



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 26 October 2011

Session 4

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Wednesday 26 October 2011

CONTENTS

	Col.
<b>TIME FOR REFLECTION</b> .....	2693
<b>WINTER RESILIENCE</b> .....	2695
<i>Motion moved—[Keith Brown].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Lewis Macdonald].</i>	
The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown) .....	2695
Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab) .....	2700
Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con) .....	2704
Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP) .....	2707
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab) .....	2709
Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP) .....	2712
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP) .....	2713
Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab) .....	2716
Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP) .....	2718
Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD) .....	2720
Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP) .....	2723
Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP) .....	2725
Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab) .....	2727
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP) .....	2729
Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab) .....	2732
Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP) .....	2734
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con) .....	2736
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab) .....	2738
Keith Brown .....	2741
<b>BUSINESS MOTION</b> .....	2746
<i>Motion moved—[Bruce Crawford]—and agreed to.</i>	
<b>PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS</b> .....	2748
<i>Motions moved—[Bruce Crawford].</i>	
<b>DECISION TIME</b> .....	2749
<b>FUEL POVERTY</b> .....	2751
<i>Motion debated—[Jenny Marra].</i>	
Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab) .....	2751
Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP) .....	2754
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab) .....	2755
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con) .....	2757
Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP) .....	2758
Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab) .....	2760
Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP) .....	2761
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green) .....	2763
Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP) .....	2764
Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP) .....	2766
The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil) .....	2767

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## Scottish Parliament

*Wednesday 26 October 2011*

[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 14:30*]

### Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Good afternoon. Our time for reflection leader today is Dr Ravindra Mehta, who represents the University of Glasgow Hindu society and is a foundation doctor at Ninewells hospital in Dundee.

**Dr Ravindra Mehta (Glasgow University Hindu Society and Foundation Doctor at Ninewells Hospital, Dundee):** Good afternoon. It is an extraordinary privilege and honour to be here today addressing the leaders of our nation in time for reflection.

My name is Ravindra Mehta, and I am here to talk about Hinduism. Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world; it is at least 5,000 years old. It is an ancient tradition that is, at its heart, spiritual, altruistic and egalitarian. Perhaps one of the most defining features of Hinduism is its pluralism—not tolerance, because tolerance is by definition a clause of disagreement by means of mutual acceptance. Pluralism is a contemporaneous notion, it is a belief, if you will, in finding points of convergence in world beliefs and in celebrating—not to mention respecting—the similarities between different faiths. That is what Hinduism encourages. Hinduism has no conversion criteria and is, by definition, a non-proselytising faith.

A good example of pluralism would be the story of a young Hindu prince named Siddharta, who travelled through his native India more than 2,000 years ago. His ideas—like those of many people before him—inspired people to do good and better themselves. He was respected and revered as the Enlightened One: the Buddha. That was one of many branches of Hinduism that is known today as Buddhism.

Hinduism represents thousands of beliefs that all conform to a universal code of conduct: karma, which is a cyclical belief in cause and effect and in treating others in the way in which you would like to be treated; dharma, which is righteousness, non-violence and respect for all humanity, creation and the environment; moksha, which is spiritual guidance and ethics; and artha and kama, which concentrate on wealth creation, hard work and having a happy and fulfilling life.

India, which is 80 per cent Hindu, has traditionally welcomed people of all backgrounds—from the Zoroastrian Persians to

the Jewish migrants of the middle east and, most recently, the Tibetan exiles.

Another important attribute of Hinduism is its emphasis on education and economic progress, Hindus are one of the most enterprising and educated groups in the United Kingdom. In the United States, Hindus earn the highest amount of all the ethnic groups, with a median income of more than \$100,000. That is reflected in India's history; it was the richest country in the world for thousands of years. A quote from one of our holy books—we have a lot of holy books; whatever you would like to choose, it is there for you—specifies economic duty by stating:

“Our duty to the country of our birth and our contribution to its social and economic advancement is of utmost importance”.

The wealth that I mentioned was due not just to education and economic advancement, but to pluralism, charity and respect for one another. As Mahatma Gandhi, a true definition of a Hindu, once said:

“Gentleness, self-sacrifice, respect and generosity are the exclusive possession of no one race or religion, but are universal qualities”.

Thank you very much indeed. [*Applause.*]

## Winter Resilience

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-01123, in the name of Keith Brown, on winter resilience.

14:34

**The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown):** This debate provides us with the opportunity to update members on the many measures that have been put in place to enhance Scotland's resilience for the forthcoming winter.

The winter of 2009-10 was the most severe for more than 30 years, and December 2010 was the coldest for more than a century. Since then, agencies across the public, private and voluntary sectors have taken significant steps to improve their resilience and that of the people who live and work in Scotland. Whatever the winter brings, building Scotland's resilience to the consequences of severe weather is a key priority. Our approach to resilience is to identify and assess the risks and, where possible, to take or to encourage preventative action to reduce their impacts.

We can hope for a mild winter, but we must prepare for a severe one. More than half the people in a survey by the British Red Cross this summer said that they were more concerned about the impacts of severe weather than they were about any other emergency, and that they did not feel that they were adequately prepared. The Scottish Government is responding to that by offering better guidance and support in the lead-up to winter, and a higher-than-ever level of preparation across the public sector. Last year, the people of Scotland mucked in and helped out. I have no doubt that that spirit will be there again this year if it is needed, but we must prepare by doing more than just asking for that. We, as a Government, and all the public sector agencies must be prepared.

On Monday, the Scottish Government began its ready for winter public information campaign. Individuals and communities are stronger when they help themselves and each other. This year, we are making it easier for people and communities to take their own actions to prepare. Our first national resilience campaign has been developed in partnership with the British Red Cross and a wide range of other organisations.

Statutory agencies have a duty to respond, but they cannot be everywhere or do everything. Winter—no matter how prolonged or severe it is—should be no surprise to us, in Scotland. Everyone can take small, low-cost and sensible actions to be more resilient in their workplaces, at home, in their cars, in their neighbourhoods or wherever they

happen to find themselves in the winter. The range of activities and resources that make up our ready for winter campaign, coupled with the relaunch of the ready Scotland website this week, will help to raise awareness of the simple steps that people can take and of the support that is available to them.

The Scottish Government has put in place significant measures to help households that will struggle to heat their homes this winter. They include the £12.5 million that was recently announced to fund insulation schemes across Scotland; the £30 million investment this year in the energy assistance package; £2.5 million to help households to replace inefficient boilers; and our commitment to extend to carers eligibility for our fuel poverty programme. An additional £5 million will ensure that the EAP delivers support for hard-pressed households through the cold weather that we might face in the coming months. Overall, our energy assistance package has offered advice to more than 200,000 households, has helped to reduce annual fuel bills by almost £12 million since 2009, and has delivered heating measures to more than 21,000 homes.

Since last winter, the Government and responders have prepared together, planned together and worked together to ensure that we are as ready as we can be to minimise the impact of severe weather. The winter weather review group, which the Scottish Government convened in the summer, published its report on Monday. It lists a series of actions that have been taken across the public, private and voluntary sectors and a range of services to improve resilience—particularly that of our critical national infrastructure. For example, the Met Office has improved its national severe weather warning service and we have invested more than £500,000 to launch the Scottish Environment Protection Agency floodline warnings direct service to help to improve information to the public with updates on various platforms.

We have improved the operation of the Government's emergency arrangements by reviewing the experience of last winter. That has included revising the staffing and training arrangements for the Scottish Government resilience room and developing a new approach to sharing information between strategic co-ordinating groups and SGoRR, when it is active.

I stress that, although we are more prepared than ever, some disruption might still be unavoidable if severe weather hits. Disruption can happen at any time—we have just to look at the M25 today for evidence of that. The challenge for us is how we respond to severe weather incidents and how quickly we recover from them. I will

outline some of the key steps that we have taken in that regard.

Transport Scotland has prepared for the coming winter with additional equipment and improved information for people who are on the move. From 1 November, 23 additional gritters will patrol the most strategically important routes before and during the morning peak when there is a risk of snow or ice and will add to our ploughing capability during snowstorms. Specialist equipment—an icebreaker, footway snowblowers and inverted-V ploughs—is being brought to Scotland to increase our winter capability.

Salt stocks are obviously fundamental to a successful winter on our roads, so as of 1 November more salt will be stocked in Scotland than was used over the whole of last winter. Transport Scotland will publish, on the basis of the daily forecast, the gritting plans for trunk road operating companies. We also have 70,000 litres of alternative de-icers that work in the severest conditions—for example, below 7° below freezing—when road salt becomes less effective.

Next week, Traffic Scotland will launch the trial of an internet radio service, which will provide 24/7 national traffic and travel information bulletins about the strategic motorway and trunk road networks. Information will be updated three times each hour during peak travel times and twice hourly off-peak, and the frequency of updates will be increased when there is extreme winter weather. The service will be available on computers and mobile devices, and via an automated message service on the traffic customer care line.

We have also set up the voluntary strategic alliance on winter tyres. This year, the industry has agreed to ensure an increased supply of winter tyres.

The freight industry has rightly expressed concerns about its portrayal last winter as being the cause of many road closures. Since then, we have worked hard with the police and freight partners to develop procedures for proactive management of heavy goods vehicles and other vehicles during severe weather conditions. Guidance has been developed, which will be supplemented by a freight Scotland hotline, so that HGV drivers can inform Traffic Scotland of traction problems that they experience on the network. That will help to inform the operating companies' treatment priorities. A similar service will be developed for bus operators.

We have secured a £2.2 million package of investment by First ScotRail for winter improvements to the railways. There will be investment in modifications to trains, and there will be equipment improvements to make trains more

reliable; for example, in the purchasing of additional plant and equipment, including improved gritting equipment for platforms and car parks; and in the provision of more permanent facilities for de-icing carriages, such as the train skirts—or kilts, as they were called last year—the polytunnels that were developed last winter, and high-pressure hot water de-icing equipment at nine main depots.

Network Rail has also enhanced its infrastructure by, for example, improving the moving points at key junctions, using remote monitoring of points heaters and providing protective blankets for points on rural lines, and investing in more four-by-four vehicles for operational and maintenance staff. Perhaps the road and rail difficulties of staff in getting to work during times of severe weather are not commonly appreciated. The trunk road operating companies and Network Rail have taken action to ensure that staff can get to work.

**Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland (Lab):** For clarity, will the minister confirm that ScotRail and Network Rail are implementing those measures at their hand and that they do not involve, for example, any changes to the franchise conditions or formal negotiations between them and the Scottish Government?

**Keith Brown:** There has been strong collaboration between Network Rail, ScotRail, Transport Scotland and the Government. The £2.2 million investment is by First ScotRail, and there is different investment that will help winter resilience, some of which is from the Government and some of which is from Network Rail. However, that has all been done at Network Rail's own hand.

The rail industry recognises the importance of accurate and timely information, and we have worked with the rail regulator to raise the bar for the quality of passenger information: members will recall that that was an issue last year. Furthermore, Network Rail, in conjunction with rail freight hauliers, has committed to maintaining clear rail routes for critical freight-train movements to ensure that sufficient priority is given to the movement of vital commodities, including fuel and food, by rail.

Airports are a vital asset in our transport connectivity. Earlier this year, I met airport operators to review the response to last winter's severe weather. They have all taken steps to strengthen their preparedness. That has included investment in new equipment. I had hoped to go to Edinburgh airport to see that yesterday, but people there have had one or two other things on their minds, so the meeting did not go ahead. However, I met a previous managing director of Edinburgh airport, Kevin Brown. Obviously, that airport faces

the same question that the Scottish Government and others face: whether to invest substantially in new capital equipment that might not be used—which can attract criticism—or to ensure that there is enough resilience. It has taken the latter course, and it is right to have done so.

We have liaised with ports throughout Scotland to ensure that they have built on their well-established plans, which helped them to play a key role during last winter. The majority of our ports have invested in early maintenance or have purchased equipment to ensure that they can repeat that role. Most notably, they have invested in the import and onward shipping of strategic salt supplies and the running of lifeline ferry links to our island communities. As I mentioned, we expect to have as much salt in stock by the end of this month as we used during the whole period last year.

Obviously, as the transport minister, I have a role in relation to transport, but winter resilience does not respect portfolio boundaries. The continued provision of essential services to those who need them most must remain our top priority. This year, we are working with care providers and suppliers to ensure that those who are in need are brought quickly to the attention of those who can provide assistance.

In consultation with our resilience partners, we are developing a protocol that outlines the steps that local authorities and service providers should follow when considering persons and customers who are at risk, especially those who are at risk of being cut off from electricity or gas supplies or of running out of heating oil. The protocol will direct activity primarily at the local level, but it will inform a wider Scottish response, if that is required.

Many sectors played vital roles in keeping communities running last winter and in supporting essential services. Here in Edinburgh, for example, the military helped nurses and care workers to reach people who were cut off by snow, and mountain rescue teams did the same in other areas. Land Rover lent four-wheel drive vehicles to the Red Cross, which enabled it to reach and help vulnerable people, and neighbours checked up on those who needed a bit more help. We will continue to support such partnerships where we can. We have published new advice for community groups that wish to work together to build resilience in their areas. We have developed a national directory of third sector organisations that can provide help and support when major incidents occur. Our ready for winter campaign sets out the simple steps that we can all take to be more prepared.

To ensure that members are kept up to date, Transport Scotland is today writing to members to invite them to a presentation by representatives of

the trunk road operating companies—Amey, BEAR Scotland and Scotland TranServ—on Wednesday. That will happen in the Parliament, in room P1.02. Transport Scotland has worked closely with the operating companies to ensure improved winter preparedness. I attended the same presentation from the trunk road operating companies yesterday. It is impressive to hear about the amount of work that those companies have done and the lessons that have been learned since last year.

At a time of severe economic challenges and environmental change, we must demonstrate that Scotland's infrastructure and services are ready to withstand severe winter weather. Obviously, such weather can affect people's personal plans and lives, but it can also have a major impact on the economy. We want to ensure that we limit that impact as much as possible. We believe that through our preparations we are ready for this winter and that the people of Scotland are, too. We believe that they have taken heed of the idea that we should hope for the best, but plan for the worst of severe weather. We all want a ready and capable Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the major winter preparedness campaign launched on 24 October 2011; commends the Red Cross, responder agencies and the broad range of partners involved for working together to stress the importance of planning ahead for winter; supports the activities that are taking place during Ready for Winter? week, which highlight the simple steps that people can take to be more prepared; acknowledges that, although Scotland's weather is unpredictable, government, responders and a range of public, private and voluntary sector partners have taken significant steps to be more prepared for severe weather this winter, including holding a major winter planning exercise, Polar Storm, last month and that improved winter planning is captured in the report of the Winter Weather Review Group, and acknowledges that preparedness will be an ongoing process and that everyone must be resilient in preparing for winter.

14:47

**Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland)**  
**(Lab):** The images of last winter remain vivid for many people throughout Scotland: long queues of cars frozen on the M8, lorries jackknifed across major roads and commuters waiting on railway platforms, unsure whether they would be able to travel. Some members will know from experience that there were days when it was not possible to travel between our major cities and when thousands of people simply could not make the journey to work. Those were graphic images, and the disruption hit people in their pockets and cost the Scottish economy many millions of pounds.

The debate is about keeping people and goods moving and supporting the economy, but it goes wider than that. It must be about people, too—



about the effects on vulnerable people of the kind of disruption that we saw last year, and about what can be done to reduce the risk of that disruption happening again. Tackling fuel poverty is critical, as the minister acknowledged, and that is a wider debate that will continue. Last winter, we called for a broader approach to preparations for severe weather, so that those who have caring responsibilities are involved in making plans, as well as those who have a remit for clearing the snow. We welcome the fact that, this year, the Scottish Government has taken steps to involve the national health service, social care providers and the voluntary sector in planning for winter weather. The publication of the report of the winter weather review group last week was, therefore, a positive step, because it pulls together several strands of winter resilience planning and covers a broad range of services and sectors. I am glad that the motion implicitly acknowledges that the report is not the finished article. Preparedness is a process, rather than an event, and the report offers a framework, rather than a completed plan.

The various contributions to the report, such as the additional briefings that we have had from the likes of the British Red Cross and ScotRail, indicate that the issue of preparedness is being taken seriously, but the report as a whole reads more like a compilation than a strategy, because it tells us what local government would like ministers to discuss, rather than telling us in detail what has been agreed. It is a good starting point, but I hope that we hear from ministers an update on that report in the not-too-distant future.

I have no doubt that ministers are keen to improve winter planning, as the motion states, but a tough winter will not test good intentions or the seriousness of preparations; it will test how effective the joining up of strategies is and how well those strategies are delivered in practice. That is why we have lodged an amendment today: the responsibilities of Government do not stop once plans are in place, nor are they confined to the areas for which ministers are directly accountable.

I would like to highlight a couple of issues to do with the kind of interventions that have been supported by the winter weather review group report. There has, rightly, been an emphasis on what individuals and communities can do to help themselves, and on what people can do to help others in their communities. An aspect of that to which the report refers, which relates specifically to the Borders, is the resilient communities initiative of Scottish Borders Council. That initiative is focused on communities that are liable to be particularly hard hit by adverse winter weather. In those areas, the community council is a sensible unit within which to organise an initiative; it can clearly play an important role in liaising between

statutory authorities, such as the local authority and emergency services, on the one hand and local volunteers on the other. That approach could usefully be rolled out across the country to other communities if it is successful. It is certainly in line with the aspiration that central Government and local government should encourage the wider public to build community and personal resilience through effective pre-winter planning.

