



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 11 November 2010

Session 3

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Printed and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by
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Scottish Parliament

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

Curriculum for Excellence

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S3M-7379, in the name of Michael Russell, on curriculum for excellence. Before the debate begins, I remind members that it will be paused at 11 o'clock to allow the Parliament to observe a two-minute silence, so whoever is speaking at the time will need to be ready to stop quite quickly.

09:15

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): I am delighted to have this opportunity to thank the teaching profession and all who work in or are part of school communities for what I have to call their unprecedented efforts in successfully continuing the roll-out of curriculum for excellence across our primary, special and secondary schools, in our nurseries and pre-schools and, we should not forget, in our colleges and even our universities.

In all those areas of educational endeavour, young people are learning what it is to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society, which is a major step forward in Scottish education.

More than thanking the people involved, I want to take the opportunity—and the motion makes this explicit—to confirm the whole Scottish Parliament's on-going support for and commitment to curriculum for excellence, which I hope we all agree provides the core principles for achieving the best possible education for our children and young people.

There is no room for complacency. We are all aware of the difficult financial circumstances that we will face over the next few years. In those circumstances, more than any other, Scotland's education system needs stability, determination and focus. It requires unrelenting concentration on fulfilling the purpose of education in Scotland, to enable every single one of our children to achieve the highest possible educational standards and to give them the best possible preparation for successful life and work in the 21st century.

In Scotland we have long understood the need for stability. In 2003, the Scottish Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee, of which

I was pleased to be a member, published its report on the purposes of education, in which it highlighted stability in education as an issue in need of attention. The report stated:

"There is a need to reconcile the often-expressed desire for a period of stability within the Scottish education system with the even more widespread perception of a need for change. Perhaps a clear and well thought-out sense of direction which is consistently pursued would provide the necessary level of stability?"

I pay tribute to the previous Administration for taking up the opportunity to achieve that long-standing agreement on the direction that we wanted our education system to take. That agreement was and is the curriculum for excellence. That was and is the big prize. It is what teachers wanted; it is what headteachers wanted; it is what parents wanted; and it is what the Scottish Parliament wanted on behalf of Scottish society.

It has its origins not just in the committee's inquiry but in the national debate on education in 2002, which also achieved a remarkable degree of consensus on the future direction of Scottish education. The aim was to improve Scottish education for each and every young person by undertaking radical reform and sticking with it over a period of time.

Given the turbulent times that we are going into, the political consensus needs to be durable and strong. Our teaching professionals and our children and young people—our whole learning communities—expect and demand nothing less.

Times are going to be tough. We will argue about the details of how we deal with that, but we need to retain an optimism and a confidence in our education system. That means an optimism and a confidence in the principles of curriculum for excellence and an optimism and a confidence that our education and learning professionals are up to the challenge and are being supported in it.

When I became education secretary in December last year, there were difficulties. There was doubt that schools were ready and predictions—mostly from the Opposition benches—of catastrophe. I am glad to say that there has been a marked change since then.

Considerable support has been put in place and, since August, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and its partners have done valuable work to provide direct, hands-on support in schools across the country. [*Interruption.*] Does Mr McNulty want to intervene?

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I was just wondering whether the difficulties that Mr Russell inherited, and resolved so admirably, were his predecessor, Fiona Hyslop's fault.

Michael Russell: No, they were not. They were caused by inaction by the previous Administration and Mr Macintosh's colleagues. I did not want to be so churlish as to say that and break the positive spirit, and I regret that Mr Macintosh has done so. I revert to the positive Mike Russell, which is my natural default position.

Summary versions and professional practice guides for key documents have been produced and distributed to practitioners. Simple fact files—I have some with me as a visual aid—to help explain the changes to parents, employers and others have been published and made widely available. I wrote to the parents of every primary 7 child going into secondary 1 to explain what was taking place and to encourage them to ask questions.

The work of teachers and all those employed in our schools has paid off. The alleged catastrophe did not happen. Our pupils are still learning and teachers are still teaching—better than ever. The consensus that curriculum for excellence is the answer to the problems that we all agreed on at the start of this session of Parliament continues to grow—it is extending as more and more people see the curriculum in action in our schools.

We can now see the rewards of the work that has been carried out across early years, primary, secondary and special schools and colleges and their partners to make curriculum for excellence a reality.

There is a transformation in the links between early years services and primary schools. The number of partnerships with the third sector and parents to help children broaden their achievements through schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award has grown. Ever-growing partnerships between our schools and colleges help all children, but especially those in need of more choices and more chances.

We see a new confidence in the professionalism and leadership of teachers. People can turn to the engage for education website and see the blogs of Richard Coton, headteacher of Monifieth high school in Angus. He talks about going live in August 2009, a year ahead of the national timeline. He talks about it being a lot of hard work but says that the staff have shown professionalism and commitment. After a year and a half of detailed analysis and evidence, he believes strongly that pupils in the school are doing better and are growing much further as a result of curriculum for excellence.

It is not just Scottish teachers; international commentators spoke at September's Scottish learning festival. Richard Gerver, co-founder of the international Curriculum Foundation, described curriculum for excellence as "spectacular". Eric

Booth, the well-known international educator and author, said that the changes were "historically unprecedented" and that curriculum for excellence—he was paying tribute to schools here—is an "unbelievable accomplishment".

Of course the job is not complete. There are difficult situations ahead. I understand fully the concerns about the future of those representing teachers and others and I have maintained a strong dialogue with them.

I acknowledge the constructive and helpful position that the Educational Institute of Scotland has taken at every stage throughout the past few years. It has questioned, challenged and criticised, but its commitment, together with its principled and reasonable approach, has led to significant improvements in the implementation programme.

The management board has managed this incredibly complex programme with true determination and it is much better equipped to do so given that we continue to widen its membership. The board, like me, is clear that as we move ahead, we will require serious thought as to each step that we take, which is being given.

We are supporting the programme in every way we can, but we agree that the implementation of the programme is not an end in itself. Curriculum for excellence is a methodology. It provides the starting point for all attempts to improve learning. I have made it clear that I welcome and support all those who are ambitious for further improvement.

Ambitious subject experts such as those in the Royal Society of Edinburgh and many others are being listened to. I regularly meet those who have views that challenge curriculum for excellence. As part of my 10-point plan, I established 18 excellence groups and asked them to report to me in early 2011 on how we can make further progress in developing excellence in every subject area in the curriculum.

Ambitious parents need our support, too. Our partners in the national parent forum want to consult parents in every local authority to get their views on how parents can become fully engaged, not just in the improvement of their child's education but in the improvement of the education of every child in their area.

I will support those consultation efforts as I support the forum—I spoke at its conference last week. I am ambitious, together with parents, teachers and the whole community, to tackle some of the endemic problems. As I said when I launched our literacy action plan, poor literacy skills are a result of deep-rooted societal issues within Scotland, but our early years services and our schools can make a real difference. We know that, so let us use curriculum for excellence to demonstrate our optimism and confidence in those

services and to help to turn around unacceptable statistics.

I am ambitious for our teachers. The Donaldson review's findings will progress positive and far-reaching issues for initial and on-going teacher education and development and will help us to overcome the difficulty of teacher unemployment.

Much has been done, but much remains for us to do. Last month, I announced the creation of a new agency—the Scottish education quality and improvement agency—that will bring together the support and challenge functions of HMIE and Learning and Teaching Scotland in a new body that will have at its heart the need to ensure that curriculum for excellence is supported to achieve our ambitions.

We must examine the structures through which education is delivered and ask whether they conform to the ambitions of curriculum for excellence and give our schools the best and most effective arrangements for implementing curriculum for excellence. Can we help our schools to maximise the resources that are available to them in difficult times, to give the best possible educational experience? For example, are schools using information technology to the best effect, not just to engage and interest their pupils but to ensure that the options for their pupils are as wide and varied as they can be? Those questions will exercise us now and over the next few years, but we must talk about our system's strengths—what has really worked in it and what we can build on to ensure that it works better.

I visit many schools and meet many parents and teachers. I will touch on what I learned on four recent visits. In West Linton, I attended a parents evening in the old primary school, which is soon to be replaced by a new primary school—one of the 300-plus schools that are being built under the Administration. The parents there were keenly engaged in and keenly questioning of curriculum for excellence, but any doubts that they had were swept away not by me or even by Scottish Borders Council's effective curriculum for excellence officer but by the children, who put on an inspiring short performance that demonstrated how they learned.

At Paible school on the island of North Uist, I saw the best demonstration of the four capacities that I have ever seen—an ever-changing noticeboard that was full of pictures that the young people had taken, which illustrated what it was to be the four elements in the four capacities. It showed how it was possible to be a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor on the island of North Uist.

In East Kilbride, I saw challenged young people who linked their capacities and their interests by

celebrating the musical "The Sound of Music" and ensuring that they understood the world through the eyes of the characters in that film. Those young people have tremendous difficulties, but their joy and enthusiasm in the classroom were infectious.

On the first day of the school term, I visited Cardinal Newman high school in North Lanarkshire, whose young teachers I had heard make a presentation at a conference on teacher education. The teachers were so excited about their prospects of teaching differently that I had to go to the school. I found a school that was fully engaged in curriculum for excellence, which was not listening to the naysayers and the doom-mongers, which knew that what was happening among its teaching workforce and its young people was a step forward in Scottish education and which was determined to deliver the best in Scottish education.

Those are only four out of many schools. In each one, I see the importance of curriculum for excellence. Yes, there is more to do; yes, the exam timetable must be adhered to—we are doing that; and yes, we must listen to and respect concerns. However, we have something that is of great importance. It is not just me who says that; the whole Parliament said that in 2002 and 2003. We now have the opportunity to stick to that commitment and to continue to do the right thing for Scottish education.

I move,

That the Parliament congratulates the teaching profession and all who work in or are part of school communities for their unprecedented efforts in successfully continuing the roll-out of the Curriculum for Excellence across all primary, special and secondary schools from August 2010; recognises the need for a long-term commitment to the Curriculum for Excellence, and confirms that commitment from this parliament.

09:29

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie)
(Lab): If rhetoric could power Scotland, we could replace Torness by hitching Mr Russell to the national grid. Wind turbines suffer from intermittency, unlike the cabinet secretary. From his lips flows a limitless and inexhaustible torrent of self-justification and self-aggrandisement.

We have been told this morning that the implementation of curriculum for excellence is going splendidly. I presume that that is why one teaching union has been thrown off the management board, while another believes that the introduction of the new qualifications should be delayed by another year; why concerns continue about moderation; why Scotland has been withdrawn from international comparative studies; and why inspectors have been taken away from

their statutory role and thrown into schools as shock troops to prop up the implementation process.

Today's debate on the roll-out of curriculum for excellence comes in a week in which the Cabinet has negotiated with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on limiting the reduction in teacher numbers next year to a maximum of 1,500, which comes on top of reductions this year, the precise figure for which will be known in a few weeks' time, and reductions in past years that resulted in the previous cabinet secretary being replaced.

The Government has been shown to be complicit in bypassing negotiating machinery with the intention of presenting teachers with imposed changes to their terms and conditions, as set out in the McCrone agreement, together with a pay freeze. By congratulating the profession out of one side of his mouth while bargaining away teachers' jobs and conditions out of the other, the cabinet secretary sacrifices whatever trust remains. That will make the process of delivering curriculum for excellence much more difficult from now on than it has been.

Even before the Government's shabby COSLA deal, management of the implementation of curriculum for excellence was weak and inconsistent. If we roll back to 2005, a broad consensus had built up through full consultation and discussion that change was required to equip pupils to compete more effectively in a changing world. We all wanted to retain some features: the flexibility that already exists in the Scottish system—no one argued for a more prescriptive national system; the combination of breadth and depth that the curriculum offered; the quality of teaching in our schools; the quality of supporting material that helps teachers to deliver much of the current curriculum; and—above all—adherence to the comprehensive principle.

At the same time, the consensus was in favour of changes that would reduce overcrowding in the curriculum and make learning more enjoyable; would better connect the various stages of the curriculum from three to 18; would achieve a better balance between academic and vocational subjects; would include a wider range of experiences; would equip young people with the skills that they will need in tomorrow's workforce; would ensure that assessment and certification support learning; and would allow more choice to meet young people's needs.

Curriculum for excellence's purpose was to introduce those changes without losing the existing system's strengths. Agreement was substantial about what we needed to do to achieve that and we had the recommendations of an influential Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development report to guide us. The pre-requisite for successful implementation was securing the full commitment and participation of the teaching workforce.

In turn, that meant well-staffed and well-run schools; support for reskilling and encouraging creativity among teachers through continuing professional development; improved pedagogy through mechanisms such as active learning, co-operative learning and better use of information and communications technology; more focus on the pupil's needs—for example, through the use of real-life experiences; better connections between subject disciplines to ensure that young people made necessary connections in their learning; guidelines for schools and teachers—possibly in the form of an outline national curriculum that left the system flexible and creative; and an examination structure that underpinned all that flexibility and creativity while enabling pupil progress to be measured.

I do not claim that all the problems began in 2007 but, in the period since then, the implementation of curriculum for excellence has certainly had major problems. I will describe some of the most damaging problems. One is the absence of proper guidelines. The documents that were produced were overlong and too complicated, which left schools across the country struggling to interpret how the key concepts might be applied in practice. The cabinet secretary's commissioning of summary documents is an implicit admission that the original documents were not fit for purpose, but concerns remain about a lack of clarity, especially on assessment arrangements and the timetable for the new qualifications.

Whatever the cabinet secretary says, the management board has not been an effective vehicle to drive forward change. Political rather than educational considerations appear to dominate the cabinet secretary's mind, and the board's role is widely seen in the profession to be that of a rubber stamp.

The role and status of key organisations in delivering curriculum for excellence is confusing and has been subject to sudden change at ministerial behest. The decision to merge Learning and Teaching Scotland with HMIE is the most dramatic example of that—no prior consultation on that took place with either organisation or the wider educational community. Perhaps the cabinet secretary was trying to rectify the evident lack of co-ordination between the two bodies, which was reflected in the failure to match journey to excellence—the very good resource and staff development tool that HMIE produced—with the educational psychobabble in the vacuous statement of experiences and outcomes from LTS.

That failure has led to a loss of confidence among teachers and schools in the management of the overall process.

The consultation on the new qualifications was mishandled. It sent out two messages: that the higher would remain the gold standard; and that the Government would prevent schools from presenting cohorts of students for certification before S4. The transmission of those messages resulted in two main problems that have bedevilled the implementation process ever since. Quite understandably, teachers up and down the country want to know what the exams will look like and have been looking for materials similar to those that they are familiar with under the current arrangements to support the new exams, even though that is at variance with the approach that is envisaged in the curriculum for excellence.

The straitjacket that prevented schools that wanted and can manage earlier presentation caused one set of problems, but the clarification from the cabinet secretary that was reported in last week's *Times Educational Supplement Scotland* could end up making matters worse. If the cabinet secretary's U-turn has the effect of allowing schools up and down the country to move S3/4 to S2/3, the overall coherence of CFE will be jeopardised.

The materials that Learning and Teaching Scotland has produced as exemplars have not been tried and tested, many of them are of variable quality and only a small proportion of them have been kite-marked. On top of that, many teachers have reported difficulties in accessing suitable material on the LTS website, as is evident from last week's *TESS*.

The quality of CPD is not what was promised, because of a lack of effective national co-ordination by the national CPD group. There is a lack of clarity about moderation arrangements, which was a major subject of concern at last Friday's association of primary heads conference. In the absence of guidance, schools are being left to interpret what CFE means for them. They are developing their own curriculum models because there is little co-ordination even at local authority level, never mind Scotland-wide.

The ministerial response to those problems seems to be to deny that they exist—that is what we heard from the cabinet secretary—or to come up with gimmicks, some of which have backfired spectacularly. The 10-point plan, the suspension of inspections and the deployment of HMIE to support schools, with schools being asked to put up their hands if they need help, have not delivered for anyone. The withdrawal of Scotland from international comparative benchmarking of pupil performance leaves Scottish parents with no yardstick against which they can judge the

performance of the system, as opposed to that of their child's school, until the equivalent of standard grade. That is disgraceful.

I believe that CFE has been diluted. Instead of being encouraged to be ambitious, too many schools have become risk averse; they are waiting for someone to tell them what to do. The cabinet secretary will no doubt accuse me and my colleagues of being negative, but his speech demonstrated clearly that this emperor has new clothes. He should look at the *TESS* blogs to find out what rank and file teachers say is going on in schools. Many teachers say privately that they are deeply worried about the way in which the implementation of CFE has been allowed to drift. If we add to that the assault on teachers and education that the Cabinet has been bargaining for, the auguries for the successful implementation of CFE are not promising.

Let us be optimistic. What does the Government need to do? The key thing is to ensure that assessment and certification support learning and not the other way round. Exam structures and content need to reflect the needs of pupils and what teachers, using their professional judgment, feel it is best to teach. For too long, we have focused too heavily on examinations to the detriment of teaching young people skills. We need to escape the domination of examinations, which is detrimental to all other considerations.

We need a robust examinations system to measure the performance of individual pupils. That is essential. However, our schools system needs to deliver much more if some young people are not to be left behind. Let us use CFE to achieve a better balance between academic and vocational subjects, to provide a wider range of experiences to equip young people with the skills that they will need in tomorrow's workforce and to offer more choice in meeting their individual needs.

CPD should not be aimed just at upgrading teachers' subject skills; the focus should be on pedagogy—improving their skills as teachers. In addition, we must involve parents as well as professionals in taking forward the reform and must explain its implications at every turn.

It would be a serious mistake if we were to agree that the curriculum for excellence is being rolled out successfully. It is not. Many teachers and schools are implementing the reform extremely successfully and delivering sound education, and I congratulate them on their work, but the Government's management of the implementation has been gaffe prone, complacent and incompetent. The loss of teachers and the threat to conditions of service will put the whole process at risk.

I move amendment S3M-7379.1, to leave out from “for their” to “2010” and insert:

“on their efforts to take forward the Curriculum for Excellence; notes the ongoing concerns among teachers about the lack of clarity over assessment arrangements and, in particular, the concern among secondary teachers over the timetable for the new qualifications that have not yet been resolved; believes that further work is required on benchmarking and moderation; is gravely concerned at the impact of current and anticipated cuts in schools budgets on the resources available for implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence; recognises the need to work with, and fully support, the teaching profession and to involve parents to a greater extent;”

09:40

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): On such a dismal and dreich day, I was almost looking forward to coming into the chamber; then I heard Des McNulty. I suspect that the truth about the curriculum for excellence lies somewhere between Mr McNulty’s negative picture and Mr Russell’s complete whitewash.

Back in February, the Liberal Democrats decided to focus on the curriculum for excellence in one of our debates. I do not expect anyone to have committed to memory my opening speech in that debate, so allow me to refresh members’ memories. I said:

“Why have the Scottish Liberal Democrats decided to focus on the curriculum for excellence in this debate? First, so that we can reiterate our commitment to it.”—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2010; c 23961.]

I am happy again to reiterate our support for CFE. We began the process while we were in government with the Labour Party, when our aim was to introduce a more holistic approach to learning and development by providing a curriculum that took us beyond teaching to the exam and which gave greater responsibility to our teachers and schools. We continue to support those principles behind the new curriculum, which we hope will provide opportunities for children and young people to develop as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

Like the cabinet secretary, we want to see stability in education, as we think that that is essential for the future. I am sure that he wanted all parties simply to reiterate their support for CFE, but I hope that he will feel able not only to support our amendment, but to do so whole-heartedly, given the importance of teachers to the process.

Quite rightly, we all recognise the outstanding work that is being done by Scotland’s education professionals in rolling out the new curriculum. Teachers, headteachers and classroom assistants are working incredibly hard to deliver the new curriculum across the country. They deserve our

full support and they certainly have Liberal Democrats’ backing.

We have welcomed some of the cabinet secretary’s more recent actions, such as the embedding of literacy and numeracy in English and maths instead of having stand alone exams, and the decision to produce further materials and information, which was necessary partly because of the lack of clarity of previous documentation. I do not think that any member would fault the cabinet secretary for his enthusiasm for the new curriculum, which is as well known as his consensual nature. Sadly, however, for more than a year we have heard and shared the considerable criticisms and concerns of many, including teachers.

The 54,000 children who entered our secondary schools this year started the new curriculum in August and will, in time, sit the new national qualifications. We should not forget that those youngsters and their parents faced an extremely anxious wait and a lack of clarity because of the Government’s mismanagement of the new curriculum’s development and implementation.

However, I accept and am pleased that the Government has begun to listen to the repeated calls for clarity and leadership from the Parliament and from many across the education sector. Some attempts have been made to rectify what was a very worrying situation. Moves were made, albeit late in the day, to inform parents, to engage them in the process—which is an issue that we raised with the Government on several occasions—to provide them with information and to listen. It was always a real concern of ours that progress towards the implementation of CFE appeared to involve a conversation that the professions and the Government were engaged in, but not parents and pupils. We see their involvement as crucial and would welcome further comment from the cabinet secretary on that issue.

CFE remains one of the biggest challenges for our schools and professionals in a generation, and that will remain the case for several years to come, but it is also a challenge for other stakeholders, as well as parents. It is fair to say that there is an enthusiasm for the task, as I found when I met Otto Thoresen, the chief executive of Aegon UK, which has its headquarters in my constituency. We talked about the importance of getting financial education embedded in the curriculum and his involvement in that. I think that there is a great deal of good will across civic Scotland towards the concept of CFE.

Although I very much welcome the Government’s current commitment to CFE, it is also crucial that we have assurances from the Government and all parties in the Parliament that the impetus will not be lost, and that we state quite

plainly that we will all work to build on the momentum that has finally been gained so that we deliver the best possible education for Scotland's children and young people. The debate allows us to do that. It is imperative that we continue to work to get the curriculum right, and that means working on it for many years.

It is in the interest of working together to deliver the best possible education for Scotland's pupils that I say that Liberal Democrats still have real concerns about the implementation of the curriculum and the development of the new national qualifications.

I have said time and again that teachers are key to our success. There is no disagreement about that across the chamber, yet the Government has allowed teacher numbers to fall by nearly 3,000, with more losses to come. The number of classroom assistants has also declined. We are all too familiar with the plight of newly qualified teachers across the country who are trying desperately to find work. The Government must listen to Scotland's teachers, instead of pushing aside those who do not agree with its stance or have problems with the support that is available.

For example, we know that the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association has been suspended from the curriculum for excellence management board for threatening to ballot on industrial action. Regardless of whether the suspension is justified, it is of huge concern to us that the SSTA feels the need to threaten such drastic action once again, partly because—to quote its chair, Peter Wright—

“on every issue save one”,

its

“well-founded concerns have been rejected or ignored.”

It is worth remembering that the union's survey last April revealed that 70 per cent of secondary school teachers had issues with the new curriculum. Those people are trained education specialists—people who are at the chalkface during this radical programme of educational change. They have engaged with a number of councils, which have listened to their concerns about the need for further support, and in so doing have diminished the prospect of industrial action. We call on Mr Russell to do exactly the same.

It is worrying that teachers did not have access to the national assessment resource until September, a month after pupils went back to school. That gave teachers no time to get to grips with the materials, to explore the resource and to prepare for teaching. Essentially, our teachers were put on the back foot over the curriculum for excellence and are now being asked to pick up the

pieces of an implementation strategy that is way behind where we would like it to be.

In addition, the Government has made no further provision for additional CPD for teachers, should that be required. It now seems that local authorities are in sole charge of ensuring that teachers are properly trained and supported. That is simply not enough—we need to know that Scotland's teachers will have the support that they need.

Given that the specifics of Scotland's new national qualifications will not be published until 2012–2013 for advanced highers—a clear framework of support is crucial for our professionals. The framework needs to encompass not only implementation and post-implementation phases but also a support structure for teachers in the years prior to and following the introduction of the new qualifications. It is arguably even more crucial that teachers should have that support when they are being expected to teach the pupils who will sit the qualifications without knowing what those qualifications will look like.

Although we maintain that support during implementation is crucial, we have concerns that the Government has pulled inspector hours from HMIE to help with the roll-out. The fact remains that HMIE's inspection work has been moved from August to December. We would welcome an update from the cabinet secretary on the issue, which is concerning. We understand why he has taken the step, but we believe that there is potential for difficulty.

Initially, £17.8 million was provided for new investment in implementation. That financed 100 extra teachers and four in-service days for teacher CPD. An additional £3 million was allocated following the introduction of the 10-point plan, but we need further assurance that the support for teachers that is needed has been delivered.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Margaret Smith: No.

We accept that times are tight, but it is critical and fundamental that we get this right.

The Scottish National Party is playing with a generation's future. That is surely worthy of appropriate and on-going investment. We will continue to listen to teachers, parents, teaching unions and other stakeholders. We will keep coming back to the chamber to call for appropriate support for teachers, Scotland's education system and the individuals in it, and to reiterate our support for the curriculum for excellence as the way forward to build a better, world-class Scottish education system.

I move amendment S3M-7379.2, to insert at end:

“; further recognises the need for ongoing support for, and dialogue with, teachers as they continue to develop the curriculum, and calls on the Scottish Government, local authorities and education stakeholders to work constructively together to make available the best possible support for the teaching profession as the curriculum and new qualifications are implemented.”

09:48

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): On behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I am happy to congratulate all the headteachers, teachers, support staff—who are often forgotten in this process—parents, pupils and students who have been involved in the initial stages of the implementation of the curriculum for excellence. I do so with enthusiasm. Change is never easy, especially in the teaching profession. Given that that change, which involves adopting an entirely new methodology, has been extensive, people have done well.

I hope that I will continue to make a positive contribution on the theme as we progress through the debate. However, I am sure I am not alone in expressing just a little surprise and, perhaps, frustration that, after just three months of the implementation of the curriculum for excellence, so much of our precious parliamentary time has been taken up by a further debate on the subject, rather than on more pressing issues such as higher education, improving literacy, teacher unemployment and delivering better-quality physical education—I could go on.

I could be cynical and suggest that the motion is less about congratulating those on the front line and more about giving the cabinet secretary a “mission accomplished” moment, but I will remain my normal, charitable self and try to link together some of the debates by concentrating on two key principles of the curriculum for excellence: greater autonomy and flexibility in schools. Both principles are designed to provide an educational experience that is more carefully tailored to the individual needs of pupils and to raise standards of attainment.

Although there is a strong temptation for me to enter into the realms of the school management debate, I will refrain from doing so—not least because I am sure that I would upset the Presiding Officer—except to respond to an important comment by Keir Bloomer, one of the architects of the curriculum for excellence. Earlier this week, he said:

“progress is made in the modern world by releasing the creative energies of people, in this case the teacher”.

I agree entirely and applaud the efforts of the architects of the curriculum for excellence to do

that and, by definition, to release the creative energies of our pupils. I was interested in the second part of his comment, in which he said that the current school management system constrains teachers

“far too much by direction from the top.”

That continues to give me and, I hope, my colleagues food for thought.

When I read the initial documentation for the curriculum for excellence, I was struck by the starting point, which was to ask what education is for—a question of which we too often lose sight, but one that I genuinely believe was behind the philosophy of the curriculum for excellence. What a pity it would be if the potential of the curriculum for excellence were to be constrained by the current system of school management, which too often moves in the opposite direction from the pursuit of greater autonomy and flexibility.

I note the comments of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which, rightly, is seeking assurances that built into the system will be an effective means of evaluating just how successful the curriculum for excellence has been, both in raising attainment levels—more critical now than ever, if we are to heed yesterday’s warnings from Scottish Qualifications Authority chiefs about where pupils in Scotland are falling short on basic skills—and in producing well-rounded young people. The society makes an important point about the evaluation process; the cabinet secretary may want to tell us a little more about his plans to address it.

There is another important debate around applying the three-to-18 ethos of the curriculum for excellence—which will, I hope, establish better links between each stage of a child’s education—to the wider developments that are required in further and higher education. Those developments are quite separate from the debate about the current funding crisis. I suggest that it is inevitable that we will see major changes in the structure of FE and HE—changes that will affect the content and length of degree courses, increase the flexibility of movement between courses and institutions, and challenge the status quo of how HE and FE institutions operate.

If the curriculum for excellence does its job properly, it will make our young people more flexible and give many of them greater purpose in their academic careers. The Scottish Conservatives have long argued that the curriculum for excellence should provide more opportunities for pupils to leave school at an earlier stage to take up places in formal vocational training or apprenticeships and should reduce the pressure on too many of our youngsters to feel an obligation to seek university places when that may not be in their or the country’s best interests.

The curriculum for excellence provides good scope for a radical remodelling of Scottish education at all levels, but one thing must underpin all its teaching—improvement in basic literacy and numeracy. I am well aware of the fact that the cabinet secretary and my colleagues in other parties intend to ensure that literacy and numeracy underpin the whole system, but I return to the comments of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the issue of how we can build in effective evaluation of the process.

We are all aware of the problems that we face. Although it is unhelpful to scaremonger, it is essential that we understand just how much we have to do to drive up standards in the area. We should be concerned about the fact that many teachers do not feel comfortable with teaching the basic skills, because they recognise that they may be part of the problem. I repeat my plea for the curriculum for excellence: it will succeed only when it is the agent that complements a good-quality grasp of the basics and of important subject knowledge.

Des McNulty: I am sure that the member saw the comments that exam chiefs made in the *Daily Mail* this morning about the desperate state of literacy skills in some of the material that they see. Is that part of the message that she wants to convey?

Elizabeth Smith: Absolutely. It is an important message that underpins exactly what I am saying: literacy and numeracy must complement and underpin everything that we do with the curriculum for excellence.

Michael Russell: Well, that is the end of Labour.

Elizabeth Smith: Does Mr Russell want to intervene? No?

The curriculum for excellence has been at the forefront of the education brief for many long months, but all too often for the wrong reasons. Much of the guidance was confused; in a few cases, it was unintelligible. There was even a false expectation among the public and parents, and perhaps even among some teachers, that there would actually be a new curriculum, whereas that was never the intention.

There are continuing concerns about the lack of clarity over the SQA examinations structure, there is anxiety about the vagueness of subject matter and there is concern, as Margaret Smith said, that parents were not consulted at an early enough stage. There were also obvious concerns about resources being made available for the curriculum for excellence, many of which remain. I suggest that the best way of addressing those concerns is to ensure that we also deal with many of the other priorities in education.

The Scottish Conservatives have been supportive of the main principles of the curriculum for excellence since the start, most specifically in relation to the need to enhance education in its widest sense, so that the educational experience better reflects the needs of individual schools and individual pupils, and because of the opportunity that it should afford both to simplify and to strengthen the rigour of our examination system.

If we want the curriculum for excellence to be a success—we do, and I am sure that all other parties represented in the chamber do, too—we must set headteachers and schools free: free to innovate, free to create and free to compete. As politicians, we should also embrace the spirit of free thinking that is designed to be the very hallmark of the curriculum for excellence. That free thinking should be unafraid of change and unafraid of upsetting the status quo, because there is only one thing that matters: improving the education and attainment of our young people.

09:57

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am pleased to participate in the debate, not only as a parent but because, through my work with Learning and Teaching Scotland over many years, I have had an interest in curriculum for excellence since its inception.

Through its debating system, the Parliament offers the people of Scotland an opportunity to see how their Government is, rightly, held to account. It also provides us with an opportunity to acknowledge the commitment of those who work in our public services, who put into practice many of the initiatives that start their journey in this place. Curriculum for excellence is one such example of the Parliament setting a direction of travel, which those who work in the education service have been striving to deliver for six years or more.

Curriculum for excellence first came to my attention when I was working with LTS. The initial ideas, which came out of the national debate, were certainly new and challenging. What were the four capacities all about? How would we know when society, or the education system, had achieved the objectives of enabling all young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors? In 10 or 20 years' time, how will we be able to tell whether we have made a difference? Perhaps more interestingly, will we be able to attribute any positive outcomes to the curriculum for excellence?

Although Scotland performs well according to many international comparisons, the education system that was inherited by the Parliament fails

far too many of our young people. In too many areas of Scotland, a high proportion of school leavers are marked as underachievers, and they proceed to what are euphemistically referred to as “negative school-leaver destinations”. That phrase covers a group of young people who set out in life ill prepared to make their way and, in too many cases, without the basic skills that they need to establish themselves in the workforce.

Literacy is one example of why we need to move forward with curriculum for excellence. Literacy is very important because of its wider benefits to the individual but, as employment patterns have changed, it has become a necessity for large parts of the labour market.

As evidence that the system was failing, I refer to the literacy commission that was established by our colleagues in the Labour Party. It concluded:

“For years in Scotland ... we have tolerated the intolerable. We have accepted a situation in which thousands of our young people leave school every year with correctable problems that leave them functionally illiterate—that is, without the basic literacy skills to function in a modern society.”

I do not know anyone who went into the teaching profession to produce school leavers who are functionally illiterate. That finding by the commission strongly suggested that there is a systemic problem, which we must urgently address. That is why we need to press ahead with curriculum for excellence and to embrace the opportunities and challenges that it brings. We should let our teachers get on with the job in hand.

Our system failed to keep pace with the changes in Scotland’s economy, and it is perceived to be ignoring the real needs of our youngsters, who expect us to offer them a better future. An increasing number of pupils in senior schools now see college as a more suitable setting for their continuing education. That might be down to a feeling that they are treated more like mature adults there, and it might also be to do with the unhelpful divide between academic and vocational courses. Too many pupils, especially weaker learners, see school as a place for academics—for those who are going on to uni. We need to remove that divide, not just between the vocational and the academic, but between school and college.

The study of science is one area in which it is clear that different methods of learning and teaching have a part to play. Although traditional academic study is suitable for some pupils, others benefit from direct participation that is more hands on and gets them involved.

From discussions with many of those who are involved in science education, it is clear to me that inspirational teachers are vital to encouraging

young people to engage with the subject. It should not matter whether the inspirational teacher is encountered in a primary school, a secondary school, a college or even the community. What matters is that, once the young person’s interest is engaged, the education system should offer opportunities for continuing progress.

