



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 21 June 2012

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 21 June 2012

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

Families

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good morning. The first item of business is a debate on motion S4M-03394, in the name of Nanette Milne, on families. I remind all members that time is extremely tight for the two debates this morning, so I will hold you very firmly to the time that has been allocated to you.

Nanette Milne has no more than 10 minutes.

09:15

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I begin by indicating that we are happy to accept both amendments.

It is well recognised that Scotland still has an enormous problem with drug addiction, which puts a significant strain on local authority, health and police services. On top of that, members of the public and—most important—members of addicts' families are widely and directly affected by our country's drug problem. They may be faced with trying to rescue sons, daughters or grandchildren from the chaotic lifestyle of the addict—indeed, many kinship carers are in that role because of family drug addiction—or they may have to cope with bereavement as a result of overdose. Sadly, that is not uncommon and is proof of the tragic consequences of Scotland's drugs epidemic. As Annabel Goldie has stated:

"Each death represents not just a life needlessly lost, but a family devastated and a community scarred."

People may try to support a relative along the long and hard road to recovery, as family support is a hugely important aspect of an addict's recovery. Sadly, those who give such support often suffer considerable distress and face stigma and discrimination, which put barriers in the way of recovery. When Sheila McKay of the Grampian Family Support Forum addressed the Parliament at time for reflection on 7 March, she said:

"Knowing that a family member has a drug problem is a painful and lonely experience."—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2012; c 6921.]

It is therefore only right that family members who give their unconditional support to their loved ones are given support themselves. That is where family support groups, which are formed to help families that are affected by drug misuse and addiction, play a vital role. They enable families to

communicate with others in similar situations, to learn from one another's experiences and to build relationships that are imperative to their wellbeing in an environment of mutual understanding.

The Scottish Families Affected by Drugs national forum started as a grass-roots organisation in 2003 that involved families who expressed their desire to become a united force in raising awareness of the difficulties that they faced. It is a membership organisation, and family members account for two thirds of the membership. It is governed by a voluntary board of directors, describes itself as

"the hub of a network of family support groups across Scotland"

and has the vision of a Scotland that recognises and supports the needs of families that are affected by the drug misuse of a loved one and the crucial role that is played by families. Its mission is to support families in Scotland that are affected by drug misuse and to raise awareness of the issues that affect them. To achieve that, it facilitates a network of family support groups, runs a national helpline and lobbies for the recognition of families in both national and local drug treatment policies. Importantly, families are at the heart of the organisation, providing information on local networks and access to funding, and supporting around 40 local groups, with just over 200 individual members.

I have no doubt that other members will tell us about support groups in their own parts of Scotland, but I want to focus on the Grampian Family Support Forum in my region, which was set up as recently as 2010 by family members and Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, and is funded by the Aberdeenshire alcohol and drug partnership. It is part of the achieving community empowerment programme, and has already made great progress towards facilitating a network of local support groups. It acts as an umbrella organisation within which local family support groups throughout Grampian can effectively communicate with one other, and was a successful participant in the third phase of the Parliament's community partnership project. It reported back to Parliament on its work over the past year at the outcome ceremony that was held in the chamber at the end of March.

Under the leadership of its tireless chairman, Sheila McKay, the Grampian Family Support Forum is an excellent example of what can be achieved. It could lead the way for peer support right across Scotland. The Grampian model has shown that, given the right forum, families are more than willing to use their own experiences to help other families in the same position, but families need to be made aware of the existence

of such fora. Perhaps general practitioners have a role in signposting them to a local support group.

I first met Sheila McKay when I sponsored an event for her, entitled “recovery happens”. It was a highly successful event, which was well attended by north-east MSPs from all parties and helped to increase our awareness that recovery from addiction can and does happen and that family members have an important role during recovery. Members of the Grampian forum were present, as were other groups that play a significant and essential role in recovery, such as Scottish Families Affected by Drugs and the Scottish Recovery Consortium. Local groups of affected families and people who were recovering from drug addiction were also present.

We heard the remarkable and inspiring story of Jane and her journey from addiction to alcohol and heroin to recovery, such that she now works for a voluntary organisation and counsels victims of similar addictions. We heard Betty’s story—the story of an amazing mother and grandmother who has held her family together despite several tragic events and who continues to help a loved one who is recovering from drug addiction. We heard from Daniel, who is converting his grief at losing his brother to addiction into films that are aimed at raising awareness of the issues that he and others have faced. The personal stories were extremely moving and the stresses that the people who told them had experienced were clear to see.

The contribution from families is continuous, arduous and critically important. Groups such as the Grampian forum try to highlight that families can and do learn from one another, that there needs to be a focus on recovery for families as well as for addicts, that families want to use and draw on their experience to help other families, and that families want to secure better services for people who are trying to recover from addiction and regain their lives.

Like us, the forum thinks that the ultimate goal for recovering addicts is total abstinence from addictive drugs, and that peer support is vital if recovering addicts are to achieve that. The forum thinks that we need more resources in place, such as easier and speedier access to residential rehabilitation, coupled with better follow-up support. It thinks that there needs to be an exit strategy for people who take methadone or other such harm-reduction treatment, which should not be for the long term.

The Grampian Family Support Forum has strong views on what is necessary to aid recovery, which my party shares. First, simply returning addicts to the community without support is ineffective; proper aftercare is required if any model of rehabilitation is to be effective. Secondly, it should be acknowledged that relapse is part of

recovery. That should be taken account of in recovery programmes, and support should be available when relapse occurs. Thirdly, even after recovery from addiction it takes time to rebuild a life, and support for recovering addicts and families is vital at that stage. There is a gap in provision in that regard.

The United Kingdom Drug Policy Commission said in a report in 2009 that at that time 134,000 adults in Scotland were significantly affected by problematic drug use in their families. Family members reported feeling isolated, stressed, stigmatised and guilty. Stigma is a particular problem that must be tackled because it not only affects the people who are using drugs but spreads to family members. The media’s use of words such as “junkies” only adds to the stigma. Organisations such as the Grampian forum are fighting an on-going battle to get the media to be more careful about what they say.

We are still far from eradicating drug addiction in Scotland, and many people who want to be free of addiction still have to wait far too long for appropriate rehabilitation. There is much that we could say about that. However, today’s debate is about support for families. I acknowledge the Scottish Government’s commitment to investing in national organisations such as Scottish Families Affected by Drugs and the Scottish Recovery Consortium, which help families and communities to support “sustained recovery across Scotland”, as the amendment in Roseanna Cunningham’s name says.

I can do no better than conclude by quoting again from Sheila McKay’s time for reflection speech:

“Our core aim is to encourage the formation of new peer-support groups and increase the membership of those that already exist ... Since the project started, our numbers have increased from three to 21 throughout the north-east of Scotland. Our profile has been raised, our opinions have been valued and our voice has been heard ... we are making an impact and planting the seeds of change.

We want to use our lived expedience to make positive changes within our communities. Why? Because, when you are qualified to speak, people listen ... Built into every trial that we go through in life—every trial that forces us to grow—are the answers that other people need.”—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2012; c 6921-2.]

Those are wise words from the heart, from a mother who has successfully travelled along the road of family addiction.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of family members recovering in their own right from the effects that their loved-ones’ drug misuse has on them; notes that family support groups provide a vital resource for families to get support for their own needs and to build relationships with others in similar circumstances; recognises the continuing challenges that small peer-led family support

groups across Scotland face to sustain themselves; congratulates the Grampian Family Support Forum on its successful participation in the third phase of the Parliament's Community Partnership Project and notes the success of the forum's Recovery Happens event held in the Parliament on 1 March 2012 enabling the forum to further its support base on its campaign; further recognises the importance of these groups in breaking down barriers around stigma and discrimination related to substance misuse and addiction; understands that substance misuse and addiction do not discriminate in relation to who they affect and are important and destructive issues for families and Scottish society as a whole, and encourages that the forum's vision is rolled out throughout Scotland so that communities across the country can learn from its example.

The Presiding Officer: I call Roseanna Cunningham to speak to and move amendment S4M-03394.1. Minister, you have no more than seven minutes.

09:25

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): I welcome the motion and the Labour amendment. Nanette Milne is absolutely right—the role of families is key to the success of our national drug strategy “The Road to Recovery: A New Approach to Tackling Scotland’s Drug Problem”.

To set the context for the debate, it is important to consider the considerable amount of information that we have on drug use and its impact on families. Recently published reports show us that illegal drug use in the general adult population in Scotland has declined by more than a fifth since 2006. We also know that reported drug use among our young people is falling steadily. That said, 59,600 individuals use opiates in Scotland. There were 485 drug-related deaths in 2010, of which many—but not necessarily all—can be attributed to opiates. Although fewer and fewer young people contribute to that tragic statistic, we have an ageing cohort of drug users who have experienced poorer health over the past decade. We can see that group moving through the population.

It is important that in the debate we recognise not only the support that is given by families, but the support that is needed by families. Those are two different things—they are not exactly the same. In Scotland, we recognise that recovery is a long-term process that involves patience and the potential for relapse. By its nature, it requires a person-centred approach and yet it must be supported by a wider recovery community.

The role of families in recovery and the impact of drug use on families were eloquently explained to me when I first met the chair and director of Scottish Families Affected by Drugs last year. I then attended the organisation's national conference to make clear the commitment of the Scottish Government to support our families and

communities across Scotland on their own road to recovery. Nanette Milne used a word that I have used frequently after meeting those people: “inspiring”. Their experience and their commitment are an inspiration to all of us. Such is our commitment as a Government to Scottish Families Affected by Drugs that I provided additional funding in 2012-13 to support it through a challenging period of transition and reorganisation.

Nanette Milne also mentioned the Scottish Recovery Consortium, which is another key organisation in the recovery movement. The consortium has set in motion an innovative and ambitious programme for 2012-13 and beyond. The work programme, which is directly funded by the Scottish Government, outlines proactive steps to accelerate the growth of recovery communities across Scotland—communities that start with peer and family support and grow into a network of peers, families, services and advocacy, making recovery a reality.

The consortium also plays a leading role in tackling stigma in the context of recovery. It is clear that stigma is a significant barrier to people accessing help. It is a further and unjust pressure on families and is not tolerable in the 21st century, when—more than ever before—altruism and our sense of community will underpin success in bringing about recovery. The battle against stigma is one that has been long fought on behalf of vulnerable individuals by the Scottish Drugs Forum. The SDF has an important role in developing peer support, advocacy services and family support across Scotland.

Together with the Scottish Recovery Consortium, individuals across Scotland in recovery are being supported to give something back to their families and their communities. I meet people who are in the process of doing precisely that on a regular basis. The stories that they have to tell—and sometimes the length of time that it has taken them to get there—are astonishing. That work requires patience on the part of communities and families as well.

The Scottish Government provided the Scottish Drugs Forum with a package of funding to help us jointly to implement our world-leading naloxone programme. The programme empowers not only individuals but families to save a life. The reality of drug misuse is that individuals put their lives at risk. To lose a family member is a terrible tragedy, which is why I committed a further £400,000 in 2012-13 to the national naloxone programme, to ensure that naloxone is widely available throughout Scotland. As naloxone is not an antidote that can be self-administered, the programme has proactively engaged families, peers and communities in training and awareness programmes. At its best, the programme

encourages an early discussion within the family about drug use and the risk of overdose. From there, it is but a small step to recovery.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I have listened carefully to the minister's comments about the recovery programmes, which I fully support, and I support everything that Nanette Milne said, but I have not heard anything about psychological support for the many underlying mental health issues that can often result from drug taking and alcoholism.

Roseanna Cunningham: The member will accept that, in a speech of seven minutes, I cannot touch on every issue, but I am aware of the mental health problems that go along with drug use, which are beginning to be particularly evident in the older group of drug users. That is a big challenge for mental health services.

Scotland's 30 alcohol and drug partnerships have the role of delivering on the agreed commitments that are articulated in "The Road to Recovery". Through our investment in front-line care, treatment and recovery services and the commitment of our local partners, we are beginning to see some green shoots of that recovery across Scotland.

We are witnessing the growth of family support organisations throughout Scotland, some of which are funded jointly by us and the Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland's partnership drugs initiative. Those include First Step in East Lothian; the family matters project in Fife; North United Communities in Glasgow; the Children 1st supporting families project in Aberdeen; the carer support service in Moray; the Armadale community families project in West Lothian; the kith 'n' kin service in Tayside; the lifeshaper project in the Western Isles; and, of course, the inspiration for this debate, the Grampian Family Support Forum, which in its own words is an example of using

"lived experience" to make positive changes within our communities."

I welcome the Parliament's commitment to this area and the consensus on the importance not only of family support, but of support for families on the road to recovery, which means recovery for the individuals and their families. In turn, that will mean recovery for communities and for Scotland.

I move amendment S4M-03394.1, to insert at end:

"; further supports the direct investment of the Scottish Government in national organisations such as Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, the Scottish Recovery Consortium and the Scottish Drugs Forum, which support families in playing their vital role in building recovery communities across Scotland, and endorses the role of the Road to Recovery in putting the individual at the centre of care, treatment and recovery services and, in doing so,

promoting the essential role of families and communities in supporting sustained recovery across Scotland."

09:32

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank Nanette Milne for bringing forward this debate on supporting families who are affected by drugs. It is an important and challenging debate on an issue that we need to deal with on a cross-party basis and with consensus.

Drug misuse is not an easy problem to deal with. As we know, there are about 60,000 problem drug users in Scotland and, on average, for every known problem drug user, four other people—often family members—are directly affected. Therefore, there is no doubt that drug misuse affects a significant number of people in Scotland. Many of them will be children who, through no fault of their own, are neglected because of their parents' drug addiction. The Scottish Government estimates that 40,000 to 60,000 children are affected by parental drug misuse, but more recent studies suggest that the figure could be even greater.

Parental drug and alcohol misuse can have a serious impact on all aspects of children's and young people's lives. For some children, basic needs might not be met and there is a heightened risk of maltreatment and abuse. Audits of child protection registers have found that a significant proportion of children live with parental drug and alcohol misuse. Parents with drug problems are often physically and emotionally unable to meet children's needs, which can result in children taking greater responsibility in the household and can affect their education.

We must recognise that the secrecy and stigma surrounding the issue are likely to affect parents and children when they consider seeking support. In some cases, children might feel frightened about the consequences of telling someone outside the family. Children want somebody to talk to whom they can trust, who does not judge them, who listens and who is reliable. Meeting other children who have similar experiences can often prove to be helpful.

Family support groups provide an opportunity for relatives, partners and friends to meet others who are experiencing or have experienced similar circumstances. As Nanette Milne pointed out, surveys have shown that family members of addicts often feel isolated, depressed and stressed. It is widely accepted that addicts need support to recover but so, too, do family members.

Given that responses to surveys have made it clear that family support groups offer the type of supportive, non-judgmental environment that helps recovery, we should welcome the work being done

by the Grampian Family Support Forum and Scottish Families Affected by Drugs to bring families affected by drugs together. The dedication and commitment of staff and volunteers in such projects provide much-needed support to families affected by drug misuse. As families benefit from working together, developing bonds and relationships and helping one another to get through challenging periods in their lives, we must ensure that not only information but the best advice are properly shared with them and that they are given the practical support they need.

I am sure that other members will highlight examples of good practice from across Scotland. However, I believe that we should acknowledge the contribution made by grandparents and recognise the pressure felt by kinship carers who step in to look after children of drug-addicted parents. Not only do many kinship carers not get the financial support that they need, but they are not well equipped physically and emotionally; after all, they often have to look after young grandchildren as well as deal with their own child's drug addiction. The financial support for kinship carers that the Scottish Government promised has still not arrived, and I ask it to bring forward that support as soon as possible.

Although it is vital that families are supported, Scottish Families Affected by Drugs has found that, despite the pressures that they face, most family members wait for at least two years before seeking help for themselves. I know that people are keen to change that situation but, in order to do so, we must tackle the stigma surrounding drug misuse. Indeed, 41 per cent of respondents to the Scottish Families Affected by Drugs survey said that stigma had been a barrier to their seeking help for a relative. The truth is that we all have a duty to tackle stigma, as it can have very serious consequences. We must also ensure that the proper facilities and treatments are available to those who decide that they want to come off drugs because, if they are not, we will see a long-term decline in their chances of recovery.

The problem of drugs is not easy to deal with. As I said, we need to approach the issue on a cross-party basis and build a consensus about how we move forward on it.

I move amendment S4M-03394.2, to insert at end:

“; recognises the contribution of Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, and believes that family support groups need to be given the support required to help their members and relatives through challenging periods in their lives.”

The Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I remind everyone that we are tight for time and that speeches will be no more than four minutes long.

09:37

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank Nanette Milne for raising an important issue that, such is the scale of substance misuse in our nation, is—I am sorry to say—relevant to every member in the chamber.

Given that substance abuse can impact severely on individuals and families and that the family can play a huge role in helping those who are struggling with an addiction, it is important that we support the small family-led groups that help not only those suffering from substance misuse but people living with someone who abuses drugs or alcohol. It is startling to note research from 2000 that estimated that between 40,000 and 60,000—or 1 in 20—Scottish children were affected by the drug problem of one or more parent. Sadly, such situations have a negative impact on the subsequent health, employability and educational attainment of those children and put them at greater risk of emotional or physical abuse.

In an ideal world, we would not have to confront such issues, and we must always do everything within our power to prevent people from falling into the grasp of addiction. Of course, such preventative work has many facets, including seizing drugs before they enter the country; effective policing to prevent distribution; and providing effective education to alert young people in particular to the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse.

I am pleased that, since 2006, illegal drug use in the general adult population has declined by more than a fifth. However, as the minister has made clear, we still have a long, long way to go. I am also confident that minimum pricing will have a positive impact on Scotland's dangerous relationship with alcohol and the harm that it causes.

However, it is an unfortunate reality that people will continue to fall victim to substance misuse and that many will form addictions, harming themselves and others around them. It is therefore the Government's moral responsibility to offer support to help people break the cycle of addiction, to allow sufferers to regain control of their lives, lessen the impact on wider society—I refer to costs relating to the national health service and law and order—and reduce the emotional torment of people who live with them.

Therefore, I am proud that this Government has invested 20 per cent more in front-line care, treatment and recovery since 2007 and that it has launched the road to recovery strategy, which firmly recognises the importance of the family unit in addressing these matters. It is due to the strategy and the continued investment in tackling

addiction that family support organisations, such as the Grampian Family Support Forum, which Nanette Milne cited, are growing in number and importance.

Tackling Scotland's drink and drug problem requires a multi-agency approach that employs a variety of tactics, treatments and support mechanisms. As members will know, drug treatment, including opiate substitutes such as methadone, often removes only the criminal element of addiction. Although such treatments have a role to play, it is far more difficult for someone to kick the habit without the support and encouragement of friends and family.

It is important that family members have the correct advice and information at their disposal, in order to recognise the signs of substance misuse and to help people through difficult times. That is why the Scottish Government increased core funding this year for Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, which supports a network of local family support groups and individual families through training, information provision and a dedicated helpline. Through that work, the SFAD gives family members not only the confidence to intervene when their relative's drug or alcohol use becomes problematic, but the knowledge and ability to offer them support and help.

The scourge of alcohol and drug misuse in Scotland remains a persistent threat to the establishment of a safe, healthy and prosperous society. Many of my constituents—particularly in Saltcoats, where we discussed this very issue on Tuesday night—have great concern that not enough is being done and that more should be done to reduce long-term methadone dependency, in particular. Although the figures that I cited show that we are moving in the right direction, communities on the ground do not see progress happening as fast as they would like it to happen.

I believe that the Parliament and the Government will continue to rise to the challenge, through ground-breaking legislation such as the smoking ban and minimum pricing for alcohol but also through our continued commitment—despite tough financial times—to support individuals and families who have fallen victim to drug or alcohol abuse.

09:42

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The debate is likely to be consensual, which reflects the fact that under the previous minister in the previous parliamentary session agreement on the recovery programme and policies on drugs was reached by cross-party consensus. That approach should be adopted in a

number of areas, but particularly that of substance misuse.

In 2001, when I was the justice minister in charge of the drug aspects of the Government's work, I was very happy to support the predecessor organisation to Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, which began a process that has continued to develop. The work of Scottish Families Affected by Drugs to develop a growing network of local family support groups is very welcome.

At the beginning of the Parliament's first session, I was involved with local group called locals against drug abuse in Alloa, which was formed by parents whose children were involved in drug use. That group had a major effect on the development of policy and services in the area. Out of LADA grew an organisation called Signpost Recovery, to which many addicts who are beginning to seek treatment turn.

I ask the minister to provide some further information, either now, or, preferably, through the Scottish Parliament information centre. First, how many family support groups are there? I would like those to be listed so that we can see how many there are. An equally important question is what their sources of funding are. In the current climate of austerity, like many voluntary groups, they are under considerable pressure. Are alcohol and drug partnerships funding those groups? If so, is the funding being maintained? What funding is being provided by the Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland? The foundation often provides initial funding, which leads to pressure on ADPs to provide further funding.

I would also like the minister to give us information about the criminal assets cashback scheme. The scheme—the introduction of which I was involved in as a minister—has been one of the Parliament's great successes. It should be noted that out of the £45 million that has been handed back to communities, only £2.25 million—in all that time—has been used to support community assets, including family support groups. I would like the minister to provide to SPICe a list of the groups that have been given community cashback scheme funding. That scheme should be used to a far greater extent to provide support for family support groups.