It is important, however, to ensure that community councils and local volunteers know what they are letting themselves in for so that they can be confident that they understand the risks that are involved. It is one thing to identify individuals in a community who might need extra support in the event of severe weather conditions and to notify those who are responsible, but a higher level of commitment is involved if community councils or individuals undertake to provide those services themselves. Delivery of hot food, for example, carries greater risks than delivery of warm blankets, and clearing snow mechanically with a vehicle is a different proposition to taking a shovel to a neighbour's path. There are also particular issues with dispensing medication.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** I very much applaud the member's support for community councils, which I am also enthusiastic about. Does he think that there would be problems in areas that do not have community councils, of which there are a number in my constituency?

**Lewis Macdonald:** I am familiar with such areas, too. Of course, the community council is not the only possible vehicle for delivering such an initiative. Whether that is done by a community council or another community organisation, it is important that they have the benefit of training, which is something with which local government can help.

I was keen to make an additional point about insurance and understanding and dealing with risk. In the Scottish Borders, community councils might well be covered by insurance policies that the local authority has in place, but not all local authority insurance policies are the same and not all community councils or community organisations have bought into suitable insurance plans. We welcome the initiatives that are being taken in the Borders, but it is critical that local volunteers are not seen as a cheap and easy option or as a substitute for those who have the skills and training to do the job. There is a role for ministers in ensuring that where communities rely on local volunteers, those people have access to the right training and advice about risk and insurance.

There should be a role for the Association of Scottish Community Councils to support

community councils and, through them, local volunteers in those matters. It is a pity that ministers have not seen fit to provide the association with the level of resource that it would need to undertake that role. Perhaps Mr Brown will say in summing up what ministers will do to assist local organisations of all kinds in providing the expertise and training that their members will need to assume those responsibilities.

A second related issue, which the report mentions in passing, is the work that farmers do in rural communities on the same basis on which people do voluntary work in other communities in dealing with adverse winter conditions. For example, councils might hire farmers or other contractors to clear local roads. Indeed, the winter weather review group report tells us that steps have been taken to explore how Transport Scotland could call on farmers to assist with snow clearing on trunk roads, too. That, of course, may prove to be necessary if we have a repeat of last year's winter conditions. It has been drawn to my attention that local authorities remunerate such work at different rates and remuneration is clearly a significant issue for people who undertake such contracts. Also, insurance for work on public highways involves costs to those who do that work.

As Transport Scotland is exploring the possibility of using contractors on the trunk road network, perhaps this is the time for ministers to give their view on how local authorities should work with private and voluntary support to clear the roads for which they are responsible. Keith Brown may wish to refer to that later.

There are any number of specific issues and I imagine that many of them will be raised in the debate. There is a common theme across all of them, whether they are to do with transport, infrastructure or support for vulnerable and isolated individuals: citizens look to local and central Government to help them to get through difficult times, and ministers have a key role in co-ordinating the efforts of the agencies for which they are responsible and those of others who have a role to play.

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** I realise that local and central Government have a part to play in co-ordinating. However, in the two severe winters that we have had, it has been almost impossible for gritters and snowploughs to get to every place. Does Lewis Macdonald agree that individuals have a responsibility to clear their own paths, to help their neighbours and to do as much as they can with the support that local and central Government can give them?

**Lewis Macdonald:** I am sure that Kevin Stewart listened closely to my earlier remarks on support for local volunteers to do precisely that kind of

work. That is why I look to ministers to provide the necessary support to community councils and other community groups in order to make it easy for people to take on that responsibility and to complement the work of the statutory authorities.

As I hardly need to say in the context of Keith Brown's portfolio, the buck stops with ministers. That might sometimes seem to be a little unfair. A number of years ago, when I was in the role that Mr Brown now has, I was asked why the transport minister had permitted the planting of trees next to railway lines. I had to tell the interviewer that that decision had been made some time before my period in office.

Mr Brown, too, will no doubt be asked difficult questions over the course of this winter and, if things go wrong, there is little merit in blaming somebody else. The buck stops with ministers, but the best defence against the unexpected is to put in place every reasonable measure in advance and to be open and honest about the risks that may arise. If ministers take that approach, we will support it.

I move amendment S4M-01123.1, to insert at end:

“, and believes that the Scottish Government has a role to play in co-ordinating local efforts to cope with winter weather, including support for community councils, and in identifying vulnerable people and ensuring that they receive adequate support.”

14:58

**Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con):** I am happy to support the motion in the minister's name and the amendment in Lewis Macdonald's name. I will be a congenial contributor to the debate and offer the minister every possible support in the work that he has ahead of him.

The minister began by recalling the winter of 2010-11 and, in particular, 6 and 7 December 2010. We would do well to remember, as the report does, that although there were multiple failures of infrastructure last winter, there was no failure of effort, commitment and determination on the part of individuals throughout Scotland to do everything that they could to assist their fellow citizens and to keep Scotland moving. The failure of infrastructure was compounded by complete failure of communications.

Last winter, there was a rush to blame an individual—I was not happy to join it—and that individual was the then minister. To be frank, the public were bewildered that, when they were stuck on roads unable to get home, the politicians' first priority seemed to be not how to get them home but which minister to blame for the fact that they had not got home. I think that we should reflect on the fact that the minister who was blamed and who

resigned is now back behind a ministerial desk and the individual who led the calls for his resignation is elsewhere, looking for alternative employment.

I remember, when I was on a radio programme at the time—"Call Kaye", with that well known Tory supporter, Kaye Adams—that one caller said, "The problem with you politicians is that, when the snow melts, you'll forget all about this. Nothing will be done, and next winter we'll be right back where we started." That was a genuine concern because, of course, we had the small matter of the democratic process intervening this year, which led to the dissolution of Parliament in March and our absence from this place for a couple of months. In other circumstances, during that time, the committee with responsibility for this matter and Parliament itself would have focused more closely on the lessons that could be learned from the previous winter and on the preparations for the winter to come.

I read the winter weather review group's report with some trepidation, but I have to say that I think that it is a comprehensive document. It sets out, across all the various agencies, disciplines and areas, a genuine effort to respond to the challenges of last winter and a process by which we can hope to meet that challenge this year. I will come back to the point that Mr Macdonald made about the responsibility of ministers to co-ordinate that effort. Of course, that work might all be in vain because, as we know from the First Minister's speech in Inverness, God is now on his side. I imagine that, in the quiet moments that they have together, the First Minister will be doing all that he can to ensure that we are snow-free this winter.

The point that comes through a number of times in the report is whether communications to the public this winter will carry authority. I am not sure about the details around that. It was lack of authority that led many people to embark on journeys without knowing whether they could complete them. They were told that the police advised people not to travel, but that term has become devalued in the public mind. Does it mean that the police are telling me not to go to my job? Are they saying that it will take me longer to get home from work, so I should allow more time? This winter, if we find ourselves faced with severe weather, the public must have access to information that carries some authority, so that they know that when they are told not to travel, that advice means precisely that. They should be sure that they should not go to the airport in the hope that planes might take off, because the evidence is that they will not and all that they will be doing is creating a problem in the airport concourse. That is one of the key things that has to be addressed.

In passing, I should say that I am slightly concerned about the fact that the message boards on motorway gantries have continued this year to broadcast messages that are really quite superfluous and unhelpful to travellers. It is important that we do not put up spurious messages there, but instead ensure that the messages that are put up on the gantries add to the notion that the information that travellers are given carries authority.

I want to pay tribute to ScotRail, which has done a tremendous amount of work in advance. I would like the minister to join me in asking ScotRail not to abandon its plans and investment in preparation for winter. I know that ScotRail will be shocked to the core, as are all the pensioners in Newton Mearns this afternoon, at Mr Macintosh's call for nationalisation of the railways, but I hope that the minister will join me in saying that that is an unlikely outcome, and that ScotRail should continue to invest with confidence.

I have a sneaking regard for Mr Brown. I know that he stood in combat fatigues in front of his vehicles in operation polar storm, recounting glory days of old. However, I think that the public have been most surprised by Kenny MacAskill becoming the poster boy for winter resilience. There he stood this week, in a bright red scarf that clearly was not his own—it was not bedraggled and scruffy enough to belong to him—

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** Shame!

**Jackson Carlaw:** It was an alarming scarlet colour and said, "Ready" on it. I know that the public will be hugely reassured by Mr MacAskill's appointment because, even if they are stuck in the deepest snow on the M8, with the longest sentence ahead, no other minister will work harder for their early release on compassionate grounds, despite all the prevailing medical evidence.

Much has been done. As the minister said, nothing is foolproof and there are responsibilities that are incumbent on all of us.

I was alarmed by last week's reports from North Lanarkshire that the local authority had said that it was concerned about whether it would be able to maintain road clearances because of attacks on vehicles in previous winters. That is completely unacceptable, and I hope that the whole community will ensure that such action is condemned and dealt with effectively. We all have responsibilities.

The preparation has been done. This year, most of the agencies have invested and set themselves up with additional preparation, so there are no excuses. Mr Macdonald's point is fair; severe weather during the coming winter will be a real test of ministerial competence. I am confident that the

minister will respond to the challenge ahead, and I wish him well.

**The Presiding Officer:** I call Gil Paterson. Mr Paterson, you have a generous six minutes and you will have a bit more if you take interventions.

15:05

**Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** Thank you for that, Presiding Officer.

I have to make a declaration of interest. I own a company—my son runs it now—that deals with the motor trade, and my contribution will be about transport matters.

The only predictable thing about the Scottish weather is the fact that it is unpredictable, unlike in other countries where the weather has seasons and patterns that can generally be anticipated and planned for. Such countries can put in place a strategy along with the necessary resources to implement it. Scotland and the other countries in these islands face an almost impossible task in anticipating the weather conditions, because of the gulf stream.

With my passion for skiing and snowboarding, I have first-hand experience of the ways in which other countries deal with adverse weather conditions. Travelling in and around Lake Tahoe on the border between California and Nevada on a good number of visits, I have driven on roads where the snow has been at least 10ft deep on each side of the road. I do not mean snow drifts; I am talking about snow that goes on for miles and miles. Depending on the severity of the conditions, the measures taken by the authorities include restricting access to roads to vehicles that have snow tyres or insisting on snow chains, or simply deciding to close the road. However, the road is closed before the hostile weather sets in, so that vehicles seldom become stranded.

The authorities can take such measures only because the weather pattern is predictable, and they can make weather forecasts that are accurate, almost to the hour and within a 10-mile radius. They also have long-term weather patterns that repeat themselves year after year, and their weather conditions can stay the same for periods of three months or more. That allows the authorities to gear up and enables them to invest in equipment that has been made for the job and which can be used year after year.

The scenario is the same in the Alps and Scandinavia, as well as in other places across the world in which the weather patterns are predictable and can be forecast. The authorities have a great deal of certainty about the equipment that they need to invest in so that they can tackle the weather conditions. Such predictable weather

patterns also allow the general public to gear up for bad weather by using snow chains and snow tyres.

The picture is very different in Scotland. Members might not be aware of it but my business, which my son now runs, started selling tyres in 1974. To date we have sold and fitted almost half a million tyres, but we have not sold a single solitary set of snow chains. In other countries, the public certainly take their responsibilities seriously. Our problem in Scotland is that we can and do get weather similar to that in Lake Tahoe, the Alps and Scandinavia, but it can all come and go within a 24-hour period.

Last year's extended period of bad weather will not be the last, but our forecasters cannot tell us definitively when it is likely to return. Being a snowboarding buff, I well remember 10 years ago when all the pundits told us that we had seen the last of winter ski resorts in Scotland because of global warming. That was some forecast, eh?

I very much agree with how the Scottish Government is dealing with our very unpredictable weather, particularly in using the winter week initiative to alert and inform the public in advance of winter itself, and I certainly hope that the public respond accordingly.

Unless we are prepared to spend even more millions of pounds, over and above the millions that are already being spent on the current strategy, on equipment that is used in countries such as America—

**John Mason:** Does the member agree that, at a time when we are short of money, the public would not be happy for us to spend millions and millions of pounds on snowploughs that might sit idle for perhaps 15 years at a time?

**Gil Paterson:** I was about to make that very point. I do not think that the public or anyone else, particularly the Opposition, would want us to spend millions of pounds on equipment that might be used for the kind of three-week period of weather that we had last year, which was a record for Scotland. We could have dealt with that weather if we had brought in the equipment that they use in America. However, my challenge to members is for them to stand up and tell me whether that equipment will be used this coming year, when it will be used, how long it will be used for and when it will be used again after that. That is the problem.

I agree with the Government's flexible approach. The people we should really speak to about the weather are those who drive the trucks that keep—

**Keith Brown:** I completely agree with the member. However, one way of getting round

incurring needless expenditure to meet potential eventualities is to make best use of existing plant. The member might be interested to know that much of the plant that is used to cut roadside hedges is being adapted this winter for snowploughing and other activities. Instead of spending a lot of money on new equipment, we are making the most of the equipment that we have.

**Gil Paterson:** I conclude by agreeing with the minister. There is no point in looking at what happens elsewhere, because those people are geared up to deal with their weather patterns. Their strategies would not last a week in the face of our diverse weather.

We should continue with the current strategy and use all the resources that we have in local government and Transport Scotland. Of course, the one thing that we cannot rely on is the public. The public expect someone else to do this job for them. That is a big issue that the minister and the Parliament need to work on. In America, people—not hundreds but millions of them—have snowplough attachments for their vehicles. We have all got to change and get back to the days when we took responsibility for, say, clearing our own pavements.

I encourage the Government to keep going in this direction and hope that it can get the public to engage in its strategy.

**The Presiding Officer:** I can give all the speakers in the open debate a generous six minutes—and the Presiding Officers will be equally generous if members take interventions.

15:13

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** We often talk about the weather in Scotland, particularly the bad weather that we frequently get. Unfortunately, we as an Opposition cannot blame the bad weather on the Scottish National Party Government; however, for once, the SNP cannot blame England for it either. I find that quite refreshing.

From speaking to my constituents, I know that the weather resulted in significant disruption for people, businesses and the most vulnerable in society. As we know, temperatures dropped to as low as -14°; on one morning, 15cm of snow fell in just four hours. Not one pupil in Renfrewshire was unaffected by school closures. Indeed, at the hardest hit rally that I attended in Edinburgh on Saturday, a disabled woman told the crowd how she had to phone Domino's Pizza because she could not get out to buy food. Like the conditions, the disruption was unprecedented.

As others have pointed out, we must acknowledge the commitment and hard work of all those who gritted the roads and cleared the pavements. There is no doubt that without the dedication of local authority staff, the British Red Cross and others the disruption would have been far greater. However, there is also no doubt that we must learn the lessons of last winter and look to improve the way in which the response to severe weather is managed. Central to that should be the need to protect key public services, such as schools and care for the elderly and the vulnerable. In addition, we must do all that we can to avoid seeing again the scenes that we saw on the M8, which was fast descending into a case of life and death.

It has been suggested that private contractors are reluctant to call on councils to assist with the salting of motorways and trunk roads because they would need to reimburse them for that. I would welcome a reassurance from the minister that he is satisfied with the arrangements between private contractors and local authorities for the salting of those roads this year.

I am sure that we would all agree that the safety of our commuters and avoiding a fragmented approach should be an absolute priority. As the Government's report states, there is also a need to ensure business continuity. Analysis by economic experts indicates that last year's severe weather affected the UK economy to the tune of -0.5 per cent. The Federation of Small Businesses has stated that one in seven people could not get to their place of work. I note that the Government has created a business continuity section on its ready Scotland website, which I hope will help businesses in Scotland this winter.

I am aware of the steps that the Government has taken to improve people's level of preparedness, and I welcome the moves by local authorities to increase their readiness. I know that Renfrewshire Council has increased its salt supply from 4,000 tonnes last year to 8,500 tonnes this year. However, if we are to experience another prolonged period of harsh conditions, increasing councils' salt supplies alone is not enough. The fact that, last winter, Renfrewshire Council's salt use topped 11,000 tonnes stresses the importance of having in place clear and co-ordinated protocols on access to the national salt supply.

Last year, there was some discussion about local authorities' access to the national salt supply, given that the percentage of the road network that is classed as high priority and which, therefore, is treated with salt varies significantly across local authorities. If one authority treats 50 per cent of its roads while another treats 60 per cent of its roads, to which authority should priority be given? We need clear criteria in place that allow the local

authorities that are most in need of additional salt access to the national supply.

The Government's report rightly identifies the need for effective co-ordination of communications to the public, which others have mentioned. It is vital that the Government ensures that people are kept well informed. In particular, we need to avoid what appear to be mixed messages from central and local government, such as the Scottish Government saying that there is ample salt while local authorities say that they must conserve their supplies. The minister will be aware that local authorities conserve salt in line with the Government's salt preservation guidelines. It is misleading for the impression to be given that more salt is available than is the case, and it puts extra pressure on local authorities.

**Keith Brown:** I can reassure the member that, last year, there was not a single case of a local authority that needed salt not being able to take it from the national reserve. It is up to local authorities—they must make their own decisions on the priorities in their area. We have ensured that that reserve is always there, so no local authorities should run short of salt, especially given that we have more salt in stock this year than we had last year—in fact, we might have more in stock than we used during the whole of last year.