I pay tribute to a teacher who is a constituent of mine, Mrs Morag Ferguson, who teaches at Annanhill primary school in Kilmarnock. Only last week, she won the SQA’s science/engineering teacher of the year award. I had the privilege of seeing Mrs Ferguson in action, with an eager class of children who were learning about the sun. They were not simply listening to their teacher telling them facts about it, as with the chalk-and-talk fashion that we all know. They were drawing it and talking enthusiastically about it in little groups—about how it gave life to everything on earth and, of course, about the fact that it is very, very hot.

The four capacities that I mentioned earlier were perhaps a little bit obscure for me way back at the beginning of this journey with curriculum for excellence, but they became clearer to me by the minute as I watched the work of those children and their teacher. That small example offers us a glimpse, not of the possible, but of the present and the future with curriculum for excellence. Our teachers are doing some wonderful things in Scotland’s schools, and our children are already benefiting from new experiences.

The staff in Learning and Teaching Scotland, with whom I worked for a number of years, will be thoroughly depressed about the attacks that have been made on them today in such a negative way by the Labour Party. I am desperately disappointed to hear that offering from Labour.

I am of course delighted to support the Government’s motion, and I commend it to the Parliament.

10:03

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome this morning’s opportunity for the Parliament to endorse members’ commitment to the curriculum for excellence and to improving the educational opportunities of our children and young people. The summer of this year marked the formal dawning of the curriculum for excellence but, as the Parliament has previously recognised, the teaching approach that is central to the curriculum for excellence has been embedding in our schools for a few terms, particularly in primary schools, where child-centred, multidisciplinary learning has been unfolding. Reflecting on my own years at primary school, I think that the best teachers already

recognise the value of that approach, and that imaginative, engaged teaching has been taking place in some classrooms over generations.

The curriculum for excellence is much more ambitious than that. Arising out of a national debate on education in 2002, it seeks to ensure that every child and young person who goes through the Scottish education system will leave a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor. It aims to offer a more flexible learning path and to simplify the curriculum. It gives teachers more professional responsibility as well as freedom and flexibility in teaching, and it enhances their role as educators. The curriculum recognises that learning should not finish when young people leave school, but that schools should give them the skills, the belief, the confidence and the ambition to do more and to continue to achieve in their adult life.

I recently returned to my old high school, Beath high school in Cowdenbeath, during its centenary celebrations. There I saw the principles of the curriculum for excellence in action, as the school used the occasion of its centenary to study a range of subjects throughout the curriculum. That led to a slightly strange experience for me. As I walked into a classroom of first years, the teacher asked, "Class, who's studying the 1980s?" There was a show of hands and the teacher said, "Well, this is Claire Baker, whom you've been investigating." I have become part of the curriculum in areas of Fife, which is quite strange.

Beath high school gave me a good education, which enabled me to achieve the exam results that I needed to be able to go to university. However, on my recent visit I noted a change in the young people. I was at school at a time of teacher strikes and school budget reductions, and there was a feeling of hopelessness and lack of opportunity among too many young school leavers. That is a familiar picture of the 1980s, to which no one wants to return as a result of the current tightening of budgets. It was not just the lack of those factors that made a difference in Beath high school; I thought that the young people whom I met were more confident, more optimistic and more focused on the possibilities for them when they left school. The Parliament has helped to achieve that, by seeking to provide direction and renewed focus on the value of a Scottish education. The curriculum for excellence is a key element.

There is agreement in the Parliament that the curriculum for excellence is the right direction of travel. We all want to see it—and our young people—succeed. However, its implementation has not been smooth. The concerns of teaching unions reached a low point when the SSTA was removed from the management board for threatening to hold a ballot on industrial action.

During the summer, the EIS voted to pursue a work-to-contract policy and to co-operate with the curriculum only within a 35-hour working week. There was concern about preparedness and course content, and there were tensions about workload. Confidence in subject readiness was and still is a significant issue, particularly in the science subjects—Elaine Murray spoke with insight about that in a previous debate.

The lack of confidence in LTS's ability to provide relevant support and materials is also concerning. Recent criticism of the LTS website, which is meant to provide teaching support and resources, is of particular concern, because the criticism focuses on a lack of support for, and up-to-date relevant information on, teaching literacy. It is unacceptable at this stage to respond that the website is a work in progress. The cabinet secretary must address the issue.

There remains a lack of clarity about assessment arrangements, which must concern young people and parents whose children have begun their first year at secondary school. We have the national assessment resource, but it offers no detail of the exams that young people will sit. I do not commit Margaret Smith's speeches to memory, but I remember that during our previous debate on the curriculum for excellence she said that young people should not be used as "guinea pigs" in education. Of course, a cohort of young people must be the first to go through the system, but that is why it is important that those young people and their teachers have the most information as soon as possible. Parents need to be confident that every school has a clear exam route to higher education. Although entrance to university will continue to be centred on highers and fifth and sixth year qualifications, the national qualifications will be the gateway to choices.

The reliance on supply teachers continues to cause concern about teaching consistency and commitment to the new curriculum. The teaching workforce must be maintained at a level that supports the new curriculum. If reports that there are 1,500 fewer teachers are accurate, that is worrying. The curriculum for excellence was never a money-saving option. Although it has been introduced in a financial climate that was not predicted, there must be proper investment in teachers. The new curriculum presents teachers with new challenges in teaching and assessment, and teachers need time and support if they are to deliver the curriculum effectively.

Everything that I have talked about is happening against the backdrop of the upcoming budget. There are already tensions as schools begin to struggle with budget cuts. In Fife, the SNP-led council sacked all the playground supervisors and passed responsibility for playground supervision to

headteachers. At the same time, cuts were made to devolved school budgets. Headteachers have been left in an impossible situation. In many schools, support staff are supervising in the playground, so the time that they can spend in the classroom is reduced—by up to 10 hours a week in some schools.

There is a lack of coherent thinking in education. Cuts are being made because they save money on the balance sheet, but little time is taken to consider the negative consequences of decisions, which might be detrimental to education and the introduction of the curriculum for excellence. It is good that we acknowledge the progress that has been made, but the debate cannot take place in a bubble. Next week we will know the scale of cuts that are being made to education and the new environment in which the curriculum for excellence must be delivered. I do not doubt the professionalism and commitment of teachers to making the new curriculum work, but there must be a parallel commitment in the budget.

10:09

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP):

I have been amused by repeated comments in recent months and during this morning's debate about curriculum for excellence being rushed in. I understand that the consideration that led to the renewal of Scotland's curriculum began while Lord McConnell was Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs. Work took off when Cathy Jamieson took on the role of Minister for Education and Young People and initiated a national conversation, and key features of the new landscape were delivered in 2006.

Curriculum for excellence is being implemented and is bringing a new, fresh focus to Scottish education. The LTS website tells us that the first qualifications to come from the curriculum review will take place in 2014, after their development by SQA. Teachers are anxious for the qualifications framework to be in place, so that they have a target to aim for. I understand that anxiety and I urge SQA to work on the qualifications timeously.

Far from being rushed, curriculum for excellence has sailed slowly, which suggests that there has been careful consideration of the various strands of the process and of the problems that might arise. From what I have seen, progress has gone smoothly for the schools and teachers who prepared for the new curriculum, who are finding that it provides a user-friendly and simple set of tools. It is right that the Parliament should pay tribute to the people who have worked hard to bring it this far, such as the teachers who have taken it on themselves to ensure that they are ready to use the new tools, and all the support staff in schools and education departments.

We must also congratulate LTS, the SQA, HMIE, local government officials and civil servants, who have been working on the new curriculum for some eight years. We should give credit where credit is due to the previous Administration, which got things started. However, Mr McNulty's approving quoting of the anti-Scottish-education comments in today's *Daily Mail* is proof of Labour's bankrupt and opportunistic approach to education.

Continuous improvement in Scottish education is possible only if there is constant effort from everyone who is involved. In curriculum for excellence we appear to have a programme that is heading in the right direction. We must keep developing the programme. Fiona Hyslop, the former Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, made an excellent decision when she ensured that teachers would be involved in the management board. That happened in 2008, to support the implementation of curriculum for excellence.

The Government has supported implementation of the curriculum with money and other resources, such as materials and tailored support for individual schools. There have been additional in-service days for teachers and there is an additional implementation year. There is every reason to believe that the change to the curriculum will be made smoothly and will work well.

Scotland's Colleges has embraced curriculum for excellence and has been implementing the senior phase. A sector-wide survey has been completed for the management board, areas that need work have been identified, a communications toolkit for learners, staff and everyone else who is involved has been produced, and a website that shares good practice and resources has been developed. All that demonstrates the seriousness with which colleges have embraced and are taking forward the new curriculum.

I declare an interest. I am the parent of a first-year pupil at a school in North Lanarkshire. I got my letter from the cabinet secretary—it was welcome, and I thank him. Last week, I attended the first parents night for my son, who has some challenges in his educational experience. I was delighted with what I saw. There were evangelical, motivated teachers, who were impatient to set about teaching kids in a different way and getting them engaged in learning. More important and more serious, I saw children who were seriously enjoying their experience in all their classes, whether they were mathematics, science or physical education classes. My son is even enjoying every aspect of home economics, which is a bit of a challenge for him. My son is thriving, which is what a parent wants to see. What I saw in

the school that night was a group of teachers who are doing a fantastic job. I congratulate them.

It is sad that the SSTA maintains its opposition to the implementation of the programme. I urge the union and its members to reconsider their collective and individual positions and to consider the positive contribution that they can make to the smooth implementation of curriculum for excellence. I know that the SSTA has amazing insights to offer, because Ann Ballinger and I have discussed the matter at length—I am happy to say that we are still friends. I recognise and applaud the passion that the teachers to whom I have spoken demonstrate every day in our education system.

Something that is close to my heart is the baccalaureate, which the SNP Government introduced. Its birth was smooth, if a little slow. The curriculum for excellence will slip easily into place, and will develop over time, as is the intention with the baccalaureate, which offers Scots pupils the tools that they need to compare their academic performance to that of people of a similar age in other countries. I am delighted that universities will embrace the baccalaureate when they look at entrance qualifications.

We have heard this morning that curriculum for excellence embeds literacy and numeracy across the curriculum. They are seen no longer as discrete areas of study but as integral parts of the education of young people in Scotland. We all agree that that has to happen, and we all welcome the foundation qualifications in literacy and numeracy.

I welcome the continued debate. We should continue to talk about challenges and experiences and learn from them. As a parliamentarian, I look forward to that. More important, as a parent, I look forward to the continued progress and success of curriculum for excellence. I support the motion in the cabinet secretary's name.

10:15

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): Curriculum for excellence might well have been the most debated subject in the chamber during the past two or three years, but that is no bad thing. The education of our children and young people should be one of the most important priorities for any Scottish Government, and for the Scottish Parliament. As Mike Russell has said, curriculum for excellence is an on-going process, not a fixed product. It is important that we continue to monitor and scrutinise the roll-out of curriculum for excellence across Scotland.

During previous debates on curriculum for excellence, we have established that there is, in effect, cross-party consensus that it is the right

approach for the Scottish education system. That might be surprising to Christina McKelvie, given her contribution to today's debate, but it should not be surprising to anyone else because it was a Labour-Liberal Executive that initiated the approach in the first place. I am pleased that the SNP chose to continue with its implementation when it came to power.

It is right that we should take an approach to curriculum development that properly prepares children and young people for life after school through their academic abilities, skills and willingness to become active and responsible citizens. It is also surely right that we use a cross-curricular approach to learning that emphasises to children and young people how various topics are interconnected.

I also welcome the opportunity that curriculum for excellence offers to integrate vocational education in our high schools in a more meaningful and worthwhile way. The minister will be aware that North Lanarkshire Council leads the way in relation to the vocational curriculum, and the OECD report commended that.

Although we fully support the principles and ethos behind curriculum for excellence, we have disagreed with the way in which it has been implemented. Even now, concerns persist within the teaching community about the lack of clarity and support. As recently as March this year, a report by the curriculum for excellence management board concluded that three in four teachers were not confident about delivering lessons for senior pupils, while 60 per cent of secondary teachers who responded said that they were not at all confident that their school would be able to make sufficient progress in implementing curriculum for excellence during the current session. As we are only three months into that session, it is a bit premature to be saying that everything in the garden is rosy.

In 2008, Fiona Hyslop was forced to concede that there was a need for a 12-month delay in the implementation of curriculum for excellence. In turn, the cabinet secretary has had to delay in the implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 to allow schools to concentrate on just one initiative.

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Keith Brown): I am sorry that Karen Whitefield is showing the same horror as the rest of the Labour Party that curriculum for excellence is working in schools. Does she remember the extent to which, between 1999 and 2007, teachers, schools and councils were demotivated, fed-up and undermined by the number of initiatives that they had under the previous Administration, including ring-fencing and bidding for different funds?

Karen Whitefield: I am surprised that the minister thinks that important legislation that recognises and supports children with additional support needs should not be implemented in our schools right now.

Keith Brown: You were not aware? You did not know?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): Order.

Karen Whitefield: I acknowledge the cabinet secretary's decision to use HMIE in a constructive and proactive way in supporting the roll-out of curriculum for excellence in our high schools. That approach is, at least, an attempt to respond to teachers' concerns about the lack of support in developing course content within the framework of curriculum for excellence. Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Learning and Teaching Scotland have worked in partnership with many local authorities, including my own in North Lanarkshire, to provide schools with the necessary support to develop S1 and S2 curriculums. I understand that the North Lanarkshire S1 curriculum was completed in October this year, and that the S2 curriculum will be finished by the end of this month. It is good to see HMIE playing such a positive role in developing Scotland's education system.

It is also worth mentioning that the LTS website is becoming populated with examples of best practice in the implementation of curriculum for excellence. However, Claire Baker was also right when she pointed out that the examples are far from complete or comprehensive, and that some quite strong criticisms have been made of the LTS website because of its lack of clarity and other insufficiencies. Only last night, I was speaking to a teacher who pointed out that nothing can replace face-to-face meetings between teachers.

Of course, the Government's problem with the latter point is that such meetings cost money, and that is the key issue with the current state of curriculum for excellence. I am not at all convinced that the Government is offering sufficient resources to local authorities and teachers to implement the new curriculum.

Although some progress has been made in preparing the S1 and S2 curriculums, there is still little or no clarity around the new exams that pupils will face in the future. The cabinet secretary has, until today, continued to dither around that point. I wonder what words of reassurance he will offer to teachers and pupils when he winds up today. Clarity around the examinations framework is required in Scotland's schools now.

The worrying thing is that the Government failed to deliver curriculum for excellence during the good times, when it claims that local governments'

budget for the past three years continued to grow. When national and local government resources were available, there were still insufficient resources for curriculum for excellence. What will be the impact of the impending budget cuts on the efforts to fully implement curriculum for excellence? Will the cabinet secretary confirm today that the Government will not enter any agreement with COSLA to start to dismantle the terms and conditions that McCrone gave to teachers? Will the cabinet secretary reassure us about that, or are we going to see this Government willingly colluding in the dismantling of McCrone? How will the cabinet secretary ensure that local authorities are properly funded to provide support to head teachers and other teaching staff in Scotland's schools to fully implement curriculum for excellence?

We in the Labour Party support the fundamental principles of curriculum for excellence. We initiated it and we are continuing, and will continue, to support the central principles that underpin it. However, it is time for the Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning to take firm control of the implementation. He must not just speak warm words and pat himself on the back; it is time for him to put his money where his mouth is and to provide hard-working teachers and pupils with the support and clarity that they deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have some time in hand, so members could use seven minutes as a guideline from now on.

10:24

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I will attempt to finish my speech within seven minutes.

It is sometimes difficult to tell whether Des McNulty's glass is half full or half empty. This morning, we learnt that, in respect of the curriculum for excellence, it is completely empty. It is not even half full.

A debate such as this is useful in highlighting for everybody the problems that remain with the roll-out of the curriculum for excellence, but the Government's motion also gives us an opportunity to get behind it, to say how important it is and to commend people. We are taught in teaching that positive reinforcement works better than criticism.

Des McNulty: The issue, certainly in my contribution, is not whether the curriculum for excellence is a good thing in principle—I believe that it is—but the problems that have arisen in its implementation. Those problems are well known and understood in the system, but the minister simply does not want to hear about them.

Robin Harper: I take Des McNulty's point.

Rousseau was probably one of the first people to consider how we should look at education from a child's point of view.

Ian McKee: Jean-Jacques?

Robin Harper: Yes, Jean-Jacques.

I had the extreme good fortune and great honour to serve with R F Mackenzie in Braehead secondary school in Buckhaven in Fife, and I would like to take the opportunity to pay a short tribute to a man who, in a sense, forecast in the 1960s where we are now in our attitudes to education. In an education system that was deeply divided, with high schools and junior secondaries, R F Mackenzie was the head teacher of a very small secondary school: Braehead had just 400 pupils. That was before the raising of the school-leaving age, and most of the pupils from that school left without any qualifications and little in the way of an education that gave them the confidence and self-belief that we are looking for the curriculum for excellence to deliver for every young person in the country.

R F Mackenzie decided that he would set up in his school a curriculum that was thoroughly based on the creative arts, such as music and art, and on technical and outdoor education as well as on the basic subjects of maths, geography and literacy. I taught modern studies and English when I was there. We produced a school newspaper that went worldwide, and we were in constant contact with A S Neill in Summerhill school. We did not go quite as far as A S Neill, but we believed that young people should be given chances to develop in the ways that they could and that they should be encouraged to develop all the skills that were nascent within them. That was central to Mackenzie's philosophy.

Now, after many years, we have a curriculum for excellence that takes on many of those points. In the first school that I taught in, we could hear the belts slapping in the corridors almost continually from the beginning to the end of the day. One of the bravest things that R F Mackenzie did was discourage the use of the belt. That is not to say that the belt was not used at all at Braehead, but most of the teachers did not use it.

That experience informs my attitude to the curriculum for excellence. I was overjoyed when it was introduced because I think that it is the best thing for our students. The cabinet secretary's move to combine Learning and Teaching Scotland and HMIE and then to put them into the classroom is brilliant. It is just what we need, because those bodies have a lot to offer. Not only that, but they will learn from being engaged at the chalkface. Actually, teachers now use interactive whiteboards; technological advances have been so quick that classrooms are unrecognisable from

those of my early days. The cabinet secretary's decision can only be beneficial on both sides—to teachers and to HMIE.

I have some concerns, which I would like to reflect on. Amid everything, the most important subjects are the creative arts, and yet they are at standstill. I know of schools throughout the country where, if something is to be cut, local authorities will cut music, drama or art. Outdoor education went out the window a long time ago: the Government will be well aware of my concerns about that. I had hoped that, by now, those subjects would be able to expand because they are central to the whole spirit and ethos of the curriculum for excellence. I would like a hint from the Government on what it is thinking about for future development. Obviously, we cannot do everything at once, and we have to play with what we have at the moment.

I was glad to hear, amid all the criticisms, that there are secondary schools that have wholeheartedly taken the curriculum for excellence on board. Primary schools—I have visited many—think that it is the best thing that has happened to them. Many schools were teaching in the spirit of the curriculum for excellence anyway, so it was less difficult for them to adapt.

In this breath I will also pay a huge tribute to the contribution that eco-schools have made to the development of curriculum for excellence. Ten years ago, we started with 300 schools on the scheme, and we now have 3,000 schools on it, with the scheme being run by a very small staff in Stirling. We will entertain an international meeting on eco-schools in the Parliament next Thursday. Sadly, the parliamentary event coincides with another prestigious event run by a certain newspaper in *Our Dynamic Earth*, and at which—as far as I can tell—everybody will be except me.

Michael Russell: I know of that coincidence of dates, but I can assure Robin Harper that I will open the conference, and I know that a colleague of mine will be present. We are very proud of the fact that that conference is taking place in Scotland, and of the eco-school movement, which Scotland leads.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member should now wind up.

Robin Harper: I was going to mention the cabinet secretary's very welcome presence at the celebration.

I will finish there, but I would welcome the cabinet secretary's response on the arts.

10:32

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): As a Parliament, our greatest single responsibility is,

arguably, to do everything in our power to ensure—to put it rather grandly—that tomorrow is better than today and to ensure that Scotland's children have the most dynamic, memorable and mind-broadening education possible, and not just that they pass some exams. A dynamic education does far more than provide a better future for individuals: it provides an enhanced future for all Scotland. The strength of our education system impacts directly on our future prosperity, and it is essential that we do everything in our power both to maintain and to improve Scotland's education system.

Strangely enough, at least three current members of this Parliament were taught by one fine teacher at Selkirk high school who managed to include in his lessons welcome digressions into fields as varied as linguistics, literature, history, etymology, modern languages, science, the guitar, English grammar, art, current affairs and the satirical songs of Tom Lehrer, including his notable 1960s hit "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park". Somehow, amid all that, he managed to find the time to get us through higher Latin and O grade Greek.

That was certainly immensely memorable, but it was deliberately not in any obvious isolated silo of educational experience. I wonder how easy it would have been to teach in that way latterly in the overexamined, overmeasured and overfragmented system that many have argued Scottish education became to some extent in recent years. If we are to correct that tendency and allow teachers scope again to teach in a more natural cross-disciplinary way, we have to embrace the curriculum for excellence.

The curriculum for excellence breaks down barriers in education. As it does so, it seeks to provide the children of Scotland with a better-rounded education and to help them to grow both academically and personally. The curriculum for excellence also seeks to adapt the education system to provide more meaningful academic growth to its students. By breaking down barriers between academic disciplines, the initiative creates a better-rounded, multidisciplinary approach to education, especially at primary school level. It gives teachers greater freedom to create experiences for their pupils that make lessons more interesting and effective. Such reforms create a curricular structure that allows for flexibility and adaptation at classroom level. By providing that flexibility, we grant our teachers the freedom that they need.

The curriculum for excellence will also provide a better environment in which the children of Scotland can experience growth on a personal level. The curriculum ensures that students are provided with the tools and opportunities that they

need to develop and grow as citizens and it seeks to provide a system that encourages that. Indeed, there is evidence that the new curriculum is having an effect in surprising ways, such as in new Edinburgh school buildings that are now physically being designed around the new curriculum.

Before we descend further into party camps on the issue, I point out that the curriculum for excellence is neither the brainchild nor the burden of any single party. All parties acknowledge—or should acknowledge—that the process that led to its creation began under a Lib Dem-Labour Administration, seven years ago, and that it has fallen to an SNP Government to implement it. Nobody disputes the considerable work that implementing the new curriculum has meant for teachers; however, we have heard relentless negativity in some speeches. In fact, if it were a temperature, it would have plummeted beyond mere negativity during Mr McNulty's speech and reached absolute zero.

The Government has responded to teachers' demand for a recognition that they must be allowed to teach and that the days of top-down direction on every aspect of their teaching lives must be brought to an end. The Scottish Government has also sought to address issues that the teaching unions have raised around the implementation of the new curriculum, which is reflected in the unparalleled involvement of the teaching profession in that task. That has included the funding of the implementation partnership and the creation of four new in-service days with targeted support through HMIE. Most substantially, there has been an additional implementation year: despite the siren calls, the time for implementation is now upon us.

Nobody pretends that implementation is a simple task, but the wisdom of going ahead is testified to in the comments of Irene Matier, of the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland, in *The Times Educational Supplement Scotland* on 4 June:

"We are hearing more and more accounts of the really positive impact Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is having on schools, teachers and pupils. In particular, many teachers report that they are actually enjoying the job much more than before."

Liz Cameron, of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, said in the June 2010 issue of "Business Scotland" magazine:

"Curriculum for excellence's approach in nurturing successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors offers great potential for developing the kind of young people we need—both as entrepreneurs and as employees."

It is now essential that we move forward and that Scotland acknowledges that we possess a dynamic cutting-edge education system that

incorporates new reforms and targets for both academic and personal growth. We live in a rapidly changing world in which we must regularly adapt our approach to education. Only through a willingness to change constantly in that way and to improve our education system can we properly prepare the children of Scotland to live and work within that ever-changing world. Unless someone in the chamber has a better idea, the curriculum for excellence presents overwhelmingly our best prospect of achieving those goals and deserves all of our support.

10:38

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is quite a few years since I was in the classroom, but I am still very much aware of the hard work and dedication that teachers and other school staff put in day in, day out in our nurseries, schools and colleges. From that point of view, it is welcome that today's motion and the Labour amendment congratulate the teaching profession on its efforts.

However, it saddens me to say that education has been one of the least successful policy areas of the current Scottish Government. I worry that, on too many occasions, the Government has found itself on the wrong side of the argument from Scottish education's professionals as individuals, groups, organisations and institutions. Again and again, it has shown a lack of respect for their views, which has ultimately been shown in the cutting of at least 3,000 teachers from our schools.

Michael Russell: By Labour councils.

Marlyn Glen: The Scottish Government must take responsibility for what happens in education throughout Scotland. I hope that the cabinet secretary accepts his responsibility.

The roll-out of the curriculum for excellence is, indeed, going ahead and the position of the major teaching union, the Education Institute of Scotland, is one of support. Where the EIS differs, however, is on the timeframe. It believes—and asks—that the qualifications be delayed, because professional opinion is that they are not deliverable in 2012. Now that the assessment arrangements have gone live online, perhaps some of the confusion that we have had will be dispelled; nevertheless, there remain real concerns about funding and about being able to maintain the number of teachers who are required to deliver the curriculum for excellence and deal with its associated workload.

The conclusions of the EIS's survey of its members, which was published last month, show that they clearly regard the implementation of the CFE as testimony to the level of teacher professionalism and good will that exist. However,

most suggestions from teachers for support centre on finance in relation to staffing levels and class sizes. At this point, we should recall the much-quoted words of the 2007 SNP election manifesto:

“We will maintain teacher numbers in the face of falling school rolls to cut class sizes”.

I had some reservations from the start about the idea of HMIE going into schools in a supportive role, but those fears seem to have been largely unfounded, I am glad to say. However, the question now is about what happens when the inspectors restart their inspections. How will that dual role work and how will the support role be continued? Many concerns and questions remain.

Robin Harper: Will the member take an intervention?

Marlyn Glen: No, thank you.

There is a necessity for long-term commitment to the curriculum for excellence, but that commitment must include resources including continuing professional development opportunities and—which is important—time at both local and national levels. How will the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning seek to ensure that the continuous professional development associated with CFE will be of the very best quality? Also, how will he ensure that teachers throughout the country will have regular access to it at a time of very tight budgets?

I turn to literacy. Labour's literacy commission reported in December last year, urging the Scottish Government to produce “an immediate action plan” to deal with the levels of illiteracy that had been revealed. The literacy commission found that almost a million Scots have difficulty with literacy and that, each year, almost one in five children leaves primary school lacking the ability to read and write at the basic standard level. The commission's report called for a zero-tolerance approach to tackling the problem of illiteracy and made recommendations.

However, it was only last month—10 months after those revelations—that the cabinet secretary published his literacy action plan. Its stated key actions include:

“Curriculum for Excellence supporting literacy from a child's early years”.

Illiteracy problems will not be solved by the curriculum for excellence on its own. What further measures does the cabinet secretary intend to introduce to end the annual output of almost 20 per cent of children leaving primary school lacking basic literacy? Any actions must be detailed and timelined. Furthermore, how can that improvement be achieved when schools are losing specialist learning support as a result of the Scottish Government's reduction in the number of teachers

and posts? That makes the work of the classroom teacher much harder and even more demanding.

As a former support-for-learning principal teacher, I understand fully the difference that support in the classroom can make to individual pupils—from essential assistance with the transition to secondary school to the special arrangements that are made for examinations. Such support can, and often should, follow the individual into further and higher education, and it helps many students to reach their full potential.

I cite an example that Margaret Mitchell will know about. Jackie Stewart, who is now the president of Dyslexia Scotland, had to wait until his 40s to be diagnosed as dyslexic. He now campaigns to ensure that assessment toolkits and help are made available to pupils as early as possible. He also works with prison inmates, who, we now understand, have very high levels of dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

We often talk in the chamber—quite glibly—about the importance of early intervention, and I understand that the Finance Committee is currently working on that in the context of preventive spending. Putting resources into education, with full support for learning from both teachers and classroom assistants, is one of the best examples of early intervention and preventive spending. I trust that the cabinet secretary understands its importance and makes the most robust arguments for that essential day-to-day spending, which makes such a difference to the lives of young people.

10:45

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): There can be few debates more important to the future of Scotland than the question of how we educate our young people, so it is only right that we consider the implementation of the curriculum for excellence, after it was introduced to classrooms in August. Given that this is the greatest education reform in a generation, the effort that has been put in by our teachers, nursery teachers, college lecturers and support staff is remarkable, as is the accompanying success.

After the division that was on display yesterday in relation to other issues, it is also worth reminding ourselves of the consensus that exists on the need for the new curriculum. Any disagreements seem to centre on its implementation, but that was always expected to be a challenge. A complicated reform will always require extra support.

I do not recognise Des McNulty's assessment of the cabinet secretary. I think that Mike Russell is to be commended for his willingness to listen to concerns from professionals as those concerns

arose and for his on-going and proactive engagement with all who are influenced by the reform, from pupils and parents to teachers and headteachers. Margaret Smith suggested that Mike Russell pushes aside teachers who disagree with him. Far from it. I regularly see the cabinet secretary answering concerns on Facebook in an open manner and inviting comments from teachers. Generally speaking, at the end of those discussions, they are satisfied.

One of the most welcome developments in the curriculum is the return to a broad, integrated education rather than a compartmentalised, tick-box exercise. Breadth was traditionally a key characteristic of Scotland's education system, and a return to teaching subjects in a rounded, integrated fashion can only be a good thing. The return to a broad-based approach has been met with enthusiasm. Indeed, it has encouraged a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament to submit a petition to the Parliament to incorporate political education in the curriculum. Which of us would not like to design those lesson plans?

One aspect that I would like to touch on is the opportunity to include local examples and items of interest across the curriculum. It is, of course, welcome that, finally, history is being taught properly in Scottish schools. However, giving flexibility to schools also allows local examples to be used in many fields, whether it involves our enlightenment thinkers and academic pioneers or things that are of interest to pupils in their day-to-day lives.

Of course, some of that was already happening. I am reminded of Sighthill primary school in Glasgow, which has been demolished, sadly, but which was sited next to Sighthill cemetery—it is still there—where the three 1820 martyrs lie. Not only were classrooms in the school named after Baird, Hardie and Wilson, the children were able to visit the graves. Imagine how that must have brought the stories to life for those children. I expect that, years hence, they will be able to tell us all about the 1820 martyrs. That sort of approach increases pupils' interest, which in turn increases their retention of information.

As an aside, but an important one, Sighthill primary school also educated many young asylum seekers. When it was demolished recently, all the pupils experienced disruption, but that is nothing compared to the disruption that is about to be visited on those of them who are seeking asylum. I hope that the cabinet secretary will share my concern about the threat to the education of Glasgow asylum seekers who this week received letters telling them that they are to be moved elsewhere in Scotland. Many Glasgow schools have reconfigured their staffing to offer support to asylum seekers, who have become an integral

part of the schools. I am concerned for the welfare of the asylum seekers, but I am also concerned about the disruption in the schools.

Addressing the University of Glasgow, Jimmy Reid once said:

“Alienation is the precise and correctly applied word for describing the major social problem in Britain today.”

The empowering aspect of the new curriculum, with its focus on creating successful learners and confident individuals is surely one way to ensure that all our young people feel integrated into our society. Attending Jimmy Reid’s funeral, I was struck by the importance that the speakers placed on the culture of learning that existed around the Clyde in the post-war period. There can be few more shining examples of a successful learner than Jimmy Reid, who as a boy was often seen, we were told, heading for Govan library with books under his arm.

If we create confident learners, we allow people to have the world as their oyster. If people are put off education and learning at an early age, we hinder their life chances.

Integrating our education system with experiences that are available in our arts and culture will also have an empowering element and will help our pupils to progress in the four main capacities in the new curriculum. Scotland has a rich culture and heritage and it is right that our young people feel confident about approaching and learning about their culture, as well as other world cultures.

Having considered some of the benefits of the new curriculum for excellence, I would like to say one or two things about the on-going implementation process. Of course, change is never easy, even when it is change for the better. However, I believe that we should pay tribute to the teachers, nursery teachers, college lecturers and support staff for their efforts so far, because they are at the very heart of the process.

Once again, I must say that I disagree with Des McNulty. I believe that the 10-point plan that the cabinet secretary announced in March has contributed to the successful implementation of the new curriculum that we have seen so far. The feedback that I have received from teaching friends suggests that the intervention at that stage ensured, at least, that those who were tasked with implementing the new curriculum were reassured that they were being listened to and that support was in place.

As a drama graduate, I agree with Robin Harper about the importance of the creative arts. I know that the cabinet secretary is well aware of that, but I will give one reason why they are important. Many anger management programmes focus on

self-expression. In Scotland, we are notoriously inhibited when it comes to self-expression, and much anger stems from that inhibition. I believe that, if we focused more on enabling our children to express themselves properly, through a focus on the expressive arts, we would see a difference in the levels of crime in our country.

As the motion implies, it is only right that the education sector has the support not only of the Scottish Government but of the whole Parliament as it delivers the greatest education reform for a generation. That education reform was needed. It is only right that all of us show our commitment to that reform by supporting the motion.

10:52

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to join my Labour colleagues today in speaking up for concerned teachers, parents and children across Scotland in this debate. Let us not confuse concern for teachers with criticism of teachers. We, on this side of the chamber, are not criticising teachers; we are standing up for teachers, just as we stood up for teachers when we were in government, with record teacher numbers, smaller class sizes and the biggest school building programme in a generation.