The minister mentioned drugs deaths. When I was justice minister, the number of drugs deaths was 332, and the year after I left office, it had dropped slightly to 317. That was still too high in comparison with the 250 or so deaths in 1997, but by 2008, the figure had risen to 574. As the minister reminded us, the numbers have come down since then, and now stand at 485. That is partly due to the very welcome naloxone programme. We need to involve families in that, but not just by providing them with the naloxone

equipment, because they are often not involved when their child or relation takes an overdose. We need families to help us to identify those who are closest to the user and who are most likely to be in a position to use the naloxone. I hope that that will happen.

I call on the Government to do further work on bereavement counselling and support for the 485 affected families, because each death is a tragedy. The guilt that families sometimes feel—often wrongly—that they have not supported their loved ones adequately through the process is a problem.

The Presiding Officer: The member needs to wind up.

Dr Simpson: We should praise Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, welcome the work that is done by the Scottish Drugs Forum and call on the Government to continue its co-operative approach in this field.

09:46

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am glad that Nanette Milne managed to bring the topic to the chamber as a Conservative business debate this morning; it was originally going to be a members' business debate. It is an opportunity for us to discuss and consider how we can best support the organisations in our communities that are on the front line of supporting people who have addictions, and their families.

In her motion, Nanette Milne cites the Grampian Family Support Forum and in her speech she mentioned Sheila McKay. I first met Sheila McKay when I was a regional member. For Sheila, one meeting was not, as a woman from Banffshire, enough, of course. As the minister knows, we Banffshire women can be thrawn and persistent. We had several meetings in Aberdeen and—as Nanette Milne mentioned—in Parliament, not just with the Grampian forum but with other groups in the north-east that are involved in such work. Sheila McKay is still working—as Dr Simpson mentioned—on extending the pool of people who are allowed to administer naloxone.

Although levels of illegal drug use are at their lowest for several years and are still in decline, we cannot underestimate the devastating effects that drugs still have on individuals, families and communities. Virtually every family in the country is now affected in some way or another by drug misuse; my family has certainly not escaped it.

The Grampian Family Support Forum has benefited from administrative and communications assistance from the alcohol and drugs partnership that covers Moray, Aberdeen city and

Aberdeenshire. The Scottish Government's recovery-focused approach to tackling drug use has helped thousands, and that progress is supported by the funding that is provided by many organisations that facilitate recovery, such as the Scottish Drugs Forum, the Scottish Recovery Consortium and the Grampian Family Support Forum. All those organisations deserve praise for their efforts, not only in helping and advising those who have addiction problems and their families, but in assisting in community action, education programmes and—as other members have mentioned—combating the stigma that attaches to addiction issues. Those organisations have been feeding back to Government and parliamentarians their information and experiences, and their opinions on the effectiveness of the current strategy and how progress can be continued. That highlights the invaluable work that they do, which is carried out as much in private as it is in public.

Worryingly, several of those organisations have heavily criticised the United Kingdom Government's welfare cuts which, they tell us, threaten the support systems that exist and the delicate balance in many families and communities that are in sensitive situations regarding addiction and drugs.

The Scottish Drugs Forum and Scottish Families Affected by Drugs have spoken out against the UK Government's proposed changes to how claimants with drug or alcohol problems can receive benefits, which threaten to undermine the progress that has been made. Both organisations have highlighted how Westminster's proposals to hold claimants hostage over their benefits, pending their drug and alcohol addiction treatment, threaten to have serious knock-on effects on families and children.

The recovery happens event was a great example of how the expertise that such groups provide is fed back into the development of national and Government strategy. Neil Bibby mentioned kinship carers. I am assisting a number of grannies who are, as a result of the drug abuse of their child or their child's partner, caring for their small grandchildren. One of the main messages that came from the recovery happens event was on the importance of a family-focused approach to recovery and addiction support. Families from across Scotland are keen to support one another and to share their experiences and knowledge. I welcome the debate as a way of thanking them.

09:50

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The debate has already shown that there is not an MSP in the chamber or anyone who is involved in making policy on children who does not believe that good-quality family support is the most

important building block in our society. Although there may be many divisions between us as we respond to the current debates about what constitute appropriate definitions of family and marriage, there is no dispute at all about the need to do more to help groups that provide crucial support when families—of whatever shape or form—find themselves in difficulty. We have cross-party agreement on that but, as was the case in the drugs debate, the next stage will be the real test. Can we lift the debate, as Nanette Milne said, away from just warm words, and on to a level that involves meaningful action, however difficult and challenging that may have to be?

As with the drugs debate, we are talking about an issue that is hugely complex and pervasive, and no party can ever pretend that it has all the answers. It would be grossly naive and arrogant for anyone to assume that they had all the answers, but we can say that we must have the courage of our convictions and not just stand by and do nothing but, instead, take a lead from groups such as the Grampian Family Support Forum.

As several colleagues have said, the effects of addiction can make family life lonely and emotionally draining. The families who are affected need help; most often, they need it from within their most immediate communities. That is what makes the Grampian Family Support Forum so special. The same is true of the Fife alcohol and drug partnership and, in the case of kinship care, of family group conferencing. Such groups are crucial in opening up avenues of discussion and breaking down barriers of discrimination or ignorance among some sections of society.

As the Parliament knows, the forthcoming children's services bill will be a major piece of legislation that will provide us all with an opportunity to do things differently and to tackle head on the complexities that we face. Members of the Education and Culture Committee have already faced some challenging questions as we have taken preliminary evidence from many experts who work on the front line of helping children and struggling families. That comes on the back of the hugely important debate about kinship care, on which, to be frank—as Neil Bibby said—none of us can take credit for progress, which has been slow. That is doubly alarming, given the promises that Parliament made on kinship care some years back. We have failed to make things much better, so it is essential that we start by understanding the exact nature of the problem, given the extent of the cross-party support and the political will to help.

In two recent Education and Culture Committee meetings, we have been challenged on the inherent problems in defining and measuring

outcomes, and we have been challenged to appreciate the real barriers that prevent better progress. Perhaps most difficult of all is that we have been told that the evidence base is patchy and inconsistent. How can we deal with a problem when we cannot put our hands on all the necessary data? That question needs the most careful attention, and groups such as the Grampian Family Support Forum can be instrumental in ensuring that families—who might well be extremely reluctant to come forward in any other forum—can first be rediscovered, and secondly be helped confidentially.

We need to be clear that Parliament is setting out on a difficult and probably tortuous journey, during which it will be not just politicians who can make a difference, but the volunteers and professionals on the ground who have the first-hand experience that we have not. Debates such as this are so important because it is immensely encouraging to see that we have the necessary political will and cross-party support. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion in Nanette Milne's name.

09:54

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

I congratulate Nanette Milne on bringing this important debate to the chamber. I know that her original intention was to have a members' business debate on the motion, but the seriousness of the issue is such that it is appropriate that it has been chosen for Conservative Party business. I am pleased, given that there appears to be consensus, that we are able to unite around the motion and amendments.

I met Sheila McKay of the Grampian Family Support Forum not long after I was elected, at the community partnerships programme event that was held in the Parliament. As Nanette Milne did, I attended the recovery happens event in the Parliament. It is fair to say that one would need to have had a heart of stone not to be moved by the testimonies of the individuals who spoke at that meeting. The clear message came out that families have a key role and that they want it to be further embedded.

There were three main messages from the event. First, families have a lot to contribute and want to be involved in supporting the people whom they love, and in helping to find solutions to the wider problems. Secondly, people who are recovering from addiction want to give something back. Thirdly, we as a Parliament and as a society, need to work together to help to tackle the stigma that people with addictions and their families face.

Important work is being done by networks such as the Grampian Family Support Forum and the other forums that have been mentioned and which will, I am sure, continue to be mentioned by members. The key role that they play is to ensure that families that are affected by substance misuse do not feel isolated within their communities. One thing that was highlighted at the recovery happens event—Nanette Milne mentioned it in her speech—is that, whether we like it or not, a societal stigma remains around substance misuse, and especially around families in which a member has a substance misuse problem. Stigma is felt by those families when, instead of taking what might be seen as the easy option and casting the family member away, they choose to support and help them. As Nanette Milne said, one aspect of that stigma is the language that is used in society.

At the recovery happens event, I made the point that we politicians have a key role to play in shaping the public debate about substance misuse and how individuals and families who are affected by it are viewed through the prism of the public debate. We must all take caution and reflect on how we respond to calls from journalists to comment on issues relating to substance misuse, particularly where an individual has committed an offence that relates to their substance misuse. The language that is used often stigmatises the family of the individual, which adds to the isolation that they feel—isolation that is being tackled by groups such as the Grampian Family Support Forum.

We also need to reflect on our own situations, which I certainly did during the recovery happens event. Within my community, my peer group and the people I went to school with, there are those who have gone down the road of substance misuse, and I reflected on the different ways in which our lives have gone. Some of the people whom I played with in the playground at primary school now find themselves involved in substance misuse. We must recognise that substance misuse is not the preserve of certain communities in society. It happens to people who have the same life chances as those who go on to very different outcomes and destinations. It can happen to anyone, and it can affect anyone. We need to reflect on that when we look at how we shape the debate going forward.

09:58

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): Not long after my election, I took on the role of co-convenor of the cross-party group on drug and alcohol misuse, and through it I have learned a tremendous amount about the issues that we are discussing today. Recently, I hosted an event in the Parliament with Scottish Families Affected by Drugs; it is nice to see some of the people from

that organisation in the gallery this morning. Also, I congratulate Sheila McKay on a lifetime of work on the agenda.

I have travelled across Edinburgh and across Scotland to speak to different organisations and groups that work in the field. I went with John Finnie to visit NHS Highland's harm reduction unit, which is doing groundbreaking work on naloxone. I ask all members to look at that fantastic work, which should be happening throughout Scotland. I reiterate Richard Simpson's point about naloxone and the situations that people find themselves in when they overdose. It does not tend to happen in a family environment; people tend not to overdose in front of their mum, dad, brother or sister. They are more likely to do it in front of somebody with whom they are taking drugs, or perhaps on their own, in which case they might be found by somebody else, in a coma or otherwise.

As important as it is that we help families to understand what naloxone is, and that we train them in using it—which is relevant to a conversation about drug and substance misuse—we also need to consider "family" in the widest possible sense. "Family" does not have to mean a relation or a blood relative; what matters is who a drug user or substance misuser defines as family. That is why community development is important, because services should be provided to the people whom somebody defines as their community on a day-to-day basis.

For some people whom I have met or worked with in the past year, family members are not the most helpful people for the recovery journey. Families might be at the heart of underlying problems or might have unhealthy relationships. Getting back into positive relationships with their families requires people to be at a stable point of recovery and to feel strong in their recovery. That cannot happen instantly—getting to the point at which people want to tackle underlying issues with their families takes a lot of time on the journey of recovery. That goes back to community development and the recovery communities that we can build.

I pay tribute to the Serenity cafe, of which some members might be aware. It has recently moved to new premises at the Tun, which is just around the corner from the Parliament. It is a fantastic organisation that is linked to Comas. I encourage members to use that open cafe, which is run by people in recovery for people in recovery and for the nearby community. More than 40 people in recovery provide the services—they are involved in food preparation and in making and serving coffees, for example. For those people, that is part of learning how to play a part in society again and learning skills that will equip them to get back into work. We parliamentarians are based close to that

organisation; perhaps we all have a role and a responsibility to encourage people in that environment to do the best that they can.

I will conclude, because I appreciate that time is tight. I have learned from the recovery community that the Government could do a couple of simple things that would not cost much but could make all the difference. One suggestion relates to the support that we offer families when a family member is in recovery. Often, the person who is recovering gets concessions for leisure activities or bus journeys, but the family gets no such concessions. If we extended to the children of recovering addicts free swimming and free bus travel to and from appointments, we would alleviate somewhat the financial pressure.

Another simple point relates to the appointments process. People in recovery being told that they must make a 3 o'clock appointment with their consultant, which is the time when they are picking up their kid from school—perhaps for the first time in a decade—creates stress that addicts really struggle with. That applies particularly to those who have had a lifetime of using benzodiazepines, which means that their stress hormone receptors are suppressed and they cannot deal with stress in the way that other people can.

Simple things could make all the difference. I would like to hear the minister's response to these simple ideas.

10:02

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I thank Kezia Dugdale for her informative speech—I will certainly visit the cafe that is just around the corner from here. I also thank Nanette Milne for initiating the debate. As many members have said, the problem affects many families throughout Scotland. Neil Bibby and other members were correct to mention the consensus in the debate. We all feel exactly the same way—we want to do something positive and work together.

I will expand on the benefits changes that the Westminster Government has proposed, and which Maureen Watt touched on. Under those changes, claimants who have drug and alcohol problems will be forced into accepting treatment. Otherwise, their benefits will be cut. Kezia Dugdale has talked about people with chaotic lifestyles being forced into treatment. It is difficult for such people to cope with bureaucracy. Conservative members should let their counterparts in Westminster know what we are doing in Scotland and tell them that the proposals will be counterproductive to the work that is being undertaken in Parliament and throughout Scotland. The changes are the worst thing that

could happen to drug users. The demands that will be made on them will do more harm than good.

Christine Duncan of Scottish Families Affected by Drugs said:

"Proposals from the UK Government to link benefits with accessing drug and alcohol treatment are quite worrying as this would have the impact of adding pressure to someone's personal attempts at recovery which can only impact even more on families and carers. We support the Scottish Drugs Forum call to the Scottish Government to maintain the thrust of the Road to Recovery."

I accept what Nanette Milne said about recovery and relapse, but we need to look at the benefits system, because the changes will do more harm than good.

I pay tribute to the many groups and individuals who face every day the reality of drug abuse and its tragic consequences. For example, Glasgow North United Communities provides fantastic support to families and individuals whose lives have been affected and, in many cases, completely destroyed by drug abuse. As Neil Bibby and other members have, I have visited many such groups and individuals in the Glasgow area and know of situations in which grandparents look after their grandchildren, sometimes while still looking after their grown-up children who have drug problems. There are individuals who have reached rock-bottom and if it was not for the support of families and support groups, they simply would not be here today. I take my hat off to those grandparents. I will not recount individual constituents' stories, but some of those stories would have you on your knees. They are people who are just trying to get through life.

Kezia Dugdale and others have referred to the stigma of drug abuse. We talk about families in terms of grandparents, mothers, brothers, sisters and fathers, but there is a bigger family out there and people with drugs problems have to spend a long while in recovery mode before they can get back into the family group as a mother or father, for example. I pay tribute to the effort that such people make. They sometimes do not have support at the start, but they tend to find it. However, it can still take them many years to recover.

Members may think that I am not being consensual in terms of the debate, but I believe that we need to look at the UK Government's benefits changes. I hope that we are trying to ensure that people with drug problems are on the road to recovery and will not relapse, but if they are forced into getting treatment that may not be suitable for them, they probably will relapse and all the good work will be wasted.

10:06

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I, too, thank the Conservatives for using their debating time this morning to highlight the role of families who are in recovery from drug abuse and—in particular—to highlight the work of the Grampian Family Support Forum. Nanette Milne has been steadfast in her support of its work and she has put its case well this morning. As another North East Scotland MSP, I am pleased to be able to speak in support of her motion, and will also support both amendments.

The Grampian Family Support Forum was established only a couple of years ago, but has already proved its worth. We all recognise that recovery from drug addiction is possible. We need to develop end-to-end support for people who face drug and alcohol problems by building closer links between community, in-patient and residential treatment and rehabilitation providers. Crucially, there must be close working between addiction services and aftercare providers so that individuals are not cast adrift when their treatment ends. Scottish Liberal Democrats believe that local people know best, and we would give local areas and organisations, including family support groups, the freedom to design and jointly commission drug and alcohol services to ensure that they meet local needs.

On-going support in the community is essential for the recovery journey and often includes mutual aid and other peer support. Those who have conquered their own addictions can contribute a huge amount of experience and support to those who are still battling addiction. We would like to see those who are in recovery being given the opportunity to give something back. We think that there would be a significant benefit in there being local networks of recovery champions. Such peer networks would involve those who are in recovery mentoring and providing support to individuals who are making their way through the recovery process.

We would like the Government to encourage local areas to develop and promote a whole-family approach to the delivery of recovery services, and to consider greater provision of support services for families and carers in their own right. That is where the work of the Grampian Families Support Forum can lead the way. The forum works closely with Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, which estimates that 24,000 family members are affected by loved ones' drugs misuse in the Grampian region alone. Our families are, in so many circumstances, the lifeline that we rely on when we face difficulties. The particular tensions that drugs misuse brings to families can stretch that lifeline to breaking point, but there are still many barriers that prevent family members from seeking support

for themselves, so the primary challenge is in breaking down those barriers.

Learning to cope with a loved one's dependency, finding space to take care of oneself and the rest of the family, and overcoming the stigma that is associated with drug misuse, which other members have spoken about, can be overwhelmingly difficult. That is why support for families is vital and should not be an afterthought. I have no doubt that mutual support from local people with first-hand experience can be an immense support. There is much that we can learn from the Grampian Family Support Forum, and I hope that other parts of Scotland will benefit from their experience.

10:09

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The debate has been very good, and it is timely and worth while. I thank Nanette Milne and the Conservatives for bringing the topic to the chamber. In the past year, since I was elected, many people in Dundee have told me that the Parliament should make drug misuse one of its biggest priorities as they see the devastating effects that it has on the community, so I am very pleased to speak in the debate.

Labour's amendment highlights—in addition to the Grampian Family Support Forum, which does such good work—the work of organisations such as Scottish Families Affected by Drugs that do similar work throughout the country. I know that SFAD has, in Dundee, been particularly active and successful in integrating the needs of families who are affected by drugs into the recovery process.

I will touch on a few speeches. Dr Simpson—as always—made a good contribution, and his call for further work on bereavement counselling for families who lose loved ones to drugs is, I hope, an issue that the minister will pick up on in her closing remarks.

Kezia Dugdale called for more naloxone programmes across the country. Mary Scanlon's intervention about the mental health issues underlying many people's addictions was pertinent and is, I hope, an issue that we might debate in the future.

Neil Bibby made a good opening speech on the effects on children. That is certainly the drugs issue that is closest to my heart, and I hear so many stories about it in my home city. He also raised the Scottish Government's commitment to provide financial support for kinship carers. I hope that that, too, is an issue that the minister will address.

Kenneth Gibson made a good contribution on the further work that should be done to reduce

long-term methadone dependency. I know that there are a number of projects across the country that are seeking to do that, but it is an area that the Government should examine more closely.

I was struck by the focus on families. I know the importance of that network, but it would be remiss of members to forget the drug addicts who do not have family support and, who, as a result of poverty, joblessness and homelessness, are alone and struggling with their addictions. I hope that that is also a subject that we can bring back to the chamber.

We should not forget the causes of drug addiction in our communities: the poverty and unemployment that lead to a cycle of hopelessness and no options, and then to desperation for a way out that can lead to dependence on drugs. Neither should we forget the lost generation of young parents and the children—some of whom also fall victim to drugs—who are living with grandparents, or the constituents who, as I said, see the devastating effects on their communities and plead with me to make the fight on drugs the priority of the Parliament.

I commend, on behalf of Labour, the work of people all over the country who work with the excellent family support services that were referred to by Nanette Milne. The selfless nature of the work is what sustains affected families and the projects. I commend Nanette Milne's motion, and I lend Labour's support to it.

10:13

Roseanna Cunningham: I thank members for the many thoughtful contributions on a significant issue affecting families in Scotland. One of the essential values of the Scottish Parliament is its capacity to educate and to highlight important issues and, on occasions, genuinely to speak with one voice. This is an issue on which we are doing that.

However, we also need to highlight some of the work that Parliament is doing through the education and community partnerships team and its community partnerships project. That is a strong example of the Parliament giving a voice to people who might otherwise be underrepresented. I want to say to those families that we have heard what they have said to us, that we will not forget about them, and that we will continue to listen and to work to support them.

We can do that through our commitment to bringing down waiting times—access to services for drug users has changed overwhelmingly compared with what it was a few years ago—through our record funding of front-line drug treatment services, which is being preserved

against the backdrop of difficult economic circumstances; through our direct funding for voluntary organisations such as SFAD; and through our commitment to tackling stigma and supporting the growth of recovery in communities the length and breadth of Scotland.

No one who has participated in today's debate, or who has been involved in the community partnerships project, has not been moved by the challenging daily experience of families who are struggling with drug or alcohol problems. As Maureen Watt and Sandra White reminded us, decisions that are made elsewhere, such as in welfare reform, and which are designed for a very different approach to the drugs problem, can put those partnerships at risk. At the moment, we are still struggling with what looks to be a rule that says that no benefits can be given until the first substantive appointment, which does not include the first conversation with the GP. Even the three-week waiting time that we are getting down to will be a challenge for people who will have to face three weeks without benefits. There is no clarity about the way in which relapses will be treated, but in our system, we accept that relapses can sometimes be part of recovery.

