore new funding mechanisms, and doing so is essential when public funding is tight.

My only word of caution is that the Scottish Government should ensure that it explores fully the long-term consequences of new funding mechanisms. That warning is justified because the Scottish Government is not taking sufficient care over the funding of the new council house building programme, for example.

I welcome the new council housing that is being built; I do not have the political opposition to it that some in the Parliament might have. However, I am conscious that the new council house building programme is being funded not by us but by tenants. My concern is that rents should not increase to such an extent that tenants are trapped in unemployment. The minister spoke about affordability. It is unfortunate that he has occasionally been blasé about rent increases. The Scottish Government needs to reflect on that further.

I have concerns about the debt that local authorities are building up. In 2007, local authority debt was about £1 billion. Today, it is close to £2 billion. Okay—we can manage that while interest rates are low, but what happens when they start to rise? Voluntary stock transfer has ceased in the three and a half years of this Scottish Government, so the debt figure will continue to grow. We do not know whether the Treasury's offer to write off debt following stock transfer is still available—perhaps Mr Johnstone will tell us about that when he gets to his feet. The Scottish Government needs to take care over debt.

The Scottish Government's treatment of housing associations has been shameful. In the past three years, the Scottish National Party Government has reduced housing association grant, partially reinstated it and reduced it again. How can housing associations produce serious development plans on that basis? While the minister was happy to have his photo taken at housing developments that housing associations had successfully built, some of his SNP

colleagues were sniping from the sidelines. They said that housing associations had too much money in their reserves and that HAG was too high, and they tried to drive a wedge between housing associations and local authorities.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Does Ms Mulligan accept that, in its inquiry, the Local Government and Communities Committee found that an estimated £300 million is held by housing associations throughout Scotland and that, given the financial constraints that we face, that money could be used to help develop more houses?

Mary Mulligan: John Wilson knows that, when the committee conducted that inquiry, the housing associations' answer to that point was that much of the money was committed, either to further development or to upgrading stock to the standards that the minister referred to in his speech. It is not as simple as saying that housing associations have lots of money swishing around that they are doing nothing with. That is the kind of comment to which I was referring.

I congratulate housing associations on the work that they have done to meet housing needs, particularly in rural areas and for older people, and on their innovative work on shared equity, shared ownership and mid-market rent. However, questions are still to be answered about mid-market rent. Perhaps the minister will say a little bit more about that subject. I am not opposed to it, but it is not the answer for everyone, so we need to look at other options.

Perhaps the minister will also explain how the Scottish Government got into the situation in which housing associations are front funding new-build projects. A number of housing associations have raised that issue with me recently, but even I was surprised to read in the briefing for the debate from the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations that front funding could be as much as £90 million. Why has the Scottish Government allowed the practice to develop? When can housing associations expect that money to be repaid?

After three and a half years, I am pleased that the SNP Government is thinking about having a housing strategy. To the interested observer, it must appear that the Scottish Government has merely reacted to events rather than guided them. When the financial recession hit and many families across Scotland faced the threat of mortgage arrears and repossessions, the Scottish Government appeared at best uncertain about what to do. It took my colleague Cathy Jamieson and others across the Parliament, including Mr Finnie, to convince it that it needed to legislate to protect home owners.

The same is true in relation to other pieces of legislation. On property factors, the Scottish Government wants a voluntary accreditation scheme, which we know the bad guys will not join, so Patricia Ferguson had to help out. On tenancy deposits, despite pressure from Claire Baker, only now is the Scottish Government coming forward with the necessary Scottish statutory instrument. On party flats, an issue that Sarah Boyack continually raised, the Scottish Government said that it could do nothing, but Ms Boyack showed it how, by working with local authority colleagues, we can attempt to do something. Even the Minister for Housing and Communities has acknowledged that whoever is in power after May 2011 will need to introduce a housing bill to tidy everything up.

However, a housing strategy is about more than finance and legislation. It is about many of the things that the minister mentioned. It is about housing for older people, and housing for younger people seeking their first homes. It is about services for tenants, whether those involve the modernisation of their accommodation or the provision of support within it. It is about the private rented sector and how we ensure that people are not ripped off and are given a proper home at an affordable rent. It is also about housing for owner-occupation and the problems that exist in that sector. This morning, the National House-Building Council announced a figure for new-build homes of just over 600 last month. If we compare that with the boom years, we know that there is a problem. There are also huge challenges around environmental issues and energy efficiency.

My Labour colleagues will explore many of those themes during the debate, and I look forward to hearing other colleagues across the chamber refer to them. I hope to have the opportunity to respond to those points at the end of the debate. We all have a responsibility to contribute to the housing debate, which the minister introduced very well this morning. There are huge issues for us to address and I look forward to the rest of the debate.

09:40

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Conservatives always welcome the opportunity to debate housing. After all, housing—either its supply or, just as important, the quality of life enjoyed by the occupants—affects everybody who lives in Scotland, so it is only right that Parliament devotes time to these issues. I welcome the opportunity that the debate offers us today.

In preparing for the debate, I tried to imagine what the minister would say. Although he threw me in one or two areas, by and large he covered the areas in the way that I expected and did what I

expected him to do. Predictability is not a fault in itself, but perhaps what the minister did not say is just as interesting.

With the inevitability of night following day, the minister continues to demonise the right to buy and, by implication, the ordinary families who took advantage of the opportunity to buy their own home and claim a stake in the future of their communities. Of course, the uncomfortable reality for opponents of the right to buy is that on 31 March this year almost five times as many social homes were lying empty as had been sold under the right to buy in the whole of the proceeding year.

On new build, I welcome the fact that just over 8,000 affordable homes have been built under the affordable housing investment programme, but let us not forget that it was also this Government that slashed the affordable homes budget by an eye-watering 45 per cent, which, in Grampian, for example—this is my press release—meant a reduction from £34 million to £21 million. Councils throughout the country were left to go into debt and to fork out £300 million to build new homes just to help the minister's much-loved press coverage.

It is about not only building homes but building cohesive, sustainable communities that people want to live in and which they feel a sense of ownership for. However, people in communities tell me that a sizeable minority of people are treating their neighbours and their neighbourhoods with contempt. A typical example is that of a 16-year-old girl in Angus who was evicted for antisocial behaviour and then rehoused in a flat where the neighbours were all elderly. The block of flats quickly descended into chaos as the girl held parties all night and all day, terrifying the other residents. Not only did the police raid the property looking for drugs, but the girl's associates trashed it, looking for the same thing. Eventually, having caused thousands of pounds-worth of damage, the girl was evicted for her behaviour, only to present herself as homeless once again and for the whole sorry cycle to start over.

Similar cases can be found throughout Scotland and the law-abiding majority have had enough. The pendulum has swung too far. I believe that it is time to replace the absolute duty of care, which requires councils to rehouse time and again people who choose to make everyone else's life a misery. We must take a new approach whereby persistently disruptive tenants are made to address their behaviour as a condition of being rehoused.

Alex Neil: I agree with the need to tackle antisocial behaviour, but can I get rid of the myth that councils have to rehouse people who have been evicted because of antisocial behaviour? If

the council deems that someone has intentionally made themselves homeless through antisocial behaviour, there is no requirement under the homelessness legislation to rehouse them.

Alex Johnstone: That is an interesting interpretation, but one that I suggest does not reflect the action that has been taken by local authorities.

Returning to my argument, I believe that the statistics bear out my point. Last year under this Government, we saw an increase in the number of people who failed to maintain their tenancies because of criminal or antisocial behaviour. That is another thing that the minister did not mention in his speech. Of course we must offer help to those who require it. Last year alone, under this Government, we saw a 5 per cent increase in the number of those at risk of homelessness who have support needs and lack basic housing management or independent living skills. That is a damning indictment of a failing wider social and education policy.

I suggest that the Government's housing agenda is driven not by common sense but often by political dogma. As it desperately tries to make a success of the Scottish Futures Trust, we are presented with the unedifying spectacle of Alex Neil rushing through plans for the national housing trust. We are told that it will provide 1,000 new homes, but in reality just 13 local authorities have expressed an interest in it and, with the deadline for signing up fast approaching, councils are desperately seeking legal advice and questioning whether the guarantees that have been promised are worth the paper they are written on. Meanwhile, private sector developers are concerned that the whole scheme simply does not add up and are backing away. Time will tell if the policy, which seems to have been concocted on the back of a fag packet, will deliver anything like the number of homes that have been promised.

In housing, we have seen from the Scottish Government a relentless procession of glossy publications and consultations—in my hand is exhibit A: "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas".

Alex Neil: It is not glossy.

Alex Johnstone: Last week, the First Minister made it clear to us that it is not time for Scottish independence, so what is it time for? I suggest that it is time that the Government started to think differently. It is not time for an independence referendum, but perhaps it is time to stop the consultations and to start taking some serious action and making the difficult decisions. In reality we have a Scottish National Party Government that has run out of money, steam and ideas, and which, of course, is running out of time.

Out on the streets of Scotland, in our communities up and down the country, a heavy price is being paid for the Government's inability to achieve anything other than looking pleased with itself. I think that we need new ideas and fresh thinking, and they are not all in this glossy publication.

09:47

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): That must be one of the longest press releases ever delivered to the chamber.

This is not the first time that we have had a discussion on the general needs of housing and, although I recognise why we have a debate without a motion today, I think that that is unfortunate. I understand why we have had a general discussion about Scotland's housing, but there is a need for us to move quickly and not just to discuss the 10 challenges that were well articulated by the minister or his document "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas", which also sets out the problem.

From a Scottish Liberal Democrat point of view, one disappointment relates to the serious matters that attacked the whole of the housing sector, in both the private and public sectors, during the development of the economic crisis which, if it did nothing else, demonstrated that the particular housing model that we were pursuing—not just in Scotland but we are talking about Scotland—was not sustainable. It was a model in which the public and the providers seemed oblivious to the fact that ever-increasing house prices could not be sustained. Although the impact of that was calculated and reported in the private sector, it had serious ramifications for the public sector, too. The disappointment is that we appear not to have reached any agreement on the structure of the housing sector that we need.

I can demonstrate that. All of us who are interested in housing have no doubt listened in the past 10 days to reports on the most recent statistics on house prices and the general supply. Many of those listening will have been like me—astonished that there had been no change. There was anxiety that house price inflation was not rising quickly enough and that house prices were not showing the growth that we need. For goodness' sake, do those in the private sector not understand that it is such house price inflation that brought the whole system to its knees? We need to think in terms of a sustainable model that can go forward.

If the financial sector has woken up to the fact that one reason why we get into the appalling position of seeing repossession is that we allow people to undertake debt that they cannot sustain,

we have to adjust our thinking on how we fund housing and enable a different market.

The Liberal Democrats have said for some time—I repeat this again this morning—that there is a serious and urgent need in both the private and public sectors to decide how to generate a much healthier private rented sector. That is not easy, but we need to get some consensus between the Government and the private sector. That is one comment that I make to the minister: there is a need to recognise the mix of economy in housing and the fact that the private sector can, must and will play a vital role in meeting housing need.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Does the member agree that the changes in housing benefit that are coming from Westminster will have a skewed effect on the private rental sector, perhaps creating a situation in which people can afford to live in one area but not another?

Ross Finnie: The point that I am trying to make is more fundamental—that we need a complete rethink.

The minister raised a number of interesting questions in his 10 points. He talked about the increase in demand and stated that it will place heavy burdens on both local authorities and the public sector in general, but that is not necessarily true. If the rented sector were dramatically changed, we could look to share the burden between the private and public sectors. That is the challenge. The dates that he mentioned are all vital targets, but in meeting them there are not four different solutions to meet four different targets. Many of the issues that have to be addressed are ones that we should be looking at anyway.

On the question of housing need, it is certainly a Liberal Democrat wish in this chamber that the one thing that should not be damaged by any recession is our obligation to meet the homelessness target. It is a mark of a civilised society, something that we should try to hold on to from a strategic point of view and something to which we should continue to aspire no matter what financial pressure we find ourselves under. Action that the Government has now taken on repossession has been welcome although, as Mary Mulligan pointed out, it required some pressure from the Opposition parties to effect a more rational stance.

We agree with much of what the minister said on increasing supply, but let us not repeat dogma and try to create a false dichotomy between local authorities and the housing associations. I know that the Scottish National Party was absolutely opposed to stock transfer at the time, and its members were entitled to that view—although I am bound to say that, like Mary Mulligan, I found it

ever so slightly quaint to see the housing minister turning up smiling and cheering at the opening of successful housing associations.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Ross Finnie: No, I regret that I am running out of time.

I must say to the Conservative party that I know that it wants to tell us about the change to the right to buy—no doubt David McLetchie will repeat the statistics to us.

David McLetchie: True.

Ross Finnie: Let us be clear. The changes that the right to buy effected mean that we are in a different position. To continue to say that the preservation of the right to buy is the most critical aspect of Scottish housing policy is to ignore the statistics on the problems that currently face us and the remedies that need to be applied. We must recognise that.

On the condition of stock, I agree with the minister that the 70,000 empty homes are the more critical aspect. Liberal Democrats have raised the matter, which we must consider. Underlying the problem is the unfortunate mismatch between the condition of the empty stock and the accommodation that it offers, and current requirements, which in many cases cannot be met. Areas can be blighted when housing deteriorates because it is void or vacant stock. It is sad that the issue particularly affects deprived areas. All that needs to be addressed.

The Liberal Democrats support much that the minister set out and much that is in the document, but the sooner we reach a point at which we must take decisions, the better—I share Alex Johnstone's view on that. We can continue to discuss our general concerns, but we need a much-changed housing structure, which reflects what happened in the recession and enables our housing policy to be sustainable into the future.

09:56

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): I will focus mainly on an issue that has been overlooked for far too long by UK Governments and previous Administrations in Scotland: housing co-operatives.

However, first I will briefly talk about land. Some time ago, it was part of my work to identify sites for new housing in Argyll and Bute. It never ceased to amaze me how difficult it was to get approval for housing developments in communities that had high housing need, even when land was apparently in abundance. The Government has taken action to speed up the planning process,

which will help, but we should go further and review the fiscal and legal penalties for landowners who hold developable land off the market, disregarding the wider interests of the community.

I was pleased to read the discussion pieces that the Chartered Institute of Housing published. I declare an interest: I am a fellow of the institute. In its discussion pieces, the CIH explored difficulties to do with housing finance in the United Kingdom, which Ross Finnie mentioned. Its points about resource availability are important in the context of the massive cuts in budget that the Scottish Parliament faces, which will reduce our ability to deliver for our communities, including on the provision of much-needed new housing.

The cuts flow directly from UK Government action to reduce the public sector deficit, and the CIH discussion pieces remind us that, despite Labour's 13 years in power, the UK still uses a definition of public expenditure that counts more housing expenditure in public sector net borrowing than is the case in most of the European countries with whose deficits the UK's is being compared. The CIH has campaigned on the issue for years. The previous UK Government understood the issue at an intellectual level but chose to do nothing about it, which has a bearing on the impending cuts. Perhaps the minister will raise the issue with the current UK Government, to ascertain whether there can be movement on it.

I move on to the role of co-operative and mutual models in delivering good-quality housing. After a discussion in the Scottish Parliament cross-party group on co-operatives, the minister and I visited a housing co-op in Easterhouse to meet representatives of the sector. It is clear that a great deal can be done in Scotland and in Westminster to strengthen the role of housing co-ops. It is worth recalling that the Monks co-operative commission, which Tony Blair established and which reported in 2001, said:

"There is currently no legal framework in UK housing law in which rights of occupancy of residential property can arise from membership of a democratic mutual provider."

The absence of a legal framework for co-operative housing is part of a wider neglect of the mutual sector in the UK. Since the Monks commission reported, some of the most significant developments in the legal framework have been taken through Westminster through private members' bills. How can we expect wider society to take co-operative and mutual models seriously, when Governments seem so uninterested in their operation? Mary Mulligan had a go at the minister about housing associations; I find puzzling and shameful Labour Governments' neglect of the mutual sector and, in particular, co-operative housing.

The sector has suffered from a serious lack of backing from Government and it has faced a number of obstacles—intended or unintended—to its growth. There is the unhelpful division between fully mutual and so-called non-mutual co-operatives, which appears to be driven by the tax regime but feeds through to all aspects of regulation. Government-supported mechanisms for rented housing and owner occupation have historically inhibited the development of mixed-tenure co-operatives, and differing treatment of housing providers has disadvantaged co-operatives that deal with people in housing need compared with providers that are registered as charities. As the minister knows, an advance since devolution has been the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator's decision to allow housing co-operatives to register as charities. He will also be aware, as many members are, that the approach is threatened by the Calman proposals. I would welcome his comments on the matter.

A recurring theme in the many debates that there have been on housing policy has been the need for communities to be empowered to make choices about how they want their housing to be provided and run. People who have wanted to choose the co-operative model have found that the obstacles are far too difficult to overcome, so their choice has been limited. In my experience, few communities are more empowered than communities that have a well-functioning housing co-operative. It is a pity that, after so many years of Labour administration in Scotland and in Westminster, we do not have more housing co-operatives in Scotland.

The minister has acknowledged the need. For the first time in the Scottish Parliament, housing co-operatives have been mentioned as a viable proposition in discussion papers on housing. I remember a time far back when I was a member of a parliamentary committee with responsibility for housing and I tried to get co-operatives recognised in legislation, only to be voted down by Labour members.

Tricia Marwick: And Liberals.

Linda Fabiani: And Liberals, of course. I almost forgot about them. I thank Mrs Marwick.

I ask the minister to consider what can be done to include a real co-operative option in Scotland's housing future.

10:02

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): One of the most worrying housing statistics that I have seen recently is that the number of people in temporary accommodation has risen to almost 11,000, which is an 8 per cent increase on last year.

As 2012 approaches, I have a great concern that more and more people might be spending longer and longer in temporary accommodation. It says in the "Code of Guidance on Homelessness" that

"Homeless people should not be placed in temporary accommodation unnecessarily, and their time there should be as short as possible",

but there is nothing in our historic homelessness legislation that says that an offer of permanent accommodation must be made within a specified period.

Our 2012 homelessness objective has been internationally acclaimed and we must not make a mockery of it by letting temporary accommodation take the strain. It should be a matter of national pride to deliver on the 2012 objective that everyone who is unintentionally homeless should be made an offer of permanent accommodation.

I urge the minister to use the imminence of that historic target to argue the case and fight for housing in the coming weeks. That means that we have to make hard choices, because we all know that budget cuts are on the way. In the debate on the independent budget review last week, I said that housing must be our number 1 priority for capital expenditure. It is obvious that that means that other things have to be regulated, so I say quite openly that, yes, housing has to have precedence over transport and other capital budgets in the next year or two.

Other sources of funding must be explored, of course, and I welcome what the minister said, particularly in relation to pension funds. The approach is certainly worth exploring, but it will not deliver in the short term.

I caution the minister against reducing HAG further. I had a conversation recently with representatives of Port of Leith Housing Association, who pointed out that if they have to borrow more and more to make up for HAG reductions, it means that the other work that they want to do, for example on mid-market rent, which is crucial in Edinburgh, will simply not be possible.

That reference takes me to Leith and Edinburgh, where every Saturday morning, at my surgeries, I hear one or more people complaining about their difficulty in obtaining a social rented house. In Edinburgh, 150 people or more apply for every house that becomes available, yet the number of new builds, which was 460 last year, is down to 300 this year, at a time when we need 800 a year. Distribution is especially crucial as we approach 2012. I urge the minister to direct whatever resources he can obtain, particularly over the next two years, towards councils with the greatest supply shortages.

It is not just supply that is important as we approach 2012. The homelessness task force emphasised the prevention of homelessness. A great deal of work from 2003 onwards was carried out on prevention. Councils tend to think, in the first instance, of crisis-driven reactive work, but it is also important to engage in longer-term proactive work. I discussed that recently with representatives of Move On, an organisation that is based in my constituency but which also operates in Glasgow and elsewhere. It has become increasingly aware of the importance of proactive work and is doing excellent work in that field, such as a housing education project in schools, visitor support services and homelessness and employability activity.

Over the years, supporting people money has also been important for prevention work. I have expressed concerns previously about the ending of the ring fencing of that money. Over and above that, the Government has failed to put in place a means of recording how housing support is being implemented across Scotland. It was recommended in the 2007 evaluation of homelessness prevention activity in Scotland that there should be more recording of prevention work by councils throughout Scotland. I would welcome any information that the minister has about how those recommendations have been implemented since then.

The minister referred to another statutory housing obligation, the fuel poverty target, which is the abolition of fuel poverty by 2016. I accept it when the minister says that he does not possess all the levers to deliver that objective, but I point out that slashing the energy assistance package budget by 10 per cent last year took us in absolutely the wrong direction. I hope that the minister will use the fuel poverty target in his arguments with the finance secretary over the coming weeks. In fact, as I listened to the minister's speech, I thought that it was, to some extent, addressed to the finance secretary. I am therefore confident that the minister will fight for housing. I urge him again to use all our statutory targets relating to housing to argue the case for housing over the next few weeks.

Action on housing supply and fuel poverty would show a willingness to protect the vulnerable at this time of cuts. We must follow that underlying principle as we make difficult spending decisions over the next few months. If we act to protect the vulnerable, we will be acting in exactly the opposite way from the UK Government. It is something that we should be determined to do.

I do not have time to refer to the housing benefit cuts—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can if you wish.

Malcolm Chisholm: I could speak at great length about the fact that the UK Government is cutting too far and too fast, but I will stick to housing benefit because that will have implications for the subject that we are discussing today. Like our Westminster colleagues, we must take up those arguments. The many different effects of those cuts have not really sunk in. However, one that was mentioned to me by an official in Edinburgh this week is that, although most of what is available for single people in Edinburgh is two-bedroom accommodation, under the new housing benefit rules rent for a single person will be paid only for one-bedroom accommodation. That is one of many changes that will have a devastating effect on the supply of housing. We need to fight on housing, and against the scale of the cuts, at the Westminster front. In Scotland, however, I urge the minister once again to fight for housing and argue that housing should be the number 1 priority for capital expenditure.

10:10

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): Ross Finnie said in his speech that the Scottish National Party had been completely opposed to stock transfer. It is worth while putting on record that that was never the SNP position, and it was never the position that was argued in Parliament. The SNP was in favour of tenants' choice, and we believed that, however the tenants voted, that should be respected.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Tricia Marwick: In a minute.

What we objected to strongly was the bribing and blackmailing of tenants, on the basis that if they did not vote for stock transfer, housing debt would not be written off. It was the SNP Government that ensured that the promises that were made to the people of Glasgow when they voted for stock transfer were kept, and that they did not sit only in the Glasgow Housing Association. It was the SNP Government that ensured that the second-stage stock transfer took place, after the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition had singularly failed to progress it.

The Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition deserves some praise for introducing far-reaching housing legislation. The work of the previous Executive put Scotland at the forefront of homelessness legislation. My criticism at the time, and my criticism now, is that the money that was needed to support that legislation to ensure that the targets were reached was never put in place by the previous Government. As evidence of that, it is worth recalling that, during the years of the coalition, the Government built fewer council

houses than the Tories did in 1995. It is also worth saying that the SNP Government has built more social housing than has been built at any time since 1982. That is to the credit of the SNP Government.

Alex Johnstone: Will the member follow through on that by reminding us who was in government in 1982?

Tricia Marwick: What I said was that the SNP Government has built more houses than have been built at any time since 1982. I am happy to acknowledge that the Conservative Government built more houses in 1995 than Labour did in its term of office in the Scottish Parliament. The SNP Government has kick-started council house building, introduced the home owners support fund and invested in shared equity schemes.

Housing has changed completely since the 1970s. In the 1970s, the vast majority of people lived in rented council homes. Very few people in Scotland owned their homes. By the 1990s, the percentage of people living in council houses had declined rapidly, partly as a result of right to buy, but also because of the drive of the banks and building societies to increase the number of mortgages for first-time house buyers.

I welcome the work that the Government is doing because it is important that we have a fundamental think about housing for the future. We also need to have a fundamental agreement about what a house is for. Other members have referred to that. Is a house somewhere in which we live, and perhaps bring up a family, or is a house more than that? Is a house a way of making profit once it is sold? Should the economy continue to be driven by house prices? As we have seen, when the housing bubble burst, housing prices fell, and they do not look like recovering any time soon. The economy cannot be driven by ever-rising house prices.

Why do we measure prosperity by the price of a home? We need to ask why an extremely successful country such as Switzerland has one of the highest rates of rented housing and one of the lowest rates of house ownership anywhere in the world. If rented housing is okay for the likes of Switzerland, why is it not okay for the likes of Scotland? I have never been fixated by housing tenure. Regardless of whether we are talking about community housing, housing in the private rented sector or housing that people own, what is important is that the house that people live in is affordable, safe and warm. It is our responsibility as members of the Parliament to ensure that we keep that in mind as we go forward.

As the minister said, new households are being formed at an increasing rate because of the growing number of single people and family break-

ups. Recently, I was reminiscing with someone about 1975, when my husband and I got married. We got a house from Glenrothes Development Corporation four weeks before we got married and, after we had got married, we had to produce our wedding certificate so that the corporation could ensure that we were genuinely married—there was no living in sin in Glenrothes in 1975. That is not the situation now. We have far better legislation, which ensures that people can make their own choices about whether to get married. People's choice of lifestyle does not militate against their getting rented accommodation.

Factors such as family break-ups and people's aspiration to have their own home mean that the number of households that are being formed is increasing, and we need to ensure that we address that as we go forward. There is a great need for us all to work together to ensure that we provide the right kind of housing—which must be safe and affordable—in the right places, where people want it. We must put party politics aside and work together to ensure that that happens.

10:17

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab):

Like other members, I welcome the opportunity to debate housing in the chamber, although it seems to be slightly odd—as others have said—to be doing so at a point when the only thing that is clear about the Government's strategy for housing is that it does not have one.

The Government has built some new houses, which are very welcome, and it has taken forward some ideas that I would agree with—not least because, as Mary Mulligan pointed out, many of them are based on Labour ideas. However, to call the Government's actions on housing a strategy is to stretch the definition somewhat. In addition, we must recognise that the building of many new houses has been possible only because the Labour Government at Westminster agreed that there could be accelerated spending of £120 million. Moreover, we know that last year witnessed the building of the lowest number of houses for 10 years.

In the past 13 years, my constituency has witnessed a fundamental change in the quality of its housing. From time to time I, like others, have had occasion to criticise the Glasgow Housing Association, but I recognise that the GHA has been responsible for much of the modernisation that has taken place in the past few years and that it is making a real difference to our communities.

The same is true of the many community-based housing associations in my area. The work of the housing associations has been especially

important—at a time when housing was not being built by local government—in helping to stabilise communities by building excellent new homes and engaging in a range of wider action programmes throughout Maryhill and other areas. Those projects have helped to keep older people in their own homes comfortably and safely and have provided jobs and apprenticeships for young people, giving them a real stake in their community and an opportunity to make their own lives. They include self-build projects, which have given local people the incentive to continue to make their homes in the area.

Talking of achievements, I am sure that Parliament would like to join me in recording my congratulations to North Glasgow Housing Association, which is the first housing association in Scotland to achieve the prestigious new customer service excellence standard. That is an achievement, indeed.

I was surprised to read recently that the minister had told the housing association movement that it had a tough time ahead. The housing association movement knows how to deal with hard times. It has demonstrated that it can adapt and change to cope with changing situations. Let us face it—the Government has already challenged housing associations in a most unhelpful way by cutting HAG. The irony is that that has been done at a time when the Government should be strengthening and supporting housing associations, and encouraging them to build more houses, not only to allow Scotland to meet its commitments under homelessness legislation—which, I am truly sad to say, is looking increasingly unlikely—but because we need to recognise that housing associations and local councils—

Sandra White: Does Patricia Ferguson agree with her colleague Malcolm Chisholm that in the budget, the allocation of money to housing must come before the allocation of money to transport?

Patricia Ferguson: If I were a member of a Government, I would make the argument for money for whatever was in my portfolio, but it must be said that housing is so fundamental to the lives of members of our communities that it must be one of the very top priorities of any Government. If this Government does not want to make housing a priority, it should stand aside and make way for one that does.

Housing associations and local councils are the only people who are building houses right now, and we need to maintain the skills that the construction industry will need as it comes out of recession.

Another challenge is coming the way of all registered social landlords in the next few years, and on this point I very much agree with Sandra

White and Malcolm Chisholm. If the coalition Government succeeds in making its planned changes to the housing benefit system, it is likely that fewer people will be able to take up private lets, with the result that more people will depend on RSLs for their housing. There has already been a fall of more than 1,200 in the number of new starts in the social housing sector in the first two quarters of this year, and we need to equip all our RSLs to make them fleet of foot and able to act quickly if those cuts go ahead.

On the subject of the Con-Dem coalition, I hope that the minister will give us assurance—I have no doubt that he will—on tenancies, because I am greatly concerned about the measures on tenancies that the coalition is putting in place south of the border, and I hope that we do not see similar moves in Scotland.

I have a particular concern about the lack of sheltered housing for our older citizens. As people live longer, the demand is obviously rising. Many more people than ever now live beyond 75 and, indeed, 80, and their needs must be met. I read what the “Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas” document had to say, but I was not comforted by what it contained, none of which was fresh. I know that we are talking about a complex and difficult area, but sometimes it is necessary to look at the evidence, make a decision and implement what one thinks is best. In addition, we need to be able to test whether money that was intended for housing support services is being spent where it is most needed. At the moment, we cannot do that. As Malcolm Chisholm did, I urge the minister to examine how data are collected.

In summary, the SNP Government’s actions to date on housing sometimes seem to have been driven more by its need to announce legislation than by an understanding of what needs to be done, backed up with a plan on how to do it. That is particularly apparent in the attempts to tighten up on rogue landlords. The measures to do that should have formed a discrete piece of legislation instead of being split into two legislative halves, the second of which will be really tight for time, given that it has not yet been introduced.

The Government may not yet have a clear strategy, but it is clear that the incoming Government will have to take up housing as a priority and will probably have to introduce a housing consolidation bill as a matter of urgency. In that respect, the present Government will not leave much of a legacy. However, I genuinely hope that the minister will be able to persuade the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth that funding for housing should be a top priority in the SNP’s budget. If he does that, he will have my support.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): At the moment, members can probably take about one minute more than they were expecting for their speeches.

10:24

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): Safeguarding the right to housing and ensuring that everyone has access to warm and secure accommodation is one of the most serious responsibilities that can be placed on any Government. Since 2007, the Scottish Government has made it clear that it is committed to living up to that responsibility by improving and increasing Scotland's housing supply.

Of course, that task is not without its challenges. The decline in council housing, largely due to the effects of the Tory right-to-buy policy, has made it difficult to ensure that those who want and need council houses can always get them. In 2007, more than 200,000 people were on social housing lists.