As the cold nights draw in and the days become shorter and fewer for the SNP Government, one cannot help but think that, as SNP members settle down in the long nights ahead, their thoughts will turn to the legacy of the Government of Scotland. Regrettably, on education, that legacy is fixed, and it is a legacy of failure—failure on school building, failure on teacher numbers and class sizes and failure on promises made to students on debt and support. At all educational levels, for teachers, parents, those attending university, college, primary school and secondary school, the SNP has failed to deliver. Education is the only department to have lost two ministers. It is a legacy of broken promises.

What is the SNP’s record on curriculum for excellence? Why did curriculum for excellence get into such a mess? After nearly four years of this Government and three years of Learning and Teaching Scotland putting out completely inscrutable documents, the Government had to put out simple fact files this summer to tell people what curriculum for excellence actually is.

Mike Russell quoted several academics who said how good the ideas behind curriculum for excellence are. They are good, and I am proud that the Labour-Liberal Democrat Government secured cross-party support for the introduction of curriculum for excellence. However, the implementation has been appalling, and the SNP

Government has to take some responsibility for that, even though it is totally failing to do so.

Mike Russell knows that his Government's record on curriculum for excellence has been weak and ineffective. That is why he has desperately tried to do something about it since becoming the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning.

I am old enough to remember—

Michael Russell: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. According to the standing orders, it is unacceptable to misrepresent a member. I do not know that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): That is not a point of order but it is now on the record, Mr Russell.

Rhona Brankin: If Mr Russell does not know that, my goodness he damn well ought to know it by now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Brankin, watch your language.

Rhona Brankin: I will—absolutely.

The five-to-14 curriculum was introduced because of a lack of continuity, progression and a rigorous assessment framework. I am old enough to remember schools prior to the five-to-14 curriculum. I worked in curriculum development alongside subject teachers who were implementing five to 14. It was challenging, but it introduced a structure and a framework. Over time, however, five to 14 became a bit of a straitjacket. Many teachers became frustrated by what they saw as an inability to develop creativity and independent learning, due to a cluttered curriculum.

Curriculum for excellence, therefore, was absolutely right. However, the risks that are currently associated with its implementation are too great. The lack of assessment detail is hugely worrying. Many of my colleagues have drawn attention to that today. There is a great danger that attainment levels could fall due to a lack of rigour in assessment. Mr Russell is aware of my concern about the weak plans for assessment of literacy. Although it is right that every secondary teacher should also be a teacher of literacy, it is essential that there is a clear line of accountability for the teaching of literacy in secondary schools. That is still missing. Let us not reinvent the wheel. The five-to-14 language across the curriculum was good in theory; in practice, it simply did not work. No one took responsibility for the teaching of literacy in secondary schools. Let us not repeat that.

We are at an important crossroads for education. The Government has failed to prioritise

education in its budgets, and this important change is being implemented against a background of 3,000 fewer teachers, bigger classes and a potential loss of curriculum preparation time in schools.

The cabinet secretary bears a huge responsibility to support curriculum for excellence. Again, I commend the work that has been done by teachers in schools throughout Scotland. Our teachers are stepping up to the plate. The cabinet secretary's job is to stand up for teachers and Scottish education. The jury is very much still out on that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ian McKee. Dr McKee, I remind you that I will stop you at 11 o'clock.

10:57

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): I am pleased to hear Rhona Brankin live up to her reputation for positivity. In that light, I am sure that she will accept the motion, which asks Parliament to reaffirm its commitment to the curriculum for excellence, given that teachers in schools throughout the country are making exceptional efforts to implement the new framework from classroom to classroom.

Rhona Brankin: Is the member aware that at least twice in my speech I said that teachers throughout Scotland are working hard? We recognise the efforts of teachers. What the member said is simply wrong.

Ian McKee: Obviously, Rhona Brankin will not accept a compliment as a compliment. I was referring to her positivity.

Commitment is a crucial word in the debate, as it is exactly what the teaching profession, parents and pupils all expect—a solid curriculum, built to last and supported at the highest level. To that end, it is Parliament's responsibility to back the curriculum and its implementation, and to provide the necessary reassurance that is expected at this time.

The Government has fully engaged with parents and teachers throughout the implementation stages, listening and acting on their concerns. All parents of pupils starting under curriculum for excellence in August, such as Christina McKelvie, received correspondence from the education secretary, who also provided question-and-answer sessions in schools throughout the country. What is clear is that curriculum for excellence is now a reality—it is here and it is here to stay.

Over the past 30 years or so, the education system has witnessed major framework reforms. Some would argue that those reforms have been too frequent and have fallen short of pupils' needs

and teachers' expectations. The Dunning report led to the introduction of standard grades and certification for all, within a curricular framework based on eight modes of learning.

11:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members are invited to stand for two minutes' silence of remembrance.

11:02

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you.

Ian McKee: We then had the 1987 reforms of primary education, which eventually evolved into the five-to-14 guidelines. In 1994, the higher still programme aimed to achieve "higher standards of attainment" and

"recognized qualifications for all within a unified curriculum structure".

Although each of those reforms had their purpose, they did not tackle the principles of teaching and learning as radically as curriculum for excellence does. It is crucial that education systems evolve to address areas of attainment that require attention as well as the changing needs of society and the economy. However, many would agree that the Scottish education system now needs a period of stability. Curriculum for excellence will give us that.

Of course, that does not mean that minor tweaks to the system cannot be made. I give members a concrete example. Curriculum for excellence makes provision for every pupil to begin learning a foreign language no later than primary 6. That is a significant step forward from the 2002 provisions, which encouraged primary schools to teach modern languages only once pupils got to primary 6 or 7.

Robin Harper: Is the member aware that, in secondary education in some councils, schools are going to teach only one rather than two modern languages? Is that a matter of regret?

Ian McKee: I am aware of that, and I am grateful to the member for raising that issue. It reinforces a point that I will make later in my speech.

There is scope for the curriculum to go even further, and I encourage local authorities and schools to engage in basic modern language conversation from the first years of primary education. Of course, there is nothing to prevent primary schools from teaching languages earlier at the moment—and some already do—but unless an expectation is made clear in the curriculum, it is unlikely that many will follow.

The reality is that modern languages are in a pretty bad state. Over the past 10 years, there has been a 40 per cent reduction in language take-up at standard grade, and an overall 20 per cent reduction if we include take-up at intermediate levels. That decline did not start overnight. The trend worsened in the late 1990s and was never addressed by the previous Administration. Labour had the opportunity to invest in modern languages and tackle the negative take-up trend but, instead, it sat and watched the situation slowly decline, leaving this Administration to sort out its negligence.

The Scottish Government has already made substantial progress on Gaelic. There has been a steady increase in take-up over the past years as a result of funding and greater responsibility at Government level but there is much more to be done.

Ken Macintosh: Is Mr McKee aware that local authorities across the board are cutting back on modern languages in primary school teaching? Exactly what has the SNP Government done to prevent that?

Ian McKee: The member should look back at what has happened over the past 20 years or so rather than looking to the SNP to pick up all the bits of maladministration by Labour in its many years in power. The East of Scotland European Consortium has been clear in predicting that, if we fail to get people speaking languages, we will struggle to make inroads in the booming markets of Brazil, Russia, India and China and our economy will suffer the consequences. If Scotland is to compete globally, it needs the right skills to succeed.

What needs to be done? There is a simple starting point: we need to get pupils learning languages sooner and faster. If we compare language learning in Scotland with that in Scandinavian nations—countries with renowned education systems—we find that pupils in Scandinavian nations are taught foreign languages at a very young age. In Sweden and Finland, pupils start learning them as early as seven and in Norway they start at the age of six. That is a difference of four or five years and any linguist would tell us that, as far as languages go, the difference is significant. My point is simple. Not only do children pick up other tongues faster at an earlier age; the sooner languages are introduced to pupils, the sooner they will be seen as equal and important subjects. If we give languages the same status and importance as English, maths or history, their take-up at standard grade and higher will inevitably rise.

There is progress to be made on the matter, but what is certain is that curriculum for excellence makes a real start in reversing the negative trend

of language learning in Scotland. It is high time that the entire chamber showed unequivocal support for and commitment to the curriculum, which is a development that will once more place our country at the forefront of educational process. I support the motion.

11:07

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I start by congratulating the cabinet secretary, Mike Russell, on his flexibility, as his ability to pat himself on the back while simultaneously attacking his opponents is much to be admired. However, from the tone of the debate, I think that there is still considerable concern about the progress that is taking place. It is disappointing that Mr Russell does not appear to take these concerns seriously. Although I recognise that there may be members in the chamber whose viewpoint of unremitting disaster would put the Rev I M Jolly to shame, that does not necessarily mean that their observations, comments and criticisms are without foundation. It is right that members in the chamber should express their perceptions of the unions' concerns about what may be going on behind closed doors.

It is equally right that Elizabeth Smith should refer to the autonomy of headmasters and schools and to flexibility. Several members referred specifically to literacy, which is an issue that I have raised in previous debates. Having taught for a while in further education, where I dealt with adults and young adults, it is clear to me that our challenges, problems and difficulties with literacy predate this Administration, the previous two Administrations and, indeed, the Parliament itself.

One challenge is that if we are going to successfully tackle the literacy issue—and numeracy, for that matter—we need to be sure that the teachers who come out of our educational institutes have the confidence, the knowledge and the ability to deliver. Teachers of my acquaintance tell me that they deal with young people in first, second and third year who are barely functionally literate. By that point, it is almost too late. I have raised with both the cabinet secretary and his predecessor the issue that, in many instances, historically—and even within curriculum for excellence—the marking and moderation regime has not facilitated addressing literacy and numeracy within specific subject areas. I have not yet received any assurance that that is being taken forward in the marking scheme.

That leads me on to observations on and what I feel are justified criticisms of the examination process that will be attached to the curriculum for excellence. I cannot think of any other situation in which one would be presented with 54,000 students and be required to teach them to a range of principles—even allowing for the national

resources—without knowing what the structure, style and content of an exam will be. I would not like to think that anyone was putting someone behind the driving wheel of a motor car without knowing what the expectation is, but that is in effect what we are asking our teachers to do.

I came across a Government document entitled “Curriculum for Excellence: Building the Curriculum 5: a framework for assessment”. It is full of warm words, as Government documents often are, but I notice that much of the responsibility, as is too often the case, particularly with this Government, has been passed on to local authorities. In effect, they seem to be on their own with this, and it concerns me seriously when I hear anecdotally from teachers that, when they ask for continuing professional development time, they are told that they should watch Teachers TV in the morning before they come to work. That is a concern. That information is anecdotal and I am not suggesting that the cabinet secretary has said that, but I am repeating what I have been told by people in the profession.

I am not quite sure where the national co-ordinators are going and I am not sure whether the details of who they are, how they will work and how they will co-ordinate have been made public beyond one paragraph in this document.

Given the general tenor of support for the principles of the move to curriculum for excellence, it is a matter of concern that serious concerns are still being expressed from all quarters—not only from the political quarters that one would expect. In conclusion, I will read a paragraph from a letter in the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland* from a teacher in my region:

“Even the most enthusiastic devotees of Curriculum for Excellence would have to admit that its progress has been slow. At the chalk face, we have lost count of the number of hiccups and false starts ... There appear to be two significant reasons for this somewhat convoluted path to implementation: the resistance of the management board to any form of genuine debate, and an apparent inability to see the effect of its decisions on schools.”

I hope that the cabinet secretary will take on board those concerns and others that have been expressed as we move forward with the curriculum for excellence.

11:14

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): This forthright debate has provided the opportunity to remind us what curriculum for excellence is intended to achieve.

I readily acknowledge, as have all the other contributors to the debate, the hard work done by Scotland's teachers in preparation for the new curriculum and the contributions of the various

organisations involved in the development and implementation of curriculum for excellence, but to give fulsome congratulations for the successful implementation of curriculum for excellence three months after its introduction is both presumptuous and preposterous. By way of confirming that that is the case, I ask the cabinet secretary to respond to concerns that have been highlighted by Des McNulty, Margaret Smith and other members and, more important, expressed by teachers at the chalkface—or, as Robin Harper called it, the white board.

There is a general feeling that implementation has been a case of too much, too soon and that it would have been better to phase in curriculum for excellence gradually. Problems arise when primary pupils move from one system—the five-to-14 curriculum—to the other. How, for example, does level C fit into the new curriculum assessment? Moreover, the experiences and outcomes are considered to be too vague; indeed, as my colleague Liz Smith and the RSE have pointed out, it is almost impossible to work with such very vague assessment criteria.

Secondary schools are unsure about when the national qualifications will be changed and that is unsettling for parents, pupils and teachers. Although the national assessment resource is intended to address assessment issues, the bank of material is not yet large enough to allow that work to be carried out. The fact that secondary teachers do not know what will replace standard grades makes it very difficult for them to teach to an outcome. Although the skills-based approach is welcome, worries have been expressed—by, among others, the universities—that children will become too skills orientated without having the necessary balance of knowledge and content.

Those very real concerns and anxieties of members of the teaching profession are coupled with the reservation expressed by the EIS, other professionals and members in the chamber that, if the implementation is to be the success that the motion refers to and that we all want it to be, there must be a guarantee that the necessary funding and resources will be in place. At a time when local authorities are under funding pressure, it is far from certain that those resources will be forthcoming.

It is probably fair to say that any change, whether it be in the national health service or in education, will attract criticism. Nevertheless, if Scotland is to regain the reputation that it once enjoyed for high standards of education that are recognised throughout the world and which have resulted in Scots being at the forefront of major global companies and industries, we must continue to re-evaluate teaching methods and curriculum content. That has certainly happened

with curriculum for excellence, which, as the cabinet secretary pointed out, was formulated as a response to the need for change highlighted in the national debate on education.

The principles and ethos behind the curriculum for excellence are good and it has huge potential to deliver the knowledge and the skills that children in Scotland will need as they grow up and enter the world of work. However, I must sound a note of caution. Parents, children and future employers must continue to be given more information about the curriculum and teachers must be given more time and information to be able to implement it successfully.

In that regard, the General Teaching Council for Scotland's advice should be taken on board. It has said that if teachers are to work with their colleagues on common course elements or discipline areas there must be time for CPD, the joint development of teaching materials and discussion of teaching principles and practice, as well as joint teaching, assessment and evaluation. It is significant that, where teachers have been coerced into teaching outside their subject area without appropriate support, the course delivery has lacked quality, which has had a negative effect on learning.

The GTCS also stresses that although there is still a commitment to a broad general education to the end of fourth year, there is nothing paradoxical in also having a commitment to progression. Such a move will make subjects more challenging and increase their depth for pupils approaching the senior phase, but that kind of subject teaching can come from only appropriately qualified and registered subject teachers. I hope that the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government will take heed of that advice.

11:20

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): First, I thank the cabinet secretary for bringing forward the debate. I realise that criticisms have been expressed and political divisions displayed this morning—and I admit that I will return to them in a moment—but it is worth highlighting the underlying unity and political consensus that, as every front-bench spokesperson made clear in their opening remarks, still seem to hold in terms of the principles and proposals at the heart of the curriculum for excellence. That is an important message to send out to teachers, parents and pupils throughout Scotland as we wrestle with spending cuts and the political uncertainty of next year's elections. Difficult decisions might well lie ahead and—to be honest again—I hope that a new Administration will be in place in the not-too-distant future, but schools should plan on the basis that the curriculum for excellence still has

overwhelming political support from all parties and will remain at the heart of Scotland's education system.

It has also been helpful to have a further exposition of why the curriculum for excellence is so important for our schools and why we hope that it will prove advantageous for so many pupils. I sometimes worry that the four capacities sound like managementspeak. I do not know whether other members noticed—I think that Elizabeth Smith might have—but even with the mighty intellect that he has at his disposal the cabinet secretary was tested on that very issue and I saw him fumbling for his aide-mémoire to remind him of what exactly the four capacities are. As we have reminded ourselves this morning—in plain English, I might add—the curriculum for excellence is about moving away from too many exams and exam-focused learning, particularly in primary and lower secondary education; giving teachers more room and freedom to teach; rebalancing vocational and academic learning; trying to re-engage with the disengaged; and, most of all, putting greater focus on pupils as learners and their development as individuals instead of concentrating overly on what they have learned or can regurgitate.

It was interesting to note the number of members who highlighted the relative inaccessibility of the language around the curriculum for excellence. Although we, as politicians, and most of those in the teaching profession, have at least begun to come to terms with the terminology, parents have certainly not yet reached that point. In fact, there is a huge gulf between our understanding of the new reforms and the lack of any shared understanding among parents. The more we talk in slogans or jargon—the vacuous and obscure guidance that, as Des McNulty pointed out, seems to plague this topic—and the less precise we are about where the curriculum for excellence is leading, the less confidence parents, pupils and teachers will have in the reforms.

We might be trying to move away from an exam-dominated curriculum, but the fact is that exams, qualifications and assessment are still essential and, for many parents and pupils, lie at the heart of their expectations of school life. Our failure—and, I am sorry to say, the failure of this Government in particular—to spell out the exact exam structure in secondary schools remains the single most important decision that is holding back the curriculum for excellence. As Claire Baker, Marlyn Glen and others pointed out, the interface at the end of S3 between the broad process of learning that is the curriculum for excellence and the subsequent road to examinable qualifications that are a passport to further and higher education or success in the job market is still far from clear. In fact, as Des McNulty made clear, the comments

that the cabinet secretary made last week to the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland* on allowing early presentation to exams in S3 have only made matters worse. They strike me as a green light to two-tier learning before the curriculum for excellence is even in place, with the academic high-flyers separated off from the rest at S2, if not earlier.

I worry that that lack of clarity about the qualifications framework and the timetable for examinations in our secondary schools reflects a wider set of problems about which the Scottish Government cannot or will not reach a conclusion. The curriculum for excellence puts greater emphasis on learning rather than content but, as many in the profession have made clear before now, content and knowledge are still essential. Indeed, in its much-quoted briefing paper, the Royal Society of Edinburgh says:

“It is not clear to the RSE that there is consensus among those developing the reforms on the importance of knowledge and intellect”.

Most of our current secondary school exams and qualifications are based on summative, not formative, assessment. Teachers and parents want to know whether that will remain the case and, if it will, which elements of teaching in S1, S2 and S3 might be included in the new assessments. Rather than feel that they are being given more room and freedom to teach, many teachers worry that they are being left rudderless and drifting. The cabinet secretary's response to those teachers is to kick the most outspoken—the SSTA representation—off the CFE steering group.

Even in our primary schools, where the curriculum has been most successfully implemented to date, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about how to benchmark attainment and progress. Teachers in primary schools remain unsure about the process for the moderation of assessment, and parents have lost the familiarity of the five-to-14 framework, with its various levels of achievement. At least in primary schools, the relationship between parents and the classroom is such that families can rely on and trust the judgment of their child's teacher on whether little Michael or Christina is doing well or struggling; at secondary level, they want the certificate to prove things. We are relying on our teachers to make the new curriculum work and to reassure parents and imbue them with confidence, but we are not doing enough to support the teachers.

My underlying concern is that there is a lack of clear leadership from the cabinet secretary and his colleagues, not because the cabinet secretary is unable to make up his mind, but because he is unwilling to do so. We are repeatedly told that the reforms are the most important and radical reforms of the curriculum in a generation, but

several members have referred to the minister's seeming reluctance to provide even the most modest funding to implement the changes. That is hardly the behaviour of someone who is fully committed to the curriculum for excellence and, as Claire Baker reminded us earlier, it is not very reassuring as we enter a period of cuts and public spending retrenchment.

I further worry that the cabinet secretary may be unwilling to provide clarity because the decisions will not be pain free or uncontroversial. The secondary school curriculum is still subject led, and any move to loosen or broaden it may or will leave some departments feeling that they have lost out. Last week, I heard from a headteacher who, in introducing the curriculum for excellence, proposed modest reforms in S1 and S2 that would lead to the loss of one period of art each week. She said that the reaction was such that she felt that she had to quell a mutiny, or at least appease huge dismay, among her staff. Many members will remember the outcry over Peter Peacock's supposed comments a few years back that allegedly undermined the importance of history in the curriculum. Of course, Mr Russell led that attack in his previous role as Opposition spokesperson. Is it any wonder that, now that the roles are reversed, he balks at the thought of taking any decision that might be interpreted as downgrading a secondary school subject?

I am sorry to say that, on recent evidence, there is every reason to suspect that the cabinet secretary and his colleagues are ducking each and every difficult decision coming their way. On university funding, they talk of the process that they are introducing to build a consensus, but the cabinet secretary admitted to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee just this week that that issue is likely to divide us at election time. He seems to be similarly reluctant to provide any kind of leadership on the McCrone agreement with teachers and local authorities. Rather than defend the agreement or even properly discuss it with all participants, he is happy for COSLA to do the running while he secretly negotiates away 1,500 more teaching jobs and professional terms and conditions into the bargain. Des McNulty and Margaret Smith emphasised that, on the cabinet secretary's watch, jobs are being lost among the very teachers whom we need to implement the curricular reforms.

I return to the issue of language and clarity. There is a fundamental disconnect between the cabinet secretary's words on all the issues that we are discussing and his actions. He promised smaller class sizes. Without a hint of irony, he still boasts of the progress that the SNP is making while presiding over the loss of thousands of teaching posts. He talks about supposedly free university funding, but simply defers the difficult

decisions and in the meantime reduces the number of places for Scottish students. He talks about his commitment to the curriculum for excellence, but stalls on crucial decisions, refuses to properly resource the reforms, and simply gets rid of those whom he does not want to listen to.

At an informal meeting of the Parliament's Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee yesterday, in which Mr O'Donnell's highly welcome Autism (Scotland) Bill was considered, we took powerful evidence from a group of adults on the autistic spectrum. The comments of one of the witnesses, Kath Baker, who was referring to the difficulties that those with autistic spectrum disorder can have with anything other than literal statements of fact, struck a chord with me. She talked about telling it to them straight and said that, if we are going to cut services because there is no money, we should just say so. She said that we should not tell them that the decision is based on eligibility or use language or other policies to hide the truth. I ask the cabinet secretary to give it to us straight, and to give us clarity, leadership and the decisions that we need to hear on the curriculum for excellence rather than the eight minutes of highly articulate but probably rather pointless and condescending verbiage that we expect.

11:30

Michael Russell: I have not heard a build-up like that for a long time. Mr Macintosh referred to "pointless and condescending verbiage". I apologise in advance for letting him down.

The playwright Joan Ure, who was an old friend of mine, once said that Scots do not want freedom of religion; they merely want the freedom to persecute others. Ken Macintosh does not want me to make decisions. I make many decisions and he usually criticises me for making them. He wants me to say something that he can leap on and attack in the way that he tries to leap on and attack things, but I am not going to do that.

The curriculum for excellence is probably precisely where Margaret Smith said that it is. It is probably not quite as good as I want to make out, and it is certainly not nearly as bad as Des McNulty and his colleagues want to make out. Their great disappointment is that what they predicted has not come to pass. I will come to that at the end of my speech. The catastrophe that they wanted to see has not happened and, my goodness, that sticks in their throats.

I want to deal with the positives in the debate rather than the negatives, and will start with Liz Smith's speech. I want to persuade her that the debate is important. She criticised the fact that this debate is taking place and thinks that there are

more important issues. We all have views on the relative importance of the curriculum for excellence, but there are two very important things to say in the debate. First, it is important to say thank you and well done to teachers and whole school communities that have worked exceptionally hard in difficult circumstances to get to the point that has been reached. That is a basic civility from the Parliament to people whose actions have at times been much criticised. Perhaps they have not had as much support at times as they should have had. It is important for members to thank them and say well done, and I defend using chamber time to do that.

The second point, about the long-term nature of the commitment, is even more important. That point relates to the opening of my first speech. I want the Parliament to commit itself to the curriculum for excellence in the long term. There is not much in the Labour amendment that pleases me, but I am pleased that it does not cut out the final part of the motion. We make that long-term commitment.

Elizabeth Smith: I began my remarks full of praise for teachers, parents and all those who are involved, so I ask the cabinet secretary not to argue, please, that I am in any way disparaging the efforts that have been made. I say again that, if the curriculum for excellence is to succeed, it will succeed to its full potential only if we address some of the other most important priorities. The Government needs to make considerable progress on those issues.

Michael Russell: I agree with Liz Smith. We are trying to deal with many interrelated issues. Indeed, I addressed some of those issues at the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee meeting yesterday, and we addressed others in the debate on higher education funding that the Tories brought to the chamber. I will continue to address those issues, and I am not criticising the member's stance, but I defend the importance of making from the Parliament the two points that I have made. That is why the debate is important.

There is a strong case for talking about school autonomy and for relating the curriculum for excellence to the autonomy of teachers. I will quote with approval something that somebody said this week. They said:

"A debate is required about the role of local councils in schools, but whatever the outcome there needs to be a massive power shift to the school level.

This is needed to allow schools to be more innovative to meet the demands of the Curriculum for Excellence. Staff need more professional space"

to deliver. I commend the views of Peter Peacock on the issue. It is absolutely clear that we need to

have that debate in the chamber. It is related to the delivery of the curriculum for excellence. We need the Parliament to commit itself to the curriculum for excellence in the long term.

Liz Smith made another point about transitions through school. I encourage her to go and see the transitions at the Rothesay joint campus, which is a good example of where the curriculum for excellence has been introduced without doors. It is said that that campus provides education from three to a degree, because of the nursery and Argyll College provision. It is useful to see how a whole school can deliver the curriculum for excellence right across the age range.

I take Margaret Smith's point about the SSTA. Many members have raised the SSTA issue. I am keen that it takes up membership and comes back to the management board, but I must make the point that it is impossible to be a member of a committee that has voted unanimously for proposals and then call for industrial action against those proposals the following day. That simply cannot happen. I am glad that the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers has now joined the EIS on the management board. I would welcome the SSTA back.

Des McNulty *rose*—

Michael Russell: No, Mr McNulty, I have heard your views on the issue.

The SSTA is welcome to come back, but it needs consistency and we need to know that we are all trying to get the best out of the process, rather than one party grandstanding for its membership despite having supported something in the committee. That is not acceptable.

Margaret Smith: Does the cabinet secretary accept that the SSTA is genuinely in negotiations and discussions with councils throughout Scotland and that progress is being made? Will he give categorical assurance to the Parliament that he will try to do likewise as far as the union is concerned?

Michael Russell: On Monday, all the directors of education in Scotland met. Each one confirmed that the curriculum for excellence programme is on track and said that they needed no delay in the implementation timetable. So the SSTA's representation of the issue is not what is actually happening. I repeat that I am absolutely open to discussions with the SSTA on that issue or on any other issue. I meet the unions absolutely regularly.

Margaret Smith raised the issue of the national assessment resource. The assessment framework was published in January and stated then that the national assessment resource would be available from autumn 2010, which was achieved.

There have been several mentions of the exam timetable. The programme addressed the criticisms. It focused initially on rolling out the experiences and outcomes across the curriculum areas between 2008 and 2009. Teachers were therefore able to concentrate at precisely the right moment on how their teaching and classroom practice should develop and extend their children. In the past half year, the programme has focused principally on supporting teachers with assessment and on how to achieve rigorous and robust standards for assessing a child's progress. The published timetable shows that, in early January 2011, draft course outlines for the new qualifications will be published. The team of SQA qualification advisers have established links with every local authority to answer their questions. The actions on the new qualifications are taking place well over three years before the current secondary 1 children will take the new qualifications.

That is a published programme. It has been agreed over the long term. It is in implementation. It should not be misrepresented or misunderstood. It is actually happening.

Rhona Brankin: Will the minister take an intervention?

Michael Russell: No, I will not. I will come to Rhona Brankin in just a moment, but I want to do so via Karen Whitefield and several other members.

I am astonished by the members, particularly Labour members, whose time was taken up with lambasting the Government for the budget difficulties that Labour created. I remind them of that memorable note from Liam Byrne, the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, that said, "I am afraid there is no money." It was Labour that spent the money and whose irresponsibility virtually bankrupted the state, and now its members tell us that budgets have to be put in place. That is hypocrisy of a giant dimension. I have to say that the most offensive thing in the debate was that those members were so blind to that fact.

There were other things that particularly concerned me. Des McNulty's speech lasted 10 minutes and 58 seconds—I counted them in and I counted them out. During that time, we heard nine minutes and 10 seconds of complaint and then there was the merest ray of sunshine. He said that he would become optimistic, but even the optimism was pessimistic. There was not a single thought about how we might take forward the curriculum for excellence. What we have had from Labour this morning is regrettable, and we have not had it from the other parties. I accept that there are difficulties still to be overcome. We are actively working on those and I welcome the co-operation and work of those parties that want to do so. What

we had from Labour was cynical and wrong. Labour members wanted the curriculum for excellence to fail and they are really furious that it is succeeding. They are spitting tacks.

What we heard from Des McNulty was astonishing. Halfway through his speech, I realised exactly where I had heard it before. We now have an education policy from Labour that is based entirely on the negativity of the staffroom cynic—the person who does not want anything in education to succeed and who is desperate to stop it. That is what Labour education policy has come to. We have the utter cynicism of a party that, in local government, has slashed teacher numbers. [*Laughter.*] It then turns up in the Parliament and, with a tinkling laugh from Rhona Brankin, pretends that that has not happened.

The reality is that the Government has worked tirelessly to deliver the curriculum for excellence. I am certainly open to the criticism that there is much more still to do. That is why I am happy to support elements of the Labour amendment, because there are issues that are still to be resolved. However, what we have seen from Labour today is a bankrupt education policy. Even Claire Baker's good speech could not save Labour from that. We have the absolutely extraordinary stance of a party that, having set up the literacy commission and having seen a Government work with that commission to achieve a literacy action plan, proceeds to denounce it, not because it is not the right plan, but because that party does not want anybody to do anything good in Scotland. Labour failed for so long and now it does not want anybody else to succeed. That is disgraceful.

Scottish Executive Question Time

General Questions

11:40

Minister for Tourism and Heritage (Meetings)

1. John Scott (Ayr) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when it last had discussions with the United Kingdom Minister for Tourism and Heritage. (S3O-11858)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I met the UK Minister for Tourism and Heritage on 3 November 2010 in Edinburgh, as did my colleague the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism.

John Scott: As the minister knows, the UK tourism minister is on record as saying that moving the clocks forward permanently by one hour would give a boost to leisure industries. Although that might be the case, can the minister confirm that, when she next speaks to her UK counterpart, she will emphasise the concerns about the proposal that I believe are shared in all parts of the Parliament and across Scotland? Does she agree that Scottish children walking to school in darkness is not an acceptable price to pay for an extra hour of sunlight in Sussex?

Fiona Hyslop: I agree with the member's statements. Richard Lochhead and I have written to the UK Government on the issue. I can share with the Parliament comments that have been received from Caroline Spelman on the UK Government's position. She said:

"May I reassure you that while the Government will always continue to listen to arguments for and against change, there are no plans to review the current arrangements for British Summer Time at this time."

I say to the member politely, as I have said to other Conservative members, that the reason why we have the difficulty and are having to address the issue is that one of his Conservative colleagues, a certain Rebecca Harris MP, has introduced a private member's bill called the Daylight Saving Bill. It is that Conservative member who is causing the difficulties. I politely ask John Scott to sort out policy on the issue within the Conservative party. However, we support the points that he makes in his argument.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): On the issue of heritage, the minister is aware of concerns regarding the John Buchan museum near Broughton in Peeblesshire, which is currently operated by a family trust. Given the worldwide significance of John Buchan, who of

course was the author of "The Thirty-Nine Steps" and a hundred other books and who was governor general of Canada, it is crucial to protect the vast collection of letters and other memorabilia in the museum. What opportunity is there for the trust to access the Heritage Lottery Fund or any other funds, if it has not already done so?

Fiona Hyslop: I thank the member for bringing the issue to our attention. I have great admiration for the centre and believe that it houses an important collection. John Buchan had a distinguished career as a writer and I am sure that many people want to visit that part of the world to see the collection. I urge the member to relay to the centre that we appreciate that it has concerns over the lease.

The member is right to identify the Heritage Lottery Fund as a possible avenue for application. I understand that the Heritage Lottery Fund would be more than happy to discuss a potential funding application with the centre.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Those who are charged with the promotion of tourism and heritage are apt to rather forget about the far north or to get the facts wrong. For instance, one leaflet promoting surfing described Thurso as an island. Will the minister encourage her UK counterparts and all whom she works with to please get the facts right about the far north of Scotland, because we have a great tourism product that we want to sell, but that is not helped by misinformation?

Fiona Hyslop: I am more than happy to do so, but I should not be a postbag for comments on the deficiencies of the UK Government on some issues. The member will no doubt be able to make representations to his UK Liberal Democrat colleagues who are now in government.

The opportunities for Caithness are huge. I hope that Jamie Stone will join me in celebrating the Royal National Mod's achievements in Caithness, where the town of Thurso almost doubled its population as a result of the number of visitors who were there for the Mod. I urge him to encourage his Liberal Democrat councillors to celebrate the contribution that the Mod made, not only to Gaelic, but to tourism in Caithness.

Economic Development (North Ayrshire)

2. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to assist economic development in North Ayrshire. (S3O-11913)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): The Scottish Government is involved in a wide range of activities to support North Ayrshire's economic development, including providing over £12.5 million of regional selective

assistance since 2007. That assistance has created 321 jobs and safeguarded a further 808 jobs in North Ayrshire.

Scottish Government officials recently met North Ayrshire Council to discuss economic development in the area. The council is reviewing its economic development strategy and more detailed discussion will take place when that is complete.

In addition, I participated in a positive pan-Ayrshire summit earlier this year that drew together a broad range of stakeholders to promote economic recovery and growth in the area, in the mutual realisation that all sections of the public and private sectors and the wider community with a contribution to make need to work collaboratively to achieve that outcome.

Irene Oldfather: The minister will recall that he came to North Ayrshire three years ago to undertake with stakeholders a mind-mapping exercise. Is he aware that, over those three years, the claimant count has risen to almost twice the Scottish and United Kingdom average; passenger transport at Prestwick airport is set to decrease by about 45 per cent over the winter months, impacting on the local economy; and North Ayrshire has appeared 342nd out of 356 UK areas least likely to recover from the cuts? Does the minister recognise the frustration of local business and local people? What further direct action can he take to assist?