Those are outstanding issues that we cannot get to the bottom of and are a worry for us, which is why welfare reform is an important part of the debate. I am proud of the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to support strong professional services and more rapid access to specialist care and support. However, we must remember that it is the families who are coping with their family member's addiction 24/7 and who are supporting them in their recovery. I have met many such families in different parts of Scotland and I am always impressed and inspired by their resilience and commitment to the individual whom they love, and their capacity to forgive and to keep going, never giving up on their family and never losing sight of the potential of an individual to recover from addiction.

The value to those families of the organisations and local support groups that we have heard about this morning is immeasurable. Across Scotland, such organisations and groups are all punching above their weight and working from the strongest motivations of care and support. Organisations such as Scottish Families Affected by Drugs offer access to advice and support, bring people together to share and learn from their experience, and continue to raise awareness of the needs of families.

As Richard Simpson suggested, we should also remember the families who have experienced bereavement as a consequence of addiction, and we should continue to build our awareness of the needs of families who are in recovery. We can

learn a good deal from families on that aspect of what happens to them. The recovery happens event that was held in Parliament on 1 March was a great example of how politicians can learn from the lived experience of those who are directly affected.

At local level, ADPs across Scotland play their part in supporting community groups as part of local packages of action to tackle drug and alcohol problems. They make local decisions on the basis of local needs. I continue to be grateful to the partnership drugs initiative for its wise stewardship of Government funding while working locally across Scotland. Funds are being distributed, but we are also building capacity in local organisations to describe the impact and value of their work, and to share learning across the country. To answer Neil Bibby's point, I say that that includes the looked after children regulations which, for the first time, empower local authorities to pay an allowance to kinship carers. In agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, funding for that has been put in place. In March 2011, we also launched a national advice and support service for all kinship carers.

Liz Smith rightly reminded us of the major challenges that remain, and that evidence gathering and measuring outcomes are huge issues. That is correct, particularly when we want to empower local groups and not overwhelm them with bureaucratic demands. Kezia Dugdale and Alison McInnes also reminded us of how complex that can be.

Today, we can recommit to continue to listen to the families who need our support; to ensure that valuable examples of good work continue to be shared as a source of inspiration and example to others; and—as Mark MacDonald reminded us—to take care how we, as politicians, contribute to the debate in the comments that we are sometimes called upon to make.

To return to the specific point of Nanette Milne's original speech, I say personally to Sheila McKay and the Grampian Family Support Forum that they have my thanks for the commitment that they have shown. I thank Sheila, for being, as a mother, a source of support and inspiration in the community; and I thank the forum for the work that it has done to raise Parliament's awareness of this important issue.

10:19

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Nanette Milne for moving the motion and allowing a debate on one of the biggest issues that Scotland faces today. As Richard Simpson said, the debate has been largely consensual. We even had sight of one of the rarest creatures to be seen

in the chamber—a consensual and non-partisan speech from Kenneth Gibson. However, I dare say that those who, like me, pine for more party-political knockabout will have to wait only a few moments until the next debate, when I am sure that normal service will be resumed.

Unfortunately, drugs are widespread throughout Scotland. People in all age groups take drugs, and they are in our cities and our rural communities. Some people take drugs recreationally; some people, sadly, are addicts and have their lives consumed as a result. Drugs can and do ruin lives, leading to isolation and cutting people off from their family and friends. As we have heard, addiction to drugs can lead to a rise in crime levels as individuals resort to theft in order to pay for their habit, thus having an impact on the law-abiding citizens who are victims as a result. Drugs impact on the whole of the victim's family and on the wider community. We could take up a whole week's debating time in debating drugs, the problems that they create for society and how we should combat them better, but today we are concentrating on rehabilitation and support for the families that are affected by drugs.

I was impressed to hear from Nanette Milne of the life-changing work that is done by the Grampian Family Support Forum in her parliamentary region. It is clear from the speeches of other members from the north-east who have come across that group just how much its work is valued. I join other members in congratulating the forum on its successful participation in the third phase of the Parliament's community partnership project.

We can learn lessons from the good work that is being done in Grampian. There is a groundswell of excellent work being done throughout the country, involving voluntary groups in collaboration with local authorities and health boards. In Mid Scotland and Fife, we have groups such as the Drug and Alcohol Project Limited, which offers one-to-one counselling, support, information and advice to individuals and families who are affected by substance abuse and who live in Fife. The Drug and Alcohol Project Limited has experienced workers who provide an essential service to families that are affected by drugs, which is free and confidential. There is also the community alcohol and drug service for the Forth valley, which offers services, help and advice, and the Perth drug and alcohol service, which is run jointly by Perth and Kinross Council and the national health service, does a great deal of vital work in the local area and provides support to families. Those are just some of the tremendous groups in my area that carry out vital work for individuals who are addicted to drugs and give personal support to families who can otherwise feel

helpless as they see a loved one consumed by addiction.

The message is clear: support for families who are affected by drug abuse is crucial in a national drugs strategy. We need a national drugs strategy that works and makes a real difference for individuals who want to stop taking drugs, and I welcome the minister's comments, which show that the Scottish Government recognises that.

Roseanna Cunningham touched on the question of waiting times. Each year, the Scottish Government agrees a number of national NHS performance targets that are known as health improvement, efficiency, access and treatment targets. NHS boards and the Scottish Government monitor boards' progress against the national HEAT targets and the progress is published on the Scottish Government's Scotland performs website. I welcome the openness of the targets, as it is important that we all have the opportunity to measure how well individual health boards are doing.

On drug recovery services that are delivered by the NHS, the HEAT target states:

"By March 2013, 90 per cent of clients will wait no longer than 3 weeks from referral received to appropriate drug or alcohol treatment that supports their recovery."

Between October and December 2011, the Scotland average for meeting the HEAT target was 84.9 per cent of individuals waiting no longer than three weeks from referral to receive treatment. That is impressively close to meeting the target fully. However, the picture in different parts of the country is not so good. In NHS Tayside, in the area that I represent and where Roseanna Cunningham is based, only 65.9 per cent of patients wait no longer than three weeks from referral to receive

"appropriate drug or alcohol treatment that supports their recovery."

Only NHS Lothian has a worse record. It is important that all health boards put in place the necessary resources and expertise that will bring about improvements in waiting times. If we are serious about pursuing this agenda, it is essential that individuals who seek or need help should not have to wait any longer than three weeks from referral to receive treatment. One of the first acts towards recovery is wanting to recover. However, when people make that decision and that choice, the necessary services to help them and their families must be available.

To the one or two SNP members who raised the issue of welfare reform and its consequences, I gently make the point that they should perhaps look first at the areas in which the Scottish Government has control and responsibility before looking at areas that are outside its remit.

Neil Bibby and Mark McDonald raised the important issue of tackling stigma. Too much stigma is attached to drug addicts, and that has an impact on their families. We must work much harder to address that, because that can often be a barrier to people coming forward and seeking help.

Neil Bibby and Liz Smith raised the important issue of kinship care. Liz Smith was clear that we have failed to deliver on the promises that have been made to kinship carers. We must all work harder to make better progress on that issue.

We must assist families who are affected by drug abuse, and we must ensure that children who are affected by a parent or parents who have a drug problem are properly supported.

Drug addiction is a social ill, but it is also a complicated and a serious issue. It is easy for us to stand up in this chamber and say that we must help individuals to get off drugs and provide support to their families. It is much harder to ensure that that happens in practice. Groups such as the forum in Grampian are on the ground and are doing some of the hardest, most rewarding and most important work in Scotland. That is why I commend the motion and the amendments to the chamber.

Local Government (Empty Property Relief)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-03397, in the name of Gavin Brown, on local government. Mr Brown, you have up to 10 minutes.

10:27

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): I bring to the chamber our deep concern with a part of the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties) (Scotland) Bill. Our particular concern involves the changes to empty property relief under the non-domestic rates regime. Although the changes will protect industrial property and listed buildings, they will almost extinguish the discount for empty commercial property, taking it from the—broadly accepted, to be fair—50 per cent down to 10 per cent.

We have three main concerns about the policy. First, it will not make any positive difference, it will not achieve the policy objective and it will not get empty properties back into use. Everyone in the chamber and most people across Scotland wish empty properties to be brought back into use. However, the prescription from the Scottish Government simply will not work and will not have any impact.

Secondly, not only will the policy not make a positive impact, but it is fairly clear that it will damage our economy and make it more difficult for it to grow when the upturn begins.

Thirdly, the policy has a cost to the public sector—something that was missed by the Scottish Government when it introduced the proposal. The bill suggested that the cost to the Scottish Government would be minimal because it has only 12 properties to be concerned about. That idea was knocked on the head the first time that the Finance Committee considered the bill, when it was gently pointed out that Scottish Enterprise has several hundred empty properties, and the cost to that agency alone could be pushing £500,000.

Underpinning all that—it is the reason for a lot of the negativity and the bad ideas—is the fact that the Government undertook no formal consultation on the measure. It consulted formally on all other parts of the bill, including a part that will cost only £750,000 a year and affect only one council. That part of the bill was deemed worthy of consultation, but a proposal that will affect thousands of properties, will affect every public sector agency in Scotland and will cost the business community millions of pounds a year was not deemed worthy

of consultation by the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government has to explain to us clearly why the proposal was specifically excluded from the consultation on the bill. This has all happened when sales of commercial property in Scotland have slumped by 40 per cent in the first quarter of 2012.

My first substantive point is why I do not think the measure will achieve the policy objective. Paragraph 4 of the policy memorandum states that

“Reform of empty property relief will provide incentives to bring vacant commercial premises back into use and raise additional revenue for the Scottish Government.”

That is a fairly loose definition of the word “incentive”. Clobbering them with a tax does not sound to me like an incentive to bring properties back into use.

The policy has two objectives: to bring vacant properties back into use and to raise additional revenue. Most people—even people who are not sceptical—feel that most of the Scottish Government’s emphasis is on the latter; it is about the money.

However, helpfully, Derek Mackay, the minister in charge of bringing forward this part of the bill, gave evidence to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee a short while ago. When I read the *Official Report* of the meeting, I was interested to see that Derek Mackay had stated:

“If it were just about income generation at the expense of the business community, we would not be progressing it.” —[*Official Report, Local Government and Regeneration Committee*, 30 May 2012; c 1070.]

The Scottish Government and the minister in charge of the bill therefore accept that, if all that the measure does is raise additional revenue, it should not be taken forward. To win the argument today, and in the coming weeks and months, the Scottish Government therefore has to demonstrate clearly how the measure will bring vacant commercial property back into use, because, by its own admission, the measure should not be only about additional revenue; indeed, the Government would not introduce the measure if that was all that it was about.

We have asked repeatedly how many properties would be brought back into the fold. It turns out that the Government has made no attempt to model that. The bill team stated:

“we cannot say that we have seen any evidence in Scotland on whether the incentive works”. —[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 2 May 2012; c 1070.]

In addition, having observed four years of evidence in England and Wales, the bill team was unable to present any evidence that the measure might have had any impact south of the border.

To correct the record, when the First Minister answered my question on the matter at First Minister's question time, he said that 5,500 properties would be brought back into use as a consequence of the bill. I put the question to him very specifically. However, the 5,500 properties are the number of commercial premises that would immediately be hit by the tax. That does not mean that a single property will be brought back into use. The figure of 5,500 properties is the number that would be clobbered by the tax.

There is a basic misunderstanding on the part of the Scottish Government about why the properties are empty. They are empty because of market conditions and lack of demand. I accept that there will be exceptions, and during the evidence sessions individual members pointed to examples in their constituencies, but the vast majority of landlords want to let their properties. That is the meat and drink of what they do. If they are not letting out a property, they are not generating an income. Landlords want tenants, but the market is weak. The measure punishes landlords who have been unlucky and who have been hit by the downturn and the recession, without doing anything positive to bring the properties back into use.

The direction of travel in Wales seems to be the opposite to that in Scotland. The Welsh Government, which has had such a measure in place since 2008, has had a business rates review undertaken by an independent group. The independent report, which was published last week by the Wales business minister, said:

"We have not come across any examples in Wales where property owners have intentionally left property vacant; indeed pressure from insurers and the risk of holding vacant property are ample enough incentive to re-let."

There we have it. The measure will not bring empty properties back into use. There is no evidence whatsoever that that will be the case, and there is a fundamental misunderstanding by the Scottish Government about why those properties are empty.

That is bad enough, but on top of that, the measure is quite likely to cause damage to the economy. Various properties have been demolished in other parts of the United Kingdom. In some cases, it was cheaper to demolish the property—no rates were paid at all as a result of that—than to pay the additional tax. A report by Lambert Smith Hampton on behalf of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors said:

"there has been an increase in the demolition of perfectly sound properties ... largely as a result of their liability to Empty Property Rates".

Therefore, there could be demolitions.

A reduction in speculative activity is also likely. If we want more premises, including commercial properties, to be built, there must be speculative activity, but the Scottish Government's measure will choke off the development of new business space because substantially more will have to be paid for vacant rates. That is a big deterrent for speculative commercial development. It has an impact on the viability appraisals and is an extra contingency to be built in at a time when the sector is finding things extremely difficult. Our view and the view of industry is that the industry does not need extra punishment, and certainly not at this time.

The measure sends out a signal to the world and the business community at large that the Scottish Government will impose new taxes on a whim without consultation. I think that I am correct in saying that empty property relief was not mentioned in the Scottish National Party's manifesto, which was published not that long ago and on which, admittedly, it won a fairly healthy majority. I stand to be corrected on that, but I had a good look through the manifesto. Why was the measure not mentioned in that manifesto if the SNP intended to introduce it? I am pretty sure that the First Minister will not mention it to the business community in the United States as something that the Government is proud of bringing forward. I am sure that that will be deeply hidden from everyone everywhere.

The measure will damage the economy and will not do anything to bring empty properties back into use. That is the key for the Scottish Government. Can the Government demonstrate at all that the measure will put properties back on to the market? There will also be costs to the public sector; we can return to that later.

I am very happy to move,

That the Parliament is concerned by the Scottish Government's plans to substantially reduce empty property relief for non-domestic rates through the proposals in the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Bill; is deeply concerned that the Scottish Government has introduced this proposal with no formal consultation and without making a business and regulatory impact assessment; notes the Finance Committee's report on the Bill's financial memorandum, which concluded that, "the Committee finds it surprising that the [Financial Memorandum] makes no attempt to estimate the number of commercial properties that will be brought back into use as a result of the Bill's empty property relief proposals"; believes that reducing the tax relief for empty properties will have a detrimental effect on business and the economy; notes that there will be significant costs to the public sector, and therefore calls on the Scottish Government to abandon its proposed changes to empty property relief for non-domestic rates.

10:38

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): I welcome the opportunity to debate the Government's proposed reform of empty property relief for commercial properties, as set out in the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc) (Scotland) Bill, which also includes a provision to allow for increases in council tax charges on certain long-term empty homes to help councils in encouraging more owners to bring their empty properties and houses back into use.

In itself, the Government's proposal in the bill will not change commercial empty property relief. The bill will simply create the enabling power to increase or, indeed, decrease the rates discount for empty commercial properties by future regulations.

Gavin Brown: Does the minister accept that the policy memorandum quite clearly states why the Government is doing that, and that the Government immediately intends to reduce the discount to 10 per cent across Scotland?

Derek Mackay: I am happy to discuss that further as I continue, but the fundamental power that we are seeking in the bill is the enabling power to vary those reliefs. The member referred to a decision being made "immediately". We are not immediately making a decision. There will be further consideration of the bill and specific regulations in due course by the Parliament. The regulations will be considered by the Parliament in the same way as the small business bonus scheme and the United Kingdom's first and only renewable energy relief regulations have been considered. The process is accepted by all parties in the Parliament.

Empty premises currently receive a 100 per cent discount for the first three months and a 50 per cent discount for an indefinite period thereafter. Industrial and listed properties receive a 100 per cent discount for the duration of the period in which they are empty.

It is our intention to vary the 50 per cent discount that empty properties receive after the first three months to 10 per cent from April 2013. We have no plans to change the discount for industrial and listed properties. Gavin Brown made fair points about experience in England, and lessons have been learned from the policy that was deployed there.

There are two driving forces behind the policy. First, we think that it will incentivise some landlords and property owners and managers to bring commercial properties back into use. There is evidence that rents remain stubbornly high even when there is demand to occupy properties.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I do not want to preach, but I have personal experience, which perhaps the minister does not have. I have been the owner of office property that was unoccupied for the simple reason that companies had amalgamated. I was desperate to find a purchaser for the property, as were my partners. We did not leave it empty out of choice; we could not find a purchaser. We still had to pay rates. Mr Brown talked about property owners who are in such a position.

What message is the policy sending about the Scottish Government's understanding of business or its desire for Scotland to be regarded as a business-friendly location?

Derek Mackay: I do not deny that Annabel Goldie has experience in the area. I have experience in leading a public-private partnership in Paisley, in Renfrewshire, to try to regenerate the largest town in Scotland. I am sorry to say that landlord support and engagement was part of the issue—and is an issue in trying to regenerate town centres throughout Scotland.

Scotland will still have the most generous package of reliefs in the United Kingdom. That is partly due to the help of the Conservatives under the previous Administration, when we introduced the small business bonus scheme, which has been successful. The Government has continued the scheme, but the Conservatives opposed the most recent budget, which featured the scheme.

The second driving force behind the policy is to raise income—that is absolutely the case. In the face of swingeing UK cuts, we have had to balance the books and reflect on the contribution that £18 million will make to local government, to help with funding in the public sector. Gavin Brown asked why there was no assessment, which is a fair question. It was deemed that such an approach would not be proportionate, given that the policy will bring in £18 million in revenue in the context of the £2.4 billion that is generated through business rates income.

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Derek Mackay: I am four and a half minutes into my speech and I should make progress.

Over the five-year period before revaluation, £750 million will still be dedicated to empty property relief—indeed, even after the reduction in relief the figure will be only marginally lower than it currently is. The small business bonus scheme and other reliefs, which amount to £0.5 billion every year, will continue.

If members think that a reduction in rates relief is the wrong policy, I wonder why Labour introduced such a policy in 2008 and why the

Conservatives and Liberal Democrats—the Liberal Democrats are again not in the chamber—retained the policy objective. If there is evidence that the policy has failed in England and Wales, why has not the policy been reversed?

We want to learn lessons from what has happened in England and Wales and ensure that the policy can be deployed in a way that supports sustainable economic growth. However, we cannot disentangle the evidence, because the policy was introduced in England in 2008, at the time of the bank lending issue, changes in shopping patterns and the recession. The VAT rise that the UK Government introduced—with a £1 billion price tag for Scotland, of course—also affected the commercial world. It is fair to say that it is difficult to draw conclusions from the experience in England. However, the policy has been sustained in challenging financial times.

By working through our regeneration and town centres strategies, we can ensure that there are incentives to use empty properties. Empty property relief is part of the rating system, on which we will consult during the summer. It is a property tax. Many would ask why it is just the active premises that pay that tax and subsidise closed premises in the overall tax take.

We are not dismissing the concerns of the private sector. I am listening to a wide range of stakeholders on the proposed reforms to empty property relief. I emphasise that there is flexibility in our approach, which the Parliament and the committee can consider when it comes to looking at the regulations. The assessment of the policy will continue. There is no rush to make a decision. We have outlined a flexible approach and we will continue to listen to people. We will also use agencies such as Scottish Enterprise to promote properties, with the new property database that was announced recently, to give maximum possible exposure to the empty properties that exist.

Whatever we do, the Scottish Government will ensure that we have a competitive edge over our counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom.

I move amendment S4M-03397.1, to leave out from “is concerned” to end and insert:

“welcomes the measures that the Scottish Government is taking to help tackle the prevalence of empty properties afflicting Scotland’s high streets by creating a new incentive, which links to the Scottish Government’s regeneration strategy and future town centre review, to bring these premises back into economic use; notes that, even after reform, empty property relief will remain significantly more generous than that available in England and, in particular, that Scotland will retain 100% relief for industrial properties; notes the considerably greater impact on Scottish business of the UK Government’s VAT rise, which is expected to cost Scottish business £1 billion, and congratulates the Scottish Government on the wider

package of business rate relief measures, worth over £500 million per annum, that has ensured that Scotland remains the most competitive place to do business in the UK.”

10:46

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the debate that the Conservatives have stimulated. I also agree with most of the motion. However, I want to give the Scottish National Party the chance to do the right thing and to give us the proper evidence.

We have before us a proposal that is at best not proven. There are huge concerns about its potential impact—particularly on our business community—and huge uncertainty surrounding the SNP Government’s projected costs. The figure of £18 million has been completely rubbished by so many commentators that it needs to be explored.

We understand the principle behind the proposal, but we are in tough times and it is our job in this chamber to ask whether the proposal will help or hinder our town centres. It is simply not good enough to be given Government assertions. We need evidence—robust evidence—and that is simply not on offer from the SNP Government.

The Finance Committee, having explored the evidence presented to it, produced a damning report. It asked questions, it interrogated the evidence and it concluded that the proposal had not been properly considered or justified. That matters. The Parliament should not pass legislation without rigorous scrutiny and proper justification. I have read a series of explanations from ministers as to why they did not conduct a business and regulatory impact assessment. The explanations are simply not credible.

When the SNP Government was elected last year, it said that it would govern as if it was a minority Government. We all know that if it was a minority Government, it would sit down and talk to members across the chamber and it would listen to the business community. A minority Government would be more focused on ensuring that the proper evidence was in front of us all when we debate this legislation.

