



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 23 December 2010

Session 3

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Scottish Parliament

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[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 09:00*]

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Good morning. The first item of business this morning is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I invite Bruce Crawford to move motion S3M-7644, on committee membership, and motion S3M-7646, on substitution on committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Stewart Stevenson be appointed to replace Aileen Campbell as a member of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee;

Stewart Stevenson be appointed to replace Angela Constance as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Michael Matheson be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Scotland Bill Committee.—[*Bruce Crawford.*]

Skills Development Scotland

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a statement by Angela Constance on Skills Development Scotland. The minister will take questions at the end of her 10-minute statement and there should therefore be no interventions or interruptions during it.

09:00

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): Against the background of the interest that various members have expressed, I will now make a statement on the voluntary severance scheme announced by Skills Development Scotland on 16 December.

First, I make it clear that a matter of this kind, relating as it does to the staffing of a non-departmental public body, is properly a matter for the board and executive of SDS, having due regard to efficiencies while maintaining operational capability. That approach has held whatever Government has been in office. Nonetheless, the facts are as follows.

Skills Development Scotland will need to find savings of £21 million during the next financial year from a budget of £210 million. That, of course, is a direct consequence of the cuts of some £1.3 billion imposed on Scotland by the United Kingdom Government. Let us be clear about the context in which SDS and the rest of Scotland's public sector now has to operate. We face a financial challenge without precedent since devolution, one that represents the biggest reduction in public spending imposed on Scotland by any United Kingdom Government.

The voluntary severance programme opened by SDS is a central part of the organisation's plans to meet its share of those significant savings. I accept that it means that jobs will go from the organisation. I regret that. However, there are two important points that I want to make absolutely clear. The first is that the SDS programme is a voluntary scheme with no element of compulsion. The second is that there will be no negative impact on service delivery as a result of the scheme. I have that unequivocal assurance from SDS and I am happy to give the Parliament that unequivocal assurance. What we have is a voluntary scheme about which we have categorical assurances from the board of SDS that service delivery will in no way be compromised. In fact, the very purpose of the scheme is to help SDS to make the efficiencies that it needs to make in order to protect spending on training programmes and other front-line services. Those are the top-line facts.

I turn now to the voluntary severance scheme. The scheme was announced by SDS on 16 December and will run until 28 January next year. The aim is to secure up to 125 full-time equivalent leavers from the organisation. That number will come from an existing base of nearly 1,400 full-time equivalent staff. Staff whose applications to leave are accepted will depart the organisation by 31 March next year. Final decisions on applications made under the scheme will be ratified by a sub-committee of Skills Development Scotland's main board.

To summarise: the scheme seeks up to 125 full-time equivalent staff from nearly 1,400, there will be no compulsory redundancies and there are assurances from the board that service delivery will not be compromised. In fact, it is quite the opposite, as the scheme aims to identify the savings necessary to protect front-line services with SDS continuing its commitment to make available 34,500 training opportunities.

As I said earlier, we regret the loss of jobs that will result, but this is the sort of tough decision that SDS simply has to take if it is to protect service provision from the full force of the cuts that have been levelled at the Scottish Government. The scheme is essentially about creating a yet more efficient organisation and getting scarce resources to where they are most needed: the front line.

In a moment, I will say something about the volume and effect of SDS's skills interventions, but first I will address efficiency. Skills Development Scotland has a strong track record in getting maximum value out of public money since it was set up in 2008. It has achieved £20 million of efficiency savings over the past two years and is on track to deliver its target of a further £19 million this year. For example, Skills Development Scotland and Scottish Enterprise have developed a shared service contract for information technology provision and expect it to deliver efficiencies of around £20 million over five years.

What about service delivery? What is Skills Development Scotland's track record on that and why is it so important that we protect it? The interventions that Skills Development Scotland makes are delivering. They are improving outcomes for the unemployed, those who want to improve their skills and young people who face a particular threat from the recession and the Westminster cuts. On that too, let us look at the facts.

Skills Development Scotland has demonstrated its ability successfully to direct resources to support people into work, from work to work and to progress in work. It undertakes a number of functions, including, as members know: an all-age careers service that operates the length and breadth of Scotland; support for young people

leaving school and college; a range of national training programmes, including modern apprenticeships, training for work and get ready for work; the individual learning account 200 programme; and the co-ordination of our partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—national redundancy service.

SDS plays a key role in our efforts to tackle youth unemployment, which is a continuing priority for the Government. Working with local authorities and others, it helps to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to stay in learning after 16, as that is the best means of improving their employability. Our priority is to ensure that every young person leaving school, college or university has the support that they need for as long as they need it to move into long-term sustainable employment. SDS will help us to deliver that.

This year, a record proportion of school leavers—nearly 87 per cent—achieved positive destinations. That is a remarkable achievement in such difficult times. Much of that success is down to SDS's delivery of training. It delivered more than 20,000 modern apprenticeships in 2009-10, exceeding what everybody agreed was a testing target of 18,500 MA places. In doing so, it nearly doubled the previous year's number of MAs. That demonstrates the modern apprenticeship programme's role in delivering a strong economic recovery by supporting individuals and employers in Scotland and ensuring that Scotland has the skills that it needs for future growth and success. This year, SDS is again making available 20,000 MA opportunities. It has also extended its investment in the adopt-an-apprentice and safeguard-an-apprentice schemes until March 2011 to give every apprentice the best possible chance of completing their apprenticeship.

Next year—unaffected, as I have made clear, by the voluntary severance scheme—the Government will provide funds to support 34,500 training places. We plan to work with Skills Development Scotland to finalise the volumes for individual training programmes over the coming weeks. That represents the same number of places as Skills Development Scotland's budget supported in 2010-11, which is an enormous achievement, given the scale of the constraint that we face on public spending.

Since the start of the recession, our national redundancy programme, PACE, has been significantly expanded through Skills Development Scotland and the service that it provides has been considerably enhanced in response to weakening labour market conditions. The First Minister recently announced a £300,000 package of skills and training support for Moray in response to the uncertainty that was created by the Ministry of Defence's strategic defence and security review.

Following the SDSR announcement, Skills Development Scotland moved quickly to increase its operational capacity in the area and has made it clear that its role is to lead a partnership initiative to assist people whose jobs will be affected. As part of the new funding package, Skills Development Scotland will provide additional training opportunities across the Moray community to supplement the support services already activated through PACE, but, of course, SDS has to make savings somewhere if it is to provide that level of service in Moray and throughout Scotland. That is at the very heart of the voluntary severance arrangements. Skills Development Scotland's scheme will help to create a yet more efficient organisation, ensuring that scarce funds go where they are needed, to help people throughout Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. We have around 20 minutes for questions.

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I thank the minister for the advance copy of her statement and, of course, welcome her to her new post.

According to the minister, this is all the fault of the UK Government—it is not.

Members: Oh.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

David Whitton: Oh, dear. Some people seem to have got out of the wrong side of bed this morning.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): At least we got out of bed.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

David Whitton: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The decision to cut 10 per cent from Skills Development Scotland's budget is the choice of the minister's colleague Mr Swinney. It may be asked why SDS has had to take a bigger hit than other departments. She says that SDS has a

"strong track record in getting maximum value out of public money".

Oh, really. That will be why thousands of pounds were wasted on an abortive rebranding exercise, on hiring hypnotists and on letting the chief executive make a vanity video to address his staff. Strangely, there is no mention of the job cuts on the SDS website.

At the weekend, an anonymous Government spokesperson said that it was "ridiculous" that Labour was demanding a statement on this issue. What is ridiculous is that, at a time of record youth

unemployment, the SNP's budget decision means that SDS is cutting 9 per cent of its workforce, when it is a body that is supposed to be helping employers to create training places and Scotland's young people to find a training place or an apprenticeship. The minister says that the scheme is voluntary and she guarantees that there will be "no negative impact" on service delivery. That is very brave.

How will those who volunteer be selected to avoid affecting front-line services? As it is clear that these job cuts will not save the £20 million required, which other services will be axed to make up the shortfall?

Angela Constance: I thank Mr Whitton for his warm words of welcome. I would, however, have expected that a man of Mr Whitton's vintage would have been far more charming and far less churlish. I am also surprised that Mr Whitton has leaped to his feet to defend a Tory Government in London.

I am interested to know what choices Mr Whitton would make. The voluntary severance scheme will save SDS £4.8 million per annum, which equates to 2,300 apprenticeships. Would Mr Whitton rather that we lose 2,300 apprenticeships? As he well knows, SDS has a track record of meeting all its targets, in terms of both providing training programmes and achieving efficiencies. The good news is that this Government and SDS will continue to provide 34,500 training programmes, which are necessary in these difficult economic times.

SDS will select those who apply for the voluntary redundancy scheme. There will be no element of compulsion. In fact, as of last night, there were 275 notes of interest for the up to 125 positions that will go.

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): I, too, welcome Angela Constance to her role and thank her for an advance copy of her statement.

She said that there would be "no negative impact" on service delivery. That will clearly be a challenge, when 9 per cent of the workforce will be gone within three months. She made at least two headline commitments, to 34,500 training opportunities and 20,000 modern apprenticeships. What other headline commitments on skills will definitely be met? With that information, we will be able to judge in future whether there has been a negative impact on the front line.

Angela Constance: As I said to Mr Whitton, selecting which staff leave the organisation is an operational matter for SDS, which can ensure that operational capacity is not affected. I am sure that SDS will choose carefully the staff who are permitted to leave the organisation. I am glad that Mr Brown recognises that I have given an

unequivocal assurance to the Parliament that 34,500 training places will be provided. I will continue to discuss the precise detail of that in the very near future with SDS. Mr Brown touched on Mr Whitton's point that this Government is making a brave decision. SDS has a great track record, of which we should be proud. Although it is Christmas, and a bit of bah-humbug is going around, we all should, of course, have the confidence and good grace to recognise that, where SDS has had a success, we should celebrate it. It is that success that is giving our young people a leg up on the ladder of life; SDS is supporting them in taking their first tentative steps into adult life and the workplace.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): My apologies to the chamber for being slightly late. I welcome the minister to her position and look forward to working with her on the shared agenda of upskilling Scotland and promoting recovery.

Obviously, considerable funds were invested in the setting up of Skills Development Scotland, with something approaching £20 million being invested only a couple of years ago. We have already had a number of changes and job losses and know now that more job losses are coming. If there is to be, to quote the minister, "no negative impact" on service delivery, does that mean that Skills Development Scotland, formed so recently, was overstaffed? If so, why was that workforce planning issue not tackled at the time of the merger?

In her letter to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, the minister talks of the 125 staff posts being selectively reduced. I hear what she said about that being an agency decision, but how will it be done? How can this new minister ensure that front-line services are not affected?

Angela Constance: Is the Liberal Democrat party's concern that there are too few or too many staff in SDS? I am not sure.

Michael Russell: They want to abolish it.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Angela Constance: I take a very close interest in the comments that the Liberal Democrats have made over the week. Indeed, I am aware that Mr Purvis would like to abolish Skills Development Scotland. Is he proposing 1,400 redundancies? That would certainly be a matter of concern to me.

Despite being in office for only a week, I am very aware that my officials in the Scottish Government remain in very close contact with Skills Development Scotland. They worked very hard to seek assurances from Skills Development Scotland that there would be no adverse impact on the provision of training places for our young

people. I assure Ms Smith that I will continue to work closely with my officials and Skills Development Scotland to ensure that there is no adverse impact on the young people whom we are trying to protect from the worst ravages of a Con-Dem UK Government that is introducing slash-and-burn policies left, right and centre. I would be interested to know what Ms Smith's choice would be. Would it be the £4.8 million savings that we are making from our service programme, or is she suggesting that we get rid of 2,300 modern apprenticeships, 130 police officers or 129 junior doctors? The choice is hers.

The Presiding Officer: We come to open questions. If questions and answers are fairly brief, we will manage to get everyone in.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): The minister has mentioned and is well aware of the importance of apprenticeships to the life chances of Scotland's young people, to economic recovery in Scotland and to addressing the skills gap. In case Mr Whitton missed it, will the minister tell us how many apprenticeship places would be equivalent to the £4.8 million cost of not going ahead with the voluntary severance scheme and how that would fill the important skills gaps for young people in Scotland?

Angela Constance: The member is correct to highlight the fact that not going ahead with the voluntary severance scheme would be the equivalent of losing 2,300 modern apprenticeship places. I grew up in West Lothian in the 1980s, when male unemployment ran at one in four. My father was one of the statistics. There is nothing dearer to me than ensuring that, despite the economic crisis in which we find ourselves, our young people and our workforce have every opportunity to secure their future and to fulfil their potential.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I warmly welcome the new minister to her post. The minister will be well aware that the community in Moray is facing devastating economic problems with the closure of RAF Kinloss and the possible demise of RAF Lossiemouth. Will she reassure me, in a spirit of Christmas generosity, that there will be no diminution of service by SDS in Moray?

Angela Constance: I thank Mr Stewart for the sentiment that he expressed in his question. He is quite right to fight for his local area. The Government shares his concerns about the Moray economy. As I said in my statement, the First Minister recently announced a £300,000 package of support for the area in response to the Ministry of Defence's actions. I look forward to working with Mr Stewart and other representatives of the Moray area to ensure that everything is done to support the Moray community at this difficult time.

Derek Brownlee (South of Scotland) (Con):

Given the clear commitments that the minister has given in relation to service delivery, can she tell us whether there is scope for SDS to go further on efficiencies, or would any future reductions in SDS's budget lead to service reductions?

Angela Constance: The issues that Mr Brownlee raises are essentially operational matters. I draw his attention to the fact that SDS has already met historical targets, both for delivering training places and for efficiency. It is important to note that last year the target for modern apprenticeships was 1,850—a challenging target by anyone's account, but one that was nonetheless exceeded. I will do my best to ensure that targets are met. I have given an unequivocal guarantee to the Parliament. Of course, if there is scope to go beyond targets, we will do our best to grasp that opportunity.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I, too, welcome the minister to her post. I have always enjoyed her sincere contributions from the back benches, and I wish her well in her post.

She stated accurately that the Liberal Democrats would have preferred to do without SDS and its £20 million set-up costs, with colleges having a stronger role. Can she confirm that the Scottish Government is reducing the revenue budget by 6 per cent over the next four years but reducing the skills budget by 10 per cent in one year? She said that there are 125 places in the voluntary severance scheme and that there have been 275 expressions of interest. Why do 150 more people than are able to leave the agency want to leave it?

Angela Constance: Oh, Mr Purvis. I am beginning to wonder whether Mr Purvis also had his Christmas party last night.

The organisation will lose 125 full-time equivalent posts. There have been 275 notes of interest, which does not equate to 275 people needing or wanting to leave at the organisation's request. For personal reasons of their own—which I could not possibly divulge—275 individuals have submitted notes of interest. With respect, I think that Mr Purvis is blistering the issue.

I highlight to the Parliament the good job that the SDS does, which is acknowledged even by the Lib Dem Scottish Borders Council—councillors who I am sure are well known to Mr Purvis. They have said:

"The concept of combining the various agencies involved in careers development, learning and skills development has been helpful, as multiple agendas have been replaced by a single strategy."

Mr Purvis will be well aware of the cuts that are coming, courtesy of the Con-Dem Government in

London. He may well aid and abet a Tory Government, but that is not my role or function.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): The minister says that there will be no negative impact on the delivery of training places, and we should all welcome that. Will the delivery of training places and the workings of SDS be monitored during and after the voluntary severance scheme?

Angela Constance: Ms White raises some practical points, and I am happy to give her all the assurance that she requires that we will be monitoring the situation very carefully.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, welcome the minister to her new post. How many staff based in the Highlands and Islands does she expect to be offered voluntary redundancy, and what proportion is that of the staff who are based there?

Angela Constance: I do not know the answer to that question, but I will endeavour to find out the information for Ms Grant. We are still at a very early stage and no one, as yet, has been selected for the voluntary severance programme. The programme was just announced on 16 December, and we have 275 notes of interest. It is an operational matter for SDS, but I would have thought that it will give careful consideration to the geographical needs of various communities the length and breadth of Scotland.

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): I, too, welcome Angela Constance to her post. Following the previous question, which related to geography, and on the subject of the skills range, will she ensure that the 35,000 training places include those that are necessary for the economy? I speak from my engineering background, in particular, and I am concerned that, as the recession eventually goes away, we have the right skills.

Angela Constance: Mr Don makes a pragmatic point. We need a range of training and skills opportunities that will equip Scotland for economic recovery, and we have to consider the needs of every sector that serves this country well.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement and questions on Skills Development Scotland.

Michael Russell: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Would you reflect, in terms of the procedures of the Parliament, on the process that got us here this morning? A demand for an emergency statement was made by Mr Whitton last Friday morning, which was backed by the Liberal Democrats on Monday, as I understand it. At the start of the meeting this morning, there were four members of the Labour Party and two Liberal Democrats here. I would have thought that you would like to reflect on that abuse of process.

The Presiding Officer: The fact that there is a statement and questions this morning is purely a matter for the Parliamentary Bureau. Whether or not members choose to attend is a matter for them.