During the past three years, the SNP Government has worked hard to meet Scotland's housing needs head on. Approximately £1.7 billion has been invested in affordable housing, with the result that the building of affordable housing is now at a 30-year high. Last year, the SNP Government supported the construction of 83 per cent more affordable homes than were built in 2006-07.

We should be hearing no more nonsense about a cut to Scotland's housing budget. We know full well that the Scottish Government accelerated money into earlier budgets to support the construction industry during the worst of the economic downturn. It has been instructive to hear Labour members saying how we should welcome the fact that the last Labour Government consented to that acceleration of capital expenditure. Such a supine attitude displays the limitations of their ambitions for Scotland. We should have a Scottish Government that can decide for itself how to set and allocate its budget without reference or deference to Big Brother. That said, acceleration of spending was the right thing to do.

However, we should be clear that, over the three-year period, Scotland's housing budget has not been cut: it has increased. Even in the face of the economic downturn, the Scottish Government has worked hard to invest in the housing sector because housing is so crucial to so many different aspects of our society. Decent housing is, first and foremost, about keeping people warm and secure, but investment in housing also supports jobs in the construction industry and beyond. That is

particularly important because of the slowdown in the private house-building sector.

As we seek to meet the targets that have been set by Scotland's world-leading Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, making our houses as energy efficient and environmentally friendly as possible will go a long way towards reducing our carbon footprint. It is a virtuous circle that promotes innovation in industry and should help to save householders money by making not just the rent or purchase of a property affordable, but its maintenance as well.

One of the most significant policies of the Government, and perhaps of any Administration since devolution began, is the inclusion in the Housing (Scotland) Bill of the end of the right to buy, not just for new-build properties but for all new tenancies. Scrapping the right to buy will give councils and housing associations the confidence that they need in order to invest again in new high-quality homes that will help to produce a housing stock in Scotland that will serve our communities for generations.

I hope that the policy will have a transformative effect on our attitude to housing. Much of what Tricia Marwick said earlier was instructive about that. Let me be clear that I have no objection to individuals owning their homes, and I declare an interest as a home owner, or at least as someone who is paying back the bank. Since Margaret Thatcher introduced the right to buy, home ownership has become an end in itself. It is less about having a place to live and more about having capital, equity and an unending source of wealth generation. A person's house should be viewed primarily as their home rather than as an investment. Although it would be naive to expect people who own their home to be totally uninterested in its price, it should not be the be-all and end-all.

The change in the pattern of tenure has created a perception that someone who rents their home is inferior to someone who owns theirs. That is unfortunate. Social housing has certainly become less accessible, leaving many people with little choice but to pursue the private ownership option, and that in turn has helped to fuel what became the housing bubble that burst so spectacularly in the past few years. It should not be the case that someone who rents their home is somehow a failure.

The Scottish Government has acted in advance of the Housing (Scotland) Bill to help and encourage councils to build and attract more social housing to their areas. For example, last year it granted pressured area status to various parts of the Central Scotland region that I represent, including Cumbernauld and Moodiesburn. That has allowed the retention of

homes for rent for people who live in areas that are facing high demand for social housing.

There is no doubt that there is high demand for the limited stock in those areas, and the Government's policy gives councils the confidence to plan for the future and invest in new homes. No one can realistically expect local authorities to build new homes that will become liable for purchase quickly thereafter, so the suspension of the right to buy will act as an incentive to build new council houses.

I am delighted to see a number of new social housing developments in my home town of Cumbernauld. The minister will recall that he attended the opening of the new development at Lochlea Road in Kildrum and will, as I am, be delighted that the Cumbernauld Housing Partnership is today holding a public event to unveil its plans for the next phase of the Kildrum development at the former site of flats on Ainslie Road and Maclehose Road. The Government has also supported developments elsewhere in the town, thus increasing the availability of social rented accommodation in an area where it is desperately needed. That is welcomed by people whom I represent who are seeking new homes, and I am sure that it will be welcomed across the board in Parliament.

Of course, the private sector has been hit hardest by the recession, and the seizing up of the construction industry has exacerbated the housing shortage in Scotland. I therefore welcome the steps that the Scottish Government is taking or considering to improve the housing situation in the private sector for owned and rented properties. Schemes such as the low-cost initiative for first-time buyers have helped those who are on lower or moderate incomes to get on to the housing ladder. The energy assistance package and home insulation scheme have helped home owners to make their properties more energy efficient and cheaper to run. The forthcoming private rented housing bill will also introduce new safeguards for private sector tenants, and it will increase landlords' responsibilities to repair and maintain their properties. Those requirements can help to drive up standards, improve energy efficiency, reduce carbon emissions and stimulate jobs in the associated economy.

However, as long as we remain with the current devolution settlement, the Government is not in a position to reduce VAT for home repairs and improvements, or to use the taxation system to provide incentives for green and energy-efficiency measures or, most fundamentally of all, to redirect resources to housing from other areas, such as the billions that are to be lavished on a new generation of nuclear weapons. Why do we not spend more on housing than we do on weapons of

mass destruction? In housing, as in so many areas of policy, we reach the limits of devolution and the case for more powers and independence becomes clearer.

There can be no denying that significant progress has been made since 2007 in tackling the housing challenges that face Scotland. The Government's consultation on the new strategy is further evidence of its vision and ambition, and of its willingness to find new and creative policies to ensure safe and warm homes for all.

10:32

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I declare an interest as listed in the register of members' interests as I proudly serve as a Labour and Co-operative Party member. I will therefore rise to Linda Fabiani's bait; I had not planned to do so but I will. Linda Fabiani either suffers from selective amnesia or she simply does not know the facts. In the 11 years that I have served in Parliament, I have been proud to see the work of people such as Cathy Jamieson, Johann Lamont, Bill Butler and a number of other colleagues who serve under the banner as I serve. They fought in and outside the Cabinet to get the Co-operative Development Scotland agency established, and have the scars to prove it. That work has been absolutely essential.

In addition, I point to some of my Westminster friends and colleagues, primarily my constituency colleague, Gordon Brown, as well as Alistair Darling, Ed Balls and Mark Lazarowicz. Each of them has proposed changes to enabling legislation at Westminster to help housing and every kind of co-operative across the land. I am proud of the work that they have done.

I go back to recent events and Nicola Sturgeon, and to how Linda Fabiani pressed her voting button just three or four months ago when we were considering the general medical services contracts. Today she had the hypocrisy to speak about supporting co-operatives and co-operative models, but when it came to empowering communities in rural areas and providing the facility of community enterprise and co-operatives, she chose not to support that. She chose only to support social enterprise. Linda Fabiani is being completely hypocritical in her approach to the debate.

Linda Fabiani: Will the member take an intervention?

Helen Eadie: No, I will not. Linda Fabiani has had her chance to speak.

Linda Fabiani *rose—*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Wait a minute, Mrs Eadie. It is entirely up to the member

who has the floor whether they take an intervention or not.

Helen Eadie: My contribution this morning will focus on builders' missives, an issue that has rarely been discussed in Parliament. The collapse in construction, and mortgage funds being drastically reduced, are devastating the lives of some new-build home buyers.

Buying a new-build home from a plan has been the start of a worst-ever nightmare for many people throughout Scotland. People from all over—from Motherwell, the Borders, Glasgow, Fife, Aberdeen, England and Ireland—have contacted me on the issue, and trading standards officials, members of the legal profession and academics have written to me and have supported and commended my efforts to protect purchasers of new-build properties in Scotland. If members are interested, I can share with them an extract from the text of a lecture relating to the contractual complexities and a view on what the solution is, which was given jointly by Professor George L Gretton and Professor Kenneth Reid to Scottish solicitors around the country in January and February of 2009.

I have, however, reached an impasse in my work because the Scottish Parliament's non-Executive bills unit has determined that the issue is a reserved matter, although the Government at Westminster has said that it believes that it is a devolved matter. So, I am caught in a no man's land, with neither the UK Government nor the Scottish Government seeming to be willing to help. It would have been helpful if the non-Executive bills unit had advised me of the competence issue at the outset of my work. I am very disappointed and frustrated that it did not do so until the end of the consultation period on my proposal for a member's bill. Despite that, I remain tenacious and will continue to highlight the need for new laws to protect buyers of new-build homes who are forced to wait helplessly while entry dates are pushed back months or even years by developers.

The worst nightmare of which I am aware is a five-year wait for a date of entry into a new-build home. The individuals concerned have taken the best legal advice, but it is more than ever clear that builders' missives are weighted entirely in favour of the property developer. The 2003 housing strategy task force acknowledged the problem in its report to the Scottish Executive. The conveyancing committee of the Law Society of Scotland, working with the Scottish Government and Scottish Homes, made recommendations that included the introduction of a standard missive for new-build properties that would provide a balance of rights for buyer and seller, but that has never happened.

The UK Office of Fair Trading also acknowledged the problem in its report, but its recommendation was for a voluntary code of practice among property developers. I questioned the wisdom of that approach at the time, and I have been proved right. I scarcely need to tell members that the voluntary code is simply not working. Here we are, eight years later, and the problems are getting worse.

I have won support from frustrated families all over Scotland and beyond. My bill would seek to give compensation and the right to withdraw from the contract if the developer did not meet the commitment to have the home ready by the date that was agreed at the time of the deposit's being paid. At the moment, the scales are weighted entirely in favour of the developer.

My most recent case involved a couple from Aberdeenshire who purchased a property. The developer did not deliver on time but would not allow the couple to withdraw from the contract. Two years later, having been silent on the matter for the whole time in between, he contacted the couple to say that the home was ready and demanded that they purchase the property. The Stewart Milne Group, on behalf of the company concerned, took the couple to court and they are now without a home of their own. They have had sequestration and their wages arrested and are left with a huge bill to pay for the rest of their lives.

Another individual lost £50,000 and another lost £40,000—and my list continues to grow. I have also had two cases in Dunfermline East. That is not to mention anything like all the cases that I know of. Solicitors are well aware of the problem and will give chapter and verse on it.

Once again, we have a situation that is on-going and people simply do not care about it. Government ministers do not want to know about it. A report by the former Scottish Consumer Council says that delays of many months, sometimes years, have been widely reported in Scotland as causing problems for buyers, especially if they have a fixed date for the sale of their own property. The Law Society of Scotland and Homes for Scotland, the body that represents the Scottish home-building industry, have worked together on the issue but the problem continues. I hope that Parliament listens to what I am saying. I had a proposal for a member's bill.

10:39

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): The present Scottish Government has brought a number of housing debates to the chamber since May 2007, and I am glad that the trend has continued. Its discussion paper, "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas", correctly refers to some

interesting questions associated with the challenges to a large number of people who are on waiting lists, and with how housing can act as an economic driver.

In examining why the Scottish Government has launched its discussion on housing and issues surrounding the housing strategy, we must consider the historical backdrop. Over the past 30 years, the UK Government has had repeated policies of large-scale voluntary stock transfers, which have produced many changes in provision. Moreover, in the recent past, there was a push by the previous two Scottish Executives towards large-scale voluntary transfers of public-sector housing, marketed as community ownership. Some people might say that that was pushing the concept of community ownership a bit too far.

In terms of the consultation paper, "Investing in Affordable Housing", there has been criticism that the housing association grant has been reduced. Currently, registered social landlords such as housing associations do not have to comply with the centralised rent-setting regime. Although some housing associations—especially those that have expanded through stock transfer—can calculate annual rent increases according to the retail prices index plus 1 per cent, a great many housing associations do not set their rents at RPI plus 1 per cent. The housing association grant is a public subsidy, and when it was introduced it was not supposed to be there for ever and a day. Throughout the previous Administration, the grant was on a downward path.

That issue ties up with the wider issue of housing affordability. In the current financial climate, people cannot afford rents at the current rates in the private rented sector; therefore, more people on waiting lists will look to social housing to obtain a house. In the area where I stay, North Lanarkshire, the number of applicants on the housing register as of 31 March 2007 was 12,851 and the number of applicants on the register at 31 March 2009 was 17,698—an increase over the period, despite the fact that North Lanarkshire Council tried to change the housing waiting list criteria for people who were applying for a council house. In that context, I welcome the fact that the consultation paper highlights the need for fairer rents although, as I stated earlier, rent setting is limited to landlords.

The Scottish Government does not operate in a vacuum in setting its policy objectives. As members have said this morning, Scotland is constrained under the current devolved settlement. That is even more apparent in the housing benefit changes that were announced by the UK Government in its June 2010 budget. A more responsive and effective welfare system will not be achieved through arbitrary changes in

housing benefit, whereby anyone who is in receipt of jobseekers allowance will have their housing benefit reduced by 10 per cent after being unemployed for 12 months or longer.

Although some members welcomed and supported the right-to-buy legislation that was introduced in 1979, it has meant increased waiting lists for council housing since it was enacted, and that has clearly impacted on local authorities' ability to meet the homelessness targets that have been set for them under the current Scottish housing legislation. The burden of responsibility to house people who present as homeless currently lies with local authorities, which has real implications for the tenants who are on the authorities' housing waiting and transfer lists. I have a constituent who has been waiting 18 years for a house transfer but keeps being told by the local authority that they cannot get the house that they are after because someone has presented as homeless and is a greater priority for the local authority. My constituent ends up losing out and not getting a transfer.

As stated by Gavin McCrone and Mark Stephens in their 1995 publication, "Housing Policy in Britain and Europe", the housing structures in Scotland are unique. Both those academics advocate a position of tenure neutrality. I suggest that, in Scotland, we have for far too long had a tenure policy rather than a fully structured housing policy.

Scotland has been severely tested by the recent economic climate, and households in all sectors have been increasingly exposed to the economic downturn, which has led to significantly higher levels of short-term or variable debt. Since 1997, personal consumption has been correspondingly more sensitive to interest rate movements, which has affected people's ability to service their mortgage payments at any given time. The repossession rates in Scotland are therefore likely to increase, although we have not seen the level of repossessions that was expected and had been predicted. Such an increase will place further strains on the provision of housing, particularly in the social rented sector.

I welcome today's debate and look forward to many of the issues that arise being taken forward in the coming months and years. We can develop a real housing strategy that benefits all sectors in society, and we can offer individuals real choice and opportunity so that they can choose the tenure and ownership sector that they want rather than having it forced on them through the provision of whatever housing is available.

10:46

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I have had the privilege of being the minister for housing twice during my time in the Parliament. During my first period in office I was asked to introduce the homelessness legislation, which was greatly denounced at the time by Shelter for not going far enough but a month later became the leading legislation in Europe.

I am particularly proud that I introduced the supporting people initiative. However, I echo the comments from members earlier in the debate about the problems that people who have been greatly privileged by that scheme now face as local authorities seek, following the end of ring fencing, to strip away or reduce financial contributions to individuals. We will hear a lot more of that, along with reductions in housing benefit.

Alex Neil: I am sure that Des McNulty will welcome the amendments that the Government will lodge at stage 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill to introduce pre-eviction protocol for people in rent arrears. That is partly to ensure that the support goes in first, so that we have a strategy of prevention rather than waiting until the problem becomes very difficult.

Des McNulty: Prevention is always desirable in such circumstances.

In my second period of office, I initiated second-stage transfer in Glasgow, which the minister and his predecessors have taken forward. Glasgow Housing Association is moving on the right track, and those of us who are just over the border see the amount of investment that is going into areas throughout Glasgow and wish that we were getting the same attention; I will return to that issue in a minute.

I signed off the 80,000 house starts in the 2007-08 budget, which provide the foundation of some of the claims that the Government is making about its investment pattern. We must look at what is happening this year and next year to see where we are going with regard to the number of houses, as there are some serious problems.

As the minister came to Clydebank earlier this week, I am sure that he will not be surprised that I want to talk about the area. One of the things that he said during his visit was that in relation to investment, there is a balance between drivers of need, drivers of homelessness and drivers of regeneration. We were talking about regeneration, because some areas of Clydebank—the minister was taken to see Salisbury Place, and he would have seen the same circumstances if he had gone to the Clydebank East area—have in effect become derelict. There is a need for a selective demolition and replacement process for that type of housing.

I hope that that type of regeneration is given appropriate priority, but I say to the minister that Clydebank suffers a need issue too; it is not just a matter of regeneration. Malcolm Chisholm said earlier in the debate that at every surgery he holds he gets at least one person complaining about inadequate housing. I have to say that I get substantially more than that.

There is a significant excess of people who are looking for houses in Clydebank in comparison with the number of houses that are available. Roughly 400 to 500 houses are available in Clydebank each year, but the number of people on the waiting list is around 6,000. Given the relative size of the place, those numbers compare similarly with the situation that John Wilson described in North Lanarkshire.

Places such as West Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire and parts of Lanarkshire require significant amounts of investment, and I disagree with Malcolm Chisholm that the money that is available should be given to places such as Edinburgh where there is absolute need. I say that as someone who represents an area—Bearsden and Milngavie—which, statistically, has the highest level of absolute need in Scotland. That area needs some investment, but the right balance must be struck. Clydebank needs investment too, particularly because there is a real risk that it will not come anywhere near to meeting the Scottish quality housing standard by 2015.

The estimates that the council has made suggest that in order to reach the Scottish quality housing standard, the amount that is invested per house would need to be £25,000, which is a very high figure even in comparison with Dunbarton, and double the amount that would be needed elsewhere in Dunbartonshire. It is higher than the equivalent figure in Glasgow, and that is to do with the construction history of Clydebank and the fact that so much of it was rebuilt after the blitz in the 1950s and early 1960s. A lot of the building methods that were used at that time were intended to produce buildings with a lifespan of 20 or 30 years, and many of those buildings have now vastly outlived the amount of time that they were initially expected to last.

We want and need investment in Clydebank, and I want the Government to be clear, if it does not favour stock transfer, about what the alternatives are that will actually deliver investment. West Dunbartonshire Council is going into a consultation about a potential partial stock transfer—I am unsure about that business model, and I want to know how the money will be delivered to ensure that the houses that we have are brought up to standard and the houses that are past their sell-by date will be replaced by other houses, which are needed in that area.

We have a relatively high percentage of non-traditional housing, which includes houses built using different construction methods, flat-roofed houses and a significant proportion of high-rise housing. Those are the same type of buildings that are being demolished in Glasgow by the GHA, but that is not happening in Clydebank. I do not want a situation in which Clydebank or places in Renfrewshire or Lanarkshire become residual locations because they are, in a sense, at the bottom of the investment heap or the back of the investment queue.

There is a problem with antisocial behaviour, to pick up Alex Johnstone's point. However, the issue is not how we deal with that as individuals but how we prevent landlords from putting in people with known histories of antisocial behaviour or serious behavioural issues, which may arise from drug or alcohol problems. The landlords know about those problems, but they simply rehouse those people and do not put in place the support and the monitoring to ensure that they do not cause problems for their neighbours. We have to ensure that we invest in houses and manage them properly.

10:54

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): We all talk about human rights to things such as safety from violence, education and legal representation, but among all those must be ranked the human right to a house, to shelter and to somewhere to live. I have a fairly important quotation from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was agreed on behalf of the peoples of the United Nations in 1948. Nothing has changed since then, and unfortunately this right has not been delivered in every situation since it was expressed. The declaration states:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services".

Housing was recognised as a human right in 1948, but it is still not enjoyed by everyone in society. That is why I welcome the document "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas", which looks to address the fact that we all have the right to a home.

I remember the clearance of tenemental property when I lived by the Clyde in Partick. Everybody else has mentioned where they come from, so I thought that I might as well slip that in. Back then, we still had enough shipyards to go round. The housing was not in the best condition, though, and we were moved to a four-in-a-block in Knightswood. It was all very nice. It was next to a canal and we could look across the canal and see the coos in the field. It was really pleasant. We

were cleared from an area of multiple deprivation. That was a success for us, but many of our neighbours in Partick moved from slums that were nevertheless communities that held jobs, shopping and transport into town, to deserts wi windaes, as Billy Connolly said. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

I am happy that community housing associations in Glasgow and throughout Scotland have become the way forward and that they are continuing to develop mixed tenure with good-quality social rented homes and affordable owner-occupier properties. It is important that communities can remain together. Aspirational or not, people like to live in communities, and it is important to have a range of tenure within them. That is the way forward.

Alex Johnstone: Does the member accept that nothing has worked in the creation of mixed tenure communities like the right to buy did during its operation in Scotland?

Bill Kidd: I know that Alex Johnstone likes to make that point. In fact, he is beating it to death today. I understand the right to buy. I know that many people took up the offer, but I also know that, if we were clearing slums anywhere in Glasgow today, the people would not be able to move to Knightswood as we did, because most of those nice houses have been bought over and only the poorer properties are left behind. We need to have mixed tenure housing developed and built and we need to ensure that there is a future for people to have proper, decent rented accommodation if that is what they choose or what they can afford. I appreciate that people had the right to buy and that it afforded many people on low incomes an opportunity to own their homes. I will not deny that, because I know a lot of people who did exactly that, but it is still important that people who need a registered social home can access one.

The progression of second-stage transfer from the monolithic Glasgow Housing Association to the community housing association control will see, at last, the re-establishment of viable communities in the city of Glasgow. That is the way forward these days. The GHA had 70,000 to 80,000 properties. It is not viable for such an organisation to be set up and to last forever when it was supposed to bring homes closer to communities. It is therefore important that the second-stage transfer is carried through. Des McNulty mentioned that he was greatly involved in that. That is recognised, but it was extremely important that it came to fruition, and that took place under the present Government, with the minister who is sitting in front of us today. I thank him for ensuring that the process is, at long last, under way, but we must remember that there is still a long way to go. A

number of housing associations and communities in Glasgow are looking for the roll-out. I am grateful that the minister indicated to us recently that that will be carried through.

With the changing demographic of the Scottish population, there is an increasing need for local flexibility in housing provision. There are more single-person households than at any time in the past, including not only young people who have left home—although many young people cannot afford to do that these days—but those in the growing elderly population in Scotland. Many of those older people are living in homes that are not suitable for them and they will require something else in order to see out their days in the community that they have lived in. However, with the growing financial constraints, less money is available to build specialist housing for the elderly and those with disabilities.

We need support for independent living and the development of new ways to provide support through the best use of new and existing technologies, as well as updates on standard adaptations. We must ensure that local authorities act on their new duty to provide support for disabled adaptations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should wind up, please.

Bill Kidd: I did not realise that I had taken so long.

Organisations such as Bield Housing Association provide remote support centrally to allow people to continue living in their homes, often with the help of aids and adaptations. I welcome the Scottish Government's "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas" and look forward to its implementation for the benefit of all our people.

11:01

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Housing is one of the most important issues that we face. We are really struggling to meet our homelessness targets, and without a house building programme that shows a year-on-year increase in the number of houses that we build, we will not meet them.

This summer, we received the figures for the new affordable homes that were built last year. Those figures show the effect of bringing forward spending on housing last year. I agreed with the policy of bringing forward that spending, but I am concerned that it led to our having a much smaller budget this year and that we are therefore unlikely to be able to build on the increase that we saw this summer. That will affect not only people who are homeless or inadequately housed, but construction workers and the wider economy. We

need to build houses not only to provide homes but to provide jobs and apprenticeships. At a time when building companies will deliver good value for money, we should be building those homes, and we should be building public buildings for the same reasons.

Nicola Sturgeon boasts that our largest hospital is being built in Glasgow using traditional funding methods. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Could members hold conversations more quietly, please?

Rhoda Grant: Although we all welcome the building of that hospital, it will take an enormous chunk of the Government's overall capital budget. If it was funded differently, say through a public-private partnership, we would have that additional capital available for house building, which is not so easily procured through PPP. The Government is looking at funding the new Forth crossing in a similar way, although that might prove impossible as it would wipe out the capital budget for a number of years. We need to look at ways of funding major building projects that also allow us to continue building homes, schools and hospitals. That said, we also need to look at alternative ways of funding housing. I welcome the minister's comments this morning, but, as always, the devil is in the detail. I look forward to seeing some more of that detail.

In the present economic climate, it is important that we ensure that the whole public sector is looking at innovative ways to continue building. It is disappointing that the Government, which has dumped so many of its ideological beliefs and reneged on so many of its promises, still holds one dear. It is also deeply disturbing that its opposition to PPP is putting those in the construction industry out of work, robbing young people of jobs, and leaving our children learning in inadequate schools. The Government pledged to match our building programme brick for brick and to build new schools and hospitals using the Scottish Futures Trust, but that is a procurement body and not a funding body, and again the pledge has been dumped. It is time for the Government to wake up to the reality that we find ourselves in and take some action. We need to get the country back building homes, schools and hospitals.

I turn to rural housing and an issue that has concerned me for a long time. I feel a bit like a stuck record, but I make no apologies for continuing to mention the issue until it is sorted. The Government has to get rid of the assumed rent in calculating additional housing association grants for rural areas. I see no reason for imposing that rent. Affordable rent levels in the local area will be available as a comparator for those that are proposed by the housing association.

Alex Neil: Is the member aware that we have introduced a separate set of calculations for rural areas that take account of the affordability of rents in rural areas and the lower incomes in many rural areas compared with the Scottish average? We are already addressing that issue.

Rhoda Grant: I very much welcome the change in the formula for rural areas, but there is still an assumed rent. Rent levels have to be determined by the housing association in the local area. The formula that is in place is still not adequate for building some houses. It covers many rural buildings, but some are really expensive due to servicing, land prices and the like and need further action. John Wilson talked about the important issue of the ability of housing associations to use reserves. The assumed rent and what financial institutions require as rent levels stop building. I welcome the fact that the minister is considering those issues, which are quite complex, and welcome the change in the formula, but there is still work to be done. I welcome that work being carried out.

When we talk about affordable housing, we need to talk about not only affordable rents, but the affordability of maintenance and heating. When I visited the Scottish housing expo with Mary Mulligan this summer, I was fascinated to see what could be done by design and technology to cut costs. While we were walking around, we got to the point at which we saw that a house's heating costs were more than £200 per annum and asked why it was so expensive to heat. Houses had renewables incorporated into them—normally air-source heat pumps—but they mostly depended on insulation and design to cut costs. The insulation that was used was of a higher specification than that in the current regulations, but it appeared to me that such insulation would pay for itself very quickly. One house had no heating at all; rather, design and heat exchange were used to keep it warm. I remain slightly sceptical about how that would work in the winter months, but I was assured that the technology had come from Scandinavia, which enjoys even worse winters than we do.

The expo challenged many of the ideas that I had about housing design. It was really worth while for policy makers, developers and architects to exchange policies and ideas, and I hope that it will not be the last such expo. I hope that we will look at finding other ways of exchanging ideas and best practice.

Fuel poverty remains a huge challenge, not only with respect to new stock; we need to look at our older stock, too. Insulating older buildings is more challenging, but many of our elderly people live in such buildings. Therefore, we need to take that on board.

In conclusion, I hope that the minister will take my comments on board. Obviously, some of those comments are less palatable than others. I welcome the progress that is being made and hope that my comments will be considered further.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to speak in this debate.

11:08

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): This debate, which is based on the Government's document "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas", is important. The Government claims that that document is a search for innovative policy ideas, and Alex Neil said that we must do more to increase the availability of housing. It is right and important that he outlined the 10 major challenges that we face, which include reaching the 2012 homelessness target, the 2016 Scottish housing quality standard targets and carbon emission targets for 2020. It is also helpful to look forward to what is likely to happen in those ensuing periods, particularly in population growth, which the minister talked about, and with the budget challenges that we face in meeting many targets in the coming years. Many members have outlined those budget challenges.

According to the minister, it is likely that there will be more than 100,000 people on waiting lists, so there are real challenges for all of us. Longer waiting lists are caused by a number of factors, not least of which is our low housing stock as a result of the right to buy.

My colleague Ross Finnie said that "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas" sets out the problems, but it does not seem to me that it contains any new ideas. I am glad that Ross Finnie clarified that. He said that the current housing model is unsustainable and that house price inflation has brought the system to its knees. I hope that the minister agrees that we need to take decisions now and that he will progress matters when he sums up in the debate and with the housing legislation in the coming weeks. I am sure that we all aim to increase the supply of affordable housing. Ross Finnie said that void or vacant stock simply deteriorates. That is often the case. We need to see whether there are innovative ways by which we can bring that stock back into good use.

Patricia Ferguson said that we need to maintain a construction industry and the skills in it. I could not agree more. However, the key issue for many of us is funding. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has clarified the cost issue well. It said:

"The average Housing Association Grant ... award is £68,500 (and £70,000 for rural areas). We welcome the

recognition of higher cost elements in rural areas where costs are often higher. HAG currently funds up to 70 per cent of the cost of building a house."

Where the rest of the money comes from has to be better worked out and it must be more secure in the future. Ross Finnie mentioned that the private sector must play a vital role in ensuring that funding is brought forward to tackle the housing crisis in Scotland and that the recession must not damage the homelessness target. That is a key issue that we must tackle.

Malcolm Chisholm said that housing must have priority over transport. That was a brave statement. He talked about the supporting people money that he brought forward and said that he regrets the removal of ring fencing. I can agree with him on that latterly.

On allocations and common housing registers, Ross Finnie said that the SNP was initially opposed to stock transfers, but it has revelled in new projects that have arisen. That has certainly been the case in many debates in the Parliament in the past three and a half years. In my experience, the common housing register in Fife has worked well for the council and many housing associations. The Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland has said that it

"agrees that Common Housing Registers should exist in every local authority area in Scotland. It should also be easy for people in one area to get information about the register in other areas."

I certainly agree with that. It has also said:

"we believe that the development of a national CHR should be avoided at all costs, due to the likely complexity and expense".

That is a well-balanced assessment of the issues.

Many members focused on the right to buy and possible reforms of the system. I understand what Ross Finnie said. Preserving the right to buy absolutely is simply not defensible, but our Conservative colleagues have defended it and have sought to have that issue brought forward again and again. Over the past 30 years, it has been quite common in Scotland to lose three quarters of the housing stock. Not nearly enough of that has been replaced. The Tories have had their heads in the sand on that issue again and again. I hope that, in the coming weeks and months, the Lib Dems will lead the charge for right-to-buy reforms. We have mentioned that today, and I hope that there will be appropriate reforms in the coming housing bill.

Jamie Hepburn spoke up well in saying that he wants to scrap the right to buy. In summing up, will the minister say whether he agrees with him? I certainly agree that rental is not inferior to ownership. Rental is not a failure in our society and it should not be viewed as such. John Wilson,

who is another SNP back bencher who has strong views on the matter, touched on increased waiting lists as a result of the right to buy and homelessness adding to the lists. People can sometimes wait more than 10 or 15 years to get a decent property that meets their housing needs.

AHIP has been discussed, although perhaps not enough. Mary Mulligan spoke about it well. She welcomed the new homes that it has brought forward for the Scottish Government, but it does not fill the gap in funding for future years. I recall standing here as housing spokesperson in 2007-08 arguing that point strongly with the minister's predecessor, Stewart Maxwell. This Government has failed to address the point. We have needed that investment, those houses and those skills that house building would have provided. However, we now have a gap that is not being filled and which is leaving a bigger difficulty in the market.