There is still time. My amendment acknowledges the Finance Committee’s disappointment in the lack of an assessment.

Derek Mackay: I make the point again that the Government is taking a flexible approach. We will listen to stakeholders, to the committee and to the Parliament. We are listening—we have not set in stone what we propose to do. We have outline proposals. We will continue to listen if there are any constructive suggestions.

Sarah Boyack: Without a business and regulatory impact assessment, the Government is

listening without having properly considered the evidence. That is the key issue.

The Government amendment is an act of self-congratulation; if there were a prize for that, the minister would surely be in the top three. However, this is a serious issue. It is simply not acceptable for members to be asked to support the bill without proper scrutiny, given the major concerns that have been submitted to the Parliament.

Evidence from England has to be considered. The number of unoccupied properties has risen as the economic downturn has gripped. Properties have been demolished rather than let. That means that when the economy picks up, those properties will not be available. It has been suggested that companies are becoming insolvent rather than being stuck with higher business rates.

In Wales, as has been mentioned, our Labour colleagues have gone for a completely different approach. They have commissioned a detailed independent expert report. It acknowledges that although business rates are a major source of taxation, the changes to the current business rates regime would not be a panacea for wider economic challenges. Crucially, it highlights the complexity of the property sector. We are not getting that sense of understanding from the minister.

There is also the impact on the public sector. For all the minister's supposed assurances to the committee, he cannot be definitive about the impact on the public sector either.

The figure of £18 million is illusory. We know from the evidence to the Finance Committee and the Local Government and Regeneration Committee that the business community is deeply worried about the proposals. Yesterday's comments by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce testify to that. The Federation of Small Businesses has called for an investigation into whether property rates relief acts as a block to or a driver of economic activity. There are too many unanswered questions.

The reassurance that we have heard again this morning—that nobody need worry because the Scottish Government is consulting on the detail of the rates—is arrogant and worrying. That approach completely prejudices the outcome of parliamentary scrutiny. We have not yet had the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's report or the stage 1 debate on the bill. There is no transparency in the process, which is run by ministers. The SNP has a working majority, but it should still treat the Parliament with respect. There should be full consultation on the proposals, followed by parliamentary scrutiny, not the other way round. When we deal with the regulations, the SNP's overall majority will mean that they are

simply nodded through, so there will be no opportunity to change the proposals.

Good government demands effective parliamentary scrutiny. The Finance Committee considered that there should be a business and regulatory impact assessment, and we agree. The SNP Government is incurring costs for businesses and local councils without proper consideration.

Our amendment is constructive. The Crofting Reform etc Bill was delayed to enable the Labour-led Scottish Government to consider major objections to part of it. That Government took its time and brought that bill back. More recently, the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill was delayed for proper consideration.

We are in hard times and there are tough decisions to be made. There is too much at stake for us not to get it right.

I move amendment S4M-03397.2, to leave out from “, and therefore calls” to end and insert:

“; welcomes efforts to regenerate local economies and encourage occupancy in town centres but is concerned that the Scottish Government's plans to reduce empty property relief through the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Bill may not achieve its stated aim, may have a detrimental effect on business and the economy and may, in fact, cost the public sector considerable sums of money; calls on the Scottish Government to conduct a business and regulatory impact assessment (BRIA) immediately and to provide the Parliament with detailed information on how many commercial properties will be brought back into use as a result of these proposals; also calls on the Scottish Government to delay further consideration of the bill until the Parliament can consider the findings of the BRIA and other evidence, and urges the Scottish Government to consider other measures to incentivise local government to invest in economic development, such as allowing councils to keep a proportion of business rates raised through increased economic activity.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

We now move to the open debate. Time is tight, so speeches should be a strict four minutes.

10:51

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

How I yearn for the days when the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats had a functioning majority in the Parliament. They used to listen to Parliament at every opportunity and never, ever used their majority to just nod things through or to ignore criticism or suggestions from the Opposition. Selective rewriting of history has just taken another bold step forward, although not quite as bold a step as the Conservatives appear to have taken. It is always good to hear Conservatives advocating U-turns on budgets, as they have made that something of an art form at Westminster of late. Whether on pasties, grannies,

caravans, regional pay or the oil and gas exploration tax, you name it, the Conservative Party announces it in a rush and then U-turns the moment it realises that it has bungled.

The Conservatives talk about proposals not being in manifestos and damage to business, but it was the Conservative Party that hiked VAT to 20 per cent, a measure that I do not recall seeing in the Conservative Party manifesto and which has caused damage to businesses the length and breadth of Scotland. Frankly, if there is a prize in this Parliament for a brass neck, Gavin Brown has certainly earned it—and then some—today.

Sarah Boyack referred to the Finance Committee, of which I am a member. Her comment that the committee's report on the bill is damning does not reflect the constructive approach that committee members took, with notable exceptions. The Government and the bill team have made it clear throughout that the approach is not set in stone and that they are willing to engage with stakeholders throughout the process. Marianne Cook from the bill team said in evidence that ministers had indicated that they will be "flexible" over the reform and will listen to stakeholders, including those from the business community.

The minister has said that he is listening, but the Opposition parties have not made a lot of constructive alternative suggestions.

Gavin Brown: Will the member give way?

Mark McDonald: Gavin Brown or his colleagues can deal with that point later. He will not impinge on my time, when he had 10 minutes to talk about that earlier.

At present, the cost of empty property relief over a five-year period is £0.75 billion. When that figure is highlighted to people in my area, they question whether the money is being used appropriately. As for the claim that properties are being demolished, it rather contradicts the point about people wanting to let or sell them. It also suggests that the buildings in question are brand spanking new business centres; I know that individuals in my region are sitting on a number of properties in a significant state of disrepair simply because they are receiving rates relief.

As the minister is seeking constructive suggestions, I will offer him one. At the moment, Northern Ireland is looking to offer 50 per cent relief to businesses that occupy long-term empty properties. Perhaps the minister and the Government could consider that constructive proposal as a further incentive to let these properties.

10:55

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I declare at the outset that I am a member of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, which is in the latter stages of producing its report on the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc) (Scotland) Bill—to give it its Sunday title.

We all want our towns and city centres to thrive, to be full of businesses and to provide jobs and opportunities for local people. However, there are serious concerns that these proposals will not help us to achieve that and, in some cases, might make the situation worse. Concerns of that nature should be reflected in the work on any piece of legislation and, indeed, preparations for such legislation should be comprehensive. However, as Gavin Brown's motion makes clear, that has not been the case with regard to this bill. I am primarily concerned about the lack of a full and proper consultation process and believe that a BRIA or even a pilot study should have been carried out. It is only right to expect such preparations to be made—as is customary—but that has not happened in this case.

The lack of consultation is clearly noted in the Finance Committee's report and has been highlighted in the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's work on the bill. Indeed, the Finance Committee's report also notes that

"no attempt"

has been made

"to estimate the number of commercial properties that will be brought back into use"

under these proposals, a situation that the report rather diplomatically describes as "surprising". Moreover, the figures given to the Finance Committee were based on limited information about Scottish Government properties, with no account taken of Scottish Enterprise or national health service properties.

As Sarah Boyack has pointed out, some of the evidence comes from England, where such a scheme has already been put in place. As the economy has struggled, the number of unoccupied properties has risen; indeed, some properties have even been demolished and people in Glasgow whom I represent have suggested that the same might be a consequence in that city.

Derek Mackay: Given that this point might well be reiterated again and again by Opposition speakers, I must point out that the issue of demolitions in England refers specifically to industrial properties. Under our proposals, such properties would still be exempt.

Anne McTaggart: People in town centres are worried about this issue.

Despite the fact that groups such as the Confederation of British Industry and Scottish Chambers of Commerce have indicated that, for the most part, commercial properties are not left empty deliberately, no account has been taken of the current economic climate, which has put further barriers in the way of filling such properties. Indeed, Annabel Goldie mentioned that point earlier.

I know of a number of potential start-up businesses that have not received support from banks to allow them to look for new properties, and the Government should be actively pushing banks to do everything they can to support businesses in finding and funding properties. The banks are happy to take advantage of low interest rates, and the liquidity trap is allowing them to fill their vaults while properties stay empty. We should provide support to allow other properties to be modernised and redeveloped as well as penalising those who are intentionally and for their own personal gain not letting out their premises.

We all want our towns and city centres to be regenerated and to flourish. However, to achieve that, we need tried and tested legislation that is built on proper preparation. Let us begin that process by getting detailed information on the number of commercial properties that will be brought back into use by these proposals.

10:59

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Today we heard a first: Gavin Brown and the Conservatives have concerns. After that I stopped listening, of course, as there was not much else in his speech. However, that alone was something—that they have concerns about something in their communities other than themselves and their cronies.

My own deep concerns are about our town centres, and one particular town centre. I want the opportunities that this reform offers them. Mr Brown said that it will not make a difference or bring empty properties back into use, but just because he said it does not make it so. After gloom and doom, he offered nothing, even though the Conservative-led Westminster Government has a similar scheme down south.

Mr Brown also stated that landlords will not want to let properties. He clearly does not live in the real world.

Gavin Brown: Will the member give way?

George Adam: I will after I have finished this point.

Mr Brown clearly does not live in the real world, because in high streets across the country there are shops that have multiple sub-lets. Some people with no interest in town centre regeneration have property portfolios and do not actually want to fill their properties. Mr Brown may come in now.

Gavin Brown: George Adam is a remarkable man. He did not listen to a word I said—he switched off—but he has spent the past minute quoting me, which is quite impressive. Can he offer any evidence that this Government policy will bring empty properties back into use?

George Adam: There is potential to bring 5,500 properties back into use. The alternative is that, as Mr Brown suggested, we do nothing and leave our town centres the way they are, with no hope or vision for the future. That is what the Tories constantly come up with. If we continue to do nothing, the cost and impact will be that, in 2012-13, £152 million will be used to subsidise empty shops. We will spend £152 million to keep shops and businesses closed. That is not right or correct in a modern and dynamic Scotland. What incentive does that give faceless absentee landlords on our high streets, who sit on properties while having no interest in town centre regeneration? Reform of empty property rates will revitalise our town centres and provide that incentive. It will work alongside other regeneration strategies and groups in our communities. It is important to our town centres and to our local economies, which work locally with the authorities and partner organisations to ensure that we can have vibrant and sustainable town centres.

Derek Mackay has much experience of this in Paisley town centre, as he mentioned. He knows, only too well, the challenges that this issue holds, and he has worked on it as a councillor and now as the Minister for Local Government and Planning. In Paisley town centre, from Paisley Cross to New Street we have more than 65 different landlords, which makes things extremely difficult. The public constantly ask how we will get people into the shops. It is a difficulty, but this measure alone will ensure that people have to keep their eye on the ball and do something with their properties, instead of sitting and waiting for things to get better.

The public pride themselves on their town centres and they want to make a difference. Recently, we had an event in Paisley to commemorate the Renfrewshire witch hunt of 1697—not 1979 as *The Herald* said. During that witch hunt, seven unfortunate souls were tried and put to death for witchcraft. The event, whose organisers I brought to the Parliament, took place in the town centre and was extremely busy. It made a difference, but what a difference it would have made had the high street been full of shops.

Every decision that I make here is based on what good it can do for Paisley. I believe that the bill passes that test. The status quo is not an option and, like the Tories, offers nothing.

11:04

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con):

Throughout Scotland, town centres that were once the vibrant and thriving hubs of local communities are increasingly in decline. Closed-down notices and boarded-up shops and office units are now sadly an all-too-familiar sight, as town centres grapple with a potentially lethal cocktail of challenges that range from the economic downturn and competition from out-of-town retail units to online shopping and town centre parking charges. Those factors have all contributed to a decrease in footfall that threatens the viability of our town centres.

It beggars belief that the Scottish Government should compound those challenges by proposing to levy what is in effect an additional business and town centre tax in the form of the reduced rates relief on empty properties, and, in doing so, become the principal architect of the potential demise of our town centres. If the Minister for Local Government and Planning and the SNP Government have their way, this measure could be the last nail in the coffin for our town centres. It is totally unsustainable for the minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to continue their rhetoric about having an ambition to reinvigorate our town centres and to reduce the number of vacant properties on our high streets while they ignore the clear and unambiguous message from Liz Cameron of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and a host of others who represent business and retail, which is a highly property-intensive sector.

Derek Mackay: Margaret Mitchell paints a pretty grim picture of town centres in Scotland. If that is the case under the current regime, why is the status quo so acceptable?

Margaret Mitchell: If we let the business rates incentivisation scheme and the bonus scheme—our ideas—kick in, the status quo has a chance of survival. However, the Government is setting such a high bar for businesses that are trying to be economically viable that it is economic madness.

The message is simple. The reason why we have so many empty properties at present is more due to a lack of demand than to prohibitively high rents. If we are to address the problem, the solution must involve stimulating demand. The Scottish Government's plan to slash the value of empty property relief will do nothing to stimulate demand, and will serve only to increase the financial burden on property owners at a time

when we should be working with them to ensure that the supply of property is appropriate for modern town centres. That should be simple enough to understand even for this Government, which on this issue is gaining a reputation for its failure to grasp even basic abacus economics.

The Government has been rumbled. If it thought that an empty property cash grab on business could be slipped through without business and retail being able to mount effective opposition, the minister and his colleagues must now realise that they have got it badly wrong. The policy is poorly judged and should be abandoned.

I suggest that instead, at the very least, the minister should seek through the forthcoming national review of town centres to engage in a constructive dialogue with local businesses and property owners in an effort to identify a credible solution to the plight of empty properties in our town centres.

11:07

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP):

I welcome this debate on reducing empty property relief for non-domestic rates. I remind members that we subsidise vacant properties by more than £150 million per year. I believe that the empty property rates reform will revitalise town centres and bring more than 5,000 properties back into use.

In Bellshill, in my area, we have revitalised the town centre and brought properties back into use. However, there have still been instances in which we have gone to owners and asked them to let their shops, and they have said, "No—we want to keep them empty because it suits us." That has to change.

As the minister said, the Government will listen to stakeholders, who will have many opportunities to engage in the process prior to the regulations being brought in. I remind Tory members that the Con-Dem Government in England has failed to reverse similar changes that were made in 2008. Tory members up here are saying, "Don't do it!", but down in England they have failed to reverse those changes.

Empty property relief will remain more advantageous in Scotland than in England and Wales, and Scotland will still remain the most competitive place in which to do business in the UK. The small business bonus scheme has reduced taxation for two in five commercial properties.

There are several provisions in the bill. It allows the Government to make regulations to alter the non-domestic rates regime by varying the reliefs that are available for certain empty commercial

properties. It also allows the Government to make regulations to alter the level of council tax relief that is available or increase the level of council tax that is payable on long-term empty homes. No one has spoken about that.

In his speech, which I listened to, Gavin Brown failed to mention the subject of long-term empty homes. The proposed change will allow many houses to be brought back on to the market. There are many houses lying empty that could be used to reduce waiting lists. The extra income could be used by councils to build more houses. I compliment the Government on giving extra money to North Lanarkshire Council that will ensure that more than 1,000 council houses are built over the next number of years; I am sure that John Pentland will mention that. For 30 years, no such houses were built. I am surprised that no one has mentioned the issue.

Michael McMahon: Is it possible that that has not been mentioned because it is not in the motion, which is about non-domestic rates?

Richard Lyle: It is still in the bill.

The Tories have been rumbled. Despite the rhetoric of the Conservatives in the Scottish Parliament, the Con-Dem Government has failed to reverse similar changes that were made in England in 2008. I am aghast at the point that the Tories have gone on about.

11:11

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): It had been my intention to start by saying that I was sure that everyone would agree that long-term empty properties are a waste of resources, but I will now proceed by saying that that is my opinion. Let me take the example of a pigeon-infested property in Craigneuk in my constituency, the continued deterioration of which is unacceptable. When I wrote to one of the well-known banks that has a branch on nearly every high street the length and breadth of Scotland, it defended its inaction by saying that it was not the sole owner. At least it did not use a lack of funds as an excuse.

I believe that something needs to be done, and I give the Scottish Government credit for trying. Although there are problems with the approach that it has taken, I do not agree with the conclusion of the Tory motion. As is so often the case, it is a matter of getting the right balance between the carrot and the stick. The bill, as far as it goes, is about wielding a big stick. It does not say much about providing help to bring properties back into use. In fact, it is all very woolly and vague. We are being asked to vote on a skeleton of a bill, and to trust ministers to put flesh on the bones by issuing regulations. Is it not ironic that a

Government that argues for maximum devolution keeps asking this Parliament's elected members to concentrate power in the hands of ministers?

Derek Mackay: I am sorry to interrupt the member's speech, which is very enlightening, but I must clarify that we are not seeking power for ministers; we are seeking the power to vary by regulation. The regulations will be presented to Parliament for consideration. Members will still be able to scrutinise and, indeed, object to the regulations.

John Pentland: The other issue with the bill is that it seems to be about income generation at least as much as it is about tackling empty properties. Those two purposes can be at odds with each other. Doing well at one means doing less well at the other. We have heard that the proposed scheme could raise £18 million. That figure is admitted to be a maximum, which is one way of saying that it is a fantasy figure.

How many properties will be exempted? Some of the properties in question are very difficult to let or need significant renovation. If they are included in the scheme, it might not be for long. The English experience is that, in such circumstances, demolition—which has happened in one of the town centres in my constituency—can be a cheaper option.

If money is needed for renovation and the banks are not lending, will support be given? When properties are council owned, we will be robbing Peter to pay Paul. The bringing back into use of properties will reduce income. The scheme will involve the spending of significant amounts on administration, adjudication, monitoring and, perhaps, assistance. How much of the £18 million will be left?

We must also take into account other adverse consequences. For example, demolition might hinder economic recovery; there is evidence that rate rises result in job losses, as the National Assembly for Wales has highlighted; and hard-pressed firms might be forced out of business. Will the adverse consequences outweigh the benefits? We simply do not know, because we do not have studies to answer the questions and we do not know what the minister is planning to introduce by way of regulations.

I urge the SNP to support our amendment, to undertake a business and regulatory impact assessment, and to take time to reflect before pushing ahead with the bill.

11:15

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I welcome the debate and thank the Conservatives for bringing it to the chamber. Like

many other members, I am concerned about the many empty shops in my constituency. It is a particular problem in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth. In that regard, I welcome the fact that there has been Scottish Government support to help to revitalise the town centres in my constituency. There has been town centre regeneration fund support for Kilsyth, and other support such as the small business bonus scheme, which has seen 63 per cent of shops pay zero or reduced rates. That practical support for small businesses is keeping them alive and open, and it suggests that the inference in the Tory motion that the Scottish Government is anti-business is something of a nonsense.

However, despite that support, there are still far too many empty properties. I see that clearly in my constituency. The much-maligned Cumbernauld town centre needs investment but, above all, it needs more amenities. I question where the incentive lies to achieve that in the current scheme for non-domestic rates relief. I question the logic of providing an incentive to keep business premises empty, and I question whether such a position is pro-enterprise or pro-business. We need to do more to try to bring such premises back into use. That is why I welcome the efforts that the Scottish Government is making. It is engaged in considering how to take the matter forward.

As far as changes to the non-domestic rates relief scheme are concerned, we have seen support for those efforts. Andy Willox of the Federation of Small Businesses stated:

"We also welcome the review of empty property rate relief and its effect on local high streets. We need a system which encourages vacant town centre business properties to be filled".

That organisation, which represents small businesses on the high street, is calling for the current scheme to be looked at.

Gavin Brown: Does the Federation of Small Businesses support the bill?

Jamie Hepburn: The Federation of Small Businesses has said quite clearly that it supports our looking at the issue of empty property rates relief. However, I recognise that the proposal has not been welcomed across the business sector.

That paragon of progressiveness, the CBI Scotland, has also come out and commented. It made a fair point, which was also made by Annabel Goldie. David Lonsdale said:

"companies rarely leave premises empty by choice".

I accept that that is the case; I am sure that they do not choose to leave properties empty. However, I question whether enough is done to get properties filled again. How many businesses reassess the rent that they are looking to charge

for such properties and how many wait it out on the current scheme of rates relief? All too often, businesses do the latter.

I return to the fundamental point that I made earlier. I do not think that such a position is pro-enterprise or pro-business. I would have thought that the Conservative Party, as the pro-enterprise party that it says it is, would agree with that proposition, not least because the scheme that the Scottish Government is looking to take forward is largely similar to the scheme that is administered by the Conservatives in government south of the border. That point has been well made, so I will not reiterate it too much.

To that end, I will not be supporting the Conservative position. I look forward to the Government taking the matter forward, and I will support the amendment in the name of the minister.

11:19

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): The debate has been interesting. It was not exactly "Through the Looking-glass", but it was a bit topsy-turvy at times. I will come to that later.

No one would seriously argue against regenerating local economies and encouraging occupancy of empty premises in our town centres. However, Gavin Brown, Sarah Boyack and others have argued effectively that the Scottish Government's plan to reduce empty property relief through the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc) (Scotland) Bill is fundamentally flawed. The proposal will not achieve its stated aim. In my view, and in that of organisations such as the Scottish Property Federation and the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, it will have a detrimental effect on business and the economy.