Jim Mather: Other things are happening, such as the town centre regeneration fund and European funding, but we are dealing with fundamental matters here. We face the worst recession in 80 years, created very much at the hands of the previous Labour Government, which failed to manage the economy effectively and, with the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority, failed to avoid the asset and debt bubbles and the moral hazard that we are all paying for now. That is the serious lesson. We continue to work assiduously with the council and I will be back in Ayrshire in January to try to take forward the situation in every way that I possibly can.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the minister agree that North Ayrshire is in a unique position to benefit from regeneration? It can secure resources, such as joint European support for sustainable investment in city areas—or JESSICA—funding channelled through the Irvine Bay Regeneration Company, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority money and, at Hunterston, its share of the £70 million announced last week to progress development of our renewables industry. This morning I met the Minister for Housing and Communities and Scottish Enterprise to discuss those issues.

Does the minister agree that co-ordination of the agencies involved in regeneration is fundamental to maximise public and private investment in North Ayrshire's regeneration?

Jim Mather: I very much agree with that analysis. I applaud that action and the bringing together of the multiple players who can help the process. I agreed today that I would go down there in January to help facilitate those actions and to ensure that we get some concrete plans and clear actions.

Hydropower Resources

3. Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what information is available on the number of watercourses, weirs and dams used in the past for mills and power generation, whose potential might be explored for water supply, drainage and microgeneration initiatives. (S3O-11933)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): Most watercourses are already an integral part of Scotland's land drainage system. The potential for existing watercourses, weirs and dams to be used for hydro generation was explored in the Scottish Government's hydropower resource study. The study included analysis of a data set of almost 2,000 existing weirs across Scotland. The study also found that it is now possible to install hydro turbines within the potable water system so that the existence of a potable water reservoir should not detract from hydropower potential.

Christopher Harvie: In recent years, many of our European neighbours have reactivated water mills and early hydro schemes as modern microgeneration, hydro and pump storage projects owned by individuals, local authorities or local companies who earn money through the feed-in tariff. Will the minister consider such initiatives as part of meeting the Scottish Government's low-carbon targets by 2020?

Jim Mather: Yes. Where environmental impacts are acceptable, the use of old mills and weirs will have an important part to play in maximising hydropower generation. Currently, the feed-in tariff, which is a key support mechanism in allowing that to happen, applies only to new installations. However, following strong lobbying of the UK Government on the issue, a commitment has been given that hydro turbines of less than 50kW that were generating before 31 March 1990 can be remanufactured as new. That delivers an as-new warranty and eligibility for the feed-in tariff when installed by microgeneration certification scheme installers on the same site and therefore makes the redevelopment of old sites a stronger possibility.

Grade-separated Junctions (Prioritisation)

4. Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will reconsider its priorities for the establishment of grade-separated junctions following the publication of figures showing that, between 1999 and 2009, there were no fatalities at the Broxden, Inveralmond and Keir roundabouts compared with four fatalities on the A90 at Laurencekirk. (S3O-11877)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): The grade separation of the Broxden, Inveralmond and Keir roundabouts is primarily about improvements related to relieving congestion and reducing journey times on the A9. Those improvements also form part of a strategy for upgrading the A9 between Stirling and Perth where, tragically, 27 fatalities have occurred between 1999 and 2009.

Regarding Laurencekirk, following the upgrade of the main A90 junction in 2005, we have made further safety improvements this year and will continue to keep the situation under close review.

Mike Rumbles: Presiding Officer, you might wish to know that Mr Graham, father of Jamie Graham, one of those who tragically died at Laurencekirk, is in the public gallery.

In 2008, the minister told the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee that the need for a flyover on the A90 at Laurencekirk was

“on the radar, but ... we have to target our safety interventions where the need is greatest.”—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 16 December 2008; c 1196.]

Does the minister genuinely believe that the need for safety improvements at those three locations where there have been no fatalities is greater than that at Laurencekirk where we have had four fatalities and many serious accidents, including that of Jamie Graham, whose life was lost?

Stewart Stevenson: The member is correct to quote me from 2008. We have, of course, made further investments in the three junctions at Laurencekirk with the precise aim of improving safety in that area. From 2005, there were four years without a fatality, showing that the previous improvements had made a difference. We believe that the improvements that we have made, on which we will conduct further safety investigations in the next few weeks, will make a similar difference.

Any fatality on our road network is a fatality too many. I extend my sympathy to Mr Graham, who is in the public gallery, and to all people who have lost their loved ones on Scotland's road network.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

Does the minister accept that although there have been no fatalities at the junction of the A90 and A937 since the junction improvements were instigated, the improvements were only ever likely to be temporary and the risk is still there? Further, has he considered my proposal for the inclusion of those junction improvements in the contracts for the Aberdeen western peripheral route?

Stewart Stevenson: I acknowledge that driving on Scotland's roads is not entirely risk free. That is why we focus on areas of particular concern and why we have taken the actions that we have with regard to the three junctions at Laurencekirk.

We will understand our financial situation next week when the cabinet secretary introduces budget proposals. I remind the chamber that our top priority in the strategic transport projects review for investment in our surface transport network was to act on safety concerns above economic and any other concerns. That will continue to be our priority after the budget.

Public Works Loan Board (Interest Rate)

5. Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what it considers will be the impact on local authorities of the increase in the interest rate of the Public Works Loan Board. (S3O-11928)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The United Kingdom Government is directly cutting Scotland's resources by £1.3 billion next year. We are working with our local government partners to reach the best possible budget settlement to support economic recovery and promote front-line services. However, the UK Government's decision to increase the interest rates on loans offered to councils by the Public Works Loan Board is an additional handicap. By putting even more pressure on local authority budgets, it reduces their capacity to invest in a wide range of infrastructure projects, including on schools, roads, housing and flood prevention schemes.

Bob Doris: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. I know that alarm bells are ringing across Scotland regarding the uplift in the interest rates of the Public Works Loan Board, which amounts to a 500 per cent increase. In Dundee alone, that will cost £400,000 next year. I have written to Glasgow City Council in the area that I represent to see what the burden will be on it and what the further constraints will be going forward.

Will the cabinet secretary make joint representations along with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to the UK Government to ask it to think again? My reading of the situation is that making public spending more expensive

pushes councils to the more expensive private financiers. We saw how that ended—it was called the private finance initiative.

John Swinney: I am certainly very happy to make joint representations to the United Kingdom Government with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. We have co-operated on a number of representations to the UK Government in the past on issues that affect the ability of the Scottish Government and local authorities to undertake their respective functions.

As I said in my original answer to Mr Doris, the increase in the PWLB's interest rate is an inhibitor to further development. If that had not taken place, investment in public infrastructure would have been easier for local authorities.

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): In his discussions with COSLA on budget setting, has the cabinet secretary taken into account the full consequences of the UK comprehensive spending review, which will cost Inverclyde Council £1 million a year?

John Swinney: Certainly we are having extensive discussions with local authorities on the question of the budget settlement. The local authorities of Scotland are as aware as the Scottish Government of the difficulties and challenges of the financial position, which have arisen out of the decisions of the previous Labour Government and the current Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition. We are working together to address those challenges.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Question 6 was not lodged.

Dental Services (Fife)

7. Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to improve dental services in Fife. (S3O-11936)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Responsibility for the overall provision of national health service dental services in the area rests with NHS Fife. The board is undertaking a range of measures to improve access to NHS dental services in Fife.

Tricia Marwick: Is the minister aware that yesterday planning permission was granted for the new dental centre at Glenwood in Glenrothes? The centre, along with a similar one in Methil—which is also in my constituency—is a result of the £6.11 million investment by this Scottish National Party Government. Does the minister agree that that investment, along with the new practices in Glenrothes, will go a long way to improve the appalling situation inherited from the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat Government, which

resulted in thousands of people in my constituency having no access to an NHS dentist?

Shona Robison: I very much agree with what the member said. Of course, the primary and community care premises modernisation programme, in which we gave priority to the development of dental services and NHS dental provision, has led to the really important developments that Tricia Marwick has mentioned. Those developments will help to sustain the momentum whereby we have seen huge increases in the number of people who are able to be registered with an NHS dentist. I am sure that everyone in the chamber will welcome that.

National Waiting Times Centre (Budget)

8. Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive when the individual board settlement for the national waiting times centre will be published. (S3O-11910)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): The draft budget for the Scottish Government is due to be published next week and it will give an indicative baseline budget for the national waiting times centre and all other national health service health boards. Their budgets will then be finalised when the Scottish Government's budget is approved, which is likely to be early next year.

Des McNulty: As the cabinet secretary knows, the Golden Jubilee national hospital is unique in that patients attend for planned procedures. What number of planned procedures were agreed in advance for the current financial year; has that number been revised in the course of the year; and what number of planned procedures are intended to be carried out next year?

Nicola Sturgeon: As the member knows, the national waiting times centre, of which the Golden Jubilee national hospital is part, is not only unique in Scotland but is also a real success story.

In 2009-10, the number of procedures was 26,500—19 per cent above the target that was set. In 2010-11, NHS boards requested 25 per cent more than the hospital's current orthopaedic capacity. To address that, the hospital is increasing its activity for joint replacement operations. It will continue to ensure that it has the capacity in place to respond to the demands that are placed on it by other NHS boards.

I place on record my thanks to those at the Golden Jubilee national hospital, who have played an important role over the past number of years in reducing waiting times in Scotland to their current historic low.

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that that must conclude general questions.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

First Minister (Engagements)

1. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-2682)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): At 11 o'clock this morning, I joined members from across the chamber in observing two minutes' silence in remembrance of the servicemen and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice. On Sunday, I will formally mark armistice day by attending the remembrance Sunday commemorative event in Edinburgh. I know that MSPs will attend their constituency events throughout the country.

Iain Gray: The First Minister's Scottish Futures Trust was supposed to raise patriotic bonds for patriotic bridges, patriotic schools and patriotic hospitals, but it has raised no money and built no bridges, schools or hospitals. It was also supposed to end the need to buy in expensive consultants. How is that going?

The First Minister: As Iain Gray well knows, the Scottish Futures Trust is involved in billions of pounds of capital investment projects throughout the country. The returns and the savings that it has made have been appropriately audited and they amount to hundreds of millions of pounds.

The problem with Iain Gray's approach is that the Labour Party was content to use the private finance initiative, which is a totally discredited and hugely expensive means of raising capital. In the years when the Scottish budget increased substantially, that could be afforded—money could be given over to PFI financiers. We are no longer in that position. We must get value for money from capital projects and that is exactly what the Scottish Futures Trust is doing.

Iain Gray: If the Scottish Futures Trust is so efficient and so cheap, why did it spend £872,000 on consultants last year? It has 26 staff and a chief executive who earns £200,000 a year, but it spends £2,000 a day on consultants and it has yet to build a single school.

However, I must admit that the Scottish Futures Trust looks like a model of fiscal rectitude in comparison with Skills Development Scotland. Regular viewers will know that Skills Development Scotland likes to spend money on stage hypnotists and rebranding. Will the First Minister hazard a guess at how much that organisation has spent on external consultancy fees?

The First Minister: Let us deal with the reality of the Scottish Futures Trust, which is supporting projects that are worth £7.3 billion. The SFT's efficiency savings have been externally audited. The audit shows that, in 2009-10, £35 of benefit and savings was achieved for every £1 that was spent on the SFT.

It would be incredible if the Labour Party continued to make its absurd suggestion that an organisation that will be essential for delivering capital programmes throughout Scotland should be abolished. If the Labour Party did so, it would inhibit the delivery of schools for the future, the hub initiative, the national housing trust, tax increment financing and the Borders railway. Regular viewers around Scotland might know what projects are at risk from the Labour Party's absurd proposition that the Scottish Futures Trust should be abolished.

In terms of Skills Development Scotland—

Members: Hooray!

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

The First Minister: I remind Iain Gray that the organisation that he derides week after week in the chamber has delivered 20,000 modern apprenticeships across Scotland, which is one third more than the Labour Party ever achieved in its term of office.

Iain Gray: Here is a tip for the First Minister: he must get the answer to question 1 after that question and not find it after question 2 but give it anyway.

Of course—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Iain Gray: Of course I welcome—[*Interruption.*]

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Read the *Official Report*.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Swinney.

Iain Gray: Of course I welcome 20,000 apprenticeships.

Members: Hooray!

Iain Gray: We argued for putting the money for them into the budget. The point is that Skills Development Scotland also spent £2.3 million on consultants last year, so we could have had another 1,500 apprenticeships instead of an army of consultants. This is the organisation that is meant to be creating opportunity for our young people and ensuring that we have the skills that we need to get the economy growing. It is no wonder that our recovery is slow.

It is just as well that we have Scottish Enterprise. Just for the record, can the First Minister tell us how much it spent on consultants last year?

The First Minister: If Iain Gray did not want to know about the Scottish Futures Trust, he should not have asked me a question about it. If he did not want to hear another answer on Skills Development Scotland, he should not have asked me about it in question 3.

Iain Gray says that he welcomes the delivery of 20,000 apprenticeships, which is one third more than the Labour Party ever delivered. If he welcomes it so much, why did he vote against the budget that proposed it?

As far as his point about the recovery in Scotland being slow is concerned, in the second quarter of this year the Scottish economy grew by 1.3 per cent, which is the highest rate for five years—

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Tell that to the unemployed.

The Presiding Officer: Mr McNeil.

The First Minister: That is higher than the rate of growth in the rest of the United Kingdom and is second in the G8 only to that of the Federal Republic of Germany, so it is a highly satisfactory figure. The challenge for Scotland and for us all is whether we can sustain that level of recovery in the face of the greatest public spending cutbacks in London for more than a generation.

Before we think that it was all the fault of the Tory-Liberal coalition, let us remember Ed Miliband's admission and the documentation that established that the Labour Party was planning cuts that would have been deeper and harsher than those of Margaret Thatcher.

Iain Gray: This time, he gave the answer to a question that I did not ask at all. The question was: how much is Scottish Enterprise spending on consultants? He does not know. I will tell him. Last year, it spent £21 million on consultants.

The First Minister has cut 3,500 teachers' jobs and 4,000 national health service jobs, and 40,000 construction jobs have gone as well. Unemployment in Scotland has overtaken unemployment in the rest of the country, but his economic agencies are spending £500,000 a week on consultants. Is he really saying that he is happy with that? Is the First Minister driving this gravy train or is he just a passenger?

The First Minister: If Iain Gray wants answers to questions that he should have asked, he should have asked them, instead of rambling across the range of economic statistics.

Iain Gray cites figures for construction employment. Let us deal with the reality of construction employment in Scotland in the second quarter of this year. The number of construction jobs in Scotland was 130,900. That was an increase of 9 per cent year on year, compared with a fall across the UK of 5.6 per cent. What might that surge in construction employment be down to? We know from the analysis that it was the capital acceleration that was led by this Government and planned by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth that led to that highly impressive recovery in construction employment in Scotland.

Once upon a time, instead of deriding Skills Development Scotland, an organisation that has been successful in delivering apprenticeships, and Scottish Enterprise, an organisation that is winning bid after bid, contract after contract and inward investment after inward investment, Iain Gray could have shared the credit for that capital acceleration. The trouble is, when it came to the crunch, he led his troops to push their buttons and vote against the budget that secured that impressive performance in construction employment, so the next time he wants to tell us that he is really concerned about apprenticeships or construction employment, he should explain why he does not back the policies that secured that capital, that construction and those jobs.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

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

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-2683)

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

Annabel Goldie: The First Minister is a passionate advocate of independence and autonomy for the governance of Scotland. Why is he such an entrenched opponent of independence and autonomy for the governance of schools?

The First Minister: As Annabel Goldie knows, we are plotting a new future for the schools of Scotland. We have welcomed innovative ideas, for example in East Lothian. I understand that a full report on the initiative, after consultation, will be presented in December. Many other initiatives are under way around Scotland. East Lothian Council is involved in talks with Midlothian Council about joint delivery of education in the two authorities. Talks between other local authorities are taking place in parallel to that.

The Government is open to new ideas about how to deliver education. However, I have never quite understood the Conservative party's attachment to what has been described as the Swedish model of education, as the comparative

performance of Sweden and Scotland over the past few years is roughly similar. Mr Russell has indicated that he is more attracted to the Finnish model, on the basis that if we are seeking an international comparison we should look to the model that is most impressive, rather than to one that might be considered somewhat mediocre.

Annabel Goldie: I realise that I am no competition for Finnish models.

This week, a highly respected educationist, Keir Bloomer, said:

“progress is made in the modern world by releasing the creative energies of people, in this case the teacher, and the system that we have at the present moment constrains them far too much by direction from the top.”

He joins the ever-growing number of voices supporting the devolution of powers to our schools. Even the First Minister's colleague Mike Russell has refused to rule that out. Despite the First Minister's warm words, it is clear that he is the roadblock to reform: feet stuck in the mud, head buried in the sand, Mike Russell on a leash—[*Laughter.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Annabel Goldie: Perhaps that should be Jack Russell.

Does the First Minister have any proposals for genuine reform to put Scotland's headteachers back in control of Scotland's schools?

The First Minister: I congratulate Annabel Goldie on embracing the obvious model analogy into which I was gallantly and chivalrously trying not to lead her.

If the member does not believe that the curriculum for excellence that is being rolled out across the secondary sector in Scotland is a major, challenging reform of Scottish education that offers great potential for the future, she underrates the significance of the most substantial change in Scottish education for many generations. We are interested in seeing greater autonomy in decision making for schools. That is why Mr Russell has complimented East Lothian so warmly on its initiative.

I do not want to get into canine analogies, but to describe Mr Russell in the terms that Annabel Goldie suggested is to underestimate his abilities. I would rather have a Scottish terrier such as Mr Russell than the lapdogs on the Tory benches.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

3. Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S3F-2684)

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

Tavish Scott: NHS Education for Scotland is a quango that is responsible for training doctors and nurses in Scotland. Was it really a good idea for eight people to be sent to a conference in Miami in May?

The First Minister: NHS Education for Scotland does an important job for education and training across the health service in Scotland. There are aspects of NES's recent activities that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has recently spoken about, but I do not think that Tavish Scott should deflect from the crucial and important job that it does for training and education across Scotland's national health service.

Tavish Scott: I do not think that I did. The issue is what NES has been up to in this case. Six of the eight Scottish delegates to the conference in Miami were paid for by that NHS quango, but the other two were paid for directly by the Scottish Government at St Andrew's house. These are difficult financial times, and everyone else in Scotland knows that every penny has to be watched carefully, yet NES does not even know how much it costs to send all those people abroad, and it reacts to criticism by wanting to recruit more spin doctors to explain it all away.

When will the Government get a grip on its responsibilities and tackle the foreign junkets, the spin machine and the obstruction of public accountability that we can see right before us?

The First Minister: As Tavish Scott well knows, and as I know he was about to inform the chamber, the course concerned was on professional competence in medicine. It was a medical-related training course. He, and his handyman next to him, Mr Rumbles, would not wish to give any other impression—including from the holiday brochure that they have there.

Tavish Scott should already know that the health secretary has written to NES, asking it to be mindful of the financial climate with regard to foreign travel. She has also written regarding the overall approach to remuneration for NES.

I have been looking closely at some developments, particularly at an article that appeared in the *Scottish Review* concerning the activities of NES with regard to remuneration for senior personnel and senior consultants. As I suspected, and as I must remind Tavish Scott, as I do on many occasions—[*Interruption.*] Tavish Scott asked about NHS Education for Scotland, and I am telling him about NES's performance. The matter concerning remuneration in NES that has caused particular concern relates to contracts that were signed by the previous Labour-Liberal Government—contracts that have been frozen by the current Scottish National Party Government.

The problem for the Liberal Democrats on a whole range of questions these days is that they will be judged not just on their policies when they were in government in this Parliament, but on the policies that they are currently pursuing in government in the coalition in London.

Tavish Scott: That is the First Minister's standard answer to anything that I ever say in the chamber. I asked about the First Minister's performance and about his Government. The only thing that changes about Mr Salmond is the excuses, which get longer.

The First Minister: The performance of this Government has been to freeze consultant salaries, to freeze distinction awards and to freeze management fees. The performance of the Liberal-Labour Government was to allow increases in all three components of salary. If Mr Scott disnae like the answers to the question, he should not open up to examination the deplorable record of the Liberal Democrats in government in Scotland in the past—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order, Mr Scott.

The First Minister: And, of course, there is now the extraordinary record of the Liberal-Conservative coalition that is in government in London.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of recent events affecting Campbeltown. What actions can he and his ministers take to minimise and prevent the possible unemployment triple whammy in Campbeltown, owing to the difficulties that are now faced by the Skykon wind tower company—which the First Minister opened—and to the collapse of Highlands and Islands Enterprise's construction framework contractor Rok, which owes its subcontractors in Campbeltown, including McFadyens Contractors, hundreds of thousands of pounds? Its work on the new Skykon factory, which is vital for making Skykon more competitive, is 90 per cent complete but still needs to be finished. What will the First Minister do to prevent an unemployment meltdown in Campbeltown and to ensure continuity for Skykon, which is the only wind tower producer in Scotland?

The First Minister: The Skykon group has encountered financial problems, which, as Jamie McGrigor probably knows, are sourced not on the Campbeltown contract but across the range of activities in the group. The Scottish Government hosted a meeting of interested parties on Tuesday, in an attempt to be of assistance in assembling a rescue package, which of course depends on a number of agreements, particularly from Skykon financiers, and on the financial stability of the rest of the group. Contingency plans are also being prepared.

The member also asked about Rok's move into administration. As members know, Rok is a United Kingdom-based construction facilities company, which employs some 3,800 people across the UK, about a fifth of them in Scotland. Some 69 redundancies out of some 750 staff in Scotland have been made, and there are some 260 redundancies across the UK.

In our contact with the administrator PricewaterhouseCoopers, we have been trying to prevent the knock-on effect down the construction and subcontracting chain. Our aim and intention is to minimise the economic damage and to mobilise the partnership action for continuing employment teams to help, where they can, with people who have been made redundant. That work will continue. During the next few days, the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism will meet two subcontractors who have been particularly affected by the decision.

Roads (Winter Weather Assistance)

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

To ask the First Minister what assistance the Scottish Government is giving to local authorities to ensure that roads are kept clear and safe in the eventuality of a repeat of last winter's weather conditions. (S3F-2698)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government continues to work with local authority partners to improve winter resilience across Scotland. A report commissioned by the Scottish ministers on the lessons learned from last winter was published in August and included 11 recommendations, which are being progressed jointly with local authority partners.

Recommendations include the monitoring of salt stock supplies throughout Scotland and the establishment of a strategic salt stock, which will provide more than 30,000 tonnes of extra salt that can be accessed in an emergency. Through that monitoring, we are confident that Scotland's local authorities are well prepared to deal with anything that comes this winter.

Stuart McMillan: I am sure that the First Minister agrees that the conditions that we experienced last year were by no means new to Scotland and that the increase in admissions to accident and emergency units last winter was linked to the severe weather conditions.

Does he agree that the use of people on community service to assist local authorities in clearing our roads and streets last year was a positive measure? Will he give an assurance that the initiative will be rolled out to the west of Scotland and throughout the nation this winter, if that is required?

The First Minister: Yes, I will. That was one of a range of successful initiatives that were taken in response to the emergency conditions last winter. There was general acknowledgement in the Parliament, and rightly so, that our authorities' response to the exceptional conditions was, on the whole, extremely good and extremely competent. It is to everyone's credit that despite last year's good performance, no one is resting on their laurels and people are considering the lessons that can be learned to improve performance if we are again hit by an exceptional winter.

The member can be assured that the use of community service people to clear snow in communities was one of a range of initiatives that were successful, gave the right message and will be pursued again if we face exceptional winter conditions.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): The First Minister will recall the concern that was expressed during last winter's fearsomely bad weather about the lack of Scottish Government action to assist in the identification of vulnerable people, particularly older people, who were trapped in their homes without the support that they needed, because carers were unable to reach them, despite their best efforts. Will the First Minister agree to establish a Scotland-wide telephone helpline in preparation for a recurrence of the weather that we experienced last winter, so that there is no repeat of last year's situation, when people had to access information via the web, despite the fact that disproportionately fewer older people have access to the internet, and when in some circumstances people phoned local numbers that were not staffed?

The First Minister: Local authority helplines are in existence to deal with that eventuality. The disagreement with Johann Lamont was that she thought that we could centralise such a function effectively; in our opinion, it was far better to apply the help that was required at local level. The response of our services was exceptional.

Despite what Johann Lamont said, it is not the case that the response of our emergency services, blue-light services and local authorities throughout Scotland to the experience of last winter left a great deal to be desired. The general consensus—with perhaps one notable exception—was that everyone performed exceptionally well, given the exceptional circumstances. Of course, the Government and local authorities will look at all positive suggestions for dealing with exceptional conditions again.

I say to Johann Lamont, as gently as possible, that if she is to encourage people to respond to national emergencies, the occasional word of positivity and encouragement from her might assist the genuinely collective effort that we all

want to make to keep the people of Scotland safe from harm.

Forensic Services

5. George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): To ask the First Minister when the Scottish Government expects to announce its decision regarding the future of forensic services. (S3F-2703)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I am surprised that Lord Foulkes does not already know that, as the Cabinet Secretary for Justice clearly explained the position at the meeting with Lothian MSPs on 28 October. As, I suspect, he does know, an announcement will be made later this year.

George Foulkes: I am grateful to the First Minister, because that gives us some time. Is the First Minister aware that Grampian and Lothian police boards support option 2, to keep a full forensic service in Aberdeen and Edinburgh? Since I have noticed that the First Minister has a particular enthusiasm for all-party campaigns to keep services open, will he, as a Grampian MSP, join me and other Lothian and Grampian MSPs in our campaign to keep a full forensic service at Aberdeen and Edinburgh? If we do not do that, it will be a victory for the criminals whom those services have helped to put behind bars.

The First Minister: I have just been handed a note that explains why Lord George Foulkes did not know the answer to his question: it is because he stormed out the meeting after five minutes and did not hear what the Cabinet Secretary for Justice said. In his newly found devotion to all-party consensus campaigns, if George Foulkes would hang about for more than five minutes, perhaps the people of the Lothians would be better served by their MSP, or are we to conclude that the Scottish Parliament's loss is the House of Lords's gain?

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Is the First Minister aware that the Aberdeen staff have proposed an alternative to option 2, which I support? Can he confirm that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice is not restricted to choosing one of the four options on which the Scottish Police Services Authority consulted?

The First Minister: As the member knows, the SPSA board initiated a searching examination with customers across Scotland on a national service model for the whole of the forensic service, and the options paper presented the recommendations from the SPSA, and the cabinet secretary will announce his decision on the matter before the end of the year. He will take into account all the positive suggestions that have been made from a range of interests around the country, given the importance of the issue.

Consultants Distinction Awards

6. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government will take following the publication of figures showing that the payment of national health service consultants distinction awards has increased 19.5 per cent in the last four years to £27.9 million. (S3F-2687)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The Scottish Government has taken, and will continue to take, action to curb excessive payments to higher paid public servants. We have already frozen the value of existing distinction awards at last year's level for consultants in Scotland. We have also restricted new awards to those that become available from consultants who leave the awards scheme. That has released £2 million of savings in the current financial year.

As the member is well aware, the awards are United Kingdom-wide, and following the Deputy First Minister's approach to the UK health ministers, proposing a fundamental review of the distinction awards scheme, the Department of Health announced on 20 August 2010 that the Doctors and Dentists Review Body will review the schemes. We will continue to press for the reform of distinction awards and will submit evidence to the review body that calls for a fairer reward system that is not limited to a small minority of the NHS workforce.

Nanette Milne: I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive answer, and I am pleased that he is giving evidence to the review, which should ensure that the award scheme will come into line with other public sector pay schemes and is affordable.

As the First Minister will know, the Scottish Conservatives are committed to protecting the health budget, but we also want more money to be diverted to front-line services. Does he agree that, in these difficult financial times, the 19.5 per cent rise in pay awards that we have seen over the past four years is difficult to justify?

The First Minister: I am sure that Nanette Milne does not mean to do this, but she does not give the full canvas of increases in the distinction awards year after year over the past 10 years. I have the figures before me now, and they show that there has been an increase in distinction awards every single year from 2000, 2001 and 2002 until the past two years, when they were frozen by the health secretary after, if I remember correctly, vigorous questioning from Dr Ian McKee.

I agree that the matters have to be dealt with, and they are being dealt with. The argument about it being a UK award scheme is nonetheless pertinent, and one of the restrictions on our ability to act is the competitive position of the Scottish

health service in having rates of pay that are comparable to the English health service.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): So it is somebody else's problem.

The First Minister: I hear Johann Lamont muttering that it is somebody else's problem. If we had had an exodus of consultants from the Scottish NHS to the English NHS, I suspect that Johann's colleagues would have been the first to complain that we had not considered the consequences of our action. Far from waiting for a Labour Government that refused to take any action, or even waiting for a Liberal-Conservative Government that has now established the review that we called for, the health secretary has already taken action to freeze the awards for the first time since devolution, clearing up the mess that we inherited from the Labour-Liberal Administration.

The Presiding Officer: We will have a very brief supplementary question from Jeremy Purvis.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): In 2009, the Scottish Government put in place not a UK scheme but a new Scottish scheme that will come into force next year. The First Minister is right that there were no new awards in 2010, but the clinical awards for next year include a new round for 25 additional awards, totalling £1.25 million, scheduled for February 2011. Before it is too late, will the First Minister ensure that no new awards are issued next February?

The First Minister: As Jeremy Purvis should know, the budget is published next week, and I suspect that he should wait, like everyone else, to see the budget rather than make assumptions about what is in it.

I am happy to defend, and I have just defended, the action that has been taken by the health secretary to cap the awards for the first time. Jeremy Purvis can be absolutely certain that further action will be taken.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): It is your scheme.

The First Minister: What we have had no explanation of is why, under the years of Labour-Liberal Administration in this chamber, the distinction awards scheme increased year after year, without any thought of any Liberal minister, including that stringent guarantor of the public purse Tavish Scott, of restricting the awards scheme.

I know that the Liberal Democrats do not like to be reminded of their record in government in this chamber—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly please, First Minister.

The First Minister: And I know that nobody in the Liberal Democrat party wants to be reminded of their current record at Westminster, but just occasionally we in the other political parties are entitled to say that we do not need to look at the crystal ball of future Liberal policies—we can read the book of their track record in administration in Scotland.

George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Members: No!

The Presiding Officer: Order. Members are quite entitled to raise points of order.

George Foulkes: Presiding Officer, it is a very serious point of order. Will you investigate the proceedings at the meeting to which the First Minister referred? I can tell you categorically, as can the other people who were present, that the reason why I left the meeting was that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice refused to give a date for publication—[*Interruption.*] Let me finish. He refused to publish the report, and he said that he had not even read it. It is categorically the case, as members from other parties who were present can prove, that the First Minister has misled the chamber.

The Presiding Officer: The member has made his point, but it is not a point of order for me to consider.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sure that it is not the First Minister's intention to mislead Parliament, so I wonder whether he will correct two factual errors that he has made. First, it is not the case that consultant salaries have been frozen, as he said earlier. Secondly, the rise in the salary of the medical director by £50,000 to a staggering £235,000 was under the ministerial direction of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing. She sanctioned that increase.

The Presiding Officer: It is the First Minister who is responsible for what he says.

12:35

Meeting suspended until 14:15.

14:15

On resuming—

Scottish Executive Question Time

Rural Affairs and the Environment

Wildlife Crime (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)

1. Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on the role of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in combating wildlife crime. (S3O-11891)

The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham): The SSPCA's work in tackling cruelty to animals often leads it into certain types of wildlife crime cases. I am grateful for the support that the SSPCA provides in that respect. It works closely and successfully with the police in joint investigations and plays a leading role in the partnership for action against wildlife crime.

Cathie Craigie: I am sure that the minister agrees with me that the SSPCA does a great job. I am sure that she also agrees that the first instinct of many of our constituents who witness crimes against wild or domestic animals is to call the SSPCA. What plans do ministers have to consult on extending the society's powers? If they have any such plans, what would be the timescale for the introduction of any legislation?

Roseanna Cunningham: At present, there are no concrete plans to consult on an extension of the SSPCA's powers. However, that discussion is active in the context of the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill.

I am aware of the offer that the SSPCA has made. It is worthy of careful consideration, but members need to be aware that extending the SSPCA's powers would make a substantial change to criminal justice in Scotland. One or two issues and concerns have been raised in various quarters that would require to be gone into carefully before we proceeded any further.

In my view, it is not appropriate to extend the SSPCA's powers through the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill. However, I do not rule that out for the future, and I certainly look forward to reading the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee's conclusions in that regard.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The minister is aware that evidence that the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee has received suggests that SSPCA inspectors should be given additional

powers to pursue those who are responsible for wildlife crime. Does she agree that, before that suggestion is considered further, all efforts should be made to ensure that every police force in Scotland has at least one dedicated wildlife crime officer and that redeployment within forces should be considered, as should recruiting more special constables to support our overstretched police force? The police are and must remain the enforcement agency; their absolute independence and training make them the most appropriate people to pursue those who commit wildlife crime.

Roseanna Cunningham: The role of the police in investigating any crime remains central. Even supposing that there were extensions to the SSPCA's powers in future, that would not remove from the police their primary role.

Currently, all eight police forces have a wildlife crime co-ordinator, although not all have full-time posts. All forces also have a full or part-time wildlife crime officer, although I am aware that, in some police forces, there may be a question mark over some of those posts.

Operational policing matters are not my responsibility and I cannot direct police forces to do or say anything or act in certain ways. However, the Government expects all Scotland's police forces to investigate all crime to the best of their ability and resources, which I anticipate will continue to happen in future.