The Lib Dems welcome the focus on this debate. I hope that the minister is not just in listening mode, but that he is willing to support the challenges that the Lib Dems will bring to stage 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill—fresh thinking and new ideas will come from the Lib Dems. Today is a springboard for change, so let us grab the challenge and ensure that we provide good-quality, affordable houses for rent for many years into the future.

11:15

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands)
(Con): It is ironic that a housing document published by an SNP Government is entitled "Housing: Fresh Thinking, New Ideas", given that the hallmark of the Government's housing policy to date is devotion to a back-to-the-future municipal socialism of which Uncle Joe would have been proud.

In 2007, the progressive way forward for housing in Scotland would have been to continue the process of housing stock transfer to new or existing housing associations and to take up the generous offer made by Her Majesty's Government to write off all housing debt related to the transferred properties, as of course happened in Glasgow and the five other local authorities that adopted that approach. The new housing association managers would have provided existing tenants with an improved standard of customer service and they would have had available to them a stream of rental income against which new borrowings could be incurred to upgrade their existing housing stock or build new affordable homes for rent or sale.

Alex Neil: Can the member confirm the rumours that the Treasury under George Osborne will no longer facilitate that kind of stock transfer?

David McLetchie: No, I cannot confirm that one way or the other. If I were the housing minister in the Scottish Government I would have got out my pen and paper to seek clarification for myself. That is Mr Neil's responsibility at the moment, not mine.

Despite Tricia Marwick's denials, we have had an SNP Government and a Scottish National Party that are at best neutral and at worst downright hostile to the whole concept of stock transfer. As a consequence, the opportunity to wipe out the remaining £2.2 billion of housing debt in Scotland and to invest hundreds of millions of pounds of new money in our affordable stock has been lost through an act of sheer negligence or political spite.

The Government has launched an attack on the concept of the right to buy and has embarked on a policy that in some instances will end that right and in others will ensure that it withers on the vine through the diminution over time in the value of the discount. Shamefully, that policy has been supported by Labour and the Liberal Democrats who are equally culpable in ensuring that another £100 million will not be available to either councils or housing associations from right-to-buy receipts. That means less money for new affordable housing programmes throughout Scotland.

Jim Tolson: Will the member give way?

David McLetchie: No, thank you.

Finally, the SNP has been determined to promote new council house building and takes great delight in castigating the previous Scottish Executive for having built only six council houses in its last four years in office. Such childish behaviour completely ignores the fact that what matters is not who builds affordable homes but that there are affordable homes to rent or buy. Homes sold under the right to buy were not towed into the middle of the North Sea and sunk; they continue to provide affordable homes for the working people who bought them, or their successors. The previous Scottish Executive is not to be castigated but commended for having sensibly continued a Conservative policy of identifying housing associations as the appropriate and principal developers and managers of new affordable housing in Scotland.

We can debate further some of the issues in the context of the current Housing (Scotland) Bill, but it is worth making those fundamental points, because what the new ideas document is essentially about is how we facilitate capital investment in new housing in Scotland, particularly affordable housing, at a time when there will be unprecedented pressures on the public purse and likely cuts in the affordable housing investment programme. As everyone knows, I believe that one key way to plug that funding gap would be to

extend rather than restrict the right to buy and generate receipts from those sales, but I recognise that the Parliament is unlikely to agree with me.

Another key way that might find greater favour, even if through the gritted teeth of necessity, is to facilitate more private investment in affordable housing for rent. I welcome Ross Finnie's comments on that subject on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. As far as possible, investors in any assets want a secure income return and the prospect of capital appreciation over time. In the past, no one would have considered housing for the homeless as falling into that category, but in fact it fits the bill perfectly. Through housing benefit, the state underwrites rental payments and a management company, funded from the same source, takes responsibility for repairs, voids, tenant support and liaison. In Edinburgh, the private sector leasing scheme, which was established by the formerly Labour council with Orchard and Shipman, has built a portfolio of 1,600 properties that are currently occupied by formerly homeless people who would otherwise have ended up in bed and breakfasts. I am told that at least 3,000 more flats and homes owned by buy-to-let investors could readily be brought into the scheme, such is its popularity with landlords.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the member give way?

John Wilson: Will the member take an intervention?

David McLetchie: No, I am sorry; I have only a couple of minutes left.

I welcome the fact that other councils are now looking at such schemes as a way of addressing the 2012 homelessness target. We have to work out what interventions from the Scottish Government and councils can facilitate such investment and extend it beyond housing for the homeless to housing for other categories of tenants, including tenants who are in work and not wholly reliant on housing benefit. In essence, that means providing a guaranteed income return on capital to investors, relieving them from management responsibilities that can be undertaken by a housing association or private company, and flexible tenancy arrangements. As well as using properties directly owned by individual investors, we should encourage the establishment of housing investment trusts whereby investors would buy units or shares from a fund, which in turn would invest in new social housing for rent.

In fairness to the Scottish Government, its consultation looks at how private sector, individual and institutional investment might be harnessed to increase the supply of affordable housing for rent in Scotland. My criticism of the Government is not

what is now under consideration, but the sheer incoherence of its housing policy. For over three years the Government has deliberately spurned the investment opportunities available through stock transfer and right to buy, but now pleads that it wants to know how it can raise more money for housing investment. To have fresh thinking, one needs a fresh mindset. Past performance suggests that this Government is not in the right frame of mind.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mary Mulligan has eight and a half minutes.

11:23

Mary Mulligan: Thank you, Presiding Officer, for being so precise.

This has been a thoughtful debate in which we have shown how varied and complex housing strategy can be. It has been quite a serious debate, although we can always depend on Mr McLetchie to give us a laugh.

In my opening comments I referred mostly to public sector housing, but a well-developed housing strategy cannot ignore the owner-occupied sector and the private rented sector. Before I respond to some of the points made by members, I will add a couple of my own. As we heard earlier, just a few years ago house builders were completing over 20,000 houses a year with much talk of increasing that. Latest statistics show that the total number of both public and private houses built last year fell to just over 16,000, which is the lowest figure in the past 10 years. Apart from that resulting in fewer housing choices for individuals and families, it has led to the latest homelessness figures showing that the number of households in temporary accommodation has risen to almost 11,000—an 8 per cent increase since last year. Statistics also show that more than 150,000 people are on the waiting lists that the minister referred to earlier. The minister is absolutely right that whoever forms the Government after next May's election, it would be wise for them to review the housing waiting lists so that we have a clear view of their numbers and make-up so as to reflect the needs of the people on them.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I apologise for not being here earlier—I was at another meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth. Given what the member has just said, does she dissociate herself from a rumour that I heard that around Clydebank and Milngavie way there is a feeling that Edinburgh should not be counted in the statistics on homelessness? There is a complete disregard for the fact that on average 130 families apply for every house that comes up in Edinburgh.

Mary Mulligan: Housing need should be addressed wherever it is—we should take it seriously. I hope that in her meeting with the finance minister, Margo MacDonald urged him to invest in housing programmes in the future.

The other serious implication of the drop in new-build homes is the loss of jobs. In excess of 200,000 people have lost their jobs in the construction industry. There are fewer and fewer opportunities for apprenticeships and the worry is that when the economy starts to pick up, skills will be in short supply or lost. In such circumstances, Governments must do what they can. On a number of occasions, the Minister for Housing and Communities and I have discussed whether the Scottish Government would be able to establish an infrastructure fund. I have always received a positive response to my questions but, so far, we have seen nothing, despite the fact that professionals and businesses in the housing industry continue to say that one of the barriers to new build is around financing infrastructure. Perhaps not even a grant but a loan could be given to ensure that that happens. I would be interested to hear the minister's comments on that.

We all know, and we have heard again today, that the demographics show an increasing number of older people. Although we all hope that we will remain young and active, we must be honest and accept that at some stage we might need a little support in our living environment. Sheltered housing is often seen as a good way to allow people to remain independent but access relevant support. It is disappointing that when the Scottish Government was asked how many sheltered housing units had been built it said that it did not know. The Government does not have a strategy for sheltered housing—it appears to pass all responsibility for that to local authorities.

Does the minister know that there is a financial hurdle, too? Many people who have taken advantage of the right to buy, which has been much discussed today, are coming to an age when sheltered housing might seem attractive. However, if they sell their property and move into sheltered housing, the service charges can be prohibitive. Some housing associations, such as Bield Housing Association in my constituency, offer a shared ownership scheme alongside a sheltered housing development. Let us hear about more such innovative ways of working, for which I praised the housing associations earlier. The Scottish Government could certainly provide a further lead on that.

Although we often refer to the challenges of housing for older people, we should not forget the equally challenging situation for those who are looking to leave the family home. The likelihood of their being able to get a council house is slim and,

as we all know, it is now very difficult to get a mortgage without a substantial deposit, which young people will struggle to find, so private rented accommodation appears to be the only answer. The Scottish Government must continue to build affordable rented housing. I would be interested to hear good examples of housing associations that have targeted the young persons market. We need to push on with better regulation of the private rented sector. The bill on private sector housing that the minister will be bringing forward should address some of those issues further. We need to explore further all types of shared ownership options for those who are starting out.

One of the issues that has been to the fore in today's debate is housing benefit, which David McLetchie mentioned in his winding-up speech. There is grave concern about the changes to housing benefit that seem to be coming from the coalition Government at Westminster. There is great uncertainty and worry for individuals and families. There is also concern from housing providers—how can they plan for the future if their rent income is to be challenged in that way? I cannot imagine anything more likely to put off private sector landlords than the concern that they will lose their housing benefit income or have it reduced.

The right to buy has also been to the fore. Alex Johnstone, Jamie Hepburn and others have all spoken about the advantages and disadvantages that have arisen from the right to buy. The previous Executive made significant changes to it by reducing the cost floor and introducing pressured area status. I acknowledge that the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which the Local Government and Communities Committee is considering at the moment, will make further changes to it, to balance the proportion of people coming forward. However, I have to wonder whether the minister has told Jamie Hepburn that he is not scrapping the right to buy altogether, because I do not think that he got that point.

Linda Fabiani mentioned co-ops. I do not think that I need to respond to her comments, which I found quite misleading, because Helen Eadie did a more than adequate job.

The minister said at the beginning of the debate that a number of targets needed to be achieved over the coming years. The Scottish quality housing standard is one of the most challenging targets. My colleague Des McNulty referred to a number of councils around Scotland that are trying to flag up that they will have difficulty achieving it. Perhaps the Scottish Government would like to consider that further.

As I said at the beginning of the debate, I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government

has finally realised that we need a housing strategy. For the past three and a half years, no one in Government has provided that overview. For all its problems, that is what Communities Scotland provided, but it was abolished in haste at the beginning of the Government's term in office. I am sure that the minister hears, as I do, that people in housing now regret its demise.

We have heard many thoughtful contributions on how a strategy should be developed. I am grateful to the minister for starting the debate and I hope that whoever is in power after May next year will take the strategy forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have until 11:40, minister.

11:32

Alex Neil: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I want to cover three specific points that members made in their contributions. In response to Linda Fabiani's worthwhile and interesting contribution, I confirm that we are committed to looking at how we can further develop the co-operative principle in the housing sector. I am happy to take forward any new ideas that we think are achievable.

Linda Fabiani: Does the minister recall that when the Labour Party in this Parliament extended the right to buy, many co-operatives that were not fully mutual felt obliged to change their rules so that they could become charitable? Now we have Labour's Calman proposals, which will disadvantage fully mutual co-operatives. Does the minister agree that the mutual sector in Scotland has suffered a double whammy from the Labour Party?

Alex Neil: I absolutely agree with Linda Fabiani. We will do what we can to rectify as much as we can in the future.

Housing support is a valid concern of everyone in the chamber and we are addressing it through the joint working party that we have with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and, in relation to homelessness, with the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations. It is not just about homelessness, however; people who are not facing homelessness sometimes require housing support, too. There is no doubt that the quality and range of services available can be variable. We need to look at that in depth for the future.

I want to clarify that we have no ideological objection to stock transfer per se. What Mr McLetchie fails to understand is that in most cases in which the proposal was put to the people in a ballot—not least in Edinburgh—they rejected it. I should point out that, having picked up the mess left by our predecessors at Glasgow Housing

Association, which had not approved any second-stage transfers, we have in the pipeline and are making substantial progress with 20,000 second-stage transfers that will be achieved a year at Christmas. That was never achieved under the previous Administration, so our record on transfers is a very good one.

I agree with Ross Finnie on the wider issues of the sustainable model. We have addressed that in the document. Before the recession and the credit crunch hit, we had the ridiculous position whereby organisations such as Northern Rock were offering people mortgages that were equivalent to 125 per cent of the value of the house and up to seven times the joint income of the applicants. That bubble was always going to burst and it burst spectacularly. The bubble was, of course, built up on Gordon Brown's watch. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, he deregulated many of these issues, to much ill effect on the whole economy.

I want to make it absolutely clear that housing policy is about not only the rented sector—extremely important though it is—but the owner-occupied sector. I want to see growth in that sector and in the whole private rented sector—indeed, I see big growth potential in the shared equity and shared ownership sector of the market. We also need councils and RSLs to build houses and maintain them to a good standard. Ross Finnie is absolutely right in what he said in that regard. There should be no competition between RSLs and councils; they should be complementary in what they do. In terms of the finance regime, we are working towards that.

There is a great deal of myth around HAG. We have heard about the terrible impact that our changes to HAG will have on construction. The reality is that we have the highest level of housing association house building for 10 years. The figure is the highest since the Parliament was set up. The argument that our changes to HAG have been detrimental to the building programme is not substantiated by the facts. The position is similar for council housing. At present, 3,500 council houses will be built and are in the process of being built in Scotland. The number of council house starts that we have initiated over the past three years is equivalent to that of the previous 11 years. In three years, we have done what Labour took 11 years to do.

Mary Mulligan: Will the minister give way?

Alex Neil: I will in a minute.

The figure for completions shows that we are building houses faster than was the case in the past. If the figure on starts took us three years, that for completions has taken us only two years. In only two years, we have achieved what Labour took 11 years to do.

I listened in particular to speeches from the Labour benches. Labour members told the Government to spend more on the HAG and more on building more houses—it was all more money on this and more money on that—but we know that, by the end of the next four-year period of the comprehensive spending review, the annual reduction in UK public expenditure will be £80 billion a year.

Mary Mulligan: Will the minister now give way?

Alex Neil: I will come to the member.

We know that £50 billion of the £80 billion reduction was imposed by the Labour Government and that the other £30 billion is being imposed by the coalition between the Tories and the Liberal party. Equally important, Alistair Darling cut to ribbons the capital budget. He planned to make a 60 per cent reduction in the capital budget. To be fair to the Tories and Danny Alexander, they have decided not to make any further cuts in that budget because it was cut so deeply by Alistair Darling and Gordon Brown.

Margo MacDonald: Will the minister give way?

Mary Mulligan: Will the minister now take my intervention?

Alex Neil: It is therefore sheer hypocrisy for Labour members to argue for more money on this, that and the next thing. They should not criticise us when they have made the bulk of the cuts. I will take Margo MacDonald.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): I am sorry minister, but you do not have time to take the intervention. You are in the middle of your last minute.

Alex Neil: I was told that I had eight and a half minutes, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I want to move to questions at 11:40.

Alex Neil: Okay. I am sorry that I cannot take the interventions.

What about the stuff that Labour announced on repossessions, tenancy deposits and party flats? The Labour Party had 13 years to sort all that; we are doing it all. Labour members say that they campaigned on all that. If they did, they were not very successful in persuading their leadership. In 13 years, the Labour leadership did nothing about any of that.

I am the very one who is in favour of action not words. We have taken action: we are building council houses when Labour did not. We have a new supply shared equity programme, which Labour did not. Indeed, we are working jointly with Homes for Scotland and developers on that new supply shared equity programme. We have the

national housing trust—a concept that is totally alien to Labour—that can build up to 1,700 new houses. We will take no lessons from the Labour party as far as housing is concerned. Labour's track record on housing is a disgrace; ours is a record to be proud of.

Scottish Executive Question Time

General Questions

11:40

Renewable Energy (Jobs)

1. Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps are under way to ensure that the 26,000 renewable energy jobs that it envisages being created over the next decade are of a sufficient quality to place Scotland in a competitive position in relation to other European nations. (S3O-11334)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Under our renewables action plan and the national renewables infrastructure plan, the Scottish Government and all its agencies are working in close collaboration with industry to ensure that Scotland capitalises on its renewable energy advantage. That includes taking a strategic approach to the development of primary locations to support highly skilled manufacturing jobs for the offshore renewables industry.

Christopher Harvie: What co-operation is envisaged between Scotland and other European and international players in the renewable energy field?

Jim Mather: The answer is: considerable. I refer to our work with the Scottish European Green Energy Centre, European Commission work and the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland. That work is being done with a focus on skills. This morning, I met the north Scotland industries group to understand what it is doing on energy and engineering skills. I have also spoken to the divisions that look after energy, enterprise and education in the Scottish Government—divisions that are coming together and whose officials will arrange to talk to Christopher Harvie and his researcher Stefan Buettner on the matter.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Does the minister agree that developing wind power further offshore and wave power in the north-east Atlantic requires specific offshore training and safety standards for those who work in such hostile environments? If so, will he say what discussions he plans to have with the oil and gas academy—OPITO—and the offshore division of the Health and Safety Executive on the application of its expertise to offshore renewable energy?

Jim Mather: I very much agree with those points. Dialogue is on-going and the question adds further focus. The item was raised at the last meeting of the oil and gas advisory board, as it was when we spoke at the all energy summit, which brought together all the advisory boards. There is common interest on the matter. We want to ensure that we do not reinvent the wheel. We are drawing in input from the oil and gas sector on training, health and safety, project management, finance and other areas where skills exist. We want to ensure that all of that coalesces.

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP): The minister is aware of my interest in bringing renewables jobs to Inverclyde. I hope for a positive response to my letter in which I invited him to come to Inverclyde to meet a couple of renewables companies. Can the minister provide reassurance that places such as Inverclyde will not be omitted from consideration for renewables jobs that come to Scotland?

Jim Mather: Our work, including under the national renewables infrastructure plan, goes very much with the flow of the market. I encourage Inverclyde and other places to make their presence and proposition felt. Given the proximity of Inverclyde and my historic connections to it, I am happy to drop in on one of my Fridays as I head to Argyll and Bute.

Edinburgh to Glasgow Improvement Programme

2. Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what advantages there will be for central Scotland as a result of the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme. (S3O-11335)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): The Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme will greatly improve the rail network in central Scotland, bringing real and lasting benefits to rail passengers and substantially improving connectivity between Glasgow, Edinburgh and central Scotland communities. EGIP will enable a significant step change in the availability of routes and journey times between Scotland's two major cities, from today's six or seven services each hour, with a fastest journey time of around 50 minutes, to 13 services each hour, with a fastest journey time of around 35 minutes.

Jamie Hepburn: One of the lines that is to be electrified is the Cumbernauld line. Does the minister agree that its electrification can allow for and should lead to an increased frequency of passenger services on that line as well as direct services between Glasgow and Edinburgh, so that people who use Cumbernauld, Greenfaulds, Gartcosh and Stepps stations no longer have to

travel to Glasgow or Falkirk to change for services to Edinburgh? Would not such initiatives lead to a vastly improved rail service for people in central Scotland?

Stewart Stevenson: The member makes an important point. At present, services to Cumbernauld are performing below their capability. With the electrification of the line through Cumbernauld, there will be an opportunity to consider what interventions could maximise use of the new and existing infrastructure.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I welcome the electrification of the Cumbernauld line. I am sure that, when it is complete, it will bring many benefits to commuters using trains from Cumbernauld. I wish to ask the minister about the effects that the plans might have on Croy station. I am sure that the minister is aware that Croy is an important hub on the Glasgow to Edinburgh line, and I wish to ensure that Croy enjoys the same number of services, if not more. What plans does the minister have to ensure that the people of Croy are consulted on any proposals that Network Rail might have to make changes at Croy station?

Stewart Stevenson: Croy station is a very important part of the commuter and social infrastructure of the west of Scotland. I have used it on a number of occasions, and I have seen how busy it is. We have not yet developed the timetables that will come into play on the completion of EGIP, but the member should be assured that there will be no diminution in the service that is delivered to Croy. We will engage with the community to ensure that the proposals that we put into Network Rail's planning system reflect the needs of the community of Croy and the surrounding area.

Edinburgh Trams Project

3. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what issues it and Transport Scotland raised with the City of Edinburgh Council before handing over each instalment of funding for the Edinburgh trams project. (S3O-11356)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Monthly progress meetings are held with the City of Edinburgh Council as part of the formal governance arrangements for the project.

Malcolm Chisholm: Does the minister accept that there will have to be an inquiry into the tram project in due course, covering problems with the 2008 contract, mismanagement by the council, the extent of any monitoring by the Scottish Government and other matters? Does he agree that there are two more urgent and immediate

priorities: first, to drive as hard a bargain as possible with Bilfinger Berger, the company that is holding up the work and is trying to extract as much as possible from the public purse; and secondly, to ensure that the whole line, from the airport to Newhaven, is completed without extra cost to council tax payers, but using, if necessary, innovative funding methods such as tax increment financing, which I suggested in a recent letter to the minister?

John Swinney: As Mr Chisholm will be aware, I have been making it clear to the City of Edinburgh Council for some considerable time that the Government has offered and continues to offer practical assistance in the development of a tax increment finance proposition for the City of Edinburgh Council. I look forward to continuing discussions with the city council on that.

On resolution of the current disputes with Bilfinger Berger, I assure Mr Chisholm of my insistence with TIE and the City of Edinburgh Council that they must protect the public purse and act to complete the project. That is certainly the approach that is being taken by TIE, and I encourage resolution of the contractual disputes so that the tram project can make progress.

Various inquiries can take place at any stage in the future, but I want to focus attention on the completion of this major capital infrastructure programme for the city of Edinburgh as soon, as effectively and as efficiently as possible.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): A year ago Mr Stevenson answered a question from Mr McKee, stating that he had not had any meetings with the City of Edinburgh Council about trams over the previous year. Can the cabinet secretary tell us how many meetings he and Mr Stevenson have had with the city council, TIE or Bilfinger Berger about the trams since last September to deal with the real difficulties around the project?

John Swinney: I am sure that Margaret Smith understands this and is not trying to play petty politics with the question, but the contract exists between TIE and Bilfinger Berger. That contractual relationship must be managed by TIE and supervised by the City of Edinburgh Council—that is where contractual responsibility lies. Of course, the Government has provided funding in relation to the project. A number of meetings have taken place between ministers, the City of Edinburgh Council and TIE in connection with the development and completion of the trams project. That is what ministers have been undertaking. As I have just explained to Mr Chisholm, the focus of those discussions has been to encourage a resolution of the contractual disputes and the completion of the project as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): I endorse every last word from my colleague Malcolm Chisholm on the Edinburgh trams project. I remind the cabinet secretary that we are prepared to support the notion of two aircraft carriers, for which there is a very dubious use. We know that a use is marked out—I see Mike Rumbles, who has armed services experience, agreeing with me—and there is a use for trams. Indeed, I would like their use to be extended.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Do you have a question?

Margo MacDonald: I have a question on the matter of an inquiry. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, in an inquiry that will be specialist and detailed, the Auditor General for Scotland will need some specialist buttressing? Perhaps the cabinet secretary might consider that for any future specialist inquiries, as ones such as the forthcoming one on this will be.

John Swinney: I am not sure that it is incumbent on a Government minister to be involved in questions of specialist buttressing for the Auditor General for Scotland. There is a separation of responsibilities between ministers and the Auditor General.

It is absolutely vital to have every focus on resolving the contractual disputes that have affected the trams project. That is what the Government has encouraged. I hope that all parties to the contract will respect and follow the guidance and approach that the Government has given.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Carbon Reduction (Digital Technology)

5. Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it considers that digital technology could play a significant role in helping Scotland to achieve its carbon reduction targets. (S3O-11349)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Scotland's future lies in low-carbon technologies and greener business. Climate change is a global challenge, which presents global opportunities. We must seize the moment and take action now to make the transition to a low-carbon economy a reality.

The Scottish Government believes that digital technologies will indeed play a significant role in helping us to meet our carbon reduction targets across a range of sectors, including energy, the built environment, communications and health care.

Bill Wilson: Transport Scotland's "Travel Plan 2010-2013" encourages the use of audio and

videoconferencing to replace carbon-generated travel. Will the Scottish Government consider encouraging organisations to provide incentives for their staff and clients to use digital technologies to attend conferences or training events virtually, rather than attending them in person, to reduce carbon emissions?

John Swinney: Dr Wilson raises a substantial issue. There is every pressure to ensure that we utilise video technology more fully in the business of government and public service. It can save on cost and on carbon emissions. It requires a change in approach and working practice, however. In many of its interventions, the Government encourages that process—ensuring a change in working practice to utilise technology and achieve the objectives that Dr Wilson set out in his question.

Broadband (Highlands and Islands)

6. Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to help secure public access to the pathfinder broadband network in the Highlands and Islands. (S3O-11370)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Although the Scottish Government fully recognises and supports the wider benefits that can potentially be gained from the pathfinder north and south networks, the matter is complex because of the potential for contractual and state-aid issues to inhibit non-local authority access. That said, we are actively exploring with pathfinder partners and Cable & Wireless the opportunities that might exist to realise the potential benefits. The most recent meeting between officials and Cable & Wireless took place on Tuesday 14 September and discussions are on-going.

Peter Peacock: I am grateful for that response and hope that the minister will continue to encourage his officials to be actively involved in supporting Highland Council and the other councils in the region when retendering for the project comes up in the not-too-distant future. Will the minister also encourage Broadband Delivery UK to support Highlands and Islands Enterprise's recent bid for the roll-out of broadband in the region and ensure that, as part of that, the pathfinder network has such public access in future?

Jim Mather: Indeed I will. We will continue to be as active and supportive as the member suggests. Indeed, at this point, I should recognise and express my appreciation for Mr Peacock's continued informed interest in the area. As he has indicated, we are continuing to press BDUK on this issue and will work with Highland Council, HIE

and Cable & Wireless to ensure that we get the very best possible outcome.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Although Shetland became fully connected to pathfinder north in December 2009, there are still concerns across the islands, especially on Unst and Yell, that general access to high-quality broadband is at best patchy. What is the Scottish Government doing to improve the broadband service to all people in Shetland?

Jim Mather: I would be interested to hear in greater detail about the points that the member raises. It might well be a case of taking the path of least resistance and taking up the new LEADER broadband funding that has become available. I encourage the member to raise the issue with people in Shetland. If she requires any clarification in that respect, we would be glad to help her.

Forth Replacement Crossing (Economic Benefits)

7. Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps are being taken to ensure that Scottish companies, the local economy and the Scottish workforce benefit directly from the Forth replacement crossing project. (S3O-11319)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Forth replacement crossing project will provide a major boost for the local economy and associated local employment prospects. The successful contractor will be required to advertise subcontracting and supply opportunities through the public contracts Scotland website and all site-based employment opportunities through local job centres. The contract will also contain a requirement for a minimum number of training places, including site-based apprenticeships and opportunities for the unemployed, throughout the construction period.

Margaret Smith: I believe that no specific, standalone business impact study has been carried out in relation to the new crossing and that any such impacts are contained in the more wide-ranging environmental impact study. Last week, I gave evidence to the assessor of the Forth Crossing Bill hearings with representatives of the Queensferry Business Association, who retain some concerns about the matter. Will the cabinet secretary agree to consider whether a business impact study would be beneficial, given that it could help the Scottish Government to do all that it can to maximise the opportunities and minimise the problems that the £2 billion crossing will bring to local businesses and the wider Scottish economy?

John Swinney: I certainly share the objective of maximising the beneficial local economic impacts

that Margaret Smith mentioned in the latter part of her question. That underpins the Government's approach to the project. I will consider her suggestion about further work on business impacts and write to her in due course, but I assure her that the mechanism on the public contracts Scotland website is very efficient, allowing contracts to be advertised and local companies to register free of charge to access those procurement opportunities.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): What steps will the cabinet secretary take to ensure that businesses such as Deep Sea World, which is one of Scotland's top tourist destinations, are protected?

John Swinney: From my knowledge of where Deep Sea World is, I am not altogether sure that the site will have any negative impact on it. If Helen Eadie has any particular concerns or questions, I am happy to consider and address them.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the Deputy First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-2555)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Later today, the First Minister and I will attend the papal mass in Bellahouston park. I am sure that the whole Parliament will want to take the opportunity to welcome His Holiness Pope Benedict, who arrived in Scotland a short while ago, on what is a great day for the whole country. [Applause.]

Johann Lamont: I am delighted to welcome our guests to the country and to my constituency. I will welcome to Bellahouston park anyone else who is heading there, too.

This week's Scottish unemployment figures showed that a shocking 50,000 more Scots are out of work now than at this time last year. The Salmond slump is hurting families across the country. Our unemployment rate is 8.9 per cent, compared with 7.8 per cent for the rest of the United Kingdom. The gap is growing and is a clear sign of Scottish National Party failure. Will the Deputy First Minister take any responsibility?

Nicola Sturgeon: Johann Lamont is absolutely right to raise the important issue of unemployment. The rise in unemployment that was announced yesterday is of great concern, because we should remember that behind the statistics and our political sparring are people and families. However, in the interests of balance, I point out to her that yesterday's statistics showed a rise in employment and a fall in the economic inactivity rate. Two out of three of the latest indicators show encouraging signs and show that Scotland is doing marginally better than the rest of the UK. Of course, that does not downplay the concerns that we should have.

More people are in the jobs market, which is why it is encouraging to see from yesterday's statistics that more jobs are available overall, and particularly in sectors such as construction. We must continue our efforts to create employment. That is why our capital investment and our support for skills and training are important. We must also recognise the risks to economic recovery. One of the biggest risks is the massive cut in capital spending that Labour planned when in government and which the new coalition Government will continue. That risk to our

recovery is another reason why the Parliament needs full economic powers.

Johann Lamont: The SNP was left £1.5 billion in the kitty for the rainy days, but the SNP's problem is that—unfortunately—it squandered that when the sun was still shining. It is one thing to express concern in government, but the Government needs to take action.

Yesterday, we were appalled to discover that 3,000 fewer teachers than in 2007 are in our schools now. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Mr Russell.

Johann Lamont: The Deputy First Minister's feeble education colleague is presiding over the lowest number of teachers for eight years. Those jobs are needed by our economy and by our children, to help them. Is that what Nicola Sturgeon calls protecting jobs?