**Neil Bibby:** I welcome that assurance, and I hope that the minister can guarantee that that will be the case this year.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** He just did that.

**Neil Bibby:** A wish on the part of residents that every road be salted around the clock is one that cannot be granted, and the Government says in its report that it cannot give such an absolute guarantee. I know that the Government has purchased more salt than it did last year, but I hope that the trap that was fallen into last year, when the Government told us that there were ample supplies of salt without adding the necessary caveats, and leaving local authorities to explain them, can be avoided.

As others have done, I pay tribute to the people—and organisations such as community councils—who pulled together in their communities and gave up their time to help their neighbours and those who were most in need.

I note from the report that the Scottish Government is engaging with NFU Scotland to explore ways in which farmers can assist with snow clearance. A number of local authorities in more rural areas already use the assistance of farmers, and I urge that avenue to be pursued as soon as possible. I hope that there will be greater

co-ordination among local authorities this winter. I know that local authorities in the Strathclyde area have taken steps to increase their ability to share supplies. Such co-operation between councils should be supported and encouraged.

I think we can all agree that, this winter, we must hope for the best but prepare for the worst. I hope that the Scottish Government will avoid making the same mistakes that it has made in past winters and that it will lead a co-ordinated and well-communicated response to whatever the weather throws at us.

15:20

**Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP):** I am delighted to support the motion. I hope that the message for this winter will be: here shall we see

"No enemy  
But winter and rough weather."

If there is rough weather, it should not be, nor will it be, an occasion, circumstance or scenario for point scoring or scaremongering, for criticism that flies in the face of the robustness of our people, or for apportionment of fear or blame. I hope that it will not get rough, but if it does it should be a time for us to work together without fear or favour.

It will be a time for leadership, communication, preparedness, real-time questions and answers and, of course, action. The minister has already demonstrated the leadership, not least in calling today for community self-help. It is right that the Opposition—in fact, that we all—apply rigorous examination of the above criteria and take our tone from last year's debate on this subject.

I will come to the specifics in a minute, but I support the minister's appeal that, in addition to all the plans to help those in need that are already laid in the ready for winter week by the Red Cross, the national health service, rapid response teams and all the other services, we encourage all able-bodied people across the nation to a programme of adopting a granny, a granddad—I can talk authoritatively about that—a buddy or a friend to ensure that the vulnerable, elderly, lonely and sick have someone who will consider them. It might be that we as members could start that programme by leading by example.

On the specifics, I will not rehearse all of the actions and proposals that the minister mentioned this afternoon and which are either in place or to be put in place, save to say that after leadership must come communication. There is the famous story of the general who gave his colonels the message, "Send reinforcements, we're going to advance", which by the time it got down to the troops was, "Send three and fourpence, we're going to a dance." I am heartened by the

minister's plan to have a single source of data to cover weather forecasts, changes to the forecasts, road conditions, accidents, critical service momentum and delivery, food and water provision and so on. All those are critical but only solvable, counterable or deliverable on the back of sound communications. The message to the regional services and the public is that, should we encounter the worst, the communication is indeed two way—but of course traffic Scotland, Traveline and the traffic customer care line are key in all that.

It is unrealistic to expect a reactive hotline to our God. Preparedness is essential to forestall the worst of any potential crisis, so it is not unreasonable to ask car drivers that, should they wish to drive, they check and prepare their vehicles for winter, they update themselves on how to drive in severe winter conditions, they plan journeys in advance and they carry emergency equipment and supplies just in case of breakdown for the time until the services can get to them.

Better still, let drivers consider public transport and, in the case of longer journeys, travel by bus and rail when they can. I commend the proposed initiatives of ScotRail—I see Mr Johnstone shaking his head: he obviously does not want to use ScotRail. I commend ScotRail for its plans to invest in new de-icing equipment, upgrading maintenance and rapid service return, and improving station access.

Overall, it is by working together, and as a community and communities, that we shall overcome possible serious weather. I agree strongly with my colleague Mr Stewart's intervention that businesses and householders be encouraged to clear their footpaths and shopfronts without fear of litigation. It may be a time for community, neighbourhood and working together.

My birthday is 8 May—for members' benefit, it is room M3.12. [*Laughter.*] There is a saying:

"Let no man boast ... that he has got through the perils of winter till at least the seventh of May."

I hope that we can get through the perils of winter so that I can start summer on my birthday. I support the motion.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):** Thank you, and I wish you a happy birthday when it comes.

15:25

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** It is exceptionally friendly in the chamber this afternoon.

Last winter, many of us suffered disruption to our travel plans. I am happy to accept that those of us who live in cities have more options, one of

which is walking between places, especially as many of us live closer to our place of work and so on. People in cities such as Glasgow perhaps suffered less than people in other areas. Nevertheless, on the worst day of the winter last year, I started my journey into the city centre by bus, but we did not get far. I then went to the nearest train station and, lo and behold, a train appeared and I got to my destination okay. I got home by bus in the evening. Perhaps unwisely, I went out again in the evening and waited quite a long time for a train, but to be fair, it came. I was ready to walk home when a bus came along and got me home. Whatever else we do, we must pay tribute to the bus and train drivers and other staff who kept as much of the system going as they could last winter.

Also on a positive note, we do not compare badly with other countries. I have visited one or two. In January a few years ago, I went to Budapest, which as members may know is a city in Hungary. People there are used to slightly colder winters than we usually get, but there were fairly icy pavements to start with, then there was rain, which subsequently froze, and they could not cope with that at all. The pavements especially, but also the roads, were unbelievably treacherous.

Another city that I spent some time in for a couple of years is London, which as members may know is a city in England. On one occasion, there was a little snow—by our standards, it was pretty minimal. I was in the House of Commons that day, but it had to stop early because it could not cope with a little snow. The whole city practically ground to a halt, including the buses and the underground. Some of us thought that the snow did not go underground, but I learned that it obviously does. When I was a councillor in Glasgow, I would come out and almost immediately, if there had been snow, the area in front of the city chambers and the main parts of the pedestrian precincts would have been cleared, but when I came out of the House of Commons in London, nothing had been done. There was snow everywhere and it was treacherous and slippery. It was pretty hopeless.

ScotRail was criticised last winter. Since then, and indeed during last winter, it looked at other countries' systems, including those in the Nordic countries, and it found that there is no magic formula. Even countries that are used to colder winters than ours still struggle. Sometimes they do not have trains running at all and sometimes they use huge amounts of hot water to clear ice from rolling stock, which can be considered wasteful. ScotRail is now at the forefront of finding innovative ways in which to keep rolling stock running.

The information flow is important, and I have to say that it has improved. If I heard Jackson Carlaw correctly, he said that there was a complete failure of communication. Frankly, that is over the top, but perhaps that is what we should expect from that quarter. There was certainly not a complete failure of communication. Years ago, when there was a bit of snow, we would stand on a railway station and have no idea of what was going to happen. Now, certainly at many stations in my area, we have electronic information that tells passengers, broadly speaking, how long the train will be delayed for, although I accept that ScotRail does not always get it right.

**Jackson Carlaw:** Mr Mason must have been visiting different stations from everyone else. Even by ScotRail's admission, most passengers who were standing at stations saw information stating that a train was about to depart, and then it was cancelled. That was most people's experience of rail information. On road information, or indeed any information, I think there is common consent there was a complete breakdown of reliable information in which people could have any confidence last winter. A lot has been done to address that, but it is stupid to deny that that was the case.

**John Mason:** The member can use strong words if he likes, but I shall try to be more moderate. I do not accept that there was a complete breakdown of communication, but there were problems and struggles. On the night that I stood in my local station of Garrowhill, we were informed that the train would be delayed, but then it was cancelled, so Mr Carlaw is right in that regard. However, as I said, I eventually got a train. There was also the option for ScotRail to use the loudspeaker system to update people on what was appearing electronically. I think that Mr Carlaw must accept that we are well ahead of what happened 30 or 40 years ago in that respect and doing a lot better.

It is clear that we need to plan well for winter and that we need to know what to expect. I commend Glasgow City Council for producing its winter maintenance plan for the coming winter and for listing, for example, the priority 1 carriageway routes for treatment, which include bus routes.

**Kevin Stewart:** Many councils have done well in telling the public what they can do in the course of the winter. However, it is important that they spell out exactly what the priorities are so that folk know that, when severe conditions hit, certain places will come first: the main roads, schools—Mr Bibby referred to that—and sheltered housing, for example. I must say to Mr Mason that my first priority would not have been to clear outside the town house in Aberdeen or Glasgow city

chambers; I would have regarded the sheltered housing in my ward as the priority.

**John Mason:** Yes; I certainly do not want to overdo my commending of Glasgow City Council. Mr Stewart is right to say that we need to set priorities and that councils need to make them clear. There are sometimes misunderstandings on the part of the public that their pavements might be cleared immediately, whereas the priority must be the roads, the hills and the bus routes.

I realise that my time is escaping me. However, last winter when I was between jobs I worked for a charity that was headed up by a Canadian, who was amazed at how poorly prepared individual drivers were here. He told me a number of things about Canada in that regard. For example, he said that virtually every car there has two sets of tyres. In the long run, that does not cost any more, and they are used to changing them at various times. Similarly, every driver in Canada would be expected to carry a shovel, some grit and a candle for warmth, which makes a lot of sense. I mention in passing that I do not think that Stewart Stevenson deserved to have to resign last winter.

We need to remember that we are only human beings and that nature is bigger than us. Be it a tsunami in Japan, volcanoes in Iceland, earthquakes in Turkey or exceptionally cold temperatures in Scotland, we will not be ready for everything. It is how we cope with the unexpected that really matters.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Anne McTaggart, to be followed by Dennis Robertson. You have a generous seven minutes and, if you take interventions, we will give you extra time.

15:33

**Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab):** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I am sure that all members will agree that a comprehensive action plan for dealing with severe winter weather is essential. We have, after all, seen the results of bad responses in bad weather. I therefore welcome the winter weather review group's report, which was published last week. I am glad that the Government acknowledges in it that lessons had to be learned from last year.

Last year, we witnessed the appalling situations that we have heard about from the previous speakers. I agree with the review group's assertion that disruption from severe winter weather is inevitable, but a standstill should not be. We cannot run the risk of families, commuters or ill people being stuck on a motorway worrying whether they have enough petrol to keep their car running in order to keep warm.



The report states that, in terms of snowfall and cold weather, the winter of 2009-10 was the most severe for 31 years and that December 2010 was the coldest December for over 100 years. All of that is fair to say, but it fails to recognise that our technology, machinery and forecasting ability were the best that they had ever been. In other words, the problem of the coldest December in a century was made worse by the mismanagement of resources.

The gridlock on our motorways not only left people of all ages isolated but left businesses out in the cold. According to the Freight Transport Association, a haulage vehicle's running costs can reach £400 a day, so the standstill was an unwelcome blow for smaller businesses, in particular. The weather struck the business community when our economy was taking a hit as a result of the Government in Westminster cutting too fast and too far, and the problem was compounded by the Government in Holyrood acting too slowly and too late.

We witnessed unnecessary problems not just on our roads but in our public transport services. Delays and cancellations as a result of bad weather are not unheard of—I am sure that every member can testify to that—but the cancellation of train services mid-journey, without replacement services or stand-by buses being organised, was not good enough. If the Scottish Government can organise a knighthood for a bus tycoon, why could it not organise a bus to pick up stranded train passengers?

The winter weather review group said that part of the rail network suffered from flooding

“following short duration/high intensity rainfall which overwhelmed local drainage system.”

I am sure that many members who use the service from Glasgow Queen Street can bear witness to the flooding at Queen Street tunnel. Long-term weather predictions suggest that our winter climate will become milder and wetter, so I fear that there will be more service disruption in the area unless the problem is tackled. Despite the commitment in the report to further study of water volumes and drainage systems, there is no mention of potential flooding on the rail network in the briefing that ScotRail kindly provided for the debate, which I am sure members have read.

It is important to learn lessons from what happened to Scotland's roads and public transport services last year. We must also address another alarming issue. The number of Scottish households that are categorised as fuel poor has reached 900,000. The Scottish Government must act to protect vulnerable members of our community as winter approaches. If conditions are similar to those last year, the number of fuel-poor

households will rise, as will, I fear, the number of deaths that are attributable to people having to choose between being cold and going hungry.

**Kevin Stewart:** Will the member give way?

**Anne McTaggart:** No, but I will take the intervention at the end of my speech, if I have time.

I am glad that Labour's Jenny Marra has secured a crucial debate this evening on the alarming number of people in fuel poverty, and I hope that members will engage in the debate. We must ensure that tackling fuel poverty is part of the winter resilience plans.

The review group acknowledged that individuals and community groups played a vital role in supporting people during last year's severe weather. I know of many organisations and individuals in Glasgow who went above and beyond to help their communities. Such organisations need support if they are to reach members of their community who do not have iPhones on which to install apps and do not use Twitter or Facebook to find out about train cancellations.

For such people, there is no better resource than the voluntary groups, community associations, community councils and public services that they deal with and trust. The Scottish Government must strive to better equip such service providers and groups to engage with vulnerable people on fuel poverty. For example, Energy Action Scotland has, in the past, provided fuel poverty training for a variety of people who already engage with fuel poor households, ranging from midwives to Macmillan Cancer Support staff and Money Advice Scotland. If the Scottish Government is serious about making sure that this winter does not result in deaths, it must act now and provide funding for fuel poverty training for the service providers and groups that work closely with the most vulnerable people in our communities.

**Keith Brown:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Anne McTaggart:** That is me finished. Sorry.

15:40

**Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP):** This afternoon, we have heard quite a bit about the communication of information. We should applaud ScotRail for holding its hands up and admitting that it did not get it right and for doing all that it can to make a huge improvement on what happened last year. We had a very positive meeting with ScotRail, during which Steve Montgomery told us that its biggest problem was not that the trains were delayed or cancelled. Its

biggest problem, and the biggest complaint that it received, concerned the misinformation or lack of information given to passengers. Passengers require information to enable them to choose whether to undertake a journey. We must get better at ensuring that the information that we send out is the information that they require in order to make that choice.

I congratulate NFU Scotland on coming forward in partnership to ensure that rural Scotland can keep on the move, too. It is essential that we focus our attention not just on the trunk roads, so that supply vehicles and lorries can get groceries to our shops, and on the railways, so that commuters can get to work, but on keeping rural Scotland on the move, so that farmers can get their produce to market and people in rural communities can get to hospitals and so on.

It is a huge concern that many people in rural Scotland are not connected and will not be able to visit the Traveline website. They will be therefore more reliant on the media, so we must ensure that television and radio provide up-to-date and correct information. One of the problems that we endured through the whole of last winter was a lack of information or, sometimes, misinformation. There is no point in telling the travelling public that a road is closed when it is open for people to get to their work. That problem needs to be addressed not just by the Government but by the media, which should take a good, hard look at themselves and the information that they put out to the public.

We have heard about the many vulnerable people in our communities, towards whom we all have a responsibility. Anyone who is able to clear their own pathway and pavement should do so. It is, however, infuriating when one clears one's pathway, as I did, only for the snowplough to come along and fill the gap. I rely on being able to tell the difference between a pavement, a road and someone's garden but, during last winter, there was no hope for me—or, indeed, my trusted Mr Q—in finding the way from one place to another because it was a total white-out. We must be sensible in the journeys that we undertake. However, I make a plea to businesses in all our communities. If it is not safe for their employees to come to work, why not encourage them to check on their neighbours, to check whether there are elderly people living in their street or to check whether there is a community centre in their area where they can volunteer their services for that day?

**Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab):** I completely agree with Dennis Robertson's point. However, he will be aware that, for a lot of workers, particularly those who are low paid, whether they get to work in winter determines whether they get paid. That is the case for contract workers, including those in

the public services. Government agencies advise people that it is not safe to travel, but employers—including those who are contracted by public agencies—make clear to people that, if they do not get to their work, they will not be paid.

**Dennis Robertson:** I take Drew Smith's point entirely. That issue needs to be addressed.

Many people are unable to get to work because the roads are not clear and, in rural Scotland, it is sometimes very unwise to travel.

**Kevin Stewart:** It is difficult for some employers, but it should be easy for other employers to allow a certain amount of flexibility. As Mr Robertson knows, because we have spoken about it before, the vast bulk of teachers in Aberdeen city seem to live in Aberdeenshire and vice versa. If teachers cannot get from the city to a school in a rural area, for example, they should report to their nearest school, which may prevent schools from having to close completely. Last year, one of the big problems was not that kids could not get to school but that there were no teachers when they got there. The need for such flexibility must be addressed.

**Dennis Robertson:** I was just coming to that point, so I thank Kevin Stewart for reading my mind; it is fantastic. Sometimes I think that we must work far too closely together.

It may be unsafe for people to travel any great distance, or they may be unable to travel because the road or rail network is not working. That applies not only to our teachers but to our home care services. We heard last year about some amazing people who walked through the snow for 5 or 6 miles to attend to some of our most vulnerable in the community. However, although that is to be commended, it is not really safe, and we should not really encourage it. It might have been better for those people to visit their neighbours in the next street and to ensure that people in other communities were doing exactly the same.

15:47

**Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD):** A Government press release on 26 November last year stated that Scotland was "ready for winter's worst". Those who were stranded on a 20-mile stretch of the M8 on 6 and 8 December last year would have begged to differ, but I am glad that the minister's comments today have been more measured.