Violence Against Women

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): The next item of business is a debate on violence against women.

We have a little leeway on timing, so members should feel free to take interventions, despite the fact that a speaking time of four minutes is advised. I call on Alex Neil to open the debate. You have around seven minutes, minister.

09:30

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): Thank you very much indeed, Presiding Officer. It sounded as if you were saying that I had even more than seven minutes.

I am very pleased to open this important debate. The subject is one that has united the Parliament since its earliest days. I think that we all agree without equivocation that violence against women, in any form, is not acceptable. I am sure that we also all agree that the issue needs to remain a priority, never more so than in the current economic environment.

I know that there has been much speculation about future funding, so I thought it important to inform the Parliament of our plans ahead of the Christmas break. We are simultaneously informing the relevant organisations of the budget decisions that we have taken for next year.

Members will be aware that recently, in answer to an oral question from Malcolm Chisholm, I gave an assurance that the violence against women fund, the children's services Women's Aid fund and the Rape Crisis specific fund would remain a top priority for the Scottish Government. I am therefore pleased to confirm to members that we will continue to fund those three important funds at the same level for 2011-12. The violence against women fund will receive £3.5 million, the children's services fund will receive £4.16 million and the Rape Crisis fund will receive £700,000.

In addition, we will continue our support for a range of activity, including provision of funding to Scottish Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Scotland, the national helplines, including the men's helpline, the ASSIST—advice, support, safety and information services together—project and the Caledonian programme. Our investment from the equality budget in 2011-12 will be £11.58 million. That is a tangible illustration of the high priority that this Government continues to attach to tackling domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women.

As we look forward to Christmas and new year, we know that domestic abuse is likely to increase over this period. Indeed, for many, Christmas will

not be a happy time—there will be young people who are too frightened to enjoy opening presents and women who nurse injuries as they sit down to their Christmas meal. That is why I particularly welcome the action of Strathclyde Police in issuing global positioning system tracking devices to repeat victims in a bid to protect them over the festive period.

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): I am sure that we all sign up to the provision of money to the organisations that the minister mentioned, but he did not mention Routes Out of Prostitution. Will any money be allocated specifically to that organisation?

Alex Neil: I have no specific announcement to make in that regard this morning, but I will inform the member when we take any additional budget decisions early in the new year.

The GPS pilot will mean that people at risk can activate the tracking devices by touching a button. Satellite technology will give their exact location, so officers could be deployed to help them. The pilot has been designed in consultation with Scottish Women's Aid. Once it has been evaluated, if it proves successful, we hope to roll it out on a permanent basis not just in Strathclyde, but across the country. It could be an extremely useful protection measure for very vulnerable women.

It is not just women who are at risk. Some men are at risk of becoming victims of violence and abuse from their partners. Such abuse is no less unacceptable than violence against women. This Government is the first in Scotland to provide funding for services for male victims. We have been working with Abused Men in Scotland to find out more about the experiences of men and the services that they need and we will continue to do so.

Violence against women is one of the most heinous crimes in our society. It perpetuates gender inequality. The imperative of tackling it is recognised internationally, as well as by the United Kingdom Government and successive Scottish Governments. In particular, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women—CEDAW—provides clear direction for us all. The next UK report on CEDAW is due by the end of May 2011 and Scotland will have a very positive contribution to make to that report.

As we come to the end of this year, I want to acknowledge a number of anniversaries. First, it is 35 years since Scottish Women's Aid was established. The change that there has been in Scottish society in relation to domestic abuse since then is due in great part to the work of Scottish Women's Aid and local women's aid

groups across Scotland. I am sure that members across the chamber will want to join me in offering to Scottish Women's Aid my sincere congratulations on reaching 35 years and our best wishes for the future.

However, another anniversary reminds us that, although much has been achieved, much remains to be done. It is now 10 years since the publication of the "National Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse in Scotland". Of course, that document has now been superseded by "Safer Lives: Changed Lives: A Shared Approach to Tackling Violence Against Women in Scotland", and the expansion of our work to incorporate all forms of violence against women was a very significant development.

Partners such as Scottish Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Scotland and the Women's Support Project have made substantial contributions towards developments at local and national level. I am happy to acknowledge the impact of their support and say that I value their role as critical friends.

Another important milestone was the publication in June 2008 of the national domestic abuse delivery plan for children and young people. That three-year programme takes a holistic approach to the needs of all those involved in a family where there is domestic abuse. The delivery plan will be coming to an end next June and we are now working to consolidate its legacy. Work will continue on some of the 13 priorities and it will be mainstreamed into the work of relevant areas of the Scottish Government.

One of the most important elements of the delivery plan is the participation priority. We have a group of young experts, aged between 16 and 23, who have personal experience of domestic abuse and who provide us with advice on implementation of the delivery plan. They are called voice against violence and they regularly meet me, Adam Ingram and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to give their views on progress, particularly in areas where they think that we are not doing enough. The members of the voice against violence group are very much on top of the facts and have clear ideas; they are articulate young people. I am grateful to them for giving up so much of their time to help us in our work. They have made a difference and are a very impressive group of young people.

It was the mothers of members of voice against violence who experienced domestic abuse. We have asked Abused Men in Scotland to help us to explore the views of young people whose fathers have experienced abuse.

Our work with partners is crucial. I thank not only our key external partners, who do so much to support our work in this area, but members across

the chamber who consistently demonstrate their commitment to working with us to make Scotland the country that we all want it to be—a Scotland free from domestic abuse and violence against women.

09:38

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and I add the Labour Party's congratulations to Scottish Women's Aid on its anniversary—more power to its elbow as the years go on. I reflect on the women who, at the beginning, saw the need for an organisation such as Scottish Women's Aid and who delivered support and compassion at a local level to women who had nowhere to go.

Christmas and new year can be an emotional time for all of us as we reflect, remember Christmases past, think of people who have gone before us, look to the future and think of what might be. It is a time to think of the goodness in people and the hope that we all have for the future.

As the minister reflected, there is something deeply depressing about the gap between the idealised view of the family that we sometimes have, particularly at this time of year, and the all-too-stark reality for women and children when violence has been brought into their home, where they should be safe, and for women who have to flee their homes and become refugees in their own country.

We understand the terrible pressure that domestic abuse puts on families, but we also recognise that it goes beyond the home. Violence against women is expressed in many ways and forms.

This is a good opportunity to reaffirm our understanding of the experience of women and children who face violence and to recommit ourselves to harnessing the power of government at every level and the talent and energy of women's organisations and the voluntary sector to support women in challenging that violence and educating our children—our boys and our girls—about a better way to live.

I hear what the minister says about male victims of abuse, but when we are talking to our young people we need to reflect on the statistics. If we do not understand that there is a pattern to such abuse, which is overwhelmingly male abuse of women, our boys and girls will not be in a position to challenge it—to have young men challenge the attitudes of other young men and to ensure that girls do not feel the pressure that they sometimes report and do not experience, as all too many

young girls do, forms of violence at a very early stage in a relationship.

As we look back on the year, we see that the figures on the reporting of domestic abuse are steady. Some of that is because we are in a culture in which women can come forward, but we know that every one of the figures reflects hidden suffering by individuals and families. We also know that there have been many expressions of the spectrum of violence against women.

We are aware of the persistent reality of violence against women in Scotland, throughout the UK and around the world. We reflect on how tragic the reality is of reports in the papers again and again of women dying at the hands of their partners—women killed because they finally had the courage to leave; killed at the point when they made the decision; or pursued and chased down after they had gone. How terrifying it is to think that, as we read the headlines and shudder, women who are experiencing violence and are thinking about doing something about it, by leaving, turn away from their planned escape because they fear for themselves and their children. When they see the headlines in the papers, they understand that the threat, "I will kill you if you go," is not an idle one.

I welcome what the minister said about the GPS initiative, but what does it say about the perpetrators of violence that to protect women we need to use such technology? It is the same for initiatives to protect women by giving them mobile phones that do not show up on a telephone bill—I have referred to that before. What kind of world are we living in where a woman has to have access to a mobile phone that does not show up on a phone bill because her partner might see it and punish her?

Violence against women is a horrific crime and we need to reaffirm our determination to understand and challenge the violence that women face and the way that it impacts on women's lives. Violence is used as a weapon of war around the world—the 16 days against violence against women is a reflection of that broader international aspect of women's experiences—and it daily shapes the lives of women and young people and destroys their life chances.

I am interested in the information that the minister gave about the voice against violence project, because we know that young people have a great deal to say about their experiences but are all too often silenced by either the perpetrator of the violence or the shame or feeling of isolation that it brings. It is critical that we continue to support such young people in school, where they may have someone they can speak to.

We should guard against complacency and it is important to ensure that the policy approach articulated by the minister is delivered on the ground. There ought not to be a separation between our aspiration and how we deliver it, which is why I welcome the commitment to continuing the dedicated funding that was identified. Whatever our views on spending and ending ring fencing, I believe that it is too much of a risk at this stage not to dedicate money to tackling violence against women. We must ensure that services are delivered throughout Scotland to protect women.

I want to raise a number of concerns with the minister, which I hope he will address. In the spirit of Christmas, I will not make them too hard, but there are issues that we must reflect on.

As I have said, I welcome the certainty of funding. That choice shows the power of women's organisations in the debate, because it reflects a strong campaign by women to highlight how important dedicated funding is.

We have to look at the single outcome agreement process. Again, people have different views on that, but there is a concern that the single outcome agreement process does not sufficiently reflect a commitment to tackle violence against women. Scottish Women's Aid highlights concerns that, at a local level, women are stuck in refuges—if they can get a refuge place—and cannot move on because of the unavailability of appropriate housing for them. I would welcome the minister's comments on how he might address that issue.

There is also the issue of women who have no recourse to public funds. It is frightening for women who have come to this country and then want to leave a violent situation but are unable to be supported. Women's aid organisations and Amnesty International have highlighted their plight. I know that it is a matter for the UK Government, but I would welcome an update from the minister on the discussions that he has had with Westminster.

Another issue is prostitution, which Trish Godman will talk about later in the debate. In addressing prostitution and the trafficking of women, it is critical that we tackle the purchaser—the person who creates the demand in the first place. Prostitution underpins an attitude to women and power relationships that must be addressed. To those who say that prostitution will always be with us, I say that such an attitude would mean that children would still be up chimneys. It is a counsel of despair. Trish Godman will say more about that critical issue.

Although there is agreement in the Parliament, there is still hostility on these issues in society. We

may have won the argument in here, but we have a long way to go in our broader communities. It is about the power that men have, which is why, in talking about violence against women, we must talk about not just the what but the why. When we understand the why, we will finally be able to eradicate it.

The Presiding Officer: In an effort to help with the timing of speeches, I advise members that we can have, on average, one minute extra per member. It might be helpful if members take that as a guideline.

09:46

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): The debate is a hardy annual. It probably comes under the heading of debates that we all feel are necessary although we wish that they were not. As the minister said, there has been a remarkable—perhaps unusual—unanimity in the Parliament that we should be doing everything possible to combat violence against women. There is a general recognition that it is far too prevalent in Scottish society.

Both the minister and Johann Lamont have referred to the fact that the debate is taking place somewhat later this year and coincides with Christmas. I will explain why that is particularly evocative for me with a personal anecdote. For many years, the Strathclyde social work department's 24-hour standby service was located diagonally across the road from my house. I frequently had visitors from the social work department, sometimes at all hours of the night, seeking place-of-safety orders. I am sure that Trish Godman would have rejoiced in getting me out of my bed at 3 o'clock in the morning so that I could issue the appropriate order.

The serious aspect is the fact that I noticed a great increase in demand for those orders over the festive period. Cynics might say that, over Christmas and the new year, people are forced into each other's company and there are tensions; however, there is absolutely no excuse for that to spill over into violence, especially when there are children in the house and the effect is not only on the woman—which is bad enough—but on the young children who must be taken into care. I found that one of the most painful duties that I have ever had to perform in my 30-odd years of public service.

As I have said before, we need a mixture of support and enforcement, and I very much welcome the commitment to funding that the minister has made this morning. The organisations to which he referred have become familiar to me over the years. I have been impressed by their evidence to the Justice Committee and by what

they do, and I think that the funding will be welcomed by members on all sides of the chamber.

We need to examine the enforcement, however, to see how it is operating. Again, I will provide a personal anecdote. In order to inform myself better about the way in which things are operating, and in connection with the Justice Committee's inquiry into the worthwhile bill that Rhoda Grant has introduced to Parliament, I arranged for the Justice Committee to attend the domestic violence court at Glasgow sheriff court. Unfortunately, as with everything else in life, the weather restricted committee members' attendance; nevertheless, it was an interesting visit.

Is the court working? Yes and no. During the time that I sat there, 20 cases were called, a surprisingly high number of which involved women. There were 17 new appearances and three people who appeared because of a breach of a bail condition. Every new case resulted in a not guilty plea. The fiscal would ask for special conditions of bail to be attached—namely, that the accused should not approach the complainant or go near the address at which the alleged offence took place—and everyone went cheerfully on their way. One of the discouraging aspects of the court was that on the public benches were several complainants who clearly took the view that, that night, it would be business as usual when everyone got back together again.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Bill Aitken: The domestic violence court has value. However, I am not too convinced that having a separate custody court is workable. I would far rather that the offenders were put in the general custody court and the court freed up to deal with trials, which would ensure a much earlier resolution of cases.

Alex Neil: This is a genuine question, not a politically motivated one. Does the member think that there is a need for any additional legislation to prevent the scenario that he described of people being released on bail with special conditions and then going home to commit the crime again?

Bill Aitken: No. I can see why the minister is asking that, but I think that administrative change is all that is necessary. Given the strictures of time, perhaps we can discuss that later. My apologies to Sandra White; I have no time to accept her intervention.

Basically, I think that the debate is a worthwhile one.

09:52

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): This debate has become something of an annual event. Scotland can be proud of the progress that we have made in this area and there is some comfort to be taken from the figures. I welcome the minister's announcement on funding. The successful work of the various women's organisations has contributed hugely to the impact that we are slowly beginning to make on this issue.

Like other members, I am keen to point out that the subject of the debate is violence against women. In that sense, Scotland has a much wider role to play. Largely as a result of pressure from various quarters, I am pleased to say that the Equal Opportunities Committee, on which I sit, is now taking forward the Forced Marriage etc (Protection and Jurisdiction) (Scotland) Bill. I will not say too much about that subject because not only is my convener sitting nearby but it might interfere with the process of examining the legislation. However, an issue that has arisen during our evidence-taking sessions on trafficking is that of cultural differences. Scotland has a substantial population of migrants, transitory and permanent. I am interested to know how through our education programmes and, for example, the community voices programme we can ensure that new citizens in our country understand our well-established principles for dealing with the issues that we are discussing and that what might have been socially and culturally acceptable in their communities is not acceptable.

We must also think about how to ensure that victims from different cultural backgrounds understand that they have the protection that our system provides. We must communicate that to them in a language that is familiar to them and in a way that is culturally understandable to them. Some of the information that the Equal Opportunities Committee took during its inquiry into trafficking seems to indicate that there are major challenges in that regard.

It is for women's organisations and the various statutory bodies to sit down and discuss how we ensure that all the women in our community have an opportunity to seek the protection that we perhaps take for granted. Critically, we also need to discuss how to ensure that the men from those communities understand that in our society their behaviour, whether it involves forced marriage, domestic abuse, servitude or any other such matters, is not socially acceptable. The problem is that we have a cultural clash.

It has taken us a lifetime—certainly my lifetime—to begin to recognise that domestic violence, and violence against women in all its forms, is not acceptable. I remind the minister that

one of the ways in which we can begin to address the problem is, as Johann Lamont has mentioned, to ensure that our budget process is gender impact assessed and that the decisions that we take on all the expenditure that may have an impact reflect that. Such expenditure stretches beyond police resources and money for Women's Aid and goes into the realm of what we do on refuge housing and various other social policies. I recognise that local authorities have a substantial amount of responsibility for those things, but it is important that the Government lays down a marker and takes the lead in addressing those particular challenges.

I have made some general observations, but fundamentally we need to work towards a shared understanding of what violence against women actually amounts to and a set of guiding principles. At its root, this is a human rights issue and how we deal with it must reflect that. Violence against women manifests itself in a huge range of ways and we must ensure that we pick up on all those ways in order to address the challenges.

09:57

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I thank the minister and welcome his announcement of continued funding for the many groups who do fantastic work on behalf of women and children throughout Scotland.

Today's debate coincides with the 20th anniversary of the 16 days of activism against gender violence campaign, which begins on the international day for the elimination of violence against women and ends on international human rights day. That is very telling because, as has been mentioned, the issue is one of human rights.

Before I discuss the issue from a Scottish perspective, I want to draw to members' attention some chilling facts in relation to violence against women on a global scale. One third of women are affected by violence globally, in some cases on a scale that is simply unimaginable.

Violence against women encompasses all forms of violence, not only domestic violence. It is perpetrated, especially in the form of rape, to destroy communities, discourage any form of resistance and—as in the war in Yugoslavia—conduct ethnic cleansing.