Nicola Sturgeon: Johann Lamont forgot to say that of the £1.1 billion that she mentioned, £600 million was spent by the previous Administration before it left office. She needs to put all the facts before the chamber.

The issue of teacher numbers is very serious, but I am surprised that Johann Lamont has ventured—dared—to raise it. It is a bit rich for Labour to criticise on teacher numbers when Labour-controlled Glasgow City Council was responsible for one quarter of all the teacher posts that were lost in Scotland last year. Two thirds of the drop is accounted for by 12 Labour councils.

We want as many teachers as possible to be in employment. That is why, in this difficult economic climate, it is encouraging that we have the lowest teacher unemployment rate in the United Kingdom. Just yesterday, nearly 200 teacher jobs were advertised on the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities portal. I hope that all of us across the chamber welcome that. Above all, I hope that we welcome the progress for pupils. Class sizes are the lowest on record, thanks to the Administration's efforts.

Johann Lamont: We do not need an English teacher—me—to tell us that that was not an answer, but we might need a maths teacher to help us count the alibis. It is a different minister but the same approach: "It wisnae me."

What of Nicola Sturgeon's own area of responsibility? Already, with the biggest budget ever in the life of the Scottish Parliament, what do we see in the health service, for which she is responsible? Four thousand national health service jobs gone. Fifteen hundred nursing jobs gone. Twelve hundred of those jobs have been lost in the city of Glasgow. We are in serious

circumstances. What is Nicola Sturgeon doing to protect jobs, not get rid of them?

Nicola Sturgeon: In the spirit of trying to find some consensus, let me say to Johann Lamont that I, on behalf of the Scottish Government, will take responsibility, as we do every single day, for addressing, as far as we can within our powers and resources, the challenges of the economic climate that we live in. It would be better if, in return, Labour took any responsibility for having created the economic climate that we live in.

I am glad that Johann Lamont has moved on to employment in the NHS. The figures that she cites should not come as a surprise to anybody who listened to the statement that I made on 4 June in this Parliament about NHS workforce projections over the course of this financial year, but let me put those figures in context. Since we took office in 2007, more than 9,000 extra workers have been employed on the front line in our NHS. That is more nurses, more doctors and more allied health professionals.

As I do my job in steering the NHS through the difficult economic climate that has been caused by Labour, I will continue to give important guarantees to those who work so hard in our health services. First, we will have an absolute focus on the quality of care. Secondly, there will be, as a result of those workforce projections, no compulsory redundancies. Thirdly, more staff will be working in our health service at the end of this session of Parliament than there were at the start of it.

Johann Lamont: I hate to think what would happen if Nicola Sturgeon was not taking responsibility. If she defines that as taking responsibility, what would she do if she were not taking responsibility? Her complacency is stunning. If someone takes responsibility, they act on the powers that they have.

Unemployment in the city that we both represent is growing month on month but, as we all know, the only Glasgow job that Nicola Sturgeon is worried about is her own. She is the Cabinet member who is cutting 670 nurses and midwives in Glasgow. She also cancelled the Glasgow airport rail link, and with it 1,300 jobs and apprenticeships that mothers and fathers in my constituency and across Glasgow are desperate to see their sons and daughters get. We know that she is on work experience today, sampling the job that she really wants more than anything else, but the real question about being responsible is, when will she and the SNP stop fretting about their own prospects and start putting the people of Scotland first?

Nicola Sturgeon: I, like every other member of this Parliament, will leave my own job to the good

judgment of the electorate, but let me say to Johann Lamont that this Government is working hard in Glasgow and across Scotland to deal with and steer Scotland through these very difficult economic times. That is why we have more modern apprenticeships, for example, than ever before. It is also why such a significant proportion of this Government's capital investment is in and around the city of Glasgow. I will take no lessons from Labour on the economic climate that we live in, but I will take responsibility—as does every minister in this Government—for steering us through it. We would be far better equipped to get through the economic difficulties that we face if this Parliament had full economic powers. If Labour wants to take more action, it should back that position.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): To ask the Deputy First Minister when the First Minister will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-2556)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The First Minister has no plans to meet the Prime Minister in the near future.

Murdo Fraser: As we speak, the pipes and drums are playing, the crowds are lining Princes Street and saltires are waving in the air. I hope that the First Minister will not be too disappointed when he finds out that they are not there for him.

Talking of the First Minister, when he announced a bonfire of the quangos three years ago he said:

“That means smaller, fitter and better government—more money for the people's priorities”.

We learn this week that, since he said that, we have 3,000 fewer teachers but an additional 1,400 bureaucrats are employed in central Government core staff. In the same period, the cost of quangos has soared by more than £600 million a year. When is the SNP Government going to do what it promised and cut the cost of the quango state?

Nicola Sturgeon: Let me say to Murdo Fraser that some of what he has quoted is simply not accurate, but I will come back to that in a second. First, let me remind him that this Government has exceeded by some considerable margin its efficient government savings. It has reduced by more than 25 per cent the number of devolved public sector bodies, delivering substantial savings for reinvestment in front-line services.

On the core civil service numbers that Murdo Fraser quoted, he should reflect on the fact that they reflect the transfer from one part of Government to another of the Scottish Court

Service and Communities Scotland, as far as I understand it. When those transfers are taken into account, we see a flatlining position for the core civil service.

This Government is absolutely committed to the importance of reducing the cost of administration. The core administration budget in the Scottish Government has reduced by £14 million, which is right in these difficult financial times.

Murdo Fraser: This is not about the number of quangos or the number of brass plates on doors; it is about their total cost, which has gone up year on year. John Swinney has promised that he will save £39 million a year from quangos, but that comes nowhere near the massive increase in the cost of our quangos of £600 million in three years. Alex Salmond promised smaller, fitter and better government, but the quango state is alive and well with the SNP. Will Alex Salmond's legacy be a bigger, bloated bureaucracy?

Nicola Sturgeon: I had hoped that this would be one of the relatively few areas in which the Government and the Conservatives could find some common cause. We all recognise the importance of directing as much taxpayers' money as possible to the front line in these difficult financial times, and we will always look at how we can do better. However, the Government has a proud record. In addition to the achievements that I mentioned in my first answer, we can cite the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Bill. We are slimming down the public sector in terms of quangos, and we have reduced the number of ministers from the number under the previous Administration. For the past two years, we have had a ministerial pay freeze, and we are constraining salaries at the upper end of the civil service. Let me say in the spirit of consensus that I am sure that there is always more that we can do, but I hope that the Conservatives will acknowledge the real progress that this Government has made.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S3F-2557)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): As always, the next meeting of Cabinet will discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Mike Rumbles: On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I take this opportunity to add our good wishes to the successful state visit of Pope Benedict.

Before the last election, the First Minister published a list of promises for the north-east of

Scotland: solving the bottleneck on the A96 at the Inveramsay bridge; reopening Kintore station; cutting travel times from Aberdeen to Edinburgh by 30 minutes; completing the Aberdeen bypass by 2011; and dualling the A90 from Ellon to Peterhead—he said a decision on that would be made within 100 days of his taking office. How many marks out of 10 does Nicola Sturgeon give him for achievement on those five points?

Nicola Sturgeon: I remember the experience of Wendy Alexander—I am not sure whether she is in the chamber today—when it came to awarding marks, so I will steer clear of that particular pitfall.

I know that Mike Rumbles takes a sincere interest in issues relating to the north-east because of his own constituency interest, so let me just mention a few of this Government's achievements in the north-east of Scotland. There have been Aberdeen to Edinburgh rail improvements, such as the opening of Laurencekirk station. The Aberdeen western peripheral route is, of course, stalled because of court action.

Let me mention another issue that I know is close to Mike Rumbles's heart: dentistry in the north-east. There is an increasing number of dentists in the north-east, and the new Aberdeen dental school was a big capital investment, which is really important for the health needs of the people of Aberdeen and other areas.

The Government is making real progress, but in the spirit of humility for which we are renowned we will continue to appreciate that there will always be more that we can do.

Mike Rumbles: I notice that the Deputy First Minister avoided answering the question. I asked her to respond to the long list of failures that I set out, and I asked her how she graded the First Minister on them—her response did not sound like a great endorsement.

The Scottish National Party Government is coming to the end of its term of office. What about the years when it had more money at its disposal than any Government in history has had? Why was not the north-east taken seriously during those years on all the points that I listed? The First Minister is not here, so the Deputy First Minister can tell us what she really thinks—

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Oh, what a waste of a question. Tavish will be—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Swinney!

Mike Rumbles: Among so many other things, the First Minister has failed the north-east on Inveramsay, on Kintore station, on the A90 and on travel times. Will any of those projects even be

started before the SNP Government leaves office next year?

Nicola Sturgeon: I will come to my rating of my leader in a second; on the basis of Mike Rumbles's performance, it is clear that he has come to the Parliament with the clear objective of making his leader look good. As everyone knows, I rate my leader very highly on all matters.

I correct Mike Rumbles on a point of detail. He said that the SNP is coming to the end of its term of office. I make a minor correction: the SNP is coming to the end of its first term in office.

Spending Review (Trade Union Involvement)

4. Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what discussions the Scottish Government has had with trade unions on the implications of the forthcoming 2010 spending review. (S3F-2558)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): We face cuts in the Scottish budget, which are being imposed on us by Whitehall. We are clear that the cuts go too fast and too deep. It is also clear that although the coalition Government inherited two thirds of the cuts, it is responsible for adding the remaining third.

If the United Kingdom Government persists in making those cuts, the cuts will affect everyone in Scotland, either as users or as providers of public services. Against that difficult background, we have had and will continue to have positive and constructive discussions with the trade unions on the challenging issues. Our shared aim is to reduce as far as we can the disruption that Whitehall's cuts will inevitably cause to people in Scotland.

Brian Adam: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that although the majority of cuts were imposed by the previous, Labour Administration after its disastrous financial mismanagement, the cuts that the Tory-Lib Dem coalition proposes go too far and too fast and will undermine many jobs throughout the country?

Nicola Sturgeon: I absolutely agree with Brian Adam. Particularly in light of Johann Lamont's questions, it is worth reminding ourselves that £2 out of every £3 of the cuts that the coalition Government is planning were first planned by the Labour Government. Labour members would do well to remember that when they discuss the matter in future.

The most worrying cut that we face is the massive cut in capital spending, which was planned by the Labour Government. The Scottish Government has worked hard to increase and accelerate capital investment, particularly in

housing, to protect jobs in the construction and other sectors. The looming cut in capital spending puts that work at risk, and Labour cannot escape responsibility for it.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Most of the unions that I have spoken to predict a period of job losses across the public sector in Scotland. Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that the Government's policy of no compulsory redundancies in Scottish Government departments will continue during the next period? Will she also clarify what steps the Scottish Government will take during the next few months and years to ensure that voluntary redundancy is maximised across the public sector and that compulsory redundancies are minimised?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank John Park for his question and the constructive tone in which he asked it. Everyone in the public sector, and throughout Scotland, is extremely aware of the pressures on public sector head count because of the economic circumstances that we face. In this comprehensive spending review period, the Government has had a policy of no compulsory redundancies, which I know has been important in the health service. As the member is aware, the Government cannot take final decisions about the next spending review until we hear the details of it on 20 October. However, that will be considered in the round. There are a variety of voluntary redundancy schemes in different parts of the public sector throughout Scotland. However, I echo and endorse the tenets of John Park's question, which is that we want to avoid compulsory redundancies.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Given the situation inherited from Labour, what level of cuts in public spending would not be too far, too fast?

Nicola Sturgeon: David McLetchie should reflect on the fact that it is not just this Government that says that the cuts planned by the coalition Government go too far, too fast; that is also the view of the International Monetary Fund. A possible point of agreement between the two sides of the chamber is that we know that the economic mess that we face was created by the previous, Labour Government. While there is no doubt that that has to be managed, we believe that the cuts are too far and too fast and that they jeopardise economic recovery and jobs. For that reason, they should be opposed.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Last week, the First Minister told Parliament that there should be no reductions at all in the Scottish budget. On Tuesday, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth told the Finance Committee that there was no doubt that there should be reductions in the

Scottish budget, owing to the unprecedented level of debt in the United Kingdom. Who does the Deputy First Minister agree with, the First Minister or the finance secretary?

Nicola Sturgeon: In all seriousness, Jeremy Purvis cannot suggest that anyone in this Government says that the deficit does not have to be dealt with. Everyone agrees that the deficit has to be dealt with. The question is what timescale should apply to that, and at what pace it should happen. I believe that the cuts proposed by the coalition Government—which, let us not forget, includes the Liberal Democrats—go too far, too fast. The IMF, for example, proposed far less than the UK Government is proposing. If the UK Government was seriously interested in protecting jobs and economic recovery, it would reconsider its plans.

Alcohol (Caffeine Content)

5. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Deputy First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on moves to limit the amount of caffeine in ready-mixed drinks. (S3F-2568)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): I know that Labour has concerns about the possible effects of consumption of pre-mixed caffeinated alcoholic drinks, particularly in relation to criminal behaviour. Although Labour took a view on minimum pricing before the evidence had been presented, I have consistently said that I remain open to considering any proposals by Labour, or others, that can contribute to reducing alcohol-related harm. However, in order for an amendment on limiting caffeine in alcoholic drinks to comply with European law, evidence needs to be provided to show that such an amendment is necessary in order to protect health or to prevent crime. Yesterday, experts told the Health and Sport Committee that there was no such evidence. If Labour members have evidence, I invite them to bring it forward.

Dr Simpson: In evidence to the Health and Sport Committee yesterday, Bob Hamilton said that there was no association between violence and tonic wine. However, this is the same Bob Hamilton who told a BBC investigation:

"I think it's clear from the figures that there is an association there."

The study on minimum unit pricing was an econometric study only. There is other evidence, such as Mary Claire O'Brien's research, which shows a highly significant link between caffeinated alcohol, heavier drinking, more frequent drinking, more sexual predation and more risk-taking

behaviour. That is backed by NHS Scotland, which said in evidence to the Labour commission:

"We think there is now sufficient information to restrict the amount of caffeine in combination products."

The evidence is available. The Government should support the proposed amendment.

Nicola Sturgeon: The difference between me and Richard Simpson is that I listen to the evidence on alcohol. If he has such evidence, he should present it formally. I assure him that the Government will consider it carefully.

The only consistency in Labour's position on alcohol so far is that it has ignored the evidence. It is ignoring the evidence on minimum pricing and it has brought forward a so-called alternative to minimum pricing that the chair of its own alcohol commission told the Health and Sport Committee yesterday had no evidence to support it. Now, it is making a proposal, the evidence for which is limited and rather questionable.

Yesterday, Bob Hamilton said clearly that violence cannot be attributed to caffeine consumption. What he actually said was, "We don't attend many violent disturbances outside coffee shops. It's the alcohol that gives us greatest concern." It is about time that Labour and, in particular, Richard Simpson—who, as a doctor, should know better—woke up to that fact.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I draw the Deputy First Minister's attention to the evidence that was given to the Health and Sport Committee yesterday, not just by Chief Superintendent Bob Hamilton, but by Dr Alasdair Forsyth of the Glasgow centre for the study of violence, who said, "There's no research to suggest that mixing caffeine and alcohol is related to mood in any way, either making you more aggressive or less aggressive." He also pointed out, "If you got rid of pre-mixed alcohol-caffeine products, people would just mix their own, and bars can mix them for people." Does the Deputy First Minister agree that if the experts are unconvinced that such a ban would work or could even be enforced, Labour will really struggle to convince members of this Parliament?

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes, I agree, although I repeat what I said earlier: I remain open-minded about anything that can help us to reduce the damage that alcohol does.

As I also said earlier, the real problem with Labour's position on alcohol is that it ignores the evidence. I say to Ian McKee that it is really unfortunate that even though so many experts—including the police, doctors, nurses, public health experts and growing sections of the alcohol industry—say that minimum pricing is the right thing to do, Labour continues to ignore that. It is

time for us to build the consensus that Scotland needs on this issue. When Labour finally decides to join it, as I am sure it will one day, I will be the first to welcome it.

Older People (Care Funding)

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

To ask the Deputy First Minister what discussions the Scottish Government has had with local authorities regarding the reported £1.1 billion funding gap in care for older people by 2016. (S3F-2562)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government has regular discussions with local government on issues of common interest, including funding issues. The substantial cuts that we expect the United Kingdom Government to announce next month will present us with huge challenges, but until we know the full scale of those cuts, it would be premature to speculate on specific amounts.

Our commitment to funding and maintaining front-line services that protect the most vulnerable in society is, I believe, supported across the chamber. I assure the member that we are working extremely closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on how best we can continue to meet our shared priorities and to devise, through the reshaping care for older people programme, a new model of health and social care in Scotland that is fair, affordable and sustainable for the future.

Nanette Milne: Does the Deputy First Minister agree with the SNP deputy leader of East Renfrewshire Council, who has suggested that tax rises or direct charging for care should be introduced to meet the predicted shortfall? If not, what does the Scottish Government intend to do to help councils to meet their obligations to provide free personal care for the elderly?

Nicola Sturgeon: As the member is aware, this Government is providing record funding to local government, which now has a bigger share of total Scottish Government funding than in the past; it certainly has a bigger share than was the case under the previous Administration.

This Government's commitment to the continuation of free personal care is absolute. The provision of free personal care is one of the Scottish Parliament's proudest achievements. In a letter in today's *Herald*, the Princess Royal Trust for Carers points out that moving away from free personal care would be harmful not just to those who are eligible for that benefit, but to their carers and families. I think that everyone in Parliament agrees with that, so perhaps we can end—or nearly end—today's First Minister's question time

on a note of consensus. Free personal care is here to stay.

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): Could the recommendations of the Arbuthnott review of Clyde valley local authorities form part of the solution to bridging the funding gap on care for the elderly?

Nicola Sturgeon: The Arbuthnott review makes lots of interesting recommendations. John Arbuthnott is, of course, a former chair of Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board, so he is well aware of the challenges that are involved.

We have a responsibility to look at how we further share services and integrate the public sector to ensure that those who benefit from the services that we provide do so appropriately. There is a great deal to be said for further integration of health and social care, not just because of the efficiencies that could be delivered, but because of the improved outcomes for those who use health and social care services that could result from such an approach.

12:30

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Scottish Executive Question Time

Europe, External Affairs and Culture

Tourism Promotion

1. Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps have been taken by the Minister for Culture and External Affairs to promote Scottish tourism in continental Europe. (S3O-11313)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Raising Scotland's profile at home and abroad, including promoting the many and varied opportunities for visitors to come to Scotland, is something that my ministerial colleagues and I seek to do wherever possible. Indeed, my very first engagement in this portfolio was to host an event during last year's Scotland week in Brussels promoting to key cultural figures in Europe the Edinburgh festivals and Scotland as a major tourism destination.

In January, I hosted a consular corps dinner at Edinburgh castle that was designed to promote Scotland's distinctive global identity as well as its unique and varied tourism offering. Just recently, I participated in an event with the consular corps and Festivals Edinburgh to promote the many tourism and culture opportunities that will exist in Scotland around the 2012 Olympic games, the 2014 year of homecoming, the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup.

Alison McInnes: Although foreign visitors made 17 per cent of the total number of trips to Scotland in 2008, they accounted for 31 per cent of expenditure in the market. As good direct transport links are essential in growing that market, does the minister, like me, regret the loss of the only direct ferry route between mainland Europe and Scotland so soon after its relaunch? VisitScotland has said that it is continuing to work in partnership with operators to ensure optimum capacity utilisation and to exploit the promotional opportunities of new route launches. What exactly has been done over the past year to promote Scottish tourism in the Netherlands and Belgium and to bolster the new ferry operator's chances of success?

Fiona Hyslop: Obviously, responsibility lies with Jim Mather for tourism and with Stewart Stevenson for transport, but I can say that there was a great deal of activity to promote the ferry service. During our visit to Europe in December,

the First Minister and I were looking to promote opportunities with Governments on the continent to support the service, but it is regrettable—although, given market conditions, understandable—that there was only so much that we could do. We have been very vigilant with regard to opportunities and extremely dedicated in turning our attention to more direct links such as the very successful Inverness to Düsseldorf route to ensure that we have more connections with continental Europe.

Volcanic Ash (Compensation)

2. Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions the Minister for Culture and External Affairs has had with the United Kingdom Government with a view to ensuring that Scottish travellers affected by the volcanic ash emissions earlier this year receive the compensation due to them from airlines. (S3O-11317)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Scottish ministers and officials worked closely with the UK Government to monitor the volcanic ash crisis and to mitigate the impact on travellers. We encouraged all individuals and families to press for their full rights in respect of both cancelled travel arrangements and additional accommodation and living expenses.

Mike Rumbles: As the minister might know, I have been contacted about this issue by several constituents, one of whom is due nearly £400 but has had his attempts to claim back his money stonewalled by KLM. Will the Scottish Government step in and try to assist Scottish citizens by pressing the UK Government to do what it can to help?

Fiona Hyslop: I understand that there are particular issues with KLM, which, in paying out only one day and one night's worth of expenses even though some passengers experienced longer delays, has argued that European Union transport ministers are still discussing the issue of compensation resulting from the ash cloud. We have no knowledge of such discussions, but the compensation requirements are clear and the travellers' complaints are being dealt with by the Air Transport Users Council. Although this is clearly a matter for the UK Government, I am sure that the Scottish Government can make representations through Stewart Stevenson and others, as it did throughout the whole volcanic ash cloud period, to ensure that, where appropriate, compensation is given to travellers who experienced difficulties at that time.

National Trust for Scotland

3. Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what

progress has been made toward modernising the National Trust for Scotland. (S3O-11333)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): On 9 August 2010, George Reid published "Fit for Purpose: Report of the Strategic Review of the National Trust for Scotland". The Scottish Government welcomes the report and hopes that it will be a catalyst for change to help the trust to modernise and equip itself to move forward in its important role. The recommendations, particularly those relating to the trust's governance, will be considered by the members at next week's annual general meeting.

Rob Gibson: I thank the minister for her update and I note the progress on George Reid's report. One issue that has been raised is increasing the number of people who visit trust properties. Can we be assured that cross-ticketing between Historic Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland will apply and will be widely advertised?

Fiona Hyslop: The NTS and Historic Scotland discuss the joint ticketing arrangement regularly. It is not without its challenges. It is clear that cross-ticketing is of great benefit to customers and visitors, but the concern of the NTS and Historic Scotland is that income is not lost to all the partners that are involved. The homecoming pass is being extended for three years and its sales are being limited to key channels such as tour operators and other travel traders, to allow us to test the market further and assess the financial impact for the partners. Joint ticketing is also in place at Fort George and Culloden battlefield and at Threave castle and Threave house and gardens. Work continues to consider the opportunities for more local cross-ticketing, but it is important to get the finances correct. We can expand and improve the offer to customers and grow visitor numbers, but we must also ensure a regular income stream, which is vital to support the preservation, conservation and promotion of historic sites.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As the minister knows, the National Trust for Scotland's major role is to conserve the best of Scotland's built heritage. Against that background, is it appropriate that the trust should use £5 million of its scarce financial resources to speculate on the development of warehouses in Bradford, Yorkshire?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): That is probably a supplementary—just.

Fiona Hyslop: I have responsibility for many matters, and I am taking questions today on transport, tourism, volcanic ash and many other issues, but I must respect the National Trust for Scotland's independence. Ted Brocklebank can give his view on whether the investment was

appropriate. The trust must exercise stewardship and invest for the wellbeing and conservation of the properties that have been left in trust to it. Such a matter is for the trust. If Ted Brocklebank has concerns about that investment, he should approach the trust's board and management.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Joint Ministerial Committee

5. Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when the next meeting of the joint ministerial committee will take place and what issues will be discussed. (S3O-11348)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The joint ministerial committee is scheduled to meet next on 18 October in its JMC Europe format. The meeting is expected to cover a range of issues that relate to business at the forthcoming Council of Ministers and to deal with wider co-ordination between the United Kingdom Government and devolved Administrations on European Union matters.

Sandra White: At the next meeting in October, will the minister raise the subject of the £185 million fossil fuel levy, which is important to Scotland? If that was returned, it could safeguard up to 20,000 jobs in Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop: We believe that the ability to apply the fossil fuel levy funding should be passed to the Scottish Government. We continually press for that. At the finance ministers' quadrilateral meeting in July, John Swinney pursued the issue, which needs to be resolved. That money could be used as a key part of investment in Scotland's infrastructure. I will pursue the subject with ministers at any opportunity that I have.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): The minister knows of the extra MEP position that has been allocated to the United Kingdom, following the agreement of the Treaty of Lisbon. At the next JMC meeting, will she support the European and External Relations Committee's view—I copied her into a letter on it—that, given the geographic, rural and other circumstances that Scottish MEPs face, there is a strong case for the additional UK MEP position to come to Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: I would be pleased to do that. It is important to take a cross-party approach to the matter. Given Scotland's geography and interests—particularly in key issues such as energy, fishing, growth areas and common agricultural policy reform—it is clear that an additional voice would be important. I am more than happy to support that case.

Music (Fife)

6. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to promote music in Fife. (S3O-11352)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government supports the cultural sector through working with Creative Scotland, particularly through the youth music initiative, and Scotland's national performing companies, and supporting the work of higher and further education institutions. In addition, the Scottish Government provides funding for local cultural services through the local government finance settlement.

Claire Baker: Will the minister join me in recognising the launch of Scottish Power's second powerful performance competition, which encourages young people to celebrate their traditional musical heritage and gives them the opportunity to perform at the Celtic Connections festival? Does she share my concern that the 25 per cent cut that has been made to music tuition in Fife schools, and the uncertainty that remains over the proposal for a further 25 per cent cut, will deeply damage the ability of young people, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, to develop their talent and to take part in exciting opportunities such as that competition?

Fiona Hyslop: The member will be aware that the Scottish budget is fixed. We want to grow Scotland's income through fiscal responsibility but, until such time as we have those powers, we are reliant on the block grant from Westminster. Therefore, the cuts that are coming, which we think are too deep and too quick, will have an impact throughout the area. Fife's cultural excellence, which was referred to the last time this issue was raised—by Marilyn Livingstone—is to be celebrated. Fife has invested greatly over the piece in music.

I take the opportunity to put on record my thanks to the many young people who have just paraded along Princes Street, showcasing to the world the traditional talents of Scotland in piping. One of the bands that were involved was Lochgelly high school pipe band. All the bands that took part deserve congratulations but, as that one is from Fife, this is an opportunity for me to pay tribute to it, as I do to all the other bands that took part.

Architecture

7. Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): I declare an interest as an honorary fellow of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland.

To ask the Scottish Government how it supports architecture. (S3O-11330)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Funding for architecture in the current financial year is more than £2.6 million, which includes support for initiatives on sustainable development, health care, school estates, regeneration and improving skills. We are driving forward change on the ground by way of policy initiatives to raise standards of design such as the designing streets initiative. Through the Scottish sustainable communities initiative and its related design workshops—the charrette series—we promote innovative sustainable development by way of practical exemplar schemes. Through partnership, we have helped to deliver the recent highly successful housing expo in Inverness, which attracted more than 30,000 visitors. Further, we promote high quality in Scottish architecture by providing annual support to the RIAS Doolan award for best building in Scotland.

Linda Fabiani: I thank the minister for that detailed answer. Does she accept that the value of architecture to our economy and culture is often understated? Does she agree that we should, wherever possible, ensure fair representation of Scottish architectural practices in contributing to our built environment and in genuine place making?

Fiona Hyslop: Scotland has much to be proud of in its architecture. It is important for all members to celebrate and promote the architecture. I see that some Conservative members are pointing to the wonders of the Parliament building, which is a great advert for Scotland's architecture and a renowned and great attraction for many visitors who come to Scotland. We promote and support projects that support high-quality buildings and places. Current examples of that include our support for the Saltire Society housing design awards, which I presented on Monday; the Scottish sustainable communities initiative; the housing expo, which I visited on 17 August; and the Doolan award, the ceremony for which I will speak at on 19 November.

Edinburgh Festivals (Marketing)

8. Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is developing its marketing strategy to increase awareness of the Edinburgh festivals in mainland Europe. (S3O-11341)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is continually developing its marketing strategy to increase awareness of cultural activities, including the Edinburgh festivals. Alongside that, we have invested £750,000 over three years through the Edinburgh festivals expo fund for the strategic promotion of the festivals and their programmes.

That has also supported the delivery of a joint festivals marketing plan.

I mentioned earlier that I have taken the opportunity to promote the Edinburgh festivals during my visits to Brussels. I was also involved in an event on 11 August with Festivals Edinburgh that brought together the consular corps and key policy officials from across Scotland. The event offered a platform to set out the Scottish Government's overarching vision for culture, with a focus on building activity, excitement and connections as we look towards inspiring and enthusing others to engage with the opportunities that are presented by the Olympic games in 2012 and the Commonwealth games in 2014.

Ian McKee: To what extent are the Edinburgh festivals promoted through European cultural institutes and associations based in Scotland? Will the minister consider further promotion through that avenue?

Fiona Hyslop: That is an important point. Indeed, at the event in the summer that we held for the consular corps with Festivals Edinburgh, the Italians in particular talked about using their cultural institute to promote the cultural opportunities that we have on offer with the festivals. I was delighted to open the "Scotland and Rome" exhibition at the Royal Scottish Academy this week with the Italian consulate general, celebrating some of the wonderful archives and paintings that we have. I recommend the exhibition at the RSA to those who have not seen it.

Not only do we have to promote the festivals while they are on but our cultural institutes are important in the lead-up to them, working on cross-opportunities with other countries both to promote the best talent that we have and, importantly, to showcase the best talent from around the world. The festivals are a platform in which the media opportunities are immense for getting people from around the world to recognise the talents that we have.

British Summer Time

9. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the Minister for Culture and External Affairs has made representations to the United Kingdom Government with regard to changing British summer time. (S3O-11294)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I have not written to the UK Government but the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment wrote to the UK Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 8 September to express his concerns that the UK Government is giving

consideration to proposals to introduce daylight saving measures.

Margaret Mitchell: Will the minister follow up and make representations on her part to the UK Government, given the concerns that my Central Scotland constituents have raised with me about the adverse impacts of such a change on road safety and the safety of children walking to school and about the damaging effects that a change would have on Scottish businesses, particularly those in the agriculture sector?

Fiona Hyslop: I am more than happy to do so, but I also point out that the proposal has arisen as a result of a private member's bill by Rebecca Harris, who is a Conservative MP. The bill had its first reading in the UK Parliament in June. As much as the Scottish Government can make its representations, there are cases that can be made within the Conservative party to ensure that the member's colleagues at Westminster are fully aware of the concerns, which I think are shared across the parties in Scotland, about the proposal.

Games Sector (Dundee)

10. Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken since 2007 to support the development of the computer games sector in Dundee. (S3O-11346)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Government is committed to supporting the games industry in Scotland, including in Dundee. Support for the sector that has been introduced since 2007 includes our £3 million investment in the centre of excellence for games development education at the University of Abertay Dundee, which was announced in February 2009, and the creation of the digital media intellectual property fund, which is managed by Creative Scotland. In the past 14 months, that fund has invested £1.4 million in digital media companies.