Flooding Emergencies

2. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to prepare for potential flooding emergencies. (S3O-11885)

The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham): I recently wrote to all MSPs, setting out the extensive programme of work that the Government and its partners have in hand to make sure that Scotland is as prepared as possible to deal with flood risks. We have invested significantly in improving Scotland's flood warning systems and increased support to communities through our additional funding for the Scottish flood forum.

Current levels of expenditure on flooding-related activity are at an historic high. Local authority flood prevention schemes were granted £9 million in 2006-07, when we were not in government, but the amount included for flood prevention schemes in the local government settlement for 2010-11 is £42 million.

Richard Baker: Following the floods in the north-east last year, I wrote to the minister to support a proposal from the Met Office and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency for an early flood warning system. I welcome the fact that

the system has now been agreed and will start operation next March, but what steps will be taken this winter to provide early warnings for communities that are at risk of flooding? In the light of the concerns that have been raised about the preparedness of the emergency response to the flooding in Stonehaven, particularly last year, what dialogue has taken place with the local authority and the emergency services to ensure that any lessons that need to be learned have been learned?

Roseanna Cunningham: There were quite a lot of questions wrapped into one there. The Government constantly reviews the arrangements for flood prevention and flood warnings. That is why we have put in the amounts of money that we have provided up until now—amounts of money that were simply not available in the years before 2007. The member should accept that the Government has put huge amounts of money into flood prevention. We are beginning to see some of the benefits of that, but of course it cannot within three or four years make up for the previous eight years, during which, frankly, not enough was done.

Interestingly, last year's floods were precisely the reason for the letter that was sent around, and the timing of the letter. We needed to make everybody aware and remind everybody of the threat of flooding in Scotland and the increased threat that is brought about by some of the changes in our weather patterns that are beginning to be obvious. We wanted to remind people that it is important that there is preparedness at every single level, from the domestic household all the way through to local authorities and the responders, and indeed in relation to what the Government has done.

On Stonehaven, I am aware that residents have experienced considerable difficulties because of and after last year's floods. We are trying to learn lessons. Every time there is a flooding incident, there are lessons to be learned. Nowhere—in no Government—is there ever a perfect response all the time. I would not pretend to be in the position of claiming that there was such a response. Each time there is such an event, we must learn the lessons for the future. I reassure the member that that is happening in respect of Stonehaven, just as it is happening in respect of all the other flooding incidents that we have experienced in Scotland over the last years.

Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister confirm that Aberdeenshire Council has done as much as it can to learn the lessons from the flooding in Stonehaven and Huntly, and that the council and SEPA have put protection measures in place? Does she agree

that each individual household must build its own resilience in dealing with the floods?

Roseanna Cunningham: Everybody—that is each one of us as an individual householder as well as our various local authorities and all the other relevant bodies—has a responsibility to do what we can. Obviously, what we can do at a domestic level is quite limited, but that does not absolve us of the responsibility to do it.

Aberdeenshire Council has indeed carried out a lot of work in response to the Stonehaven and Huntly floods. It has been clearing river banks and watercourses and ensuring that the existing flood alleviation infrastructure is as efficient as possible. SEPA has been installing a new gauge on the Carron, which, although it is unable to provide flood warnings, can provide and has provided good flood monitoring, allowing the council, police and fire and rescue services to make decisions in real time during flooding events.

When the agreement between SEPA and the Met Office bears fruit, we will have a rolling five-day forecast that is made available to all those who are involved in responding to floods so that they are as prepared as they can possibly be in the circumstances for what may or may not happen in the days ahead. That is probably about as much as can be expected at present, given that we have no certainty about when or precisely where a flood will hit.

Peatlands

3. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to promote the proper management of peatlands and the repair of damaged areas. (S3O-11883)

The Minister for Environment (Roseanna Cunningham): The Government is working in partnership with land managers to protect our peatlands. In particular, we have provided funding through the Scotland rural development programme for a number of peatland management options. Regulations that prevent inappropriate land use also serve to promote better management of peatlands.

Ms Alexander: Is the minister willing, as RSPB Scotland has suggested, to issue a ministerial direction to the statutory agencies to deliver peatland restoration? Is she willing to direct planning authorities to enforce peatland restoration and, in particular, to avoid granting any further consents for commercial peat extraction?

Roseanna Cunningham: We understand the desire for more extensive restoration of damaged peatlands. The call for that is coming from a number of different areas. We have also noted the call for more research, particularly into the

greenhouse gas effects of peatland restoration. The calculation is not straightforward and simple. We are looking at supporting further research.

The member may be interested to know that the Government will publish a policy statement on carbon-rich soils next month. That will set out what we are doing to support carbon-rich soils and will inform discussions about further opportunities to promote peatland restoration. All planners will have regard to these issues when it comes to decisions that are made on specific planning applications.

Some of our peatlands already lie in designated sites, but most, of course, do not. When proposals for significant land use change come forward, there are issues that Scottish Natural Heritage and SEPA need to be conscious and aware of, and they must advise the relevant authority of the likely impacts and any mitigation or compensation measures that would be required if the development were to go ahead. The calculation is not always easy to make. We still have a lot of work to do to try to ensure that we understand those impacts far more clearly than we do at the moment.

We support the RSPB financially through the rural priorities mechanism, and we will continue to do so.

Dairy Farmers (Support)

4. Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to dairy farmers. (S30-11924)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): Scotland's dairy farmers received £49 million in 2009 in single farm payments and are due to receive £47 million in 2010. The difference is due to fluctuation in the exchange rate.

The Scottish Government has also provided dairy farmers with more than £13 million of funding since 2007 under the Scotland rural development programme. Scotland's dairy processors have also benefited from more than £5 million of funding since 2008 under the food processing, marketing and co-operation grant scheme.

Aileen Campbell: Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that, even though Scotland's dairy industry is among the most efficient in the European Union, dairy farmers still receive poor financial returns? The exodus from the industry continues. Will he outline how the Government will work with all interested parties to reverse that trend and ensure that Scotland's dairy farmers receive a fair price for their milk? Does he share my belief in Scotland's potential not only to benefit from its high-quality primary produce but to

transform the sector by developing excellent-quality processed and high-end products?

Richard Lochhead: I share—as I am sure all members do—Aileen Campbell's concern over the future of the dairy sector in Scotland. At present, it appears that many dairy farmers are being squeezed by competition among retailers, who often appear to use milk as a loss-leader to attract customers into their stores. That is all very well if the bottom line of the supermarket is taking the hit, but it sometimes appears that dairy farmers pay part of the price. I am sure that the whole chamber wants to address that matter.

How can we work together to address some of the issues? First, the European dairy high-level group will report shortly. Clearly, the Scottish Government will pay close attention to the group's recommendations, which will of course be relevant to the dairy sector not only in Scotland but across Europe.

In Scotland, we continue to discuss with the dairy sector the way forward for an industry for which the issues are often complex. Over the next week or two, another dairy farming summit will be held in Edinburgh at which all stakeholders and, I hope, a number of members of the Scottish Parliament will get round the table. I agree that the issue will not go away in the short term. We have given a lot of support to help our industry to become even more efficient. Certainly, the industry is doing what it can. Although not all dairy farmers suffer to the same degree, the issues that they face are of big concern in the context of the future of Scotland's food sector.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): What is the minister's response to the fact that my dairy farming constituents in the southern isles ring-fenced area face financial ruin as a result of not being able to sell their milk quota on the national milk quota market—something that every other dairy farmer can do?

Richard Lochhead: As the member will be aware from much correspondence between us and with other members in recent years, the issue goes back some years. There is no likelihood of the Scottish Government's current position on the issue changing. Many dairy farmers in Scotland face many different pressures. We must find solutions that help all dairy farmers and address some of the flaws in the current market.

Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for inviting me, along with other members of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, to the dairy stakeholders meeting next Thursday. Given that the main theme of the meeting is to share best practice to ensure a sustainable future for the dairy supply chain in

Scotland, has the cabinet secretary been informed of whether the retailers will attend this time?

Richard Lochhead: The member makes a good point. I hope that the retailers will attend. They attended the previous dairy summit; we are waiting to hear from some of them whether they will attend the forthcoming summit. It is difficult for us to achieve solutions for the dairy sector in Scotland if not all the key players in the supply chain are around the same table. Although I recognise that, for competition reasons, we cannot discuss certain themes at the meeting, I hope that the retail sector will turn out for it.

Single Farm Payment Scheme (Overdeclaration of Eligible Land)

5. David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what the financial implications are for it and for farmers as a result of the overdeclaration of eligible land that was identified in the European Union audit of the 2006 single farm payment scheme. (S3O-11866)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): The European Commission audit of 2006 expenditure on the single farm payment scheme has still to be drawn to a final conclusion, so it is too soon to assess the overall financial impact on the Scottish Government and our farmers. However, my officials are working assiduously to minimise any possible impact on the farming community from the audit of the payments and processes that were directed by the previous coalition Government.

David McLetchie: I understand that the Scottish Government is providing our farmers with further details of what land is eligible and what land is ineligible for the single farm payment, and that it is encouraging them, where appropriate, to reassess their claimed areas. Will that have any implications for the timing of this year's payment or for the amount that is paid out from December?

Richard Lochhead: The member highlights the Scottish Government's impressive track record on making single farm payments on time from 1 December onwards. I have tasked our rural payments and inspections directorate to pay at least 70 per cent of eligible claims by 1 December. We are proud of that track record and want to stick to it this year, as we have done in previous years.

The member makes a good point about the resources that are required to deal with all the common agricultural policy regulations and with the payments. I am convinced that we have applied enough resources to that to ensure that we can stick to our good timetable for making single farm payments.

Sustainable Development (Scrutiny)

6. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive how it plans to ensure independent scrutiny of its record on sustainable development. (S3O-11951)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): Following the United Kingdom Government's decision to withdraw funding from the Sustainable Development Commission, the Scottish Government is considering the best way forward on scrutiny of sustainable development. We will announce decisions soon, in the context of the Scottish spending review.

Patrick Harvie: Through the committee structure, Parliament provides a strong degree of political scrutiny of the Government's record, but there is an important role for independent, non-political scrutiny. The Sustainable Development Commission has fulfilled that role well, challenging Government, when necessary, and offering constructive criticism, when possible. Does the minister recognise not only that Scottish funding for the STC must continue to be allocated for that purpose but that whatever vehicle fulfils that purpose must have the same degree of independence, to ensure that challenges can be brought, where necessary, not just to this Government but to any future Government?

Richard Lochhead: The member raises a number of important issues. I agree that there is a need for independent monitoring of how the Scottish Government's activities contribute to sustainable development.

Although I cannot give the member any guarantees about the funding situation—he will be well aware of the funding pressures that face the Scottish Government—I give him an assurance that, once we are in a position to take final decisions, we will closely consider how the independent scrutiny role can continue in one form or another.

The Scottish Parliament has a very important scrutiny role, and Audit Scotland, the United Kingdom Committee on Climate Change and many other channels are available to ensure independent scrutiny of the Scottish Government with regard to sustainable development. We will carefully consider the need to ensure that that scrutiny continues, but I am not in a position right now to say exactly how it will continue.

Justice and Law Officers

Child Sex Offenders (Management)

1. Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how many of the 33

recommendations in the Justice 2 Sub Committee's 2006 report on managing child sex offenders have been delivered since 10 May 2007 and on what date these were or are expected to be implemented. (S3O-11903)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): Thirty-one of the 33 recommendations have been implemented. Of those, nine were implemented prior to 10 May 2007 and 22 have been delivered since then.

We are unable to implement recommendation 20, requiring housing applicants to declare that they are registered sex offenders, as that would not be compatible with the Scottish Parliament's duty to ensure that all legislation that it passes is compliant with the European convention on human rights. We expect recommendation 12 to be delivered in 2011.

Paul Martin: Six years after the tragic murder of Mark Cummings by the convicted sex offender Stuart Leggate, we have moved on. I welcome the cross-party consensus on the issue.

I am not convinced that there is an argument against registered sex offenders providing that information when they make a housing application. I acknowledge some of the challenges that we face regarding ECHR compliance, but does the minister agree that it is unacceptable, particularly when we consider the history of the issue, that a registered sex offender does not have to provide that information to a housing organisation when making an application for rehousing?

In the case of Mark Cummings, it was clear that Stuart Leggate did not provide that information. That crucial information should have been provided to the housing provider, which would have allowed Stuart Leggate to be monitored.

Kenny MacAskill: Mr Martin raises a variety of matters, and I pay tribute to him for the manner in which he has supported Margaret Ann Cummings. I acknowledge the progress that has been made, collectively.

The situation is regrettable. The Government sought to establish whether we could avoid the impediment that has been placed upon us, but the legal advice was clear that that would not be compliant with the ECHR. The matter clearly causes concern, especially to local authorities and to those who deal with housing applications. The member's point regarding the tragic death of the young Mark Cummings is clear.

We must recognise that there other ways in which we can now carry out monitoring, through sexual offences prevention orders and multi-agency public protection arrangements. It would have been preferable had we been able to pursue matters in the way that emerged from the general

review. I can assure Mr Martin and the Parliament that there are other ways of ensuring that the police co-operate with housing associations, which, in turn, should co-operate with social work departments.

The issue was not simply to do with the address that Leggate was living at; one of the clear problems arising from that case was the failure to have joined-up communications between the various organisations concerned, all of which have not just a statutory obligation but a moral obligation to look after the safety of our youngsters.

Progress has been made, despite the difficulties that we have faced as a result of the impediment to bringing the matter to fruition.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Question 2 was not lodged.

Prisoners (Right to Vote)

3. Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has been consulted by the United Kingdom Government regarding its response to the European Court of Human Rights decision on convicted prisoners having the right to vote. (S3O-11917)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): No, the Scottish Government has not been consulted by the UK Government over its reported plans to change electoral law in response to the European Court of Human Rights decision on convicted prisoners having the right to vote.

Elaine Murray: The cabinet secretary's reply has come as a bit of a surprise to me. I am of the opinion that people who are convicted of serious breaches of the law should forfeit the privilege of deciding who determines the law.

The Scottish ministers have responsibility for running the local authority elections in 2012. HM Prison Dumfries has a population of 120 long and short-term offence-related protection prisoners, such as sex offenders who have refused to take part in a STOP programme. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that if those offenders are permitted to vote, their votes could materially affect the results of the election to Dumfries and Galloway Council in the North West Dumfries ward? Have he and his colleagues considered how such a situation might be avoided in North West Dumfries and in other council wards in Scotland that have prisons in their boundaries?

Kenny MacAskill: The Scottish Government has always made its position clear. We were not consulted by the current UK Government on its pronouncement, but in prior discussions the Scottish Government made it clear that it did not agree with the proposal to give prisoners the

franchise. The situation in Scotland has always been that people who are remanded, who are innocent pending a trial, have the right to vote, but people who have been convicted of a criminal offence, whether it is serious or otherwise, face consequences as well as the imposition of a penalty by the court.

I cannot comment on the particular circumstances of the ward in Dumfries to which Elaine Murray referred. I do not think that there will necessarily be a great rush among the fraternity to take matters up. The member can rest assured that the Government disagrees with the UK Government's decision and that previously, when there was a consultation, we clearly, unambiguously and specifically expressed the view that we did not agree with the approach.

**Criminal Procedure (Legal Assistance,
Detention and Appeals) (Scotland) Act 2010
(Post-legislative Scrutiny)**

4. Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on calls for urgent post-legislative scrutiny of the Criminal Procedure (Legal Assistance, Detention and Appeals) (Scotland) Act 2010. (S3O-11878)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The Scottish Government has announced a fully independent review of law and practice in the wake of the decision in *Cadder v Her Majesty's Advocate*. The review will be led by Lord Carloway, who is a senior High Court judge, and will encompass many of the issues that are addressed in the 2010 act. The review will report in sufficient time to provide the option of legislating during the 2011-12 parliamentary year.

Iain Smith: I welcome Lord Carloway's review. Has the cabinet secretary discussed the 2010 act with the chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission? Are there proposals for training for solicitors and police officers on how the new legislation will operate?

Kenny MacAskill: I will deal with the member's questions in reverse order. Yes, the Law Society of Scotland and the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland were fully canvassed on the matter, and the chief superintendent who represents ACPOS in that regard is ensuring that police training is brought up to speed. Thanks to the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General for Scotland, guidance changed in the summer and there is already implementation in relation to many matters.

The specific change in the 2010 act is the increase in the maximum period of detention, to ensure that the police can do their job and balance the rights of people who face accusations in relation to serious offences with the needs of the

police and the need for our communities to be protected from crime. ACPOS and the Law Society of Scotland have been in discussion for a considerable time.

I discussed the matter with Professor Alan Miller at a meeting of international human rights commissioners, which was hosted in the Parliament—I think that that was the first United Nations-supported event that we have held here. I made it clear to Professor Miller and to most of the representatives and dignitaries at the meeting that the Government fully supports human rights, as do the people of Scotland, but we think that human rights means the right not to have one's family starve before one's very eyes, the right not to have one's country disappear under rising sea levels and the right to greater access to truth and justice.

The position of members who appear to think that the extension of the period of detention from six to 12 hours correlates with such issues seems preposterous. I have just dealt with a question on the right to vote of people who are convicted of serious offences, including the sexual abuse and murder of youngsters, and a question about the right of people who are convicted of a serious sexual offence not to have that information routinely made available to housing associations that deal with them. As I said at the meeting of international human rights commissioners, in the context of what we mean when we talk about human rights, some people in Scotland should get things in proportion.

James Kelly (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): One of the implications of the recent legislation is that 500 additional police officers will be required to administer the arrangements whereby suspects have the right to a lawyer when they are detained in the police station. That will come at a cost of £20 million according to the financial memorandum. What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth about the implications of the recent legislation for the draft budget, which will be published next week, and the implications for front-line policing throughout Scotland?

Kenny MacAskill: The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth will make a statement on the budget to Parliament next week. I have had full discussions with him, not simply on the *Cadder* case but on the other challenges that face the Scottish Government, and the justice directorate in particular, as a consequence of the problems arising from the cuts that were initiated by the Labour Government in London and which are now accelerating under the Conservative-Liberal coalition.

The figures in the financial memorandum to the Criminal Procedure (Legal Assistance, Detention

and Appeals) (Scotland) Act 2010 are as Mr Kelly said. However, as matters become clear, it is being recognised that the doomsday scenario that some predicted is not coming to fruition. That said, no one should underestimate the difficulties that will be caused as a result of a decision of the UK Supreme Court, which is not meant to deal with criminal appeals in Scotland. That decision will have not just financial consequences, but significant consequences for the law of Scotland; that was never meant to happen and it is a matter that will require to be addressed.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Does the cabinet secretary accept that his earlier rant is not an excuse for, and does not explain, his not consulting with the Scottish Human Rights Commission on the introduction of the legislation? More to the immediate point, is he aware that when England introduced equivalent arrangements, it took two years before the training mechanisms were put in place for the police and the solicitors involved? A large volume of advice and instruction was given on all that and it has to be followed through.

Finally, will the cabinet secretary advise us whether Lord Carloway's remit has been, or will be, put into the public domain?

Kenny MacAskill: No; we will discuss Lord Carloway's remit with him. Clearly we will not direct him, but once the remit has been fine-tuned and agreed with him, we will make it available.

The problems that have to be faced south of the border are predominantly due to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 system that is operated down there. The Administration here, supported by ACPOS and others, has made it clear that although we might have to accept some of the directions of travel as a consequence of the Cadder case, we will certainly not accept the bureaucracy that seems to be consequent south of the border.

We consulted the appropriate stakeholders, including the Law Society of Scotland, the judiciary, the police and relevant members.

I do not know how the Scottish human rights commissioner defines his role and, as I have just said to Mr Smith, I discussed that with him. I have to say that, when we are hearing about allegations of British soldiers using torture in Iraq, and other similar matters, I am surprised that Mr Miller and, indeed, Mr Brown and Mr Smith, seem to be so vexed by the increase in detention hours from six to 12 when they have failed to comment on matters that are much more fundamental to human rights.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5 was not lodged.

Assault to Injury (Direct Measures)

6. Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive how many direct measures have been issued for assault to injury since 1 April 2008. (S3O-11862)

The Solicitor General for Scotland (Frank Mulholland): Approximately 11,500 charges of assault to injury are reported by the police each year. Under the terms of the Criminal Proceedings etc (Reform) (Scotland) Act 2007, procurators fiscal issued direct measures for assault to injury to a total of 815 people in 2008-09, 546 people in 2009-10, and 312 people between April and September 2010.

Gavin Brown: The cabinet secretary said a few moments ago that some people in Scotland should get things in proportion. The Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland has provided me with details of cases in which direct measures were used, including somebody being struck with a pickaxe handle and somebody else punching, biting and kicking, which led to a laceration of an eyebrow, bleeding, a bite mark, and bumps and scratches on the victim's head. Are those incidents appropriate for direct measures?

The Solicitor General for Scotland: I have no direct knowledge of those two cases, but Her Majesty's independent Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland concluded in the review of direct measures that their use is appropriate, proportionate and in accordance with the guidance.

Mr Brown is well aware from previous questions that I have answered that direct measures are not used for serious violence, domestic violence, assaults on police and emergency workers, assaults with a sexual element, persistent offenders, assaults aggravated by race, religion or sexuality, or assaults that are likely to attract a sentence of imprisonment or community service order.

I should add that, in general, summary justice reform is delivering significant benefits to the criminal justice system. Cases are being dealt with more quickly—the figure for cases dealt with in 26 weeks is up from 70 to 77 per cent. There is a significant increase in early pleas of guilty from 21 to 33 per cent, and there has been a significant reduction in the number of witnesses cited. More than 50,000 witnesses, many of them police officers, have been spared the need to go to court to give evidence as a result of the impact of summary justice reform.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Advocate General for Scotland (Cadder Case)

8. Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the Advocate General for Scotland on the implications of the Cadder case. (S3O-11932)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): I welcome the Advocate General's consultation on devolution issues and acts of the Lord Advocate, and his willingness to consider change in this important area. The First Minister and I have both written to the Advocate General to highlight the serious problems the current settlement is causing and to raise a number of wider issues arising from the Cadder case and more generally. In particular, we wish to re-establish the High Court of Justiciary as the highest criminal court in Scotland and to stop that role being undermined by large numbers of supposed devolution issues being referred to the Supreme Court. I also want to see Scotland able to present its case directly to the European Court of Human Rights in cases that have such an important impact on our justice system.

Rob Gibson: Will the cabinet secretary keep us informed in future about responses from the Advocate General for Scotland? It is important to know that as much concern is being expressed about these matters in Westminster as in Scotland and to see whether the Advocate General is a defender of the Scottish legal system or an advocate for the Supreme Court.

Kenny MacAskill: I am happy to do that. My letter to the Advocate General has been lodged in the Scottish Parliament information centre and is available for anybody to view. I have had a discussion with the Advocate General, in conjunction with a meeting with the Lord Chancellor south of the border, prior to his raising his consultation, so I accept the genuine willingness and direction that he has shown. However, there is a significant constitutional matter that has resulted in the significant problems that we discussed earlier. I assure the member that I am happy to keep him and other members informed. As a Government, we believe that we are being severely disadvantaged. The consequences are severe, and the whole nature of how our appeal system is supposed to operate has been undermined by people using devolution minutes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Cathie Craigie. Very briefly, please.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): We all have to learn from situations in which we have to take emergency action. Since the Parliament passed the emergency legislation, I have received a letter from a constituent who is

very critical of the Government and the Parliament for the failure to consult fully before introducing the legislation. He has put the case to me that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Craigie, is there a question?

Cathie Craigie: Why did the minister not consult on the various options on which the Supreme Court could have ruled?

Kenny MacAskill: The decision was given at 9.45 am on the Tuesday. To ensure that no problems arose for our police in protecting our communities from serious, dangerous offenders, we introduced emergency legislation the following day. Considering the nature of the decision, and its significance and seriousness, we acted appropriately. I am glad that Ms Craigie voted for it at the time; I am surprised that she is querying it now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): That concludes question time.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I appreciate that you were not in the chamber at the time but, in answer to question 4, which related to the Cadder decision, the cabinet secretary went off on a great excursion regarding matters to do with torture in Iraq. For the avoidance of doubt—the cabinet secretary appears not to understand this—can you clarify for the chamber that the question of Iraq has nothing whatever to do with the Scottish Parliament's powers, or with the rights of the cabinet secretary or parliamentarians?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. I am afraid that that is not a point of order. I am not responsible for the content of ministerial answers.

Scottish Water Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a statement by Stewart Stevenson on the proposed Scottish Water bill. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:56

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): Water is one of the most abundant resources on the planet. It is also one that, through its ubiquity in Scotland, its being almost constantly in our vision and its easy availability from our taps, we Scots often take for granted. However, the idea of water's ubiquity and its easy availability to all is false. For many in the world, it is a vital commodity in desperately short supply. As available water resources become stretched, the value of water, both economically and in humanitarian terms, becomes greater. According to the United Nations, there is enough fresh water on the planet, but it is distributed unevenly and too much of it is wasted, polluted and managed unsustainably. We take water for granted but disregard it at our peril.

It may not always feel like it, but Scotland is a lucky country. It is blessed by an inventive and inquisitive people, resource-rich land and sea and easy access to what the world is increasingly recognising as the next great asset—water. One of the tests for us in the future will be how we care for and use that great asset. Our Victorian predecessors, in particular, exercised clever stewardship and innovation, building drinking water and sewerage infrastructure for Scotland's people and helping to drive cholera out of our cities. To this day, we benefit from their investment, their foresight and their efforts. Scottish Water is the embodiment of that. For less than £1 a day, the average household gets wholesome water and has its waste removed and treated.

Our water is a public asset, and we are committed to ensuring that it is managed and exploited for the public good in a public agency. I believe that a majority of members continue to believe in that. Our first purpose in looking at how we should discharge our water responsibilities is to maintain that link between public asset and public good. Has our public body, Scottish Water, done well? Yes, it has. It has been the fastest-improving water company in the United Kingdom and continues on an improvement path. It delivers excellent-value services while improving quality and customer service. Customer bills are stable.

Can Scottish Water do more? Yes, it can. Scottish Water is Scotland's biggest purchaser of electricity, and there is considerable potential in its asset base to develop wind, hydro and micro-hydro power generation to the extent that all its electricity needs could be met and further amounts of electricity could be generated and exported to the grid. There is also considerable potential to develop redundant assets, such as disused sewage treatment works, into modern waste recycling facilities that support Scotland's drive to become a zero waste society. Scottish Water also holds a great deal of water knowledge and experience, which it could use to become part of a centre for the sustainable exploitation of water. We should aspire to lead the world in that.

We are confident that there are significant commercial opportunities in each of those areas—and there is more. Let us look at areas that are not so overtly commercial. Our people want to help when international disasters strike. Water is often the instrument of disaster, the carrier of disease or the cause of drought. We should aspire to a situation in which Scottish expertise and practical help can make a bigger difference.

The vision that was painted by the First Minister in his statement in September on the programme for government described an evolution for Scottish Water, not a revolution. He promised that we would bring forward legislation to enable Scottish Water to play a wider role. It is usual, as part of such a process, for discussions to take place between the Scottish Government and the parliamentary authorities about various matters relating to draft legislation.

It is true that we originally believed that we could start the move of Scottish Water into a broader role with a very limited bill. However, as we reflected further on our vision for Scottish Water, it became clear that we were at risk of underestimating the potential. Our proposals for legislation might be seen as being too limited and as not providing a sufficient basis for the continuing development of Scottish Water's role.

We can also be more imaginative in thinking about how Scottish Water could develop a role in key areas of public concern at home. For example, Scottish Water already has a close relationship with local authorities. Its retail arm, Business Stream, works with them to help them to reduce water use and therefore save money on their bills. That is only a beginning.

Scottish Water also has extensive experience in procuring large-scale capital projects. Could we find a way to use that experience more widely? Perhaps local authorities could draw on that expertise when procuring flood protection schemes and other flood management work,

which would ensure the best use of public funds by taking a shared service approach.

Canals are important assets that we are retaining in the public sector in Scotland. We should be asking ourselves what opportunities there are for creating additional public benefit from all our water infrastructure, both inland and maritime.

On top of all of that, however, is the fact that water is global. It respects no borders. Climate change brings droughts to previously wet areas and floods to places that are not used to flooding. Water's ever-changing journey across the planet means that the issues are international and the solutions are global. As water supply becomes less predictable, so its importance to the economy and society becomes more obvious. There is an old adage that nobody worries about the well until it is empty. As the world begins to worry about the well, so our vision needs to be international.

Those are among the important questions that we need to examine more fully. Given the extent of the proposals, it would be wrong if we did not have a full consultation phase. Many people will have views and ideas, and I am sure that they will add to the menu that I have described today. It is important that they are heard.

We have identified some areas of uncertainty, which could be material. Significant among those are the UK Government's decision to move British Waterways in England and Wales to the third sector, and the forthcoming Scottish bill's approach to borrowing powers.

Present legislation is highly complex and is based on Scottish Water undertaking a limited set of functions. We need to ensure that that framework—its regulation, financing, corporate structure and interaction with ministers—is robust enough to deal with the wider possibilities that we have begun to identify.

We therefore decided last week that the present limited provisions should be withdrawn, and I wrote to Patrick Harvie, the convener of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, to explain that and to set out our plan to consult on proposals for legislation that is more wide ranging than was initially planned.

Later this month, it will be my pleasure to deliver on that promise when we bring forward draft proposals as part of an ambitious consultation on Scottish Water's future. I am sure that colleagues in all parties will welcome our commitment to consult on these important matters.

In setting out that there should be a water bill, the First Minister spoke about developing a legacy for future generations and said that making the best use of our precious water resources is a long-

term strategy. I agree with his words, and I think that, when we discuss such a vital part of our economy, our environment and our society, we should do so in a constructive fashion.

When we talk about water, we talk about our future. It underpins much of what we do. This chamber should beware of starting a storm in a water cup, if the price of that is to block our ears and close our eyes to the important business of mapping a future for our most precious resource.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement, for which I will allow about 20 minutes.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I am grateful to the minister for the advance copy of his statement. However, I find it difficult to be grateful for any other aspect of his Government's handling of the proposed Scottish Water bill.

Two months ago in the chamber, as the minister mentioned, we heard the First Minister invoke the spirit of the late, great Tom Johnston and his hydro power achievements. However, when Stewart Stevenson told me soon afterwards that what was coming down the pipe was a modest bill with some five sections that would tidy up the non-core—I repeat, the non-core—activities of Scottish Water, I realised without surprise that Tom Johnston's mantle was too big even for Alex Salmond's ample frame.

Stewart Stevenson has been sent out to stop a bullet for his cavalier boss today. Precisely when will his Government get beyond the back-of-a-fag-packet stage and tell Scotland's people what it has in store for their water?

Stewart Stevenson: I am a reformed former smoker of some three decades' abstinence, so fag packets do not form any substantial part of our approach.

The First Minister was right in his remarks in September to draw on the inspiration of Tom Johnston, who was a man of a different political persuasion but one who was widely respected for his contribution to empowering much of Scotland through hydro power. He was probably one of the greatest secretaries of state that Scotland has ever had.

It is clear that the issue is not simply legislation. It is about direction, and the need to create space for Scottish Water to deliver on the huge potential of the huge water resource that our country possesses, which is valuable to us and to people elsewhere. We have never intended to progress simply by developing Scottish Water through a legislative process. Our approach has always been about using legislation to deconstruct barriers and develop a wider vision for Scottish Water, and taking the opportunity to create a real

water agency that can deliver not only for Scotland but for people across the world by using expertise, exploiting water and dealing with natural—and unnatural—disaster.

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con):

The minister has no doubt quoted to the First Minister what Oliver Hardy said to Stan Laurel—“Here’s another fine mess you’ve got me into.”

On 28 October, in response to my scepticism about whether we would hear much more of the bill before next May, the minister said:

“I am working hard on the future for Scottish Water, and we will be excitingly engaged in that in the future.”—[*Official Report*, 28 October 2010; c 29739.]

We now know that that exciting engagement has all the panache of previous excitements, such as a local income tax or the independence referendum.

The First Minister promised us

“not a revolution but an evolution.”—[*Official Report*, 8 September 2010; c 28251.]

He did not promise us yet another false start. His Government has had four years to formulate a convincing policy, and it has failed. In the minister’s words, the First Minister’s well is now truly empty, and the minister needs to start worrying.

Will the minister eschew the doe-eyed sentiment of his statement today and step up to address the broader interest—Scotland’s interest? Will he work with Scottish Conservatives to overcome whatever objections he has to a mutualised solution and give up control of Scottish Water, freeing it to make its own decisions and allowing it to develop for and contribute to the greater benefit of Scotland?

Stewart Stevenson: Jackson Carlaw has put the usual record on the record player. The idea of giving up control is interesting, because if we were to change the current arrangements and move Scottish Water from its present position as a public corporation, we would not be giving up control but placing control in other hands: the hands of those who have narrower interests. They will not have at heart the broad interests of Scottish public policy and our role in the world as a centre of water expertise that can support countries around the world when they need advice and help on water.

Commercial companies have a much narrower agenda. Whether they be mutual, as is the case in Wales, or privately owned, as is the case in England, those companies are there to serve their owners, but to do so in a much narrower sense. They work under the rules of the Companies Act 2006, and the fiduciary duties that are placed on directors make it clear that the generation of profit has to be first and foremost. The whole point about Scottish Water and its present position in

the public sector is that it can support wider social and economic agendas that the Government and the people of Scotland wish it to support. No, we shall not be looking at removing Scottish Water from the public sector.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):

I thank the minister for the statement. However, we asked for a statement not so that the Government could tell us that water comes out of a tap but so that it could tell us whether its proposals were competent. Are we seriously expected to believe that the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change submitted a water bill to the Presiding Officer but, the moment the bill left his hands, immediately regretted it and, in those few seconds, suddenly thought that the Government could do better and that there needed to be a greater vision?