The evidence that we have heard from various sources is that the proposal will cost the public sector considerable sums rather than save money for the public purse. If the Scottish Government disagrees with that analysis, it must do more than simply assert that it is right and everyone else is wrong. It must prove its case.

Derek Mackay: Michael McMahon asks how the proposal will support the public sector. He is right to identify that elements of the public sector would pay more if relief was reduced, but all the funds that will be saved—the £18 million—will go, through non-domestic rates, to public sector projects.

Michael McMahon: In the evidence to the Finance Committee, there was no basis for bringing the figure of £18 million to the table. It

was not assessed properly and will not stand scrutiny.

In recent weeks, the Finance Committee has taken a lot of evidence that has called for more robust verification and statistical analysis of the effects of public spending in Scotland. There is concern that we cannot prove that the money that we spend has the impacts that we hope for.

So to a more bizarre aspect of the debate—and I do not mean Mr Adam's reference to witch hunts. An oft-heard refrain from the nationalists in the Parliament—if there are any nationalists left in the Parliament, given what Angus Robertson has said—is that everything that Scottish Labour does results from its having to dance to the tune of London Labour. Once that old tripe has been dished out, we are often challenged to be like Labour in Wales, which has done this or done that differently from Labour in London. It is therefore ironic that the SNP demands that we copy a misguided but well-intentioned policy that was introduced by a Labour Government in London and which the minister has confirmed he wants to emulate. It is strange that, on this occasion, the SNP wants us to ignore the fact that Labour in Wales has looked at England's situation and taken the same view as Scottish Labour, which is that the policy will not achieve the intention.

As has been clearly exposed in evidence to the Finance Committee and in this morning's debate, such legislation has been tried and has failed and should not be copied in Scotland. In the light of that, it beggars belief that the Scottish Government should reject calls for a business and regulatory impact assessment to provide Parliament with detailed information on the bill's potential impact on business and to give us an indication not of the number of commercial properties that we can expect to be brought back into use, but of the number that will be brought back into use.

It is not enough for the Government to continue to assert that, because it is doing something, it will work. We must see the evidence. As it stands, the evidence is not there. It is regrettable that the Government continues to assert that it is right and expects everyone to accept that proclamation without question. It is clear from the debate that SNP members accept that, but that is simply not good enough. Parliament and the business community must be listened to. So far, that has not occurred.

Too many questions have been asked about the bill's efficacy for us just to accept that the Government should follow England's lead. The sounds that are heard from Westminster do not beckon us like the pied piper; they are a siren warning us to head away from the rocks. The

Government should learn lessons from England and drop the proposal now.

11:24

Derek Mackay: The Scottish Government is trying to show that it is an internationalist Government that is willing to learn lessons from across the United Kingdom.

Michael McMahon rose—

Derek Mackay: Oh, come on. I have only just started.

Michael McMahon: Will the minister give way?

Derek Mackay: Okay.

Michael McMahon: The point is that the Government is not learning the lessons or listening.

Derek Mackay: When members kept referring to the demolition of buildings in England, I had to say that those buildings were industrial properties. The fact that industrial properties will continue to be exempt in Scotland shows that we have listened and learned and that it is the other parties that have not moved on. It appears that unionism is alive and kicking in the chamber, although policies of unionism that are deployed and implemented by the Labour Party and continued by the Conservatives and the ever-absent Liberal Democrats hold true except for viewers in Scotland, where there is—in those parties—denial on introducing and deploying such policies.

The issue is serious, and I have tried to be consensual in my approach in the debate and to make it clear that the Government will continue to listen to—and to learn from—the private sector, partners and parliamentarians.

I have been asked specific questions, which I have tried to answer. The debate has moved on from the debate in the Finance Committee, although I admit that a number of probing questions were asked there and that specific information was sought, much of which was provided in due course to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, including how the formula and figures were arrived at, how the policy would be deployed and how it would affect different parts of the public sector. We were able to explain that the impact of the proposed changes to rates relief would be a maximum of £300,000 for the NHS, £400,000 for Scottish Enterprise and £1.7 million for councils. However, we should bear in mind that there will be a saving of £18 million of revenue, which will all be retained for the public sector in the face of savage UK cuts to the Scottish Government budget.

The Government's flexibility and willingness to listen is very much on the record. I have had a

number of meetings with stakeholders and I will continue to have such meetings as we approach the bill's enactment and the subsequent regulations that Parliament will consider.

Margaret Mitchell: Will the minister taken an intervention?

Derek Mackay: Certainly, I will—but after I have made my next point.

Margaret Mitchell asked earlier whether we would ensure that our policy and the rates review would not be implemented in isolation, would tie in with the town centre regeneration strategy and would be worked up in partnership with the private sector. I will, of course, commit to that, because it makes sense for the rates system to be tied in to whatever incentives or town centre regeneration proposals we produce.

Margaret Mitchell: I merely put it to the minister that he really cannot have it both ways. Either the bill will be passed to achieve the £18 million saving, or he will delay it because it sends out the wrong message. Which is it? Can we have a definitive answer now?

Derek Mackay: That is not the case at all. We are saying that the bill will give us the power to introduce regulations to vary rates relief as we do for the small business bonus scheme, so the same kind of approach would be taken. However, we must balance the budget. The figure in the budget was £18 million, but we are trying to be flexible in asking whether there are different ways in which to deploy the policy to achieve the objective of incentivisation while sustaining us against the budget pressures that we encounter. Mark McDonald made a helpful suggestion in that regard around what is happening in Northern Ireland. Despite the rhetoric, the Westminster Government and the Welsh Assembly Government have not yet changed their policies on empty property rates relief, although they may be considering doing so.

The power that we seek through the bill will give us the ability and adeptness to change the policy that applies in Scotland.

Sarah Boyack: Will the minister take an intervention?

Derek Mackay: I want to make progress.

Northern Ireland has been able to develop an incentivisation scheme—which Gavin Brown may be interested in—to bring properties back into use. If properties that have been empty for a time are brought back into use, they may be eligible for rates relief at that point. The Scottish Government is interested in that proposal and in how it could be applied here, which shows that we are prepared to be flexible about the details when the regulations are introduced.

We want to implement the policy with a partnership approach. I do not dismiss the concerns that have been expressed, but I am mindful of budget debates in the chamber in which Opposition politicians have often simply cried out for more.

I come to the Conservatives' position. At least the Labour Party supported the public health supplement, which is a radical tax that will contribute to preventative spend. The Conservatives said that the bill is the wrong prescription at the wrong time. It says a lot that they would, to fund some of their pledges, re-introduce prescription charges. Their solution to some of the budget pressures in Scotland says a lot about where in Scotland they think the burden of taxation should rest.

Of course, we are judged by our deeds and not just by our words. The £18 million that would be saved or generated through reduced rates relief pales into insignificance compared with the £1 billion VAT bill that was landed on Scotland as a consequence of a UK Government decision. Through our policies and their application, the full package of rates relief that is over £0.5 billion a year, including empty property rates relief, will still be at a very generous £721 million after the reform, which will ensure that Scotland has an advantage in the competition to be the best place in the United Kingdom in which to do business. We will continue to work in partnership with the private sector and others and we will maintain our "listening Government" approach in order to achieve that objective.

11:30

Gavin Brown: One is left with the impression that John Swinney fired the bullets but poor Derek Mackay is left holding the gun. Derek Mackay does not appear to be terribly passionate about the policy and if there were thought bubbles coming out the side of his head, they would quite clearly contain bad things about Mr Swinney, questioning why he was left to defend the policy. He did his best, but when he came down to it, he was about as convincing as the "The dog ate my homework" excuse that one used to use in school.

Derek Mackay completely ignored—as did every SNP member—the fundamental point and question: will the bill increase the number of empty properties that are brought back into use. Everybody in the chamber wants to see more empty properties being brought back into use. No village, town or city wants the blight of empty properties. All parties across the chamber want to see things done, but let us not conflate the two issues. To want something to be done and to decide that what has been chosen will do anything are two entirely separate issues. I have to say that

every SNP speaker either intentionally—or unintentionally—conflated the two issues.

SNP members again stated that the bill will bring 5,500 empty properties back into use. No, it will not. The Scottish Government bill team are not saying that and the minister did not say that. There is no evidence that the bill will bring a single property back into use. That is what the bill ought to be about and that is our objection to it. It is a burden on the public and private sectors and it could potentially damage the economy via demolitions. There is no evidence at all, and no attempt has been made to answer whether the bill will solve the problem that the Government says exists and that we all believe exists.

Sarah Boyack: How credible did Gavin Brown find the minister's assertions about why we were not going to get a BRIA?

Gavin Brown: I think that that question is what is called friendly fire. Of course the minister's assertions were not credible. I do not think that even the minister found them credible. In fairness to the minister, he was not the minister when the policy was drawn up, and I suspect that if one was to have a private conversation with Derek Mackay, he would probably—I cannot put words in his mouth—speak common sense. Certainly, all his SNP colleagues on the Finance Committee, including Mark McDonald, who is in the chamber, and the committee convener said categorically that there should have been a consultation.

Derek Mackay: I—again—make the point to Gavin Brown that a business and regulatory impact assessment would have been on the proposition that was announced at the budget. I have repeatedly said that we are listening to the various stakeholders to see how the policy might be developed. As that engagement is on-going so, too, is the assessment. Surely that shows that we are listening, that we are looking at the potential impact, and that we are taking that on board to see how we can refine the policy. Surely that is an approach that he would appreciate.

Gavin Brown: No. The approach that I would appreciate is a full and formal consultation on primary legislation. I do not doubt that Derek Mackay is the listening type, but saying "We are listening" is not the same as having a full consultation, especially when every other part of the bill underwent a full and formal consultation.

Derek Mackay asserted that only industrial properties have been demolished. That is simply incorrect. The Lambert Smith Hampton report—published by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors—to which I referred, makes it clear that properties of all type were demolished. If Derek Mackay can provide evidence that only industrial

properties were demolished, I would be extremely interested to see it.

We heard also that the Government is going to be using Scottish Enterprise to promote some of the schemes that it proposes. That is great; I have a lot of time for Scottish Enterprise and I hope that it does that well. Why will the minister not ask at the same time why Scottish Enterprise is sitting on several hundred empty properties? The reason is that it is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to get tenants for those properties in the current climate. There are simply not enough tenants and if Scottish Enterprise, which markets extremely hard and has some of the most talented people in the business, cannot get properties let, what chance do other business owners and property holders have when they do not have one ounce of the marketing budget that Scottish Enterprise has?

I will start to draw the debate to a close, but do not worry, Presiding Officer—I will take longer to close than a minute. Fear not.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): I got worried there.

Gavin Brown: The fundamental point is that the bill will not incentivise owners to put their empty properties back on the market. It will not incentivise anyone to do anything; it will just clobber businesses that cannot get their properties let out.

There is widespread concern about the bill across the political spectrum and we have heard various quotations and comments from business organisations. I was so robust in the motion because I believe that we should scrap the proposals. It is not just the business community or business organisations that are calling for that. Yesterday, I went to the trouble of reading all the submissions that have been given to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, and a broad spectrum of people across Scotland are saying that the proposals should not go ahead.

The Association of Town Centre Managers Scotland said that

"Increasing the liability of property owners, in many cases, will not improve market conditions and reletting will not be any easier. The proposed legislation could make many property owners more risk averse."

The Enterprise North East Trust stated very clearly:

"For property owners or landlords, the empty relief scheme is helpful but in no way detracts from a property owners ultimate desire to relet—it could be argued therefore, that it is currently well balanced. The removal of empty relief would, we suggest, have a negligible impact on a Landlords ability to let."

From the council side, we have a submission from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which said that

“COSLA recognises that there is a cost implication for Councils where they are in ownership of properties which are unoccupied. There are often good reasons why these properties may remain empty. Councils are active in letting out such properties as part of their asset management plans.”

If councils cannot relet properties with the resources that they have, how can some of our smaller businesses do so?

Individual councils have also written in with evidence. Glasgow City Council might have to pay £1 million. Falkirk Council development services ends its comments with:

“The proposal is not therefore supported.”

Submissions from the national health service talk about the cost that NHS National Services Scotland will have to pay, and NHS Ayrshire and Arran said that it wishes its

“concerns to be noted concerning the reduction of relief for premises that are empty.”

People from across the spectrum have raised concerns about the policy and are calling for it to be abolished. I can find almost no one who thinks that it is a good idea, and almost no one—even in the Government—who can show that it will make any impact on the number of empty properties or put any back in circulation. That is why we brought the debate to the chamber today, and why we are pushing our motion.

Scottish Executive Question Time

General Questions

11:40

Clyde Coastguard

1. Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent representations it has made to the United Kingdom Government regarding the future of Clyde coastguard. (S4O-01149)

The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown): We have made absolutely clear our opposition to the UK Government’s cuts to the coastguard and its proposed closure of the Clyde and Forth maritime rescue co-ordination centres. That has included our responses to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency consultations, sustained correspondence with UK ministers, engagement with staff and communities affected by the cuts, and repeated calls for those decisions to be reversed.

Stuart McMillan: Representatives from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and a cross-party delegation of members have just had a meeting, and I welcome the fact that the minister showed great interest in and support for the many issues that were raised. Does he agree that, in the light of the recent incidents on the Clyde, it is vital that the Clyde coastguard station remains open instead of being closed, as is planned? Will he write to the UK Government, pressing the case for it to ensure that there is a transitional period? I am convinced that that will highlight the folly of the UK Government’s proposals.

Keith Brown: Ministers are aware of the incidents that have been mentioned, and our thoughts are with the family and friends of the man who lost his life. As Stuart McMillan said, I met representatives of the Public and Commercial Services union from the Clyde maritime rescue co-ordination centre this morning, along with Duncan McNeil, Stuart McMillan and others. The PCS members are to be commended for their on-going professionalism at a difficult and uncertain time. I assure Stuart McMillan that the Scottish ministers will continue to press the UK Government. I will write to the UK minister with responsibility on the point that Stuart McMillan has raised about ensuring that the transitional commitments given by the UK Government are adhered to.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The minister will be aware of the vital support that is given to the Clyde coastguard by the helicopter search and rescue service that currently operates from HMS Gannet

at Prestwick airport in my constituency. Does he agree that that vital service should continue to operate from HMS Gannet in support of the coastguard service, and will he please make representations to the UK Government in that regard?

Keith Brown: That is substantially outwith my portfolio responsibility, but it points to the fact that we have a joined-up response from the emergency services just now, which we are keen to see continue. I will incorporate those comments in the approach that I make to the UK Government. If I can be assured of support from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat benches in that regard, I am sure that we can make progress with the UK Government.

Further and Higher Education (Care Leavers)

2. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to assist care leavers into further and higher education. (S4O-01150)

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan): Opportunities for all was launched in April, when we guaranteed every 16 to 19-year-old in Scotland a place in education or training. Beyond that, staff across all agencies that support young people leaving care provide a range of advice and support to help them to access the opportunities that are available to them. The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council recently concluded three college pilot programmes that supported care leavers. The aim was to improve access to college for members of that group through providing more support and information while raising awareness of their particular needs within education. Additional funds were granted for the current academic year to support the mainstreaming of that approach.

Neil Bibby: The minister will know from previous answers given by the Government that, over nine years, only nine care leavers in the whole of Scotland have received the care leavers grant from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland. Does the minister think that that is acceptable? Will he consider reviewing the criteria for the grant?

Dr Allan: The issue does not lie with the criteria for the grant, although the Government is always happy to receive representations on such matters. We have always acknowledged that we must get more people from care backgrounds into further and higher education, which means intervention at much earlier stages in the education process. We have encouraged universities to set admissions targets for people from looked-after backgrounds, and we intend to pursue outcome agreements in that area.

"Price and choice in remote communities"

3. Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the Office of Fair Trading report "Price and choice in remote communities" in relation to such communities in Scotland. (S4O-01151)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Many of the issues that are identified in the report are reserved to Westminster. The Scottish Government believes that the powers involved—for example, on fuel taxation—should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, which would allow us to address the issues directly.

Rob Gibson: The OFT has confirmed in detail what we already know: scattered and remote communities suffer higher prices due to monopolies and lack of competition in broadband and in the delivery of goods and fuel. Given that Highland Council procures diesel fuel for fishing vessels using the port of Lochinver, could the council do the same for vehicle and heating fuels in order to offer reduced costs for vehicle users and residents in many of our scattered communities?

Fergus Ewing: Rob Gibson is right. I, too, understand that Highland Council deals with the procurement of diesel as part of the business of running harbours, which is its duty. It does not have a duty to run fuel distribution networks, which are intensely complex, and the council says that fuel may end up being even more costly if it were to undertake that burden.

With the news yesterday that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has announced that fuel tax is to be increased by a further 3p, the burden that is borne by Rob Gibson's constituents and others throughout Scotland, which is already massive and disproportionate, will increase. According to the table of European Union statistics that I have before me, the tax on diesel in the United Kingdom is the highest in the EU, at 56 per cent. Apparently, Westminster is unable to manage its financial affairs as well as the other 26 EU states are managing theirs.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Question 4, in the name of Neil Findlay, was not lodged. He has provided me with an explanation.

Racist Hate Crime

5. John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps it is taking to tackle racist hate crime. (S4O-01153)

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): All hate

crimes are deplorable and have no place in modern Scotland.

Earlier this month, we cautiously welcomed newly published figures that show a decrease in racist incidents recorded by the police in Scotland for 2010-11. Although those figures showed a decrease in racist incidents, there is absolutely no room for complacency and the Scottish Government is committed to tackling all types of hate crime and supports all efforts to stamp it out.

That is why we are providing nearly £9 million in funding during the period 2012 to 2015 to organisations whose work is aimed at tackling racist attitudes and improving the lives of minority ethnic communities, including refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers and Gypsy Travellers. That includes £2.9 million to strategic partners such as the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations, Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland and the Scottish Refugee Council to deliver race equality at a national level and represent the views of minority ethnic groups and individuals in Scotland. We also provided funding of £5.9 million to organisations to deliver projects working towards race equality at a grass-roots level.

Even one racist hate crime is one too many and we continue to work with those organisations to create the one Scotland to which we all aspire.

John Park: The minister might be aware of the report in the Dundee *Courier* on 13 June of a 50 per cent increase in race hate crime in Fife. Obviously, that is concerning. It has been suggested in reports in the newspaper that Fife Constabulary is recording those crimes differently now, which might account for the spike. Will the minister look into the spike in Fife and consider publishing some figures from Fife in the next three to six months, which will help us to see whether the issue is simply down to reporting methods or whether something more sinister underlies the figures?

Roseanna Cunningham: It is often the case that there are variations in the national figures. Sometimes, that is to do with issues such as changes in recording methods or the fact that there has been a specific focus on a particular crime. The member is quite right to flag up the differential between Fife and other parts of Scotland. I undertake to have a closer look at the matter to try to establish the underlying causes and determine whether the issue is simply a technical one or whether a problem is developing in Fife. I will meet the member in the near future, if he wishes.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): The minister will not wish to comment on the decisions that courts have made

or may make on this matter, but will she, in general terms, applaud the decision that was taken by the City of Edinburgh Council—and, I believe, Dundee City Council—not to allow marches by the so-called Scottish defence league? Does she agree that there is no place in Scotland for the Scottish defence league's message of hate against ethnic minority communities in general and the Muslim community in particular? [*Applause.*]

Roseanna Cunningham: The applause perhaps gives the member the answer that he might expect. I suspect that every member in the chamber is united in their abhorrence of the message that is being promulgated in Scotland by what is a small group of individuals who insist on making arguments that the rest of us simply do not and never will agree with. I commend those councils that are taking active steps to prevent that message from being broadcast even more loudly on the streets of Scotland's cities.

Small Business Bonus Scheme (Jobs)

6. Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how many jobs have been created by the small business bonus scheme and how this evidence was collected. (S4O-01154)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Two out of five commercial premises in Scotland pay no or low business rates under the small business bonus scheme. Since its introduction by this Government, the scheme has reduced the tax paid as business rates by £420 million. The Scottish Government estimates that the scheme has sustained many thousands of jobs in small and medium-sized businesses throughout the country.

Michael McMahon: I thank the minister for his response, but it does not answer my question. I asked how many jobs had been created and how the information was collected. The fact that he was unable to answer the question has partly answered it.

The minister will be aware that the Finance Committee has been considering the issue of data collection. In our evidence session with Dr Lena Wilson and others, the most robust evidence possible of the outcomes of public spending was requested. Does the minister's answer reflect the fact that we cannot judge the overall outcome of the small business bonus scheme because we do not collect the information that relates to it?

Fergus Ewing: I used to run a small business. If anyone had said then that I could get help to reduce my business rates, I would have known that that was a great thing.

It is puzzling that, in its manifesto, the Scottish Labour Party wanted to continue with the small business bonus scheme. Now it appears that it is against the scheme. It is for it and it is against it; it is not sure; it is on the fence. That used to be the prerogative of the Liberal Democrats in Scotland.

In Lanarkshire, 6,914 businesses benefit from the scheme. Does the Labour Party want to take that benefit away? We should be told.