Maureen Watt: The computer games industry is of substantial economic significance, particularly to Dundee, but it is currently facing hard times as witnessed by the recent difficulties faced by Realtime Worlds and Cohort Studios. Does the minister believe that the industry's financial position would be far stronger if the UK Government had not withdrawn planned tax breaks for the industry—tax breaks that for years the Scottish National Party has called for?

Fiona Hyslop: I agree. The UK Government's decision to withdraw tax breaks for the industry was retrograde and short-sighted, but I put on record my understanding that the games industry in Dundee is robust and has opportunities. I met a number of games companies in Dundee only a

few weeks ago, and I know that the talent and opportunities in a fast-moving and innovative market are very important. We were pleased to provide support through our Creative Scotland innovation fund, helping companies through the recession, to a number of computer games companies in Dundee. One of them is working with Channel 4 to provide an innovative product.

Much as there have been difficulties in Dundee, we should not underestimate the talent and abilities of the games industry, which mean that it will not only survive but grow effectively. However, it can be maximised and supported fully only if we have the tax breaks. Clearly, if we had the financial powers in this Parliament, it would be a decision that the Government could take to support the games industry in Dundee and elsewhere in Scotland.

Education and Lifelong Learning

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 1 was not lodged.

"Education at a Glance 2010"

2. Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report, "Education at a Glance 2010". (S3O-11336)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): We have welcomed the OECD report, which shows that Scotland remains an attractive place for teachers to work. The report confirms what we already knew: Scottish teachers are hard working. The salaries and working conditions of teachers in Scotland remain highly competitive.

Bill Kidd: How will the results that have been published in "Education at a Glance 2010" be used to inform the Scottish Government's development of education delivery, in the context of comparators with other nations that are listed in the report?

Michael Russell: International comparisons are always useful. They help us to examine good practice elsewhere and to benchmark what we are endeavouring to do. For example, after 15 years' experience teachers in lower secondary education in Scotland have the eighth highest salaries out of 28—their salaries are higher than those in Australia, England, Finland and New Zealand. Teacher salary per hour of net contact teaching is slightly below the OECD average, but the ratio of salary to gross domestic product per capita is above the OECD average.

Teachers are well rewarded in Scotland, but of course they are well qualified and they work

exceptionally hard. In the context of the difficulties that we have we should consider the issue constructively, rather than in the rather cack-handed way in which the leader of Glasgow City Council tried to consider it a couple of weeks ago on the front page of *The Herald*.

Schools (Staffing)

3. Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Executive how many working days were lost in each of the past five years due to school staff being granted authorised absence from normal duties to undertake trade union-related activities and what the cost was to the taxpayer. (S3O-11296)

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): The information requested is not held centrally.

Alex Johnstone: Can the minister believe that I can help him out? My colleague Elizabeth Smith made freedom of information requests to our 32 local authorities and received 18 detailed responses, which indicated that in the year to the end of March 2010, 2,418 days were given over to trade union activity, at a cost of £364,000. Those are the figures for only 18 local authorities, so it is easy to assume that a significantly larger—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Now that we have the answer to the first question, can we have your next question, please?

Alex Johnstone: Trade unions have an important role to play in protecting workers, but does the minister agree that in a time of severe financial pressure it might be thought that the millions of pounds that are being spent on union representatives' days off could be spent on increasing the number of teachers or educational start-ups?

Adam Ingram: It is unfortunate that the Tories seem to be resorting to old-style union bashing. Like all employers, local authorities have a statutory duty to provide reasonable time off—paid and unpaid—for trade union activity. It is clear that there needs to be a balance between reasonable time off and disruption to classrooms, but no local authority has approached the Scottish Government on the issue.

I refute the suggestion that time spent on trade union activity is “lost”, as the member said. Employer relations with teacher trade unions are important to stability in the education system.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Given the positive but significant changes that school staff are experiencing during the roll-out of the curriculum for excellence and the new national qualifications framework, does the minister agree that the Parliament should support our teaching

unions throughout the period, including the provision of appropriate paid time off work for union officials?

Adam Ingram: I agree with Dr McKee and value highly the contribution that teacher trade unions make to wider education reform. With the curriculum for excellence well under way, it is important that we continue to engage with teacher organisations, both locally and nationally, to ensure successful implementation.

Rural Schools

4. Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Executive how it will safeguard the future of rural schools. (S3O-11300)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, which was introduced by the Government and supported unanimously by Parliament, establishes a presumption against the closure of rural schools by ensuring that a decision by a local authority to consult on a closure proposal is only one of last resort.

Jamie McGrigor: The cabinet secretary may be aware of the campaign in the first session of the Scottish Parliament, which I supported, to save six rural primary schools in Argyll and Bute, such as the successful and popular Drumlumple primary school near Campbeltown, which I recently visited with Annabel Goldie and which, I am glad to say, is still thriving. Given the importance of rural primary schools in both providing good-quality, accessible education and helping to sustain fragile rural communities, what specific assurances can he give about the action that ministers will take to prevent the closure of threatened rural schools when local authorities are facing such challenging financial circumstances?

Michael Russell: I have already answered that question—the Government introduced legislation specifically to tackle the activity to which the member refers. It establishes a presumption against the closure of rural schools by ensuring that a decision by a local authority to consult on a closure proposal is only one of last resort.

The 2010 act has belt and braces. It means that the consultation process must be fully open and transparent and that there must be an educational justification for closure proposals; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education is involved in that regard. There is a process that allows local communities to ask for the decision to be called in, should there be doubts about the consultative process.

I well remember the campaign to which the member refers, as I was part of it. Regrettably, although a number of schools were kept open, my

wife's school was not, so I know what effect closures of rural schools have. We are trying to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and transparently. I accept that we are in a time of great financial difficulty, but rural schools are important to the fabric of Scotland and very important to local communities. We are working hard to ensure that they continue to be so.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I find it difficult to understand the conundrum that the cabinet secretary is posing to Argyll and Bute Council. The council has announced that a substantial number of school closures are inevitable due to the squeeze that the Scottish Government is placing on its finances, but the cabinet secretary has just said that there is a presumption against closure of rural schools for any financial consideration. How will he advise Argyll and Bute Council to resolve the dilemma that the Government has imposed on it?

Michael Russell: I will give a number of pieces of advice. The first, which is directed to the people of Scotland generally, is never to vote Labour again because of the mess that it makes of the public finances. These are not Scottish National Party financial reductions—they are a result of the absolute carnage that was wreaked on the public finances by a Labour Government. That Government proposed more than two thirds of the cuts that are now coming through from south of the border. [*Interruption.*] Facts are chieftains that winna ding—the Labour Party does not like to hear the truth, but it will hear it from me. The reality is that two thirds of the proposals for financial restrictions that are coming from Westminster were proposed by Labour. The remaining third are coming courtesy of the Liberal Democrats, who have become convinced of the wisdom of Tory cutting. That has something to do with the fact that they got ministerial positions, too.

Every local authority is facing incredibly difficult decisions. The Government is working hard with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual authorities to confront that situation. Authorities are receiving no help at all from Mr McNulty and his colleagues, who simply cannot accept the reality of the mess in which they and their party have landed Scotland. Over the next few months, the reality of that mess will become apparent and the blame will go where it deserves to go—to Mr McNulty and his colleagues. Ms Karen Whitefield is gesturing, but she is to blame, along with others. So, of course, are the Tories.

Colleges (Apprenticeships)

5. Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what support it is giving to colleges to establish wind-turbine technician apprenticeship courses. (S3O-11322)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): Decisions on the funding of individual colleges are a matter for the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. Colleges are expected to prioritise their resources in a way that best meets the needs of local communities and businesses.

Jim Tolson: Following last week's First Minister's questions, it would seem that the answer is "none".

Does the minister realise that failure fully to fund those four-year apprenticeships now would be hypocritical of a Government that talks the talk on renewables but simply will not deliver, and that vital training and subsequent jobs for the industry will be lost to Scotland, possibly forever?

Michael Russell: I tell Mr Tolson that the first rule of politics is, "When in a hole, stop digging." Mr Tavish Scott got himself into a considerable hole last week with a wholly nonsensical question.

Siemens has been working for the past year with a range of partners to develop a wind-turbine technician modern apprenticeship. That programme recently commenced and is being run in collaboration with Carnegie College; 16 apprentice places are being provided in the first year, 12 of which are held by employees of Siemens.

Earlier this year, a funding gap emerged when the college revealed that it did not have sufficient funded places left for this year. Scottish National Party-controlled Fife Council stepped in to fill that gap so that the first year of the programme could go ahead. Lorraine Hubbard of Siemens wrote to Jim Brown of energy and utility skills, who was on a part-time secondment to the Scottish Government at the time, in his capacity as chair of the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland skills sub-group. She copied that correspondence to Catherine Stihler, John Park and Jim Tolson. On the back of her correspondence, a meeting was held between Hugh McAloon, the Government's deputy director of skills, and Ms Hubbard. After that meeting, Ms Hubbard indicated that she was content with the approach that was being taken, and she has reiterated that she was happy with the outcome of the meeting.

In other words, constructive discussion has taken place in order to progress the issue. We have done something; we have not simply misrepresented and moaned, which is the Liberal Democrat position.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): I know that the minister is aware of the new jobs that have been created in the Dalzell steel works in Motherwell, which is in my area, and at Clydebridge in Cambuslang, which is represented

by my colleague Sandra White. There are high hopes for growth in the renewables sector and a projected increase in the demand for strengthened tempered steel for wind turbines. Will the minister work with both companies, and with Skills Development Scotland, to ensure that appropriate support, including apprenticeships, is provided to assist future expansion in our steel industry?

Michael Russell: Absolutely. We work very closely with private industry, Skills Development Scotland and many others to ensure that the maximum help is given in such circumstances. That is the hallmark of this Government—to take constructive action and to keep things moving. It will remain our hallmark not just for the rest of our first term, but as we go into our second in government.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I appreciate the minister's answer to the initial question. I was lucky enough to be at the opening of the Whitlock centre at Carnegie College in Rosyth yesterday, where I saw at first hand the fantastic work that will be done there.

I want to make a point on behalf of people who are already in work or who are over 20 and who have come out of work who require to move into adult apprenticeships. The Scottish Government has moved away from its policy in some areas. How does the minister reconcile the present position with that policy? I stress that although it is important that we focus on ensuring that school leavers have apprenticeship opportunities, we must also focus on providing apprenticeships for people who are already in work or who are over 20 and who are looking for employment.

Michael Russell: I thank Mr Park for that helpful question. It is absolutely true that although we have prioritised younger people, we must consider people who are in work and older people. When I was in the Western Isles recently, representations were made to me about the particular needs that exist there with regard to modern apprenticeships for older workers. We are working on that with the help of European money. We will continue to do so, and I will be happy to continue to engage with Mr Park on that issue.

Educational Achievement

6. Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it is taking to reduce the educational achievement gap between children living in poverty and their classmates. (S3O-11311)

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): Improving educational outcomes for every child and young person remains a top priority for this Government. The curriculum for excellence, the early years framework and getting

it right for every child all provide a personalised and coherent package of learning and support that enables every child and young person to reach their potential, whatever their circumstances.

Our first child poverty strategy will set out the measures that we propose to take to contribute to the United Kingdom target to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and to ensure, as far as possible, that children in Scotland do not experience socioeconomic disadvantage. We will publish our strategy by the end of March 2011.

Jim Hume: The minister should be aware that Save the Children recently published research that revealed that children from wealthier backgrounds performed 60 per cent better in exams than children from poorer backgrounds. The report said:

"There has been no improvement in addressing the achievement gap in recent years."

The report also said that between 2005 and 2007, some local authorities adopted a policy of targeting resources to tackle the issue. It was reckoned that, as a result of that, about 40 per cent of the children involved improved their national assessment level. When we consider that education is the way out of poverty, it would appear that thousands of children are being denied that escape route.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we get to the question, Mr Hume?

Jim Hume: Does the minister therefore accept the findings of the Save the Children report, and that the Government's education policy has failed to break the cycle of underachievement?

Adam Ingram: The attainment gap is not a new phenomenon. It has been highlighted in several reports from the senior chief inspector of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, and it was central to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's report on Scottish education. The question is about not what school someone attends in Scotland but who they are. Socioeconomic background determines people's ability to take advantage of educational opportunities.

That is why this Government has focused in particular on the early years and early intervention. Experiences in the early years are absolutely critical to child development, and the Government's early years framework aims to build parental and community capacity to ensure that every child has the best start in life and is ready to take the full benefit from formal schooling.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am sure that the minister will agree that inequalities have a long history and that they precede the formation of the Scottish Government

in 2007. Will he remain committed—I hope that he will—to reducing class sizes in general, specifically in areas of deprivation, unlike our Labour opponents in councils, who have never been fully committed to lowering class sizes?

Adam Ingram: Yes, I can give Mr Gibson that commitment. He will be well aware that we have asked local authorities to target areas of deprivation through ensuring smaller class sizes and, for example, rolling out our free school meal initiative. All those initiatives are targeted on the fundamental premise that Mr Hume introduced: it is those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not benefiting as they should from the Scottish education system. We aim to and are addressing those issues.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I hope that the Presiding Officer will indulge me briefly by allowing me to ask the Minister for Children and Early Years to join me in welcoming members of North Lanarkshire's award-winning pipe band to the gallery today. They joined Lochgelly high school's band in parading through Princes Street.

Does the minister agree that nurturing and supporting some of the most vulnerable young Scots is essential if we are to reduce the gap in educational attainment effectively? Will he therefore congratulate North Lanarkshire Council and Glasgow City Council on their investment in nurture programmes for their youngest and most vulnerable citizens?

Adam Ingram: I am happy to add my congratulations to North Lanarkshire's pipe band, and to North Lanarkshire Council and Glasgow City Council on the positive and constructive moves that they have made with the introduction of nurture groups. Those groups have been of significant benefit to the children whom they have assisted. The Government seeks to encourage nurture groups to address the economic disadvantage that we have been talking about today.

School Transport

7. Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last reviewed its guidance to local authorities on school transport. (S3O-11367)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government regularly reviews its guidance on school transport. In 2007 a new survey—"School Transport: Survey of Good Practice"—was issued, followed in 2009 by "Scotland's Road Safety Framework to 2020", which included a number of commitments to improving the safety of children travelling to and

from school. We have since commissioned the production of a practical toolkit on school transport safety that will set out what local authorities could and should be doing further to ensure and improve school transport safety.

Elaine Murray: I thank the cabinet secretary for his interesting reply. I realise that the work is still under way, but perhaps he can give some guidance on the importance that local authorities should place on the safety of young people who have to walk to school, particularly in rural areas, where roads can be unlit and the speed limit is often 60mph. How should those considerations be weighed against the application of the 2-mile and 3-mile walking distances?

Michael Russell: There is statutory provision regarding free school transport. In Scotland, authorities have a duty under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 to

"make such arrangements as they consider necessary"

for the transport between home and school of pupils residing and attending school in their area. In considering those arrangements, authorities are required to

"have regard to the safety of such pupils."

Therefore, safety is always a paramount consideration.

There is a statutory minimum distance—it is interesting to note that Dumfries and Galloway Council is one of the councils that observes the statutory minimum—of a 2-mile journey for under-eights and, thereafter, a 3-mile journey. However, that does not take precedence over safety. There must be a safety audit of the route to ensure that it is safe.

The member will know that there is often considerable dispute about such safety audits. On a number of occasions, I have encouraged parents and local authorities to negotiate on the issue of how accurate the safety audits should be. Nevertheless, there is a statutory duty to be mindful of safety and a statutory minimum distance. As free-standing and legally responsible bodies, local authorities must reconcile those to ensure that they are doing their best.

Scottish Food and Drink Fortnight

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on celebrating the growth of Scottish food and drink fortnight. I call Richard Lochhead to open the debate.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): Today is a special day for Scotland, and positive images of our nation are being beamed around the world, no doubt, as we speak. Today is also about celebrating an industry that helps to put Scotland on the map internationally. We have been celebrating that industry for these two weeks.

It has been almost three years since the Parliament unanimously agreed with the Scottish Government the need to develop a national food and drink policy. At that time, I said that a food revolution was taking place the length and breadth of Scotland and that we wanted to support and accelerate it. Today's debate celebrates the fact that that food revolution continues, thanks to the work of the industry, the Scottish Government and its agencies, the people of Scotland and consumers.

Our food and drink are a national strength and, as we focus on economic recovery, they have a big role to play in the nation's economic success. The debate takes place during food and drink fortnight and is intended to highlight the important role that that celebration plays. This is also Scotland's year of food and drink, during which, as a nation, we are celebrating the wealth of produce that is on offer from Scotland's larder.

Almost two weeks ago, I had the honour to launch the eighth food and drink fortnight at the Dundee food and flower festival. Every year, the fortnight gets bigger and more successful, and we should all applaud its aims. It encourages us to discover, buy and enjoy the food and drink that are produced on our own doorstep; it supports the people who make the great products that we enjoy; and it challenges restaurants, caterers and suppliers throughout Scotland to source and champion quality Scottish produce. The fortnight helps to build Scotland's reputation for excellent quality food and drink.

At the launch in Dundee, I was impressed by the range of products on offer, with award-winning products such as venison salami from the Deeside smokery and fruit wines from Cairn O'Mohr. This year witnesses the biggest food and drink fortnight yet. More than 130 events have been taking place

the length and breadth of Scotland, which is a substantial increase of 30 per cent from last year. The event has come a long way since it was started, in 2003, by the Scottish Countryside Alliance Educational Trust. I am sure we all applaud the trust for its vision and commitment, which has got us where we are today.

Over the years, the event grew until it became a national showcase for food and then drink, which was formally included for the first time last year. So, this is the right time for it to be handed over to the new organisers, Scotland Food & Drink. Scotland Food & Drink is the organisation that is charged with building even more success for this fantastic industry. As part of Scotland's year of food and drink, EventScotland has helped some of the events that have taken place, including Dundee flower and food festival and eatBute, to make even better use of fresh, seasonal produce.

We are not the only ones who are saying that our larder is fantastic. The International Culinary Tourism Association recently declared Scotland one of the most

"unique, memorable and interesting places"

for food and drink on the whole planet.

That study reaffirms what many of us here already know: Scotland is a land that is rich in primary produce and represents quality.

The interest in quality, healthy, sustainable and local produce has never been greater. It is remarkable to witness communities not only celebrating the larder on their doorsteps but linking in our food and drink industry and the provenance of our produce with local economic development and environmental sustainability.

Earlier this week, I was privileged to launch the Cairngorms food for life development plan, which aims to increase the production and consumption of local food, and to expand the national park's food economy through business growth and new business development while reducing its carbon footprint. As I hope members will agree, that is a great idea that will help local businesses, forge a stronger link between food and tourism and help our environment.

At the weekend I was delighted to attend eatBute, which is an event that very much forms part of the island's future and links food producers with tourism and job creation. When I returned home to Elgin, I was able to enjoy a fantastic Saturday evening meal comprised solely of ingredients that were produced on Bute and which I had bought earlier that day.

There is a buzz right round Scotland about this great natural asset that we have. The selection of the best of Scotland's produce that is on offer at all

the events during the food and drink fortnight is testament to that.

The economic impact is being felt not just locally, in many of the communities that I have mentioned, but nationally, too. The buzz is supported by some impressive sales figures, which show that we are punching above our weight in the recent economic climate. Members should listen closely: retail sales of Scottish brands across these islands have increased by a fantastic 30 per cent over the past three years.

The saltire is increasingly associated with quality, and consumers are now looking for it on supermarket shelves and elsewhere more than ever before—and not just on these islands. Last year, there was a record increase in Scottish food and drink exports, with international sales reaching an all-time high of more than £4 billion.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be pleased to know that I was listening closely. He just said that there was an all-time high in international export sales of £4 billion, yet his document, “Recipe for Success—Scotland’s National Food and Drink Policy”, states:

“Overseas food and drink exports ... are worth £5 billion a year.”

Which figure is correct?

Richard Lochhead: There are of course different figures: there are figures for the value of what has been exported, and figures for the value to the Scottish economy. That accounts for some of the different figures that members may see in relation to the subject. The value of exports from Scotland overseas has now reached a record £4 billion.

More produce is being sold by producers directly to consumers. Nearly a third of shoppers say that they specifically purchased locally produced food during February 2010, which is double the number that did so in 2006. That is vital to the success of many of our more fragile rural economies.

Farmers markets are a critical element of rural life, connecting farmers with consumers in a unique and profitable way. The Scottish Government recently gave £200,000 to support farmers markets in Scotland, and we will, I hope, see many more of them flourishing throughout the country.

Those figures illustrate very well the surge in year-round consumer demand for Scottish produce, but we should not rest on our laurels and take all that good news for granted. That is why the Government and all our agencies continue to support our businesses and engage with the consumer wherever we can.

We have worked tirelessly over the past three years to support the sustainable growth of our food and drink sector. Our actions, through the development and implementation of Scotland’s first ever national food and drink policy, have ensured that we have adopted a clear, consistent and coherent approach for a healthier, wealthier, fairer and greener Scotland.

It is an approach that has met with international recognition. The European Commission has been impressed by the holistic nature of the policy, and we have had contact from countries as far away as Japan and Australia that are interested in what we are doing here. Only a few weeks ago, a Canadian member of Parliament with an interest in the subject took time out from the Edinburgh festival to meet our leadership forum, which is a group of sectoral experts who oversee policy delivery in Scotland. She was able to witness at first hand the great work that is being done, and she is now considering how to transfer our approach and apply it to the development of a similar policy in Canada.

A successful business environment is key to our policy, and will help Scotland Food & Drink in our shared goal to grow our industry from £7.5 billion to £12.5 billion by 2017. We really need to support all these businesses. Since May 2007, the Government has supported 126 food and drink businesses with £25 million-worth of assistance through our food grant schemes.

I know that many members take a close interest in public procurement, which also has a significant role to play for our businesses. That is why Robin Gourlay from East Ayrshire Council has been seconded to the Scottish Government. He is working on making it easier for small and medium-sized enterprises to enter public procurement contracts. As many people know, Robin is a world-recognised expert on school food procurement. Indeed, we have seen East Ayrshire Council quoted and mentioned in a number of United Nations reports in recent months. Robin Gourlay has already delivered a guide that demystifies the procurement process for SMEs and he is hard at work on revising our sustainable procurement guidance.

There is evidence of increasing interest from SMEs in public contracts. For example, there were 18 expressions of interest in the national health service milk contract, whereas last time there was only one, so we can see that great progress is already being made. For companies to win such contracts, it is essential that they have efficient and effective supply chains. We are helping them with that as well. The Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society’s cultivating collaboration—or C2—project is already reaping rewards. Some 180 companies and 65 organisations have

participated in the project, which has the Government's backing, and SAOS is working with 39 supply chains ranging from micro-scale SMEs to large businesses. We want to make it easier for producers to get the big contracts with the supermarkets, food service companies and so on. That is important work.

We need to ensure that the best skills are available to businesses to support their work. That is why we have funded 600 modern apprenticeships in food and drink over the past year, compared with only 15 the year before.

Those are positive and specific outcomes, but we can support the industry in many other ways. I enjoyed the opportunity to visit a number of companies and producers during this summer's Cabinet tour. The Cabinet hosted a number of receptions at which we celebrated the year of food and drink and met many people and businesses who are involved in producing the great food and drink that we have in Scotland.

Given that we have fantastic Scottish ingredients, I am sure that many of us continue to be frustrated by not knowing what is on our plates when we are at a hotel, restaurant or whatever. That is why the Government launched a provenance resource to help caterers and restaurants with practical ways to raise the profile of local food with consumers. The provenance on a plate toolkit has generated increased sales of fresh, seasonal produce, raised consumer awareness of local produce, and built stronger links with local food suppliers. It is important that tourists and people who live in Scotland know what is on their plates when they eat out, and that the people who serve up the food go to the effort of letting people know when the food is local and the provenance and the story behind it. That is what the initiative is all about. It will play a part in helping to aid understanding of what it means to buy Scottish.

I hope, as I am sure many other members do, that Europe takes the opportunity to support our stance when it legislates on labelling, which we hope will be as soon as possible. We continue to press our European and indeed our United Kingdom colleagues for a quick resolution to the labelling issue. I hope that progress is being made on that in Brussels.

Scottish food and drink fortnight's continued growth and success in celebrating our wonderful produce serves only to enhance Scotland's reputation as a land of food and drink and to deliver many economic benefits throughout that important industry and the rest of Scotland. I ask everyone in the chamber today to join together in celebrating Scottish food and drink fortnight, celebrating Scotland's fantastic image for top-quality food and drink, and of course celebrating

the important industry that takes our fabulous raw materials, adds value and gives us all that economic success.

15:09

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): The debate coincides with the second week of Scottish food and drink fortnight. It might be that I am being cynical, but I suspect that it was scheduled for this afternoon to allow members away to celebrate the Pope's visit to Scotland. It appears that rural affairs and environment debates are often scheduled when many members want to be away.

Food and drink is and has been for many years one of Scotland's key sectors. However, like Gavin Brown, I am slightly confused about the figures. According to the Scottish Enterprise website, 122,000 people are employed in the food and drink processing sector throughout Scotland, which generates £7.57 billion in sales, but the Scottish Government press release this month quoted £9 billion in turnover and 369,000 people in the supply chain. As Gavin Brown pointed out, there seems to be some discrepancy as to whether the revenue that is generated by the sector is £4 billion or £5 billion. Whatever the figures are, there is no disagreement about the sector's importance, especially in rural areas, in which the largest private sector employers are often in food production and processing. That is the case in my constituency.

Earlier this year, the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism, Jim Mather, announced that 2010-11 had been designated Scotland's year of food and drink. That followed the year of homecoming. In light of recent evidence that suggests that the success of the year of homecoming may have been exaggerated, I hope that the success of the year of food and drink will not need to be exaggerated.

It is, of course, tempting to use such a debate to recite the many successes of the Scottish food and drink industry and to use local exemplars as illustrations in it. I am keen to draw members' attention to the savour the flavours fortnight in Dumfries and Galloway, which is a new event in the region. The region's food and drink are celebrated in it and local people and visitors are encouraged to enjoy locally produced food. The event aims to promote farmers and producers markets, encourage local hotels and restaurants to use local produce, let residents know where they can purchase locally produced food, and educate children about healthy eating. In July last year, savour the flavours was awarded LEADER funding for two years. The aim was to develop a dynamic business base, and increased awareness and enjoyment of local food.

It is useful to consider more generally how a food and drink strategy can interact with and support other policy areas, and to reflect on how synergies can be improved and whether there are contradictions that need to be resolved. An internationally recognised reputation for quality and excellence in the food and drink sector will increase its contribution to the economy. Such a reputation will assist Scottish companies to expand their markets outside Scotland and contribute to our tourism offering, especially where there are partnerships between providers that support and promote each other.

Despite the quality of our local produce, many Scots still have an inferior diet. Scotland's obesity levels are among the world's highest. More than a million adults and 150,000 Scottish children are obese—that is, their body mass index is 30 or more. Two out of three Scottish adults are either overweight or obese. Scots on low incomes suffer disproportionately from obesity and poor diets. To misquote Susie Orbach, fat is a social justice issue.

Our obesity record is not something to be proud of. Apart from anything else, it is hardly an international advert for our food and drink. Surely our ability to produce excellent local food should be able to help to address that problem. In some cases, regulation could help. I was disappointed, for example, that my colleague Richard Simpson's proposed bill to ban trans fats did not receive sufficient cross-party support to progress to parliamentary consideration. I am not suggesting that we should ban buy-one-get-one-free offers, large helpings or anything of that sort, but I wonder whether the Government could help by working with retailers and supermarkets to encourage people to eat less, but better.

If I recall correctly, it was Christopher Harvie who, in a previous debate, described the lack of provision for single people in supermarkets. Most products are sold in pre-wrapped quantities that are aimed at family purchase. Purchasing food in quantities that are larger than are required encourages both overeating and waste. If retailers could be persuaded to sell produce in smaller quantities, purchasers could decide whether to buy smaller amounts of higher-quality products or larger proportions of cheaper products for a similar financial outlay. I know that work on obesity is being done through the recipe for success strategy, but I am interested in whether that issue has been discussed in the Government's grocery retailers forum.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Does the member agree that, to encourage people to exercise and eat better, they should be encouraged to have more allotments, or councils

should be encouraged to provide more allotments?

Elaine Murray: I will come on to that later in my speech.

The issue of labelling is related to what I have been talking about. Purchasers need to be confident that they are actually buying locally produced food when they think that they are doing so. Members have discussed in the chamber and in the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee how producers ought to benefit from the higher animal welfare standards that operate in this country. We have previously looked at pig meat production problems, but a similar situation could be arising with eggs post 2012. Consumers need clear information about nutritional content, product origin, and animal and environmental welfare.

As we are all aware, eating behaviour patterns are established in childhood and they can be hard to break later on in life, although adults tend to be more adventurous than children in trying new foods. Children need to get the chance to enjoy good locally produced food and to understand where and how it is produced. Sadly, healthy eating initiatives in Scottish schools appear to have gone disastrously wrong, although I do not blame the current Government alone for that.

Only a quarter of secondary school pupils in Dumfries and Galloway take school meals. Uptake has been falling for some time, but I am afraid that it was not helped by the Scottish Government's draconian guidance in 2008, which advised, for example, that condiments such as tomato sauce or salad dressing should not be displayed and should be sold only on request. I had a school meal in a secondary school in my constituency where the salad was bits of lettuce and tomato neat, with no dressing. All that did was to remind me why I did not like salad when I was a child. Serving pupils of secondary school age in particular with bland, tasteless food just sends them off to the nearest fast-food outlet in town. We need to strike the right balance by offering nutritious, tasty food, locally produced where possible.

On that note, I would be interested to know what progress is being made in the procurement of local produce, particularly in the public sector, where there is more direct control. Such procurement does not just support local producers, but cuts down food miles and helps to reduce carbon emissions. I know that there is an online portal—public contracts Scotland—that was established to try to assist with that. Are recent figures available on whether locally sourced food and its use are increasing across the public sector? I was encouraged last week by reports of the progress that has been made by Scottish agriculture in reducing carbon emissions by 22 per cent over the

past 20 years while production has remained stable or increased. Agriculture and food production in Scotland still make a significant contribution to our carbon emissions, but it looks like they are going in the right direction with the commitment to maintain momentum.