I welcome this afternoon's debate and the chance to hear the minister's report on the Government's progress. The Government has certainly been busy with its six-point plan, emergency preparedness reports, get ready for

winter week and polar storm exercise. However, the proof of the pudding will be what happens if Scotland is tested again, and we all hope that it will be enough.

Predicting the weather and compiling long-range forecasts are an inexact science. The only predictable thing about Scotland's climate, as Gil Paterson has mentioned, is its unpredictability. There is nothing new about bad weather in Scotland—even Burns, in "A Winter Night", wrote:

"Blow, blow, ye Winds, with heavier gust!  
And freeze, thou bitter-biting Frost!  
Descend, ye chilly, smothering Snows!"

Of course, the difference now is that we have quite a lot more traffic on our roads.

We have perhaps experienced a bit of a golden period since then, even recently. In 2006, 2007 and 2008 there were, according to the Met Office, only 20 days on which snow was lying in Scotland. However, in the last year alone, there were 45 such days.

Just four weeks before the onset of the extreme weather last November, the Met Office bravely suggested that we could be in for an unusually mild and dry winter. At the same time, independent forecasters were predicting a winter on a par with that of 2009-10. That illustrates how difficult a task local authorities and trunk-road operating companies face at that time of year.

I noted the findings of the emergency preparedness report that was produced in conjunction with the Red Cross. Although it is only right that we expect the Government, local authorities and emergency services to have robust preparedness plans in place, they can cover only so much ground. It is incumbent on us all to be prepared individually for emergencies that arise from severe weather but, unfortunately, only 40 per cent of Scots feel prepared to deal with such emergencies. Of course the Government cannot do everything for us, but it can raise awareness of what actions we can and should take this winter. The number who feel prepared should be significantly higher this time next year, and the Government's ready for winter campaign seems to be a step in the right direction.

The experience of the past two severe winters has undoubtedly reshaped and improved the winter resilience plans of all local authorities and—to be fair—of the Government. However, with greater preparedness comes greater financial pressure. It is important to note that, while roads and transport budgets across local authorities are subject to cuts, the financial demands on them are increasing significantly. The non-domestic rates budget that is available to local authorities will increase modestly, but the general revenue grant is to be cut by 12.4 per cent in real terms over the

spending review period, which will obviously have an impact.

Last week, media reports said that Fife Council intends to enter winter with an opening stock of salt supplies that totals 40,000 tonnes. Just three winters ago, that council entered winter with 8,000 tonnes, so it now has five times more stock. Demand for salt from the three supplying mines has increased dramatically. It has proved to be the case that, in severe weather, the UK salt mining industry cannot cope with the spike in demand. That necessitates the procuring of salt from Peru and Egypt, which can be almost 50 per cent more expensive per tonne.

Local authorities have gone from paying perhaps just £23 per tonne and entering winter with modest stocks in a just-in-time scenario to increasing their opening stock significantly, at much greater expense. That is before we consider the costs of additional equipment and additional labour hours. The increase in the routine and winter maintenance budget is welcome, but it pertains only to our motorways and trunk roads and will not go towards gritting footpaths or clearing snow from inaccessible residential areas. Councils have also had to raid their reserves. Perth and Kinross Council has gone from expecting a surplus to having a £477,000 overspend because of the wintry weather.

The Scottish Government cannot simply pass the buck to councils and expect them to cope. I am interested to hear of any contingencies that the minister has put in place to provide financial support to local authorities should it be required this winter.

**Keith Brown:** It is worth pointing out that, last year, we did exactly what the member wants—far from passing the buck, we passed £15 million from our hard-pressed budgets to local authorities. The budget that councils have been given this year represents a higher share of our total budget than was allocated under the previous Administration. That demonstrates that we are aware of the pressures on local authorities and are trying to help them with those.

**Jim Hume:** I thank the minister for his intervention. He is right to say that, even with the best laid plans, disruption will occur if severe weather arrives. We must be innovative to minimise disruption as much as we can. NFU Scotland's farmer assistance scheme, which Perth and Kinross Council has adopted, has been mentioned before. It would be good for the minister to look at and perhaps broaden that.

We should pay tribute to the work and dedication that have been exhibited in the past two winters by those whose task is to keep Scotland functioning. They include voluntary organisations

such as four-by-four responders and the Radio Amateurs Emergency Network, and I wish them the very best for the forthcoming winter. I sincerely hope that those in the public, private and voluntary sectors who worked tirelessly last winter have an easier time this year.

15:54

**Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP):** Gil Paterson declared an interest, and maybe I should, too. I was one of the motorists who bought tyres from his company—

**Gil Paterson:** Did Richard Lyle buy chains?

**Richard Lyle:** I did not buy chains or half a million tyres—I bought only four tyres.

I pay tribute to all road staff and all those in services who worked tirelessly throughout last year's bad winter. Many staff worked far above the call of duty. On many occasions, staff who worked from depots did not go home for several days. It is right that we debate winter resilience before the onslaught of this year's weather. I hope that the weather will not be as bad as it was in the previous two years, but who knows what type of weather we will face over the next few months?

I well remember last year's bad weather. It was 10.30 on a Monday morning, and I was on my way to Motherwell. Like many that morning, I got caught in a traffic jam. Most of the vehicles that were in front of me could not get up the hill; we were in a dip. In Motherwell, people go down a hill and go up a hill. Nowadays, most cars cannot cope with the snow. It always surprises me that some of the most expensive cars—like the one that Jason Carlaw has, I am sure—do not have front-wheel drive and are not four-by-four. Car manufacturers could consider that as we face worse weather conditions in some years. I was lucky. My car had a front-wheel drive. I was in a used, cheap man's Merc—an A150. I have changed that car since then, and I hope that my new car does the same as my old one did, and will take me out of any adversity. Most of the cars eventually got up the various hills in the Motherwell area only because many drivers helped one another. That is a tribute to everybody helping one another on that day.

The snow fell for several hours in the area. The area had been gritted, but the gritting was overcome by the amount of snow that fell that morning. Thankfully, I was able to get home after two hours. I was one of the lucky ones that day. I was faced with a mountain of snow when I returned to my street. I was unable to get into the street—I am sure that most of us were in the same position—so I parked at the end of it and proceeded to dig along the road to gain access to my home. The point of my story is that that

prompted several of my neighbours to come out to help me. In turn, we helped other neighbours to get into their homes. The Scottish people have great comradeship in adversity. Most members have said that last year brought out the best in people. I am sure that we will face any impacts that the weather brings.

We have to be prepared. I welcome the Minister for Housing and Transport's statement. The cold weather affects not only the roads; it affects families and groups throughout the country. I also welcome the various programmes that the Government has announced for insulating homes and tackling fuel poverty. All residents should be encouraged to prepare, plan, improve their energy efficiency, protect their pipes, and do what they can in their own homes. I compliment all local council staff who have played their part in working to repair affected homes over the years, especially last year.

Last winter was the worst that Scotland has seen since 1962-63—I am old enough to remember 1962 and 1963—and the second coldest since records began in 1914. I was not around then; I may look that way, but I was not. There are more gritters, but we must remember that gritters sometimes cannot get to areas because they, too, get stuck in traffic jams. Councils need to place gritting bins in appropriate places. If there were gritting bins in the dip I was in in Motherwell, we could have got up the hill much better. Members may want to consider the issue of strategically placed gritting bins on roads or hills that cars may not be able to get up.

Most councils have in place a programme for the main roads that they will salt. That point was made earlier. Many roads in council and private areas are not salted now. Strategic areas, main roads, motorways and roads near schools are salted, but many roads are left out. Once main roads and motorways are cleared, there is a case for councils at least to plough local roads that require it. I do not even want them to salt those roads; all that I want them to do is plough them. Dennis Robertson was lucky that a plough came along his road. I stay beside a sheltered housing complex, and we had to dig snow out ourselves. I hope that the minister will speak to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local councils about that matter.

I condemn anyone who attacks council road workmen who are trying to help their fellow Scots—Jason Carlaw spoke about that earlier—and I condemn the persons who attacked North Lanarkshire Council personnel last year.

We must build on the lessons that were learned last year. I am sure that we will all play a part in ensuring that we do so.

16:00

**Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP):** I, too, have a personal tale to relate from last winter. In the midst of the heaviest snowfall, which was certainly the worst that I have experienced in 20 years of living in Angus, I had unavoidable cause to journey from Carnoustie to Aberdeen to collect a vehicle. I completed the journey by foot, bus and train in just under two and a half hours, which was a remarkable achievement in the conditions. Indeed, the most challenging part was tramping the 500yd from my home to the bus stop and from the bus stop to the garage at the other end. That was largely because of the attitude and approach of Strathtay bus drivers and rail staff. I had a ticket for a specific train, and when I got to Arbroath rail station, I faced a wait of about an hour for its arrival. The staff told me not to worry about that and to jump on the first train that came along, because although the network was open, the service was patchy.

When I got to Aberdeen—quickly, as it turned out—I had a short walk to Union Street, a quick bus trip to the Lang Stracht, an undignified hike through 2ft of snow, and I was there. I realise that far more serious weather conditions struck the central belt, but my point is that we can overcome at least some of the consequences and inconveniences of extreme weather by applying common sense, adapting and pulling together.

I take pulling together down to a basic level. I hesitate to say this because, at four days short of my 49th birthday, I dread starting any sentence with the words, “When I was a lad”, but here goes: when I was a lad and heavy snow came, we did not sit back in the house failing to go to school or work because the council had not turned up to clear the road and pavements. I have just realised how uncannily like Norman Tebbit’s rant about people getting on their bikes and looking for work that sounds. It must be true what they say: the older you get, the further to the right you move. Anyway, I recall going out with my dad and all the other dads and kids to help clear the road down the back of the terrace where we lived so that everyone could get their cars out of the garages, which were in the basements of the houses, and on to the road. Then we cleared the front path and the pavement on either side and then we helped to clear the drives and pathways of the older folk in the area who could not do that for themselves. It was not some grand gesture; it was just the natural thing to do.

However, I have to say that, nowadays, Richard Lyle’s tale of neighbourhood coming together is not all that commonplace—and, sadly, not only because people have a fear of being sued because someone has slipped on a piece of ground that they have cleared. Clarity on the issue

of liability is to be found in the advice that is offered at [www.readyscotland.org](http://www.readyscotland.org), although I accept that some of Dennis Robertson’s constituents might have a problem accessing it. The website states:

“There is no law preventing you from clearing snow and ice on the pavement outside or on paths to your house”.

It continues:

“Provided you are careful, use common sense and don’t do anything which would be likely to cause harm or distress to others, it is highly unlikely that you will be found responsible for any accidents.”

Some people still get out there and clear the drive, the path and the pavement and then salt the area to ensure that it is safe to walk on. However, certainly in towns at least, all too often we sit back waiting for an overstretched council workforce to get to our street and then complain about the length of time that it takes them to reach us.

Actually, it is worse than that. I know of a businessman who decided to lend his council—I should add that it was not my local council—a helping hand by taking a digger from the plant hire business that he owned and clearing a path all the way to his home, which lay at the far end of a rather well-heeled estate. He also cleared various roads that lay off the route that he had an interest in making accessible. Imagine his surprise, therefore, when his generous gesture was greeted by one ungrateful neighbour complaining in all seriousness that he might have cleared the pavements while he was at it.

The thing about extreme weather is that it is just that—extreme. As individuals, we must play our part in overcoming it, as several members have said. Although the Government and other relevant agencies and organisations must be suitably prepared for the onset of winter and ready to discharge their responsibilities—based on what we heard from the minister, that certainly seems to be the case—at a local level it cannot be left entirely to councils, which simply cannot maintain for 12 months of the year the resources that are required to spring into action when bad weather arrives to ensure that our communities do not grind to a halt. I say that as an SNP member whose local council is not of my political persuasion.

Since my days as a young journalist, I have had an enormous regard for the men and women who do their best to keep our country functioning in the worst of the winter weather, particularly those who are involved in ploughing and gritting the roads.

During my time as a trainee reporter back in the early 1980s, I was sent out with a snowplough driver whose beat was the Glens of Foudland—I was to do a story on the nature of his job. That was in the days before the tachograph, the working time directive and health safety, when

drivers did an extended run, grabbed a cup of tea and then went back out on another extended run in an almost endless cycle. Members such as Mr Stewart who know that area will know that that is pretty much what is required to keep the road from being blocked.

Even now, we still see people rising to the challenge of a severe winter. We need look no further than the men and women who are keeping our roads open now, the electricity company employees who are out in savage conditions repairing damaged power lines or the two Network Rail workers who last winter were hospitalised with frostbite after working in temperatures that plunged to -22°—incidentally, that happened not in some remote corner of Scotland but in Rutherglen. Given what those workers do to try to ensure that our lives are as normal as possible, is it so much to ask that we as individuals step up to the plate?

I realise that time is pressing, so I will make one final point. I say to Chic Brodie that the community spirit is still out there in our rural areas. In one of my villages in Angus South the locals came together some years ago to purchase grit bins, which they fill every year. They live on a brae; there are about 30 households living on or off the brae on an unadopted road. I draw to the minister's attention the fact that this time last year, in preparing for the onset of winter, those residents purchased salt at around £70 a tonne and this year they purchased it at £75 a tonne. It was disturbing to hear that during the depths of last winter, when a top-up of the bins was needed, they were forced to pay up to £190 a tonne. I understand the laws of supply and demand and that grit became harder to source, but, frankly, that reeks of profiteering. I ask the minister to do whatever he can to ensure that if we are hit by another bout of severe weather, communities that have to ensure that their own roads are kept clear are not ripped off.

16:06

**Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab):** Like many members, I can well remember where I was last year when the emergency debate took place when we were having winter problems: I was stuck at home and was very frustrated not to be able to get to the Parliament to participate in the debate.

When I leave tonight, I will climb in my car and it will take me half an hour—top whack would be 40 minutes—to get home. I do not live far from the Parliament, but last year over the short distance between here and Dalgety Bay, where I live, by the shores of the River Forth, the roads became absolutely impossible. Cars were completely abandoned, which I say to the minister is a problem. I quite understand why many people got out of their car and left it wherever it was, but that

made it impossible for any of the buses to get along the bus routes and for the snow-clearing vehicles to get through to clear snow. We need to get the message across to people that they should do their absolute utmost not to abandon their cars. We are not unsympathetic to the problem, but people really need to understand that by abandoning their cars they can prevent all the emergency vehicles and so much other transport from getting through, so they should give that some thought. With a little bit of help from friendly neighbours, who have been mentioned already this afternoon, the situation could change. I can walk to the railway station, but I am thinking of the many older people in my constituency—if they do not have the bus service, they have nothing, because they cannot drive, which means that they are absolutely stuck. Last year, it meant that they could not get to the shops.

The minister and I have a common friend—the chiropodist—whose praises I will sing to the utmost. Last year, her customers could not get to her, so she took her sledge—and took extra milk and loaves with her—in order to get round to every single customer who needed to see her. When she got to their homes, she checked their cupboards and often found that there was absolutely nothing in them. When we go and visit old people, we should not just take their word for it that they are all right and everything is okay; we should go and check. That is what we must do if we are really to be caring neighbours.

I commend the minister because I know how much effort he has put into all this work. We can see that from his appearances on the television. As Jackson Carlaw said, I am sorry that it is not Keith Brown but Kenny MacAskill who is the poster boy. Keith Brown should get the credit, because he has done the hard work. Kenny MacAskill should stand aside and allow Keith Brown to take the credit, because it has to be said that he has really given his utmost.

One of the messages that I bring from my constituency is that we must prioritise the roads. Other members said that—I think that Richard Lyle mentioned it. Some of my roads were never cleared at all. It was weeks and weeks before they saw a snowplough. The people in those places were not asking for salt or grit bins but they were asking that the roads at least be cleared, because the situation was totally impossible.

When I was sat at home last winter, I was on my BlackBerry and laptop non-stop during the weeks of really bad weather with people coming to me because I had a really good link to Fife Council's Milesmark depot. I sing the praises of the officials there, who responded to the many emergency calls from people who needed help because they had hospital appointments for cancer treatment or

because they needed to make funeral arrangements to bury their fathers. It should not have been an MSP directing operations. I should have been setting the policy, not managing it, but that is what I was doing in effect; I managed who got priority attention.

I have been a councillor. Some members know that I was the roads and transportation spokesperson on Fife Council at one time. One budget that was always cut back was the salt budget for the roads. I was part of the team that set the budget at the beginning of the year, and it was always suggested that we could save money on the salt. I hope that no local authority in Scotland takes that attitude this year. I hope that local authorities listen to the messages that the minister has given.

When I heard the exchange between Gil Paterson and John Mason, I smiled to myself. Gil Paterson is right about snow chains and snow tyres. I have just come back from Bulgaria—I spend as much time as I can in eastern Europe helping trade unions and socialist parties there—and I was surprised when my neighbour there said to me, “I am coming back out of town and will live here all winter.” I wondered how on earth they would do that because, like other parts of the world, it is not uncommon for Bulgaria have 2m or 3m of snow. They do it by having snow chains and snow tyres.

We need to get the message across in Scotland that people need to start buying snow tyres and snow chains. It is an investment but, if people—particularly the big freight companies—are to have regard for the economy, I am afraid that it is one that will have to be a part of life.

The point that the minister made about investment in heavy equipment is absolutely right. We can contract companies for short periods; we do not always have to buy the equipment. Fife Council always contracted with local farmers and local companies to get that heavy equipment.