In Liberia, it is estimated that a staggering 75 per cent of women were raped during the conflict. In Rwanda, between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped during the genocide, and a decade later, 67 per cent of the survivors are HIV positive.

A number of members have raised the issue of trafficking, which is another form of violence perpetrated against women in which there has

been a huge increase in recent years. The harrowing stories of women who have been trafficked and forced into prostitution and servitude are truly horrific.

Although we are doing something about that, I do not believe that enough is being done to tackle trafficking. We must do more to educate people not only in this country, but in the countries from which the women are trafficked. We must inform society that the trade in human suffering cannot be allowed and is not acceptable.

Violence against women has many different forms and origins, but the perpetrators share a similar perception: that violence against women is in some way acceptable. The aim of many campaigns is to change that perception, and Johann Lamont touched on that in her contribution. If we are to change that perception, we need to have a serious debate about how it is formed in the first place and tackle it at the root, before it manifests itself in violence.

The Scottish Government states in "Safer Lives: Changed Lives" that its approach is informed by the definition that was developed by the national group that was set up after the United Nations declaration on the elimination of violence against women. It defines violence against women as

"a function of gender inequality, and an abuse of male power".

As a result, the definition encompasses

"actions that result in physical, sexual and psychological harm or suffering to women and children, or affront to their human dignity".

Interestingly, the definition includes sexual exploitation through prostitution and pornography and acknowledges that activities such as prostitution, stripping, lap dancing, pole dancing and table dancing are forms of commercial sexual exploitation. I and others have raised those issues time and again in the Parliament and we will continue to do so.

Many believe that such activities do not lead to direct violence against women, but that is not borne out by the facts. In a UK survey of 240 prostitutes in Leeds, Glasgow and Edinburgh, 50 per cent of those who work outdoors and 26 per cent of those who work indoors reported some form of violence by clients in the six months preceding the survey. It might not be good to say this, but it is the truth. Among prostitutes who work outdoors, 81 per cent had experienced violence by clients. Of those women, 33 per cent had been beaten, 30 per cent had been threatened with a weapon, 25 per cent had been choked, 27 per cent had been raped in a form or manner that I do not want to mention in the chamber, and 9 per cent had been slashed or stabbed. It is horrifying to think of that.

Any debate about the roots of violence against women needs to examine those activities and understand how they contribute to the way in which women are viewed and how that relates to violence against women. The national group's definition goes on to state:

"These activities have been shown to be harmful for the individual women involved and have a negative impact on the position of all women through the objectification of women's bodies."

We must remember that.

I welcome the fact that we are here today to take forward the national strategy to address domestic violence in Scotland and to look at the progress that has been made, but today's debate must also serve as a wake-up call to look more deeply at the reasons behind violence against women and, if necessary, to tackle the issues that we have been reluctant to look at in the past. If we do not have the courage to seriously explore the reasons for violence against women, the cycle will continue.

10:02

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): This year's debate on violence against women is perhaps the most important since the Parliament's early efforts set in motion Scotland's approach to tackling the on-going scourge of violence against women. It is especially important because experience consistently shows us that during periods of financial restraint prevention services and support for victims of such violence are frequently the first and hardest hit. I therefore start by welcoming the Scottish Government's commitment to maintaining the dedicated funding streams for the violence against women fund, the Rape Crisis specific fund and the children's services Women's Aid fund. That sends out an important message at this time.

Gender-based violence is rooted in inequality between women and men in our society, and both must be challenged through the type of preventive work that was highlighted by Jenny Kemp of the Zero Tolerance Charitable Trust, which is based in my constituency, and by Detective Chief Superintendent Carnochan, during the Finance Committee's recent inquiry into preventative spending. However, in 21st century Scotland, equality should not be a bonus to be awarded at times of plenty and should not suit a particular public or political mood or agenda. It is a basic human right both morally and in the laws of the country.

That is why it is so vital at this time that we ensure that all policy and budget allocation decisions at national and local levels are subject to rigorous gender impact assessments to ensure

that the equality gap is not directly or inadvertently widened, thereby perpetuating and strengthening a cultural attitude that condones violence against women. For example, a recent study of young people's attitudes to gendered violence found that a third of young men and a sixth of young women aged between 14 and 18 believe that using violence in intimate relationships is acceptable in some circumstances.

Another recent report, "Hidden Marks" by the National Union of Students, found that one female student in seven had been the victim of a serious sexual or physical assault while at university or college, but that fewer than 10 per cent had reported the attack in the belief that they were somehow culpable in what had happened to them. The attitudes and commitment that we show today will directly affect the attitudes to and experiences of violence of the generation of tomorrow.

Although I welcome the national announcements that were made today, it is essential that the political commitment that is displayed in the Parliament is directly translated into local planning. Good analysis of single outcome agreements by various organisations, including the Scottish women's budget group, has shown that far too frequently that is not the case. In evidence to the Finance Committee, Zero Tolerance said:

"As far as violence against women is concerned, there is a mismatch between strategising at national level and what happens on the ground. Single outcome agreements do not reflect the priority that has been given politically to tackling violence against women over the past 10 years. Services have been cut and withdrawn. As soon as ring-fenced funding for tackling violence against women is removed, it is one of the easiest things to go."—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 26 October 2010; c 2570.]

I have seen evidence of that in my constituency, where local authority funding for Edinburgh Women's Aid has dropped by £113,000 in the past three years. Further reductions are expected this year. I heard about that serious concern when I attended Edinburgh Women's Aid's recent annual general meeting. At that meeting we heard a moving speech from a woman who has been the victim of domestic abuse over many years and who, as well as emphasising the funding issues, emphasised the need for further action in the realm of protection. Rhoda Grant's Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill will carry that matter forward significantly. The speaker also highlighted problems to do with the Matrimonial Homes (Family Protection) (Scotland) Act 1981, about which I have written to the cabinet secretary.

I am reminded of the old adage about the three Ps that are needed for work to tackle violence against women: provision, which we have talked about; protection, which I mentioned; and prevention, which I mentioned in the context of

Zero Tolerance. All three Ps demand our attention and resourcing.

I commend Scottish Women's Aid and GMB Scotland's new together we can stop it campaign, which encourages everyone to take some of the small actions that are needed to fight gender-based violence—actions that can, collectively, have such a powerful effect. I join members in congratulating Scottish Women's Aid on its 35th anniversary and I acknowledge the sterling and invaluable work that it has done over three and a half decades.

I will finish by mentioning a far more recent campaign—white ribbon Scotland. Ultimately, violence against women has to be a men's issue. Until men start challenging other men on how they speak about gender issues, and until men speak out against the gender-based violence that goes on around them, it will be hard to achieve the cultural shift that is necessary to stamp out violence against women for good.

10:07

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): Exactly a year ago, on 23 December 2009, petition PE1307, on domestic violence and abuse, was raised. The Parliament's Public Petitions Committee held an evidence session at which two people who had suffered domestic violence came forward to give evidence. They did so only because they could remain anonymous, but were terrified that their identities would be revealed. Not many people relish talking about their personal problems in public, but the two victims had a more compelling reason for wanting to remain anonymous: they were men—male victims of domestic violence—and the petition was calling for greater recognition of the existence of the problem and for better services.

Hearing the two men's stories and knowing how anxious they were to remain anonymous made me realise how far we have come in the context of the public perception of domestic violence against women. The men did not want their friends and colleagues to know what had happened to them, because they feared that they might not be believed or that they might be ridiculed or pitied. I well understand that fear; there remains a perception that men can look after themselves and that violence against men does not matter quite as much. It is still often regarded as acceptable to joke and laugh about male victims of domestic violence.

Of course, this debate is about violence against females, but the evidence session in the Public Petitions Committee demonstrated three things to me. First, violence crucifies and destroys people, whoever they are. Secondly, we have much work

to do in recognising and stamping out domestic violence against men. Thirdly—and more positive—attitudes have shifted during the past 20 or so years, perhaps since the start of the zero tolerance campaign in 1992.

I remember that back then it was common to hear the argument that some women asked for violence, or that they exaggerated or even made up their accounts of violence. Much work had to be done to ensure that society understood that a veneer of respectability, charm and gentleness might well hide a violent and abusive side to a man. More work had to be done to convince society that domestic abuse is never acceptable and is never the victim's fault. Yet more work remains to be done to convince women victims of that.

The arguments have moved on and opinions have shifted. We do not yet live in Utopia, so things are not perfect. Notwithstanding the report about the younger generation to which Malcolm Chisholm referred, society on the whole believes women and does not trivialise violence against them. It is also a long time since I heard a so-called joke about the issue.

However, violence against women is still a significant worldwide problem, as Sandra White said. A World Bank study showed that violence against women aged between 15 and 44 causes more deaths and disabilities worldwide than war, cancer, malaria or traffic accidents. That is staggering.

Victims of violence need more than changing attitudes and better statistics; they need help. I warmly welcome the minister's announcement on the funding situation. However, it should not matter who a person is; anyone who is a victim of violence should be entitled to help.

During the recent 16 days of action, I helped to launch a campaign that focuses on asylum-seeking women. That campaign has been promoted by the Govan and Craigton integration network, and was part of the wider Asylum Aid campaign for a women's asylum charter. In a nutshell, the campaign aims to ensure that asylum-seeking women who have been victims of violence are supported in exactly the same way as settled UK citizens would expect to be supported, as a minimum. A community art worker has worked with women at all three drop-ins in Govan and Craigton in Glasgow to design postcards for the campaign. I am happy to share those designs with members.

Recent reports have highlighted the issues that women who seek asylum face. For example, a report from Human Rights Watch says that

"women are held in detention largely for the UK's administrative convenience, have very little time to prepare

a legal case, and have only a few days to appeal if refused. But the claims often involve such sensitive and difficult issues as sexual violence, female genital mutilation, trafficking, and domestic abuse.”

A report by Debora Singer, who is a policy and research manager at Asylum Aid, quotes a woman in detention, who said:

“I was happy with a lady interviewer but not a male translator ... Because he was a man I felt ashamed. If it was a woman I would have said more.”

That should be contrasted with what happens when a woman goes to the police to report a rape. She can ask for a female police officer to be present at her interview, and she will be supported by a specially trained officer.

The Asylum Aid report also mentions a woman called Cecilia, who said:

“I’d prefer, rather than going to a detention centre ... to be in prison for the rest of my life”.

She talked about male staff at Yarl’s Wood immigration removal centre appearing unannounced, entering her room and searching through her possessions, including her underwear. Having experienced rape in Cameroon, that was particularly frightening for her. In prisons, a search is always undertaken by a female prison officer after the woman has been warned that there will be a search.

We all agree that violence against women is abhorrent. Whether the woman is a citizen of this country or of the no man’s land that is the home of the asylum seeker, they should have the right to be treated with dignity. Where we have developed a gender-sensitive, rights-based approach to domestic violence, that sensitivity and those rights should be afforded to all women, including asylum seekers.

10:12

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): I am confident that, if we walked out into the street today and asked people about violence against women, they would say that they abhor it. If we asked them to qualify that, we would come up with the kind of statistics that Malcolm Chisholm talked about: that is, some people would say that it is all right in some instances to be violent to women.

There is a whole spectrum of violence against women, from domestic and sexual abuse to men buying sex from women. Prostitution is a form of violence against women, and acceptance of prostitution perpetuates that violence. If we remain silent on the issue, we will perpetuate the beliefs of men who buy sex that they are entitled to sexual access to women, that they are superior to women, and that they are licensed as sexual aggressors. Men who use women in prostitution strongly endorse such attitudes to women.

Prostitution is a form of violence against women. That is backed up by the facts, of which Sandra White gave many. Some 75 per cent of women in prostitution have become involved in it when they were children. More than half of women in prostitution in the UK have been raped or seriously sexually assaulted in the hands of pimps or others. Up to 95 per cent of women in street prostitution are problematic drug users—hence, my question to the minister. With another hat on, I know that most of those women want to get out of prostitution. Some 68 per cent of women in prostitution meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. That is in the same range as victims of torture who are undergoing treatment.

Members are here today to speak out about violence against women. Members must ask themselves how they view prostitution. If they do not class prostitution as a form of violence against women, how would they describe it? I accept that there are women who freely choose to enter prostitution, but I wonder whether they would make the same choice for their sister or their daughter. I want to be sure that, if women have made that choice but wake up one morning having made a different choice, there is a route out and they know how to access facilities. Criminalising men’s demand for prostitution will tackle the related harm that the trade causes.

We can learn from others. In Amsterdam, prostitution is legal, but the Dutch authorities are cleaning up Amsterdam’s red light district because it has become a centre for human trafficking and other serious crime. In Australia, where prostitution is decriminalised, the authorities are seriously considering reversing the law to make prostitution illegal. When the law was changed in Australia, authorities carried out inspections of brothels to ensure that, whatever position a woman was in on the bed, she would be able to reach a panic button. What does that tell us about prostitution? The World Health Organization has said that all prostitutes should carry a medical card to prove that they are clean and healthy, but why should men not carry a card? There are no questions being asked about that.

Given that the Parliament has done so much to challenge discrimination against women, it is unacceptable that prostitution remains a blight on our country. Some members who are present have told me that they cannot support my proposed member’s bill on prostitution because they do not think that it will work. When I convened the Local Government Committee, I was told that we would not be able to sort out the business of section 28, but we did. I was then told that we would not be able to get rid of warrant sales, but we did. We were all told that the smoking ban would not work, but it does. Our job is to examine proposed legislation, to improve it and to try to

make it work and, if we cannot do so, to go back to the drawing board and see where we went wrong.

If members are serious about tackling violence against women, I ask them to consider adding their names in support of my proposed member's bill to criminalise the purchasing of sex. We will not get a serious debate about prostitution as a form of violence against women if my proposal does not make it to the next phase. I ask members to support it.

10:17

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Violence against women and girls is a problem of pandemic proportions. If anyone doubts the veracity of that statement, they should consider the fact that at least one in three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. That statistic becomes all the more frightening when we consider that the perpetrator is usually someone who is known to the victim. Violence against women encompasses but is not limited to physical, sexual and psychological violence, including domestic abuse, rape, incest and child sexual abuse, occurring in the family, the general community or in institutions; sexual harassment and intimidation at work and in the public sphere; commercial sexual exploitation, including prostitution, pornography and trafficking; dowry-related violence; female genital mutilation; forced and child marriages; and honour crimes.

The issue is complicated, so in the limited time that is available I will focus on two specific aspects. The first is the launch of a five-week campaign against domestic abuse by Strathclyde Police, as part of the force's on-going break the circle of violence campaign, which runs throughout the year and has four phases. The domestic abuse phase has proved to be a successful tool in tackling violence against women in Lanarkshire. The campaign involves a proactive approach to organised crime, antisocial behaviour and—significantly—domestic abuse. A contributory factor to its success is that the campaign has great local support, particularly from the *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser*, but also from Asda, North Lanarkshire Council, Scottish Women's Aid and Citizens Advice Scotland, as well as from local politicians of all parties and now the Scottish Prison Service.

One of the most successful aspects of the campaign is its focus on repeat offenders, who can be tracked using a Scottish database and national intelligence. That allows Strathclyde Police not only to identify the usual suspects, but to take steps to ensure that those repeat offenders know that they are being monitored. In turn, that allows the police to target repeat offenders at

recognised volatile or trigger times, such as Christmas and new year and before old firm matches, when incidents of domestic violence are known to increase.

Officers contact the most serious offenders to let them know that the police are aware of their past behaviour and, crucially, that the police are monitoring them. That assertive approach has a marked effect that leads to a significant reduction in the numbers of domestic abuse incidents after, for example, old firm games, because the perpetrators know that the police are watching. In areas such as Monklands, which has the highest number of reported domestic abuse incidents in North Lanarkshire, that proactive approach, coupled with the knowledge that the police are determined to tackle the abuse, can serve only to give victims hope. The unpalatable truth is that as we approach the season of goodwill and look forward to spending time with our families, for all too many domestic abuse victims this is not a time of celebration but a time to dread.

The second aspect on which I will touch briefly, for the reasons that Hugh O'Donnell stated, was highlighted during the Equal Opportunities Committee scrutiny of stage 1 of the Forced Marriage etc (Protection and Jurisdiction) (Scotland) Bill. Scottish Women's Aid stated that it is often when women come to it to seek assistance in relation to domestic abuse that the issue of forced marriage comes to light. It is a simple and abhorrent fact that forced marriage is a form of violence against women. That violence is not merely physical, but can involve verbal abuse and coercion, which are in themselves forms of brutality. One of the most appalling instances of coercion involves the threats and emotional blackmail that are sometimes used when a member of the family—often the victim's mother—threatens to commit suicide if the woman does not enter into the marriage. Self-evidently, that kind of coercion is deeply distressing and is a dramatic example of the type of intimidation that is exerted. It is not surprising, therefore, that many victims of forced marriage and, by extension, domestic abuse suffer from depression and mental health problems.

I hope that today's debate will contribute to raising greater awareness of this vexing and all-too-prevalent issue.