Finally—this addresses Sandra White's point—there is a huge interest among the public in Scotland in growing their own food. A briefing that was given out at the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society reception last night stated that almost 6,000 people are on the waiting lists for local authority allotments, of which there are around 7,000 in Scotland. Sixty new groups are also looking for land and support. With such demand for allotments and community gardens, we need to find innovative ways of freeing up land for cultivation by the public. I was interested to hear from the environment minister last night that housing associations and others are now getting involved in making land available. Other landowners, such as farmers, might also be able to get involved in enabling expansion to meet that demand. It is well known that involving young children in growing food helps to engage their interest in healthy eating and in trying foods that they would not normally like, such as vegetables. Some schools are able to incorporate that into their eco schools programmes and some of the schools in my constituency do so. However, not every school has the land to be able to do that. Allotments and community gardens, particularly in urban areas, could play an important role in the eco school programme as well as in outdoor learning.

We on the Labour back benches are happy to join in the celebration of the growth of the Scottish food and drink fortnight and to wish the year of food and drink every success, but we need to recognise that a food and drink strategy has to be long term and inherently linked to other strategies and priorities.

15:18

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I declare an interest as a farmer, a food producer and a past chairman of the Scottish Association of Farmers Markets, as well as a member of the Ayrshire food network.

I welcome the debate, which comes at a time when food production and agriculture, apart from dairy farming, are experiencing a bit of an upturn. However, it is a different story for our fishermen, who are facing threats from Iceland and the Faroes in the pelagic sector, and reduced quotas and days at sea, and rising costs in the demersal sector.

Today's debate, however, is about celebrating Scottish food and drink fortnight, which was

launched by the Scottish Countryside Alliance in 2007. There is much to celebrate this year with over 130 events taking place. Some key facts—for example that our food and drink sector generates £9.5 billion annually, making it the largest business sector by far in Scotland—are to be applauded. Our food and drink supply chain employs more than 360,000 people in Scotland and we export more than £800 million of food annually. That is dwarfed by our drinks industry, particularly our whisky industry, which exports more than £3 billion worldwide—our congratulations go to it. Fish and shellfish exports provide 55 per cent of our food exports and the sector is also to be applauded for growing that market over recent years.

Further, it is important to note that of the 75,000 businesses involved in the food supply chain, over three quarters employ fewer than 10 people and therefore have the potential and capacity to grow. Skills development organisations, such as Lantra, and our colleges must be congratulated and supported in the future. As we fight our way through Labour's recession—I apologise to Elaine Murray—our future recovery will undoubtedly come from small businesses such as those, which is why we must do all we can to support them. Food networks, farm shops and farmers markets will be vital building platforms in the future, particularly in developing public procurement contracts, which, notwithstanding the minister's enthusiasm, is not happening as quickly as it should. Perhaps Robin Gourlay's secondment to the Government will help in that regard.

What does all that mean? First, I know that all politicians of all parties say this, but we must start cutting back on regulation and red tape. Every year our Parliaments in Edinburgh, Westminster and Brussels push out more legislation. Businesses, especially small businesses, are being overwhelmed by the tsunami of regulation and forms that keep coming into their in-boxes. Of course Parliaments exist to create legislation, but we also have a duty of care to the recipients of the legislation that we produce, given the cost that goes with it, and we must reflect on the cumulative disincentive that it creates to starting and maintaining new businesses. Nowhere is the problem more acute than in Scotland at present; we must address the lack of business start-ups.

However, we also have to remember that food production is a function of nature. This year's massive reduction in the worldwide wheat harvest is another wake-up call in terms of what the future holds and the dangers of food insecurity if we do not maintain and support primary production here in Scotland, in the UK and, particularly, in Europe.

Alyn Smith MEP raised that important point in last week's edition of *The Scottish Farmer*. I

welcome him to the cause of trying to change mindsets in the European Commission and getting our officials in Brussels to realise that food security is a real and emerging problem that must be factored into reform of the common agricultural policy in 2013.

I turn to food production itself. Input costs, such as fuel and fertiliser costs, are rising dramatically for our terrestrial and marine food-producing industries. That in turn might lead to food-price inflation. Indeed, Simon Ward, chief economist at Henderson Global Investors, has already warned that food-price inflation could reach 7 per cent later this year, which could push up the consumer price index to around 4 per cent, which is certainly not to be welcomed.

In this first debate on the subject in the parliamentary year, although we note and applaud the success of Scottish food and drink fortnight, we must not lose sight of the many problems that our food and drink producers face as we move into the next decade of the century.

A sea-fishing industry in decline is a problem that must be confronted now. Livestock and human depopulation of our hills and glens is an unwelcome socioeconomic fact of life, which has environmental consequences as livestock production decreases in our remote and fragile areas. The issue of succession—carrying on family businesses—in the primary industries of agriculture and fishing has not been adequately addressed. There is the potential for that to lead to further long-term decline in food production and harvesting capability.

European support coming to Scotland is reducing as we give back single farm payments in an attempt to stop slipper farming, which cannot be in Scotland's overall best interests. Volatility in food production in world markets is growing—speculators in commodities are exacerbating the problem of shortages when they occur.

Many problems remain to be addressed. Although we welcome and support this debate on the growth of the Scottish food and drink sector on the day of the papal visit to Scotland, difficult years lie ahead if growth is to be maintained and developed. However, Conservatives in Scotland and the UK are prepared for the challenge and will work constructively with all parties and stakeholders to chart the best way forward.

15:24

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): I also declare a farming interest.

It is a pleasure to take part in a debate on a subject about which I am passionate. I had an interest in it before I started my parliamentary

career and I have continued that interest. I secured a members' business debate on local food way back in June 2007 and I am now one of the conveners of the cross-party group on food.

One would be hard-pressed to dine in a top restaurant in some of the world's biggest cities and not find some form of Scottish produce on the menu. A fine example of quality exported Scottish produce can be found at Peelham farm down in Berwickshire, which does not sell sand to the Arabs but does sell salami to the Italians. Last year it won the future farmer award. Congratulations must go to Arnold and John Park of Drinkstone near Hawick for winning that accolade this year. The Borders seem to be leading the way again.

Unfortunately, some people are unaware of the world-class produce that is available on their own doorstep. That is why schemes such as the Scottish food and drink fortnight are to be applauded for their scope and ambition in attempting to build on Scotland's outstanding reputation for quality food and drink.

Not only should we be proud of the standard of our food and drink, but we must acknowledge how important the industry is to our economy. Various figures have been quoted, but it is worth around £9.5 billion annually and is responsible for keeping more than 350,000 people in employment, so it is obviously critical to Scotland.

Scotland Food & Drink's vision, which is

"to make Scotland internationally known as 'A Land of Food and Drink'",

is a laudable objective, but it is important that we do more to promote ourselves as a land of food and drink closer to home. For some time now, I have campaigned for locally sourced food to be used more widely within the public sector. That is a means not only of promoting our produce and improving our diets, but of helping to boost our economy by creating a sustainable food, drink and agriculture sector in Scotland. That is of great importance in my region, which is the South of Scotland.

I note that the Scottish Government's national food and drink policy, which was published last year, expresses a desire

"to make our public sector a world-wide exemplar of excellent food and drink procurement practice which supports our sustainable economic growth and contributes to a healthier Scotland."

I welcome the Government's commitment to strive towards something that I and my colleagues have advocated for some time. However, I am afraid that although there is some evidence of a trend towards the public sector sourcing more of its food locally, more needs to be done. I have obtained

figures through freedom of information requests that highlight the massive disparity that exists among local authorities throughout the country.

Leading the field is East Ayrshire Council, which sources 30 per cent of its food in Ayrshire—of course, Robin Gourlay was involved in that. Part of its success could be attributed to the council's innovative local food pilot scheme, which was met with enormous enthusiasm. However, unfortunately, only 3.5 per cent of North Ayrshire Council's food budget this year will be spent on local produce. That is in stark contrast to neighbouring East Ayrshire Council. Stirling Council spends 28 per cent of its food budget on food that is sourced within a 100-mile radius, but nearby Clackmannanshire Council will spend only 9 per cent this year.

I highlight those statistics not to condemn the councils concerned but to point out the differences that exist between neighbouring councils. Why should such disparities exist when neighbouring authorities could use the same food sources? Perhaps they need to develop shared strategies under which they work co-operatively to source local food produce.

Another success story of recent years is the rise of farmers markets—in which I acknowledge John Scott's involvement. From speaking to constituents in Kelso, Haddington, Hawick and Peebles, where successful markets are thriving, I know how valuable the markets are, not only to farmers but to consumers. Many farmers markets have become tourist attractions in their own right, and 15 of them have been accredited by VisitScotland. They serve as an excellent vehicle not only for promoting local produce but for exposing members of the public to high-quality local produce that they may not necessarily be offered in retail stores. Local authorities, town centre managers and the Government should encourage the continued success and expansion of farmers markets into more Scottish towns, alongside initiatives such as the food and drink fortnight.

We must recognise that we can have such an enviable food and drink sector only as long as we are willing to safeguard our producers. That is why I welcome the comments of my Liberal Democrat colleague Ed Davey—now the UK Minister for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs—who has announced the UK Government's intent to create a supermarket ombudsman to prevent retailers from abusing their considerable power. As such behaviour can lead to less innovation, less choice and lower-quality goods, the creation of a groceries code adjudicator is long overdue: I am sure that all members join me in welcoming its creation.

Scottish food and drink fortnight has been a great success, and I wish it well in promoting our fine foods for the future.

15:29

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

In this Scottish food and drink fortnight we are given a glimpse—many people need more than a glimpse—of what fantastic food we have in this country. Yesterday the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment was in Mallaig promoting the sale of Scottish langoustines and prawns. Too few people in this country ever see a Scottish langoustine. I am perhaps luckier than most, but that is only because I know fishermen locally. The point is that they could get the same price for selling them to the market at home here if only they could establish a permanent supply chain. I hope that the Government is successful in securing that. The commitments and progress that have been made in the sector have been set out by members in the debate already. We should consider how well bedded in the industry is in various parts of Scotland.

In June I was taking some Canadian friends from Glasgow up to the north. The food in the restaurants in Glasgow and the produce that they saw on sale in the shops was light years different from what it might have been 10 years ago.

Overseas food exports come to £800 million a year, whereas food imports from overseas are £900 million a year. We must ask ourselves when we will be producing more of our own food. As John Scott said, food security is now more of an issue in the markets and in debate.

Other members have mentioned farmers markets, and I wish to highlight the fantastic success of the Perth farmers market. Studies that were carried out by Perth and Kinross Council and Scottish Enterprise Tayside in 2006 showed that, even then, the farmers market generated a direct annual income of £311,000. That was £31 for every £1 of public support. Indeed, £1 spent on the local food generated £2.49 in the local economy, as opposed to £1.40 when that £1 was spent in a supermarket. People are not only getting value for money at farmers markets; they are getting the provenance, too. The farmers market movement has opened the door for so many people to see our terrific produce.

There are large numbers of small firms involved in the industry. One of them was highlighted yesterday, and I know it particularly well. Connage Highland Dairy near Inverness produces organic cheese—which we were able to sample in our canteen. It is now on sale in Harrods, although it is also available at very reasonable prices locally in our area and elsewhere. It is an ideal example to

highlight during what is also organic food fortnight, which is run by the Soil Association. The Soil Association's awards throughout the UK have thrown up a lot of interesting examples. I declare an interest as a member of the Soil Association and of the Scottish Crofting Federation. I will come back to that area in a minute. The beer and cider winner at the awards was the Black Isle Brewery's Yellowhammer, a beer that is produced very close to where I live. It won against competition from various contestants from throughout the UK.

I draw members' attention to an event that is coming up in Parliament on 10 November called crofting connections. Dozens of schoolchildren and many croft food producers are coming to Parliament to show us what crofting connections is doing. It involves 1,200 young people between the ages of five and 16 who live in remote rural communities throughout the Highlands and Islands. We will get a selection of the youngsters to come into Parliament, together with producers from the crofting areas, and they will show their wares. I hope that members will all get invitations and come along.

That reminds us that there were communal ways of working the land in the past. The communal ways of selling food now, through co-operatives, provides the modern way to conduct that kind of collective activity. Such events show schoolchildren both traditional and contemporary horticulture. It is not just about oats and kale—there is an array of vegetables, all sold by the likes of the Skye & Lochalsh Food Link. It sells fruit, salads, oatcakes, shortbread, vegetables, herbs, meat, seafood, confectionery, preserves, cheese and ice cream. The group, which distributes a range of these products to hotels and shops in the area, sets an example for many such groups elsewhere.

Making, by the way, a Bute connection, I note that in Caithness and Sutherland, where we are trying to turn the economy around, the Duke of Rothesay has backed the Mey Selections brand, which has put the local food and drink industry back in the spotlight and is making a significant contribution to the area's economy. More than 400 food and drink producers contribute and, with one particular product now being sold through a large national supermarket, the brand is starting to get some recognition. By ensuring that many of the products are bought locally, are served in local hotels and so on, we improve not only the whole agricultural process, but food and other produce in our country.

I do not have much more time. Nevertheless, I want to warn Parliament about certain issues that are emerging as a result of people seeking simply to make a profit. First of all, we should not be importing diseased potato seed, problems with

which have increased since I asked questions about the matter in June. We should remember that cloning is now governed by European Union rules, and we need to be aware of animal welfare in our attempts to make farming sustainable. Above all, we need to address the issue of labelling to ensure that we protect the natural produce that Scotland can produce and is producing, and that people are aware of the differences between some of the lesser products available and the best of our own larder.

The debate provides an excellent chance to celebrate Scotland's food and drink, but we must take part ourselves by encouraging others to buy Scottish.

15:36

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab):

Although, as we know, it is something of a filler, the debate is welcome and so far has been interesting and informative. Jim Hume has even confessed to being passionate, so what more can we ask for?

As I thought about the motion, it occurred to me that consumer behaviour in relation to food has experienced a major shift in the past 10 to 15 years. Consumers have become a bit more discerning about the kind of food that they choose to eat, which has greatly benefited our own Scottish industry. More now than ever, people think about where their food has been sourced and, if it is meat, how it has been raised. Increasing awareness among people in Scotland of what is happening in the third world has ensured a wider commitment to fair-trade issues. A decade ago, only a fraction of consumers would have raised such questions.

The media has a role in promoting the industry and, indeed, has played it in recent years. Not that long ago, cooking programmes were limited to those that were presented by Delia Smith; nowadays, we have everything from "Come Dine With Me" to programmes with Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay, Rick Stein and a host of others that not only show us how to cook food but to look at how food is sourced and examine the culture around it. Such media exposure has raised awareness of healthy eating and the advantages of using fresh local produce, and has played a role in educating our young people.

At local authority level, education and catering departments have in the Parliament's lifetime placed more emphasis on healthy eating, five-a-day campaigns and so on. Without a doubt, we are all better informed about the value of healthy eating and local produce.

Coming from Ayrshire, I know all too well the importance of locally sourced food. One of the

signs of summer approaching is the appearance in the shops of new Ayrshire potatoes, which year in, year out are hugely popular. The island of Arran has also developed a niche industry around cheese, oatcakes and jam, to say nothing of the increasing awareness of Arran beer and whisky.

Jim Hume: The member referred to Labour-controlled North Ayrshire Council. I discovered through an FOI request that, unfortunately, it sources only 3.5 per cent of its food locally, while East Ayrshire Council manages to source 30 per cent. Was the member aware of that?

Irene Oldfather: I mentioned Ayrshire in general, but I am happy to take on board Jim Hume's point. I noted the statistics that he described in his speech and I am certainly happy to question North Ayrshire Council on them. We all recognise the value and importance of local produce.

That brings me to a further point about Ayrshire. I am pleased to advise Parliament that the town of Kilwinning—Tom Shields occasionally calls it the great burgh of culture—in my constituency was last week given the go-ahead to host a farmers market, which I look forward to visiting in the not-too-distant future. By giving people access to high-quality fresh food through working in partnership with supermarkets or through schemes such as farmers markets, local producers have more chance of getting their produce from the farm to the table.

I will say a few words about animal welfare, which Rob Gibson mentioned briefly. Education about food is a key element of increasing the popularity of Scottish produce. For the most part, we in Scotland have a good record on animal welfare. However, we cannot be complacent. Last year, the Scottish Government advised me that foie gras had been served at official functions. Thankfully, that has now been taken off the menu. Perhaps the minister will confirm that. I am a vegetarian, but I think that most people who eat meat like to think that animals have been reared humanely and have not lived in torture before being slaughtered for food.

I was pleased to read about the Farm Animal Welfare Council's new approach, which involves promoting the assessment of animal welfare and moving away from the five freedoms. The five freedoms played an important role, but they took a negative approach to animal welfare by promoting freedom from hunger and thirst and freedom from discomfort. The council says now that the question is not whether animals suffer but whether they have a life that is worth living. That creates a positive focus that will increasingly ensure not just that animals are not mistreated but that they have a good quality of life. That shift in perspective is

welcome and will make our animal welfare standards even stronger.

I am running out of time, but I echo other members' words about labelling, which has been a positive development. Labelling on welfare provenance should be promoted. I think that consumers would agree that they want more information with which they can make informed choices.

Continuing to embrace change—whether through better animal welfare, improved labelling or even meeting the challenges of the common agricultural policy, which I did not have the chance to discuss in detail—will not only benefit consumers but will make the Scottish industry a positive example of best practice.

15:43

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I am extremely pleased to speak in this important debate on Scottish food and drink fortnight and I will not exhibit the slightest cynicism, which I have detected in earlier speeches.

Scotland is—rightly—world famous for the quality of our whisky, but for far too many years Scotland has tended to keep secret the fantastic quality of the food that we produce. It is sad that, although most of the world has heard about our alleged penchant for deep-fried Mars bars or greasy fish suppers—I share Elaine Murray's concern about the links between poor diet, obesity, low income and health—the world knows less about the top-class quality of our beef, lamb, venison, salmon and cheese and about our fine fruit and vegetables. That is not to mention Loch Fyne kippers, Arbroath smokies and even the humble haggis, which is the butt of many jokes but makes the finest of winter meals, as long as it is served with neeps and tatties.

However, things are changing. We have heard that food and drink fortnight is going from strength to strength. The 130 events this year represent a 30 per cent growth since 2009. That growth is helping us to reach our target of making the Scottish food and drink industry worth £12.5 billion by 2017. Scottish Development International now provides a portfolio of international support to assist Scottish food and drink companies in exploiting international trade opportunities, first in North America and Europe, but later through extended services much further afield. Things are going well.

However, it is important not to become too complacent. Study of other industries shows us that export success often needs sound home performance as a firm base. Here in Scotland, the picture is a little patchy. At the top end of the market, we are becoming well served with outlets

such as Andrew Fairlie's restaurant at Gleneagles and the growing collection of first-class restaurants along the waterfront at Leith, which provide a dining experience that can match that of anywhere else in the world.

Too often, we are let down by our middle-range restaurants. The great natural food that we have available tastes marvellous with simple but careful preparation, yet so often in Scotland, when one goes out for a meal, the food is overcooked or even has the provenance of the cash-and-carry ready foods section, rather than the river, glen or grouse moor. On several occasions and in more than one coastal town, I have had defrosted Norwegian prawns. The food is sometimes presented in less-than-pleasant surroundings. We cannot expect visitors from abroad to go home raving about the quality of our food if we sometimes treat them in that fashion.

I know that things are improving from yesteryear, but they need to improve still further. It would help if some of our countrymen and women did not mistake service for servility. On more occasions than we would like, there are stories of grudging and inadequate service in restaurants and hotels in Scotland. Every aspect of presenting food and drink needs full attention to quality and detail.

Another aspect of the Scottish food scene that disturbs me slightly—my colleague Rob Gibson touched on this—is that we are surrounded by sea on three sides and have some of the best lobsters, prawns, scallops and fresh fish known to man, yet in many areas of the country, including those on the coast, it is sometimes difficult to purchase any of those delights. In the part of the west coast of Scotland that I know fairly well, the catch is transported directly from the fishermen to vans and refrigerated lorries to go to destinations as far away as France and Spain, there to be sold in markets or to grace the tables of restaurants. I appreciate that that is an efficient and rewarding way of selling seafood and that the weakness of the pound makes Scottish seafood good value abroad, but it is a great pity that visitors to coastal areas of Scotland cannot all realise what a treasure we have here.

During the recent recess, I visited the maritime provinces of Canada, where one cannot move for fish restaurants, lobster suppers and signs proclaiming slogans such as, "Digby: the home of the world's best scallops". It is even possible to buy fresh lobsters in Halifax airport to take home, as a reminder of how good they are. If only we could draw attention to our seafood in the same way. However, those are merely observations from a disgruntled foodie who objects to being held to ransom for a simple lobster, if one is available at all.

I salute the Government for the hard work that it does on food and drink. I congratulate the supermarkets on rising to the challenge of buying locally and presenting us with a much greater choice of fine food from Scotland. I particularly congratulate the Scotch whisky manufacturers—although I am not perhaps their favourite MSP at the moment, thanks to my views on minimum unit pricing—on the mammoth sales of whisky that they achieve year in, year out and on the superb quality of the blends and single malts that they produce. If I had a glass of whisky in my hand now, I would raise it and propose a toast to the Scottish food and drink industry and the work that has been done, not only by the present Government, but by the preceding one, to make the most of our fabulous food and drink resources. Instead, alas, water will have to do. Slàinte mhath.

15:49

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

(Lab): I welcome the Scottish food and drink fortnight and the opportunity that it provides to promote the wealth of produce that is on offer from Scotland's larder. Of course, it is not the only thing that is being promoted. In "Recipe For Success—Scotland's National Food and Drink Policy", I counted no fewer than seven pictures of the cabinet secretary and, sadly, only one of the First Minister. I kindly suggest to Richard Lochhead that, if he wants continued success, he might want to change that ratio when the document is reprinted.

We all know that a vibrant, profitable and healthy food industry in Scotland is vital for our economy. If we are to grow that industry to be worth more than £10 billion by 2017 and build on Scotland's international reputation as a land of food and drink, we need to concentrate on support for the sector to help it grow. As we have heard from other members, the sector is a major employer, providing jobs for more than 300,000 people in companies big and small, scattered throughout Scotland, and plenty of new opportunities are emerging. Statistics show that around 80 per cent of all food and drink businesses in Scotland are family run, and on the processing side the industry has a somewhat older age profile.

The continued long-term success of this vital industry will depend on the quality of the people who are involved in it and the level of skills training that is provided for them. Statistics from Improve, the food and drink sector skills council, show that in workforce development, food and drink manufacturing and processing employers are the most likely to report skills gaps in comparison to all other industries in Scotland. They are also more likely than other Scottish employers to have

provided only on-the-job training and less likely to have management accounts. That means that the industry could face some serious challenges in the years ahead. Skills gaps and training are huge issues alongside rising prices and fuel costs.

I know that I am preaching about the need for skills training again, but I make no apology for that. Indeed, I must say to the minister that the question of skills was missing from his speech. I am not a lone voice. The need to increase investment and the impact of education, training, research and technology transfers throughout the sectors were highlighted in the scenario of predicted world food shortages in the UK Cabinet Office report "Food 2030", which was published in January. In a survey conducted by Improve, Scottish employers most frequently cited weakness in oral communication, problem solving, technical and practical skills, planning and organising, and written communication among potential recruits. That can lead to higher operational costs and difficulties in meeting customer service objectives.

Unfortunately, when employers take action to overcome skills gaps, the main response seems to be changing work practices followed by recruitment from outside Scotland. However, there has been progress to reverse those trends. Figures from Improve show a big lift in the number of businesses participating in the modern apprenticeship programme, which the minister mentioned, from about 25 in 2008-09 to more than 600 in 2009-10. The good news is that there should be another 400-plus starts in the following year.

As a side benefit, around 30 per cent of those apprentices have been in the 16 to 19-year-old age group. They have come into the industry due to there being fewer opportunities in the job market and the competition for places at college. As Dr McKee has mentioned, we have to change the attitude of such youngsters and persuade them that a job in the service industry does not mean that they have to be servile to anyone. What they are actually doing is promoting and helping to sell Scotland and its produce to visitors and other customers alike.

Improve believes that businesses have benefited from the flexibility and multiskilling that have resulted from the increase in the modern apprenticeship programme that Labour fought to have included in the past two budgets. What makes a huge difference is the fact that the modern apprenticeship programme can be delivered in the workplace with less impact on day-to-day production requirements—it is a job with training.

The spirit of collaboration in the food and drink industry is to be applauded. Improve has worked

with the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the city of Glasgow college to review, update and revalidate a new higher national certificate and diploma in food science and technology. That new programme began last month and is an important route into the industry for school leavers. However, too few colleges are supporting the food and drink manufacturing and processing industry, even though, as we have heard from other speakers, it is one of our biggest manufacturing sectors in Scotland and a major exporter.

Another example of the collaboration at the higher level is the new programme entitled the Scottish fellowship in food and drink management. Developed in conjunction with Improve, Scotland Food & Drink, the Scottish Agricultural College and the University of Abertay Dundee, the programme is aimed at growing the next generation of business leaders and directors from those who are already in the workplace.

Despite that progress, we still need to inspire and encourage our young people to think about a career in the food and drink industry. With that in mind, I was pleased last Wednesday when the Scottish Food and Drink Federation launched its programme, a future in food. The bringing together of schools, teachers, lecturers, students and food and drink manufacturers from all corners of Scotland can only bring progress.

We must recognise the career opportunities that the sector offers in various areas, such as food science, engineering, finance and information technology, to name just a few. I do not want to sound like a broken record, but I will say that it is vital for all industries to show clear connections between what children learn in school and the courses, qualifications, employment and career opportunities that they can take up in later life.

Through skills development and training, companies can turn their businesses around. I have mentioned Macphie of Glenbervie in the Parliament in the past. That company is an independent food ingredients manufacturer that employs 300 people on two sites: 250 at its main plant near Stonehaven and 50 at its plant in Uddingston. Training and personal development are central to the company ethos at Macphie. Among the company's senior management team are people who left school with no qualifications, who, through personal development and encouragement from the company, improved their skills and their job opportunities.

Many other companies throughout Scotland could follow Macphie's example. That is not pie in the sky—if members will excuse the pun. The Macphie system works. When the company took over the Uddingston plant, staff turnover 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 staff have achieved some form of qualification through national and Scottish vocational qualifications modules.

It is not just me who thinks that the food industry needs to make itself a more attractive career choice and needs to offer better training opportunities. The final word goes to Kirsty Cleaver, a work placement student and runner-up in the BBC's "Junior Apprentice", who is now working at Macphie. She said:

"More people would be interested to join the food and drink industry if it was spoken about more widely at school. Not just in the cooking part, but in all areas such as sciences, finance, quality control".

As we celebrate Scottish food and drink fortnight, let us not rest on our laurels. The industry needs to keep investing in its people if it is to maintain the worldwide reputation that it enjoys.

15:57

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): I am pleased to contribute to the debate.

A number of members have talked about the important part that farmers markets play in promoting Scottish food and drink, and I do not want to be an exception. I draw particular attention to the Cupar farmers market, which takes place on the third Saturday of the month—it will take place again on Saturday. As an experiment, the market has been moved out of the Bonnygate car park and into the Crossgate, which is Cupar's central shopping street. That should increase footfall not just for the farmers market but for other local businesses in the Crossgate.

Farmers markets provide an opportunity for people to bring new products to the market, and if members go to Cupar on Saturday they will find many interesting and innovative products, such as Anster cheese and Trotter's independent condiments. Trotter's produces delicacies such as wild garlic pesto and hot pepper jelly, which I assure members are both delicious. They will also find venison from Fletchers of Auchtermuchty, which in 2010 was named the best British small meat producer by *Good Housekeeping* magazine, as a result of its mail order products. For many people, a farmers market is one of the few opportunities that they have to buy good-quality venison and learn what a good and healthy product it is to cook with. In passing, I ask the minister to explain why deer farms continue to be discriminated against by their exclusion from the single farm payment scheme, which causes continuing concern to farmers such as Fletchers of Auchtermuchty.

Scotland benefits from a number of iconic brands. We need to concentrate on adding value and ensuring the quality of our products. Scotch

beef, Scotch lamb and Scottish pork are well known; we also produce a lot of milk, cheese and vegetables. We need to ensure that labelling is clear and honest, particularly in the supermarket industry, so that when people think that they are buying Scottish products they actually are doing so and are able to make the choice to do so.

We also need the large supermarkets to play fair. John Scott mentioned food security, part of which is to do with ensuring that our primary producers can continue to produce with a fair return. There is a serious risk that the behaviour of our major supermarkets will drive too many of our primary producers out of business. I am pleased by the announcement by the Liberal Democrat Minister for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs, Ed Davey, that the UK coalition Government will introduce new legislation to establish a groceries code adjudicator, to ensure enforcement of the groceries supply code of practice and to protect our primary producers.

Food and drink is a key aspect of our tourism industry. I fear that too often we do not take full advantage of our food and drink in some of the events that we run. I am pleased that that is improving in many cases and that Scotland Food & Drink is making an effort to promote Scottish food and drink at festivals such as The Big Tent in Falkland, but other opportunities are missed. In his speech, Ian McKee spoke about the lack of availability of fresh seafood in many of our coastal villages. It is a great surprise to me that at the Pittenweem arts festival, a great event that is attended by hundreds of thousands of people every year, it is quite difficult to find any fresh fish—it is possible to find fish and chips—for sale on the quayside on a Saturday afternoon, in one of our primary fish markets. Surely the food and drink industry should work to ensure that we promote Scottish food and drink at such festivals.

The Edinburgh fringe is well known for its jokes about deep-fried Mars bars, but if people go to the Pleasance, the Spiegeltent or any of the other major venues, they will find that German sausages are the thing that they are most likely to be able to buy to eat. Surely we should be doing more to promote Scottish food and drink at such events.

I want to say a little about exports. This week, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, of which I have the privilege to be the convener, published the report on its inquiry into international trade. Food and drink is a major part of that; in fact, it is likely in the not-too-distant future to become the largest manufacturing part of our export trade.

We have many iconic brands that we sell abroad. Scottish smoked salmon is now a world leader. As has been mentioned, seafood from around Scotland is often more available in Spain

than it is here. Whiskies with brand names such as Johnnie Walker and many of our malts are well known throughout the world. I am sure that all members welcome the announcement that a free trade agreement has been reached between the European Union and South Korea, which will result in the removal of tariff barriers to Scotch whisky. South Korea is already the seventh-largest importer of Scotch in the world. The agreement means that Scotch whisky will be able to penetrate that market even further, which is good news.

We have other brands, such as Mackay's jams from Arbroath and Walkers Shortbread. We have managed to melt the iron curtain and turn it into Irn-Bru in Russia. Tunnock's tea cakes sell in Saudi Arabia. Those are all examples of companies that have expanded well into the export market, but we do not do enough of that. Too many of our small companies do not even think about how they can export; I am sure that we could do more to encourage that.