The First Minister’s statement in September on the legislative programme devoted seven pages to the water bill. He could not have been clearer about how substantial it should be, so where is it? There is no new information today that was not available before the bill was presented to the Presiding Officer.

The minister has drafted words in an attempt to rival Sir Walter Scott on the clarity and beauty of what flows from the Scottish springs, but there is no clarity about what happened in the few short days between the bill’s submission and its withdrawal. Parliament needs an answer to a straightforward question: was the bill competent?

Stewart Stevenson: The Liberals have made much of the suggestion that the bill was incompetent because it focused on borrowing powers. Let me read section 42(3) of the Water Industry (Scotland) Act 2002. It states:

“For the purpose of the exercise of any of its functions, Scottish Water may ... with the consent of the Scottish Ministers, borrow money, in sterling or otherwise, from any person or body, whether in the United Kingdom or elsewhere.”

There would never be any question of the issue of borrowing powers making any proposal that we brought forward incompetent when the powers already put in place by the Liberal-Labour Administration in 2002 are so comprehensive. There is, of course, a difficulty in relation to borrowing. It lies in paragraph 10.14 of HM Treasury’s “Consolidated Budgeting Guidance from 2010-11”, which states:

“should the PC”—

the public corporation; that means Scottish Water—

“undertake any borrowing the financing raised will be recorded in the budget of the sponsoring department.”

There is no question of the bill being incompetent for those reasons and no sensible Government would ever bring forward a bill that was incompetent. There is no issue in relation to competence.

I have delineated exactly the whole issue of borrowing in relation to Scottish Water. I am happy to ensure that the member, if he requires further information, receives it, but I have quoted section 42(3) of the Water Industry (Scotland) Act 2002 and I have indicated how Scottish Water scores on Scottish Government spending. However, the Scotland bill that is in preparation at Westminster, where his political colleagues are engaged in that, is an opportunity to look again at HM Treasury's consolidated budgeting guidance—

Jeremy Purvis: Did the minister know that before he put the bill forward?

Stewart Stevenson: We did not, in any sense, have the kind of the position that we have now. We know, too, that the position on canals is moving. We have to take account of a whole range of things that are happening and we would be rightly criticised if we did not take the opportunity to ensure that what we are doing is in harmony with the UK Government. I am sure that the unionists opposite would wish me to do that on every possible occasion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I see that a lot of members want to get in. As I hope to get in as many as possible, I would like quick questions and quick answers.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Returning to the ambition shown in the statement, I would like to know how the proposals will benefit the Caledonian and Crinan canals in my region.

Stewart Stevenson: As members will likely know, the previous Westminster Government looked at changing the status of canals that are operated by the British Waterways Board. We have been discussing the matter with the previous and current Governments for a considerable time now and the position that we have reached is that, whereas canals south of the border will move to a mutual position in a charity, canals in Scotland will remain in public ownership under the British Waterways Board. I should explain that the board is a cross-border authority and any ministerial decisions that are made require the authority of a minister in Scotland and a minister south of the border. Making the British Waterways Board the sole responsibility of the Scottish Parliament and Government is a convenient short-term solution, but there are clearly opportunities to explore whether, in light of the changes south of the border, different structures can deliver greater value. We will certainly look at that, but I repeat that canals in Scotland remain in the public sector

to deliver value for the people of Scotland and the people who visit us.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I have to say that I picked out three major highlights from the minister's statement. He said that water is global; that we take it for granted but disregard it at our peril; and that Scotland is a lucky country. If the bill was not incompetent because of borrowing issues, was it incompetent for other reasons?

Stewart Stevenson: The bill is now being progressed on a much wider canvas to look at other matters. The Government would not put forward any bill that it believed to be incompetent.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): This is the most unusual ministerial statement that I have ever heard, but then I have been in Parliament for only three and a half years. Let us review the implications of the minister's comments. When he gave the bill to the Presiding Officer, did he say, "You can have a look at it and spend precious public money on lawyers, but I'll be back in a few months' time with a better one"? Just how much public money has been wasted on this bill so far?

Stewart Stevenson: The member is asking me a question about something that happened elsewhere. I am absolutely sure of what happened in the Scottish Government: we initiated discussions with the committee likely to be dealing with the bill and the Presiding Officer—in other words, absolutely normal procedure in relation to legislation. In parallel, matters in relation to canals and borrowing powers for the Scottish Parliament were moving on south of the border and it was clear that our proposal for a limited technical change to the legislation for Scottish Water would have left us having to return to the matter at a later date. As a result, we have concluded that it is important to look at the matter in the round and, in undertaking the consultation that I have just announced, I invite everyone in Parliament and wider Scotland to engage in this issue in a way that will protect Scottish Water's ability in the public sector to deliver for the people of Scotland using the most valuable public resource: water.

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP): The minister might or might not be aware of my long-standing campaign to tackle flooding in Inverclyde, but I know that the minister to his left, Roseanna Cunningham, is. Given that much of the flooding is a result of years of neglect by the owners of the infrastructure in Inverclyde—including, I should say, Inverclyde Council and Scottish Water—is the minister able to guarantee that the development of micropower generation schemes will not be the sole preserve of Scottish Water and that small-scale community renewables projects that can aid the flood prevention

measures that have already been introduced by the Scottish National Party Government will still be able to take place?

Stewart Stevenson: It is certainly not our intention for Scottish Water to abrogate exclusively to itself rights on microgeneration and micropower. However, Scottish Water has a very substantial estate that can be exploited and, as the biggest purchaser of electricity in Scotland, it must take every opportunity to generate power on its own estate where it can. Indeed, some steps involving joint ventures with others have already been taken.

However, this opportunity is so substantial that it might well be possible for Scottish Water to generate sufficient power to feed directly back into the grid. That is an issue on which the legal position is probably not clear and in respect of which legislation is likely to be of benefit. That is not required immediately, but it is required in the longer-term view. The issue is one in a range of issues that we wish to include in the consultation so that we ensure that we give the earliest possible indication to Scottish Water of how it may build on its success to date.

Tom McCabe (Hamilton South) (Lab): It is clear that the minister is aware of Scottish Water's strategic importance. He recognises its strategic value in the United Kingdom and the world and he recognises that there is a vision of it playing an extremely important part in our country's development. However, that is not new knowledge—I think that almost every member possesses that knowledge. Was the minister not aware of those things before he submitted the original, rather feeble proposals, or did they just dawn on him rather late?

Stewart Stevenson: I return to issues south of the border. There is a clear set of changes that can affect the environment in which we can progress Scottish Water's future. I associate myself with Tom McCabe's remarks about the strategic value of Scottish Water and of water in Scotland more generally. I know that we share with the Labour Party common aspirations for Scottish Water and the exploitation of a public asset for the public good. It is clear that we have been aware over the period since September, and, indeed, since a little while before that, that there are circumstances south of the border that create further opportunities for Scottish Water. It is important that we do not lose those opportunities at the earliest point, which is why we want to consult on that and on a wider range of ambitions for Scottish Water. I am sure that we will get some very interesting replies.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP): The minister will no doubt be aware that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization centre for water law, policy and science at the University of Dundee, which is in my constituency, is at the forefront of the science of water management, and that we need to continue to move forward in this area if we are to catch up with the Netherlands and Sweden. They are the global leaders in this commercial area. Does the minister agree that it is important that we get the balance right between selling water and selling our expertise in its management, engineering, science and financing?

Stewart Stevenson: Mr FitzPatrick touches on an important point. Water is a commodity that we seek to add value to. There is, of course, considerable engineering expertise and experience in Scottish Water, which can be made available to other bodies, such as local authorities when they are making engineering purchases. That expertise and experience complement the financial expertise in the Scottish Futures Trust, and create an even stronger offering from the public sector to ensure that we get value for money and exploit the precious world resource of water.

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): My constituency covers the area that was once represented by the great Tom Johnston and which the local authority describes as "The Canal Capital of Scotland"—the Forth and Clyde canal runs right through Strathkelvin and Bearsden. Does the minister believe that a Scottish waterways board is a viable stand-alone quango, or does he intend to add Scotland's canals to Scottish Water's portfolio?

Stewart Stevenson: There is already a degree of interworking between British Waterways Board Scotland and Scottish Water. Water is carried along our canals for some purposes for Scottish Water. It is a source. Similarly, Scottish Water is a provider of water for canals. Therefore, there is already a degree of synergy.

Communications are becoming ever more important in the modern world, and Scottish Water is looking at providing its sewerage in particular for conduits for communication cables. Canals present another opportunity without some of the difficulties that other methods present. Therefore, there is potential synergy. We have not come to a final conclusion on the matter, but it is important that we consider the opportunities and their associated difficulties in the consultation. However, it is clear that there are opportunities for both the BWBS as it becomes, we hope, a purely Scottish body and Scottish Water.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The minister wants us to believe that legal competence is not an issue. If that is right, surely we are left with the question of ministerial competence. Is he not aware of the frustration that has been felt on

the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, as we have been left with no option but to cancel meeting after meeting that had been arranged to a timetable based on the given expectations about the introduction of the bill? Will he reflect on the wisdom of handing over a bill to the Presiding Officer before he decided what he wanted to put in it or of the First Minister starting the fanfare before the bill was even written?

Stewart Stevenson: I recognise the substantial inconvenience that has been created for the committee and I will certainly reflect on its convener's remarks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement. My apologies to the two members whom I have been unable to take, but I am afraid that time does not permit.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. There has been much to-ing and fro-ing this afternoon in the chamber. Can the Presiding Officer tell us whether the bill as lodged was competent and is he able to publish all the correspondence between him, the Parliament and the Scottish Government on the matter?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that that is not a point of order. However, I am sure that, if the member wishes to write to the Presiding Officer, he will give her a reply.

Rural Out-of-hours Health Care Provision

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-7190, in the name of Christine Grahame, on out-of-hours health care provision in rural areas.

15:26

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): This has been a busy week for the Health and Sport Committee, with our regular meeting on a Wednesday morning, the stage 3 debate on the Alcohol etc (Scotland) Bill yesterday and now a committee debate this morning.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): This morning?

Christine Grahame: I mean this afternoon. I am just checking that members are awake.

I feel in particular for my colleague Helen Eadie, who rounds the week off with her members' business debate tonight. Next week for the team, it is stage 1 of the Patient Rights (Scotland) Bill. Perhaps we should look at the legislative agenda closely and read the runes—the Patient Rights (Scotland) Bill, the Palliative Care (Scotland) Bill, the End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill and the grand finale in more ways than one, the Certification of Death (Scotland) Bill. It could drive us to drink.

That said, it is time to turn to the topic. It would be useful to remind members why the committee undertook an inquiry into out-of-hours health care provision in rural areas. It reflects not only the radical changes to general practitioner contractual duties, but the facts that so many members, including me, represent wholly rural constituencies and that even some urban members—if I may call them that, because of Scotland's rural nature—have rural corners of their constituencies.

In the days of Dr Finlay and his casebook and his very worthy Janet the housekeeper—this is a generation test—and right up until 2004, GPs had 24-hour responsibility for care of their patients. They could not delegate that responsibility and were required to make arrangements for any cover that was needed. However, as demand for out-of-hours care increased steadily, and perhaps because of raised expectations of medical care—which are no bad thing—together with the demographic shift in population, it was recognised by the mid-1990s that GPs who were providing out-of-hours care were under significant pressure. As a result, new ways of working developed and GP co-operatives became the main vehicle for delivering out-of-hours services. Those new ways

involved GPs giving one another shift cover, as it were.

Step forward into the picture NHS 24, which was launched in 2001 and which has three core functions. It provides nurse-led consultations, aided by clinical-decision support software, or triage by phone; it provides referral, where appropriate, to a range of other services; and it provides health information through health information advisers. It is fair to say that, in the early days, the news for NHS 24 was not all good. Some high-profile cases rightly set alarm bells ringing as to the efficacy and even safety of the service, but I believe that today it is realised that NHS 24 is a different kettle of fish. It is not perfect, but it is improved and improving. However, damage was done and our report emphasises that there remains

“a substantial degree of work to be done to re-build confidence in NHS 24, in order to ensure that it operates as a fully effective element of the out-of-hours range of services.”

On the plus side, NHS 24 now takes responsibility for the Scottish centre for telehealth. Established by the previous Scottish Executive in 2006 to promote the use of telehealth by health boards in Scotland, it could have a much enhanced role to play in delivering health care in remote and rural areas, with the prospect of saving some patients what can amount to a round-the-globe trip to see a consultant, with costs to the health service in personnel and cash, to patients' wellbeing and even to their pockets. To date, the centre for telehealth has been a bit of a Cinderella operation, but the move to NHS 24 will give it impetus, changing its modus operandi from advice to advice and action. We hope that it will go from having no teeth to having a full and biting set, which all committee members want—I mean its efficacy, not its teeth. I refer Parliament to our earlier report, which was debated on 22 September this year, busy little committee bees that we are. I digress.

Into the mix with all those pressures was added the UK-wide GMS contract, or, to give it its Sunday name, the new general medical services contract 2004. The days of team Dr Finlay, Dr Cameron, Janet and the unforgettable Dr Snoddie, were not just numbered; more than just being television history, it was curtains for the likes of that couthy doctorial team. What did that GMS contract change? It brought in two key changes, with ramifications that were perhaps not fully appreciated at the time. It freed GPs to opt out of providing any services out of hours—not in itself a bad thing, because a tired doctor is not always the best doctor—and it transferred the responsibility for securing that out-of-hours provision to NHS boards.

How was the 24-hour service to be delivered and has it been delivered? NHS boards are free to enter into contracts with GPs who wish to provide out-of-hours cover and/or to employ salaried GPs to deliver services. That has had financial consequences for some boards, which might find themselves buying GP time at an expensive ad hoc hourly rate. That consequence was noted by Audit Scotland in its 2007 report, but more on that later. New service models have developed and some now have multidisciplinary teams comprising doctors, specially trained nurse practitioners and paramedics. Members are no doubt familiar with that arrangement from their constituencies. Done well, and ensuring that patients are part and parcel of that kind of delivery, the arrangement can be a plus.

How are the arrangements doing in general? In August 2007, Audit Scotland published its report into primary care out-of-hours services. That investigation found that 80 per cent of patients were happy with the care that they had received, but the report also warned that with fewer GPs choosing to provide out-of-hours services, there was a risk that the service was not sustainable in its current form. It also said that NHS boards, particularly in rural areas, had borne the additional costs of the new service because, as Audit Scotland found, of GPs who opted out of providing out-of-hours services, 1,440 re-provided those services for NHS boards on a fee-for-service basis. I alluded to that earlier and I might come back to it later.

Audit Scotland also raised the concern that, in some areas, GPs dictated the rate of pay for working out of hours because there was no nationally agreed rate. Boards often had to enter lengthy discussions about pay rates, particularly in remote and rural areas where the cost of providing out-of-hours services is greater for self-evident reasons. I referred already to the cost to NHS boards of that solution, to which I also refer in the penultimate conclusion of our report. I might not have time to talk about it further today, so members can read it for themselves.

In September 2009, Randolph Murray lodged public petition PE1272, calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that there is adequate provision for out-of-hours GP cover in all remote and rural areas in Scotland. That petition presented the out-of-hours situation in the community of Kinloch Rannoch, subsequent to the introduction of the new GMS contract. Out-of-hours care in that part of NHS Tayside is now provided by first responders. We had already decided to undertake an inquiry into the impact of the new GP contract on remote and rural areas and so subsumed that petition into our inquiry and travelled to Kinloch Rannoch to take evidence from the petitioners in situ.

Our committee report was published in April 2010. In it, we express concern that trust and confidence in the out-of-hours service had been lost and that a substantial amount of work remained to be done to rebuild confidence. That can be achieved only when the system can be depended on to work properly, which will require out-of-hours services to be fully joined up, which they are not currently. An example of that is the confusion and lack of clarity over when to access ambulance services and, indeed, the reliability of accessing those services. That is not the only example, but it is probably one of the more dramatic ones.

The committee recognised the Scottish Ambulance Service's stated commitment to service enhancement, but community groups reported grave problems with the availability of ambulances to deal with emergency situations. There was also a worrying 41 per cent increase in emergency calls made out of hours since the GMS contract was introduced in 2004. That seems to suggest—and reasonably so—that the Scottish Ambulance Service is filling a gap in service that, properly, NHS boards should have filled and that, as a consequence, ambulances are not always available for real emergencies.

The committee concluded that NHS boards should be given the responsibility for devising—and should be enabled to deliver—specific, sustainable and often innovative arrangements for out-of-hours services that meet the needs of individual communities. Those should, and must, be delivered in consultation with those communities. That is how we build trust.

There are shining examples that we urge other boards to examine, such as in the Borders—I refer to paragraph 87 in our report. The Borders success was achieved in part by making extensive use of salaried out-of-hours doctors with appropriate training and, therefore, by having a handle on costs. Lochaber and Wester Ross also come out with a pat on the back; I refer to paragraph 88 in our report. I hope that colleagues will expand on those and other matters that I have mentioned.

The committee received a response from the Scottish Government in June 2010. The response sets out the actions that the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland are taking. I am sure that the minister will expand on those during the debate.

I commend the report by the Health and Sport Committee. I look forward to the informed speeches of colleagues and, indeed, to the informed update from the minister.

We all wish our constituents, who are supportive of the NHS and the personnel within it, to trust that when they need medical attention—or simply

advice or reassurance—the NHS will be there for them at the appropriate level. We also all wish that the people who live in our remote and rural areas feel secure that there will not be a rural health care postcode lottery.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Health and Sport Committee's 4th Report, 2010 (Session 3): *Report on out-of-hours healthcare provision in rural areas* (SP Paper 421).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I should have said at the beginning of the debate that we are short of time. The debate is oversubscribed, so everyone will need to stick to the time limits that I give them.

15:37

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): I welcome the opportunity to report on what the Scottish Government and NHS boards are doing to improve out-of-hours health care provision, including for people who live in rural areas. I also pay tribute to the work of the Health and Sport Committee in producing the report. It has been a busy time for the committee's members.

I will repeat what the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing said to the committee. First, the Scottish Government is committed to providing the highest-quality health care to the people of Scotland at whatever time of day and in whatever part of the country it is required. Secondly, we believe that the current arrangements for out-of-hours services are fit for the purpose of providing such care.

Out-of-hours primary care should not be considered in isolation from all the NHS and other services with which it interacts. Therefore, I will touch on the wider issues, including integrating out-of-hours services with other unscheduled and scheduled care services; providing better information to the public about the range of services that are available and when they are available; and assuring the quality of the services that are provided in different NHS board areas.

For clarity, I will set out what we are doing under the three headings in the Health and Sport Committee's report. The first is accessibility and availability. I certainly attach importance to NHS boards conducting regular reviews of out-of-hours services with the appropriate engagement of the local community. Earlier in the year, the Scottish Government issued new guidance that is designed to assist NHS boards with their engagement with patients, the public and other stakeholders when progressing potential service changes. I am happy to say that boards are making good progress with

their efforts and are developing strong partnerships with communities, many of which are influencing how local services, including those that are provided out of hours, are delivered. That is a positive thing and I encourage boards to continue that dialogue.

Out-of-hours services contribute enormously to managing people in the community by avoiding unnecessary admissions and, thereby, improving the patient experience. That lies at the heart of the increasing number of anticipatory care initiatives throughout Scotland. The services are also about ensuring continuity of care for patients with chronic conditions, whether or not the patient's GP continues to provide 24-hour primary care services. We also know that good access to general practice is a key factor in out-of-hours demand. I am therefore pleased that the cabinet secretary will next week launch a toolkit that has been developed by the Royal College of General Practitioners to help GPs to take the practical steps that are necessary to ensure that there is consistent high-quality access for patients during in-hours periods.

The Scottish Ambulance Service is making a significant contribution to managing people in the community with the continuing development of its see-and-treat initiatives. That is resulting in increasing numbers of people being treated by paramedics in their homes, which avoids unnecessary journeys to hospital. The potential benefits include optimising the use of telehealth. That is just one of the areas that are covered in the good practice guide that was issued to the NHS in August.

We are aware that many people are uncertain about how and where to access the service that is best placed to support them. That is why we supported the pilot of the know who to turn to campaign in NHS Grampian, and it is why, earlier in the year, we made the marketing toolkit that supported that pilot available to all NHS boards, along with funding to help them to run similar campaigns in their areas. All NHS boards are adopting the toolkit or a variant of it. Supporting patients to get to the right treatment at first contact is a key objective of the work that the Scottish Ambulance Service and NHS 24 are undertaking on a new common triage tool.

In recent years, NHS boards have been working with NHS Quality Improvement Scotland to assess the quality and effectiveness of their local out-of-hours primary care services against the set of NHS QIS standards that were published back in August 2004. That has assured us that NHS boards have developed safe and effective services, that they all have in place robust clinical governance arrangements, and that they all monitor and report on service performance. The

NHS QIS standards have been invaluable in supporting the development of out-of-hours primary care services in the past six years, but as we told the committee in evidence, we also believe that the time is right for NHS QIS to refresh the standards so that NHS boards may better examine their services and make improvements where appropriate. Since we gave that evidence, NHS QIS has started work with key stakeholders to develop and pilot new standards, and it aims to complete that work by this time next year.

In the meantime, I stress that all NHS boards provide for real-time monitoring of how they are handling calls and delivering services against a timeframe that has been set by NHS 24; that they ensure on-going sound clinical governance around the clinical workforce that supports out-of-hours services; that they have robust processes in place for investigating and learning from adverse incidents; and that they have regular reporting arrangements, whereby their out-of-hours performance feeds into the clinical and corporate governance structures of the board.

The third heading in the committee's report is sustainability and cost. Ensuring sustainability means different things in different places. What it certainly does not mean is turning the clock back. We believe that there is added value in, where geography allows it, co-location and, where possible, integrated primary and secondary care services. That fosters closer working between professions and will help to sustain services and standards throughout the challenging times that lie ahead. In nine of the 11 mainland NHS boards, GPs work in support of hospital doctors in accident and emergency departments out of hours.

There are a range of models that reflect local circumstances. In most, GPs work as an integral part of the hospital team, in which they undertake a generalist role. Their experience of working across the system with knowledge of the services that are available in the community is of benefit to the whole system. Those increasingly integrated models are in the best interests of improving and sustaining patient care and service delivery alongside delivering effective and efficient services.

We should recognise just how far out-of-hours services have come since responsibility passed to NHS boards in 2004. It took time for boards and NHS 24 to put in place robust, responsive and effective services. I was very struck by what Christine Grahame said about NHS 24 in particular having had its challenges in the past. One of the strong things that came through the committee report is how far NHS 24 has travelled in making its systems and processes more robust. There is an element of truth in what the committee says in its report—Christine Grahame also raised

it in her speech—that we now need a rebuilding of reassurance among the public on the progress that has been made. We all in the chamber know that to be the case, but we need to ensure that everyone out there is also assured of it. We are looking at how to do that and how to communicate to the public the ways in which they can access the right bit of the service at the time when they require it.

A lot is in place across Scotland. There is still more to do, but NHS 24 now has a range of initiatives that are designed to support patients in the community, to help to manage demand on an out-of-hours basis and to provide other unscheduled care services. We are not complacent. I look forward to the opportunity that the debate provides to explore how best to continue to drive up standards.

15:47

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I will try not to repeat the excellent speech that our convener made, in which she covered much of the ground. Instead, I will try to amplify a little on some of what she said.

Christine Grahame covered well the development of the service. One model that emerged in the 1990s was GP co-operatives with telephone triage and walk-in nurse-led clinics. General practitioners in rural areas were given the opportunity to have the support of an associate practitioner, which strengthened their role. Models of best practice developed in centres such as Glasgow and Stirling, but in the main the co-operatives covered urban areas. That said, at the time, Grampian came closest to having a more inclusive model.

The challenge for us going forward is to understand that the development of out-of-hours services over the past 20 years has, in essence, been provider oriented. The challenges that face out-of-hours care are evident in the increase of 41 per cent in emergency calls to out-of-hours services since the introduction of the new GMS contract. While non-emergency demand on the Scottish Ambulance Service has remained static, emergency out-of-hours demand has risen. That seems to suggest that a proportion of out-of-hours services, which are properly the responsibility of NHS boards, is now being picked up by the Scottish Ambulance Service and may be partly incorporated into its see-and-treat mechanism, which is growing quite rapidly. We know, too, that the level of contact with NHS 24 has grown hugely over the past few years. We should note also that, within that, the Scottish Pharmaceutical General Council contract, which again is a unique Scottish innovation, and which supplies emergency medicines, has also grown. Indeed, 35 per cent of

the calls to NHS 24 are pharmacy related. We should not forget that.

Accident and emergency provision, too, is developing and changing. It has evolved from a service that was basically a district general hospital service with one or two full trauma units to one that has a mix of services from minor injury units, through the mixed DGH units, to full trauma units and specialist units such as children's units. General practitioners in out-of-hours services still continue to provide a slightly different type of service with health boards running the primary care out-of-hours services that, in the main, they inherited from the GP co-operatives of the 1990s.

In rural areas, there is an absolute need to integrate into the entire service the British Association for Immediate Care-trained doctors who work with the Scottish Ambulance Service. It will be necessary to use all available practitioners to provide a seamless service.

The Commission for Rural Communities in England reported:

“Those with responsibility for providing or commissioning GP services”

in rural areas

“did not appear to be using objective evidence about rurality to shape or improve out of hours provision.”

It came to conclusions similar to those of the committee—that there must be an integrated approach that involves listening to and working with communities to incorporate all the services.

The committee felt clearly that there was a lack of clarity—indeed, a great deal of confusion—among the public about accessing out-of-hours services. The first thing that a patient must do is decide what their condition is and which of the raft of possible opportunities—contacting 999, contacting NHS 24, going directly to accident and emergency or, in rural areas, calling their GP—is appropriate. I understand that the Grampian pilot is endeavouring, with some success, to address the failure to integrate services and to give clarity, but the issue is difficult.

Christine Grahame indicated that NHS 24 had made considerable progress. Its handling of last year's flu pandemic was evidence of the organisation's growing maturity and credibility, but the evidence that we received indicated that there is further to go.

With NHS 24, GPs' surgeries on extended hours so that we do not know when out-of-hours services are and are not available—the arrangements are different in every area—999 calls and testing of 888 calls, the situation is not getting easier and confusion is multiplying. If that were not bad enough, I hear that there is a proposal for NHS call handlers to handle minor

cases. How do we decide what is a minor case? We know about cardinal symptoms, but if someone presents with a headache, it can be anything from a brain haemorrhage that is about to occur, to meningitis, to simply a bit of stress. Will call handlers with no training really be able to handle such cases using a protocol? One bad case will set NHS 24 back on its heels.

Christine Grahame referred to the financial situation. I will not go into detail on that but, according to Audit Scotland, it has cost the health service an additional £31 million to switch from the GP-based service in which I practised—for 25 years, I was on duty for 85 hours a week—to a situation in which the work-life balance of the modern GP, along with their pay, has improved considerably. Only 51 practices are providing integrated out-of-hours care. The number of practices using the alternative model, to which Christine Grahame referred, of developing associates or salaried GPs has increased, but only from 61 in 2004-05 to 89 in 2006-07; I do not know the current figure. The model has been developed in the Borders and is worthy of further development.

Our other big problem is that GP numbers are dropping. We have gone from 3,500-odd GPs having to provide the service to about 1,800 providing it. The previous audit indicated that the figure is now down to 1,400; I suspect that it will continue to drop. As we have seen in England, when locums are brought in they can cause considerable problems, because they come in without proper review. I know that Audit Scotland looked at that issue.

Quality standards are important and must be addressed. However, the message that I have taken from this interesting review is that, unless we have a totally integrated unscheduled care service, we will continue to have considerable difficulties. The report must take us forward.

15:53

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank members of the Health and Sport Committee for their extensive report and the clerks to the committee for all of their hard work and assistance. Although I am not a member of the committee, I joined it on its visit to Kinloch Rannoch to take evidence, on a day that I am sure will live long in the convener's memory. I take this opportunity to thank all of the individuals, health boards and organisations that gave evidence and contributed to the report. In particular, I thank members of the Kinloch Rannoch community, some of whom have made the long trip from highland Perthshire to be here to watch today's debate.

As we have heard, the inquiry was generated by a petition that a resident of Kinloch Rannoch submitted to the Public Petitions Committee in summer 2009. The petition outlined concerns about the provision of out-of-hours GP cover to rural communities.

In its final conclusion, the report refers to the fact

“that trust and confidence in the out-of-hours service have ... been lost.”

It states:

“a substantial degree of work”

is required

“to re-build confidence. This can only be achieved when the system can be depended on to work properly, which will require out-of-hours services to be fully joined up—which they are not currently. NHS boards should be given the responsibility for devising ... specific, sustainable, and often innovative arrangements whereby out-of-hours services meet the needs of individual communities. This should be delivered in consultation with those communities.”

I entirely agree with that. It is clear from the report's conclusion that there are significant problems with the out-of-hours health service in rural and remote communities. I hope that health boards throughout Scotland will take note of the report's findings and will work with those communities to ensure that they have a health service that they are satisfied with and in which they can put their trust.

The Scottish Conservatives believe that rural and remote communities require an out-of-hours GP service that is fit for the 21st century. The local GP service should be the focus for out-of-hours services in rural areas. There are still great concerns in rural communities regarding NHS 24's lack of knowledge of local services and geography. We have already heard various examples of that in the debate, and I am sure that we will hear more of them later. Such problems would not occur if a local GP provided the out-of-hours service—a GP in the community who knew their patients and who knew the area.

The British Medical Association Scotland has made it clear that there will be no return to a universal Dr Finlay style of service, and I understand why that cannot happen. I do not think that anyone is calling for a whole new system across the country. We believe that a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. The complexities of rural communities must be considered when designing out-of-hours health services.

The Conservative and Liberal Democrat Government at Westminster has pledged to amend out-of-hours provision south of the border and to put GPs back in charge of commissioning the service, even if they do not provide it directly themselves. I urge the Scottish Government to

work closely with Andrew Lansley and his team to see what lessons Scotland can learn from what is happening south of the border.

The committee convener has mentioned, and the report covers, important issues concerning ambulances in rural areas. The report notes the 41 per cent increase in the number of emergency calls that were made out of hours following the introduction of the new GMS contract in 2004. That suggests that a proportion of the out-of-hours service, which is properly the responsibility of NHS boards, is now being picked up by the Scottish Ambulance Service, which, in some cases, diverts its fleet from emergency situations. As Christine Grahame said, it seems that the Scottish Ambulance Service is being used to fill gaps in provision.

In places such as Perthshire, where there is already a threadbare ambulance service, that is a worrying trend. Only one ambulance is stationed in highland Perthshire, and it covers an area of 600 square miles. Many rural communities feel that ambulance cover is simply not sufficient.

I return to Kinloch Rannoch as an example of a remote and rural community whose out-of-hours health service has been removed. In May 2006, the local general practice opted out of providing an out-of-hours service, against the wishes of the local community and, to be fair, against the wishes of NHS Tayside. At that point, NHS Tayside made a commitment to the community that it would insist that the new general practice that was due to begin following the retirement of the then doctor would provide an out-of-hours service. That promise was broken, and out-of-hours cover is now provided via NHS 24, with the result, local residents claim, that there are lengthy waits for ambulances and residents call one another out during the night for help rather than rely on the service. As the minister will know, there is a great deal of concern in the community that NHS Tayside is not addressing its responsibility to provide an appropriate out-of-hours service in that remote and rural area.

Given those concerns, I ask the minister whether the Scottish Government is prepared to intervene on the issue with NHS Tayside. The Scottish Government has intervened on a range of important health issues, such as reversing the closure of accident and emergency departments at Monklands and Ayr, so is it prepared, on this occasion, to get involved in this important health issue and to take up cudgels on behalf of the community? I would be grateful if the minister responded on that point when winding up the debate.

What is happening in Kinloch Rannoch is an illustration of what might well happen—and what probably is already happening—elsewhere. We

cannot allow health services to be diluted in this case, as it could set a precedent for other communities in Scotland. Kinloch Rannoch residents are standing up for their community, but also for all other rural and remote communities in Scotland. I thank them for the work that they are doing, which highlights a hugely important issue.

15:59

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the convener of the Health and Sport Committee for taking us down memory lane, with her references to Dr Snoddie, Dr Cameron and Dr Finlay. Of course, I am far too young to remember those television characters and their doings in the small community of Tannochbrae.

The talk of Dr Finlay reminded me of my great-uncle, Dr Edward Fraser, who was very much in that mould. I can see him yet, as I did when I was a small boy, going round the straths and glens of Ross-shire in his old grey Humber, with his bag and his stethoscope. I am proud to say that he was a much-loved figure, and when he died every pub sent a wreath to his funeral—there might be another story there, which we do not know about. The manner of his death stays with me. He was changing his tyre at a croft near Edderton—Mary Scanlon will know Edderton—when he died of a seizure. He must have had high blood pressure or some other condition that had not been spotted because of the way in which he worked. We should remember that when we think about NHS 24 and why we are trying to shape services in the way that we are doing. It is about health professionals as well as patients.

I will speak on behalf of my party as I draw out some of the points that strike me. People deserve to be treated as individuals when they receive health care, and whether they live in a remote and rural area or in a built-up area should be no barrier to their receiving high-quality, personalised care. Members have heard me talk about the matter many times in the Parliament, specifically with reference to the Scottish Ambulance Service. A national health service must surely provide consistent standards to patients throughout the country.

When GP contracts are renegotiated, the opportunity arises to address deficiencies in out-of-hours care. Last time, negotiations took place on a United Kingdom-wide basis. We question whether it would not be better for communities and patients if negotiations took place on a Scotland-only basis. I am sure that many members would work with the BMA and others to develop proposals that would involve GPs far more in the planning and delivery of out-of-hours care and

would ensure greater co-ordination between out-of-hours services.