I commend the minister for the hard work in which he and his team are involved. Like others, I thank all the volunteers throughout Scotland who have given such commitment in the past.

16:13

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** It has been a long debate and much has been said so far. However, the highlight for me has been finding out that Keith Brown’s number 1 fan is Helen Eadie. I tell him to be very afraid. However, if I want grit for my road, I will call Ms Eadie.

“Drivers in the Borders have been urged not to travel as heavy snow continues to cause problems across the region.

The A7 is said to be passable only with extreme care and the A68 is shut, both at Soutra and south of Jedburgh.

There are also reports of cars getting stuck, while the A1 is closed at Berwick because of an overturned lorry with further problems at Cockburnspath.

Schools in the region were on holiday on Monday but no decision has yet been made on reopening for Tuesday.

The main roads which remain open are said to be generally only passable with care—sometimes extreme care.

That is said to be the case right across the Borders from Berwickshire through to Peeblesshire.

Many bus services have also been affected and the situation will be reviewed throughout the day.”

That was not a weather forecast; it was a news report from 29 November last year about the first heavy fall of snow across the Borders and Midlothian.

We have heard lots of anecdotes about what happened, and I have one to add to them. It took me three hours to travel from Peebles to the Sheriffhall roundabout. I did a wee twirl at the Auchendinny road, which I did not mean to take, and had to get back on the main road and go through Penicuik on black ice. I say to Anne McTaggart that I do not blame Scottish Borders Council or Midlothian Council.

Wonderful though we have all decided Keith Brown is—I have not actually made up my mind yet—I do not expect him to keep every road in Scotland clear. Things will happen suddenly. Black ice can occur at the drop of the rain. These things happen: some cannot be avoided, but some can. This might not go down well, but I had little sympathy for the lady who, with two young children in the car, got stuck on a motorway in blizzards—which had been predicted—while she was taking presents to somebody. She should not have done that. The task was not important. Delivering a blood transfusion, for example, is important. Some people think that they have a divine right to travel on the roads or the railway, notwithstanding what comes down from the heavens. That, of course, is a nonsense.

Co-ordination, which has been referred to, is extremely important. I know that adversity is the mother of invention, and that a lot of lessons were learned following last winter. In particular, I commend the voluntary sector, from the neighbour next door, to the Red Cross, to the groups of people in communities who help one another. The experience where I live was extremely good. We should not always blame people for not keeping their pavement clear. I know that, as soon as I cleared mine, the snow came and froze, and the pavement was covered again. I even took the Saxa salt out to try to get it off, but it was impossible.

As Jim Hume knows, farmers play a huge part across the Scottish Borders. They go out with their tractors and so on, doing a really big job.

We have all said something about checking on our neighbours. I feel like I am in the war, saying, “Get your food cupboard stocked, your candles and so on”, but those are all things that are required. Having lived in a rural area for many years, I had all that in stock—I had hurricane lamps and everything. Maybe some of the city dwellers are going to have to do that. It can be quite fun, actually, making toast over an open fire—if there is one. It is a change. Of course, someone who has done that will wake up in the morning with a bright red face, which they will not have noticed because they were in the dark when they got it.

I want to say something cheery about the snow. I was in Helsinki when it was -20°C. It was beautiful—it was like being in Zhivago territory. Last winter, the most hideous rubbish sites in Scotland very briefly looked beautiful, with the moon shining on the snow. It is absolutely great for children when schools close. While we are all in here being stuffy and saying that the schools have been closed for five days, Scotland’s schoolchildren are out having free exercise and fun, coming in soaking wet with bright red faces, as happy as Larry.

I commend grippers to everyone. I learned about them from Mary Scanlon. One day in the winter, she was marching up the High Street at a rate of knots while Bill Aitken and I were falling all over the place. We thought that she was a very special person until we saw that she had on her feet these little rubber things with whirly metal bits on them. I immediately bought a pair for myself and a pair for my elderly next-door neighbour, who, for the first time in seven days, was able to get to the paper shop. If somebody wants to make a lot of money, they should start stocking up on those grippers now. I would have brought them with me to show Gil Paterson, but product placement is not yet allowed in the Scottish Parliament—if it were, I would have lifted up my foot and shown them to him.

There are other manufacturing opportunities. I recently found out about an international business in my constituency called Findlay Irvine. I am sure that members will not have heard of it, but it makes special machines that detect where skidding is going to happen on roads and at airports and exports them all over the world. I want somebody out there with a pen and a pad who is listening to us talk about the difficulties with snow, black ice and everything to say to themselves, “Okay, blue-sky thinking: how can I get manufacturing productivity going in Scotland by devising things like grippers for feet, ways to sort

things out or a device for Dennis Robertson so that his dog knows whether he is walking into a wall, a lamp post or snow that the snowplough has thrown up.” There are advantages to the problems that we face.

On that point, I have one final thing to say—about pavements. I would rather that Keith Brown was the minister for pavements because it is the very last area that gets treated. Kevin Stewart’s point about sheltered housing was well made because sheltered housing residents’ pavements do not get cleared. We should think about the money that the NHS could save by not having to treat broken and fractured limbs and so on if someone would just take care of the pavements. I ask that person with their pen and pad to get something sorted for the pavements.

16:20

**Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab):** Follow that if you can, eh, Margaret?

The events of last winter and the dreadful conditions that we experienced have been etched in the memory of everyone here. Every year we have come to expect a great deal from the winter maintenance patrols and emergency services who work in difficult times and yet always go that extra mile to help those who find it hardest to cope in bad weather. Their contribution should be celebrated today.

I am grateful to the Scottish Government for recognising the importance of holding a debate on winter resilience now and for setting out its plans for the coming months. Our transport system and national infrastructure are vital, and we must do all that we can to keep Scotland moving through the rain, hail, sleet and snow—some of the most adverse weather conditions. When the elements overwhelm us and travel is no longer safe, we must do all that we can to protect the public.

Last winter, as we have heard, the road network came to a grinding halt. Major arteries seized up, motorways came to a standstill and congestion that lasted all through the night spread across central Scotland into the towns and along A roads, preventing whole swathes of the network from being cleared and properly treated. We know that that cannot be allowed to happen again. We do not want to see a repeat of the cost of that disruption to the economy and the distress that it caused families and communities.

The past two or three winters have shown us that, however sophisticated and developed it might be, our infrastructure is fragile in adverse conditions. Government contractors cannot always predict the elements, and they can never control them, but they have a duty to be prepared and to put robust contingencies in place.



If this winter is anything like last winter, it could test that preparedness and those contingencies to the limit. From Met Office reports, we know that snowfall and prolonged periods of low temperatures, such as we experienced last year, are within the normal range of natural climate variability. I also note that the Met Office is examining research into whether bad winters are clustered. If they are, after two or three years of severe weather, we could be facing another long, cold winter.

South Lanarkshire Council in my area is taking steps to ensure that it is as prepared as possible for the coming months. It is issuing advice on road use in winter conditions, has invested in three new Scandinavian gritters and has increased its salt supplies to well over 30,000 tonnes, which is 9,000 tonnes more than last year.

In learning about plans that local authorities are putting in place, some questions have arisen that I want to put to the Scottish Government. Has it made arrangements with COSLA that will guarantee a consistent supply of de-icing material and salt stock throughout the long winter months? In the past, some councils have been forced to purchase extra supplies in season, when costs are at their highest. Given that the United Kingdom uses more salt than it actually produces, councils almost always have to import from abroad. That is an expensive business, although I learned recently that when councils agree good deals with suppliers in advance, they can import salt more cheaply than the Government can. Nevertheless, I would like to know how the Scottish Government is co-ordinating the planning and procurement of those supplies to ensure that there is a more comprehensive plan in place to treat Scotland's roads this year.

**Keith Brown:** It is worth pointing out that the salt that local authorities hold is entirely a matter for them. They procure it as they see fit, and they are right to procure it early if they can get it for a better price. We have worked with local authorities on what is called the salt cell, which is a strategic reserve that can be used to help out if they happen to fall short. However, the matter is one that is entirely for the local authority, as is the level of priority that local authorities attach to each individual road. The member can take some comfort from the fact that, throughout Scotland, local authorities and the Government have enough salt in stock already, bought at good prices in the summer—more than we had to use during the entire winter period last year.

**Margaret McCulloch:** I thank the minister for his answer, which was really helpful.

How will the Scottish Government facilitate the collaboration between the roads authorities and Transport Scotland, should there be a need to

share resources and emergency equipment? The minister may or may not be aware that, last year, South Lanarkshire Council offered its assistance in treating trunk roads. That offer was rejected.

Scotland's roads can be very dangerous during the winter, and drivers have to ensure that they are aware of the hazards and of any travel difficulties that may develop at short notice. I welcome the Scottish Government's initiative to promote safe winter driving and winter tyres. However, in harsh conditions, it might be safest for drivers not to venture out of the house at all. I hope that the Scottish Government will do all that it can to communicate to the public the importance of travel warnings from the police. When the police tell drivers not to travel unless their journeys are essential, they really mean it.

Employers must manage winter absences with care—and definitely with sympathy. They must communicate with authorities about any closing down of workplaces—as we would all expect headteachers to do when deciding whether or not schools should remain open.

Although we cannot predict the elements, we should always do our best to prepare for them. The Scottish Government must ensure that Scotland is ready, that we are all prepared, and that the people we serve can keep safe on the roads.

16:26

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** Some people might have thought that a debate on winter resilience would be rather boring; however, this debate has actually been rather lively at points. It has also been rather informative. Who knew before today that Helen Eadie had a Keith Brown fixation? We are all better for knowing that—although I can see that Keith Brown is not entirely happy that members keep referring to it. I withdraw the remark.

Also, although some people might have thought that the debate was not important, since I was elected no issue has sparked as much correspondence for me as last winter's weather. It is important that we have the debate. However, having spoken to colleagues, I know that not all of them received the same volume of contact on the matter. That tells me that there may be something peculiar about the way in which North Lanarkshire Council deals with bad weather. I will return to that later.

I would like to echo the call that some members made by saying that we all have a role in tackling the problems associated with extreme winter conditions. Clearly, local government and Scottish Government agencies have the primary role, but we all have a part to play. I saw that for myself in

Cumbernauld and Kilsyth last winter. Like many other members, in their areas, on several occasions I played a part in clearing my street with my neighbours. However, as Christine Grahame said, the task could seem fruitless—no sooner had we finished clearing the snow than it fell again. Unlike Dennis Robertson, I was not in danger of being infuriated by a snowplough. There was no sign of a snowplough or a gritter anywhere near my street.

The issue of litigation is raised from time to time and a few members touched on it. Last winter, the issue was raised with me by a shopkeeper in Cumbernauld village—where I happen to live. He is a barber and he cleared the street and pavement outside his shop. No sooner had he done so than some happy individual walked by and threatened him with legal action should he slip on the street. However, as Graeme Dey said, the available advice on where the law stands is that it is very unlikely that any individual could be the subject of litigation for clearing the streets. The answer that I received to a written question last year also showed that to be the case. People should have no fear of playing their part in clearing snow and ice from the pavements and streets around them.

Concern has been expressed that people do not feel ready for the winter. The Scottish Government commissioned a survey of just over 1,000 people in May, and about three fifths of those questioned felt that they were not properly prepared for heavy snow, a prolonged freeze or flooding—all of which we can expect to experience in a harsh winter. We should welcome the ready for winter campaign, which, as well as allowing Kenny MacAskill to demonstrate his sartorial elegance—I thought that Jackson Carlaw was most unfair in his description of Mr MacAskill's attire—will remind individuals and families of the risks and consequences of being underprepared, will highlight the range of information and resources that are available, and will encourage as many people as possible to be ready for winter this year, which I am sure we all support.

Turning to what the Government is doing, I believe that lessons have been learned from last year. We must remember the context. Dick Lyle, I think, made the point that last winter was the worst one that Scotland had seen since the winter of 1962-63—which, unlike him, I cannot remember. It clearly posed challenges, but lessons have been learned. As well as the ready for winter campaign, following the problems that motorists faced on the M8, in particular, last year, a multi-agency response team has been formed, which includes representatives from the police forces, the trunk road operating companies, Transport Scotland and ScotRail. It will operate from the traffic control centre in Glasgow.

In addition, there was the suitably dramatic-sounding exercise polar storm—a polar storm is certainly not what we hope to see this winter—which looked at how we can respond more coherently and in a better fashion to severe winter weather.

We should accept that Scotland should be more prepared for bad weather than ever before, because of the lessons that have been learned. I see that the Scottish Government resilience room will operate 24 hours a day during spells of severe weather. That should allow for better support and improved co-ordination of the response, which will involve the Government and—vitally—the public being better informed. Jackson Carlaw and Dennis Robertson touched on why that is important.

I notice that we do not have quite as generous a six minutes as we did at the start of the debate, so I will turn to the final area that I want to discuss, which is the experience in my area. John Mason suggested that the priority should be ensuring that Broadwood stadium is kept clear so that Clyde games can go ahead. I am not sure that that will be the Government's number 1 priority, but I will see what North Lanarkshire Council can do. However, there are wider concerns about the way in which North Lanarkshire Council approached snow clearance. Jackson Carlaw mentioned North Lanarkshire Council reporting that attacks on gritters made some places no-go areas. My first response was that my constituency must be a haven of vandalism, so rare a breed were gritters in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth last winter, but I doubt that that is the reason.

Of course, we should be concerned about any attacks on public servants—any person who makes such an attack should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. However, there are genuine concerns about the council's strategy for snow clearance, which left entire areas untouched. I hope that it has done the same as the Scottish Government and has learned the lessons from last winter. I hope, too, that its response will be better in the event that we experience the bad winter that we hope does not transpire.

I welcome the debate and commend those who were involved in responding to last winter's weather. I wish those who have the responsibility for responding to this winter's weather well, but I hope that they are not prevailed upon to the same extent.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):**  
We come to the winding-up speeches.

16:33

**Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):**  
It is always interesting to have a debate on a subject such as winter resilience. From my

experience of such debates, I find it quite ironic that when the Government has the presence of mind to have the debate in advance of the bad weather, the debate is relatively quiet and civilised, whereas if it had taken the trouble to get it wrong and have the debate after the bad weather, it would have been much more exciting. However, it is positive that we are having the debate in advance.

The thought occurred to me that every time we get a period of bad weather in Scotland, a director of some senior football club appears on television to demand a winter break in the football season. My thought is always, "That's a good idea—just tell us when the bad weather is going to come and we'll have a break." In Scotland, the problem is that we do not always get bad winters but when we do get them, they can last a long time and there is no way of knowing that they are coming.

Last year, the snow first fell in the north-east at the beginning of the last week of November and did not start to melt until well into the first week of January. Not only did the towns and cities have a serious problem, but away from the coast the snow lay continually over that period, so we had to deal with some serious problems. Gil Paterson remarked that the snow lasted three weeks where he was. He and I had different experiences of the snow.

The real problems that we faced during the long period of bad weather were to do with the transport of both people and goods. At the time, my concern was that we were beginning to hear stories of supermarkets running out of products and the shelves being empty, and we came close to a situation in which we could have had serious shortages. The just-in-time principle of supply, which our main retailers and others have adopted, makes us more susceptible to that. Therefore, I take the opportunity to pay particular tribute to Scotland's HGV drivers. Some people held them responsible for the blockages on our motorways, but they cannot stop. They continued to provide a service, often suffering the hardships of being trapped on the road, and their work averted a potential crisis.

I will go on to some of the other comments. Chic Brodie seemed to suggest that some of us were exaggerating the problems that we had with ScotRail. I have discussed my specific problems with ScotRail and I can assure members that where I get on and off the trains, at Stonehaven, there were no trains at all for long periods. As my colleague Jackson Carlaw pointed out, the problem was not just the lack of trains but the serious lack of information. Much of the information that was available through the traditional means, such as the internet and the national rail hotline, was simply inaccurate. At one

point, in despair, my wife—trying to get rid of me, I think—phoned the national rail hotline and was told by a very nice Indian lady that there was no reported disruption on the Scottish rail network. That is an example of the problems that we faced.

Anne McTaggart referred to Facebook and Twitter as ways of getting information. I can tell members that, on one occasion during the snow period last year, I travelled to Edinburgh on a train that did not exist. It had already been cancelled, but word came out of Aberdeen station via Facebook that an east coast main line train, which was frozen solid and had no toilets or other facilities, was travelling south because it had to be somewhere else and the staff had decided to allow passengers on to it if they turned up at the station. I was at the station in time for the train to arrive and travelled to Edinburgh on the non-existent train. That indicates the importance of having information when it is available.

As Jackson Carlaw said, there was a failure of both infrastructure and communication, which affected not only passengers such as me but the then minister. Stewart Stevenson was forced to resign largely, I believe, because of his "Newsnight" appearance when he gave inaccurate information. I do not believe for a minute that Stewart Stevenson intended to mislead; I believe that he did not have the information that he should have had. Therefore, not only were passengers affected by misinformation; the problem went right to the top. I hope that Keith Brown is now in a position to guarantee that he will not be misled and that, as a result, he will not mislead Scotland's travelling public if bad weather returns.

We are in a country where the weather is difficult to predict, but I will defend weather forecasters because their record shows that weather forecasting over a period of one to six days has never been as accurate as it is today. We need to use the information that they give us more effectively and understand it better. We need the organisations responsible for disseminating that information to interpret it accurately and effectively. As Jackson Carlaw said, once the same piece of misinformation has appeared on the motorway gantry for three days, it does not matter what it says. Nobody will believe it.