10:22

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): Once again, I note the annual event that is this debate. As is my custom, I will not repeat the things that others have said, but that does not mean that I do not agree with them.

I am surprised that statistics have not yet been picked up on. Violence against women is all about individuals and human rights, so statistics might seem to be slightly irrelevant, but we have some, nevertheless. Just fewer than 54,000 incidents of domestic abuse were reported in 2008-09 and a few under 52,000 in 2009-10. I do not set too much store by those figures, but if awareness is rising and the statistics come from a similar reporting regime, it looks as though things are getting better. That is nothing to be complacent about, but perhaps the statistics offer us some hope.

The statistics also point me in my next direction, which is to encourage the current and successive Governments to ensure that everything they do is evidence based. That is hugely important to our work in the area. It would be easy to spend money on things that seem like good ideas, but unless we are doing evidence-based research and finding out what works, there is a risk that we will ring fence the wrong money.

There are financial effects from the human rights issues that we are talking about. Assaults on women lead directly to homelessness, which the Government and local authorities in particular have to deal with. There are ways and means of encouraging local authorities, for whom tackling such violence is a primary responsibility, to think about where they spend their money. Single outcome agreements are only part of the process of saying to councils, "It would be very much better if you spent your money on prevention rather than cure." If money being spent on looking after women in their homes and reducing violence saves councils from spending money on the consequences of children and women being made homeless afterwards, it is a good way to spend the money.

When I look at existing research, I notice depressingly familiar risk factors—if I may put it in epidemiological terms—including poverty, disability, and the effects of alcohol and drugs. We know about those factors. That should encourage us as a Parliament, a Government and a society to tackle those issues because we know that, on the way through, we will help to tackle violence against women.

I note that the fact has already been mentioned that domestic violence is not directed solely against women; some men suffer it. There is a tension in the statistics. I picked up entirely what Johann Lamont said and I absolutely agree that we must not lose sight of the fact that the majority of the problem is men's violence against women. However, we also must not lose sight of the fact that there is another side to that coin. We must look after those men and ensure that they are not

simply ignored because they are statistically the smaller group.

I return to the major issue and congratulate Scottish Women's Aid on its 35 years. Some things are improving. Its work is obviously valuable and I trust that it will carry on.

That brings me to another issue. As a former local councillor—as many other members are—I do not like the idea of ring fencing but, in a policy area such as domestic violence, there is a pretty persuasive case for the Government's saying that we must tackle the issue, that it is setting aside a sum of money one way or another and that, if that money goes through the local authority, it must be put in the direction of domestic violence.

I will comment briefly on Rhoda Grant's Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, which we are considering in the Justice Committee. I do not want to pre-empt anything that the Justice Committee will say about it, but it has three essential measures. One is the idea that we should remove the need for a course of action for a woman to be able to bring a civil action. That makes a great deal of sense.

Secondly, and crucially, the bill proposes that we improve access to legal aid because many women who flee their homes and seek to flee from violence do not come with purses stacked full of money. That is an important issue.

The third point is that making a breach of interdict a criminal offence—and, therefore, something with which the authorities will deal, rather than the victim herself having to deal with it—is another extremely important measure.

Johann Lamont: On the point that Nigel Don made about poverty being a factor in domestic violence, there is an issue about women lacking funds, but I am sure that he agrees with Scottish Women's Aid and others that male violence is no respecter of class. In fact, we delude ourselves if we think that it happens only in poor communities.

Nigel Don: Absolutely. I was not suggesting for a moment that I think that. The statistics merely show that poverty is one of the risk factors.

10:27

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): The debate is important. It easy to say, "Och, we do this every year," but it is important to recognise that we have an opportunity to discuss this important issue. I will try not to echo many of the comments that have already been made. I also welcome the minister's statement on funding. I start with a plug for Scottish Women's Aid's latest campaign. Members can add their names to my motion congratulating Scottish Women's Aid and should not forget to sign the motion on funding, too. I also thank

everyone who has been involved over the past 10 years in the cross-party group on men's violence against women and children.

The number of proceedings in domestic abuse cases has increased enormously in recent years, but it is not clear how much that is due to there being more prosecutions and how much it is due to better recording. Central Scotland has shown one of the most marked rises. In 2005-06, there were just eight cases, all of which were successful, with two offenders receiving custodial sentences. By 2008-09, that had risen to 601 cases, with 547 being successful and 60 offenders receiving custodial sentences. It is clear that those figures reflect changes in policing and prosecutions more than changes in prevalence, and the police are to be congratulated on the advances that they have made.

Fortunately, we are no longer in the era of "Life on Mars", when cases were described as being "just a domestic". As we have heard, Strathclyde Police, for example, is offering GPS devices that those at risk can activate by touching a button. Sadly, those devices will probably be more important over Christmas and new year.

The figures for male victims probably also reflect a change in policing, with police more likely to record claim and counterclaim.

It is clear that sexual violence and more serious prolonged cases of physical, psychological and emotional abuse are overwhelmingly gender-based. Women are far more likely to be killed by a man than they are by a woman. On average, two women each week are killed by a partner. Men are most likely to be killed by a man. On average, women are assaulted 35 times before the police are called.

I say to Mr Don that it is difficult to consider statistics because women often do not report violence and, sometimes, it is far too late when they do report.

Nigel Don: I have no more respect for statistics than Cathy Peattie does, but if they are comparative year-on-year figures, they show us trends—that is all.

Cathy Peattie: Sadly—talking about trends—the matters that I have just mentioned are not taken into account in the British crime survey, which records a maximum of only five crimes per person and therefore excludes an estimated 3 million crimes a year. Sometimes we cannot trust statistics.

A history of domestic and sexual abuse affects a third of women who self-harm or attempt suicide, half of women mental health service users and 70 per cent of women in psychiatric in-patient wards. Thirty per cent of domestic violence starts in

pregnancy and it affects 9 per cent of all mothers, for whom domestic violence is identified as the prime cause of miscarriage and stillbirth. Also, 12 per cent of women students are being stalked.

We need more resources, information and awareness raising for all victims, but we cannot tackle the root problem unless we recognise the need for a strategy that addresses the causes of violence against women and children.

It is likely that the recession will have an adverse impact on victims of domestic abuse in a number of ways, not least of which will be the impact on services to help them. Although, as I said previously, I welcome the Scottish Government's statement and funds, I am pleased that they are protected and I hope that they are not siphoned off to set up some kind of new quango. Local authority funding will be under extreme pressure.

We have to recognise that organisations such as Women's Aid and Rape Crisis provide national services through local organisations. Abused women often seek refuge in other areas, so councils that do not provide adequate support are basically leeches on those who do.

We also need to protect ground-breaking projects such as children experiencing domestic abuse recovery, or CEDAR; the advice, support, safety and information services together project, or ASSIST; the domestic abuse courts; and work with perpetrators.

Domestic abuse. Together we can stop it.

10:32

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I welcome this debate on violence against women, but, like everybody else, I regret that we still need to have it. This horrendous scourge blights our society, and it is concerning that domestic violence in same-sex relationships is on the increase, as is violence against men. The difference is that violence against women covers a wider spectrum than just domestic abuse and tends to be power based.

Any violence in society is unacceptable, but violence by those who are supposed to love and care for their victims is totally unacceptable. My member's bill, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, seeks to provide greater protection for victims of domestic abuse, regardless of their gender or sexuality. However, from the evidence that I have received and the available statistics, I believe that the bill will predominantly help women—83 per cent of domestic abuse cases involve offences against women.

It is a tragedy that a third of murders of females are committed by a partner or ex-partner and that

two women a week are killed by domestic abuse. No legislation can halt a murderer who is intent on killing, but the bill can provide victims with more robust support and the police with the tools that they need to prevent further abuse.

The bill will make non-harassment orders easier to obtain. A victim currently needs to have two incidents of abuse before they can seek such an order: one incident of abuse is too many, therefore two is totally unacceptable. The bill will also make breaching an interdict with powers of arrest a criminal offence, which will make such interdicts much more effective. The interdict itself does not criminalise a person, but if they breach it they should, and will, feel the full force of the law.

In addition, the bill seeks to provide greater access to justice by increasing accessibility to legal aid for those who seek protection. When someone is fleeing, they do not often stop to collect their bank statements or financial information. In many cases they cannot access bank accounts, because statements are mailed to the victim's residence and the ATM trail will enable the abuser to track down the victim, which might lead to further abuse.

My bill is not the last word on domestic abuse—far from it. This is a process. I have been struck by the number of people and organisations that have asked me to broaden my bill to take on other issues. Given that it is a member's bill, the difficulty is how to do that without making it so complex that it endangers the whole. A lot more needs to be done.

When I was in Australia and New Zealand last year, I was struck by the actions that those Governments are taking at a national and state level. In Australia, the police are proactive. They have the power to raise interdicts without the victim's consent. Those interdicts include exclusion orders, which enable the victim and their children to remain in the home while forcing out the perpetrator. In Scotland, it is often the case that the victim is forced to leave their home and possessions and children are forced to leave their friends and home.

The Governments in Australia and New Zealand have carried out a lot of work on the effect of domestic abuse on children. Scottish Women's Aid works with children, but we are a long way behind in recognising the effect that domestic abuse has on young people. Their future prospects and self-esteem are badly damaged. That is why, in New Zealand, a perpetrator is not allowed access to their children until they can show that their behaviour has changed and that they recognise the impact of their actions. I am therefore grateful to the minister for his confirmation that he will keep the funding for Scottish Women's Aid's children's programme. That programme allows young people

to access services in their own right, even when their mother is too afraid to seek those services or support.

There are many programmes for perpetrators, some of them in Scotland, but they are new, so there is little information on how successful they are in addressing behaviour. What is clear is that the state needs to take an active role in providing protection and resources to victims, but we also need to provide victims with the ability to protect themselves.

I welcome the debate and look forward to bringing my bill to the Parliament. I hope that it will obtain support.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): We move to wind-up speeches.

10:36

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): As many members have said, the debate is an annual event, and this year it is made even more poignant by being held in Christmas week. Johann Lamont and other members have talked about the difference between the Christmas view of the family that we hold, which is one of peace and goodwill, and the reality in many Scottish homes, which is a reality of fear. That reality is built on inequality between a man and a woman; most often, the perpetrator of the violence is male.

One clear message from today's debate is the continuing, unanimous view across the chamber that domestic abuse is still a major problem that we need to tackle. It is also worth while to reflect on some of the work that the Parliament has done throughout the years of devolution. I am thinking of action from the Governments, committee legislation, petitions that have come before the Parliament and the member's bill that is on-going.

Nigel Don was absolutely right in saying that there are positive messages in some of the most recent statistics. There appears to be a small reduction in the number of recorded cases of domestic abuse. However, when 50,000 such incidents are reported each year, the number of cases is far too high. Clearly, we cannot be complacent. We have heard today about the complexities of domestic abuse. Two women a week are killed, the majority of them by their male partner. The spin-off effects on women and children's lives are wide-ranging. Their mental health can be affected, as Margaret Mitchell mentioned. It can also affect their ability to have a home, as Nigel Don said, and it can take them into prostitution, as Trish Godman mentioned. We also know that such women are much more likely to end up abusing themselves, through substance abuse and so on.

We have an awful lot of people to thank today who look after the needs of all those women. Rightly, we have focused on Scottish Women's Aid as it celebrates its 35th anniversary—I use the word “celebrate” without any sense that there is much to celebrate, given that it is still needed. We are absolutely right to support the voluntary sector. I very much welcome the minister's funding announcement in that regard.

Cathy Peattie and a number of other members mentioned the police's role. Fundamentally, one of the clearest representations of the difference between how the issue is tackled in Scotland now and how it was tackled 20 or 30 years ago is the way in which our police forces deal with it. My local force, Lothian and Borders Police, is working with the violence reduction unit. The force's website, which I have visited, provides incredibly wide-ranging information on domestic abuse.

That information is not limited to men's violence against women; there is now a helpline for male victims. That development is welcomed by constituents of mine, who, as male victims, feel the shame that Anne McLaughlin captured in her speech. There is also a recognition that domestic violence happens in all sorts of relationships, including same-sex relationships. All of the organisations that are working in the multifaceted area of violence, including violence within relationships, are to be congratulated on and thanked for all their help.

Malcolm Chisholm was right to say that the problem is rooted in inequality—violence against women is about power and control. We see that most obviously in physical abuse, but all of us know from our experience of life that people are belittled, criticised and kept down, and are not allowed to see their families, to get the support that they might provide, and are not allowed because of cultural issues to seek support. This issue is very complicated.

Rhoda Grant is to be congratulated on introducing her Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill. I wish it well.

10:42

Bill Aitken: A number of interesting speeches have been made in this interesting debate. Sandra White made some particularly interesting points. None of us can be complacent about what is happening in Scotland. However, by introducing the international aspect of the issue, Sandra White indicated just how horrifying things are in certain parts of the world, especially places such as Liberia, Rwanda and Bosnia, where rape against women was used as a weapon, demonstrating a degree of barbarism that few of us can

contemplate. The member was right to bring that issue before the chamber today.

Anne McLaughlin dealt with the question of women's violence against men and with an issue that I know is dear to her heart—namely, the difficulties that are experienced by asylum seekers. She, too, highlighted an international dimension. There may be arguments about whether violence against women justifies individual asylum applications, but those are for another day. It can in no way be gainsaid that violence of that type is totally unacceptable.

I found Malcolm Chisholm's speech deeply depressing—not because of the way in which he put it across, but because of its content. He was totally correct to underline once again in the chamber the serious attitudinal problem that so many young people have in relation to violence against women, which is regarded as acceptable. Where I come from, disputes were settled somewhat more often by pugilistic ability than by the ability to articulate an argument particularly clearly. However, in those days in Maryhill, any concept of a man hitting a woman was totally unacceptable; it was simply not on. Assaulting a woman would have brought particular condemnation from other men on to the head of any man who did it. Young people were conscious of that. Malcolm Chisholm was merely quoting from studies that have been carried out, but I find it depressing that the attitude seems to have changed, which is very concerning.

Trish Godman raised the issue of violence against prostitutes and aspects of human trafficking. Although I do not totally agree with her on other aspects of the matter, as she is aware, I can certainly assure her that no one would take a more serious view of violence against any woman than I would. Human trafficking, for any purpose, is totally unacceptable. The courts must react, and everyone is entitled to their protection. That is especially true in the case of many prostitutes, who work in a very vulnerable situation. On that aspect, perhaps I can give the member some reassurance.

Margaret Mitchell dealt with issues about dowries and forced marriage, which I understand the committee that she convenes is dealing with. We understand the issues there. She also highlighted a situation that is all too prevalent in Glasgow and the west of Scotland, where domestic violence is frequently related to the activities at old firm football matches. That is depressing. Those of us who are interested in football—a number of us who are present in the chamber this morning are—like our teams to win, but when that does not happen there is absolutely no justification for returning home and taking it out on one's partner. That is completely out of order.

Nigel Don, in a typically thoughtful speech, raised the issue of homelessness. Local authorities, and indeed the Scottish Government, have taken various steps over the years to ameliorate the particular difficulties that arise when a woman is forced to flee the familial home. There has been some progress, but the minister might wish to review the situation to see whether anything further can be done in that respect, as it is a very real issue.

In her speech, Cathy Peattie showed a healthy disrespect for the veracity of statistics, and she was right to do so, because we do not really know whether there has been any attitudinal change. We have seen the action that the police and the Crown Office have taken, but has that changed what is happening underneath the surface? We do not know.

Rhoda Grant took the opportunity in her speech to canvass support for her bill, and we will see what happens with it, but it is fair to say that the Justice Committee has found much of the evidence on the matter to be of interest.

10:47

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): As other members have said, this is one of those debates in which we might be happy to take part, but we would prefer for it not to have to take place at all. However, it has been valuable, not least because of the thoughtful speeches that we have heard, and also because it makes us take time to review the action that has been taken to combat violence, to consider the many elements of that violence, to note the progress that has been made and, most important, to acknowledge the work that still needs to be done.

Johann Lamont, Cathy Peattie, Nigel Don and Anne McLaughlin all made thoughtful speeches on domestic abuse. Let me be clear: Scottish Labour believes that domestic abuse, whether physical or psychological, is entirely unacceptable, and we abhor violence in all its forms. It is a fact that 83 per cent of recorded cases of domestic abuse involve a male perpetrator and a female victim. Violence against women is rooted in gender inequality, as is particularly clear in the domestic situation.

Since the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament, much progress has been made in raising awareness of domestic abuse and developing services to support victims. The Parliament has played a crucial part by passing legislation. Today, Rhoda Grant outlined a further piece of legislation that she is pursuing—her Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill—which will provide further support for abused women.

We should not think that the matter is just one of legislation; it is also about ensuring that relevant services are provided, and that those services work together. That includes the police, council departments and the voluntary sector. Progress has also been made in that regard, but we can never be complacent.

Trish Godman spoke about her prostitution bill—the proposed criminalisation of the purchase and sale of sex (Scotland) bill—which seeks to criminalise the purchasers of sexual services. She told us that we should not be put off her proposed bill because it might seem hard, and I hope that members throughout the Parliament will give it further consideration.