As members said, services that are provided by GPs, NHS out-of-hours centres, NHS 24, the Scottish Ambulance Service and A and E departments need to be fully joined up. Everyone must play their part in a joined-up approach. There is a clear need to rebuild public confidence in NHS 24 and to improve public awareness about which service to contact. Patient confidence is critical if we are to avoid unnecessary emergency attendance at hospitals.

My party is highly supportive of telehealth technology, which can be particularly beneficial to patients in remote and rural areas—I am sure that in saying that I speak for every member who represents a constituency such as mine. Telehealth technology can empower patients and play a key role in enhancing services, but the availability of high-speed, reliable broadband is crucial if we are to achieve that goal. That remains an issue for the Parliament and the Government—and not just with reference to my constituency.

The Government and the NHS must provide training and relief for GPs in remote and rural areas who retain responsibility for out-of-hours care. The key challenge for the service is to provide care for people who have long-term conditions, so that they can avoid unnecessary hospital admissions out of hours. It is important that patients understand that self-management is an essential strand to the strategy.

I thank the convener and members of the Health and Sport Committee for their report, which I read with great interest. I noted that the chief executive of NHS 24 described a new model, which is being rolled out, whereby Scottish Ambulance Service dispatch centres are co-located with the NHS 24 service, to improve service when calls are passed between services.

The committee reported that the Scottish Ambulance Service said in its submission that there was

“a ‘lack of awareness about which service to access’, that patients were ‘confused about the most appropriate route to care’ and that, particularly in remote and rural communities, there remained a ‘traditional role and expectation on GPs as the first point of contact.’”

The committee noted that such confusion remained, although there has been improvement. In its conclusion, it said:

“The Committee is concerned that trust and confidence in the out-of-hours service have, as a consequence, clearly been lost. There remains, therefore, a substantial degree of work to be done to re-build confidence in NHS 24”.

There it is, in black and white.

The Scottish Ambulance Service sometimes does work that it perhaps should not be doing, which should fall to be done by other NHS services. That takes me back to a question—I wish that I had intervened on the minister earlier—about patient transport, which I have raised before. I would be obliged if the minister touched on that subject in her summing up.

In fairness to the Scottish Government and to the minister, not all is bad news. Paragraph 88 on page 19 of the report says:

“The Committee recognises that solutions to the provision of out-of-hours care need to be informed by the historical and geographical contexts of each individual area. The Committee notes that in areas where effective solutions have been found, such as Lochaber and Wester Ross, it has been as a result of community buy-in, integration of services, and practitioners sharing the responsibility”.

In other words, there are success stories. In north-west Sutherland in my own constituency, out-of-hours care works because of the willingness of the professionals and the community to realise what is possible practically. I pay tribute to those people.

16:05

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): One theme that came out of just about every evidence session at our committee, and again in the cabinet secretary's response to our report, is that one size does not fit all, and out-of-hours cover needs to be tailored to the needs of each individual rural community, yet in reality some NHS boards seem to attempt to do precisely the opposite. Like the ugly sisters in the fairy tale, who try to squeeze their feet into shoes that manifestly do not fit, NHS boards try to force out-of-hours medical services that are designed to work in urban areas on to the countryside, where they patently do not meet the health needs of the different community.

I will take as an example what happened in Kinloch Rannoch. I do that not because that rural area represents all other rural areas—to claim so would be to fall into the one-size-fits-all trap—but because much of the evidence that the committee heard focused on that community and the petition that we received. I do not intend to go into every detail of the concerns of those who live there; I will draw out some relevant themes.

Because of a collapse in the existing out-of-hours arrangements, which we have heard about, NHS Tayside set about providing an alternative. Local people, not unnaturally, wanted the re-establishment of local GP cover, but they did not get it. NHS Tayside argues that suitable GPs did not come forward to offer a more local service and, in any case, the health board decided that it was impractical, because it would cost a staggering £556,468.77 per year, according to

health board officials. That is more than half a million pounds, even if we forget the 77p.

One can understand how board members could come to a decision not to go ahead with such a service, given that figure, but let us look a bit more closely at how that figure was reached. The officials estimated that Kinloch Rannoch would require the services of four full-time equivalent drivers, as it is the board's policy not to allow unaccompanied visits. Perhaps that is good policy when the GP who is on call has to make regular visits to tough housing estates, but it is a little bit over the top when we are talking about 800 hardy rural souls who usually generate no more than one out-of-hours call every three weeks or so. The truth is that no drivers are needed in any other rural areas, so why should they be needed in Kinloch Rannoch?

The board then said that the service would need 3.8 full-time equivalent doctors to cover an out-of-hours service because of the European working time directive and NHS employment policy. Again, that might be appropriate for an urban area, but is it required for a handful of requests per year? The board must be joking.

It seems as if someone at NHS Tayside was determined that a local GP out-of-hours service would never see the light of day. It is not as if many health boards, including NHS Tayside, show the same concern about the working hours of the doctors who staff the out-of-hours services that they run in busy urban areas. I found out from NHS Tayside that it employs GPs for that purpose without any knowledge or apparent concern about how many hours they have worked that week in their own practices. As the GPs are self-employed, they fall outwith the scope of the European working time directive, and there seems to be no desire to ascertain that information before allowing them to put in a shift or shifts for the health board. If the health boards can use those GPs—who might be working 50 hours a week in their own practices—to staff extremely demanding on-call rotas, why can they not devise a scheme to do something similar in places such as Kinloch Rannoch, where the workload is minuscule in comparison?

How might that be done? Our committee heard evidence on GPs in the Highlands who are contracted satisfactorily for an agreed lump sum, many times lower than that mentioned by NHS Tayside, to provide out-of-hours cover. They run a rota among themselves. Boards could devise innovative rotations of young doctors or pre-retirement doctors to cover needs in suitable areas. Telemedicine and the use of highly trained, locally based community nurses—whom we have talked about already—both have enormous

potential if used wisely and with the on-going support of all concerned.

Advertisements for such posts could be made 10 times more attractive to potential applicants. Many of our rural areas are most beautiful and provide opportunities for country pursuits and an escape from the urban rat race, but those benefits need to be sold positively, not just by a tiny anonymous advertisement in the *British Medical Journal*.

Indeed, one size does not fit all, and a solution for one area will not always work elsewhere. The important thing is that the health board looks for a solution and takes on the local community as a partner in the search.

Having a locally based out-of-hours service also saves money and misery as a doctor who knows the patients can often avoid expensive ambulance journeys and hospital admissions. He or she knows what treatment a patient needs, what treatment they have had in the past, and what works and what does not work.

In summary, let me quote the two last sentences of the report:

"NHS boards should be given the responsibility for devising—and should be enabled to deliver—specific, sustainable, and often innovative arrangements whereby out-of-hours services meet the needs of individual communities. This should be delivered in consultation with those communities."

Give them the responsibility and tell them to get on with it.

16:11

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): At the outset, I compliment Ian McKee on what was a very good speech.

I found the inquiry into out-of-hours services in the NHS to be very interesting and, I hope, useful, particularly for those who live in the more remote and rural areas of Scotland. One of the more enjoyable aspects of that work was a rare treat—an outing for the committee, with a visit to meet the people of Kinloch Rannoch despite the snow. At the start of the visit, we heard the bad news that the convener Christine Grahame could not be with us because of an unfortunate car accident. We are pleased that she was not seriously hurt, and although she was badly shaken I am reliably reassured by her that she was not stirred. The people were hugely helpful in telling us about the reality of living in one of Scotland's more remote and rural areas and accessing the services of the NHS. The hotel in which our meeting was held and in which we stayed overnight was both warm and welcoming, and we thank the staff for their good service and hospitality.

I had another rare committee outing with Mary Scanlon when we had a fascinating visit to London to see different examples of city-based out-of-hours health service facilities—something that has left a lasting impression on me.

One of the more striking points that I learned from the committee's work was that people are often not referred to the most local services and on occasion have had to experience journeys of 100 miles and more when, if the co-ordination and collaboration had worked better, they would have been able to access assistance much more swiftly locally. We were told that that happens often because the calls are handled in regional offices where the call handlers have no idea of the geography of the area or of any particular logistical problems. I hope that the work of our inquiry will provoke the action that is necessary to organise better that aspect of care for patients.

The reality is that every area of Scotland is different in many ways, and the solutions have grown up locally when sometimes a different, more collaborative approach might have been better. That is why Murdo Fraser is right when he says that there should not be a one-size-fits-all approach.

Another hobby horse of mine—although not just mine, because everyone in the chamber has referred to it—is the way in which e-health could improve services and minimise costs for all patients, with potential added benefits for patients who live in remote and rural areas. If my memory serves me right—I have heard members refer to this—we heard that e-health is to be located with NHS 24, so there seems to be a recognition that both services will benefit by closer working. I believe that the majority of committee members see the possibilities that can emerge if there is a real driver with determination to see improvements in e-health. To date, that has been missing. As politicians, we have to champion that cause. Some of us are already doing that, but NHS employee champions need to be appointed, too.

Speaking of costs reminds me of one of the most staggering things that I learned in the course of the inquiry—the huge differences between health boards in GP charges for holiday cover. The report of our inquiry sets out the detail of those staggering differences, which were absolutely huge. The Scottish Ambulance Service complained that people were simply not clear about whom they should phone for assistance, and that demands a major educational campaign. I very much hope that the cabinet secretary will tackle what I think is an unacceptable situation.

One of the most reassuring things about our inquiry was learning that there is continuing work to improve out-of-hours services. It seems that, because of the high-profile cases, NHS 24 has

been constantly under the microscope, with reviews being undertaken by NHS Quality Improvement Scotland and Audit Scotland, which have been constantly measuring its performance.

I hope that the petitioners will feel that the Parliament has listened carefully and with understanding to their issues. It is the job of the Government to listen to the petitioners and the Parliament, and I hope that it will respond by ensuring an improvement in the delivery of out-of-hours services and building on the trust that—as Christine Grahame and others have rightly said—is so important.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

Thank you, Ms Eadie. As a result of the extra minute that you have kindly given us, I can offer Nanette Milne and Mike Rumbles four minutes each.

Members: No!

The Presiding Officer: Mind you, much more of that and they will not have any time left. *[Laughter.]*

16:16

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I will be brief, Presiding Officer. The early problems with NHS 24 and its undoubted failures, which were exposed in the 2005 review, inevitably led to patients receiving poor levels of out-of-hours service. Patients were—and, indeed, still are in many instances—unsure of the difference between out-of-hours primary medical care and emergency services. They are unsure whether they should call NHS 24 or an ambulance. I feel that the failure to prepare the public properly in 2004 for the changing pattern of out-of-hours care, together with a lack of information about the standards of care that they should expect, has had much to do with the public's lack of confidence in the service, particularly in rural areas.

Enormous improvements have been made, with NHS 24 now much more local and working more closely with health boards. Indeed, in some places, such as Aberdeen, it is co-located with the on-call GPs and alongside accident and emergency and telemedicine facilities. However, more needs to be done to integrate out-of-hours services with each other and with the systems that operate in normal working hours, as the Health and Sport Committee's inquiry found out.

In a country with Scotland's geography, a one-size-fits-all approach to out-of-hours provision is of no use. The needs of specific communities require services that are developed locally and in consultation with local people. In parts of Grampian, for example, advanced nurse practitioners and paramedics work with GPs in

rural areas. They are in telephone contact with their GP colleagues, who have telemedicine links to their out-of-hours hub, and with accident and emergency services in Aberdeen if advice is required. They are able to diagnose, prescribe for and treat many acute conditions, and they can refer patients for admission to hospital when necessary.

In Braemar and upper Deeside in Aberdeenshire, where the GP did not opt out of 24-hour responsibility for his patients and where there are also trained first responders, patient calls can be answered very quickly. Problems arise, however, if urgent hospital admission is required, as it can take far too long to get an ambulance there to transport the patient safely to Aberdeen with a paramedic free to care for the patient en route.

I have been working with MSP colleagues from all parties, with the GP, with the local community and with the Ambulance Service to solve the problem. It is hoped that, following a productive meeting here a few weeks ago that the cabinet secretary presided over, it might be possible to set up a retained ambulance service for out-of-hours cover in the area similar to one that already operates in Shetland. I am hopeful of a satisfactory result in the not-too-distant future, and I put on record my thanks to the cabinet secretary on behalf of the local community for her help in the matter. They greatly appreciate that.

I am confident that with co-operation between communities, health boards and the emergency services, satisfactory out-of-hours care can be provided for patients throughout Scotland using appropriate models of provision. There is still a long way to go before everyone receives the seamless service that they look for and deserve, but I am encouraged by the Government's response to the committee's report—notably, its commitment to continuous improvement and its commitment to work with NHS boards to develop national out-of-hours quality standards. It has taken far too long, but I am certain that, if the will exists, we can have out-of-hours services that restore the confidence of rural communities.

16:20

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I welcome the Health and Sport Committee's report on out-of-hours health care in our rural areas. I will take this opportunity to focus on one specific issue that involves the out-of-hours service in my rural constituency.

At the moment, there are two doctors with vehicles who are available for people in my constituency who require the out-of-hours service. One is based in the community hospital in Aboyne,

on Deeside, and the other is based in the other part of my constituency, in the community hospital in Stonehaven, on the coast.

NHS Grampian has launched a public consultation on drawing down that service, and there is a suggestion that my constituents could cope with having just one doctor with a vehicle, based in the community hospital in Banchory, to serve the entire area, which covers hundreds of square miles. That suggestion is a result of the reduction in the budget that is available to the out-of-hours services across Grampian. It is interesting to note that that budget is being reduced by NHS Grampian, even though we are being told in this chamber that the Scottish National Party Government is protecting NHS budgets.

Anyone who has a grasp of the geography of my constituency will realise that a proposal to put an out-of-hours doctor and vehicle in Banchory and expect them to cover the whole of my constituency is simply not feasible. I can see why, looking at the map, such a single location is attractive to the cost cutters in Aberdeen, but anyone with any experience of trying to drive over the Cairn o' Mount or the Slug road between Deeside and the Mearns in winter will immediately appreciate the impossibility of such a location for such an essential service.

I defy anyone to tell me that a doctor based in Banchory—or, indeed, Aberdeen, which is the other suggestion—could reach my constituents within an hour, which is what we were told to expect, yet that is what is being suggested. I am concerned that if the proposal to base a doctor and vehicle in Banchory is not changed, my constituents in the Mearns will be left without adequate cover. Further, my constituents on Deeside could be left without cover if that doctor and vehicle are dispatched to the Mearns in the middle of winter.

If we are to rebuild confidence in NHS 24 and the out-of-hours service, as the committee report says that we must, we must bear it in mind that that will be made much more difficult, if not impossible, if NHS Grampian replaces the two doctors in my constituency as planned. I hope that NHS Grampian sees sense and, after the consultation, accepts the limitations of geography and maintains two out-of-hours doctors, based in Aboyne and Stonehaven.

Originally, regional MSPs and I were promised, in a meeting with NHS Grampian, that the service would be maintained. Now, several years later, with the reduction in budgets, someone is looking at a map and saying, "Couldn't we just move the service there?" That is the result of people not understanding the local circumstances or appreciating the level of service that my

constituents should be able to expect from their out-of-hours service.

16:23

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): We started this short but perfectly formed debate with a tour d'horizon by the committee's convener, Christine Grahame. She complained about the workload of the Health and Sport Committee. I do not want to alarm her unduly but, given the tenor of the exchange between the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee convener and Stewart Stevenson earlier, it is not impossible that she may yet have the forthcoming water bill to deal with, should it ever see the light of day.

I congratulate the Health and Sport Committee on its excellent and timely report. It goes into detail on the significant changes that have taken place in out-of-hours care prior to and subsequent to the introduction of NHS 24 in 2001. Richard Simpson spoke insightfully about the history of the service and, at one stage, almost seemed to regret his decision to change careers. However, that was as nothing to young Jamie Stone, who appeared to regret or have forgotten his decision to retire.

I commend the report for stating, in the first paragraph:

"Out-of-hours services in our remotest areas constitute a critical lifeline in the most testing and diverse geographical situations. Each location presents a unique set of challenges, for which there is no one-size-fits-all solution."

That is a theme that a number of members quite rightly picked up on. It is as much the case in general practice as in out-of-hours care, and—as the minister rightly said—we need an integrated service.

The debate has been interesting and largely consensual, and members have drawn on their experiences of how these vital services are being delivered and how various agencies are performing in different parts of the country. Jamie Stone, Murdo Fraser and Mike Rumbles have all contributed well in that regard, and Ian McKee drew on his personal experience.

We all need to recognise the improvements that have been made. Members will recall the all-too-frequent and graphic illustrations of how NHS 24 struggled in its early days to meet the expectations not only of patients, but of health professionals. There were sometimes calamitous repercussions and Richard Simpson, in drawing on the flu pandemic experience last year, provided an illustrative contrast.

Concerns remain, and further improvements must be made, but we are in a better position to respond to those challenges if we acknowledge the progress that has been made and learn the

lessons to date. The improvements so far have been achieved in large part due to the work of NHS 24, which has worked closely with health boards, GP practices, the Ambulance Service and patients.

I commend the creation of the regional call centres, and closer working between NHS 24 and local health boards. That journey is not yet complete—I will come to that in due course—but I recognise that significant strides have been taken.

It is essential that we now build on the recent improvements. Members have pointed to the continued evidence of a residual lack of public trust in NHS 24, but they have also noted the rise in demand for those services. Despite that rise, as the committee report makes clear, one of the principal problems that NHS 24 faces is the ongoing confusion among the public about accessing out-of-hours services.

That theme is taken up by the BMA, which points to the role of Government and NHS Scotland in raising awareness and increasing public understanding. Through that work, we may help to address the issue—which many members picked up—of the marked increase in the emergency workload of the ambulance service. The report identified a 41 per cent increase in emergency call-outs since 2004, and noted that that indicates

"that a proportion of out-of-hours service, properly the responsibility of NHS boards, is now being picked up by the Scottish Ambulance Service".

The risk, as other members have pointed out, is that in some cases that diverts the ambulance fleet away from emergency situations. I agree with the comments of many members about the need for a more joined-up and collaborative approach. Richard Simpson and Ian McKee were right to point out not only that integration is needed, but that it must be based on a listening exercise and the involvement of communities.

The investment in building up capacity and training first responders in communities around the country may help to take some of the pressure off, but I am aware from my own constituency that that can often be viewed as an attempt to scale back the role of the NHS and emergency services. It should be about complementing and enhancing what is currently provided, rather than achieving it on the cheap.

Murdo Fraser rightly drew on the experience of those in Kinloch Rannoch. Given the comments from Helen Eadie and other members, I almost wish that I had been on that Health and Sport Committee visit; it seems it was the stuff of legend.

Christine Grahame: Not in my car.

Liam McArthur: Not in the convener's car.

I accept entirely the need for issues of sustainability and cost to be addressed, as the committee notes in its report. The question is whether that is best achieved on a UK-wide basis or by adopting a Scottish approach; more work is needed in that regard.

I conclude with some observations on how the service works in Orkney, which is in some ways one of the most challenging of rural environments, given its island nature. It includes the island of Flotta, with which I know the convener has a particular empathy.

There continues to be scepticism about triage over the phone, but that has been helped by the fact that the two GPs who provide the out-of-hours service are familiar with the idiosyncrasies of Orkney, a familiarity that is crucial in delivering health care across the islands. There have been developments in telehealth, which I mentioned in a recent debate, but the out-of-hours hub is not in Orkney, and the nurses and those who answer the phones out of hours need that familiarity. It would be remiss of me not to point to the need for a locally based air ambulance to improve response times, which are still too long.

We owe a huge debt to all those who work in the health service, in whatever capacity, and we can play a part in repaying that by helping to support the efforts to innovate and improve services. The committee report and the debate have been useful in that regard. I congratulate the committee on its work, and—like Jamie Stone—I hope that the minister will take on board the committee's recommendations and members' comments, so that the public in rural areas can have confidence in a high-quality, integrated service that deals with and treats them as individuals.

16:30

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

In debates on anything remote and rural, I am generally able to give examples from the Highlands where the situation is worse than it is in the rest of Scotland, so I was delighted that the example of best practice for rural out-of-hours care was brought to our committee by a representative from Lochaber and Wester Ross, where they had

“community buy-in, integration of services, and practitioners sharing the responsibility for out-of-hours care at a local level.”

That compared very favourably to what was found in Kinloch Rannoch.

Not only has this been an interesting debate but, as Helen Eadie said, the inquiry—very unusually—allowed the Health and Sport Committee to hold a meeting outside Edinburgh. It was right and proper to hold the meeting in Kinloch Rannoch, given the

problems faced by that community in recent years. We found that issues raised in remote and rural communities were generally very similar to the concerns about NHS out-of-hours provision across Scotland. I thank the Kinloch Rannoch group that submitted a petition to the Parliament. It helped to lead to this inquiry, which I believe will, in time, benefit patients throughout Scotland.

The BMA and the previous Government may have negotiated every last detail of the new GMS contract but, unfortunately, they left people throughout Scotland with no idea of what they should expect in terms of emergency response and clinical care, as no standards were set. As Liam McArthur said, neither did patients throughout Scotland know the circumstances in which it was appropriate to call an ambulance, call NHS 24, visit accident and emergency or wait until the next day to see their GP. That is acknowledged in paragraph 39 of the committee's report, which states that there is

“a great deal of confusion amongst the public over accessing out-of-hours services.”

The Health and Sport Committee recommended what countless committees and MSPs in the Parliament have recommended since May 1999: for our publicly funded services to talk to each other, work together and put the patient first. That does not even cost money—only good will and a commitment to a patient-focused health service.

Like other members, I am pleased to note that the medical director of NHS 24 is also a board member of the Scottish Ambulance Service. I was a harsh critic of NHS 24 in the early days, and I think that my criticism was justified, but I feel that Dr George Crooks has turned the organisation round by improving response times and bringing a more professional and integrated approach.

The inquiry highlighted the need for standards based on clinical outcomes rather than on processes and tick boxes, which is something that should have happened in 2004 when the contract was implemented. As recommended in paragraph 66 of our report, patients need to know the minimum service that they can expect. That is what the people of Kinloch Rannoch were asking: what is the minimum that we can expect? Process-driven health standards will, I hope, be consigned to the dustbin, with a new focus on clinical outcomes becoming the norm.

I do not think that it is helpful when local BMA representatives compare the out-of-hours service in Kinloch Rannoch to the NHS needs of people in Dundee. Our NHS has evolved to ensure that the health needs of all the people in Scotland are catered for, whether that relates to out-of-hours provision in a remote area or to narrowing the health inequalities gap.

I met Pauline Howie of the Scottish Ambulance Service last week and I have been assured that much has happened since the Health and Sport Committee inquiry started, with improved integration of the Scottish Ambulance Service, NHS 24 and others.

In the Scottish Ambulance Service's annual report, which was published today, Chris Bennett from Orkney tells how the

"ambulance got to"

him

"in minutes",

and how the paramedics "diagnosed a stroke" and got him

"to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary for a CT scan, after which"

he

"was given clot-busting treatment".

He has

"now made a full recovery".

Given that NHS Orkney is the only board without a computed tomography scanner, we should give all credit to the ambulance service.

Like others, I feel very passionate about the need to embrace telehealth, which is simply not being used to its full potential. After complimenting George Crooks of NHS 24, who is now in charge of the matter, I send him the message to please move this issue forward.

I suggest that the care home could provide the most appropriate environment for rehabilitation for many elderly people who might otherwise be placed in hospitals for weeks, sometimes months. Given that ambulance crews are now able to take X-rays in a person's home, such a move might result in more accurate assessment of and placement for elderly people.

The final four points in the health secretary's response to the Health and Sport Committee's report sum up precisely what is needed for rural and, indeed, urban out-of-hours care in Scotland: "Improved collaboration", "Clear communication", "Clinical excellence" and "Continuity of care". I hope that the inquiry takes us in that direction.

16:36

Dr Simpson: The debate has been useful, not least in drawing together the individual experiences of so many MSPs. Indeed, that is a measure of the fundamental importance of this report's main thrust: the need for local solutions to local problems. Liam McArthur mentioned the need for call handling services to have local knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of the area that he represents and Mike Rumbles highlighted the

serious challenge faced by more rural areas where mountain ranges and difficult roads mean that one cannot simply look at a map and assume that the area is flat.

Murdo Fraser and Ian McKee dealt in considerable depth with the situation in Kinloch Rannoch, which was one of the factors that stimulated this particular inquiry. Indeed, when one hears that the out-of-hours service in that area is supposed to cost around £500,000, one has to begin to question certain reality factors with regard to the health board involved. People in the boards need to learn that they must talk to their local communities and look at everything: fire, ambulance, police and health services; first responders; and what the local GPs are prepared to provide in the extended round. In fact, Linda Harper from the Royal College of Nursing and lead nurse for G-MED—the Grampian out-of-hours medical service—told the committee:

"to deal with Grampian's remote and rural areas, we have developed a team of advanced nurse practitioners, who have a lot of good skills and work well together. As far as the six dimensions of quality are concerned, we certainly provide safe, effective, efficient and person-centred care, which for patients is the most important thing. If the appropriate training is available for advanced nurse practitioners, paramedic practitioners and so on, they can be very supportive."—[*Official Report, Health and Sport Committee*, 20 January 2010; c 2582.]

We—and indeed our boards—need to think imaginatively if we are to develop the effective co-ordinated and integrated services that lead not to the kind of postcode lottery in which people do not get the care or service that they want, but to a new form of postcode service that is not a lottery but provides care on an individual basis.

We are not alone in this—other places face similar problems. The Commission for Rural Communities, which I cited earlier, has said:

"Allowing staff to undertake a wide variety of tasks (for example, where nurses from Minor Injuries Unit cover out of hours centres) ... offers opportunities to gain the critical clinical mass necessary to keep a service viable (especially in rural areas), and it allows staff to experience a varied workload."

In Fife, which is part of the region that I represent, the health board is endeavouring to co-locate minor injuries units and general practice units. Such an approach can lead to considerable efficiency gains. Most co-locations with emergency units began with closed doors; indeed, I experienced that very situation in the 1990s. There were two entrances, one for accident and emergency and the other for general practice, and before NHS 24 came along the patient had to choose which door to go through. We find in the research that 40 per cent of the accident and emergency attendances in the reported literature were actually for general practice and primary care matters. People went in the wrong door. Many

people who went through the primary care door ended up being admitted to hospital. We need single entrances and an integrated service.

No matter what the benefits and gains will be from the coalition budget that we will see next week, members should make no mistake: we are faced with major budgetary challenges for the NHS. Unless we are imaginative and integrate services in a novel way at every level, not just in rural and remote areas, we will be faced with considerable difficulties.

I want to speak a little more about NHS 24. I have already expressed concern about call handlers managing minor issues. The cabinet secretary has spoken about the other side of the issue. She said:

“A big misconception is that NHS 24 provides out-of-hours services. It does not. Its job is to provide the call-handling service, the triage and the referral to the appropriate services consistently throughout Scotland.”

I have no argument with that. She then said:

“NHS 24 therefore has a key role in ensuring that patients are referred to the appropriate service, which is the Ambulance Service if the incident is immediate ... If the matter is less serious, the appropriate service might be a minor injuries unit, a GP out of hours, a community paramedic or a patient’s GP in hours, when their GP’s surgery next opens.”—[*Official Report, Health and Sport Committee*, 3 February 2010; c 2669.]

However, NHS 24 provides much more than that. We know that it provides links to social workers and that there are social work experts in the unit at Cardonald. It has much stronger links with the Ambulance Service. There are ambulance workers in the call centre. It has mental health nurses, and it provides cognitive behavioural therapy telephone triage. It also deals with suicide and other mental health issues. It is developing into a much more comprehensive service than one that simply signposts and directs—and so it should. However, we must be careful that it provides appropriate services and that we do not inadvertently again add to the confusion of members of the public about precisely where they should go. That is the fundamental issue in the report.

I am heartened by the report and by the many speeches that have been made, as they illustrate members working in a highly consensual way. All members have a common objective that can be met with good will. However, NHS boards must listen to their communities. If they do not, we are in trouble. The Government has tried to democratise at the board level through the health board elections, but there must be democratisation much further down the line at the community partnership level. With that, we can drive forward the sort of care that everybody in every community

in Scotland deserves from their out-of-hours services.

16:43

Shona Robison: I, too, thank members for their varied and useful contributions to what has been an interesting and consensual debate on an important topic that touches the lives of everybody in Scotland, including those who live in rural areas.

Members have acknowledged the good work that is in progress, and the need for the pace of change to speed up and for the service to have greater cohesion. That was very much the flavour of the cabinet secretary’s response to the committee’s report. She laid out clearly who was going to do what to take forward particular elements of the report and its recommendations.

Perhaps we need to get a little better at recognising best practice throughout Scotland and at encouraging its take-up when benefits have been demonstrated. We have heard about a few of those benefits, and I will refer to one or two of them in picking up on members’ remarks. If I do not get round to dealing with all members’ comments, I will attempt to do so by writing to them.

Christine Grahame talked about several issues, including the increase in pressures on the Ambulance Service and the accident and emergency service, in particular since 2004. We are beginning to get a better understanding of that situation. I am not sure that it is all related to the changes in the GP contract. Some of it might be, but there are other pressures, such as the ageing population. The profile of people who use the Ambulance Service or A and E shows that there is still very much a balance towards older people, which we must address in a number of ways. So there are complexities.

Richard Simpson made several good points. He talked about the use and contribution of BASICS-trained GPs. That was an important point, and one on which we absolutely agree. The other point that he made, which to a degree answers Mike Rumbles’s concerns, is that, even with the level of protection that the health budget is receiving, the increases in the health budget are nowhere near the increases in previous years’ budgets. At the same time, we still have the pressure of rising costs in the health service, whether in drugs budgets or other areas. Therefore, we need innovation and we need to consider efficiency and redesign.

Mike Rumbles: Will the minister give way?

Shona Robison: I will come back to the member’s point in a moment. In fact, go on—sorry.

Mike Rumbles: My point was not about the reducing budget—that is incidental, although it is the reason why NHS Grampian has said that the changes I mentioned are happening now. My concern is about geography. People have to understand the geography of the area that they serve, and that does not mean just looking at maps.

Shona Robison: I understand that. As I understand it, NHS Grampian is at an early stage of consultation and there are no proposals on the table. Therefore, there is an opportunity for communities to influence the decision making. We expect communities to be part of any service changes, and not only major ones. That is good practice, so we would expect it.

Murdo Fraser talked about health boards taking note of the committee's report. I am sure that they will do so. The cabinet secretary laid out in her response to the report how that will happen—how it will be picked up and responded to directly, which is important.

I am not sure about this, but Murdo Fraser seemed to indicate that there is a case for GPs to take back overall responsibility for 24-hour health care. Our opinion is that that is not the way forward and it certainly would not be welcomed by general practitioners; indeed, they are likely to reject it. Things have moved on since the days when GPs had that responsibility. Although the current system might not be perfect and there is still work to be done, Richard Simpson laid out some things that show the potential if we can just complete the integration of services. There is potential for something far better.

Murdo Fraser also mentioned the future of the GMS contract and the fact that the UK Government has produced a white paper proposing changes to the way in which the NHS is run, including out-of-hours proposals. The Scottish Government has said on a number of occasions that we do not support GP commissioning, and we would not support it in the current case. One reason for that is that we believe that NHS boards are best placed to commission and pay for services, because they can take a wider perspective. Handing over even more resources to GPs to commission services might not be in the interests of patients or the public purse. The UK Government should think carefully before embarking down that road, because the law of unintended consequences might come out at the other end. We should be cautious.

Murdo Fraser raised several issues about Kinloch Rannoch, as I expected him to. I recognise his interest in the issue over a long period. The point that I make to him, which has been made already and which I know that the cabinet secretary said a fair amount about in her

evidence to the committee, is that we expect boards to ensure that they meet the NHS QIS standards when they provide out-of-hours care and that they listen to local communities.

However, that does not mean that they will always agree and accede to the demands of local communities. There is a balance to be struck. I encourage the continuation of the discussions of the reference group that involves NHS Tayside and local residents, which have been going on for quite some time. As I understand it, that process has resulted in some positive developments. The community might not have got everything that it wanted, but improvements to the service have emanated from the work of the reference group.

Jamie Stone mentioned transport issues. I am sure that he will be aware that the Scottish Ambulance Service is undertaking a considerable programme of work on the patient transport system, which is important.

One other thing that I want to mention—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please, minister.

Shona Robison: Okay. I will write to the members whose points I have not responded to. Some other important points were made but, rather than take up any more time, I will deal with them in writing.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. I am sorry to have drawn you to a close.

I call Ross Finnie to wind up on behalf of the committee.

16:51

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): It has been a useful debate and, as many have observed, there has been a great deal of consensus. Of course people have different views on how out-of-hours care might be better provided, but there is a common view across the chamber that its provision is an essential part of the work of the health service.

As our convener pointed out at the opening of the debate, our inquiry had a number of purposes. We embraced the petition on provision in Kinloch Rannoch, but we did so only as part of the process of looking at out-of-hours care in the round.

Confusion is one of the issues that arose. People who have been listening to the debate all afternoon might be wondering what it is about. The committee's report was on out-of-hours health care, but most members have mentioned NHS 24. People who have been listening to the debate must think that we have been discussing the provision of care from early in the morning until last thing at night: NHS 24 has been mentioned, so, according to the ordinary use of the English

language, MSPs must have been talking about all-day care. However, some MSPs have chosen to talk only about out-of-hours care. In the ordinary use of the English language, even the title “NHS 24” is likely to cause confusion to any ordinary citizen who might be confused about what they want.

Some members who are present started the morning by attending a BMA event—the association was launching its manifesto at what can accurately be described as an out-of-hours event, in that it started at 8 am. A number of interesting points were made on out-of-hours care. One thing that the BMA appeared to be clear about—but which not every health board is clear about—is that every citizen, regardless of where they are, should be able to access a GP within an hour. I found that interesting. I am sure that the minister is aware of that aim and that she wishes that all health boards were able to meet it.