16:39

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I welcome the debate, which has been a good one, for the most part.

I start by paying tribute to the British Red Cross, which hounded all candidates in the run-up to the election about its ready for winter campaign and had continued making representations to the Government, with some effect. It has also

continued with its public campaigning, which is welcome. We should pay tribute to it for its efforts.

I welcome the plans that the Government has set out. Now is a good time to prepare for the winter and we welcome the steps that are being taken. However, the buck stops with the Minister for Housing and Transport and it is his job to ensure that everything is in place for the winter. If it is not, we, unlike Jackson Carlaw, will hold him to account. Stewart Stevenson resigned because he was not up to his game. I hope that Keith Brown will be. Perhaps Jackson Carlaw will not be quite so amused about job hunting in the next few weeks, once the leadership campaign is over and done with, but I hope that he will not be licking his wounds too much.

Many members spoke about roads and rightly said that we cannot predict the weather, but we can prepare for it, and that preparation needs to be joined-up. The gridlock on the M8 last winter, which Anne McTaggart mentioned, was unacceptable. It was also unacceptable that there was no way out of Inverness by road, rail or air for many days last winter. We welcome the purchase of gritters, but where will they be sited? Will it be possible to move them to where they are most needed? Like many others, I travel on the A9 week in, week out. The gritters will be much needed there, but when severe weather hits roads such as the M8, they will also be needed there. Can they be moved around to where they are most needed? Margaret McCulloch mentioned the issue as well, but in the context of trunk road agencies and councils. We now have two different contracts, and winter weather is one of the big issues that arose when the trunk road contracts came away from councils. We need to find ways of making the two contracts work together, with sharing of resources and expertise.

We need better information and updates. As someone who travels on the A9 a lot, I know that there are few good, robust updates. I tend to depend on the live cameras that are sited on the road, because they give me the best impression of the road before I travel. Dennis Robertson talked about how information is relayed to people and about connectivity, which is a big bugbear of mine. I will not discuss that now, but he is right. Another issue is that there is little information on rural roads. We see trunk road information on websites and there are places to look for it, but there is little information on rural side roads. Information must also be meaningful.

Many members talked about self-help. It is important that people clear their pavements. Perhaps the Government needs to legislate to ensure that people do not face litigation for their best efforts to help others out. We do not want a society that depends on litigation, in which people

are afraid to act. It is also right that people should clear side roads and lanes. However, I query what Gil Paterson said about ploughing. We have to be really careful about that. My father drives a snowplough so I know what is involved. I know the risks that he faced day in, day out. It is not safe for amateurs who have no training and lack the correct equipment to go out and try to become some sort of vigilante. We need to look at the issue in the round.

Anne McTaggart talked about the 900,000 people in Scotland who live in fuel poverty and the importance of including them in the winter resilience plans. That is of the utmost importance. People in fuel poverty are the most vulnerable when temperatures plummet. Age UK told us recently that 200 people in the UK will die each day this winter due to cold-related illnesses. That is unacceptable. The draft budget for 2012-13 proposes a £65 million budget for energy efficiency and fuel poverty. That is much less than the 2010-11 budget, which was £70.9 million, and the budget will not recover to that level during the current spending review period.

In committee this morning, Energy Action Scotland told us that it would take £200 million a year to deal with fuel poverty and meet the targets, and that £100 million of that would have to come from Government. We need not only low-cost energy for our people in fuel poverty but insulation. Again, Age Scotland's special adviser told us recently that energy prices per unit in Sweden are 50 per cent higher than those in the UK but the average energy bill there is 30 per cent lower, which is due to insulation alone. It is right that we attack the policies of the big six, but the Government also has a role in dealing with the fuel poor, and it must act now to help them.

I want to say a quick word about winter tyres, which is an issue that I raised with the Government, the Treasury and, indeed, different agencies last year. It was not very clear to me what the minister meant when he spoke about purchasing more winter tyres, so I would welcome more detail on that. I have watched health care workers and home care workers travelling in remote areas. The health care workers had contract cars but were unable to fit winter tyres to them because it was too difficult. A home care worker who used her own car had fitted winter tyres, so the health care workers followed her around the area that they had to cover, because it was easier to do that. They commented on the huge difference in traction between the cars without winter tyres and the car that had them.

I have been told that it is maybe not safe to fit winter tyres on cars, because it may give people confidence that they should not have. To me, though, safety is imperative for the workers who

go out and make their best efforts to reach people who need their care. We need to look again at how we use winter tyres and perhaps snow chains, although I know that there are issues about using those on roads.

The review group's report refers to vulnerable people, which is an area that we must look at. We are all aware of vulnerable people who are known to agencies and who maybe receive home care and the like, but there are others who are totally independent under normal conditions but become homebound because of poor weather conditions. They perhaps cannot get out because of icy pavements or because they are not confident about travelling on the roads, although they need to get food and energy supplies and medicines in. I understand that a framework for dealing with that situation is being put in place, but I wonder what steps are being taken to track those who may be in need and identify their needs.

In that respect, there will be people who live in rural areas or off-grid who need supplies of Calor gas or oil. How are such people identified and how are the supplies got to them? Many other issues were mentioned in the debate, such as the effect of severe weather on the economy and on councils' budgets.

I am glad that the minister is moving forward and not looking at the fiasco that we had last year, but we need to appreciate those who helped us out of that fiasco. The Government must take a lead in planning, and it will have our full support if it does that.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call on Keith Brown to wind up the debate. Minister, you have 10 minutes, which will take us to 4.59.

16:48

**Keith Brown:** Thank you very much, Presiding Officer. As I tried to outline earlier in the debate, Scotland is striving to be as prepared as possible for the severe winter weather that we may have. I have tried to describe some of the measures that have been put in place by the Scottish Government, responders and others in the private and voluntary sectors to help Scotland be more resilient should we face another winter of severe weather. I will try to outline one or two other measures, but I will also deal with various points that members raised during the debate.

I think that Jamie Hepburn felt that exercise polar storm was too dramatic a title. We thought about calling it exercise snowy sleep, but that perhaps would not have got the same attention as exercise polar storm. It was a major winter planning exercise that took place in September and brought together nearly 200 delegates from the emergency services and the public, private

and voluntary sectors to assess our ability to respond during prolonged severe weather. It was an extremely useful exercise.

I think that there were four requests in Anne McTaggart's speech for additional funding for various things, and Rhoda Grant made the same point. I take the approach that if an Opposition party member's suggestion comes with an indication of where the money should come from, or even some idea of how much money is being talked about, we should take the suggestion seriously. If the suggestion is not made in that way, it should not be taken seriously.

A member quite rightly made a jibe about cuts that are too fast and too deep, but it is worth pointing out that it was a Labour chancellor who said that we would get tougher cuts than we had under Margaret Thatcher, which is what we are experiencing. We cannot respond to every request for additional funding.

**Rhoda Grant:** The minister could take the money out of the budget for the referendum on separation and keep to the fuel poverty targets that the Parliament set in legislation.

**Keith Brown:** We will see how many times Labour spends that budget during the next five years. Time will tell.

Lewis Macdonald made an important point about community councils. We are committed to supporting community councils so that they can make a full and active contribution to the communities that they represent. We will consider how best we can support them to operate in future, as part of the wider community empowerment agenda. As Lewis Macdonald said, community councils in the Borders, with support from the local authority, are developing community emergency plans, based on Scottish Government guidance, and are playing a key role in building community resilience. We will encourage such an approach.

Lewis Macdonald raised a point about insurance. As he said, many community councils have their own insurance. We are working with the industry on the issue and we have reached an agreement with Zurich Municipal, which, as members know, is a large-scale insurer of public organisations, including a large number of community councils, that community resilience activity will be covered under the terms of its standard insurance. That should give comfort to community councils. Such activity is what we mean by Government support for community councils, because of course their primary relationship is with local authorities, through their schemes of establishment.

**Lewis Macdonald:** I welcome the assurance that the minister has given. Does he accept that

there is also a role for a national approach to community councils, which would best be articulated through the Association of Scottish Community Councils? If so, does he think that the Scottish Government can provide further support on winter resilience in that context?

**Keith Brown:** I reiterate that the primary link is between local authorities and community councils, as is set out in statute, although we will provide support and encouragement where we can do so.

On Lewis Macdonald's point about farmers, Transport Scotland is having on-going discussions and I think that tomorrow a meeting will take place in Perth at which we will hear from Moray Council on best practice in relation to working with partners. Transport Scotland will have further discussions with the National Farmers Union Scotland if authorities identify a need for national criteria. A great deal of work has been done in that regard. Rhoda Grant made a good point about the need to ensure that only properly-qualified people work the plant.

Jackson—sometimes Jason—Carlaw made a number of points. I welcome his positive words. Indeed, I welcome the positive words from members of all parties, although I am under no illusion about how quickly they will dissipate if we have a cold winter and things do not go to plan. Jackson Carlaw said that he fears that given that we have had an election since last winter people might have taken their eye off the ball. It is worth remembering that since the election we have experienced the highest-ever winds in May and, in August, some of the heaviest rainfall that we have ever experienced. We have also had a volcanic ash cloud and the remnants of hurricane Katia. Therefore, all the people who are involved have had to stay very much on top of the matter—not that they would not have done so anyway, but the conditions have meant that we have continually needed to consider issues to do with resilience.

Dick Lyle talked about the strategic placement of gritters and grit bins. He might remember that in the six-point plan that we adopted last year we addressed precisely that point in relation to our responsibilities on the trunk road network—one example is the rise at Harthill, which is not far from Dick Lyle's area. We have put grit on site on the strategic trunk road network, so that we can get the roads gritted quickly. I take Dick Lyle's point that local authorities might want to adapt the approach for their purposes.

Someone said that there should be a minister for pavements, rightly drawing attention to the fact that pavements were a problem for many people last year. As I said, we have the salt stocks that we need. There are other materials, such as magnesium chloride and Eco-Thaw, which work far better than salt at low temperatures. It is open

to local authorities to get those materials, although they are much more expensive than salt. The materials keep pavements clear of ice for longer periods; they also break up hard-packed ice. That is an option but, by and large, pavements are the responsibility of local authorities. Where they abut the trunk road network, we have provided community self-help kits to a number of local communities, especially in rural areas. The people will have their pavements cleared and those areas will be gritted, but that cannot happen everywhere at the same time, so community self-help kits have been issued, which have been very much welcomed.

Margaret McCulloch raised the idea of working closely with local authorities. We are doing that. She mentioned South Lanarkshire Council specifically. Amey told us yesterday that it has a commitment with South Lanarkshire Council to enhance communications and supply and to provide mutual aid when required. That happens in Aberdeenshire, where some functions of the trunk road operating company are carried out by the local authority and vice versa, and it also happens in Dumfries and Galloway. That should continue. Last year, we made a number of offers of assistance even to the airports, and we had the trunk roads next to Edinburgh airport cleared. There were also problems with clearing the runway, but the plant that we have cannot be used on runways. We regularly ask ourselves how we can help other organisations.

There was a lot of discussion about the threat of litigation if someone clears a path and somebody else slips. Ready Scotland advice makes it clear that that is extremely unlikely, as Graeme Dey helpfully mentioned. Even if someone were to be sued, the vast majority of household insurance policies would cover them for that eventuality. If people are insured, that should take care of that. One or two people were trying to put that story about last year, perhaps through their own self-interest or in the interest of the legal profession. However, it should never be a matter for legal reproach if someone takes action to help out a neighbour. I understand that that was a concern, but that addresses that.

Jackson Carlaw spoke about the variable message signs that are mounted on gantries. The VMSs in Scotland can be used for other purposes when there are no emergency messages to put up. I do not know whether that is exactly what he was referring to. He made a good point about the need to ensure that the language that is used in VMS messages is as clear and understandable as possible. We do not live in a police state and cannot tell people not to go out, but we can make the dangers of going out as clear as possible and we will do that. This year, we have refined the

language that we are using to make sure that that happens.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I must stop you for a moment, minister. I ask members who are coming into the chamber to do so quietly and to listen to the minister's concluding remarks, please.

**Keith Brown:** We are also making the information as consistent as possible with the Met Office's advice. Although well intentioned, differing advice can be confusing.

There are now some good leaflets, such as "Drive Safely This Winter", which give good advice to drivers on how to go about their business. It cannot be expected that everybody will have that information. Also, as several members have mentioned, before the last two years we had a long period of mild winters during which people got out of good habits. The leaflet "Drive Safely This Winter", published by Safer Scotland, should be extremely useful for that purpose.

Many members talked about how much voluntary organisations and individuals did last year, much of which went unsung. For example, the trunk road customer care staff at Airdrie, who worked at the time for an organisation called beCogent, stayed behind late at night or worked through the night on a voluntary, unpaid basis on a number of occasions. They continued their jobs through the night because they were well aware of the predicament of some people who were using the roads. Such selfless dedication was evident across the piece and, as members have made clear, we should do everything that we can to encourage that.

The last issue that I will address is that of my being a poster boy. I do not know whether I was surprised to be Helen Eadie's poster boy or disappointed not to be Christine Grahame's poster boy. However, these days, I am quite happy with anything that I am called that involves the word "boy". It may not be evident to members that Kenny MacAskill played an important role in the resilience last year and convened many of the SGoRR meetings. The responsibility that he has for the police is central to resilience, as it is the police who close roads, which is why he and I are sharing the responsibilities. I completely refute the terrible accusations about his sartorial taste that were made by Jackson Carlaw. We will talk to him about that after the debate.

Kenny MacAskill and I, along with the ministerial team, will do everything that we can to prepare Scotland as well as possible for the coming winter.

## Business Motion

16:59

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-01128, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Wednesday 2 November 2011

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate: Reducing the Time Needed to Find a Permanent Home for Looked-after Children

*followed by* Business Motion

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 3 November 2011

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate: Veterans

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

2.00 pm Themed Question Time  
Education and Lifelong Learning

2.40 pm Justice Committee Debate: Report on the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill at Stage 2

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Wednesday 9 November 2011

2.30 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Scottish Government Business

*followed by* Business Motion

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 10 November 2011

9.15 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Scottish Government Business

11.40 am General Question Time

12.00 pm First Minister's Question Time

2.15 pm Themed Question Time  
Finance, Employment and Sustainable  
Growth

2.55 pm Scottish Government Business

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business—[Bruce Crawford.]

*Motion agreed to.*

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Bruce Crawford to move motions S4M-01129 and S4M-01130, on the approval of Scottish statutory instruments; motion S4M-01131, on the suspension of standing orders in regard to the Scotland Bill Committee; and motion S4M-01132, on the Office of the Clerk.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Construction Contracts (Scotland) Exclusion Order 2011 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scheme for Construction Contracts (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2011 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 12.3.3A of Standing Orders be suspended for the purpose of allowing the Scotland Bill Committee to meet on Thursday 17 November 2011 to take evidence from Scottish and UK ministers.

That the Parliament agrees that the Office of the Clerk be closed on 28, 29 and 30 December 2011.—[Bruce Crawford.]

**The Presiding Officer:** The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.



## Decision Time

17:01

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-01123.1, in the name of Lewis Macdonald, which seeks to amend motion S4M-01123, in the name of Keith Brown, on winter resilience, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-01123, in the name of Keith Brown, on winter resilience, as amended, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to,*

That the Parliament welcomes the major winter preparedness campaign launched on 24 October 2011; commends the Red Cross, responder agencies and the broad range of partners involved for working together to stress the importance of planning ahead for winter; supports the activities that are taking place during Ready for Winter? week, which highlight the simple steps that people can take to be more prepared; acknowledges that, although Scotland's weather is unpredictable, government, responders and a range of public, private and voluntary sector partners have taken significant steps to be more prepared for severe weather this winter, including holding a major winter planning exercise, Polar Storm, last month and that improved winter planning is captured in the report of the Winter Weather Review Group, and acknowledges that preparedness will be an ongoing process and that everyone must be resilient in preparing for winter, and believes that the Scottish Government has a role to play in co-ordinating local efforts to cope with winter weather, including support for community councils, and in identifying vulnerable people and ensuring that they receive adequate support.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-01129, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on approval of the Construction Contracts (Scotland) Exclusion Order 2011 [draft], be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Construction Contracts (Scotland) Exclusion Order 2011 [draft] be approved.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-01130, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the Scheme for Construction Contracts (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2011 [draft], be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Scheme for Construction Contracts (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2011 [draft] be approved.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-01131, in the name of Bruce

Crawford, on suspension of standing orders, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 12.3.3A of Standing Orders be suspended for the purpose of allowing the Scotland Bill Committee to meet on Thursday 17 November 2011 to take evidence from Scottish and UK ministers.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-01132, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the Office of the Clerk, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Office of the Clerk be closed on 28, 29 and 30 December 2011.

## Fuel Poverty

### **The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):**

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-00760, in the name of Jenny Marra, on fuel poverty. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

#### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament notes with concern the rising number of fuel poor in Scotland; understands that there are now 900,000 such households; considers that fuel poverty will rise further this winter in light of what it considers to be drastically increased domestic fuel prices; further considers that, if this winter is as harsh as that of 2010-11, there will be a risk of people being unable to heat their homes; notes the Scottish Government's target to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016, and would welcome action this winter to prevent fatalities and households across Scotland having to decide between heating or eating.