Bill Aitken told us of his experience at the domestic abuse court. Although he remains sceptical, many others have seen the advantages of that programme, so I ask the minister to think further about whether it could be rolled out across Scotland.

While we are on justice issues, I ask the minister what monitoring of changes to sentencing policy will take place. In 2008-09, 668 people were given custodial sentences in cases involving domestic abuse; for 402 of them, the sentence was less than three months. What will the impact be when the changes to custodial sentences take effect?

Sandra White highlighted exploitation within the entertainment industry. She made her case well when she said how easy it is to overlook the fact that such activity is a form of violence and to accept it just as part of the fabric of our society. However, it is clear that it can bring about attitudes that see violence as acceptable, and as such it must be taken much more seriously.

Domestic abuse was raised during a meeting that I had with the police just last week in my constituency. I want to emphasise two particular issues that the police raised. The first was to do with women returning to the place where violence has taken place. Why does that happen? Does it happen for practical reasons, such as the need for a home or financial support, or because of the dream of keeping the family together? Alternatively, does it happen because a woman's self-esteem is so low that she does not feel that she deserves any better? How can we be more effective in tackling that?

The other issue that the police raised was education. They stressed that we will never solve the problem unless we start at an early age. That is why projects such as the respect campaign that the Zero Tolerance Charitable Trust introduced in our schools are so important.

I welcome the continuing provision of financial resources that the minister has announced, but I

hear the warning of Malcolm Chisholm and Nigel Don, who pointed out that the single outcome agreements, particularly at a local level, do not necessarily support the words that we hear in the Parliament, so there may be an argument for having some ring fencing.

In closing, I can do no better than to quote from the press release that the Scottish Trades Union Congress issued in support of today's debate:

"Words and strategies will not be enough. Changing attitudes and keeping women and children safe from harm requires investment, both of our time and our money. The STUC will continue to give this the highest priority in the year ahead."

I can guarantee that the Labour Party will continue to do so, too, and I look forward to working with the Scottish Government to ensure that it does likewise.

10:53

Alex Neil: The quality of the debate has shown the Parliament at its best. Perhaps we should all reflect on whether we could learn a lesson or two about being as constructive as we have all been this morning when we deal with such serious subjects. The contributions by members of all parties have been absolutely first class.

The first general lesson that we are all agreed on is the point that Johann Lamont made, which was reiterated by a number of members, that major changes in the culture of Scotland are still required. I hope that by making those changes in the not-too-distant future we will not need to have such debates because there is no domestic violence or violence against women in Scotland. There is no doubt that the culture of the macho man who thinks that he can do anything and get away with it still exists in some parts of Scotland, and we must challenge that in every way and at every turn and every opportunity.

As Bill Aitken said, a lot of what Malcolm Chisholm said about the research study findings was a bit depressing, not because it was Malcolm who delivered it, but because the findings were depressing. The most depressing part of it was the attitude of too many young people, male and female, who think that domestic abuse and violence against woman are an acceptable part of our culture. That shows that one of the priority areas that we have to work on is educating our young people that domestic abuse, in all its forms, is totally unacceptable.

The second dimension was introduced by Sandra White, and as Bill Aitken said, it is important: the international dimension. We are rightly critical about where we are in Scotland and how much more needs to be done here. However, from a Scottish Women's Aid report of a

conference that was held in New York, we can see that we are doing more, and in many respects are further ahead, than many of our counterparts in the UK and internationally. That is not a reason for complacency, but it is worth mentioning how much progress has been made since Scottish Women's Aid was formed 35 years ago. We need to move at a greater pace and on all fronts, but we should not ignore the progress that has been made to date.

The third major lesson from today's debate is the multidimensional nature of violence against women. We heard a thoughtful speech from Trish Godman about prostitution in all its evil forms. We also had a thoughtful speech from Anne McLaughlin about refugees. I say to Margaret Mitchell, in her role as convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee, that I and my colleagues in justice will take seriously the conclusions and recommendations of the Equal Opportunities Committee's excellent report on migration and trafficking. Much of the issue and the legislation around it is reserved, but we will work with our colleagues in Westminster to address the issues that the report highlights.

The Government is also supportive of Rhoda Grant's bill. There was a meeting yesterday with Fergus Ewing. I understand that it was productive, and that the Government is working closely with Rhoda Grant on various aspects of her bill. I hope that she agrees that we are trying to be as helpful as possible.

During her opening remarks, Johann Lamont asked a valid question about an update on the issue of people with no recourse to public funds. She will be familiar with the sojourner project, which is administered through the Home Office. It has been running for some time, and I have been informed that funding for it will continue into the new financial year, which is welcome indeed. To date, 40 women in Scotland have been assisted by the sojourner project pilot. However, I have been dealing with two constituency cases, and I have to say that some of the pilot project is restrictive in nature and it needs to be more flexible to help more women. I know that the project's remit and how it goes forward is under review.

I should also say that, if the Treasury was more flexible—I am not making a party-political point—

Hugh O'Donnell: That is so unlike you.

Bill Aitken: You would never do that.

Alex Neil: I would never do such a thing. Seriously, if the Treasury was more flexible, the Scottish Government would wish to do more to help with funding for women with no recourse to public funding. We will continue to talk to our colleagues at Westminster about that.

We are working on the Forced Marriage etc (Protection and Jurisdiction) (Scotland) Bill, which, if passed, will also mark another advance on the issue.

In my opening speech, I paid tribute to the pioneering work of Strathclyde Police on its GPS project, although Johann Lamont made the point that it is a tragedy that we need such a system in the 21st century. Margaret Mitchell also mentioned the pioneering work that Strathclyde Police has been doing in the run up to, during and immediately after old firm games. It is worth pointing out that, since that work was started almost two years ago, the incidence of domestic abuse around old firm games has been reduced by about 30 per cent. That shows that a proactive approach by the police to prevention and to dealing with the problem can be effective.

As I have nearly run out of time—although I have much more to say—let me say finally that not only are we united in this chamber about the unacceptability of violence against women but there is a great deal of agreement on how we should move forward to do more to tackle the problem.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister should conclude.

Alex Neil: When we decide on our new year resolutions, I hope that we will all resolve to do everything that we can to eradicate from Scotland domestic abuse and violence against women.

Scottish Executive Question Time

Europe, External Affairs and Culture

11:00

Gaelic Language and Culture

1. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how it plans to protect Gaelic language and culture given the current economic position. (S3O-12452)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): We will protect Gaelic language and culture by ensuring that all key elements of Gaelic development remain in place and continue to operate effectively in promoting Gaelic in the current economic climate. For that reason, we have worked hard to protect Gaelic bodies and minimise reductions in the area. We are confident that all key Gaelic activities will continue to operate, and Gaelic will remain a key priority for the Scottish Government.

I am sure that all members will join me in welcoming the announcement yesterday from the BBC trust that BBC Alba will soon be available on Freeview. That is good news: it is fitting recognition of the success and achievements of BBC Alba and it will allow many more people in Scotland to have access to BBC Alba's quality programmes.

John Farquhar Munro: I am sure that the minister appreciates that education is at the core of protecting the Gaelic culture. In communities all over Scotland, there is a lot of pressure on parents to secure a Gaelic education for their children. Does the minister agree that it is now time for parents to be given a right to Gaelic education for their children no matter where they live in Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: That is certainly a position that we support. As the member is aware, we asked Bòrd na Gàidhlig to produce a Gaelic action plan. Its focus and emphasis, particularly in early years and education, was not necessarily on a legislative right at this time, but I think that the direction of travel is as set out by the member. We just have to find the mechanism that we can use to support people, particularly considering the financial constraints. For example, the Scottish Government made an announcement recently about supporting Gaelic development at Glenurquhart primary school, and we are very supportive of moves in the city of Edinburgh to ensure that Gaelic education is promoted, developed and improved.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): What opportunities will be created for the programme-making sector in Scotland by the BBC trust's recent welcome decision? Does the Scottish Government continue to lobby for BBC Alba also to be made available on cable networks?

Fiona Hyslop: Indeed—and I will ensure that the full information is made available to the member on the accessibility of BBC Alba.

In the past year, 50 per cent of all the independent productions in Scotland were commissioned by BBC Alba. That shows that there is an economic argument to support BBC Alba, but it is also good news for independent television production companies.

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The minister mentioned the school in Edinburgh. One of the great successes in Gaelic development in recent years has been the success of the Gaelic school in Glasgow—both primary and secondary combined. What can the minister do to encourage the City of Edinburgh Council to follow Glasgow's lead in that regard? What financial help may she be able to give to help Edinburgh achieve that objective?

Fiona Hyslop: I agree completely with the member: we should promote the success of the Gaelic school. I reassure him that only this week I announced that the Government would support funding for the development of Gaelic education in Edinburgh, particularly for a stand-alone school. I have already announced that this week.

The Gathering

2. George Foulkes (Lothians) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the Minister for Culture and External Affairs plans to repeat the gathering in future years. (S3O-12499)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I have no direct responsibility for the decision on whether any gathering event will be repeated in future years. Although the company that delivered the gathering event encountered serious financial difficulties, the event itself was a huge success. It generated £10.4 million for Scotland's economy and attracted 47,000 visits, with attendees coming to Scotland from around the world.

On that evidence, consideration will be given to any staging of future events such as the gathering. The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism has mandated EventScotland to initiate planning for Scotland's next year of homecoming in 2014. A strategic group is being established, and it will consider the part that any gathering-type event may play in making that year just as successful as our first year of homecoming.

George Foulkes: Does the minister agree that a repeat gathering will be a success only if the organising structure is financially and administratively sound and if it concentrates on bringing the Scottish diaspora—especially the clans—to Scotland and is not used by some people as a party-political flag-waving exercise?

Fiona Hyslop: I certainly do not recognise the latter part of George Foulkes's question. The role of the diaspora is essential in the promotion of Scotland and it was part of the success of the overall homecoming year. The Government will build on that. I am pleased to inform the member that I will make some announcements shortly about how we can further promote Scotland's diaspora both at home and abroad in promoting Scotland's interests.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): Notwithstanding the problems that the minister has acknowledged, does she welcome the more than £10 million boost to the Scottish economy and the more than £8 million for the city of Edinburgh that resulted from the clan gathering, or does she believe, as Lord Foulkes seems to believe, that we can afford to turn up our noses at that level of financial injection?

Fiona Hyslop: Scotland is a warm and welcoming country, and we are looking forward to the hogmanay celebrations, which will see hundreds of thousands of people descending on Edinburgh and other parts of Scotland to celebrate. Any opportunity to promote Scotland is welcome. The year of homecoming was particularly successful, and many other countries are looking to our experience to see what they can learn in doing likewise. We should acknowledge success when we see it and build on it. Undoubtedly, we should learn lessons, but we must also build on our success.

International Development (Ethical Standards)

3. Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it undertakes to ensure that official exchanges with the countries it provides aid to are carried out to the highest ethical standards. (S3O-12487)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Our international development activity and funding support are based on the principles that are enshrined in the Paris declaration on aid effectiveness. Specific elements have been addressed within our funding criteria, where possible, to build the quality and impact of Scotland's contribution to international development.

Bill Wilson: Does the minister agree that all representatives of Scottish and United Kingdom interests on the international stage should support

the full investigation of any instances of alleged corruption in their external dealings by institutions based in Scotland or the United Kingdom? With reference to that, would the minister care to give some advice to the UK Government on its choice of special representatives—royal or otherwise—for trade and investment?

Fiona Hyslop: I agree with the member that allegations of corruption should be fully investigated. I take any allegation of corruption involving Scottish companies very seriously. It might not be appropriate for me to offer advice to the UK Government on its choice of special representatives for trade investment, but the Scottish public will expect anybody who performs those functions to do so to the highest possible standard.

Deaf Culture

4. Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on the “2010 Brussels Declaration on Sign Languages in the European Union”, which emphasises the importance of deaf culture in society and urges it to be protected and promoted nationally and regionally. (S3O-12496)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government welcomes developments that support the languages of Scotland. The “2010 Brussels Declaration on Sign Languages in the European Union”, which was put forward by the national associations of the deaf of the member states of the European Union and its affiliated members—Iceland, Norway and Switzerland—is an important development. The declaration was signed on 19 November 2010, but the resolution has not yet been considered by the European Union.

Cathie Craigie: Does the minister agree that every British Sign Language user should have the right to communicate in their own language in order to protect, preserve and promote their cultural identity? The minister may be aware that I recently consulted on a proposal to introduce a bill that aims to secure BSL as one of Scotland’s official languages, commanding equal respect and status to English and Gaelic. Will the minister support the principles of that bill?

Fiona Hyslop: I am well aware of the bill proposal that Cathie Craigie has put forward and of her long-standing championing of the issue. As with all members’ bills, we must await the results of the consultation on the bill. We will look closely at those results, which will influence the bill as introduced. I assume that it will have to be introduced in the next session of Parliament.

The Government recognises the importance of BSL and has always treated it as a language

rather than as simply a means of communication support and we have provided significant funding for the training of tutors and interpreters. We see that as an important contribution to protecting the language.

When the United Kingdom Government recognised BSL as a language in 2003, the Scottish Government felt that it was not necessary at that time to take any further action, on the basis that, in the activity that we were doing around the issue of language recognition in Scotland, we were treating BSL as a language. I reassure the member that that issue of language recognition in Scotland is currently being explored.

Maid of the Loch

5. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it considers the Maid of the Loch to be a cultural asset and, if so, what assistance it will provide to the Loch Lomond Steamship Company to help her sail again. (S3O-12490)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Maid of the Loch is an important part of the heritage of the Loch Lomond area. The Scottish Government has assisted the Loch Lomond Steamship Company in making contact with Community Enterprise in Scotland, which is helping the company put together an application for consultancy support to develop its financial strategy.

Jackie Baillie: The minister will be aware that her predecessor, Michael Russell, agreed to provide substantially more in-kind assistance to help the Maid of the Loch to be fully restored. It is, therefore, extremely disappointing that she has not honoured that welcome commitment.

It is customary for commitments that are made by a minister to be honoured by their successors in the same Government. As an eternal optimist, I ask the minister, who views the Maid of the Loch as a cultural asset, what practical things she will do to help.

Fiona Hyslop: I reassure the member that we are supporting the project. She will be aware that our consistent advice is that we are unable to offer Scottish Government staff time free of charge to third parties, so secondments tend to be on the basis of mutual funding. On the basis that no financial strategy is in place for the Maid of the Loch, we have provided every support. Indeed, on 16 December, I received correspondence from John Hughes to reassure me that he had met the relevant organisations in order to put forward plans to ensure that that financial strategy is put in place. It is important that it is.

I reassure the member that Scottish Enterprise has contributed £5,000 to a viability assessment to

find out whether the plans to sail the Maid of the Loch on Loch Lomond were viable. It has confirmed that it is in regular contact with the LLSC and has met the company as recently as 18 November to explore whether forthcoming refurbishment plans fit with that viability study. It will continue to work with the company.

I hope that the member, rather than being critical and negative and sniping from the sidelines, will support the Scottish Government's on-going work to support the initiative.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): What steps can the Scottish Government take to encourage the lottery and other agencies to provide the funding that would allow the vessel to be reboilered?

Fiona Hyslop: Having a strong financial strategy will help any bid for lottery funding. The fitting of any new boiler will be dependent on that financial strategy. That is why the support that the Government is providing in relation to Community Enterprise in Scotland and Scottish Enterprise is important.

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Sites

6. Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive when it expects to be informed which Scottish sites have been added to the tentative list for nomination for UNESCO world heritage site status. (S3O-12438)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I understand that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport expects that an announcement revealing which sites have been successful in their applications for inclusion on the new United Kingdom tentative list will be made before the dissolution of the Scottish Parliament in 2011.

Alex Johnstone: I invite the minister to join me in paying tribute to the many Arbroath men and women who have worked closely together to ensure that Arbroath abbey, the site of the signing of the declaration of Arbroath in 1320, is included in the list of sites.

Will the minister ensure that Scottish sites that are proposed for the honour of being given world heritage site status are given a fair hearing and appropriate support, since there will be strong competition from other parts of the UK?

Fiona Hyslop: We are working with the UK department on that, and we were consulted on the selection of assessment panel members to ensure that knowledge and understanding of the Scottish sites are part of the panel's skills base.

I congratulate those who have been campaigning for Arbroath abbey, but Alex

Johnstone will appreciate that I have agreed with UK ministers to refrain from promoting any particular site. I also congratulate St Andrews and those who are campaigning for the Forth bridge, the buildings of Charles Rennie Macintosh, the crucible of iron age in Shetland and the flow country, so that I can treat all the applications equally.

Antarctica

7. Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what role it has in the regulation of activities in Antarctica. (S3O-12473)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Activities in Antarctica are regulated by the Antarctic Treaty, which was signed on 1 December 1959 by the 12 nations that were active on the continent at the time, including the United Kingdom.