Private Drains and Sewers

7. Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Scottish Water regarding the adoption of private drains and sewers. (S4O-01155)

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment (Alex Neil): The rules on the adoption of private drains and sewers have been agreed by the Government and the Water Industry Commission for Scotland. Those rules are laid out clearly in information leaflets on Scottish Water's website. In connecting new customers, Scottish Water must ensure that drains and sewers meet a required level of performance and do not create liabilities that it would fall to existing customers to fund.

Nigel Don: The cabinet secretary will be aware that there are new builds in Scotland that, for obvious economic reasons, are unlikely to be completed for a significant period. Some of those schemes have been built in part and, in piping terms, are complete. Such schemes could be adopted, were the rules to allow it.

Will the cabinet secretary meet me and the head of Scottish Water to sort out how we can modify the rules to make some sense of the situation on the ground—quite literally—where such schemes really should be adopted, so that the roads can then be adopted, gritted and looked after, and customers can be given a sensible service by their local authorities?

Alex Neil: As always, I would be more than happy to meet the member to discuss any particular problems that he has in his constituency and to invite the senior management of Scottish Water to such a meeting to try to resolve any issues that need to be addressed.

Margaret Burgess (Cunninghame South) (SNP): In Auchengate in my constituency, there is a small development of 76 residential properties that were previously owned by the Ministry of Defence. The residents of those properties are responsible for the sewerage system and the pumping station. In discussion with Scottish Water about Scottish Water adopting the system, it transpired that the residents are also responsible for about a mile of the sewerage system, until it

reaches an adjacent village. Scottish Water has refused to adopt the system until it is upgraded, which the residents have been told could cost upwards of £0.5 million. Will the cabinet secretary look at the specifics of the matter and perhaps discuss it with me and Scottish Water to look for some resolution?

Alex Neil: I am already aware of the problem and investigating the specifics of it. Once I have concluded my investigations, I will write to the member, after which I am more than happy to meet her, along with senior management from Scottish Water, to try to resolve any outstanding issues.

Sectarianism

8. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to educate children and young people about the dangers of sectarianism. (S4O-01156)

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): The curriculum for excellence provides the right environment to enable our young people to develop as informed and responsible citizens, and education remains central to the Scottish Government's approach to tackling sectarianism. I am therefore delighted that Education Scotland will highlight its work to combat sectarianism at this year's Scottish learning festival, which will showcase best practice in the area. That best practice includes a range of projects that are currently funded by the Scottish Government and which use many approaches, such as the arts, sports and classroom-based learning, to deliver real outcomes for our young people.

Christina McKelvie: Will the minister join me in congratulating the Larkhall community on being awarded the first Nil by Mouth communities award, which was granted for the positive work that has been undertaken by the community, the churches and the Machan Trust to tackle sectarianism? I convey an invitation to the minister to see the great work that the Machan Trust in Larkhall does in tackling the scourge of sectarianism in its community.

Roseanna Cunningham: I am delighted to join my colleague Christina McKelvie in applauding the creativity of the Machan Trust and staff and pupils on the initiative. That initiative is an example of the great work that is happening in Larkhall and the surrounding area, and is one of the reasons why Larkhall has become the first area in Scotland to receive the Nil by Mouth award, which recognises several years of hard work in uniting people of different religious and cultural backgrounds.

I have visited a variety of schools in the past few months, and would be delighted to visit the member's constituency, meet those who are involved in that excellent project and see first hand some of the other exciting initiatives that are taking place across Larkhall and the surrounding area. There are, of course, such initiatives in other parts of Scotland, too. An enormous amount of very good work is being done in Scotland right now on sectarianism, and I commend everybody who is involved in it, but I particularly commend Larkhall for being the first to get champion for change accreditation status.

Edinburgh International Culture Summit

9. Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what benefit the Edinburgh international culture summit will bring to Scotland. (S4O-01157)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The first ever gathering of culture ministers from around the world will take place in the Scottish Parliament, for which I give many thanks to the Presiding Officer. It will be hosted by the Scottish Government, Edinburgh International Festival, the United Kingdom Government and the British Council, and will take place on 13 and 14 August. The culture summit will showcase the best of Scottish culture, position Scotland as a leader in international cultural debate and, in the year of creative Scotland, celebrate and enhance Scotland's reputation as a highly creative nation.

Clare Adamson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that the international cultural discourse fostered by the summit will enhance Scotland's international reputation?

Fiona Hyslop: The summit will enhance understanding of the creative and cultural reputation of Scotland and the UK and the potential for full international relationships that are based on cultural ideas; it will promote international dialogue; and it will consolidate relationships with developing countries. It will also make a valuable contribution to the overall success of the year of creative Scotland and the cultural olympiad, which will, of course, kick off tonight in the Raploch, where the big noise orchestra will perform with the Simón Bolívar youth orchestra and Gustavo Dudamel. That is a great opportunity to showcase Scotland.

The summit will allow delegates to experience Scottish and other hospitality opportunities in the Parliament. I understand that the Parliament has a key role in that, and I am sure that the Presiding Officer is looking forward to the event as much as we are.

We must remember that Scotland is a creative nation. We are rich in heritage, and we have much to contribute to the world. As we welcome the world, we can promote ideas and innovation. People will see a warm, welcoming and outward-looking nation, which will enhance our international reputation. I encourage all MSPs to find some way of contributing to what I think will be a wonderful event and a chance to showcase Scotland's international capability and our cultural contribution to an audience the likes of which we have never seen before.

The Presiding Officer: Question 10 was not lodged by Elaine Murray, but I have had an explanation for that.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

Engagements

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I welcome the Deputy First Minister to her place and ask her what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-00782)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): Today the First Minister is travelling back from a successful trade mission to the United States, and I will have meetings to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Johann Lamont: It is a pity that the First Minister cannot be here today, but I am glad that at last he has been able to make a trip to the pictures without it ending in farce—although in those trews he could give Jack McConnell a run for his money in the fashion stakes. Of course, I say that as something of a fashion icon myself. *[Laughter.]*

I know that this is a word that the Deputy First Minister cannot use, but how does she explain the fall in support for independence?

Nicola Sturgeon: I reassure Johann Lamont that Jack McConnell's hold on the title of champion of silly outfits is quite safe. She need not worry on that score.

I am very confident that the people of Scotland, when they see the proposition that this Government will put forward for an independent Scotland, will vote yes, for an independent Scotland.

Let me tell Johann Lamont that I am happy today and indeed on any day to talk about independence. I am happy to talk about the power that independence will give us to prevent any more illegal wars, the power that it will give us to rid Scotland of Trident and the power that it will give us to protect the vulnerable from Tory welfare reforms. Johann Lamont does not want to talk about any of those things, because she prefers to leave all those powers in the hands of her new friends in the Tory party. She prefers Tory government to self-government.

Johann Lamont: The First Minister is not here, but his spirit lives on in that response from the Deputy First Minister, which simply did not answer the question. Support for independence is falling. Is it not the fact that independence is becoming more and more unpopular because of airy and meaningless assertions from the likes of the Deputy First Minister, such as, "Scotland will have

a seat on the monetary policy committee of the central bank of a foreign country"?

Nicola Sturgeon: Johann Lamont mentioned the monetary policy committee of the Bank of England, and I have to say that she is becoming a bit like a broken record on the issue. The position of the Scottish Government is perfectly reasonable, and Johann Lamont does not have to take my word for it, because that is also the opinion of the former member of the monetary policy committee, David Blanchflower, who said that it is not unreasonable for Scotland to have a seat on the monetary policy committee. I am going out on a limb here, but I suspect that David Blanchflower knows a bit more about those things than Johann Lamont does.

On unpopularity, nothing will be more unpopular in Scotland in the coming months and years than the new coalition between Labour and the Conservatives—the coalition to hold Scotland back.

Johann Lamont: The problem for the Deputy First Minister is that she did not go on television and say, "David Blanchflower thinks it might be a good idea"; she said that it would happen, and she repeated that in the Parliament, without even asking anyone. That is what I mean by meaningless assertion in a serious debate *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

Johann Lamont: Indeed.

I felt for the Deputy First Minister when she had to defend her boss's love-in with Rupert Murdoch, but her defence of her boss's banking plans is even more risible. We can imagine Wallace's address to his troops at Stirling Bridge if Nicola Sturgeon had written it: "Don't worry boys. If we win, we'll still keep Edward as king. We'll send him homeward with a seat on the monetary policy committee." *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. We cannot hear the member.

Johann Lamont: Presuming that the Scottish Government is doing anything to prepare for independence—there is that naughty word again; maybe we should call it the "i" word—can the Deputy First Minister tell me how the discussions are going with the European Union about, shall we say, an independently-minded Scotland being a member?

Nicola Sturgeon: An independent Scotland will be a member of the European Union and if Johann Lamont is arguing otherwise, she really is in an utterly absurd position.

It is interesting that Labour members are laughing, because Johann Lamont's propositions

are certainly something of a joke. I said that the monetary policy committee position was reasonable. David Blanchflower says that it is reasonable. However, the real question for Johann Lamont is this. If Scotland—when Scotland—votes for independence, is Johann Lamont really saying that she would argue against an independent Scotland having that representation on the monetary policy committee? If she is, she is arguing an absurd proposition, but we should not expect anything more from a party that is so happy to link arms with the deeply unpopular Conservative Party.

Johann Lamont: Again, the Deputy First Minister simply asserts something about the European Union. She does not ask anybody or check her facts. It is a simple assertion. She says that it would be absurd to suggest that an independent Scotland would not be on a monetary policy committee. In forty years I have not heard that argument being made by anybody in the Scottish National Party until this year.

There is another option that the SNP will not talk about, although Jim Sillars talks about it. It is, of course, an independent currency of your own. This is Monty Python's "Life of Nicola". What has being British ever done for us—apart from the pound, the monarchy, the Bank of England, financial regulation and the union jack. The only—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: The only dead parrot in the sketch, as the First Minister would have it, is independence. The reality is that the SNP—under its current leadership, on Nicola Sturgeon's watch—is not even prepared to make the case, because Nicola Sturgeon knows that the Scottish people will not buy it: compromising the monarchy, compromising the currency, compromising the second question; we will still be British, but not nationalists; and the final humiliation of SNP members not even being allowed to say the word that they have campaigned for for their whole political lives. Is there anything that Nicola Sturgeon will not sell out on? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Nicola Sturgeon: I remind Johann Lamont that Monty Python actually worked quite well for the SNP in the election last year. We won an overall majority on the back of that particular broadcast. Johann Lamont was all over the place there, but I will try to take her points one by one.

On European Union membership, I will refer her to the words of the late and greatly respected Robin Cook:

"It's in the nature of the European Union, it welcomes all comers and Scotland would be a member."

Was Robin Cook also wrong?

It might have escaped Johann Lamont's notice that the SNP has been in favour of retaining the Queen since 1934. Johann Lamont says that she did not hear about our position on sterling—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Nicola Sturgeon: —until this year. That has been our position since 2005. Perhaps Johann Lamont should pay greater attention. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Nicola Sturgeon: I will tell Johann Lamont what the benefits of independence are: no more Labour illegal wars; no more weapons of mass destruction; an ability to tackle the poverty that Labour so abysmally failed to tackle; and an ability to protect people in Scotland from the policies of a right-wing Tory Government. Johann Lamont prefers to leave all those powers in the hands of a Tory Government. That is what she will find difficult to explain to the Scottish people.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): When the Deputy First Minister says that the Scottish National Party has been in favour of keeping the Queen "since 1934", that possibly means 7.34 last night rather than 1934, when the Queen was not on the throne.

To ask the Deputy First Minister when she will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S4F-00775)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): Dear oh dear. I have no plans to meet the Secretary of State for Scotland in the near future.

Ruth Davidson: The Deputy First Minister has said that she has sympathy with the doctors who are striking today and understands their frustration and anger at pension changes that they say are unfair. Will she explain to the Parliament precisely what she finds so unfair about an annual pension of £68,000?

Nicola Sturgeon: That is a serious issue, so I will treat it extremely seriously. I deeply regret the action that has been taken today, although it is not a strike by doctors, because they are continuing to cover all emergency and urgent care as normal. However, those who are participating in the action are not covering non-emergency care. It is therefore unavoidable and unfortunate that many patients will be affected. I deeply regret the action. British Medical Association material states that the action is being taken to force the UK Government back to the negotiating table. I should point out

that the Scottish Government has never left the negotiating table. I therefore consider the action not just unfortunate, but unnecessary.

I also regret the fact that the action is taking place over an issue on which the Parliament has limited room for manoeuvre. However, we remain willing to work in partnership with national health service trade unions to find a way forward on the pensions issue within the severe constraints that are imposed on us. I urge the BMA to continue to be a part of that.

Ruth Davidson: I did not hear anything in that response from the Deputy First Minister about why £68,000 is an unfair pension income or about whether she would increase that at the expense of lower-paid public sector workers. All we had was more SNP grandstanding that it would do something different, just do not ask what.

On the point about sitting round the negotiating table, the Deputy First Minister knows fine well that the Department of Health had 23 meetings on pensions with the BMA, including five between the Secretary of State for Health and the head of the BMA.

Given that the responsibility of the Deputy First Minister and her Government is to stand up for the patients who are affected today and for the taxpayers, who finance three quarters of the multibillion pound pension bill—

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): Doctors pay taxes; it is Tory donors who do not.

The Presiding Officer: Mr McDonald, please stop it.

Ruth Davidson: I ask the Deputy First Minister how many appointments have been cancelled in Scotland because of the industrial action, how many operations have had to be postponed and how many patients have been denied treatment by their NHS because the taxpayers' contribution of £50,000 a year to a £68,000 pension is not deemed to be enough.

Nicola Sturgeon: I point out to Ruth Davidson—as I appreciate that she might not be aware of this—that the NHS pension scheme was reformed in 2008. Everybody in Scotland, including doctors and other public sector workers, and certainly the Government, understands and appreciates the importance of the long-term sustainability of pension schemes. However, many people in Scotland, including low-paid workers, think that the current United Kingdom reforms are more about a cash grab for deficit reduction than about the long-term sustainability of pensions.

I have already outlined the Scottish Government's position. We will continue in negotiations, albeit within the limits of the severe constraints, to see whether we can find a better

way forward. That is in the interests of patients and of those who work in our national health service.

On the impact of today's industrial action, Ruth Davidson and other members will appreciate that I have been monitoring the situation carefully and closely and will continue to do so throughout the day. I am advised that approximately 3,200 out-patient appointments and around 450 in-patient and day cases have been cancelled. Patients have been advised and all appointments will be rescheduled as soon as possible. I also understand that approximately 60 per cent of general practitioner practices are affected to some extent. I will continue to monitor the situation as the day progresses. The interests of patients and of patient safety and continuity of care are absolutely paramount, which is why the Scottish Government will continue to work with doctors and health boards throughout the day to ensure that any impact on patients is minimised.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Why has the Dalai Lama not been afforded a proper welcome by the Scottish Government or the Scottish National Party-led Dundee City Council, which, after a visit from the Chinese consul wanted the city's logo removed from the visit programme and will not even put up the deputy lord provost of the city to welcome the Tibetan leader? What message does that send about the SNP's willingness to address human rights abuse in China?

Nicola Sturgeon: The Scottish Government has on many occasions raised, and will continue to raise, with the Chinese Government in meetings and speeches the important issue of human rights. As for Jenny Marra's question about Dundee City Council, I am sure that she appreciates that arrangements made by Dundee City Council are entirely a matter for that council. There has been no discussion or contact whatever between the Scottish Government and Dundee City Council about the Dalai Lama's visit.

More generally, I say in all sincerity to members across the chamber that I think it unfortunate if anyone in any party seeks to politicise the Dalai Lama's visit to Scotland. It is not a political or state visit; the Dalai Lama is making a pastoral visit to Scotland and is being very properly recognised and respected by this Parliament in what I understand will be a non-political meeting hosted by the Presiding Officer tomorrow in Queensberry House. I hope that all members will recognise that and reflect it accordingly in the tone that they take about the visit.

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): This week, Philips Lighting in Hamilton in my constituency announced the potential loss of 40 jobs. As the company has had

a 65-year presence in Hamilton, the announcement will be a blow to the local economy as well as a shock for the workers concerned. What support can the Scottish Government offer both to the workers directly affected by redundancies and to Philips itself to ensure that the workforce in Hamilton is protected?

Nicola Sturgeon: Like all members, I share the concern that Christina McKelvie has expressed with regard to developments at Philips Lighting and their impact on the employees affected, their families and, indeed, the general area. I understand that, as Christina McKelvie has indicated, there are around 320 staff on the Hamilton site and approximately 40 employees across production and support functions are likely to be affected. It is hoped that that number will be achieved through voluntary redundancies. I confirm that our local partnership action for continuing employment team has already contacted Philips to offer PACE support and that PACE presentations to staff have been arranged for 8 August with the offer of follow-up workshops and one-to-one career management interviews. I hope that that reassures the member that we will do everything possible to provide support to Philips employees who might be affected by redundancy and minimise the time that they are out of work.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):

To ask the Deputy First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-00780)

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

Willie Rennie: In response to Jenny Marra, the Deputy First Minister talked about human rights in China. Let us remind ourselves that China is a country where 500,000 people have been detained without trial, where women are forced to have abortions on the orders of the Government and where political oppression is at its most severe in Tibet. The Deputy First Minister has a chance today to be very clear about what she thinks. Will she, on behalf of the Scottish Government, condemn the Chinese Government's human rights record?

Nicola Sturgeon: I condemn human rights abuses everywhere that they happen and am absolutely unequivocal in doing so.

I say again in all sincerity to Willie Rennie that I think every single member of the chamber has a deep commitment to human rights across the

globe and that it is a mistake for any member to seek to divide the chamber on the important issue of human rights. I hope that that statement is unequivocal enough for Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: I am pleased to hear the Deputy First Minister condemning the Chinese Government's human rights record—I have to say that it is a welcome change from the First Minister's ambiguous attitude.

Will the Deputy First Minister now take some practical steps? We know that the consul general has put pressure on Scottish councils and the First Minister; Dundee has pulled back from the Dalai Lama's visit and the First Minister is refusing to meet him. To put things right, the Deputy First Minister can do two things: first, encourage her colleagues on Dundee City Council to provide a high-level speaker to deputise for the lord provost; and secondly, get the First Minister or any other minister at any point over the next three days to meet the Dalai Lama. If the Deputy First Minister takes those steps today, she will send a loud and clear message to the Chinese Government that she condemns its human rights record. Will she make those changes happen?

Nicola Sturgeon: Willie Rennie is making a serious mistake by trying to divide the chamber on these issues. I do not speak for Dundee City Council, but Willie Rennie's description of its position is wrong. The Lord Provost will attend the reception for the Dalai Lama after he has attended a funeral. I hope that Willie Rennie is not seeking to make an issue of that.

As I said to Jenny Marra, the Dalai Lama is making a pastoral visit to Scotland. He will be properly recognised by the Parliament in a reception that will be hosted by the Presiding Officer and which, as far as I understand it, no party-political representative will attend. It is also my understanding—although Willie Rennie may know differently—that no United Kingdom Government minister, including Michael Moore and Danny Alexander, will meet the Dalai Lama while he is in Scotland.

I hope that Willie Rennie will do two things. I hope that he will accept the deep commitment of everyone in the chamber to human rights across the world, and I hope that he will accept that this is a pastoral visit by the Dalai Lama and that it would be wrong for anybody to seek to politicise it.

Carers (Support)

4. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):

To ask the First Minister what support the Scottish Government gives to carers. (S4F-00776)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): During carers week,

and, indeed, all year round, I acknowledge and applaud the tremendous work of Scotland's unpaid carers and young carers, who care for their families, friends and neighbours. Yesterday, the Minister for Public Health launched in the Parliament the Support in Mind Scotland carers' information pack, for carers of people with mental illness. With our funding, local authorities exceeded the target of delivering an extra 10,000 respite weeks by 2011 and achieved an extra 10,600 weeks. The Scottish Government is providing unprecedented levels of support to carers and young carers through our manifesto commitment, which includes at least 20 per cent of the change fund for older people—almost £50 million over 3 years—and will support carers of older people to continue to care.

James Dornan: I know that the Deputy First Minister recognises the great work that is being done in both my constituency and hers by organisations such as the Glasgow south east carers' centre. When working with carers and carers groups, I became aware that many of the voluntary organisations that support carers and those who require care in Glasgow face extra difficulty, due to the unique tendering process that Glasgow City Council has put in place. Given those challenges, would the Deputy First Minister consider using the change fund to further support the work of those important voluntary organisations?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am very familiar with the good work of the Glasgow south east carers' centre. As James Dornan rightly said, it operates in his constituency and has a heavy presence in my constituency. I also know of the concerns expressed about the tendering processes. As I indicated in my original answer, we have made it abundantly clear that at least 20 per cent of the change fund for older people should be used to support carers to continue to care. That will apply in Glasgow as much as it will in any other partnership area. The change plan submitted by Glasgow city community health partnership states that approximately £2,600,000 will be spent on supporting carers, either directly or indirectly, which represents more than 20 per cent of its change fund application. However, we want evidence of support and will therefore ask all partnerships to submit a progress report in September, to review in particular progress on the development of support for carers and work on joint commissioning.

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): This week we all recognise the contribution that Scotland's 650,000 carers make. I am confident that the cabinet secretary will be as concerned as I am and others are about this week's survey of more than 3,000 carers, 80 per cent of whom believe that their caring role has an

impact on their health. We know that work takes place, as she has just described, and that support is in place for many but, obviously, many carers are missing out. What action can we take to ensure that all carers receive the help that they need?