Our inquiry focused on the need to do more to get smaller companies to look at the opportunities for food and drink. Through organisations such as Scottish Development International, we should bring more buyers from overseas to visit some of our food and drink companies, to see the good-quality production methods and products that we have here. I hope that SDI can be encouraged to promote more events for buyers, so that they can come to Scotland to visit food and drink companies.

Food and drink is one of Scotland's iconic industries. All of us want to support it. I welcome the opportunity that the debate has provided for us to highlight some of the excellent products that we produce here in Scotland. I hope that we will continue to do so.

16:04

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I suggest to David Whitton, who unfortunately has left the chamber, and Richard Simpson that we should be more worried about who does not appear in "Recipe For Success". I notice that there is no picture of Nicola Sturgeon, the Deputy First Minister.

As the cabinet secretary and others have said, it is fantastic to celebrate Scottish food and drink fortnight, and Scottish food and drink overall. I am happy to celebrate food and drink, especially when it is Scottish, on any occasion—some people might say that at times I celebrate it too much. I come from Glasgow, where we have excellent access to fantastic restaurants that serve Scottish produce, which is fantastic.

I want to highlight a number of areas, the first of which is farmers markets, which many members

have mentioned. It is wonderful that the Government has pledged £200,000 to support and expand farmers markets. I do not know whether the Deputy Presiding Officer will agree with me on that, but I see her at the farmers market in Partick, so we certainly have something in common. Partick farmers market is fantastic. It is held right in the middle of Glasgow and you can get any produce under the sun there, including fantastic home-grown farm produce, meat produce and wine. That is a plug for farmers markets in general, but particularly the one in Partick. I should also mention the one that is held on the south side of Glasgow, in Queen's Park.

Another issue that I want to raise is the need to encourage the use of fresh, local produce, particularly in the public sector. I could not agree more with the sentiments of the minister and others on that, and with David Whitton's point about employability and apprenticeships. We must look into and support the use of local produce. For too long, local producers have not been able to get into the public sector market, if members will pardon the pun. They produce fantastic food that is much better for the people who eat it and for the environment.

Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): A problem that I experienced in a previous life, when I worked for a small wholesale meat business, was the fact that public sector contracts tended to be so large that small local businesses could not access them. Does the member agree that if public sector contracts were broken up into smaller units, many small, local businesses could access them?

Sandra White: I fully agree. I know that the Government is looking at that; there might be an issue to do with legislation. I ask the minister to mention that when he sums up. The use of local produce is good for the people who buy it, the producers and the environment—because less transport is involved—and the produce itself is fresher. That must be looked into.

I move on to supermarkets and the stocking and supply of local goods. I note that the Government is looking into that area, too. Unfortunately, some aspects of it might be reserved, as they relate to procurement. However, the Government is pushing hard and is meeting the supermarkets and the Westminster Government to discuss it. We must tell the supermarkets that if we have local produce on our doorstep, it should be used. As my colleague Stewart Maxwell said, smaller producers should be involved as well as larger producers, and they should get a fair price.

Jim Hume: Does the member welcome Ed Davey's announcement that there will be a supermarket ombudsman?

Sandra White: Members are saying, “Who?” The behaviour of supermarkets has been looked at by the Scottish Government and, to be fair, was looked at by the previous Executive. It is not just a recent issue; people have been concerned about it for years. I remember standing outside certain supermarkets—I will not name them—several years ago to protest about the fact that they did not sell Scottish produce such as Scottish fish and Scottish cheese. The situation has changed a lot since then, but we must still ensure that supermarkets use local produce and that farmers and everyone else get a fair price for it.

I will digress slightly from the subject of Scottish produce. At Christmas, I was in one of the big supermarkets when a gentleman came in with a list that his wife or his partner had given him. He was looking for a turnip and he said, “I can’t find turnip anywhere.” I pointed and said, “They’re there,” but because they were labelled “swede” the man did not have a clue what to buy. That sort of issue needs to be looked at.

I turn to allotments. I am sorry to bring the Deputy Presiding Officer into things again, but I have been to see her allotment. It is very nice and produces great food, and I know that she enjoys working in it. I am sorry about that, but I could not mention allotments without mentioning the Deputy Presiding Officer’s; I will not say where it is, though.

I am pleased that this Government, like its predecessor, has supported allotments—it has given £700,000 to the grow-your-own community and food projects. As Elaine Murray has already said, it is not just about people growing their own food, it is about getting exercise, showing community spirit, and general wellbeing for everyone.

There is a demand for allotments and other areas for growing. I stay in a built-up area in Glasgow, and people there cannot get access to an allotment, but there are great projects going on just now. The Annexe Healthy Living Centre in Partick is looking at community gardens in the Anderston and Argyle Street areas. I congratulate the centre on its work. If people cannot get access to fresh produce and exercise, we need to be a wee bit more innovative, particularly for those who live in built-up areas.

I congratulate all those who are involved in grow-your-own-food projects and who are pushing for more allotments. Everyone is proud of our Scottish produce, and we are selling it well, but we have to ensure that we can say to supermarkets that they have to stock it and pay the producers a fair price for it. It has been a great pleasure to take part in this debate.

16:11

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Like others, I am happy to be able to add my voice in support of food and drink fortnight. Indeed, it would be hard not to do so. Anything that promotes the great produce that we have in Scotland has to be for the overall good. My region of the Highlands and Islands produces some of the best food in Scotland, and Scotland produces some of the best food in Europe and the world.

Irene Oldfather reflected on how the interest in food has developed and changed in recent decades, and I fully subscribe to that view, not just because of the necessity of food for our daily lives and the food that we hope to encounter every day, but because interest in cooking has been growing enormously. As Irene Oldfather said, that could partly be because of the celebrity chef phenomenon. I must confess that I spend far too much time watching celebrity chefs and cooking programmes, hoping to pick up hints and tips, because I enjoy cooking in my leisure time.

Celebrity chefs also take a particular interest in promoting local food. Whichever programme we might tune into, the chef will be promoting the food of the region that they are in. That has helped people to develop a greater interest in local food. That is not the only reason for the developing interest in food. People are more interested in the provenance of food, partly because they are concerned about quality, additives and processing methods, so they are taking a closer and keener interest in local food, which they can understand and relate to more effectively.

As other members have said, local food is increasingly part of the tourism experience. People want to come to Scotland because of the food and they want to go to different parts of Scotland to sample the food. However, as Ian McKee indicated, it is often difficult to get access to local food. I am constantly struck by how difficult it is to find a good seafood restaurant around the coast of Scotland, when in other parts of the world they are a commonly seen part of the landscape. Iain Smith is about to correct me.

Iain Smith: If Peter Peacock comes to the east neuk of Fife he will find some excellent seafood restaurants.

Peter Peacock: And I have eaten in some of them. My point is that they are noticeable because they are exceptional. Such restaurants are not as common in Scotland as they are in other parts of Europe.

The tourism experience is important, and it is a reason why more interest is being taken in local food.

John Scott often alludes to food security and the need for our country to produce more food so that we can be less dependent on food from other parts of the world. There are all sorts of different reasons for that.

People are also interested in local food because of concerns about the environment and food miles. I readily confess that I do my shopping in Tesco in Inverness—it is difficult to find any shop other than Tesco in Inverness—and I am often staggered that when I am looking for asparagus, it has come from Peru. It is a staggering thought that in Inverness, sometimes the only choice is to buy asparagus from Peru. Think of the costs and environmental damage of that when we could produce much more asparagus locally. Perhaps we would not have it all year round, but we could have it when possible.

Increasingly, interest in food is becoming a leisure pursuit. “MasterChef” is inspiring whole generations of people to think about how much more they can do to raise the standards of their domestic food production and their cooking, which is very encouraging. All of what is happening is greatly encouraging. However, there is a danger that a lot of that appeals to a particular part of our society and that other parts of society are excluded from it. There is a danger that the kind of world that I have described is a middle-class interest.

At the same time that we have that welcome and growing interest in the betterment of food and the better promotion of food, we have an obesity crisis, which Elaine Murray talked about. That is partly because we all tend to lead more sedentary lifestyles than we once did, but, for many, it is probably principally fuelled by poor diet. Elaine Murray was right to point to the fact that poor diet tends to be associated with people in low-income groups who feel locked into a position where they cannot source their food in different ways—families that are dependent on processed food that is high in salt, fat and additives.

I am afraid to say that that situation is also fuelled by the sad fact that, for many families in Scotland, the art of cooking has all but disappeared. In fact, in some families, for the second or third generation, it has completely disappeared and those people do not know how to make a pot of soup—possibly the simplest meal that can be made. Many people in low-income families feel that fresh ingredients are too expensive and beyond their immediate reach, whereas the opposite is normally the case. Things that are bought fresh and cooked properly can last longer and be more economical than the processed food that many people feel they are locked into buying. Because people now lack the

knowledge and skills to use fresh ingredients, that is becoming a factor.

I was intrigued to watch the “River Cottage” television series that was filmed in Bristol and involved engaging a community in a peripheral housing estate in local food production. One of the remarkable things to come out of that was the admission by one family—I know that this is common—that they only ever ate the breast of chicken and put the rest in the bin because they did not know how to do anything with it. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall promptly put them right on that, and chickens now last them for three meals rather than one. It is good to see that happen, and it is not an isolated example. As a society and a Government, we must put more effort into ensuring that the enjoyment of cooking also relates, for those in the more disadvantaged groups, to the economic benefits that cooking can bring for them as well as the health benefits. We must ensure that they rely less on processed food and that that whole way of approaching food is brought to a much wider audience than at present.

We must link food production and cooking, as there is such an interest in it, while ensuring that the skills and the land are available to promote better food than we have had in the past. In setting that challenge, I am far from being pessimistic. Landshare is an initiative that brings together people who have a passion for home-grown food. It is for people who want to grow food but who do not have land and for people who have land that they are prepared to share with those who want it. The initiative provides tools and expertise in the ways of doing things. Landshare came out of the “River Cottage” experience in Bristol, which was so inspiring that the makers of “River Cottage” wondered whether the initiative could be made to work nationwide. Landshare is now a national movement involving more than 50,000 people. That is an incredible success in a short period of time. The Landshare website provides a matchmaking service, which enables those with land to link up with those who want somewhere close by them to grow food. Believe it or not, that website is run, in part, from the island of Eigg. I was happy to be there recently to hear a bit about that and other things that I have touched on.

Landshare promotes another online tool that enables people to get access to allotments by putting six people together who then write to their council to trigger the allotments legislation in their favour. There is also a service to identify derelict land of the kind that Sandra White referred to that can be brought into use. In fact, when I recently got off a train at Paddington station, in the heart of London, I saw a new set of allotments on what was previously derelict land in the centre of that major city. It can be done. Landshare is promoting

that excellent initiative, and I hope that we can see much more of that.

On the boat back from Eigg, I met an entrepreneur from the south who owns 150 garden centres and is promoting allotments beside them on a commercial basis. Literally thousands of new allotments are being brought into use through that mechanism.

All that points to more demand for allotments than there is land available. We need to do even more in Scotland to promote such schemes, and to cut into the waiting lists that Elaine Murray referred to earlier.

Shared community polytunnels are now emerging—there is one in the Black Isle, which I see Rob Gibson is aware of. I do not know if he has visited it—I have still to do that. Polytunnels offer a way to extend the season for and the range and variety of produce that can be grown. I am interested to hear what the minister has to say about allotments in his summing up.

I am prepared to continue if the Presiding Officer wishes, but if he wishes me to shut up I am equally prepared to sit down. I see that he is not encouraging me to sit down, so I will say a bit more.

It is not just allotments that are needed—there is also a need for more small-scale commercial production. Again on my visit to Eigg, I met a local food group that is not only increasing the production of local food on the island by using polytunnels and other mechanisms and supplying local shops with it, but reducing the amount of food that is imported to the island. That is part of creating a more sustainable island, but the group wants to go further by expanding the production and adding value by building a new facility. I hope that the Scotland rural development programme will be able to help with that, and I hope that the rules are flexible enough to allow that type of development to be supported.

I note that the minister was in the Cairngorms earlier this week to support the food for life initiative. I have to say that his photograph aged him terribly; he looked even older than David Green, which is saying something. It is an excellent initiative, and it is good that the Cairngorms national park is promoting food production, attaching that to the Cairngorm label and helping social and economic development in the area.

I make a plea to the minister to help the local food movement to move further forward. We are seeing, and have seen during the past few decades, a contraction in the number of slaughterhouses. I urge him to take another look at whether there are ways in which we can interpret the rules differently—as they seem to do

in Austria, which is also part of the EU—and encourage more local slaughtering to progress the local food movement.

I see that the Presiding Officer is now frowning at me, so I will sit down.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Thank you, Mr Peacock. There is, after all, only so much that one can take of a good thing.

16:22

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): When members think of Dundee in a culinary debate, they can be forgiven for thinking of pies—or pehs, as eh wid ca them. There are some very good pies that come out of Dundee, but the city might not be your first thought when looking at what Scotland has to offer in terms of food and drink.

That is not the case for the cabinet secretary, who was one of 26,000 visitors who flocked to Dundee's flower and food festival at Camperdown park earlier this month. I hope that he will excuse me for giving a quick plug for next year's festival, which will be held from 2 to 4 September. He will of course be very welcome, along with any other members who want to come to Dundee. I cannot guarantee that the weather will be quite as good as it was this year, but Dundee is the sunniest city in Scotland, so the odds are better.

This year, festival attendees were treated to cookery demonstrations from celebrity chefs such as the hairy bikers, and had the chance to sample some excellent produce from Tayside and beyond. The flower and food festival provides an ideal opportunity to showcase the quality and range of produce that is produced on our doorstep, and to encourage people to embrace Scottish produce.

Exhibitors such as Yorkes of Dundee, which sources meat from a local herd of Angus and Highland cattle, and Westpark Nursery, which produces fruit and vegetables on the outskirts of Dundee, were on hand to provide tasters to tempt the public and get them to eat more Scottish produce. Judging by the feedback that we have had from this year's festival, there has been some fantastic success in that regard.

In this year of food and drink, Dundee had the honour of being chosen as the location of the 50th National Vegetable Society competition, which the Deputy Presiding Officer, who has just left the chamber, would no doubt have enjoyed. Entrants from as far afield as Jersey and Northern Ireland came to the competition at the flower and food festival, and visitors had the opportunity to learn about the techniques and benefits of growing your own vegetables. In the past, allotment owners kept many of the techniques that they used secret, but I am told that, nowadays, they want to pass on their

techniques and encourage as many new people as possible to join their pastime and produce their own food.

Education is a big part of Scottish food and drink fortnight. We must ensure that the public, and especially children, learn about food from plough to plate. The Scottish Government's national food and drink policy, which was launched in June 2009, also highlights the importance of food education. I was particularly pleased to be able to join the Minister for Public Health and Sport and member for Dundee East at the formal launch of the Food Standard Agency Scotland's schools resources on the first day of this year's Dundee flower and food festival.

Getting children to engage with food is vital if we are to change habits. With that in mind, each year in Dundee, a partnership involving NHS Tayside, Dundee College and the Dundee flower and food festival invites schools throughout Tayside to submit entries to the Desperate Dan-wich healthy eating competition.

David Whitton: I am tempted to say, "Speaking of Desperate Dan," but I will not do that. In engaging with the children and teaching them about food, does that initiative also encourage them to look at the food industry and the food sector as a place for a good career opportunity?

Joe FitzPatrick: I was pleased to be able to sit with some of the kids from one of the schools in my constituency, St Andrew's primary school, while they were interacting with the games that have been produced. The initiative looks at the whole range of the food industry. The focus is on ensuring that kids understand where their food comes from, the health benefits of different foods and how food should be stored, but as part of the process the kids were engaging in the possibility of being part of that growing industry.

Going back to the "Desperate Dan-wich" sandwich competition, it was obviously felt that Desperate Dan's cow pies were not very balanced, and the competition gives children an opportunity to learn more about healthy food choices. This year, some 435 recipes for healthy sandwiches were submitted from throughout Tayside, and 12 finalists were invited to the food festival to make their own sandwiches. Nine-year-old Lewis Walker from Pitlochry primary school took the coveted title with his creation, the Chicken Licken pitta. I am sure that we are all waiting for next year's Turkey Lurkey sequel.

As we heard from the cabinet secretary, we are on the way to growing Scotland's food and drink sector to £12.5 billion per annum by 2017, and Dundee is playing its part in that. I hope that everybody in the chamber agrees that we should

all unite behind that target and ensure that we reach it. All of Scotland has to be a part of that.

Members might not be aware of Dundee Cold Stores Ltd, which supplies locally grown vegetables to all the major brands throughout the UK and is Scotland's only large-scale frozen fruit and vegetable plant. The service that it provides, which ensures that products go from the field to the freezer within 150 minutes, is particularly important for beans and peas, and it has led to one in six of all peas that are consumed in the UK being produced in Dundee. That is thanks to a grant of more than £500,000 from the Scottish Government's food processing, marketing and co-operation grants scheme.

The company is continuing to expand and it is making big inroads into frozen food markets throughout the UK. It is also taking steps to become more energy efficient and plans to reduce its carbon footprint and increase its market competitiveness by erecting an 850KW commercial-scale wind turbine at the factory. The turbine could generate 20 per cent of the company's annual energy needs. It sets a great example to food producers in the area and it will make the company's peas greener without the need to add E numbers.

It would be remiss of me to talk about food without touching on the Scottish Crop Research Institute, which, although not in my constituency, is close to it and employs a number of my constituents. The SCRI is one of the leaders of research into producing new varieties of crops and the bulk of what comes out of its research is done using non-genetic techniques to make sure that we continue with Scotland's proud record of being a GM-free food producer.

The food and drink sector plays a vital role in our economy and Scottish food and drink fortnight provides an ideal opportunity to showcase and promote the world-class produce that we have. It will help to ensure that we grow the sector and head towards the target of £12.5 billion per annum by 2017.

The Presiding Officer: I thank all members for making good use of the extra time available. They have done so to the extent that I must ask closing speakers to stick closely to the times that they were advised of. Liam McArthur has around six minutes.

16:30

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): The debate is important and it has been useful, if not solely for the purpose of providing a support group for those of us without an invitation to Bellahouston park this afternoon. It has also allowed Peter Peacock to get a number of issues off his chest.

Scottish Liberal Democrats fully support the ethos and objectives of the Scottish food and drink fortnight and the year of food and drink, which will run until May 2011. I, too, congratulate the Scottish Countryside Alliance on the role that it has played. Both initiatives draw valuable and much-needed focus on to the extraordinary range of Scottish produce and—most important—its quality. Its quality is critical. The debate has exposed, possibly through Gavin Brown's questioning, a degree of uncertainty about the true value of our food and drink sector, but there has been no disagreement about the economic importance of its wealth and job creation, or about the range of companies in the sector, from the biggest companies to cottage industries. Providing quality is the only way of ensuring that that key industry remains globally competitive. It is also the only way in which justice can be done to the natural advantages that we enjoy.

Of course, the Scottish food and drink fortnight, like similar events that are arranged to draw attention to other sectors and issues, relies implicitly on the support of a wider strategy. The contribution that such a focus on Scotland's food and drink industry can and does make should not be underestimated, but it is essential that it is rooted in a coherent and comprehensive strategy to support the development of the sector and the need for constant innovation in particular.

In that context, I welcome the approach that is taken in the national food and drink policy, if not all the photographs in the policy document. As well as emphasising the significance of what is rightly identified as a key sector in our economy, it is entirely appropriate that policies that support the sector should emphasise the health, environmental and educational benefits to be derived from it. Joe FitzPatrick mentioned the educational benefits. The overlap of those themes is now well recognised. However, I hope that the minister accepts that there is still some way to go to achieve many of the multiple benefits that are available from more extensive procurement of a wider range of healthy, locally sourced produce. My colleague Jim Hume referred a great deal to local sourcing. Members will recognise his efforts in that regard in the Parliament and prior to 2007—he mentioned those efforts. Despite the expressed good intentions of ministers in the current Administration and previously, the figures suggest, as Jim Hume made clear, that local authorities' procurement practices are at best patchy. In some cases, they fall woefully short of where we would want them to be at this stage, given the efforts to date.

Like John Scott and Jim Hume, I welcome the close involvement that Robin Gourlay will have, but I do not underestimate the scale of the challenge that he faces. It is clear that local

authorities, the NHS and others in the public sector have legal requirements to secure best value, but the discrepancy between the performance of some councils in the area—Mr Lochhead rightly mentioned East Ayrshire Council—and the performance of others suggests that best practice is not being properly shared. Perhaps the cabinet secretary could set out a little more clearly how he plans to address that over the remainder of the year of Scottish food and drink.

As well as offering economic benefits from supporting local farm and other food and drink businesses, the strategy's success offers the simultaneous opportunity to improve Scotland's appalling health record through promoting better diets. Elaine Murray rightly highlighted the social justice dimension and the unhelpful image that Scotland's appalling health record portrays internationally, and Irene Oldfather rightly drew attention to the explosion of cookery programmes, of which Peter Peacock is but one avid viewer. Despite the increased awareness that exists, our health record remains stubbornly appalling.

Reducing average food miles by sourcing more food locally can help to curb the harmful emissions that arise from unnecessary transport. Given the stretching targets that we have set ourselves in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and the need for early action to get us on the right trajectory to achieving those targets, I hope that the cabinet secretary recognises the need for urgent action.

Despite not having been invited to Holyrood this morning or Bellahouston park this afternoon, it is clear that most of us have derived consolation from the welcome opportunity that this debate has provided to wax lyrical about the tremendous contribution that our constituencies and regions make to Scotland's world-class food and drink industry. That is entirely right and proper and, in that spirit, please allow me to serve up an offering from the islands that I represent.

Orkney's quality food and drink industry does tremendous work in supporting the range of award-winning products that emanate from my constituency. Many are household names and now supply many of the most reputable supermarkets, independent retailers and high-class restaurants. On the menu of those restaurants, one may find shellfish landed fresh from the seas around Orkney, the finest beef and lamb, the best cheese in Scotland, milk and butter, oatcakes, bread and bannocks baked from the ancient bere barley, all washed down with a pint of Dark Island, Red McGregor or Scapa ale, or Highland Park or Scapa whisky, according to taste.

As well as the quality of the produce, it is important to recognise the part played by effective

marketing. As the cabinet secretary suggested, it is not just a question of slapping a saltire on the pack. The story behind the product is integral to helping distinguish it in a marketplace where an emphasis on quality can be taken as almost a given. That has certainly been key to Orkney's success, not just in food and drink, but across a wide range of sectors under the Orkney the brand initiative. Scotland as a whole is doing the same thing, but it is clear that it could do better.

A number of members highlighted the inextricable link between the food and drink sector and Scotland's critical tourism industry. The effect can be dramatic where the crossover is managed effectively, but all too often tourists looking to sample good local produce across many parts of Scotland find it incredibly difficult to do so. Peter Peacock, Ian McKee and Rob Gibson all drew attention to the fact that dining out on some of Scotland's best produce is possible only when one heads furth of Scotland.

This has been a useful debate that has celebrated our world-class food and drink sector and will help to support its future success. We should not, however, lose sight of some of the serious challenges that face us, such as food security, the pressures on our pelagic and demersal sectors, and procurement, about which David Whitton's comments were well made, not least in avoiding a repeat of the sort of experiences that Ian McKee has had to endure on holidays in the past.

There is much to celebrate and it is good that we do so. Perhaps another upside of the papal visit is that it persuaded business managers to free up the time for this afternoon's important debate.

16:37

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): We began this afternoon by celebrating the growth of the Scottish food and drink fortnight and thereafter the debate expanded widely across a whole range of food and drink topics. The cabinet secretary started the debate in a positive manner by pointing out just how important it is to raise awareness about the quality and variety of Scottish food. He pointed to the food and drink fortnight as being a good example of joining together producers, retailers, restaurateurs, farm shops, hoteliers, markets and just about everybody else in between. He also said, quite rightly, that this is the year of food and drink, which I understand started in May and will run for the rest of the year.

A range of topics were covered and my colleague John Scott majored on two of them: food security and pricing. Mr Scott put forward his fears about the volatility of prices in the food

sector, particularly in relation to wheat, which has had a difficult year as a result of disasters in Russia and Pakistan. He also pointed out that the input costs for many producers are going up significantly and highlighted the cost of fertilisers. He said that food inflation is running at about 7 per cent, which is pretty high when we consider that the consumer prices index, announced last week, is at just over 3 per cent. Mr Scott also touched on his slight difficulties with regulation and red tape. Many businesses in Scotland suffer from too much red tape and regulation, but those in the food and drink sector probably take more than their fair share of that burden and anything that can be done to cut it must be positive.

We heard about healthy eating and obesity. Elaine Murray spent a lot of her speech labouring that issue. There is a particular concern about obesity in our children and what we can do to try to turn that around. I do not think that there are any quick fixes there, but turn it around we must if we are to prosper as a nation.

We heard about the reputation of Scottish food, procurement and the economic impact of our food and drink industry, on which I will spend my remaining time. We know that there are an enormous number of jobs in the supply chain, however one decides to carve that up. We know that somewhere in the region of 75,000 businesses are involved in food and drink and that there is an enormous gross value added, to the tune of about £9.5 billion, for the Scottish economy.

Whichever way exports are dressed up, food and drink account for a massive slice of them. Whether food and drink exports are worth £4 billion or £5 billion, total Scottish exports last year, on which figures came out at the end of last week, were worth about £15 billion. So, whether food is worth £4 billion or £5 billion, it is an enormous slice of that total.

I asked the cabinet secretary about the figures that he set out in his speech. The Scottish Government website and the food strategy document say that food and drink exports overseas are worth £5 billion a year; Scottish Development International says that last year was a record year, with exports worth £4.06 billion; and the Scotland's global connections survey says that the figure was £3.8 billion. Different organisations occasionally come up with different figures, but my worry is that all three are part of the Scottish Government: Scottish Development International is a part of the Scottish Government; the global connections survey is carried out by the Scottish Government; and of course the cabinet secretary's food and drink strategy document comes from the Scottish Government.

There might not be an answer to that today, but it is important to know the value to the Scottish economy of overseas food and drink exports. Is it £4 billion or is it £5 billion? There is a pretty big disparity between the two figures. The figure is important not just for its own sake; we need a baseline because the Government, in alignment with the industry, has set targets for driving the industry forward. The strategy sets a clear target of going from £7.5 billion for total sales, including exports, to £10 billion by 2017. If the figure for exports is £1 billion out, how on earth can we measure progress towards that target and how would we have any idea in 2017 whether we had got there? I hope that the cabinet secretary will address that point, either today or later on, because it is extremely important to get a baseline.

We heard about the value of exports from the Scottish whisky industry. Iain Smith gave us the good news that South Korea has decided to relax some of its trading arrangements; the Scotch Whisky Association has been pushing for that for a number of years.

We are doing a lot at the moment—the Government is clearly acting and all parties and the industry are engaging in that work—but there is a reason why this subject is so important just now. Usually, we cannot compete on price. Usually, we compete only on quality, but because the pound is weak at the moment, particularly against the euro, we can compete on price for the foreseeable future. For that reason, we must drive the industry forward now.

16:44

Elaine Murray: For most of us who attended the debate, it was interesting and instructive. A small group at the back of the SNP benches spent most of the time talking to each other, but I think that the rest of us were quite interested in the speeches that were made cross-party. Members made thoughtful contributions about where improvements could be made to strengthen the industry and the serious challenges that the industry is facing, which Liam McArthur described. It has not been some sort of happy-clappy debate about how great everything is, although we have heard about very good examples from around the country.

John Scott illustrated some of the problems that the food and drink producers are facing.

Jim Hume talked about discrepancies in performance between local authorities. If we are looking at public procurement, we have to understand why some authorities are doing so much better than others.

A number of speakers—Rob Gibson, Iain Smith and Peter Peacock—talked about the problems with being able to access locally produced food. Like Iain Smith, I find it astonishing that, although we talk about the need for deer management and how there are too many deer in parts of the country, it can be difficult in certain areas to procure venison, which is a good, local, healthy food. Why is that?

Ian McKee rightly said that it is important that we do not become too complacent. He also mentioned the need to have a sound home performance and good-quality service as well as good-quality food if we are to be able to exploit our food and drink for tourism purposes.

David Whitton spoke about skills. There is a skills gap in the food and drink production and manufacturing sector, despite the fact that it is one of Scotland's largest manufacturing industries and despite its importance in export. That concurs with evidence that the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee received on farming, particularly hill farming. The loss of people from the land has resulted in a loss of skills. In particular, it is compounded by the fact that farmers have to find other incomes and are not able to maintain their skills. There is a skills issue not only in production but in primary production, which needs to be addressed and taken on by the colleges and further education establishments.

John Scott also spoke about food security, which is an increasingly important issue. The food and drink supply chain is the UK's largest single manufacturing sector—it accounts for something like 7 per cent of gross domestic product—but, despite the fact that UK farming exports £12 billion of food and drink, Britain is not self-sufficient and imports something like 40 per cent of the total food that is consumed in the country. The food supply chain is also vulnerable to changes in society and the environment, which can lead to volatility and price changes, such as the increase in grain prices in 2008.

That is an issue not only for us, because the global population is increasing and food production is threatened by climate change, scarce water supplies in many parts of the world, an increased range of pests as temperature increases, the decline in numbers of pollinators such as bees—Peter Peacock likes to remind us about that—and the distortion of the market by the demands of wealthy consumers in rich countries for specialist food and flowers, which often prevents local people from growing the food that they need to supply their demand. I wonder about the asparagus to which Peter Peacock referred. What could be grown in Peru that the local population needs if it was not exporting asparagus to Britain and incurring many food miles? Irene

Oldfather mentioned the importance of the fair trade movement, which seeks to address that imbalance.

One of the other issues to which Peter Peacock referred in passing was waste. He spoke about people not knowing how to cook the entire product. There is quite a lot of television interest in that at the moment and various programmes try to encourage people to use the whole animal—I saw one last night, as it happens—but the statistics on food waste are shocking. The cabinet secretary is probably concerned about that issue. In Scotland, more than £1 billion-worth of food is thrown away every year. That is £430-worth per household and 566,000 tonnes of food, two thirds of which could have been eaten and half of which has not even been touched. That is the equivalent of 1.7 million tonnes of carbon and it would be the equivalent of taking a quarter of our cars off the road if we could eliminate it, although we will not do so altogether.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in Rome estimates that more than 1 billion people throughout the world are starving, which means that, in Scotland—in this small nation—we throw away £1-worth of perfectly good food per starving person in the world. That is one of the reasons why food waste needs to be addressed. The statistics are scandalous and, if we could get that message over to the public more, we might move away from the commonly held view that people can throw whatever they like in their bins because they pay their council tax and that is what the tax is for. I support Scotland's zero waste campaign—love food, hate waste—and believe that we need to get the message out more widely.