Antarctica is not explicitly reserved by the Scotland Act 1998, and observing and implementing international obligations is excepted from the general reservation on foreign affairs. However, as part of our Government-to-Government dialogue, Scottish ministers agreed some months ago that in the case of licensing expeditions and related activities under the Antarctic Act 1994 the UK Government should continue to exercise the relevant functions. In line with that approach, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will continue to deal with applications and licences in respect of British expeditions, including those that are based in Scotland.

Jamie Hepburn: Does the minister share my disappointment that provisions in the Scotland Bill will prohibit members of this Parliament from bringing forward proposals to create a Scottish commissioner for the Antarctic? That would undoubtedly have been a welcome addition to the public landscape in Scotland.

More generally, does the minister agree that, however banal some instances may seem, the re-reservations in the Scotland Bill are, given the co-operative arrangements that are already in existence, not only unnecessary but contrary to the principles of the devolution of power?

Fiona Hyslop: Re-reservations are to be regretted, particularly when it is clear that they are not necessary in terms of administrative agreement.

The idea of having a Scottish commissioner for the Antarctic is interesting. I understand that Sir Michael Forsyth is currently en route to Antarctica as part of a charitable expedition; I am not sure whether he had advance notice that the position might be available. I am sure that members on all

sides of the chamber wish him well in his expedition.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Although that is an important issue, does the minister agree that the people in my constituency of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth have felt during the past month that they are living in Antarctica? It is perhaps easier to get to or about Antarctica than it is to get about the constituency of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth.

Many of the cultural events that happen during the Christmas and new year season have had to be cancelled. Does the Scottish Executive have any pot of money that could assist local organisations that have had to cancel cultural events?

Fiona Hyslop: That is broad and wide ranging. Perhaps the experience of Antarctica, whether for expedition or research purposes, has been well learned in Scotland in recent days.

There is an important point about resilience. Many communities throughout Scotland went ahead with a number of events despite the weather problems. Some events had to be cancelled, but many are being rearranged. I acknowledge Cathie Craigie's point about funding, but there is a point at which Scotland has to get on with the job. We are open for business, and we can get on with things.

A number of the winter festivals that were cancelled will go ahead in January and February—although I particularly regret that the Christmas songs that some of our pupils have diligently learned might have to be replaced for January and February concerts.

Juvenile Pipe Bands (Support)

8. Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it makes available to juvenile pipe bands outwith the education sector. (S3O-12481)

The Minister for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government supports and promotes young pipe bands through the youth music initiative and through our partners Creative Scotland.

The Scottish Government recently announced that the youth music initiative will continue to be funded at the previous level of £10 million per annum through 2011-12. Organisations can apply directly to Creative Scotland in respect of 20 per cent of the fund, which is for independent and national music and arts organisations that provide activities that are designed for young people outside school or nursery.

Stuart McMillan: The minister provided me recently with a very helpful response on funding

for pipe bands, but I would be grateful if she could clarify an element of the criteria. Every year juvenile pipe bands have a throughput of players: some reach the leaving age, new young players come in—some of whom are basic learners on the practice chanter—and some graduate from the chanter to the pipes. As a result, although the bands appear to qualify under at least two of the criteria for those who apply to the fund, the third element is up for debate. Will the minister provide some reassurance that juvenile pipe bands will not be penalised in their funding applications through Creative Scotland? Will she agree to meet me so that we can discuss the matter further?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Please be brief, minister.

Fiona Hyslop: That is an important point. I am happy to take the issue forward with Creative Scotland.

Education and Lifelong Learning

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move on to questions on education and lifelong learning. I go to question 2, from Frank McAveety.

Budget 2011-12 (College Bursary Funding)

2. Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what impact it considers the real-terms reduction in college bursary funding announced in the 2011-12 draft budget will have on further education students. (S3O-12508)

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): Our draft budget ensures that funding for student support in colleges will be protected at a time when Scotland's block grant is being cut by £1.3 billion. That is a clear indication of the priority that we attach to shielding college students from the budget reductions that we are being forced to make elsewhere. The impact will be that, overall, college students will be supported at the same level of resources as this year.

Mr McAveety: I thank the cabinet secretary for her reply. I mean, I thank the new minister for her reply. Sorry about that.

Does the minister share my regret that many colleges in Scotland have had to reduce their bursary support to students and many have had to close their doors to prospective students? The Glasgow College of Nautical Studies has even had to fund uniforms and equipment for students from the college's hardship funds. Does she recognise that reducing bursary support for students even further will only work against young people from ordinary backgrounds having the chance to go on to further and higher education? Will she revisit

the proposal to reduce the bursary budget by £1.5 million?

Angela Constance: I thank Mr McAveety for his faith in me and the promotion that he almost gave me.

We should welcome the fact that the draft budget that the Government has proposed maintains and protects student support at 2010-11 levels. The budget for this year is £84 million, which represents a 6 per cent increase on last year. Therefore, student support budgets are being maintained at record levels. The member might be aware that, on 21 December, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council announced a further £3.5 million for student support.

Although I appreciate that this is a difficult time for colleges and students, given the scale of the cuts that have been levelled at the Government, the member should be assured that we are doing all that we can to support Scotland's students.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise. I should have called question 1, but the member is not here. Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Education Maintenance Allowance (East Kilbride)

4. Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how many people are in receipt of education maintenance allowance in East Kilbride. (S3O-12505)

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): In the academic year 2009-10, 620 people in East Kilbride were in receipt of education maintenance allowance.

Andy Kerr: I thank the minister for her answer and welcome her to her new role.

The guidance on changes to EMA that the Government issued to local authorities in the summer states:

"The removal of ... bonus payments will reduce expenditure but will not, in itself, bring expenditure into line with the available budget."

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has already taken some £6 million out of the pockets of Scotland's poorest families by scrapping EMA bonus payments this year. Will the minister guarantee that EMA will remain in its current form and that no changes will be made in the future?

Angela Constance: I think Mr Kerr will find that we have already given that guarantee. I would have thought that he would welcome the fact that, here in Scotland, we are protecting education maintenance allowance while it is being scrapped in England. The member for East Kilbride might

also be interested to know that there has been a 6 per cent increase in the number of young people in his area who are benefiting from the allowance. I hope that he will join us in celebrating that fact.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member who lodged question 5 is not here.

Farming (Careers Advice)

6. John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what encouragement careers advisers give pupils to interest them in pursuing a career in farming. (S3O-12439)

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): Careers advice in schools is delivered by Skills Development Scotland. The Scottish Government also funds Lantra—the sector skills agency that is responsible for the land sector—to promote skills development in farming and other land-based industries. A key priority for the sector is to raise awareness of the job opportunities that are available and to promote the sector as a career destination of choice.

A series of events with SDS careers staff and skills investment advisers is scheduled to take place during the next 12 months, to highlight the opportunities that the food and drink sector offers and the diversity of career choice, from primary production to manufacturing and processing—in effect, from farm to plate. The approach ensures that staff have the most up-to-date and relevant information when they provide careers information and advice.

John Lamont: Does the minister agree that many careers advisers do not have first-hand experience of the high-level skills and opportunities that are available in farming, for example in production, research, business development, green technology and land management? A number of schemes have been used overseas and in England to encourage school leavers to look more closely at a career in farming. Has the Scottish Government considered using such initiatives in Scotland?

Angela Constance: I know that John Lamont is a constituency member who has a keen interest in farming. He is right to raise the issue, because, in broad terms, the farming industry needs new life-blood for its future and there is a need to encourage young people into the agriculture and land-based sectors. If we can learn lessons from across the United Kingdom and from other countries, we will be more than glad to do so.

The member should be reassured that much good work is going on. The Scottish Government funds Lantra, which runs various successful initiatives, such as the land-based learner of the year awards. Lantra helps the industry to develop

its national occupational standards—including modern apprenticeships. SDS and Lantra work together through various channels, such as websites, contact centres, the network of career centres and the fact sheets that are developed to support the sector. There is also the new entrants to farming scheme, which is available to people under 40. However, the member is right to suggest that there is always more to do and more to learn.

Primary Schools (Proposed Closures)

7. Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what action local authorities are required to undertake when proposing the closure of a primary school. (S3O-12477)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): When local authorities propose the closure of a primary school, they must undertake a consultation, using the updated and robust process that is set out in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

Stewart Maxwell: The cabinet secretary might well be aware of East Renfrewshire Council's proposal to close Robslee primary school and transfer the children to Giffnock primary school, which is causing great concern among the pupils, parents and teachers at both schools. Can the cabinet secretary reassure me that all interested parties, particularly parents, will get the maximum opportunity to take part in any consultation, and that there will be complete transparency in the council's decision-making process following any consultation?

Michael Russell: The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Bill had two intentions: to ensure protection for vulnerable rural schools, which are very much the engine of rural activity and development and which create the potential for future success in rural areas; and to ensure that there would be a level playing field, so that parents would always be part of the process and would be given fair information. Parents would feel that nothing was being concealed and there was no deceit and, at the end of the day, they would have a chance to take part in an open and transparent process.

Parents and communities have clear legal rights under the 2010 act. They have the right to receive accurate, up-to-date, clear information. They have the right to propose alternatives. They have the right to comment. They are part of the process, and the Government will be rigorous in ensuring that the 2010 act is observed in letter and spirit by every local authority in Scotland.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the significant flaws in the consultation on school closures in Argyll and

Bute. Across a whole range of measures, the council has failed to make a case for closure in the overwhelming majority of schools. In particular, the requirements of carrying out a community impact assessment and considering alternative options to closure were absent. The cabinet secretary will be aware that both requirements are statutory.

I have written to the new minister to ask her for a cross-party meeting to discuss the substantial concerns about Argyll and Bute Council's approach. I would be grateful if I could entice the cabinet secretary to provide us all with an early Christmas present by agreeing to that request.

Michael Russell: I am always happy to be enticed by Jackie Baillie, particularly as we get so close to Christmas, but I have to remain unenticed at the moment. Jackie Baillie is aware that, as I have a connection with the Argyll and Bute constituency, it would be quite improper for me to comment on the closures process there. However, the new minister, Angela Constance, has taken responsibility for the matter and I am sure that she will reply very soon to Jackie Baillie's reasonable request for a meeting.

I repeat what I have said about the policy intentions of the 2010 act, which applies throughout Scotland. It was intended that there should be a level playing field, and openness, transparency and accurate information are essential. Of course, parents have the right to request a call-in at the end of the process if they think that those things have not been present. That said, I am unenticed to comment on what is happening in Argyll and Bute, and will remain so.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank the minister for his replies to earlier questions, particularly on the proposed closure in East Renfrewshire of Robslee primary school and Auchenback primary school. For the avoidance of doubt and to provide clarity for members, will the minister advise us of the criteria that will be used, should parents be unhappy with the local authority's decision and request a call-in?

Michael Russell: I am happy to do so. A number of criteria can be used for a call-in decision, but they generally relate to the quality of the process that has been undertaken. For example, a crucial question is whether the local authority had considered the alternatives that had been proposed. The member will be aware that I have recently called in four decisions in the Western Isles, one based on my view that alternatives had not been adequately considered. Another question is whether the information that was provided to parents was and remained accurate during the process. Allegations have been made in Scotland that information changed during the process or was deeply flawed at the

start of it and was not corrected. There are various other reasons for call-ins.

I feel that there is a Christmas truce and that we might play football across the trenches because Mr Macintosh and I normally disagree on such matters. However, we are absolutely at one, as the chamber was at one, on the policy intentions of the 2010 act—that there should be a level playing field, openness and transparency. Parents may not accept and may be very unhappy about a closure, but they should feel that they have been treated with fairness and respect during the entire process. That is crucial to any decisions that are taken under the act.

Aberdeen City Council (Education Budget and Teacher Numbers)

8. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what dialogue it has had with Aberdeen City Council on its education budget and teacher numbers. (S3O-12491)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): The Scottish Government has held discussions with all local authorities to discuss the budget settlement for 2011-12. Those discussions have included consideration of the implications for education budgets, and, within that, plans for teacher employment.

Richard Baker: I may be at risk of ending the Christmas truce.

The cabinet secretary is keen on talking about which councils are reducing teacher numbers, but in Aberdeen, where there is a Scottish National Party council, teacher numbers have been cut by 250. That is the second highest cut in Scotland. What dialogue has the cabinet secretary had with Aberdeen City Council about its plans, given that teachers in the city are threatening to strike for the first time in two decades over the prospect of hundreds more jobs going as a result of cuts of £120 million?

Michael Russell: As might be expected, the member has jabbed his Pickelhaube straight back on to his head and has returned to fighting between the trenches.

There are always difficulties in adjusting education budgets. That is particularly the case when there are savage cuts from Westminster. In such circumstances, I would expect local authorities to work in the spirit and within the letter of the deal that we reached with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which every Scottish local authority has accepted. That deal should provide the framework for moving forward with education. I hope that it will influence the discussions in Aberdeen and everywhere else.

College Student Support Budget 2011-12

9. Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what the real-terms change to the college student support budget will be in 2011-12, as a result of funding remaining at the 2010-11 level. (S3O-12522)

The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): My reply is similar to that which I gave Mr McAveety a few minutes ago. Our draft budget ensures that funding for student support in colleges will be protected, at a time when Scotland's block grant is being cut by £1.3 billion. That is a clear indication of the priority that we attach to shielding college students from the budget reductions that we are being forced to make elsewhere.

Cathy Peattie: Is the minister aware of the role that colleges play as a stepping stone in education? Will she reflect on the implications for training for young people to take up much-needed green jobs? If support is not available for such training, how will the Government fulfil its commitment to meet climate change targets without a skilled workforce to meet those challenges?

Angela Constance: I reassure Mrs Peattie that I value greatly the role and contribution of Scotland's colleges in providing education and training opportunities. I appreciate that life is difficult for college students who are taking their first tentative steps into the adult world or the world of work. Some college students are parents, some are part-time workers and others have been made redundant and are taking up opportunities to retrain. The point about the importance of skilling up our workforce for green jobs is well made. It is important that we focus on that as we go forward. The Scottish Government has done well in protecting student support budgets. Clearly, I would like to do more, but the Government operates within the limits of the housekeeping money that it is given by Westminster.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the minister to her new role. Notwithstanding her earlier comments, there is huge pressure on college budgets and on the delivery of student support, which is leading to cuts in child care provision at colleges and increasing the pressure on that provision, as more adults with caring responsibilities try to return to college. What steps will the minister take to ensure that child care budgets do not run dry, as they have in previous years?

Angela Constance: Mrs Baker should be reassured by the action that the Government has already taken. Student support budgets are being maintained at an all-time high and at record levels. As I said to Mr McAveety, on 21 December, the

Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council announced a further £3.5 million for student support. The allocation of those funds is a matter for the individual colleges, which gives them scope and flexibility. We do not have strict eligibility criteria that are operated by a central agency. Colleges can make assessments based on face-to-face contact with students. Colleges the length and breadth of Scotland work hard to support parents who are college students.

Scottish Baccalaureate

10. Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how many higher education institutions have recognised the Scottish baccalaureate. (S3O-12453)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): The Scottish baccalaureate has been recognised by many universities, in their prospectuses and, more generally, in developing the knowledge and skills that are necessary for higher education. The number of centres that are approved to deliver the baccalaureate has doubled this year to 140. As uptake of the qualification increases, I expect recognition by universities also to increase.

Hugh O'Donnell: Given the range of weighting that we have in relation to exams for the curriculum for excellence and the Scottish baccalaureate, how will the package come together to deliver a comprehensive range of examinations for our students?

Michael Russell: Very simply, the Scottish credit and qualifications framework provides an internationally respected framework for understanding how all levels of examination in Scotland, from the very basic right up to the postgraduate level, fit within a comprehensive system. We are proud of that and we are already exporting it. For example, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership has advised the Hong Kong Government on how it could put in place a similar framework. We also see how the baccalaureate is contributing as part of the whole, for example by allowing advanced standing in university entrance. There is a way in which qualifications ratchet up and do different things. We are developing a robust and effective system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Elizabeth Smith, very briefly, please.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary update us on the Scottish baccalaureate for the arts and social sciences?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly, minister.

Michael Russell: I can indeed. We will have a report early in 2011 that I will share with the chamber. I am enthusiastic to ensure that the baccalaureate continues to grow, but it must be evidence based.

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): That was a little too brief, minister. *[Laughter.]*

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You were not in the chair earlier, so I apologise to the Deputy Presiding Officer, the minister and other members for missing my question, which was the first education question. I did so for no reason other than that I forgot about today's different timings. There is no excuse for that and I apologise.

The Presiding Officer: I appreciate your gesture and your honesty, Mr Purvis. Thank you for that.

General Questions

11:41

Air Discount Scheme

1. Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what assessment it has made of the impact on island businesses of the removal of business-related travel from the air discount scheme. (S3O-12450)

The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure (Keith Brown): The Scottish Government's position is that the air discount scheme is not intended to cover business-related travel and the original notification to the European Commission in 2006 did not expressly request it. Although we are aware that business-related claims have been made, we do not believe that a publicly funded scheme should be used to subsidise public and private sector travel budgets.

No assessment has been made by the Scottish Government of the impact of our decision to remove business-related claims. Clearly, the impact on public bodies and private sector companies in the eligible areas will depend on their level of scheme use.