Nicola Sturgeon: I very much appreciate Duncan McNeil's question, and I think that he is absolutely right. I will be frank about the issue, as I often am when speaking directly to carers. First, we owe carers an unbelievable debt of gratitude, but we do not just owe them thanks; we owe them action to support them. Secondly, I am not sure that we will ever—no matter how much we do—properly repay carers for the extraordinary contribution that they make, but we have an obligation to do everything that we can.

I was struck by the survey to which Duncan McNeil refers, because it reflects evidence and information directly from carers that shows that they often care at the expense of their own health. That is why so much of the action that we have taken—and will continue to take, because it is work in progress—focuses on providing respite care and short-break provision, and on encouraging general practitioners and other health professionals to be conscious of the health needs of people who have caring responsibilities.

I am not standing here saying that the Government has got all that right and that there is no more that we can do, but we are going in the right direction and we will continue to work with carers' organisations to ensure that we are fulfilling our obligation to them.

On behalf of every member in the chamber, I am sure, I end with a heartfelt thank you for the contribution that carers make. *[Applause.]*

Doctors (Industrial Action)

5. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Deputy First Minister what impact industrial action by doctors could have on operations, diagnostic tests and out-patient appointments. (S4F-00778)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): As members are aware, today's industrial action is the first by doctors in almost 40 years. It is important to emphasise that doctors are not on strike, as they are continuing to cover all emergency and urgent care.

However, non-urgent care is being affected. As I said earlier about hospital care, boards have assessed the impact on operations at clinics and taken steps to inform patients of cancellations. As I said to Ruth Davidson, I am advised that approximately 3,200 out-patient appointments and

approximately 450 in-patient appointments and day cases have been cancelled, and all appointments will be rescheduled as soon as possible.

I also understand that approximately 60 per cent of GP practices are affected by the industrial action to some extent.

Dr Simpson: I thank the Deputy First Minister for that answer and advise members of my British Medical Association membership.

I think that every member in the chamber regrets the action for the effect that it will have on patients. Whatever the rights and wrongs on the pensions issue, I think that the public would be more sympathetic if doctors confined strike action to defending the national health service and patients.

However, the BMA gave three weeks' notice of the strike rather than the statutory one week's notice in order to allow patients to be informed in good time of the fact that their appointments, operations and diagnostic tests would be cancelled.

What action did the Government take? Was a chief executive's letter issued to health boards? What monitoring has the Government undertaken to ensure that patients have been informed in a timely way of that disruption to their lives? What further action will the Government take to ensure that those patients whose lives are being disrupted today get their appointments as quickly as possible?

Nicola Sturgeon: First, I reiterate what I said earlier: I deeply regret that the action is taking place, and I do not believe that it is in the interests of patients or the NHS—or indeed, ultimately, in the interests of doctors or those who work in our national health service.

Scotland's health boards have been planning to deal with the impact of today's industrial action since it became clear that it was going to happen. I have been receiving regular updates on the preparedness for the industrial action. As Richard Simpson may be aware, NHS Scotland employers and BMA Scotland agreed on and issued joint principles for dealing with the industrial action.

Health boards have taken all steps as quickly as they have been able to in order to advise patients whose appointments are affected or cancelled. Richard Simpson is right to say that the industrial action in general has been known about for a number of weeks. However, he will appreciate that, for some individual doctors, the decision on whether to participate in industrial action will have come later than that, so boards have had to assess the impact on an on-going basis and inform patients accordingly.

I am satisfied from the updates that I have had that boards have taken all appropriate steps to do that in order to minimise the impact on patients but, unfortunately, as I have made clear in previous answers, a number of patients—too many patients—will be affected by today's action. I again give them an assurance that all appointments will be rescheduled as quickly as possible to minimise the disruption and the impact on patients, who should be the first priority for us all.

Rail Journey Times (Inverness to Edinburgh and Glasgow)

6. Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): To ask the Deputy First Minister what progress has been made to reduce journey time on the main rail line from Inverness to Edinburgh and Glasgow. (S4F-00786)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): Over the past five years, this Government has invested £1.9 billion in improving the infrastructure of our railways, which has included opening the Airdrie to Bathgate route, work on the Borders rail link and improvements to services between Dundee and Elgin. In addition, of course, the Minister for Housing and Transport will make further announcements on the future of rail this afternoon.

As part of that investment, we have made progress on reducing journey time between Inverness and Edinburgh and Glasgow by 35 minutes and increasing the number of services. In 2011, two additional trains were added to the service, which means that it is now provided by a total of 11 trains. Recent network improvements between Perth and Inverness complete phase 1 of the project.

Rob Gibson: I declare an interest as a regular user of the service. It would indeed appear to be more punctual and the number of services has increased. Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that passengers to and from the north of Scotland will see further reductions in journey times by the end of this year?

Nicola Sturgeon: As I said, the transport minister will provide further information about rail services in general this afternoon, so I do not want to incur the ire of the Presiding Officer by straying on to territory that he will cover later.

However, I am happy to confirm that a consultation on the new timetable was conducted in May and that the new timetable that is to be published in the autumn will see journey times being reduced again this December. In addition, Network Rail is currently examining what infrastructure improvements are necessary to

further reduce journey times on the route. I hope that, as a user of the service and as a local MSP, Rob Gibson will welcome those developments.

12:31

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Scottish Executive Question Time

Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy

National Health Service (Whistleblowing)

1. Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it plans to review the partnership information network policy on implementing and reviewing whistleblowing arrangements in the NHS. (S4O-01159)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): I take advice from the Scottish workforce and staff governance committee on those matters. SWAG normally reassesses PIN policies every two years in order to determine whether they are considered to remain fit for purpose or require further review. The PIN policy in question was first published in December 2011. It is open to SWAG to decide that individual PIN policies are subject to review, either in part or in full, outwith those timescales if it considers that to be necessary and appropriate. I have asked SWAG to review the implementing and reviewing whistleblowing arrangements in NHS Scotland PIN policy with particular reference to the prospect of introducing a whistleblowing helpline for staff, and to report back to me by the end of this year.

Dave Thompson: The cabinet secretary is to be commended for her efforts to create the right environment for whistleblowers. Constituents have raised that issue with me.

We must be seen to be open and accountable. In that regard, will the cabinet secretary confirm that she will meet Patients First, which is a new whistleblowing campaigning organisation that is just starting to operate in Scotland?

Nicola Sturgeon: I would be happy to meet Patients First, as I am happy to meet a range of organisations. Dave Thompson will appreciate that it is not always appropriate for me to meet such organisations to discuss individual cases, but if Patients First wants to meet me to discuss general issues, I would be delighted to have my office arrange a meeting.

Dave Thompson will be aware that the Scotland Patients Association is also very active in Scotland. I meet it regularly and very much value the advice that it gives.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

Many issues that relate to whistleblowing could be addressed by more understanding and supportive human resources departments in the national health service rather than by the usual approach of suspending conscientious staff. Will the cabinet secretary ensure that HR departments try to support staff rather than bully them for whistleblowing?

Nicola Sturgeon: I hope that Mary Scanlon recognises that I would never tolerate bullying in the NHS from any source for whatever reason. HR departments exist fundamentally to be supportive of staff and to take a supportive approach to addressing any issues that staff may encounter, and to help them to address any particular problems that they are experiencing. That is absolutely the way in which I expect HR departments and, indeed, all levels of management in health boards to approach the issues, and the belief that that is the best approach underpins the PIN policy that we are talking about.

I am the first to admit that, from time to time, health boards will fall short of the standards that we expect on the issue in question and on many other issues. When they do, it is right that we take action to put things right. However, the policy and the principles on which that policy is based are very clear, and I expect all health boards to abide by them.

Giving Voice

2. Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Scotland regarding its giving voice campaign. (S4O-01160)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): No formal discussions have taken place between the Scottish Government and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Scotland about the giving voice campaign. However, the campaign's aims are subject to an on-going parliamentary petition, which was submitted to the Parliament's Public Petitions Committee.

The national delivery plan for allied health professionals was published this week and was welcomed by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. The delivery plan emphasises the need for AHPs to ensure that the communication needs of people who use services are effectively met. It also makes clear the need to consider how to support children with communication difficulties to access the curriculum and achieve their full potential.

Chic Brodie: As the minister said, effective speech, language and communication are fundamental to the success of our communities and our economy. People with speech, language and communication needs are likely to be unemployed or underemployed and victims or perpetrators of crime. Will the minister ask national health service boards to update their strategies to improve their SLCN services, so that we can secure an additional annual net benefit to Scotland and its economy? The benefit is currently approximately £60 million.

Michael Matheson: As I said, the national delivery plan includes actions and AHP directors in each health board should be working in partnership with colleagues in research and analysis to grow the health economics base for AHPs in Scotland, so that we can gain a clear understanding of the economic benefits that can be gained from AHPs' intervention across the health and social care setting.

As part of the mainstreaming of the delivery plan, NHS boards have been asked to prepare local plans that detail how the actions in the national plan will be delivered locally and how that will be evidenced. The chief health professions officer will work with NHS boards and local authorities to support implementation and to ensure that activity is effectively monitored, so that we can assess progress in each board.

Post-natal Depression

3. Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive how many women had post-natal depression in 2011. (S4O-01161)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The information is not held centrally. The Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guideline on the management of perinatal mood disorders refers to a range of evidence that shows a post-natal depression prevalence rate of around 10 to 15 per cent. The figures encompass people who experience mild, moderate and severe post-natal depression.

Jim Hume: The minister will be aware that SIGN guidelines on post-natal depression focus on cognitive behavioural therapy. However, CBT is inappropriate for some sufferers, who would be better served by art therapy and counselling. The post-natal depression group PND Borders offers such services but receives no funding from NHS Borders or Scottish Borders Council, even though it had 80 referrals from those two organisations during its first year of existence. The reason for the lack of funding is that the therapy that the group offers does not conform to Government guidelines.

This week is Action on Depression week in Scotland. Will the minister agree to meet me and Jenny Copsey, of PND Borders, to discuss the group's funding anomaly and the Government's guidelines on post-natal depression?

Michael Matheson: The new SIGN guidelines were published only in March, after careful consideration.

The decision about the approach that should be taken with a patient who is experiencing post-natal depression is primarily a clinical one and involves a multidisciplinary team in considering the most appropriate treatment programme for the patient.

I am aware of the concerns that have been expressed on behalf of the organisation in the Borders to which Jim Hume referred, which supports individuals who are experiencing post-natal depression. However, the member will acknowledge that it is the responsibility of local health boards and local authorities to decide how to provide services locally and which organisations will deliver services. The decision on funding the organisation is therefore a matter for the local health board and local authority. I will be happy to discuss the matter in more detail if the member wants me to do so, but I am sure that the member recognises that the primary responsibility for the matter lies with the local health board and local authority.

Shingles (Vaccination Programme)

4. Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made regarding the introduction of a shingles vaccination for all 70 to 79-year-olds. (S4O-01162)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has recommended that people aged 70 to 79 should be vaccinated against shingles if the vaccine can be purchased at a cost-effective price. The United Kingdom Department of Health, which procures vaccines on behalf of the four UK health departments, has started work on the vaccine procurement process, which will establish whether a cost-effective shingles vaccination programme can be introduced.

Roderick Campbell: The minister will be aware that a chicken pox vaccine is available in Australia, the United States of America and Japan. Can he say what implications his answer to my first question has in relation to a chicken pox vaccine?

Michael Matheson: I am aware that the chicken pox vaccine is available in a number of countries. We are guided on such matters by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, whose current advice is that the universal varicella vaccine for chicken pox is not recommended. I

assure the member that those recommendations are kept under review in light of any data that may emerge. If further recommendations come from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation that we should act upon as a Government, we will take the appropriate action at that particular time.

NHS Grampian (Maternity Services)

5. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what discussions it has had with NHS Grampian regarding its plans for the provision of maternity services. (S4O-01163)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): Scottish Government ministers and officials regularly discuss matters relating to service provision with national health service boards.

I am aware that following a full public consultation, NHS Grampian has reached a view on its preferred maternity service configuration. As the proposals would involve major service change, the board will now submit the proposals to the Government for a final decision. The member will appreciate that, due to my formal part in that process, it is important that I do not pre-empt consideration at this stage. However, upon receipt of the proposals, I will carefully consider all the evidence and representations before coming to a final decision.

Richard Baker: When the Fraserburgh and Aboyne maternity units were threatened with closure in 2006, Andy Kerr intervened as health minister and they remained open because fears had been expressed over expectant mothers having to travel long distances to give birth.

Will the cabinet secretary consider carefully new plans that have now been submitted to her that are different from 2006, but still include proposals to close the Aboyne and Fraserburgh units? Will she ensure that before those plans are put into action, she is personally satisfied that they are genuinely about better maternity services and not about reducing budgets?

Nicola Sturgeon: I will say three things quickly to Richard Baker. First, when this issue was under consideration previously, Andy Kerr had exactly the same role in the process as I do now. He considered proposals that came to him and took a decision. That is what I will do when the proposals come to me. Secondly, to correct something that Richard Baker said, I have not yet received the proposals. Thirdly, when I receive the proposals I will, as I said in my previous answer, give him and other members with an interest an absolute assurance—as I always do on such issues—that I

will look very carefully at the proposals, I will consider carefully all representations that are made and I will reach a decision only when I am absolutely satisfied in my own mind that it is the right decision to take.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Question 6 in the name of Linda Fabiani has been withdrawn for understandable reasons.

Edington Cottage Hospital

7. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what its position is on the value of Edington cottage hospital to North Berwick and its neighbouring communities. (S4O-01165)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): I am very well aware that the hospital is very valued by the local community.

As Iain Gray knows, national health service boards are responsible for planning and providing the best possible quality and safe local services. It is right that they keep those services under review to ensure that they continue to reflect local needs.

It is in the context of East Lothian's older people strategy that the East Lothian community health partnership is at an early stage of discussions with local stakeholders about future service provision at Edington cottage hospital. If those discussions result in a specific proposal to change current services, I expect the health board to engage appropriately with local stakeholders in line with national guidance.

Iain Gray: I wanted to thank the cabinet secretary for her endorsement, but I fear that organisations such as the friends of the Edington hospital in North Berwick will find that endorsement rather less strong than they hoped for.

Two weeks ago, the Edington celebrated 100 years of serving the people of North Berwick. It continues to provide crucial services close to home. It allows for short-term in-patient care; it allows people to return from surgery in Edinburgh earlier than they would have done otherwise; and most important of all, it provides palliative care close to families.

The Edington hospital has served its community for 100 years. It would be unfair to ask the cabinet secretary to promise another 100 years of life for the Edington, but it would be good to hear her suggest that for the foreseeable future, it is a facility that will remain available to serve my constituents in North Berwick.

Nicola Sturgeon: I appreciate and respect Iain Gray's role as a constituency member to speak up for the hospital, although I am a bit disappointed at

his tone. I was clear in my answer and I will say again that I fully appreciate how highly valued the hospital is by people in the community. I am aware that the hospital celebrated its centenary recently. It has done a sterling job for the people of the community that it serves and I fully understand the sense of anxiety that there will always be if people have a sense that there may be change on the horizon.

I expect the NHS board to take full cognisance of the value that people place on the hospital, but I am sure that Iain Gray agrees that it would be wrong for any health board to refuse to consider whether services can be improved in any way at any hospital in any part of the country. For example, there are no en suite facilities at the hospital and not all provision is in single rooms. It is right that the health board considers how it provides services and whether those services can be provided better to local people. However, in doing that, the board must be mindful of the important place that the hospital has at the heart of its community.

Finally, I point out that no proposals for change are on the table. If such proposals emerge, they would have to go through the robust consultation and decision-making process that any change proposal has to go through.

Read Classifications

8. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what representations it has received regarding Read classifications for general practitioners. (S4O-01166)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): The Government has had no recent representations about the United Kingdom Read classification system for GPs. NHS National Services Scotland, which is responsible for Scottish input on the issue, has received representations about the way in which version 2 of the Read codes classifies homosexuality. NSS is taking forward the issue with the UK authority that is responsible for the matter. The Scottish Government agrees, and I certainly agree, that the current situation does not reflect our equalities aims and I support change to bring systems into line with those aims.

Mary Fee: I thank the cabinet secretary for that somewhat pre-emptive response. I recently met Stonewall Scotland and was horrified to discover that gay men are classified under mental health and paedophilia. In the 21st century, that should not be the case. I look forward to that changing quickly.

The Presiding Officer: I do not think that an answer is required.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am happy to respond. Obviously, the classification is 20 years old, but that is no justification if it does not reflect our values and commitment to equalities. I am happy to keep Mary Fee updated on the efforts that NSS makes to bring the classification into line with the current situation.

Coeliac Disease (Prescription of Gluten-free Foods)

9. Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it has taken to ensure that a full range of staple gluten-free foods is available on prescription to people with coeliac disease in all national health service board areas. (S4O-01167)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that people who are living with long-term conditions such as coeliac disease receive the care and support that they need. A range of gluten-free food products is available on prescription to patients who are diagnosed with coeliac disease.

Alison McInnes: Thanks to the resources that have been put in and the research that has been done by food manufacturing companies, the range and quality of foods that are available to coeliac sufferers has greatly improved in recent years. A balanced and nutritious diet is more likely to be followed if it is enjoyable. It takes a great deal of time and investment to create successful new gluten-free foods and to gain approval from the Advisory Committee on Borderline Substances. It is therefore disappointing that products that have ACBS endorsement are being denied to coeliac sufferers in some parts of Scotland.

For example, Nairn's Oatcakes recently developed a gluten-free porridge, but it is not available on prescription in all NHS areas. Such disparities are unfair for coeliac sufferers and, if they go unchecked, are likely to have an impact on companies' willingness to fund future research and development. Will the minister review the current patchwork of provision with a view to ensuring that people throughout Scotland have equal access to staple products? Will he consider the merits of a community pharmacy supply model as an alternative way of delivering a more cost-effective service?

Michael Matheson: The member is correct that there is a process through which the United Kingdom Advisory Committee on Borderline Substances is responsible for deciding on which products could be considered as appropriate for the prescribed list of gluten-free products. It is important to recognise that the current guidelines focus on prescriptions for staple food products. That is the arrangement that has been put in place

across the NHS, which I believe is consistent with Coeliac UK's prescribing guidelines. We are about to undertake a review of the processes in Scotland, which we will do in consultation with a range of stakeholders to see how we can continue to improve the range of services and products that are available to patients who require access to gluten-free products.

Olympic and Paralympic Games

10. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what message it has for the public and competitors from Scotland with regard to the forthcoming Olympic and Paralympic games. (S4O-01168)

The Minister for Commonwealth Games and Sport (Shona Robison): As the great turnout for the Olympic torch demonstrated, people across Scotland are looking forward to the fantastic festival of sport and culture that the Olympic and Paralympic games will offer. The Scottish Government congratulates all those Scottish athletes who have been selected to compete at the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games and we wish them good luck when they compete in London.

Kenneth Gibson: How will the Scottish Government capitalise on the opportunities presented by the Olympic and Paralympic games to ensure that the Scottish public are aware of the benefits of participation in sport to their personal health and wellbeing?

Shona Robison: That is a very good question. We must ensure that the spirit and enthusiasm that are already evident as we head towards the Olympics are captured and, more important, rolled on for the two years up to the Commonwealth games. Much of the work that is going on in communities on the back of the Olympics—and indeed the Commonwealth games in two years' time—will give children and people of all ages the opportunity to take part in sport. For example, the 150 community sports hubs that will be established will provide a lasting legacy for young people, in particular, to get involved in sport. I should also remind members that the Olympics will kick off in Scotland on 25 July—even before the opening ceremony—with the first football match at Hampden. I encourage everyone to go along and see some great football.

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): The whole chamber will rejoice as the Scottish saltire flutters high above every Olympic stadium with every British success—at the heart of the union flag where it belongs. Of course, these games are not political. Does the minister agree that the principal success for every competitor and athlete in the games is the triumph of their own commitment and sustained effort over many years,

and will she and everyone in this chamber be cheering on their every effort?

Shona Robison: The good thing about the Olympics is that politics is left at the door and that it is all about people coming together to compete. Those are the values of the games, and I certainly believe that they provide a fantastic opportunity for some of our young athletes who have never performed at that level. For example, Craig Benson, who is only 17 years old, has made it into the Great Britain swimming team. The fact that the games will provide new and hugely inspirational role models to inspire the next generation of young athletes coming through in Scotland can be only a good thing.

Patient Consultation (Changes to Care at Home Services)

11. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what guidance it gives to national health service boards on consulting patients when changes are proposed to services delivered to patients at home. (S4O-01169)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): NHS boards must involve the communities they serve in planning and developing health and care services whatever the setting, no matter whether those services are delivered in hospital, in the community or at home. Involving patients, carers and the public is an important aspect of our ambitions for improving the quality of NHS Scotland's services. Scottish Government guidance, which was introduced in February 2010, sets out boards' responsibilities to inform, engage and consult their patients and the wider public and how they should progress such work. That guidance applies to all boards, which are further supported in their involving people practices by the Scottish Health Council and its proactive and tailored advice.