17:03

### **Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):**

Members may be aware that the Scottish fuel poverty forum met this morning for the first time under its new chair, Professor David Sigsworth. I wish him the very best of success, and I hope that the Scottish Government will have learned from its mistakes in neglecting the advice that led to the resignation of the forum's previous chair, Graham Blount. Early in my speech I ask the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment to guarantee that he will assist the forum in a much more productive way by publishing its remit and revealing who will provide the secretariat to the forum. I also ask that the forum will be given all the information that it requests from officials.

Fuel poverty is a serious concern for hundreds of thousands of people throughout Scotland, and it is the poorest who suffer most. With some 900,000 households struggling to meet their increasing fuel bills, the Scottish Government must do whatever it can within its powers to honour its obligation under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016. We have a long way to go to achieve that. Rising fuel prices, harsher winters and stagnating wages are undermining efforts to meet the 2016 target. As recent reports state that the cheapest dual-fuel price has—for the first time—risen above £1,000 per annum, we face a huge challenge to stem the tide of those who are falling into fuel poverty in this country.

Fuel poverty affects us in Scotland uniquely. In Braemar in my constituency, heating a home takes 55 per cent more fuel than is needed to reach the same standard in Bristol. That is because we face colder, longer winters and because our households are more likely to be in rural locations, not to be connected to the main gas grid and to be harder to heat. That causes many problems.

**Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jenny Marra:** No, thank you.

Health and wellbeing suffer as people choose between heating and eating, and our carbon footprint continues to grow. Circumstances are tough, but we have convened here today on the cusp of winter—as the clocks go back this weekend—in the knowledge that the Parliament can make a difference. As representatives of people across the country who worry about the impending winter, we have the responsibility to use the powers that are available to the Parliament to tackle fuel poverty to the best of our capability.

We have significant powers, not least in areas such as maximising energy efficiency. We have the ability to create policies that help the growing number of families, single occupants and elderly people who are vulnerable to fuel poverty. Too often, the Scottish Government has neglected its duty to tackle fuel poverty. It has used cross-legislative jurisdiction as an excuse and has overemphasised the powers that we do not have, rather than used the powers that we have.

I say to those who believe that we can tackle fuel poverty only through the exclusive right to regulate energy prices that they are wrong. Powers to regulate energy companies are reserved, but we can develop well-funded and well-targeted policies in the Parliament's remit that work in tandem with Westminster to reduce fuel poverty. Ignoring that role and responsibility is a breach of our contract with the Scottish people.

In his speech to the Scottish National Party conference last weekend, the First Minister said:

"We don't control the energy markets but we can and will do something to help."

I hope that he will be true to that pledge this winter. So far, campaigners have been disappointed to find that Mr Salmond has cut expenditure on tackling fuel poverty from £70.9 million in 2010-11 to £48 million in 2011-12. That is a reduction of almost a third, at a time when fuel poverty is worsening.

In answer to my question a couple of weeks ago about a Government underspend in last year's fuel poverty budget, Alex Neil said that last year's £7 million underspend was being "recycled". What does that mean? Is the money subsidising this year's budget? Does it mean a further £7 million cut in real terms on top of this year's £23 million cut? That would be a cut of £30 million from the Government's fuel poverty spending in the past couple of years, while the poorest households have suffered the harshest winters and some of

the steepest energy price increases in living memory.

What could the Scottish Government do if it was not cutting the budget by £30 million? Fuel poverty campaigners suggest incentivising installers to deliver insulation and energy efficiency schemes in very remote and rural areas. In the Western Isles, 58 per cent of households are fuel poor. In Orkney, the level is 44 per cent. Those figures are unacceptable, but not irreparable. By incentivising installers to travel to those areas, we can target resources efficiently for those who need them most.

Similarly, improvements could be made to widen access to resources for the most vulnerable by investing in the Scottish housing quality standard, which could be expanded not only to improve the performance of households in the social rented sector but to include the private rented sector in the scheme. That policy needs resources to work. In 2009, 62 per cent of dwellings failed the SHQS, and most failed on energy efficiency criteria.

For the rest of the United Kingdom, the Government has announced that privately rented properties are to meet minimum energy efficiency standards before they are allowed to be let. The Scottish Government has the power to implement a similar policy if it so chooses. Such schemes should be underpinned by proper incentives and regulation if they are to make a difference.

Those are just two initiatives in the campaign against fuel poverty. The continuing drive for consumers to maximise their fuel efficiency must be supported. Similarly, schemes that target harder-to-heat homes in communities in which homes are off the main gas grid would offer significant rewards when we are looking to reduce the overall levels of fuel poverty in Scotland. It is important to recognise that those opportunities are our opportunities in the Parliament. The prerogative rests with the Scottish Government to fully utilise the powers that it has to help the rising number of fuel poor in Scotland.

**Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** Will the member give way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** No. The member is in her final minute.

**Jenny Marra:** I am winding up. I am sorry.

There must be a tangible commitment to policies, underpinned by a robust budget commitment, that will deliver practical help to those who need it most. I hope that the debate will go some way to urging the Scottish Government and the First Minister, as he said, to do something to help the fuel poor this winter.

17:11

**Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP):** I thank Jenny Marra for raising in Parliament the important issue of fuel poverty in Scotland. We all regularly discuss the matter in debates, because it affects all constituencies—or one third of all households, to be exact.

Rural households are twice as likely to be in fuel poverty as urban households. I have a particular regional interest in that because I represent South Scotland where about 41 per cent of families are said to be living in fuel poverty—the third-highest rate in Scotland. Thanks to the Scottish Government's home insulation scheme, £300,000 will go towards assisting some 6,500 homes in Stranraer and north Rhins that have the highest levels of deprivation.

The debate is timely; the Scottish Government is already asking whether we are ready for winter. I have been asking my constituents that, and have written to all domestic fuel providers in South Scotland to find out how they are encouraging customers to be prepared. Launching the campaign on Monday, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Kenny MacAskill, rightly said that no one can be certain what this winter will bring weatherwise. For that reason, we must ensure that people are adequately prepared for every eventuality.

Let us be clear; it is not just in the winter months that fuel poverty becomes apparent, but it is a key indicator of where work needs to be done to protect the most vulnerable people in our society. I am delighted that, at the start of this month, the Scottish Government announced a 35 per cent funding increase for fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes. That involves an extra £5 million being put into the energy assistance package, and is a measure that is designed to help hard-pressed families in Scotland to make it through this winter without added financial burden.

I am sure that members will welcome the commitment that has been made by the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment, Alex Neil, in his statement to Parliament on 5 October, to review the fuel poverty strategy to take into account recent energy company price rises. It has been estimated that the recent fuel price increases will push up to 170,000 more Scottish households into fuel poverty. That is unacceptable by any standards, and I know that the cabinet secretary is pursuing that issue with UK Government counterparts. It is clear to me that, until Scotland has complete control over our energy resources, we cannot realise our full potential as an energy leader in Europe. Furthermore, that would ensure that we were able to tackle fuel poverty more effectively and efficiently.

**Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Aileen McLeod:** No. I would like to keep going.

At the Scottish National Party conference in Inverness last week, Alex Neil announced a £1.5 million increase in the boiler scrappage scheme. That scheme has been a resounding success, and it will cover more than 10,000 houses in Scotland. In the face of savage budget cuts from Westminster, the SNP remains committed to eliminating fuel poverty and to using every resource that is currently available to do so. Within that remit falls the fuel poverty forum and the renewed approach that boosts links with the sustainable housing strategy group. Joint action can be taken on housing and fuel poverty. That is exactly where things need to start.

I have given just a few recent examples of what the Scottish Government is doing to ensure that fuel poverty levels are decreasing in Scotland. I pay tribute to the other organisations that are playing their part in driving down the worrying statistics; local authorities and third sector organisations such as Energy Action Scotland and the Energy Saving Trust are also working to eradicate fuel poverty, and registered social landlords are building energy efficiency measures into new-build housing. For example, people who live in the new Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership homes in Stranraer that were built under the neighbourhood renewal programme benefit from much lower fuel bills because of the high levels of insulation and other energy efficiency measures.

We must inspire a generation of Scots to drive down fuel poverty and to create awareness of fuel efficiency measures that we hope will carry on to future generations. The Parliament must work towards that. A legacy that I am sure that we would all welcome is the eradication of fuel poverty in Scotland.

17:15

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I, too, congratulate Jenny Marra on the debate, which is hugely important and which is well placed because it follows our debate on winter resilience. In that debate, many points were made about the importance of addressing fuel poverty as part of winter-resilience preparation. I will repeat a statistic that I gave in that debate, because it is horrific: Age UK tells us that every day in Britain this winter, 200 people will die of cold-related diseases.

The draft budget proposes £65 million for energy efficiency and fuel poverty measures. This morning, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee heard that there should be at least

£100 million from the Scottish Government if it is to have any hope of meeting the 2015 target. As well as low-cost energy, we need insulation. In Sweden, people pay much more for their energy, but they pay about 30 per cent less to heat their homes than do people in Scotland, and that is down to insulation. Insulation falls under the Scottish Government's responsibility, so it must either ensure that adequate grants are available to people who are fuel poor to insulate their homes, or set up a programme to install that insulation. Rather than slash budgets, the Government must introduce measures. That would be a spend-to-save initiative.

If we lift people out of fuel poverty, it improves health and educational attainment in young people. A knock-on benefit is that, if we keep the jobs local and give them to small and medium-sized enterprises, we boost local economies. It is a win-win situation, not only for those who are living in fuel poverty and for the other services that benefit by not having to pick up the pieces, but for the people who obtain jobs as a result.

We must consider microrenewables, which I have spoken about a number of times. Those who can afford to fit microrenewables then get the feed-in tariffs that quickly pay back the investment. However, fuel-poor people do not have sufficient capital to invest in microrenewables. It would not be difficult to find a solution that would allow people who are fuel poor to benefit from microrenewables and to use feed-in tariffs to repay the costs.

**Margaret McDougall:** Does the member agree that the minister should publicise more the solar panel schemes that are available, whereby householders benefit by gaining up to £250 towards their electricity costs over a year at no cost to them?

**Rhoda Grant:** Yes—I am aware of a number of schemes of that nature in which companies take the feed-in tariffs and make that investment. We must use those schemes, but people who are fuel poor tend not to be able to shop around and find such schemes. Therefore, the Government has a responsibility either to push people in that direction or, as I would prefer, to set up a scheme.

**Mike MacKenzie:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Rhoda Grant:** I am short of time, so I will plough on, if the member does not mind.

I want to talk about the central heating scheme for older people. It remains a real concern to me that people who are off-grid for gas have to install storage heaters, which do not meet housing-quality standards. Those people would prefer to fit oil or gas central heating systems, but they are told that they have to pay the difference, which

can sometimes reach many thousands of pounds. Fitting of systems that are not responsive, that are expensive to run and which really do not fit with the housing-quality standards forces people into fuel poverty. I ask the Government to look at that again.

The big six energy companies, which have responsibility for helping people and have budgets, which have been outlined by Government, need to look at how they reach out to communities such as those in the Western Isles that do not benefit at the moment. The eradication of fuel poverty is enshrined in legislation; we have to meet the 2015 target.

17:20

**Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):**

I congratulate Jenny Marra on bringing the issue for debate. I apologise for the fact that I did not appear to be paying attention to the opening part of her speech; I had a problem with my console for some reason and was trying to get it reorganised.

It is important that we discuss the matter once again. I do not intend to rehearse all the arguments—we will have other debates in which we can do that—but in what I intend will be a relatively short speech I will deal with a specific issue that gives me grave cause for concern.

As we all know, fuel costs are rising, and they are rising fast. We have seen the problems that are associated with energy suppliers making what appear sometimes to be arbitrary increases in their charges. Of course, Government action is happening both north and south of the border in an attempt to persuade companies to keep their energy prices down. However, I remind the minister that his own Government is pursuing a long-term energy policy that seems to keep its priorities in relation to energy supply at the top end of the cost range, rather than at the bottom. Wind power and carbon capture and storage do not come cheap and, consequently, they could add to fuel costs, over time.

However, that is not the cause of the fuel costs that we have today. Energy prices are high, which has unfortunately coincided with a period when wages tend to be depressed. The specific problem is that, as a result of flatlining wage settlements and increasing fuel costs, a large number of people who were not defined as being fuel poor in the relatively recent past are being drawn into fuel poverty. Worse still, many of those people do not realise that they are already, or are about to become, fuel poor. The Government has a responsibility to ensure that we take the opportunity to advertise the fact that difficulties are being experienced, because many people out there will be suffering as a result of the changes

and will be unaware that there are options for them to receive Government support.

I believe that there is a particular problem in the private rented sector, which quite often is the housing supply of necessity for many of the people who are about to be affected by fuel poverty, particularly those in the harder-to-heat rural environment, where we know that costs are likely to be higher.

My concern in this debate is to highlight the fact that there is a group out there who have not been fuel poor in the past but who realise that their energy costs are becomingly crippling high and who will fall into the category of being fuel poor in the future. We need to take all the schemes that we have discussed in the debate—and will continue to discuss—and all the opportunities to assist that have been discussed in previous debates and focus them on a new group who do not realise that they were fuel poor but who are, I am afraid, becoming so.

17:23

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, and to other members because I have to leave before the end of the debate to get to an appointment in Cumbernauld.

I congratulate Jenny Marra on securing tonight's debate on a very important issue. Far too many people in Scotland—one third of Scottish households—are in fuel poverty. It is an absolute outrage in this fuel-rich country that any household is in fuel poverty.

Let us consider the effects of fuel poverty on individuals and families. Professor Hills, who is director of the centre for analysis of social exclusion at the London School of Economics, has argued that fuel poverty poses serious public health and environmental problems. According to the Office for National Statistics, there are some 27,000 extra deaths in the UK each winter compared to other times of year. That figure is worse than the figures for Finland, Sweden and Norway, all of which have severe winters more regularly than these islands do. Professor Hills and his team estimate that, in about half of cases in which a death was attributed to lower-than-average indoor temperatures, there were economic reasons.

The manifestations of problems that are associated with fuel poverty, particularly in wintertime, are stark and serious. However, lest we think that it is only a wintertime issue, I point out that fuel poverty affects families all year round. It is a disgrace that some families are forced to choose between heating and eating.

Fuel poverty occurs against the backdrop of oil and gas from Scottish waters funnelling billions into the UK Exchequer, and the energy companies enjoying great profits at increased price for households. Earlier this month, the Office of the Gas and Electricity Markets released figures that show that profit margins for energy firms have increased to £125 a year per customer from only £15 earlier in the year. As Jenny Marra mentioned, the average dual-fuel bill is now more than £1,000 a year. That is set to rise by £175 to reach £1,345 by next month. That is clearly a significant challenge for any household, but especially for those that are in fuel poverty.

I welcome the fact that the First Minister is calling for the big six energy companies to meet the Scottish Government and stakeholders to discuss the issue, and I am sure that the cabinet secretary will tell us more about the plans for that meeting. However, reform of the industry that is more fundamental than a simple meeting with those companies is required.

That is why, although there is nothing objectionable about Jenny Marra's motion, I did not feel that I could sign it and lodged an amendment to it that acknowledges the part that fuel costs play in driving fuel poverty. Jenny Marra mentioned that in her speech, but her motion fails to acknowledge the part that energy companies play in the problem. That is why my proposed amendment suggests that the Parliament

"recognises that the energy market is a reserved matter, and believes that power to legislate in this area should be transferred to the Scottish Parliament to allow for better regulation of the market as a vital tool in tackling the problem of fuel poverty in Scotland."

**Jenny Marra:** Will the member give way?

**Jamie Hepburn:** I am just about to conclude, otherwise I would have been delighted to give way.

If we are serious about tackling fuel poverty, the conclusion in my amendment is inescapable for the Parliament. We cannot simply complain regularly about fuel poverty without acknowledging that the powers that we have to deal with the problem are limited. I urge all members to support the transfer to this legislature of powers such as those that are called for in my amendment, so that we can end the scandal of fuel poverty in a fuel-rich society.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Due to the number of members who still wish to speak, I am minded to accept a motion without notice to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

*Motion moved,*

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Rhoda Grant.*]

*Motion agreed to.*

17:28

**Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank Jenny Marra for securing the debate.

As we are all aware, the number of fuel-poor households has reached a staggering figure and, alarmingly, that figure continues to rise. That cannot be allowed to continue. People will be asked to prioritise food or fuel as we approach the winter months, especially if the weather is as severe as it was last year. It should be acknowledged that an affordable, warm, dry home is a basic human right.

Some extremely valuable services offer lifelines to the most vulnerable members of our communities. For instance, Glasgow Housing Association has specially trained staff members to provide tenants with energy-saving advice. The free home visit by GHA's energy specialists allows tenants to be guided through the process of ensuring that their homes and lives are more energy efficient. It is not only through Glasgow Housing Association that support has been made available. The Glasgow home energy advice team—G.HEAT—offers Glasgow residents free and impartial advice on all aspects of energy use.

Both those services can help residents to save money on their fuel bills, as well as making their homes easier to heat. The key service that they—particularly G.HEAT—offer is that they can provide not only much-needed advice but invaluable advocacy. I am sure that all members have personal experience of the hassle that can arise from trying to change suppliers. However, for many of our most vulnerable groups, the task of trying to rearrange utility provisions is far more daunting than we can ever imagine. That is where G.HEAT can make a difference to people's lives. Its specially trained advisers can act on residents' behalf when dealing with the energy companies and arranging better deals. If the Scottish Government is serious about helping some of the 900,000 fuel-poor households, it needs to recognise and build on the positive work and engagement of the likes of GHA and G.HEAT. In order to do that, we need to expand that model throughout the public and third sectors.