We must also not allow excuses about the fiscal climate to deflect us from efforts to reduce waste. In England, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appears to be pulling back from some of its waste management agenda and I very much hope that that will not happen in Scotland, because the consequences for the climate are significant if we do not tackle waste. We must find innovative ways around that.

A number of members have mentioned the allotments movement. It is an exciting movement. Allotments were very common during the war—there were about 70,000 or 80,000 allotments in Scotland then, but that total has now gone down to about 7,000. However, there is now huge interest in growing one's own food and that is very much to be encouraged for all the reasons that members such as Sandra White have described.

Peter Peacock described an interesting initiative in his region, which links the issues of food security and sustainability on the island of Eigg. He pointed out that the food chain depends on local facilities such as slaughterhouses being

available. That is an important consideration for producing local food in rural areas. There is no point reducing food miles by selling local food if the animal has to go to the other end of the country to be killed, and the produce then has to come back again. We have to address that.

Several areas of policy have been referenced in the debate, and we need to tie them all together. There is Scotland Food & Drink and "Recipe for Success"—a number of members have referred to the photographs in the document, but there are other issues there, too. There is the skills strategy, which David Whitton mentioned; there are also the land use strategy, the zero waste strategy, the tourism strategy and other strategies relating to reducing climate change. Our food and drink policy can positively affect all those strategic areas, but we need to understand how the strategies work together if we are to get the maximum benefit. That is particularly the case during times of financial stringency such as the period that we are experiencing at the moment.

It is good to celebrate the success of food and drink fortnight and its growth across the country since its inception. It is also good to look forward and address some of the challenges that we face, through this and other policies.

16:52

Richard Lochhead: This has been a good debate, with a lot of consensus on the importance of the food and drink industry in Scotland and on the importance of celebrating it, as we have been doing over this Scottish food and drink fortnight.

There have been some disappointments—I am very disappointed to learn that I feature in only seven photographs in the food policy document. I am sure that the point that David Whitton was trying to make was that I should feature in many more.

However, disappointments have been few and far between, as it has been a good debate. We can argue over the figures for employment levels in food and drink and the economic value of food and drink in Scotland. Because the industry is now a priority, it is important to bring together the various agencies, with their statistics and figures, to ensure that we are using the same methodology—we have different methodologies at the moment, and some people concentrate on manufacturing jobs in the food and drink sector, whereas other bodies, including the Scottish Government, include jobs to do with food and drink across the whole supply chain. Looking at those figures in different ways gives different results. We need uniformity in our approach and in how we use figures as a base for where we go from here.

Irrespective of any argument over figures, I hope that we can all agree on the importance of the sector and on the fact that it is going in the right direction. Food and drink policy is going in the right direction, and the employment statistics and economic value statistics are all going in the right direction, too.

As food and drink minister, I have been lucky enough not only to enjoy lots of food and drink from Scotland over the summer months but to visit many businesses the length and breadth of the country. The week before last, for example, I visited the Lockerbie creamery. There is a good-news story there, and the staff spoke of their plans for developing new products in the future. I visited Vion in Coupar Angus. There is good news there, too, with the company wishing to capitalise, through its meat products, on Scotland's reputation for quality and provenance. More investment decisions are being announced at what is a major employer in that area.

Last week, I visited Braehead Foods in Kilmarnock, which deals in Scottish game. Again, there is a good-news story there—the company has grown over recent years and has opened a cook school, which is doing very well. Also in the past few weeks, I went to Mackay's in Arbroath to look at its new products, in particular the marmalades and chutneys. Mackay's is a traditional company, but it is doing extremely well. The figures are rocketing, and the firm aims to get into new markets and new products. It is success story after success story.

The wider food and drink sector in Scotland is not without its challenges. Some sectors have been impacted by the economic climate. Overall, however, it is a good-news story with lots of success to talk about.

I, too, have visited Macphie of Glenbervie, which was mentioned by David Whitton and other members. Not only has it a lot of good news to tell about its new products and new markets but, as Mr Whitton pointed out, it takes very seriously its role in skills and development and in attracting young people into the food and drink sector. It has set a fantastic example for other Scottish companies.

I do not know whether David Whitton was too busy counting the number of photographs in the document in which I feature, but I have to tell him that, despite what he said, I did mention skills and training in my opening remarks. Indeed, I pointed out that, compared with the handful of apprenticeships that we previously had in the food and drink sector, there are now 600. I thought that, at the food of the future event that, as members have pointed out, the Scottish Food and Drink Federation held last week in Parliament and which many of us attended, it was fantastic to see the

video featuring young employees from Macphie of Glenbervie and other Scottish companies and heartening to hear them say that they saw their future in Scotland's food and drink sector. That project alone, which is receiving £180,000 from the Scottish Government, will help 3,000 children in Scotland's schools learn about the food and drink industry.

A lot more is being done. For example, we are working up proposals for a national food skills academy in Scotland. I hope to make an announcement about that in the near future, but I can say that staff from Macphie of Glenbervie have also put a lot of effort into that initiative.

John Scott: We all agree that we need more young people to work in the industry, but does the cabinet secretary agree that the policy of the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board is reducing their ability to do so?

Richard Lochhead: I am not sure that there is any evidence to support that claim. Of course, we have to keep such issues under review to ensure that we are aware of any impact that the board might be having.

Scotland's food and drink policy has given rise to a lot of firsts. For example, many members highlighted the need to work with retailers and supermarkets in Scotland. I said in my opening remarks that, in the past three years alone, demand for Scottish brands not only in Scotland but in England and Wales has increased by 30 per cent, much of which has been down to awareness among our retailers and supermarkets that they need to work more closely with our smaller producers, in particular, and to respond to consumer demand. When people go to the supermarket, the local shop or wherever, they want to see our fantastic Scottish produce on display and have the opportunity to buy it.

Liam McArthur's comments about the use of the saltire are important. My point was that many people associate the saltire, on which, of course, supermarkets and retailers are capitalising, with quality, provenance and something that they will enjoy eating and drinking. However, we must be careful that the sign lives up to its reputation and that it is not exploited by manufacturers who have not contributed to that reputation and therefore do not deserve to get sales through it. However, although that debate is important, we should not attack the saltire. It is a fantastic symbol and is responsible for the increase in sales that I mentioned earlier.

Some small Scottish producers want to become bigger; others do not. Although it is important that we work across the supply chain to ensure that small producers can get their products sold in some of the bigger supermarkets, we must also

work with companies that want to become the big household names of the future. We want to add value to the fantastic raw materials that our farmers and crofters produce and the seafood that our fishermen land at the quayside. Many of these companies are growing and our food policy must support them in becoming much bigger companies and employers of the future.

As John Scott and others pointed out, our fishing and agricultural policies will have to be linked to our food policy if we want the fantastic raw materials on which our processing and manufacturing sector relies to be there for ever more. It is important, therefore, that we get the common agricultural policy right and that it delivers support for our primary producers—Scotland's crofters and farmers. We also have to get the common fisheries policy right because, if we do not, we will not have as much stock in our sea or as many fishermen in our coastal communities. Just as we do not want to waste food in our homes and businesses—as Elaine Murray made clear in her speech—we do not want the fantastic food in our seas to be wasted through discards. That is just a complete waste.

In the bigger picture, we as a planet must face up to many challenges. The global population is forecast to increase from 6.1 billion to 9 billion by 2050, which will place a huge demand on the planet's resources. That is why we must tackle issues such as food waste, because the demand for food, for instance, will increase by 50 per cent. World energy demand will also increase by 50 per cent and demand for water will increase by 30 per cent by 2030. We must recognise that we are part of the planet and that we cannot afford to waste natural resources, but we must also acknowledge that Scotland is not short of energy or the ability to produce food and drink and that we are certainly not short of water.

The Presiding Officer: I must hurry you.

Richard Lochhead: That situation gives our food and drink businesses a big competitive advantage and will give the whole of Scotland a big competitive advantage in the decades that are ahead. It is important that we protect the country's capacity to produce food, which we are good at doing.

The Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Richard Lochhead: Scottish food and drink fortnight is all about celebrating the fact that we are fantastic at producing food and drink, thanks to our natural environment and the skills and talents of our people and the businesses in which they work. I urge all members to continue to work across Scotland with our primary producers, retailers, the Scottish Government and all our agencies not only to celebrate food and drink but

to ensure that the industry goes from strength to strength and that the nation gains all the resulting benefits.

Decision Time

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business.

Glas-goals

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S3M-6906, in the name of Bill Butler, on Glas-goals aiming high. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament supports the *Evening Times'* Glas-goals campaign and its three targets of encouraging Glaswegians to walk or run a million miles, stub out a million cigarettes and shed half a million pounds in weight between them over the next year; notes that the paper will work with partners including NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Glasgow Life, Glasgow City Council, Glasgow 2014 and Glasgow Housing Association to deliver a year-long series of events aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles; is alarmed that Glasgow, as it heads towards the 2014 Commonwealth Games, has one of the worst public health records in Europe with men in Glasgow having the lowest life expectancy in the United Kingdom, and with nearly a third of the city's population suffering from obesity and over 190,000 of its citizens still smoking; believes Glas-goals has the potential to make a significant contribution in addressing these deep-seated problems; encourages Glaswegians to join the campaign by participating in the Glas-goals events, which so far have included fun runs, cycle races, bunny hops and the World's largest tea dance, and encourages other local authorities and health bodies to consider using Glas-goals as a blueprint for campaigns across Scotland.

17:02

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): Please allow me to begin by thanking the 40 MSPs from across the chamber who have signed my motion and, in effect, lent their support to the Glas-goals campaign. Before I go into detail about the undoubted benefits of Glas-goals, I will present a few hard and unpleasant facts about my city, which I love.

The city of Glasgow has one of the worst public health records in Europe. Men in Glasgow have the lowest life expectancy in the United Kingdom. Nearly one third of the city's population suffers from obesity and almost 200,000 of its citizens smoke, which contributes to high levels of lung cancer and associated conditions. The life expectancy of a person in Drumchapel, in my Glasgow Anniesland constituency, is 11 years less than that of someone who lives in neighbouring Bearsden. That fact prompted my illustrious predecessor, Donald Dewar, to observe memorably that the imbalance in "the social arithmetic" needed to be corrected. In plain language, that means campaigning for a society that has greater equality and fairness.

Against that stark background, Glasgow's newspaper, the *Evening Times*, launched the Glas-goals campaign. The campaign aims to

change the grim statistics. It has set ambitious but achievable targets to create a vibrant and healthy Glasgow. The paper has joined several key partners, including NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Glasgow Life, Glasgow City Council and Glasgow Housing Association, to set a series of health goals for the city. The goals include improving basic fitness, challenging obesity, improving diets and helping as many Glaswegians as possible to stop smoking.

Glas-goals has set itself the bold target of helping Glaswegians to stub out 1 million cigarettes, run or walk 1 million miles and lose hundreds of thousands of excess pounds in a year. Campaigners will work with key groups that include Marie Curie Cancer Care and sport relief to help to improve the city's health record, and to raise the profile of the many impressive projects—large and small—that are already tackling the deep-seated health issues throughout the city.

Throughout the year, the campaign will stage fun and informative health and fitness events. Those that have already been held have proved to be a huge success. In June, it was revealed that Glas-goals had smashed through its initial target of stubbing out 1 million cigarettes by reaching a staggering 2.5 million. That is to be welcomed. It also celebrated passing the 300,000 miles barrier in terms of participants walking, running, cycling or swimming.

Members will be glad to hear that more success came last Sunday, when Glas-goals managed to make it into the Guinness book of records, because of the phenomenal success of its world's largest tea dance attempt in George Square. There were 306 couples—including, I am glad to say, members of the Sequin dance club at Peterson Park tenants hall in my Glasgow Anniesland constituency—who strutted their stuff and replaced London in the record books. I hope that colleagues from across the chamber will join me in congratulating all those who took part.

In August, more than 13,000 people joined Sir Chris Hoy and Lorraine Kelly to take part in a Sky Ride cycle around Glasgow city centre. The 5 mile route allowed cyclists to take advantage of traffic-free city centre streets and to take in sights such as the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow Science Centre and Glasgow Green. I believe that cyclists of all ages and abilities thoroughly enjoyed the event, which was hosted in partnership with British Cycling and Glasgow Life.

Those flagship events have been hugely successful, but of equal importance are the many smaller projects that are taking place day in and day out across the city in workplaces, schools and communities. Often, those events help people to take their first steps towards improving their health and can encourage them to make the often quite

small changes in their lifestyle that can lead to significant improvements in their quality of life. An example is the lunch time health walks that are co-ordinated by Glasgow Life and which are held every week at a number of locations throughout the city. I have taken part in several of them in my constituency, so I know that they provide an excellent way of taking light exercise at a convenient time. I have thoroughly enjoyed taking part in those walks.

Recently, in a moment of weakness, I was convinced by my staff to take a pedometer challenge, which requires me to walk the equivalent of the west Highland way—some 96 miles—in less than six weeks. I can exclusively reveal to members that, a full 48 hours into the challenge, I have managed about 27,000 steps and I have even been able to coax several of my colleagues to don pedometers and take up similar challenges.

Today's papal visit puts Scotland on the world stage, which is a good thing. Four years from now, the eyes of the world will again be fixed on Scotland as we play host to the Commonwealth games in Glasgow. We all want to ensure that those games provide not just a grand spectacle, but a real and lasting legacy for every citizen in our country. The games will provide us with state-of-the-art sporting facilities and new housing, and will make a massive contribution to the regeneration of Glasgow's east end. However, the success of the Commonwealth games will not be measured in bricks and mortar alone; it will also be measured by the contribution that the games make to building a healthier, fitter and more active nation whose citizens enjoy a better quality of life.

Glas-goals presents us with a real opportunity to begin to develop that legacy. By bringing partner agencies together and coming up with imaginative ways of promoting healthy living and encouraging people to take their fitness seriously, the *Evening Times* deserves Parliament's thanks. Glas-goals presents communities throughout Scotland with a model that I hope will be imitated. Such initiatives will help people walk more, participate more, feel fitter and—most important—to live longer, more active and more fulfilled lives. Glas-goals is a campaign for everyone—not only in my home town of Glasgow, but across our nation. The campaign has already met many of its targets. Let us all do what we can to encourage local authorities and health boards throughout the country to use Glas-goals as a blueprint for a better Scotland.

17:10

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I thank Bill Butler and I congratulate him on securing the debate, and I thank the *Evening Times* for working

in partnership with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, the GHA and Glasgow City Council to improve the health of every Glaswegian.

It is a real worry and a blot on our record that for many decades Glasgow has had the worst health record of any city in Scotland. Each and every one of us, regardless of our political parties or thoughts, should think about that. A lot has been done in Glasgow not just in recent years but even under the previous Government, and we still have the reputation for being the most unhealthy city and people in Scotland.

We are trying to change that, and along with the *Evening Times* and the Glas-goals campaign I hope that everyone will join in. I have certainly tried to join in. Last Sunday, I joined in the family race around Glasgow Green. It was a good day not just because I had my granddaughter and others with me on bikes, but because everyone enjoyed themselves. It was very much a community and social event—I think that it was sponsored by milk companies, too. Bill Butler mentioned the tea dance, which lots of people took part in, particularly from areas such as Partick. It was a great success, too.

The key to the success of such campaigns is that they do not push people to run miles or become really fit in a couple of weeks; they make things enjoyable. Last Sunday, the Singing Kettle put on a show on a stage, and all the young kids thoroughly enjoyed it. Things like that bring people out to enjoy not just the keep-fit part of events but the atmosphere. That is something that we have to consider.

I do not want to be controversial on this point, but I ask Bill Butler and others to speak to Gordon Matheson of Glasgow City Council to ask him not to stop the free fruit for children in schools in Glasgow. We have just had a debate on fruit and other Scottish produce, so it is fitting that we now have a debate on keeping fit. However, I plead with everyone, particularly Labour colleagues, to tell Gordon Matheson not to stop the free fruit. It would be the most vulnerable people and the ones who need it most who would be affected by that aspect of Gordon Matheson's policies in Glasgow City Council.

I was going to ask Bill Butler how many miles he has managed to run. I know that he told us how many steps he has taken, so perhaps Patricia Ferguson or somebody else will be able to say how many miles that is. The challenge is to do a lot of miles. I think he said 96 miles, so it is a lot—I would not like to do it in one day.

I have tried to do my best through the healthy living centres, and Bill Butler mentioned the fact that we have healthy living centres and health walks. A lot of voluntary groups organise health

walks—I know that some do an hour's walk every week in the Maryhill and Woodside areas around the sights in their areas. Indeed, the Annexe healthy living centre in Partick organises walks that go into the communities in Anderston, Partick and Townhead. The last walk I did with that group took us up to the necropolis, which was wonderful; lots of people in Glasgow have not seen the necropolis. There were people from all walks of life.

We have to ensure that people in Glasgow are fit and healthy, but we cannot force people to take part, so the Glas-goals campaign, because it is different and people will join in, must be welcomed. As Bill Butler said, perhaps other areas will take it on board and use it as a blueprint to get their citizens fit, too.

I thank Bill Butler once again for securing the debate, and I look forward to the day when Glasgow is not at the bottom of the league in health.

17:14

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): I offer my congratulations to Bill Butler on securing the debate, and to the *Evening Times* on its initiative. Perhaps more important is that I also praise the efforts of the many thousands of Glaswegians who have taken up the challenge and are trying to increase their activity levels for the sake of their health and that of their families and communities.

As others have said, Glasgow and her citizens have languished at the bottom of health league tables for too long. As a result of many Scottish Parliament policies under successive Governments, more Glaswegians live in warm, affordable houses and have access to good health facilities, as Sandra White said. However, the health problems of the city will take perhaps another generation or two to wipe out.

Campaigns such as Glas-goals provide the encouragement that the city needs, and help to bolster a feeling of pride as the city participates in a collective workout. At the weekend, as we heard, 612 people waltzed, jived and salsaed into the record books. There are also many examples of individuals and small groups getting involved and having fun.

In my constituency, northern sole mates offers walks and jogging several times a week and is popular with all ages. When healthy north Glasgow announced its first 5k event in 2006, people wondered how many would turn up. Five years later, the event is a fixture for the communities in the north of the city, with 2,900 people participating this year. It is a pleasure to see mums and dads with buggies, people in fancy

dress and even the occasional MP and MSP, not to mention a certain *Evening Times* reporter, taking part. I have to admit that the reporter finished somewhat ahead of the politicians.

For many years I campaigned for sports facilities in my constituency, along with my colleague Ann McKeichin. I am delighted that Glasgow City Council has responded by providing new pitches and a gym at John Paul academy, followed by a gym and dance facility in the new St Monica's primary school campus in Milton. In April, a new sports complex opened in Maryhill, at a cost of some £9 million. That is a lot of money, but the complex is an investment and within four months of opening it had been used and enjoyed by 30,000 people.

Not everyone wants to go to a gym or a pool, so it is good to see the Forth and Clyde canal's banks being increasingly used for fishing, cycling and walking. Just today, an application was made for permission to develop a paddle sports centre with a white-water course and canoe polo pitches at one of the canal basins. I might be an enthusiast for the canal, but I am not sure that I will take advantage of those facilities.

If anyone is in doubt about the vibrancy of the communities of Maryhill, they need look no further than the online and aptly named Maryhill activity directory, which is the brainchild of Jim Hamilton and is an invaluable local resource. Pages and pages are devoted to sport and other physical activity. The directory is a mine of helpful information.

Glas-goals is helping to build the legacy of the Commonwealth games, which will be a games for all of Glasgow and all of Scotland. The campaign is imaginative and positive in outlook. It acknowledges that sport is not for everyone, but that activity should be. The minister will be aware that the activity levels of young women and girls present a particular problem. Girls are as active as their male peers when they are 10, but by the time they are 11 or 12 their activity levels have often dropped to a level that men do not reach until they are 40. It is vital that we recognise, as the campaign does, the power of dance and drama for young women who would not otherwise be involved.

The Commonwealth games will offer a host of opportunities to everyone in the city. I very much hope that we take advantage of those opportunities, because if we do we will reap the kind of benefits that Barcelona got from the Olympic games that it hosted so successfully.

I congratulate the *Evening Times* and everyone who has taken part in the campaign. Given the cross-party consensus in the debate, I wonder

whether we need a cross-party group on Glas-goals.

17:18

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I congratulate Bill Butler on bringing the debate to the Parliament and I commend him for leading by example and taking his first 27,000 steps.

I apologise for the absence of my colleague Bill Aitken. He was extremely keen to speak in the debate but he had another engagement and had to return to Glasgow, which is unfortunate. He asked me to convey his apologies to members.

The final part of the motion asks that the Parliament

"encourages other local authorities and health bodies to consider using Glas-goals as a blueprint for campaigns across Scotland."

As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I am much less familiar with Glas-goals than the other speakers are, so I welcomed that part of the motion and I hope that it helps to justify my presence in the debate. The campaign is excellent—if it can work in Glasgow, surely it can also work elsewhere in Scotland, with consensus and working together.

It is unfortunate that Glasgow, which is a city of vibrant people, with many attractions, has become synonymous with ill health, as Bill Butler said. We should note that much that applies to Glasgow also applies to areas elsewhere in Scotland. Drug abuse, smoking, alcoholism and the growing problem of obesity take an enormous toll on Glaswegians' health; as we all know, in many cases it can cost them their lives. Accordingly, initiatives such as the Glas-goals campaign are to be warmly welcomed.

Not many of us are destined to be Olympic runners, nor is it necessary to take strenuous exercise to achieve a level of fitness—a point that the Minister for Public Health has made constantly in the past few years. Any clinician will say that the beneficial effect of a brisk walk, done regularly, is enormous.

From time to time, many people find it challenging to shed weight. We need look only at the queue every Thursday in the Parliament for WeightWatchers to see that not all of us are shining successes. In Glasgow, in particular, the problem of obesity has been exacerbated by poor diet. The traditional fish supper, sugary drinks and too much junk food generally have contributed to the problem. That is why it is so vital that all agencies, health boards, housing associations and local authorities work together to do everything that they can to promote better diets.

As Bill Butler says in his motion, it is depressing that 190,000 Glaswegians still smoke. The

message is stark: smoking kills. It is disappointing that that message has still not got through to everyone. All agencies must continue in their efforts to persuade Glaswegians to kick that potentially fatal habit.

The Glas-goals campaign deserves to succeed. It recognises that being healthy and taking measures to improve one's fitness can be fun. Although my colleague Bill Aitken was unable to attend the debate, I trust that in future he, along with other MSPs, will be persuaded to join in a tea dance, a run, a walk or some other activities.

17:22

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I, too, congratulate Bill Butler on bringing the motion to the chamber. He explored some of the statistics and situations in Glasgow's health record that are familiar to all of us and which have been debated on numerous occasions. Some of the issues are historic, of long standing and culturally rooted in aspects of Glasgow's behaviour that all of us can identify.

The statistics for physical and mental health are stark. I would also like to mention sexual health, which is significantly worrying in Glasgow and the west of Scotland compared with other parts of the United Kingdom and Europe. On this day of all days, I can barely resist the suggestion that we add another target to Glas-goals—for Glaswegians to use a million condoms over the next year. I cannot think of anyone who could object to such a target for Glasgow. Perhaps those Glasgow members who are not here with us tonight can raise the issue wherever they happen to be.

Some of Glasgow's ill health—some of it less serious, but much of it chronic—can be attributed to individual behaviour around smoking, drinking, eating and exercise. Some can be associated with the environment; environmental inequality has a clear impact on public health. Some is attributable to economic factors. The complex relationships between health inequalities and economic inequality are still a growing area of work; much research is happening, and there are lessons that we have not yet fully understood.

Another issue is the way in which messages proliferate in our society. A public health campaign or a health promotion budget is relatively small compared with the vast marketing budgets of organisations that promote unhealthy activity, whether those be burger bars, drinks companies, tobacco companies or promoters of processed food. The scale of the marketing budget that goes on telling us all to eat unhealthily, to drive everywhere instead of walking and to pursue such unhealthy activities is astonishing, and it is

extremely difficult for people who work in public health to get over that.

Information needs to be provided as part of any public health campaign but, increasingly, information is available in bucketfuls—many people are bombarded left, right and centre with messages about what to do, what to eat, where to exercise and so on. Another aspect of such campaigns is access and opportunity. As well as access to fresh and nutritious food, people need access to places that feel safe and pleasant to walk, cycle or run in. The third element is motivation—people have to want the thing that is being suggested to them. Public health campaigns must not be seen as finger-wagging exercises that tell people how they should live their life, whether they like it or not; they must be motivating. In that regard, I think that the Glas-goals campaign is extremely positive because it has an upbeat, “Yes we can” spirit to it. It is aspirational; it is about seeing what more we can do for ourselves.

My final point is about what more our public bodies—local authorities and health boards—could do with their land. One of the impacts of devolution has been a land reform agenda that has sought to capture the idea that land is part of the common good. In Glasgow, there is an eight-year waiting list for allotments. In Glasgow, most tenement back courts have in no way been designed to be pleasant, enjoyable spaces for playing in, enjoying the open air or growing food.

A huge amount could be done by exploring concepts such as landshare, which involves linking up people who want to grow with people or organisations that have some land. Local food production has environmental benefits, and people acting together and taking part in a collective enterprise results in better community links. On top of that, people can save some money on their weekly shopping bill.

The production of fresh, healthy, nutritious, home-grown fruit and veg gives people great-quality exercise with other people and is brilliant for physical and mental health. I would love to see Glasgow City Council, the health board and other public bodies that have wee bits of land here, there and everywhere opening them up to allow members of the public to turn them into productive land. That would help with our food supply, which the previous debate dealt with, and it would help the public health situation in Glasgow.

17:27

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): I congratulate Bill Butler on securing the debate and on his excellent speech, every word of which I totally agree with. I also congratulate the *Evening Times* on its Glas-goals

campaign, which has the potential to motivate the paper's wide readership to adopt some realistic goals to help them lose weight, quit smoking or become active.

The fact that the *Evening Times* has managed to capture the imagination of the community is quite an achievement, because it is sometimes hard for public health campaigns to capture people's imagination and make them want to take part. It strikes me that the *Evening Times* has managed to get people to want to play their part and to be almost competitive in achieving their goals. As Mary Scanlon said, other local authorities and communities might be able to learn lessons from Glasgow, and to come together and emulate what it is doing.

We know that just giving people information about behaviour change is insufficient to improve health. Glas-goals is imaginative and cost effective in that it involves a partnership of the public bodies that Patrick Harvie alluded to, and it ensures high community awareness of key health improvement and social change messages, while helping people to make small, achievable changes in their lives that will make a big difference.

One aspect of the campaign is the aim to achieve a healthy weight. Unfortunately, more than a quarter of all adults in Scotland are obese and almost two thirds are overweight. We know that those problems are particularly difficult in the greater Glasgow and Clyde area. Our response to that challenge has been to make a 20-year commitment, jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to tackle overweight and obesity problems through the obesity route map. Problems such as obesity cannot be solved overnight; the aims are long term. The obesity route map contains around 80 actions covering all areas of government to ensure that it is achieved. It also includes the use of land that Patrick Harvie mentioned. I have certainly challenged health boards to look at their estates and the contribution that they can make, particularly in the run-up to the Commonwealth games. They need to show how they can make their estates more accessible to patients and staff, whether in hospital or out in the community, so that they can use them for a lunch time walk, for example. People need to get out and about and put that land to good use.

Our eight healthy weight communities across Scotland, including one in the Priesthill and Househillwood area of south-west Glasgow, are examples of obesity plan actions. Those projects embrace a vast range of activities and initiatives, from breastfeeding support groups to walking clubs for young people and healthy local gala days. They are about finding out what can be achieved in a community if we do all the good things that we know about. That action is based on

the French model, which has been very successful, and some interesting evidence will come out of those healthy weight communities to inform our way forward.

The smoking cessation aspect of Glas-goals is obviously very important. Members have already spoken about the importance of turning the smoking figures around if we are to tackle our poor health record. We have made great progress in shifting cultural attitudes to smoking. When people said that it would never happen in Scotland or in Glasgow, the smoking ban was brought in, and it has made a big difference. We can take particular pride in the national network of high-quality national health service smoking cessation services that can help people who are motivated by the campaign to sustain their smoking cessation. Those services are excellent examples of preventive and anticipatory approaches. However, although smoking rates in Glasgow are coming down because of the great efforts of a number of people, they are still the highest in Scotland and they cause a significant amount of preventable ill-health, so the Glas-goals focus on smoking cessation is welcome. Smoking prevention, cessation and wider tobacco control measures are important, and we need to maintain momentum towards what I hope will be a smoke-free country.

The Glas-goals aim to encourage Glaswegians to walk or run a million miles is fantastic. I am impressed with the number of steps that Bill Butler has taken; no doubt we will get a weekly update on how he is getting on with that. His point is that we should all be doing a bit more. For my part, I did the cyclathon in Dundee at the weekend, and I have the bruises to show for it. It does not matter what the activity is; the point is that maintaining a consistent level of activity throughout life can make a big difference. The activity can be walking, running, dancing or even gardening; it does not matter. I was pleased to see that some of the Delhi handover ceremony events, for example, are dance-based events that are taking place the length and breadth of Scotland. That is an attractive proposition for girls. Patricia Ferguson mentioned the challenge that we face with teenage girls and young women. We need to be creative in what we offer to them.

The goal of 2014 is a big opportunity for Glasgow and the rest of Scotland. The community sports hubs should make it easy for people to get access to clubs and other facilities. That is a practical part of the 2014 legacy.

Glas-goals is, without doubt, acting as a powerful catalyst in giving a high public profile to other initiatives, such as healthy working lives, that impact on every sector of the population in the west of Scotland. Schools, workplaces, communities and individuals have signed up for

walking and running events, dance classes and swimming galas, and through the active nation website and the *Evening Times* online they have also committed to taking more physical exercise, which is all fantastic.

Glas-goals is also making widely available information on how to get more support to change, such as how to join a walking group and where to get advice and support on weight loss or stopping smoking. That makes it easy for people, and that is important when someone is at the point of making those lifestyle changes.

I have been pleased to see the focus on parenting support in the campaign. I am aware that the council and the health board have adopted the triple P positive parenting programme, part of which is a media and information campaign to ensure that parenting support is seen as being as normal as attending antenatal classes or school parents nights. The campaign's actions will also make an important contribution to tackling health inequalities, which is a major concern for Glasgow, in particular. I am also pleased that Glasgow is taking part in the equally well programme.

I again thank Bill Butler for bringing a timely debate to Parliament, and I thank the *Evening Times* for providing a bit of a beacon to other areas. Perhaps other newspapers may follow the lead that has been taken by the *Evening Times*. The last thank you goes to all the thousands of people who have seized the moment, have taken up the challenge and are playing their part in making Glas-goals into a reality. It is something very special that we can all support and take forward together.

Meeting closed at 17:36.

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