The difficulty is that the general provision is uneven across Scotland. The committee found it difficult to frame its report when good examples emerged—such as in the Borders or in Wester Ross—alongside specific difficulties, some of which have been picked up graphically during the debate. Murdo Fraser and Ian McKee dealt with the Kinloch Rannoch episode. As part of his analysis of the figures, Ian McKee noted that NHS Tayside will provide a driver even if there is not a whole person available, which is an interesting concept and one that we ought to pursue. However, there were serious issues about whether the board’s objections were based on sustainable numbers. Murdo Fraser and Richard Simpson referred to that.

We had other specific examples. Liam McArthur talked about the real difficulties in island communities and how air ambulance and telehealth services function in remote and rural areas. Then we had the geographical example from my colleague Mike Rumbles. The redesign of a health service is always possible, but I suspect that redesigning Cairn o’ Mount will be beyond even NHS Grampian. That might be a fundamental barrier to its making any progress on its redesign proposal.

A number of members picked up on key aspects of the report. The minister and the cabinet secretary have made reasonably positive approaches on those key aspects, by which I mean that they understand that there is still work to be done, particularly on the standards that have to be set. That remains a matter of some concern. We are now quite well into the process and we need to see the standards that QIS is to develop because, as the committee pointed out, we need to have a greater handle on whether we are able

to measure our out-of-hours care service in a way that makes sense.

The integration of the various services is another possible cause for confusion, but people must have clarity. We have been told that patients should not be confused, because NHS 24 is actually a call-handling service. However, Richard Simpson and the committee have pointed to areas where there is still confusion and overlap. Some of the overlap is being addressed. Experiments such as co-locating the Ambulance Service with NHS 24 should eliminate a lot of the confusion.

The Presiding Officer: Order. There is far too much noise in the chamber.

Ross Finnie: I will speak more quietly.

The matters that I mentioned need to be addressed. We have to be clear about the purpose of services and eliminate the overlap.

The report is addressed to the public. It is not addressed to the Parliament and not really addressed to practitioners. It is intended to meet the needs of the public and address their expressions of concern, because it was firmly rooted in a call from a petition to the Parliament. That petition was about a specific community, but it was clear from the evidence given to us that many of the issues that the petitioners raised were shared with communities throughout Scotland.

Members from throughout Scotland spoke in the debate, and all were able to articulate individual concerns that remain, despite the fact that, as the committee’s report recognises, substantial improvements have been made in the delivery of the NHS 24 service.

However, the difficulty is that the availability of the service remains uneven. We must recognise that there are differences between communities throughout Scotland. That is where the QIS standards might help, because, if there were standards against which we were able to measure the service—notwithstanding the different ways in which it is delivered to meet particular geographical or economic and socio-economic needs—that would provide clarity.

In response to the committee’s report, the minister has made clear her position on sustainability and cost. The committee is more concerned about sustainability. Of course we understand that there is an inextricable link, but that takes me back to the need for a clear understanding of how we deliver it and by whom it is to be delivered.

There is also, in our report, a clear question about people’s need to understand what they ought to expect from their local doctor during hours so that there is no further confusion about leaving something to out-of-hours services. That is

brought out clearly in the report, and I am not entirely clear that we have received much of a response from the Government on that. If that delineation was to be much clearer and we were to make it understood to the patient, their understanding in that regard would be greatly helped.

The committee is pleased that the report appears to have gained general support. It exposes for the benefit of the Parliament and the public the issues that remain to be addressed within NHS 24. We have made it clear to those who work in NHS 24 that we acknowledge the huge improvements that have been made. However, as the minister said, work is still in progress and much still needs to be done. There certainly needs to be greater clarity about NHS 24's purpose, its effect, and what it is intended to deliver. Only when we have that clarity will we be able to ensure that communities throughout Scotland get equality of treatment, but not on a one-size-fits-all basis.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motions S3M-7384 and S3M-7385, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Protected Trust Deeds (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2010 be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Bankruptcy (Certificate for Sequestration) (Scotland) Regulations 2010 be approved.—[*Bruce Crawford.*]

The Presiding Officer: The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson):

There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S3M-7379.1, in the name of Des McNulty, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7379, in the name of Michael Russell, on the curriculum for excellence, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)

Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 70, Against 42, Abstentions 2.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S3M-7379.2, in the name of Margaret Smith, which seeks to amend motion S3M-7379, in the name of Michael Russell, on the curriculum for excellence, as amended, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-7379, in the name of Michael Russell, on the curriculum for excellence, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brocklebank, Ted (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothians) (Con)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Brownlee, Derek (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Butler, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Foulkes, George (Lothians) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Gordon, Charlie (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South of Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kerr, Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Livingstone, Marilyn (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney) (LD)
 McCabe, Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McLetchie, David (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)
 McMahan, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mulligan, Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Munro, John Farquhar (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)

O'Donnell, Hugh (Central Scotland) (LD)
 Oldfather, Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Pringle, Mike (Edinburgh South) (LD)
 Purvis, Jeremy (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Elizabeth (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smith, Iain (North East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stephen, Nicol (Aberdeen South) (LD)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stone, Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Tolson, Jim (Dunfermline West) (LD)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Whitton, David (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Western Isles) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Ochil) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Livingston) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Christopher (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Marwick, Tricia (Central Fife) (SNP)
 Mather, Jim (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ian (Lothians) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McLaughlin, Anne (Glasgow) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Bill (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Abstentions

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the

division is: For 70, Against 42, Abstentions 2.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament congratulates the teaching profession and all who work in or are part of school communities on their efforts to take forward the Curriculum for Excellence; notes the ongoing concerns among teachers about the lack of clarity over assessment arrangements and, in particular, the concern among secondary teachers over the timetable for the new qualifications that have not yet been resolved; believes that further work is required on benchmarking and moderation; is gravely concerned at the impact of current and anticipated cuts in schools budgets on the resources available for implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence; recognises the need to work with, and fully support, the teaching profession and to involve parents to a greater extent, recognises the need for a long-term commitment to the Curriculum for Excellence, and confirms that commitment from this parliament, and further recognises the need for ongoing support for, and dialogue with, teachers as they continue to develop the curriculum, and calls on the Scottish Government, local authorities and education stakeholders to work constructively together to make available the best possible support for the teaching profession as the curriculum and new qualifications are implemented.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-7190, in the name of Christine Grahame, on out-of-hours health care provision in rural areas, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Health and Sport Committee's 4th Report, 2010 (Session 3): *Report on out-of-hours healthcare provision in rural areas* (SP Paper 421).

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S3M-7384, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the approval of an Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Protected Trust Deeds (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2010 be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S3M-7385, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the approval of another Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Bankruptcy (Certificate for Sequestration) (Scotland) Regulations 2010 be approved.

World Arthritis Day

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-7169, in the name of Helen Eadie, on world arthritis day, 12 October 2010. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that World Arthritis Day takes place on 12 October 2010; understands that arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions are a major cause of pain and disability, accounting for 48% of all work-related illness in Scotland; considers that this places a significant burden on both the NHS and society; acknowledges that it is estimated that over one million people consulted a GP or practice nurse in 2008-09 in relation to a musculoskeletal condition and that there were over one hundred thousand NHS hospital stays in Scotland in 2009 for which a musculoskeletal condition is recorded; pays tribute to organisations working to raise awareness of arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions, such as the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance, Arthritis Care Scotland, the National Osteoporosis Society in Scotland, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI), Scottish Inflammatory Diseases and Rheumatology Industry Group (SIDRIG), the National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS) and Psoriasis Scotland Arthritis Link Volunteers; looks forward to the publication of the national musculoskeletal programme and considers that it has the potential to develop a national framework for improving the standards of care for people who live with all forms of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions; understands that a national lead has been appointed to support this work and a national programme board to ensure implementation; believes that people living with musculoskeletal conditions can usefully input to the national programme board, and would welcome publication of research into the prevalence of musculoskeletal conditions and on improving treatments and their impact on local NHS services.

17:04

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I am grateful to Parliament for the opportunity to share with members the concerns of those who work with patients who suffer from musculoskeletal conditions. Two or three years ago, a group that named itself friends of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions—some mouthful—and which comprised clinicians, the pharmaceutical industry, patients, their representatives and politicians who either work with or suffer from any one of the various musculoskeletal conditions came together. We have met regularly in the Parliament. Our most ardent campaigners have included Anne Simpson, who is well known to members, from the National Osteoporosis Society; Diane Thomson and Alison Culpin of the Scottish inflammatory diseases and rheumatology industry group; Jenny Snell from the National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society; Ros Meek from the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance, which represents 34 organisations that are involved in bone and joint conditions; Angela Donaldson of Arthritis Care;

and Janice Johnson of Psoriasis Scotland Arthritis Link Volunteers.

The current Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union has prioritised the issue of rheumatoid arthritis and the European Parliament has adopted a key set of priorities that, it is hoped, will start to improve the lives of people with arthritis across Europe. The written declaration on rheumatic diseases was tabled in the European Parliament in January 2008. That was an achievement indeed, as only a few written declarations are made each year in the European Parliament. The broad cross-party initiative urged the European Commission and the Council to make rheumatic diseases, which affect more than 100 million people in Europe and cause severe damage to EU member country economies, a priority in the EU's seventh research framework programme and future health strategy. The European Parliament resolution constitutes a strong reaction to the European Commission for having overlooked one of Europe's most common health threats.

I am delighted that the written declaration on arthritis has received overwhelming support from the European Parliament. As it is one of the most common reasons for consulting a doctor, it is incredible that arthritis is not up there with the feared and funded illnesses with which we are all so familiar. The written declaration highlights the prevalence and the human and economic cost of arthritis and outlines some measures that could improve outcomes for people who live with the condition. It also sets out four clear actions that will help to achieve that. They are:

“attach more importance to rheumatic diseases in the new Community strategy on health, given their high social and economic costs; encourage Member States to establish and promote the implementation of national plans to fight rheumatic diseases; develop a Community strategy on rheumatic diseases and draw up a Council recommendation on the early diagnosis and treatment of rheumatic diseases; develop a strategy to improve access to information and medical treatment”.

If one in five people has arthritis, at least 25 members of the Scottish Parliament are likely to be sufferers. Members' support for my motion today is a reflection of just how many people's lives are blighted by this crippling disease. I hope that, as a Parliament, we too will make a declaration to champion the battle against all forms of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions and move its importance up the political ladder. I also hope that the Scottish Government or one of our major newspapers will consider establishing an annual award for pharmaceutical companies and researchers whose peers say they have achieved the most each year in developing new research and making effective treatments for patients.

One in five adults in Scotland is affected by some form of arthritis, with one in five general practitioner visits involving symptoms of arthritis. Musculoskeletal conditions are no respecter of age. For example, our principal Fife consultant, Dr Jane Gibson, runs special clinics for children and young people. I have been an arthritis and osteoporosis sufferer for many years. When I had the first of my two hip replacement operations, I was in my mid-40s, but people in the ward who were considerably younger than me were also having joint replacement operations.

At our most recent event in the Scottish Parliament, Professor Stuart Ralston and Dr Jane Gibson were the guest speakers. It was most interesting to learn about the major study involving 8,000 patients that Professor Ralston is undertaking into the genes of those who suffer from osteoarthritis. He told us that, for more than 30 years, there has been little or no progress in the treatment of osteoarthritis. However, the good news is that Professor Ralston is very hopeful that some new treatments may follow on from the results of the genes study. What is clear is that real progress in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis is being made.

According to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, one third of people in the United Kingdom with rheumatoid arthritis stop work within two years of onset of the disease. Arthritis is also the most common condition for people in the UK who receive disability living allowance. Early intervention can help to minimise the damage that it causes and to improve people's chances of staying in work and leading a fuller and more productive life.

The new biologic drugs have transformed lives and enabled people to dispose of their wheelchairs and to take up full-time employment. The drugs are expensive but, from a wider socioeconomic perspective, it can be argued that it is more cost effective for society to have a person engaged in economic activity than for them to be caged in at home, suffering pain and being depressed because of their illness.

There are many ways in which rheumatoid arthritis services could be improved, but those can be placed in three steps that would lead to a significant improvement in the condition of many people with rheumatoid and other musculoskeletal conditions.

The first is to ensure increased GP and patient awareness. The treatment journey begins in primary care, but diagnosis can often be drawn out and inconsistent. Early intervention is vital, so an information campaign that was designed to reiterate to GPs the importance of early intervention in suspected rheumatoid arthritis would be useful. Such a campaign would go hand

in hand with an information programme aimed at the public, to make them aware of potential rheumatoid arthritis symptoms and to encourage them to visit their GP quickly.

We hope that, in combination, those two measures will lead more patients with potential symptoms to present to their GPs and lead to increased GP awareness of how best to deal with them. Through my work with friends of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions in the Scottish Parliament, I have learned that the rheumatology unit in Fife, headed by Dr Jane Gibson, is regarded by those who are in the best position to judge as being one of the best designed in the UK, with its peripatetic services and speedy diagnosis and referral service. Dr Gibson's team works in a different way from most others and has a much more holistic team approach that needs to be seen in action to be understood.

Step 2 is early diagnosis. We need to have particular regard to the Scottish inflammatory diseases and rheumatology industry group, which has produced some good research responses. If members wish to have further details of the excellent work that the group has done, I am happy to provide those.

I hope that members will join me in helping to raise this debilitating disease and other musculoskeletal conditions into a much higher priority for action by the Scottish Government, health boards and everyone who is involved in helping those who suffer from such conditions. I am most grateful for the debating opportunity this evening and pleased that colleagues have shown a willingness to support me. I thank each and every one of them for staying for the debate.

17:13

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Presiding Officer, I am grateful to you for calling me early. I apologise to you, the chamber and, in particular, Helen Eadie for the fact that I will have to leave shortly after I have made my speech.

I was attracted to the motion above all else by the reference that it contains to psoriasis and its relationship to arthritis. I will speak about psoriasis for a couple of minutes. As many members know, psoriasis is and is not genetic. There is a linkage with arthritis; psoriasis does not necessarily lead to arthritis, but often it does. As far as we know—I am interested to hear what Dr Simpson says about the issue—psoriasis is linked to alcohol consumption and stress. Sadly, there is some evidence that there is a higher incidence of psoriasis in more northerly latitudes; in that respect, it is a bit like multiple sclerosis.

As members know, in psoriasis the immune system goes into overdrive and produces ugly skin loss. The condition can be treated effectively to a certain extent by steroids, ultraviolet light and sunlight. However, I want us to consider for a moment the people who suffer from psoriasis. In its most virulent form, the condition can be very unsightly, which can lead to considerable embarrassment on the part of those who suffer from it. In turn, that can lead to a form of loneliness, such that people are embarrassed to talk about or to reveal their condition. Psoriasis sufferers may be unwilling to go to a swimming pool or often to go on holidays abroad, because they do not want to be seen in the sun. That is extremely sad, and a particular sort of loneliness. Many other diseases have a similar effect, but it is true of psoriasis in particular. We should be concerned about that.

For many patients, psoriasis seems to be a one-way road: although there can be dramatic recoveries and the condition can be halted, for some people it does not get better but continues to get worse. Indeed, arthritic and rheumatoid conditions also seem to get worse along a steady road.

I have some suggestions to make. I am of course aware that budgets are incredibly limited, but I wonder whether some way of having dedicated nurses for psoriasis and similar conditions could be established without any additional resources being committed, perhaps within the existing financial envelope. New money had to be put in for MS nurses all those years ago. Perhaps something can be done nevertheless.

I have mentioned the loneliness that people can experience as they suffer from such conditions in silence. Perhaps it is a matter of getting people to talk about it more. I compliment the efforts that have been made in the Parliament as members have tried to highlight psoriasis. Perhaps, with the support of nurses, support groups could be set up, with people having the opportunity to share their experience of the disease.

Helen Eadie has suggested having an award for pharmaceutical companies that make advances in tackling arthritis and rheumatism—and perhaps, I submit, psoriasis too. That would be a tremendous encouragement. Ultimately, the way to tackle arthritic and rheumatic disorders, as Helen Eadie said, is through a drug regime and using the new treatments that we must develop. We must continue to develop them. If we do not, there is no hope for people who suffer from rheumatism, arthritis and related conditions. Above all else, it is our job to offer hope. I speak with some passion about the subject because I know some sufferers, and I know how debilitating such conditions can be.

Presiding Officer, from the bottom of my heart I congratulate Helen Eadie on bringing this excellent debate before us. I will not be with you in a year's time, but I will remember debates such as this as being some of the finest offerings that we see in the Parliament.

17:17

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I, too, congratulate Helen Eadie on securing the debate. I commend her for her unfailing interest in arthritis and other musculoskeletal diseases and for her contribution to raising their profile in the Parliament.

I note that more than 1 million people are estimated to have consulted a general practitioner or practice nurse in 2008-09 in relation to one of those conditions, although I would guess that that is a significant underestimate of the actual number of sufferers. I myself have been in the hands of a physiotherapist in recent weeks because of a back problem, and without going near my GP. I am sure that there are other people like me. Many more visit chiropractors on a regular basis for the treatment of back and joint problems.

From the helpful briefing notes that have been sent in by various organisations, it is clear that there needs to be an increase in awareness among GPs, particularly of rheumatoid arthritis, which is arguably one of the most serious of the conditions. Early diagnosis is vital if the reversible joint destruction and disability are to be avoided and if people are to continue in work.

I will focus on osteoporosis, the complications of which can cause very severe pain and disability. I have taken a particular interest in the condition as an MSP and am patron of the Aberdeen branch of the National Osteoporosis Society. Fragility fractures resulting from osteoporosis are common and they are very painful. Hip fractures are associated with high levels of mortality and are expensive to deal with. Many older women, in particular, develop osteoporosis. It is sad to see people such as my husband's late stepmother, who was an active physical education teacher, walker and gardener in her younger days, in constant pain, shrunk in size and bent over from collapsed osteoporotic vertebrae.

With modern detection methods and the application of bone-protecting treatments, the fracture risk can be halved. It is now therefore recommended that all fracture patients over the age of 50 should be identified, assessed and treated where appropriate.

Osteoporosis affects not only older people. At the risk of this speech becoming a Milne family history, I will mention my son, who developed a degree of osteoporosis as a result of prolonged

steroid therapy undertaken when a teenager. He was not aware that he had the condition but, fortunately, it was looked for and picked up during a routine check-up. Thanks to treatment, his bone density is back within the normal range, fortunately before he had any fractures—and despite his passion for downhill skiing.

The work of fracture liaison services is invaluable in detecting and treating osteoporosis, and the associated specialist nurses make an enormous contribution to the national health service. There is concern that posts could be at risk in some areas, given the current financial pressures on health boards. I hope that the minister will listen to pleas from the National Osteoporosis Society to protect threatened posts.

The NOS stresses that it is important that all hospitals that deal with fracture patients are linked to a comprehensive fracture liaison service and that incentives are given to primary care staff to improve prevention and treatment in relation to osteoporosis and fractures. I hope that the minister agrees with the NOS and I look forward to hearing her response.

I thank Helen Eadie for highlighting the importance of early diagnosis and treatment of the musculoskeletal disorders that are so common in Scotland.

17:20

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): Like Nanette Milne, I pay tribute to Helen Eadie, not just for securing this debate but for her work in helping to promote awareness of the issues that are mentioned in the motion. She is a tireless campaigner on a range of issues and it must be hard for her to keep track of everything that she is involved in. This evening she has secured a debate in which we focus on a set of medical problems that affect a huge number of people in Scotland. There can be barely any families who have not experienced the consequences of the conditions that are mentioned in the motion.

Nanette Milne and Jamie Stone talked about the personal impact of some of those conditions. It is hard to watch someone suffer. We often feel frustrated that so little can be done to ease pain. Tremendous progress has been made on drugs and a range of therapies and treatment is available, but sometimes we can only watch as people shrink before our eyes, as Nanette Milne said, and we can only witness the debilitating effects of severe arthritis. Osteoporosis and arthritis have affected members of my family, and it is tragic to see people suffer.

We all know about the litany of issues that affect our health in this country, such as diet and lack of exercise, but we cannot do anything about the

climate. At this time of year, and even in a Scottish summer, when the weather worsens the pain starts, as I know from the experience of close family members. Medication is undoubtedly welcome, but there are long-term consequences to taking some of the significant drugs that are available. We need to be aware of that.

The organisations to which Helen Eadie referred do a fantastic job, not just in raising awareness but in campaigning for a better and more understanding approach. I worry that in the financial climate that we are entering into some services that can make a difference to people's quality of life might be the first things to be dispensed with. I am thinking, for example, about the aids and adaptations that make a difference by enabling people to operate independently in their own homes. We must ensure that such assistance for sufferers is regarded as vital.

I ask the minister to reflect on an issue on which I have heard contradictory information and evidence. I am concerned about schoolchildren who carry extremely heavy loads to and from school. Heavy bags are often carried for a considerable distance. My intuitive response to seeing children carrying heavy loads is to wonder what will be the long-term consequences for their backs. I hope that we can undertake research into the long-term consequences of carrying excessive loads from an early age. If there is an issue in that regard on which we should be reflecting, let us do so.

In conclusion, I want to mention Helen Eadie's idea about an award. I do not dispute the significance of giving awards to the companies that are doing the research, but they are often well rewarded when they come up with a product. If we do anything to recognise achievement, I like to think that we would recognise the achievements of those who, despite their illness and disability, contribute significantly to their families and to the community, and to those who help them. The untold good that is done by volunteers and sufferers of debilitating illnesses is immense, and I hope that, in some way, we can put on record our appreciation of what they achieve.

17:25

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I start by saying how pleased I am that Parliament is discussing this issue today. I congratulate Helen Eadie on securing such an important debate, and on all the hard work that she has done on the issue over many years.

World arthritis day has been celebrated annually since 1996, allowing people around the world who suffer from arthritis to unite to raise awareness of a debilitating condition, to influence public policy in

a way that is beneficial to sufferers, and to ensure that people who have arthritis, and the people who care for them, are aware of the vast amount of support that is available to them. Arthritis affects approximately 700,000 people in Scotland, and it is estimated that arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions account for 48 per cent of all work-related illness in Scotland. The scale of the suffering is truly disturbing, and it is surely our duty as elected representatives to do everything in our power to ease that suffering by supporting people who have arthritis and their families and carers in any and all possible ways.

It should always be remembered that, although arthritis is commonly associated with old age, it affects many young people, which can have a huge impact on their careers and personal lives. Earlier this year, I met a young constituent who was being sponsored to walk the west highland way in aid of Arthritis Research UK. She was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis by her GP when she was aged only 23, but she manages her condition with painkillers and anti-inflammatory medication, and she lives a full and vibrant life. However, as she explained to me, that is because of early diagnosis by her GP, swift and excellent treatment from the NHS, and a full understanding of the support and services that are available to her.

Many people are not so fortunate: many of those who suffer from arthritis are unaware of the care and support that is available to them, and they may lose their independence and experience terrible pain, which is often needless. That is why the awareness that world arthritis day raises is so valuable.

Of course, world arthritis day is an annual international event, but it is important to remember that there are charities and other organisations in Scotland that work every day of the year to help the people who are affected by such conditions. The work that those organisations carry out and the expertise that they bring are invaluable and vital when we are forming health policy and providing services. Their unique position and constant dialogue with people who are affected by arthritis make them the best-placed and most-informed organisations to advise Parliament.

For example, Arthritis Care Scotland has more than 50 branches throughout the country and an army of devoted volunteers, and it campaigns tirelessly for the changes that will benefit people who suffer from arthritis, their families and carers. The NHS must also be commended for its role in the fight against arthritis. Although there is no cure, its pioneering treatments help people to cope better and to live fuller lives with the condition.

Arthritis Care Scotland has also helped people to cope in their communities with their illness in

simple but effective ways by, for example, altering traffic lights to allow people more time to cross the road. That is the kind of thing that we might take for granted, but through contact and dialogue with sufferers, Arthritis Care Scotland understands what people need and how to make positive changes to make things easier for them.

Jamie Stone talked about psoriasis. Twenty years ago, I worked for a company called LEO Laboratories Ltd, which brought out a revolutionary new treatment for psoriasis, called Dovonex. I was in my late 20s and I had never met anyone who had psoriasis but suddenly, when people realised that I worked for the company that made that drug, loads of folk came out of the woodwork and said that they had psoriasis. They were people I had known all my life; three members of my own family, including my mother's sister. That was because there was a stigma around psoriasis: people wanted to keep it hidden and, of course, traditional treatments for it were quite horrible. I agree with Hugh Henry, but I am not convinced that rewards for pharmaceutical companies are really necessary as their reward comes through the bottom line, although certainly it would not do any harm.

I know that the Scottish Government is committed to tackling the problem of arthritis and that it gives significant grants to arthritis charities such as Psoriasis Scotland Arthritis Link Volunteers, which receives a three-year Scottish Government grant, but much more has to be done. I therefore hope that in the forthcoming weeks and months we as a Parliament can form a consensual national strategy to help to combat the crippling conditions that affect so many of our fellow Scots.

17:30

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Lab): I join others in congratulating my esteemed colleague Helen Eadie on securing the debate, and I join them in recognising the work that she does in this area. It is an important issue that often does not get the attention that it deserves.

Although, as Nanette Milne did, I will focus mainly on osteoporosis, I will also refer briefly to rheumatoid arthritis and make a couple of points. First, the introduction of biologic drugs is crucial because they allow people to get back to work quickly. Far too often, we allow people to drift into situations in which they are imprisoned by their condition and it becomes, if not too late, at least much more difficult to treat them.

To do that, we need to establish a much more effective primary care part of the managed care network system. We need general practitioners who have a special interest in rheumatoid arthritis as part of networked practice groups within the

community health and care partnerships, in order to ensure that the information is available. The average GP will not see many cases of rheumatoid arthritis and, frankly, is unlikely to have the sufficient knowledge to treat the condition, to diagnose it or even to make the specialist referral. That is not to cast aspersions on my GP colleagues; it is to recognise the reality that unless a practitioner sees cases pretty frequently, he or she will not keep fully up to date on the issues. We need a different approach, so I will be interested to hear what the minister has to say about that.

I will return to osteoporosis. As Nanette Milne said, fragility fractures that result from osteoporosis are painful and debilitating. Hip fractures are associated with high levels of mortality, are costly to treat and can be prevented by effective fracture liaison services. Health boards that implement a fracture liaison service will significantly reduce fragility fractures by up to 70 per cent, which will reduce the number of hip fractures and, in turn, reduce the costs of treating patients. Every low-impact fragility fracture should result in a proper assessment of risk through a fracture liaison service. That would create vital savings in the long run by reducing hip replacement costs, which can be up to £28,500 if we take all the costs involved, including the subsequent community costs.

We must do more to prevent falls among older people. For example, Falkirk Council has produced an award-winning scheme in association with Forth Valley NHS Board, with a falls prevention plan. The Falkirk project focuses on reducing the pattern of falls at the earliest stage. The service, which has been going for almost 10 years, has shown a dramatic drop in the number of falls. It has shown that 1,000 or so fewer falls happen per year, which is predicted to prevent some 50 fractures per year, with a saving of more than £1 million. That does not include the savings from other injuries that are associated with falls. As such significant savings can be made, why is that system not being rolled out throughout all the NHS?

Today, I had my staff ring round NHS boards to ask about the implementation of the falls report, which this and previous Governments have promoted, and to ask whether we have taken the work forward. Every health board should now have a falls prevention co-ordinator, but in the phone-round we found that there is little clarity on whether boards have one. There was even a misunderstanding about what we meant: someone thought that we were asking about the chair of a committee that looks at the issue. NHS Lanarkshire said that it has two posts, but that they are both vacant—and we know what is happening to vacancy management in the current conditions. What is the Scottish Government doing

to ensure that falls prevention is co-ordinated by every board?

The minister will not be surprised that I want to return to Forth Valley NHS Board. Forth Valley is let down from its participation in the excellent Falkirk initiative by the fact that it is the only health board that still does not have a full local osteoporosis service. I raised the point two years ago in debate, but we still do not have a service despite promises. I have been told that the service has been delayed again because of costs.

In funnel plots that have been presented to me, Forth Valley is one of the highest for where there is no medication on a second fracture and for patients who are not on medication pre-fracture, as in-patients and 120 days after admission. It is also one of the lowest on the funnel plot for nutritional assessment. That is an unacceptable position for my constituents.

An analysis of a number of hospitals shows the performance of Forth Valley NHS Board to be very poor. Only 6 per cent of all the patients there, during their total in-patient stay, had a falls nursing care plan—compared to 98 per cent at the neighbouring Queen Margaret hospital in Fife. Only 1 per cent of patients discharged to rehabilitation had a falls nursing care plan in both orthopaedics and rehab, and only 8 per cent had a falls nursing care plan in place in rehab. At Queen Margaret hospital, the figure was 100 per cent for the former. In Forth Valley, only 2 per cent of patients discharged to rehabilitation had a nursing and allied health professional assessment in orthopaedics, and only 3 per cent of patients had a nursing and allied health professional assessment in orthopaedics and rehab. Again, the figures for Queen Margaret hospital were 100 per cent.

I have, so far, been unable to persuade the board, which is now delaying the matter again because it says that the cost would be £250,000 to £300,000. I say to the minister that the one area in Scotland that does not have a service must be required in accountability reviews to put in place a service.

17:36

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): I, too, congratulate Helen Eadie on her motion, which has given Parliament the chance to discuss the important subject of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions. As the motion makes clear, that covers a wide range of conditions that place a real burden on the people who live with them, as well as on their families and carers. Those conditions also account for a significant proportion of NHS activity in spite of the stoicism with which many people face them. It is for those reasons that arthritis is mentioned in our

long-term conditions action plan as an example of a common long-term condition.

The action plan is about helping people to live well with their condition and recognising them as leading partners in their own care. Self-management is one of the key elements in that work. Arthritis has been at the forefront in developing innovative and new approaches to self-management, and we have been able to draw on those in setting up the long-term conditions self-management fund, which is administered on behalf of the Government by the Long Term Conditions Alliance Scotland. Across the long-term conditions work, we very much value our partnership with the voluntary sector, and I echo the terms of the motion in acknowledging and appreciating the work of the various third sector organisations that it mentions.

Please excuse my coughing, but I have been talking too much today.

A fair amount is happening at the moment in relation to arthritis, which I hope to share. The Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network has revised its clinical guideline on the early management of rheumatoid arthritis, taking account of the new medications that have been developed. I hope that when it is published in December, the guideline will promote awareness of the benefits of treating the condition as soon as possible after onset. Implementation of the existing SIGN guideline has been assisted by the “Clinical Audit of Care in Rheumatoid Arthritis”—known as CARA—which NHS Quality Improvement Scotland published in December 2008. Its findings are being addressed through the web-based audit programme that is run by the Scottish Society for Rheumatology.

The revised guideline will also pave the way for the needs assessment of rheumatoid arthritis that we have commissioned from the Scottish public health network, which is about giving more impact to the needs assessment that was published more than 10 years ago. The network considered whether it should continue to focus on rheumatoid arthritis. There is no doubt that other types of arthritis should not be neglected, so the needs assessment will emphasise that rheumatoid arthritis work should promote benefits for people with those other types of arthritis, too.

All of that work could be drawn together effectively through the mechanism of managed clinical networks, which would give a strong voice to patients and the voluntary sector on the way in which services should be improved. Such networks promote multidisciplinary working with extended roles for nurses and AHPs, and they encourage the development of integrated care pathways across community and hospital care. They would use the SIGN guideline as their

evidence base, and the findings of CARA would help them to work with boards in the most effective application of resources. We have, therefore, been exploring with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde the possibility of that board hosting a rheumatology MCN, and I am pleased to say that the board is now in the process of setting up such a network with some pump-priming funding from the Government. I hope that that will act as a demonstrator that other boards can follow.

Towards the end of last month, SIGN published a groundbreaking new guideline on psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis that should bring about improved diagnosis and treatment in primary care.

I also support the call in the motion for more research into these conditions, since stem cell therapy is still some way off. The chief scientist office is already supporting five research projects related to arthritis at a cost of £1.1 million, but it is always interested in well-constructed applications.

I am aware that there have been no new advances in the treatment of osteoarthritis in the past 25 years. The increasing recognition of the role that genetics plays will, I hope, help to change that position. It is also good that the musculoskeletal service model that is referred to in the motion will, in its first phase, have a focus on osteoarthritis.

We are developing the national MSK programme under the auspices of the delivery framework for adult rehabilitation. It focuses on early access to assessment and treatment by specialist practitioners based in primary care. They form part of a team that includes nurses, physiotherapists and podiatrists. People will be referred to the most suitable hospital service.

Since the motion mentions that arthritis and MSK conditions account for 48 per cent of all work-related illnesses in Scotland, it is important to mention that taking account of people's work goals is an essential part of the model. Linking to employability services early in people's rehabilitation journey will form part of their care plan—that is the point that Richard Simpson made. That ties in well with our revision of the healthy working lives strategy.

The model also integrates the work that our lead clinician for chronic pain has been taking forward in developing chronic pain pathways. Those are designed to direct people who are living with pain to the most appropriate service, whether that is provided by voluntary sector groups such as the Pain Association Scotland, in the community or in a specialist pain management clinic.

The MSK service model is being evaluated in two NHS boards. We have appointed a national lead to support the roll-out of the model, and a national programme board is being set up to

oversee its implementation. The board has not yet been created, but I support what the motion says about the contribution that people living with MSK conditions would be able to make. I can, therefore, give assurance that the board will include patient representation.

A number of points were made in the debate. I will write to Richard Simpson about the latest position with regard to Forth Valley NHS Board, because I understand the points that he makes.

I hope that it will be clear from what I have said that the Government takes seriously the needs of the many people who are living with the conditions that have been mentioned tonight. I am confident that the work that is in hand will lead to earlier and more effective interventions that will markedly improve people's quality of life.

Meeting closed at 17:42.

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