Energy Action Scotland has provided fuel poverty training to a number of groups and individuals, who are already engaging with potentially fuel-poor households. By utilising the networks of midwives, community psychiatric nurses and other health professionals who are already in contact with vulnerable people and have their trust, we can truly start to lift people out of fuel poverty. The Scottish Government must provide additional funds to facilitate that type of

training. I am aware that I said that earlier. I am sure that the minister will mull over Rhoda Grant's reply on that point.

When dealing with fuel poverty, we must not shy away from the fact that we are dealing with fuel poverty as a whole. In doing that, we must think about the institutions that continue to make a positive impact on the lives of impoverished people in our communities. We need to strengthen the support that is available to the credit union movement, which continues to provide low-cost, affordable loans and financial services to its members. We need to ensure that the ethical model of credit unions is promoted, reflecting credit unions' positive record of supporting fuel-poor members by engaging in advice and guidance services.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I would be grateful if you could close now.

**Anne McTaggart:** The credit union movement has utilised its low-cost loans to members to buy out prepaid meters, which have been shown often to hit poorer people harder.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must close now.

**Anne McTaggart:** Also, by providing credit union—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must close, thank you very much.

17:32

**Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** I congratulate Jenny Marra on securing the debate, as fuel poverty is one of the most significant problems of this era. Unfortunately, we are losing the battle against fuel poverty at the moment, in the face of exorbitant increases in energy costs and decreases in real incomes, especially for the most vulnerable people in our society. However, I am disappointed in Jenny Marra and her colleagues because, in their long years of power in Westminster and Scotland, when the sun was shining and budgets were rising year on year, they failed to fix the roof, but they expect us to fix it now that it is raining.

**Rhoda Grant:** Will the member give way?

**Mike MacKenzie:** No, I am just beginning.

I am disappointed that they do not show some humility in that respect and in respect of the fact that, across that period, the indices of inequality, in every measure, increased rather than decreased. That is a badge of shame for the Labour Party.

I thought that I heard a Tory member speak earlier in the debate, but he seems to have gone, and there are no Liberal Democrats in the

chamber either. What a disappointment. Is that a reflection of the seriousness with which they view this problem?

There are three main factors in fuel poverty. The most important is income inequality, which I have mentioned. Our northern European neighbours have far more equal societies than we do. The second most important factor is the steeply rising fuel prices, which look set to continue well into the future. The third factor, in order of priority, is our relatively uninsulated housing stock. Again, the Scandinavians put us to shame in that regard. The Scottish Government has taken all reasonable steps to tackle that problem, introducing a range of insulation and energy efficiency measures.

**Jenny Marra:** Will the member give way?

**Mike MacKenzie:** No, thank you.

The Scottish Government has increased the funds for those measures in this coming year by 32 per cent, in the face of Westminster capital cuts of almost 40 per cent. By contrast, the Westminster Government is failing to properly regulate the energy suppliers.

Recently, a Lib Dem MP, Alan Reid—members might not have heard of him—proudly told me that his Government was taking two major steps to combat fuel poverty. First, it was making it easier for people to switch suppliers. Consumers will therefore be able to switch easily from one supplier who has just implemented a 20 per cent price increase to another supplier who has also just implemented a 20 per cent price increase. Members will understand my reluctance to compliment the honourable gentleman on that measure.

The second measure is that the Government has apparently extracted a promise from the energy suppliers that they will not increase prices this winter. Given that they have just increased their prices by 20 per cent, that hardly seems to be much of a concession. That is what we in Scotland expect from Westminster—cold comfort.

**Jenny Marra:** Does the member accept that the Scottish Government should do everything in its power and not use the issue as a constitutional point-scoring exercise? It is far too important.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr MacKenzie, you must close at four minutes.

**Mike MacKenzie:** I am also appalled at the lack of understanding about the true scale of the problem and the expenditure that it would take to solve it. I put it to Jenny Marra that it is far more than another £50 million or so a year. I would be happy to speak to her about that in detail later, but I must continue.

It is also a fact that fuel poverty is significantly worse in Scotland than it is in England. Perhaps our unionist friends in the chamber will explain whether that is part of the much lauded union dividend.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must stop now, please.

17:36

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I add my congratulations to Jenny Marra on bringing the debate to the chamber, but it is infuriating to listen to members saying what an important topic this is, then turning it into a game of political football. That does not bring much honour to any of us.

Notwithstanding Mike MacKenzie's contribution, I say to Jamie Hepburn that he knows very well that I will campaign alongside him for a yes vote on independence. I see no reason why Westminster should continue to control the regulation of the energy industry, as I do not think much of the way in which it has exercised that control over the years. However, let us not kid ourselves that Scottish control over the regulation of the energy industry would reawaken the myth of cheap and abundant energy. The Green party and environmentalists in many other political parties, often sadly without a majority, have argued for years that the idea of cheap and abundant energy is coming to an end and that we will have to live in a new era in which energy is a rarer and less cheap commodity.

**Jamie Hepburn:** I thank the member for his generosity in taking my intervention. Does what he has just said not gloss over the fact that one of the drivers of fuel poverty is the cost of domestic fuel and that the energy companies are profiteering? They do not need to be making the profits that they are making just now. Surely the member has to accept that.

**Patrick Harvie:** Even if there was majority support for the nationalisation of the entire industry—and I doubt that we are at that level yet—we would still be living in a world in which energy will continue to increase in cost. That is the reality that we have to acknowledge, and it is why investment in the housing stock and in demand reduction, which goes beyond energy efficiency, has to be the way to bring people's bills down in addition to generating energy locally and in community and public ownership where possible.

Earlier today, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee heard evidence from more than one witness that agreed with the proposition that energy prices will continue to increase more or less regardless of any Government's energy policy. I do not think that there is a policy for cheap energy available to us either in Scotland or at

Westminster or, indeed, globally. That is why investment in the housing stock is key to reducing fuel poverty as well as to reducing our emissions.

We also heard evidence from Norrie Kerr of Energy Action Scotland on the 2016 target. He told us very clearly that, although it is still theoretically possible to reach that target if we increase our spending, at current spending levels as outlined in the spending review we will certainly miss that target. That is the position that we are in at the moment. We have agreed to a target for the best of reasons but, in different circumstances, we now need to invest, invest, invest as a political priority.

**Mike MacKenzie:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Patrick Harvie:** I am sorry, but I do not have time to take a second intervention.

Let us not kid ourselves that the money is not there. The money is always there for those who want to pour tarmac in the road-building programme—something that increases our fossil fuel consumption and our climate change emissions. We argued for £100 million a year for the home insulation scheme; that is less than the cost of one mile of the M74 extension that other political parties have crowed about so proudly. Let us not kid ourselves that the money is not there.

Anne McTaggart's speech, although at times a little halting, made one very important point that nobody else has made so far—that fuel poverty is part of a wider agenda of poverty in our society that has structural causes for which we all bear responsibility. Let none of our committees ever again listen to people such as the notorious tax exile, Jim McColl, demanding a further tax cut. Let us start closing the gap between rich and poor for all of our people, including those who are benefiting at the very top.

17:41

**Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP):** I congratulate Jenny Marra on securing this members' business debate on an issue that is vital for the whole country. We all know of constituents whose lives are severely challenged because of increases in the price of energy. I am a member of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, and at an early meeting of the committee we heard from representatives of the six energy companies. We listened to their attempts to justify what has been happening. With familiar regularity, one energy company increases its price and the others do the same shortly afterwards.

The motion highlights the fact that 900,000 homes are in fuel poverty. Only today, at the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, we



heard of the challenges that face Governments in attempting to deal with fuel poverty. With prices increasing, the Scottish Government will always be chasing a moving target in trying to reach its 2016 target. Scotland is a fuel-rich nation; no one in Scotland should be living in fuel poverty. How much could have been done if successive Westminster Governments had not squandered the billions of pounds of revenue from the North Sea since the 1970s? How much of that money could have been invested in housing stock in Scotland? Fuel poverty did not start in 2007; it has always been there. It is just a shame that over the years Labour and the Tories, when they were in power in London, did not do much about it.

Jenny Marra talked about the Scottish Government doing more. Yes, the Scottish Government could do more. Every Government could do more. We need the powers to ensure that we can get the job done.

This morning at the committee we heard about the provision of free insulation. The offer was not fully taken up. Let us think about that—something was being given away free, but not everyone took up the opportunity to get their home fully insulated.

**Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Stuart McMillan:** No, I am sorry. I do not have time.

If people will not take up something that is free, that highlights how difficult things can be for a Scottish Government—whether of the SNP persuasion or the Labour-Lib Dem coalition pre-2007.

On an issue of such importance, I am once again disappointed that Labour cannot rise to the occasion. Time and again in the Parliament, Labour talks about spending more money; yet, in local government, it votes against spending more. In recent years, Labour on Renfrewshire Council voted against the administration's investment in housing to reach the SHQS, and against the administration's anti-poverty strategy. Instead of playing party politics, perhaps Labour should acknowledge its hypocrisy and try to bring more powers to this Parliament so that the necessary investment can be made.

**Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Stuart McMillan:** I am in my final minute.

Borrowing by local authorities is a good idea. The Scottish Government should have the powers to borrow money—as normal independent nations do. Rhoda Grant mentioned Sweden—a normal independent nation—and that is a good example

to follow. I look forward to the day when Scotland can become a normal independent nation.

**Rhoda Grant:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Stuart McMillan:** I am sorry. I am in my final minute.

We have to get the powers to allow us to do much more to eradicate fuel poverty in Scotland.

17:44

**Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP):** After the debate we had on winter resilience, I wondered whether there was a great danger of mass agreement breaking out. I regret that we have had the carping that we have had, and I really do not understand Patrick Harvie's point about who is directing the political football. Fuel poverty is far too important an issue for the naked party politics that we have heard on the Scottish Government and the constitution. Although I welcome the debate, I stress the importance of that point.

Fuel poverty is an amalgam of limited incomes, the drive for energy efficiency and fuel costs. We all know the impact that the London-based economic crisis has had on incomes. I would not dare to follow Mike MacKenzie on energy efficiency and housing, which he spoke about so well. What I will do is talk about fuel costs. As a member of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, I confess my personal anger and distress about the subject, on which we must rise above party politics.

As Stuart McMillan said, in June the committee had representatives of the six major energy companies before it. At the end of the meeting, I asked them whether they would work with us on a cross-party, panel basis to reduce and help to eradicate fuel poverty in Scotland. To a woman and a man, they said that they would. Despite the actions of Energy Action Scotland, Consumer Focus Scotland and all the other bodies involved, the fuel companies are giving us straws in the wind. They may already be paying lip service to the fuel poverty forum.

Despite the positive action on funding that has been taken in the present difficult economic situation—the £65 million that the Government will spend on fuel poverty and energy efficiency this year, the £50 million that will be spent over the lifetime of the Parliament on the warm homes fund—

**Jenny Marra rose—**

**Chic Brodie:** No, I will not take any interventions.

In addition, the minister announced further spending of £1.5 million. Despite all that, the

energy assistance package and all the other packages, we now face an almost unbelievable challenge. The 900,000 households in poverty in Scotland face an oligopolistic market, in which the remuneration of a senior executive of one energy provider rose by 83 per cent—against the background of the poor and the elderly suffering the pain of sliding into poverty.

As with the banks, successive London Governments have failed to tackle the power and the wealth of the few. As a consequence, the many are suffering. It is time for much more competition in the marketplace. I see Patrick Harvie laughing. If we reduce demand, what does he think that the fuel companies, with all their overheads and capital expenses, will do? They will continue to increase their prices.

**Patrick Harvie:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Chic Brodie:** No, I will not.

It is time for us to look at community energy companies and to see whether we can create a consumer-based mutual to enter the market to compete and to drive down the anticipated fuel rises to which Patrick Harvie referred.

Fuel poverty is a huge issue and we should face it together. The effect is clear. What we must do is root out the causes.

17:48

**The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil):** I, too, am willing to congratulate Jenny Marra on securing the debate, although I must say that members' business debates are intended to be a bit more consensual than her speech indicated. I suggest that in future she should do more homework and get her facts straight. I do not think that anyone in the Labour Party is in a position to criticise the SNP Government when, during the final two years of the Labour Government in London, one Ed Miliband, who was the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change at the time, reduced the budget for the English warm front scheme by 50 per cent. We would never do that, either north or south of the border.

**Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Will the cabinet secretary give way?

**Alex Neil:** No, I do not have time for interventions at the moment.

Let me give the Labour Party some facts and figures. Fact number 1 is that, by the end of the present spending period, we will be spending well over 40 per cent more on fuel poverty programmes than the previous Lib Dem-Labour Executive did. Fact 2, importantly for fuel poverty,

is on our spending on housing. The reality is that we are spending substantially more on the housing programme, too.

**Patrick Harvie:** Will the minister give way?

**Rhoda Grant:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** Fact 3 is that, unlike Labour and the Liberal Democrats, we are making our programme available first of all to poor families with children under five. They never did. We are making our programmes available to families with disabled children. They never did. We are making our programmes available to people who are terminally ill. They never did.

**Patricia Ferguson:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** From 30 November, we are extending the energy assistance programme to carers, which they never did.

**Drew Smith:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** We will not take any lessons from the Labour Party on what to do on budgets or eligibility for programmes. The reality is that we are doing far, far more to tackle fuel poverty than Labour ever did either north or south of the border.

**Drew Smith:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Patrick Harvie:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Patricia Ferguson:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Lewis Macdonald:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** I am now prepared to take an intervention, but I am spoiled for choice. Let me take Lewis Macdonald.

**Lewis Macdonald:** I am grateful that the cabinet secretary has finally taken an intervention. I am interested in the claims that he makes. Perhaps he can tell us how the budget for fuel poverty at the end of the spending review will compare with the budget last year.

**Alex Neil:** It will be 35 per cent higher at the end of the spending review, as I have made absolutely clear. The reality is that, as well as the money that we are spending, we are working closely with Chris Huhne, the UK Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, to ensure that Scotland gets its share of both the green deal money and the energy company obligation money. As we have—

**Rhoda Grant:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It is clear that the figures that the cabinet secretary has quoted back to my colleague Lewis Macdonald are not correct. Is it right for him to be able to mislead the Parliament in that way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The figures are a matter for the minister.

**Alex Neil:** I will maybe raise a point of order to say that Rhoda Grant's intervention is incorrect.

The reality is that, on top of what we are doing with the fuel poverty programmes specifically designed to help people who are in fuel poverty and with our housing programme, we are working with the UK Government as best we can to ensure that we get our fair share of the UK programmes.

**Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** In her opening remarks, Jenny Marra mentioned the Scottish fuel poverty forum. Does the minister agree with what it says about energy? It states:

"while it is our remit to work within existing resource levels, it should be recognised that in light of rising energy costs, it is difficult to see how sufficient progress can be made within these constraints."

**Alex Neil:** The major driver of increasing fuel poverty in this country at the moment is the huge energy price increase that the six major suppliers are imposing. There are three influences on the level of fuel poverty at any one time: first is the level of income; second is the condition of the housing; and third is the price that people pay for energy. All the independent reports show clearly that by far the biggest single driver of increasing fuel poverty at the moment, not just in Scotland but throughout the United Kingdom, is the huge increase in energy prices.

As Jamie Hepburn and others mentioned, Ofgem's figures show that the big six suppliers are increasing their profits per household per annum from £15 to £125. That increase is a multiple of six, and I find it incredible that, in her introductory remarks, Jenny Marra totally discounted the influence of energy prices in determining the level of fuel poverty. Every dog in the street knows that in Scotland and south of the border the single biggest influencer is the increase in energy prices.

**Jenny Marra:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** I do not have time.

The other important point, as well the amount of money going into different programmes, is the effectiveness of the programmes. As I told the Parliament earlier this month, I have asked the reconvened fuel poverty forum to carry out a comprehensive review of fuel poverty policy in Scotland to identify ways in which we can better focus our resources. We have re-engineered programmes in the past, particularly the energy

assistance programme, particularly by extending coverage, as I mentioned. Also, the universal home insulation programme has been vital, not just in extending the number of people who benefit from our fuel poverty programmes but because it has been a major referral point for the energy assistance programme as well.

The energy assistance programme, as members should know, has four major elements, including advice and help for people to move to better tariffs or social tariffs, and positive assistance with insulation and central heating. I have not even had time to mention the boiler scrappage scheme, which is something else that our predecessors never did.

I am proud of our record in dealing with fuel poverty, which compares brilliantly with the total inadequacy and poor record of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I thank all members for their contributions to the debate and—

**Patrick Harvie:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before I close the meeting, we have a point of order from Patrick Harvie.

**Patrick Harvie:** I recognise that Rhoda Grant's earlier point of order related to statements by the minister, which are not a matter for the chair. However, the information that the Scottish Parliament information centre provided to members on the same issue suggests a different state of affairs in relation to the Government's budget from what the minister suggested. If SPICE has provided us with the wrong information, that would be a serious matter. I doubt that it has done so, but could we ask it to contact the Scottish Government to confirm the source of its figures?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I do not believe that to be a point of order.

*Meeting closed at 17:57.*



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