Liam McArthur: I welcome Keith Brown to his new position and the various challenges that he will find in his new portfolio, some of which will continue to exist after the snow melts. As an early priority, will he look again at the decision taken by his predecessor to cut business-related travel from the highly successful scheme? The scheme was introduced in 2005 by my colleague Tavish Scott and has delivered real social and economic benefits to Orkney and communities throughout

the Highlands and Islands by helping to reduce the high cost of travel on our lifeline air services.

Keith Brown's predecessor developed a reputation for announcing first and consulting later. I urge the new minister to adopt a different approach, undertake a full consultation with my constituents and others who are affected, and begin the process of dumping unworkable and unfair changes to a scheme that has done so much to help retain population in our more fragile communities by supporting economic development.

Keith Brown: I am happy to meet Liam McArthur at any time to discuss any issues that he wishes to discuss and, where possible, I commit to consulting well in advance of making decisions.

When the scheme was notified to the European Commission, a request for use by business passengers was not made. In fact, the scheme is covered by the aid of a social character provision, which is designed to offer social support to individual customers. The scheme also specifically prohibits use by national health service employees, although I am not sure why they should be treated differently from employees of other organisations. We are committed to continuing the scheme, but on the basis of how it was notified.

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 was not lodged.

Breastfeeding (Community Mothers)

3. Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on the importance of services such as community mothers in the support and promotion of breastfeeding. (S3O-12524)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Services such as community mothers and other peer-support programmes are recognised by the Scottish Government as a valuable method of supporting mothers who choose to breastfeed.

The Scottish Government is about to launch "Improving Maternal and Infant Nutrition: A Framework for Action". One of its actions is that a national framework for breastfeeding peer-support programmes be developed and such programmes be made available in each national health service board area, targeted at areas with low breastfeeding rates.

Elaine Smith: Does the minister recognise that the Scottish Government's cuts to local authority budgets are directly affecting front-line services such as community mothers, which supports and sustains breastfeeding? It is a particularly important service in places such as Lanarkshire,

where there are worryingly low breastfeeding rates. Does the minister consider that any decision to cut funding to community mothers projects would contravene duties under section 19 of the Equality Act 2010, given the disproportionate impact on women?

Shona Robison: Given the massive cuts to the Scottish Government's budget from the United Kingdom Government, the settlement for local government has been widely welcomed as good. It is up to each local authority—including North Lanarkshire in the member's area—to decide how to spend that money. I hope that the council wants to give priority to supporting breastfeeding initiatives and community mothers. My expectation is that NHS Lanarkshire will continue to support community mothers in the best way that it can and I am happy to provide the member with more details about its plans for doing so.

Business Support (West Dunbartonshire)

4. Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it gives to businesses in the West Dunbartonshire area. (S3O-12482)

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism (Jim Mather): An extensive array of support and advice services is available to West Dunbartonshire businesses from a wide range of public and private sector organisations including Scottish Enterprise, the small business gateway, the local council, Scottish Development International, Skills Development Scotland, VisitScotland, the third sector, financial institutions and other sectoral advisory bodies.

Gil Paterson: Will the minister provide reasons why the small business bonus scheme is not being made mandatory, as is being done with the equivalent scheme in England?

Jim Mather: We will monitor the recent policy changes in England, although they appear only to remove the central requirement for an application form and, at first glance, seem to fall short of making the scheme fully mandatory.

The Scottish Government will continue to take positive action to help small businesses and confirmed the continuation of the small business bonus scheme this year. Earlier this month, the First Minister wrote to more than 19,300 potentially eligible business premises to raise awareness of the scheme and encourage participation.

I note that the temporary expanded English business rate relief scheme remains significantly less generous than the small business bonus scheme, under which a Scottish business can be up to £3,000 better off this year.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie)

(Lab): Will the minister intervene to ensure that Scottish Enterprise honours the agreement between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government with regard to funding for the urban regeneration companies such as Clydebank Re-built? Will he or the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth meet me in advance of any decision being made about the future funding of Clydebank Re-built from Scottish Enterprise or Scottish Government sources?

Jim Mather: I am very conscious of the public money that has gone into the project in question and am more than happy to meet Mr McNulty. I am happy to meet, talk and see how we take the matter forward.

Glasgow Airport Rail Link

5. Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North)

(Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will consider reinstating the Glasgow airport rail link project once the £2.2 billion borrowing capacity proposed in the Scotland Bill starts to become available and whether it will halt the planned sale of land while options are assessed. (S3O-12489)

The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure

(Keith Brown): We have no plans to reinstate the branch line element of the Glasgow airport rail link project and we continue to dispose of surplus land.

Ms Alexander: I am disappointed in that answer, given that the Government claimed to have reluctantly decided to cancel the project. Whoever is in government now faces the prospect of having access to £2.2 billion, starting in 2013 with specific projects. I wonder why the Government will not consider reinstating GARL, given the fact that it claimed that the decision to cancel the project was taken reluctantly and that it is the only capital project in the history of devolution to have been cancelled mid construction.

Keith Brown: It is worth considering some of the real-life circumstances that we face, such as the departing Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the previous Westminster Government saying that there was no money left, and the massive cuts to the capital budget from which we are suffering. Wendy Alexander cannot hide from those facts, no matter how hard she tries. The simple fact is that the cuts to our revenue budget are dwarfed by those to our capital budget.

Wendy Alexander's disappointment is far less than mine at what the previous Labour Government did to the economy and the way the current Government has continued to apply with vigour the cuts that the Labour Party signalled. It is

our duty to dispose of assets that we no longer need, to get best value for the taxpayer.

Medical Professionals (NHS Grampian)

6. Maureen Watt (North East Scotland)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many medical professionals are employed by NHS Grampian compared with May 2007. (S3O-12484)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Information for May 2007 is not held centrally, as the annual NHS National Services Scotland manpower census is conducted on 30 September each year. However, for the period from September 2006 to September 2010, medical staff numbers in NHS Grampian grew by 190, which is an increase of 11.4 per cent.

Maureen Watt: Does the cabinet secretary believe that the fact that NHS Grampian employs more nurses, doctors, dentists and other health professionals than it did at the start of this Administration—professionals who would not be there had Labour won in 2007—is a clear demonstration that the Scottish National Party Government has the national health service at the heart of its priorities?

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree entirely with the sentiments of Maureen Watt's question. On a range of measures, even the hardest critics in the Opposition would recognise that this SNP Government has had the NHS absolutely at its heart. More people are working in and will be working in the NHS at the end of this session of Parliament than were at the start of the session. That is one reason why we have seen such incredibly good strides forward on waiting times, to use one example.

Let me take the opportunity of the looming festive season to thank, on behalf of us all, everybody who works in our NHS for the tremendous job that they do.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Lab): I join the cabinet secretary in thanking all staff for their hard work, particularly during the bad weather when so many of them made such a huge effort to keep the service going. However, I bring us back to the reality of the fact that the workforce group that she set up is faced with cuts of 1,500 nurses, 230 allied health professionals and 68 doctors this year. When will the workforce plans for next year be available? How will the cabinet secretary ensure that medical graduates currently being trained will have adequate job opportunities, given her plans to cut 25 per cent from foundation year 1 and foundation year 2 and 40 per cent of doctors from the certificate of completion of training?

Nicola Sturgeon: Richard Simpson should perhaps spend a bit more time studying these issues. If he did, he would be aware of the reshaping the medical workforce programme, which is about ensuring that Scotland can move from a service delivered by doctors in training to one delivered by trained doctors. It is a very important piece of work. There is unanimity among those on the front line behind that change, and I would sincerely hope to have Richard Simpson's full support for progress towards that aim.

Workforce planning for next year will happen in the same way as it does every year. Again, I would expect Richard Simpson to consider that to be the appropriate way forward.

I repeat that, thanks to the steps that this Government has taken, more people will be working in our NHS at the end of this session of Parliament than were at the beginning. I hope that everyone welcomes that. The NHS, as everybody knows, faces a number of challenges over the next few years. It is incumbent on us all to get fully behind those who work in our health service and to support them rather than carp from the sidelines.

Ski Industry

7. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it takes to support the ski industry. (S3O-12437)

The Minister for Public Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government recognises the valuable economic benefits and employment opportunities that snow sports bring to Scotland and we continue to support their development. Through sportscotland, VisitScotland and our enterprise agencies, we provide funding to enable the industry to realise its full potential. Building on the success of last season, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise have commissioned a strategic review of snow sports that is designed to identify what further can be done to develop this important industry.

Nanette Milne: I refer members to my entry in the register of interests.

The minister will be aware that the A93 is the main route through from Aberdeenshire to Perthshire and that it is the only way to reach the area's largest winter employer, the Glenshee ski centre. The A93 is vital to Braemar's economic stability and a key component in helping the Cairngorms National Park Authority to achieve its fourth statutory aim:

"To promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities."

With that in mind, will the minister agree to discuss with the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure how the maintenance of the A93 can be improved to support the ski area and economic growth in the area?

Shona Robison: I have been up to Glenshee a couple of times this season and I can confirm that the facilities and conditions are fantastic. I encourage others to go. The A93 is a local road that stretches from Perth and Kinross to Aberdeenshire and winter maintenance is a matter for those local authorities. I know that those local authorities take the requirement to keep the road open very seriously, because of the economic benefits that Glenshee brings to the area. I saw for myself how hard they were working to ensure that cars could get access to the Glenshee centre but, of course, we will keep a close eye on these matters.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Ross and Cromarty District Council took to an advanced and costed stage an exciting project to establish skiing on the slopes of Ben Wyvis, near Dingwall, in John Farquhar Munro's constituency. Unfortunately, all those years ago the then Conservative Government refused to grant the capital consent to the council and the project was shelved. While I cannot ask the minister to commit to capital spend, will she agree to let her officials meet me to see the documents, which are very interesting, and to discuss whether the project could be revived in some future year?

Shona Robison: I am always happy to meet or have my officials meet to discuss such matters, but we have to recognise the real constraints on capital investment across the board, which make it extremely difficult to make capital investment of that nature. There is, of course, always the opportunity for commercial interest in such ventures. I encourage Jamie Stone to encourage, in turn, commercial interest in that initiative.

Nurses (NHS Ayrshire and Arran)

8. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the change has been in the number of nurses who are employed by NHS Ayrshire and Arran since May 2007. (S3O-12470)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Nicola Sturgeon): Information for May 2007 is not centrally held for the reasons that I explained in a previous answer. However, for the period from September 2007 to September 2010, nursing staff numbers in NHS Ayrshire and Arran increased by 470, an increase of 12.4 per cent.

Kenneth Gibson: I am pleased that the cabinet secretary is able to confirm that hundreds more front-line health professionals, including nurses, are now working in NHS Ayrshire and Arran than was the case when the Scottish Government came into office, not least in the accident and emergency unit that her predecessor tried to close. That proves this Government's commitment to continuous improvement in the health of people in Ayrshire and Arran and, indeed, the health of the nation.

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree with Kenny Gibson. The principal Opposition party does not like to hear the facts, but the facts are—as Kenny Gibson narrates—that more people will be working in our national health service at the end of this session of the Parliament than were at the start of it. That is good news for patients across Scotland. The extra good news for Ayrshire and Arran is that there is still a functioning accident and emergency department at Ayr hospital, which it would not have had if the previous Administration had stayed in office.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will of course be aware of the recent Government statistics that show that there are already 550 fewer nurses in the NHS. Before the financial year is out, a total cut of 1,500 nurses will be made. Does the cabinet secretary, who I know is fond of hearing the facts, recognise that, according to nurses themselves, the strain that is being felt is considerable—operations are being cancelled, re-admissions are up and the risk of contracting hospital-acquired infections is increasing? Does she recognise that her boast about the increase in the number of staff in the NHS is perhaps down to much higher increases in managers and not the nurses who deliver front-line care?

Nicola Sturgeon: If Jackie Baillie had listened, she would have heard the figures that I gave in response to Maureen Watt and Kenny Gibson's questions, which were for doctors and nurses. There are more doctors and more nurses. I appreciate that Jackie Baillie much prefers to attack the NHS than to praise it for the fantastic work it does, but the facts speak for themselves. This is a challenging time for our NHS. This Government is determined to stand by our NHS and ensure that we get through these tough times. It would better befit the Opposition if it showed similar support for the hard-working people in our national health service.

The Presiding Officer: Question 9 is withdrawn.

Inverness Bypass

10. David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what

discussions it has recently had with Highland Council regarding the proposed Inverness bypass. (S3O-12525)

The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure (Keith Brown): My predecessor, Stewart Stevenson, met representatives of Highland Council on 10 November to discuss developments regarding the proposed Inverness bypass as part of the strategic transport projects review joint action plan.

Highland Council is progressing a study into connectivity in south-west Inverness that includes options to cross the river Ness and the Caledonian canal. Transport Scotland continues to work with Highland Council as part of the stakeholder group for that study, meeting most recently on 10 December.

David Stewart: The minister will be well aware that the city of Inverness desperately needs a bypass because of the staggering population growth in the area over the past decade. Does he share my view that a bypass would slash traffic congestion and provide well-needed stimulus to business and tourism? Can he offer any message of hope today as an early Christmas present for the Highlands?

Keith Brown: I am aware that the member is very well versed in these matters, including the circumstances of the Scottish Government's commitment on the eastern link and the council's commitment on the western link. Those options, which include crossings of the river Ness and the Caledonian canal, are out to public consultation at the moment. The consultation does not close until 28 January. I assure him that we will take a very close look at the responses as soon as we can, once the consultation process is closed.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

Engagements

1. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S3F-2800)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Later today, I will meet the new Minister for Transport and Infrastructure to discuss the latest energy statistics for Scotland, which show that, last year, there was an increase of more than 5 per cent in the volume of renewable output from Scotland and that we are well on course to exceed our target of 31 per cent for next year. I know that Iain Gray, as an enthusiast for renewable energy, will welcome those figures at this Christmas time.

Iain Gray: It is indeed Christmas time, and we are nearly at the end of 2010. The First Minister promised us a big year this year. He was going to have an independence bill on Burns night and a referendum on St Andrew's day, but he did not. Less than a quarter of Scots now support his independence project. Is Alex Salmond really still one of them?

The First Minister: The latest poll that I have seen—an Angus Reid survey from last night—shows that Scottish National Party support has increased by 14 per cent since the election this year. The argument that will be persuasive is that independence—control of our economy—offers Scotland a real and better future. The proposals from all three of the unionist parties—Labour, Conservative and Liberal—offer us nothing that will improve our economy. That is what will make the difference and why Scots will back an independent future.

Iain Gray: I thought that I should check the latest arguments for independence, so I went to the SNP website this morning. When I clicked on "Independence" and "Success Stories", all the old favourites were there. Let us start with Iceland. The website states that

"Independence has given Iceland the freedom to become a world leader"

and that

"The Icelandic economy has been growing steadily since the 1990s."

I do not think so.

What about Ireland? The website states:

"Independence has given Ireland the freedom to compete with others on a level playing field, and win."

In the real world, it is nearly 2011, but, in Alex Salmond's Bute house Brigadoon, it is still 1990-

something. The First Minister does not really still believe this stuff, does he?

The First Minister: As First Minister, I must do two things. First, I must address the miserable legacy that was left by the Labour United Kingdom Government, which has resulted in £1,300 million of cuts in Scotland this coming year, two thirds of which were planned by Alistair Darling, the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer—cuts tougher and deeper than those of Margaret Thatcher.

Secondly, I must try to get the resilience to respond to that difficult situation. I welcome the fact that, in the second quarter of this year, Scotland not only outperformed the United Kingdom but in economic performance was second only to the Scandinavian countries, including Norway—across the North Sea—which has breezed through the recession more successfully than any other country in Europe. Of course, Norway has substantial oil and gas reserves. If only Scotland could get a Christmas present of substantial oil and gas reserves and the economic power to use them for the benefit of the Scottish people.

Iain Gray: I thought that Norway would come up. After all, the arc of prosperity stretches all the way from Trondheim to Oslo these days—except on the SNP website, where it still includes Montenegro. The website states:

"Montenegro shows us just how easy it can be to become an independent country. 40 days is all it took for Montenegro to regain her freedom.

It could be Scotland next."

Yes—40 days, two world wars, the Balkan conflict, ethnic cleansing, a war crimes tribunal and a United Nations peace-keeping mission.

Members: Shame!

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): Order.

Iain Gray: You could not make this stuff up—unless you are the SNP. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order! The chamber will come to order.

Iain Gray: Iceland, Ireland and Montenegro—is it any wonder that the First Minister has lost the argument on independence? [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Ms Cunningham! Order!

The First Minister: We often welcome ambassadors from other countries to the gallery. Iain Gray will have to be very careful about how many countries he insults. I thought that this was the run-up to Christmas, but Iain Gray is giving us 1 April.

Under the United Kingdom, we face the dismal prospect of not just one year of cuts but many,

many years of cuts. With economic power, we can grow the economy and benefit the Scottish people. As we come to May's election, beyond this Christmas spirit from Iain Gray, the choice will be quite simple. It will be between the Labour, Tory and Liberal option, which offers no economic power and less money for Scotland even compared with the cutbacks that we have had; and a future in which economic power delivers for the Scottish people. That is why we are very confident that, in the new year, people will vote for independence for this country.

Iain Gray: It is the party that says on its website that Montenegro shows how easy independence is that insults the history of that country and that people.

The First Minister has lost the argument on independence, dropped his independence bill and run away from his referendum. Thanks to the SNP, we have lost the ability to use our tax-varying powers. He has left the Parliament with less power than he found it with. Two weeks ago, he led his MSPs to vote against more powers for Scotland. Everyone knows that Alex Salmond has failed as a First Minister—3,000 teachers know it and 500 nurses know it—but has he not also failed as a nationalist?

The First Minister: If I were Iain Gray, I would not go into poll comparisons between me and him, as it wouldnae turn out very well from his point of view.

Members: Go on.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Do you want to hear them? Should we give the poll comparisons?

Members: Yes!

The First Minister: I think that we should. Iain Gray has been returning ratings lower than those of Wendy Alexander.

On leadership capability, I am grateful to another website for reminding me that, on 15 January 2008, when Wendy Alexander was leader of the Labour Party and Iain Gray was shadow finance secretary, the Labour Party proposed a cut of £10 million in winter maintenance. My goodness! Is it not lucky that Parliament did not accept that particular Labour amendment? What a pity we wasted £500 million on an Edinburgh tram system that was championed by Iain Gray.

As for the achievements of the Government, let us consider the delivery of free education in Scotland, the 1,000 more police officers on the streets, the small business bonus and the saving of Monklands and Ayr accident and emergency units—which might come in quite useful in these frozen conditions. Above all, there is the council

tax freeze, which has helped every family in Scotland. Iain Gray's position was that he was for it; then he was against it; then it was mibbe aye and mibbe no. It is delivery and achievements such as those that I have mentioned that will secure the return of an SNP Government.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

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

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S3F-2801)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I spoke to the Prime Minister on Sunday.

Annabel Goldie: Scotland is still in the icy grip of winter. Two weeks ago, I raised with the First Minister the "Scottish Road Network" report, which was published back in August. It promised that an even wider review of the winter resilience of Scottish transport would be published in the autumn but, a fortnight ago, it had not been published and the First Minister did not seem to know what I was talking about. I am sure that, with his legendary athleticism, he bounded out of the chamber to order his civil servants to produce it. My question is simple: what did it say?

The First Minister: Eleven short-term recommendations were made. If Annabel Goldie had read the report when she asked the question, she would have known that all of them were being implemented. In addition, suggestions were made for the medium term and the longer term. We have had particularly effective resilience in salt and grit supplies in Scotland, the need for which was one of the big lessons from last year, but there are still lessons to learn, hence the six-point plan on transport that the new Minister for Transport and Infrastructure announced and the measure that we are taking to ensure that fuel oil and liquefied petroleum gas for heating are delivered to people who need them in the present circumstances.

Difficult weather brings difficult conditions—that is pretty obvious. We have had the worst December on record in Scotland. When I spoke to the Prime Minister on Sunday, much of our discussion was about the inability to have Heathrow airport open over a period of days and the variety of transport problems in England—particularly those with the east coast main line—that have had knock-on consequences for Scotland.

I would have thought that, in those circumstances, Annabel Goldie would be in a mood in which she was at least prepared to accept that, in challenging, difficult conditions, it is not possible for any transport minister or any Government to keep open every airport, every air route and every rail line in all circumstances. I was surprised by the lack of clamour from Tory and

Liberal members for the resignation of the transport minister in London.

Annabel Goldie: I have had a lengthy response to something that I did not ask about, but let me publicly pay credit to the Prime Minister, whose communication with the First Minister at the weekend I was informed about. I am extremely glad about that improved cross-border co-operation between the two Parliaments and the two Governments. I join the First Minister in praising everyone who is going to extraordinary lengths to keep Scotland moving, but that is the reality of the situation that we are in—how do we keep Scotland moving?

Three weeks ago, the First Minister said to me:

“we have two months’ supply of grit and salt in Scotland at the present moment, even under heavy usage conditions.”—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2010; c 31183.]

In other words, he assured us that we had supplies for all of Scotland for all of December and all of January under heavy usage but, in the past 24 hours I have received reports that a number of councils have confirmed that their remaining salt stocks can be counted in days rather than the weeks that we thought we had. One council is rationing and, even when salt is on order, there are still uncertainties about delivery dates. How much salt does Scotland currently have? How many days will it last? Is rationing more widespread? When will fresh supplies arrive?

The First Minister: The direct answer to the question is that we have 140,000 tonnes in Scotland at present. We have 150,000 tonnes on order for January. We have good confidence in those deliveries because, fortunately, the Scottish Government, in addition to buying up a resilience supply as part of the implementation of the 11 points in the document to which Annabel Goldie referred, we had the foresight to make orders that will arrive in the first week of January. Those are orders that are external to the UK supplies, which, as the Prime Minister and I discussed, are under considerable pressure—indeed, they are inadequate to meet the UK’s needs. That is why we have ordered externally, from Peru, India and a variety of other locations, and that is why we have a resilience stock.

I say gently to Annabel Goldie that there is significantly more pressure on the supplies of certain councils in England, after the weather that has been experienced there, than there is on the supplies of councils in Scotland. In Scotland, we have managed to use the resilience supplies—I can give Ms Goldie a list of the councils that have benefited from that—to ensure that the salt and grit are there to keep Scotland moving. We will continue to do that; that was the purpose of building up the resilience stocks.

We are now into a fourth week of suffering in Scotland and my view on the extraordinary conditions is that there are countless thousands of people in Scotland in the health service, the public services, the social care system and the voluntary sector, as well as the gritters, the drivers and the snow plough operators, who are working shift after shift to keep this country and its economy moving. I know that Annabel Goldie understands and welcomes that but, at this Christmas time, let us salute those people who have done exceptional things over the past three weeks and compliment them on their efforts for Scotland.

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-2802)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I am going to book an appointment at his constituency surgery, and then I will find out what he really, really thinks. [*Laughter.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Tavish Scott: This morning’s news of a serious accident on the A9 reminds us of the human tragedy that cold weather has the power to bring. Reports from Scotland’s hospitals show that three times more people are suffering from broken and fractured bones from falls, which is putting the service under the same pressure as a single major emergency would. The report of the Scotland-wide Scottish salt group says that councils have requested the release of 20,000 tonnes of the 25,000 tonne strategic stockpile. Is the Government directing which parts of Scotland are given priority?

The First Minister: Yes. That is the purpose of the Scottish salt cell, which has been in operation for some weeks now. That is why the strategic supply has been released. I can provide details about how the supply is being replenished. All that is being done, even in the current exceptional conditions, because of foresight and planning.

Tavish Scott referred to the accident on the A9, which was a very serious incident indeed. There was one fatality, one serious injury and three other injuries. It involved three heavy goods vehicles. Diversions are in place northbound and southbound but, given the inevitable accident investigation, the road closure will be significant and we will update MSPs about it later today.

Tavish Scott: I am grateful for that, and I would be grateful if the First Minister could make the information available to all members about the councils that are receiving grit and those to which it is being directed.

As the cold temperatures continue, does the First Minister recognise that thousands of people in all parts of Scotland are worried about the heating oil supplies? What assurance can he give about that? What action can be taken to help people who are not on the official list of vulnerable people but who are on the verge of having no heating on Christmas day? How can people get on to the list of vulnerable customers? Does it include families with new-born children? What should people do if they are not on the list of the vulnerable but they still have no oil for their heating?

The First Minister: In the temperatures that we are suffering, our definition of “vulnerable people” is families without heating. That is why the seven-point protocol that was released yesterday, which has now been signed up to by all the oil distributors and the vast majority of the liquefied petroleum gas producers, is so invaluable in making sure that every family has heating for Christmas.

I should point out that press reports occasionally give a misleading impression. The resilience room contacted Shell immediately about a story that appeared in a newspaper yesterday about something that looked troublesome and outwith the agreed protocol. The information that we received from the company is that the person concerned had received their fuel on the scheduled day, and that their tank was 30 per cent full. It is understandable that people get anxious when they see press stories about difficulties with deliveries. However, thanks to the additional supplies that have come in by tanker to Aberdeen and Inverness, and the relaxation in drivers' hours, which will run well into January, we are confident that the heating companies will be able to get through the backlog in time for Christmas. That is the strong position that we are in at the moment, and facilities are being made available for people who run dry—the protocol accommodates that—to make sure that our families have heating for Christmas.

Coastguard Stations

4. Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will make representations to the United Kingdom Government regarding the proposal by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to reduce the number of coastguard stations, in light of their role in protecting Scotland's marine and coastal environment. (S3F-2809)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I thank Alasdair Allan for his question and bringing the issue to the attention of Parliament. Although there has been substantial publicity about the issue, with everything else that has been happening, I do not

think that the significance of the issue has been understood. The plans will have a significant impact on Alasdair Allan's constituency. Richard Lochhead has written to the UK Government to highlight our grave concerns about the matter. Scotland is a maritime nation with one of the longest coastlines in Europe. That is reflected in the importance of our maritime industries such as fishing, which generates tens of millions of pounds; oil and gas, which generate billions of pounds; and the growing offshore renewables sector, which will also generate billions of pounds. Given that level of maritime activity, the proposed closure of 60 per cent of Scotland's current maritime and coastal stations is very serious, and that is how we are treating it.

Alasdair Allan: Does the First Minister agree that the proposals to reduce five coastguard stations in Scotland to one full-time and one part-time station imply that calls at night from any vessel in difficulty off a vast area of the Scottish coastline, and indeed far into the north Atlantic, would be taken by a single centre staffed by people who could not possibly be expected to have local knowledge? Will he acknowledge that, taken together with the intention to withdraw emergency tug services, the proposals are not just ill thought out but reckless?

The First Minister: I agree with Alasdair Allan. There are improvements that modern technology can allow, but local knowledge in coastguard stations is still invaluable—and that applies to Stornoway and elsewhere. The coalition Government's proposals are ill thought out. The Government and, I hope, the Parliament will do everything in our power to oppose any reckless measure that may jeopardise maritime safety.

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that the announcement last week of the consultation to modernise the services will result in the closure of Clyde coastguard station in Greenock. The station looks after the Clyde, the busiest gateway to our shores from Europe and the UK. It manages Ministry of Defence traffic, including submarines, significant ferry routes, cargo traffic and an increasing number of cruise ships. The proposals will ensure that those services are looked after from Belfast, Stornoway or Liverpool. Will the First Minister convey in the strongest terms that the Parliament, I am sure, believes that the proposals as set out are not only daft but dangerous?

The First Minister: At this Christmas time, I find myself agreeing with Duncan McNeil, although I must say as the ghost of Christmas past that I was concerned about the last round of closures of coastguard stations, which occurred in 2000.

I was disappointed with the UK Government's consultation document in a number of ways. It

does not list any of the devolved Administrations as consultees and we were informed about the proposals at the same time as they were announced by the Westminster Government. I do not regard that as adequate consultation.

Of much more importance, however, is the inherent danger in the nature of some of the proposals. I believe that, given the wealth, industry and activity around Scotland's coastline, if we can unite as a Parliament, at the very least we can secure some mitigation of the extreme proposals. I will therefore be marching arm in arm with Duncan McNeil against these reckless proposals. Together, our united efforts will secure a victory for Scotland.

Liam McArthur (Orkney) (LD): I echo the sentiments expressed by Alasdair Allan. As the First Minister will be aware, over recent years successive fisheries deals have resulted in many vessels being forced to steam further west and north to avoid putting pressure on cod stocks. Does he agree that that is just one further example of why the Stornoway and Lerwick coastguard stations must both be retained? Will he do all that he can to ensure that those two key stations are not played off one against the other?

The First Minister: Yes, I agree with that. It should also be said that the lower number of fishing vessels means that the automatic response of any vessel in the fishing community to come to the aid of any other vessel in distress is not always practical or available, which makes it all the more important that the co-ordination through the coastguard is as good as possible. Any member from a maritime constituency, wherever it is around the coast, will understand that, but all in the chamber will understand and emphasise the paramount importance of safety. The proposals—they are just proposals at this stage—must be subjected to the most intense scrutiny by this Parliament and to intense campaigning to ensure the safety of all our maritime industries.

Climate Change Objectives (Biomass Plants)

5. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the impact of large-scale biomass plants on its climate change objectives. (S3F-2808)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Biomass, particularly renewable heat, can help to meet the emissions reduction targets in the Scottish Government's world-leading Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. Our policy is to promote the use of biomass plants for heat only or for combined heat and power. Relatively small new plants can bring the greatest benefits to communities and local supply chains and maximise efficient use of the fuel source.

Individual applications for the smaller plants are, of course, considered locally.

Malcolm Chisholm: I commend the First Minister's enthusiasm for renewable energy in general. However, does he agree that large-scale biomass plants such as the one that is proposed for Leith docks, in my constituency, emit a substantial amount of greenhouse gases—more than coal-fired plants, according to a recent study—and incur a massive carbon debt that can be repaid only after decades, if ever? Will he support the call from Greener Leith, No Leith Biomass, the Leith Links residents association, me and several of his back-bench colleagues for a moratorium on the construction of such large-scale biomass plants pending further research into their consequences for climate change?

The First Minister: As a former minister, Malcolm Chisholm is well aware that I cannot comment on the detail of any individual application that we are likely to receive for determination. We have not yet formally received the application for the biomass generating station at Leith. The application is currently undergoing a check versus a scoping opinion to ensure that all elements requested by the consultees have been considered.

The research that we have indicates that biomass can achieve 80 to 90 per cent energy efficiency, which is pretty impressive. Nevertheless, I agree with the conclusion in the research that was carried out for WWF Scotland and Friends of the Earth Scotland by Garrad Hassan last month, which is that the most logical use of Scottish biomass is for small-scale heating or combined heat and power systems, according to local heat demand.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): In responding to Malcolm Chisholm's question about climate change objectives, the First Minister again praised the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, which, sadly, the Government was in breach of for several months earlier this year by failing to set emissions reduction targets. The next objective that is legally defined for the end of this month is the publication of the Government's proposals on public engagement on climate change objectives. Has the Government decided to miss that deadline as well, breaching the legislation again, or will it simply publish on boxing day or new year's eve so as to minimise public engagement?

The First Minister: I will try to organise as many Christmas presents as possible for Patrick Harvie.

Biomass has a role to play in meeting the renewables targets. As Patrick Harvie well knows, the renewable heat target of 11 per cent by 2020 is a key part of the climate change targets, which

will be achieved not just by the Government but by the Parliament and the country.

Flu Vaccine

6. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to raise awareness of the importance of the flu vaccine among eligible groups. (S3F-2805)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I am grateful to Murdo Fraser for raising this hugely important issue, as it allows us once again to highlight the importance of flu vaccinations.

Our efforts this year have included television and radio adverts during October and November; pharmacy posters; engagement with more than 100 stakeholder organisations; a national invitation letter for everyone over the age of 65; and a range of public relations and online activity that has led to 77 separate pieces of press coverage across Scotland and more than 40 online articles. A further series of radio and television adverts will commence on 30 December to encourage more people in the at-risk groups to come forward for vaccination.

Murdo Fraser: The First Minister will share my concern that there has been a low take-up of seasonal flu vaccinations among some eligible groups. For example, fewer than one in five pregnant women have had the jab. I do not know whether the First Minister himself falls into an eligible group, but I was interested to see him described in a newspaper at the weekend as being

“a wee softy”

who

“hides behind a rather macho facade”.

Is the First Minister too much of a softy to have had his own flu jab?

The First Minister: I will receive the jab tomorrow afternoon, in Mintlaw surgery. The member is correct to say that I am in one of the at-risk groups because of a chest infection.

I draw attention to the issue of pregnant women being especially at risk from some aspects of the flu virus that is circulating. The vaccination take-up rate is higher than it was this time last year and is much higher than it is in England at present. I do not think that the decision to withdraw the paid advertising campaign in England was particularly sensible and neither does the chief medical officer. I am grateful to Murdo Fraser for drawing attention to the subject because, although the take-up rate is higher than it was last year, it is not high enough—hence, the renewed advertising campaign. Members may believe that I am

overcoming my softy-ness in order to have the jab. I encourage everyone in the at-risk groups to get the vaccination, which is the best possible protection against the flu virus. In particular, I encourage pregnant women, in the interests of their families and their unborn children, to take up the flu virus. They should contact their doctor and get the flu vaccination—it is the best protection that they could have.

Decision Time

12:30

The Presiding Officer (Alex Fergusson): We come to decision time.

The first question is, that motion S3M-7644, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Stewart Stevenson be appointed to replace Aileen Campbell as a member of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee;

Stewart Stevenson be appointed to replace Angela Constance as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S3M-7646, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on substitution on committees be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Michael Matheson be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Scotland Bill Committee.

The Presiding Officer: I wish everyone a happy recess.

Meeting closed at 12:30.

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