Mark Griffin: Is the cabinet secretary aware that constituents in Lanarkshire who rely on incontinence support services delivered to their homes were given just over a week's notice of, and no consultation on, a change to that service? Many of those who rely on the service are frail and elderly, and they valued the personal approach to delivery that they received until 1 June. Patients now have to call an 0845 automated number in Bradford and key in their patient identification number—their date of birth—before they can key in a product number. That might be easy for some, but not for the majority of those frail and elderly patients. Will the cabinet secretary investigate why NHS Lanarkshire introduced that service change without consultation, and is she able to tell me whether the same approach is being rolled out across Scotland?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am very well aware of the importance of services that are delivered at home, which are often vital not only to an individual's health and wellbeing but to their ability to continue to live independently at home. I also understand that health boards have to be very careful in changing service delivery and that they are under a real obligation to properly consult, engage and inform patients with regard to any such changes.

I am happy to pass on to the health board the member's particular concerns about the change to the incontinence service in Lanarkshire, and to let him have its response. To my knowledge, that change has not been rolled out uniformly across Scotland, although it may well be that other health boards are making similar changes. I am more than happy to express his concerns to the health board and to have further correspondence with him, based on its response.

Royal Hospital for Sick Children (Edinburgh)

12. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made regarding the development of the new Royal hospital for sick children in Edinburgh. (S4O-01170)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): Since the issue was last raised in the chamber on 24 May 2012, discussions and exchanges have taken place between NHS Lothian, the Scottish Futures Trust and providers. Positive progress has been made and the substantive commercial issue has now been removed. Other remaining issues are being addressed, with a view to achieving a swift resolution to enable the project to progress as quickly as possible.

Colin Beattie: Understandably, there has been public concern that the Royal hospital for sick children should progress as quickly as possible. The construction of the new facility is sorely needed. Although I understand the complexity of the negotiations with stakeholders, I ask the cabinet secretary whether she has any broad timescale for the completion of the project towards which the national health service is now working.

Nicola Sturgeon: I reiterate—as the First Minister did in the chamber a couple of weeks ago—the absolute commitment of the Scottish Government and NHS Lothian to delivering the new sick kids hospital. I repeat the commitment that that hospital will be built and will serve young people in this part of Scotland.

As the member will be aware, completion of the project was being sought for September 2016. There are delays in negotiations with the funders

of the existing private finance initiative contract regarding land and associated commercial issues, which have yet to be fully resolved, although I indicated positive progress in my initial answer. Latest estimates indicate that practical completion can be achieved by the end of 2016, with operations commencing in spring 2017, following a period of commissioning the new facility and transferring services to it.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will know that, back in May, NHS Lothian commissioned a paper to look at the option of staying on the current site at Sciennes. That site was rejected as not being fit for purpose for the Royal hospital for sick children in 2003. Does the progress that the cabinet secretary has indicated today mean that that is no longer an option, and can she guarantee that the new hospital will be built on the appropriate site at Little France?

Nicola Sturgeon: I hope that Iain Gray will have taken that reassurance from my answer to Colin Beattie. NHS Lothian has been experiencing delays that are not of its making. It has been working extremely hard with the Scottish Futures Trust, with the Government's help, where appropriate, to get over the delays. Continuing on the current site has never been NHS Lothian's preferred option, but it is planning for contingencies, as all responsible health boards do. Let me make it absolutely clear that the new sick kids hospital on the new site is a commitment of the Government and NHS Lothian. I hope that Iain Gray takes heart from the progress report that I have given today. There is a 100 per cent commitment to see the hospital go ahead, see it built and see it deliver the quality services for children and young people across this part of Scotland that I am absolutely sure it will deliver.

Dialysis Facilities (Rural Areas)

13. Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to improve dialysis facilities for patients in rural areas. (S4O-01171)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): All hospitals are aware of the need to provide dialysis services that respond to the needs of individual patients. Health boards have responded by developing satellite dialysis units where appropriate, so that as many people as possible get that form of renal replacement therapy near their home or place of work. There are now nine adult renal units and one paediatric renal unit in Scotland, which are complemented by 24 satellite dialysis units across the country.

The Scottish Government has also helped to fund the development of renal patientview, which

allows individual patients electronic access to their treatment files, so that they can gain a better understanding of their condition and an opportunity to participate in decisions about the management of their care.

Mike MacKenzie: I am sure that the cabinet secretary is aware of the campaign to provide a dialysis facility in the Lorn and Islands district general hospital in Oban. Can she offer any hope for those who have campaigned for that facility for many years?

Nicola Sturgeon: I thank Mike MacKenzie for raising an important issue. I completely understand the desire of people who require renal dialysis to have that as close to home as possible. Some people have to go through that procedure three or more times a week, every single week of their life, so if we can reduce the associated travelling, that incredibly disruptive impact on people's lives will be minimised to some extent. I understand how important that is.

I am well aware of the calls for a renal dialysis unit in Oban. I recently had the opportunity, along with Mike Russell, to meet some of Mr Russell's constituents from Taynuilt to hear their concerns at first hand. I was able to reassure them that NHS Highland is taking the issue very seriously.

The board is currently conducting a detailed review of renal services and has been working with local stakeholders to take the issues forward. The review is expected to conclude in September. I hope that Mike MacKenzie will rest assured that the board is committed to providing person-centred services that are safe, sustainable and delivered as locally as possible.

Primary Care Facilities (NHS Lothian)

14. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what new primary care facilities have been completed recently by NHS Lothian. (S4O-01172)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): Most recently, the new £18 million Musselburgh primary care centre was completed on time at the end of April. On 6 June, I had the pleasure of officially opening the new £3 million Dalkeith health centre, which was also completed on time, in September 2011. Those new facilities ensure that service providers have modern, first-class facilities within which they can continue to deliver quality care to patients.

In a time of financial constraint, the Government is using every lever to maintain capital investment. A number of primary and community care facilities will be built in the following years with a value in excess of £200 million under the hub programme,

which represents one of the largest ever investments of its kind in the national health service estate.

NHS Lothian has identified five primary care projects for delivery through revenue finance via the hub initiative. Those include Blackburn health centre, Firrhill, the north-west Edinburgh partnership centre, the Wester Hailes healthy living centre and Gullane surgery and day care centre.

Gordon MacDonald: Although I welcome those new facilities, there is increasing concern in the Oxfangs and Firrhill areas of my constituency that there has been no or little progress on the proposed Firrhill partnership centre project.

Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the scheme and tell us whether a finalised business plan is in place and whether the commencement of the project is dependent on any other health proposals in the NHS Lothian area?

Nicola Sturgeon: I appreciate Gordon MacDonald's concern about the issue, and I am pleased to tell him that the Scottish Government approved the initial agreement for the Firrhill partnership centre project on 6 June. The project has been included in the pipeline for the south-east Scotland territory hub programme, and the Scottish Futures Trust has awarded £0.82 million in enabling moneys to facilitate its delivery. A programme will be developed by hubco following the issuing of the new project request, and it is anticipated that work will start on the site in 2015.

Health and Social Care Integration (Highlands)

15. John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made regarding the integration of health and social care in the Highlands. (S4O-01173)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): On 1 April this year, Highland Council and NHS Highland transferred staff, resources and functions to enable the council to develop integrated children's services across health, education and social care and to enable NHS Highland to develop integrated adult services across health and social care.

The early indications from Highland are that progress is positive and that staff are already seeing the benefits of integrated working.

John Finnie: Can the cabinet secretary advise me to what extent the Scottish Ambulance Service patient transport improvement plan 2012 had regard to the integration of health and social care in the Highlands?

Nicola Sturgeon: The head of healthcare strategy for NHS Highland was a member of the Scottish Ambulance Service scheduled care board, which developed the service's patient transport improvement programme 2012. At an operational level, the Scottish Ambulance Service is working in partnership with NHS Highland, Highland Council and the Highland and Islands transport partnership to develop an integrated transport model and to support the health and social care integration agenda in the Highlands.

A project manager has recently been appointed by Highland Council and NHS Highland to lead that work, which includes the development of an integrated transport hub for health and social care. I am sure that all the partners that are engaged in that work would be happy to brief John Finnie further on its progress.

Follow-on Milk (Advertising)

16. Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the advertising of follow-on milk. (S4O-01174)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government has had no discussions with the UK Government specifically on the advertising of follow-on milk. The Food Standards Agency in Scotland has policy responsibility for the legislation that covers the advertising of follow-on formula, and it provides advice to the Scottish Government on those matters.

Mark McDonald: The minister will be aware that the World Health Organization's "International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes" recommends that there should be no commercial promotion of alternatives to breast milk. In Norway, where there is no such commercial promotion, 99 per cent of babies are breastfed at birth and more than 90 per cent are still breastfed at the age of four months. There is a feeling that allowing the promotion of follow-on milk clouds the judgment of mothers who may otherwise breastfeed their child and leads them to choose formula instead. Will the minister take that on board and meet me to discuss these matters further?

Michael Matheson: The legislation governing infant and follow-on formula is currently being reviewed by the European Union. The Food Standards Agency is in regular contact with the relevant departments at a UK level to reflect Scottish interests in the on-going discussions. We will consider anything that may emerge from that review process that we need to address here in Scotland.

The member requested a meeting to discuss the matter in more detail. I would be more than happy to arrange for such a meeting to take place, but some of the work that is being done at an EU level may assist in informing any discussion that takes place in due course.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): Given the efforts of manufacturers to circumvent the law preventing the advertising of their artificial milk and their complete disregard for the principles of the Innocenti declaration and the international code, what action can the minister take to help to mitigate the damage of such advertising and to ensure—given that next week is national breastfeeding awareness week—that parents are in no doubt about the unique health benefits of breastfeeding?

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware that we have a range of provisions in place at health board level to encourage mothers to breastfeed. There is a range of programmes to support them in doing so.

I note the point that the member makes about advertising and the impact that it can have on people's attitude to breastfeeding, which is why I think that the review that is taking place at an EU level will assist us in looking at whether there are further measures that we can take in Scotland to address some of the issues. Given that the member's long-standing interest in the matter resulted in the passing in this place of legislation to support breastfeeding, it is extremely important that we do everything that we can to encourage mothers to breastfeed, when they wish to. As a Government, we are prepared to do that, in partnership with our local health boards, and to look at what the EU review comes up with, to see what further measures can be taken to address the issue.

The Presiding Officer: Questions 17 and 18 have not been lodged, although the members have provided explanations.

Post Mortems

19. John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive which national health service boards do not employ or contract pathologists in their own area who are qualified to conduct NHS or procurator fiscal post mortems. (S4O-01177)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): That is a matter for NHS boards. The information requested is not held centrally by the Scottish Government.

John Pentland: Since the death of North Lanarkshire's only specialist pathologist, all post mortems are now being dealt with in Glasgow. It

has been reported that bereaved families in Lanarkshire now have to wait up to three weeks to bury their loved ones. That is a major concern for people at a very stressful time. Will the cabinet secretary please look at the situation with a view to ensuring that it is properly addressed?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am aware of the unexpected death of the pathologist in Wishaw and the fact he has not been replaced. I am more than happy to convey John Pentland's concerns directly to the health board, and I am sure that it would be happy to discuss the matter with him.

More generally, there will be reasons—I am not necessarily saying that this applies in the case in question—why it would not be cost efficient for a board to employ a pathologist solely to perform post mortems. One such reason would be that the number of cases was too small. In some cases, boards will put in place arrangements with other boards or with universities that can offer the service.

John Pentland is absolutely right about the importance to families of having post mortems carried out quickly. In relation to NHS post mortems, I am not aware of any problems nationally that are causing post mortems to be delayed. However, the majority of post mortems in Scotland are carried out under the instruction of a procurator fiscal. While they do that work as quickly as possible, on occasion there may be factors that have to be taken into account or stakeholder engagement that may need to take place, which may lead to some delay. I fully understand the importance and the sensitivity of the issue, and I am more than happy to have the health board concerned liaise directly with John Pentland on it.

The Presiding Officer: We have time for question 20, but I ask Annabel Goldie and the cabinet secretary to be brief.

General Practitioner Services (Internet Access)

20. Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to increase the provision of internet access to GP services. (S4O-01178)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy (Nicola Sturgeon): In September 2011, we published the "eHealth Strategy for NHS Scotland 2011-2017". One of its strategic objectives is to support people in all forms of communication that they have with the national health service in Scotland to help them to manage their own care, but also to promote ease of communication. Work is under way on both the e-health strategy and the associated action plan, which will be in place by March 2014. One of the

areas in which improvements will be made is the provision of internet access to GP services.

Annabel Goldie: By 2015, patients in England will be able to book GP appointments, obtain repeat prescriptions, procure their test results and access their medical records online. It all sounds absolutely marvellous. When will that facility be available to patients in Scotland?

Nicola Sturgeon: As Scottish health secretary, I am not completely au fait with the situation in England. Annabel Goldie will bear that in mind as I answer her question. I also note that, often, what we read in the headlines about developments in England or elsewhere does not reflect the reality.

I say to Annabel Goldie in all sincerity that Scotland has a well-deserved international reputation for e-health, but she is absolutely right: we have to ensure that the way in which we deliver services keeps pace with technology. Recently—although I say that, it was probably not as recently as it seems in my memory—I visited my old GP practice in Irvine, and it was piloting the very service that Annabel Goldie talks about, which enables people to access services online. I am absolutely committed to our getting more of that in more GP practices across the country as quickly as possible.

Rail

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a statement from Keith Brown on rail. The minister will take questions after his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions during it.

14:42

The Minister for Housing and Transport (Keith Brown): Rail transport is vital to Scotland's success as it supports economic growth, strengthens connections and provides sustainable alternatives to road and air travel. The Government has invested record levels in rail, opening two new passenger lines and seven new stations, providing 38 new trains and increasing train services by 10 per cent. Since 2004, intermodal rail freight traffic has grown substantially and passenger numbers have increased by 30 per cent. We are determined to build on that success and ensure that our railways meet the needs of the people of Scotland.

Rail must form a key part of a fully integrated transport system. Rail passengers are also cyclists, bus users and ferry passengers and it is essential to everyone that journeys are joined-up. We have an opportunity to make that happen in 2014, with the new contracts for rail passenger services and a new funding agreement for Network Rail.

The "Rail 2014" consultation showed the importance that the people of Scotland attach to rail services. It attracted more than 1,200 responses, which are being published today, and I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I am also grateful to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee for its scrutiny of the issues, and I have today written to the convener to set out how we will pursue its recommendations.

Rail services in the United Kingdom are provided through a private sector model. Although the Scottish network is funded entirely by the Scottish ministers, the structure of rail remains reserved. We have written to UK ministers several times, most recently in February and May, making it clear that we could achieve better outcomes for passengers if Scotland had overall responsibility for rail. I am disappointed that, so far, UK ministers have chosen not to respond. A yes vote in 2014 will enable us to rectify the situation and create a more fully integrated transport network.

In setting out the way forward for Scottish rail services from 2014, I will focus on three areas: the structure of our railways and the requirements that are placed on the rail industry; the future of the franchise; and the benefit to passengers.

I am pleased to announce a £5 billion programme of investment in Scotland's railways between 2014 and 2019. That will support the delivery of franchised passenger services and enable Network Rail to operate, maintain and enhance the network over that period, which will continue the delivery of the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme and the Borders railway. We will announce further progress on EGIP shortly. Network Rail will also be required to advance a series of strategic enhancement projects, including work on the Highland main line and the Aberdeen to Inverness rail improvements project, as detailed in our infrastructure investment plan.

We are working to future proof the network. Organisations across Scotland have come together to make the case for high-speed rail. We will continue to drive forward work on that while ensuring that EGIP and the other network improvements are compatible with our approach.

We are establishing separate funding streams to provide for future growth. A £30 million fund will support strategic freight enhancements, while £60 million of investment will improve journey times and punctuality, and £10 million will develop future projects, alongside the £30 million that has been announced for new and improved stations. A further £10 million fund will accelerate the closure of level-crossings, to make our railways even safer.

Our requirements and funds are set out in our high-level output specification and the statement of funds available, both of which are being published today. We will issue new guidance to the Office of Rail Regulation on how we expect it to best represent Scotland's interests.

On taking forward the franchise, we agree with the rail unions and others that privatisation has led to too much fragmentation and additional costs. The rail industry has for too long been distracted by internal arguments over responsibility. We will therefore expect the ScotRail franchise holder and Network Rail to work together to develop a deeper alliance, which will be a significant step towards greater industry integration. The industry should focus on passengers, providing better services and enhancing resilience and operational effectiveness. We expect that deeper alliance to generate annual savings of up to £30 million.

Passengers have made it clear that they value a single focused contract for services across Scotland. We therefore intend to let the next ScotRail contract for 10 years, with a potential break point after five years, to encourage investment and ensure that the franchisee focuses on improving performance, increasing passenger numbers and enhancing the rail experience. We

will welcome bids from a wide range of operators, including not-for-profit operators.

When we consider the future of rail services, the Caledonian sleeper stands as a unique and cherished service for rail users to and from Scotland. In December, we announced our contribution to the £100 million-plus of transformational investment in the service. To get the best from that investment and ensure that the Caledonian sleeper remains a unique, valued and high-profile service, we intend to let a separate franchise for it of up to 15 years.

The Caledonian sleeper is more than just a train service; it is sometimes part of a holiday, it is a business office and it can be a hotel. The sleeper is special to passengers and to Scotland. Users should be clear that the improvements will be made in the term of the next franchise. A separate longer franchise, coupled with more than £100 million of investment, will give this historic service the 21st century future that it deserves. The specification of both franchises will be published at the turn of the year.

Of course, our passenger rail network's primary purpose is to enable travel connections for work, services and leisure. We are determined that passengers will feel the benefit of the new arrangements. Rail fares will be attractive and affordable, and we intend to expand fares regulation to protect those in rural areas, as well as commuters. We will look to the next franchisee to increase passenger numbers through innovative fares packages. That will build on the Stranraer promotion, under which fares will be reduced by 65 per cent. We need the franchisee to use available capacity on off-peak and lightly used services.

We are fully aware that people want joined-up journey options, so we will require bidders to develop plans and proposals for the actions that they can take to link with other forms of transport—bus, bike and ferry. It is sensible to ensure that buses arrive in time for trains and vice versa. To support that, we will expect comprehensive smart ticketing across the network by the end of the franchise.

In line with the digital strategy, which the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment laid out, and in response to business and passenger demand, we will look for wi-fi-type facilities to be available across the network by 2019. In preparation for that, I was delighted to launch the pilot wi-fi programme earlier this week.

Members may recall that, during the consultation, there was discussion about antisocial behaviour and the consumption of alcohol on trains. We had a substantial number of responses on that issue. We will take forward with the

franchise holder and British Transport Police more measures to ensure that antisocial behaviour is driven out of our trains.

The ICI committee quite rightly stressed the importance to passengers of trains running to time. We will set a minimum performance level and punctuality targets that will increase over the period. We will also require the industry to publish right-time information for all routes so that we can all see to the minute how services are improving. The industry will also be expected to work with passenger representative bodies to ensure that new performance regimes and information meet their needs.

I draw the attention of Parliament to the issue of indemnity clauses, which the trade unions have regularly raised concerns about. We have decided to review the clauses with a view to developing an alternative approach that is fair to both operators and the workforce.

The response to the "Rail 2014" consultation demonstrated not only the importance that communities place on the railway but their willingness to play a part in it. We want to see that enthusiasm harnessed and promoted. Therefore, we will encourage the creation of local community rail partnerships and will require the industry to work with them to establish facilities and services that address local needs.

We have created a comprehensive package of measures that, working with the rail industry, employees and passengers, we believe will deliver high-quality rail infrastructure and services that are responsive to Scotland's needs and represent good value for money, while supporting our businesses and communities, promoting tourism and offering real alternatives to road and air travel. Scotland deserves a 21st century railway and this Government will see that that is delivered.

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

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement, which represents the end of a protracted climbdown after a much-criticised consultation that proposed ending cross-border services, withdrawing sleeper services and closing large numbers of stations. Those proposals met with opposition not only in the chamber but in communities and from trade unions. We welcome the Government's change of heart on those proposals.

However, the statement raises further questions. Since devolution, further powers on railways have been devolved to this Parliament. If the Government feels so strongly that more

powers are required, why did that not feature as one of its six key demands for the Scotland Bill? The Government seeks to award the next franchise for 10 years. If a private company wins that franchise, is it not the case that that is how our rail services will be run for the next 10 years, whatever the constitutional settlement?

There is another inconsistency in the minister's statement. Given that he criticises the fragmentation of delivery of rail services, why does he want to create a new, separate, 15-year franchise for sleeper services? That proposal, too, has been met by significant concern from trade unions.

The statement is very light on detail on future fare levels, which were consulted on as well. What will the minister do to prevent big hikes in fares in the future? The statement refers to innovative fare packages, but what future level of fare increases does the minister believe will be reasonable?

Keith Brown: I thank the member for the various questions that he asked. First, it is worth pointing out that the extensive consultation that we undertook, which included a number of options, stands in stark contrast to the lack of consultation by the current and previous United Kingdom Governments on the franchises for which they have been responsible. For example, I think that the east coast rail franchise consultation started only this year, even though the contract is to be let for the coming year.

It is quite difficult to climb down from a consultation. We had a genuine consultation in which we asked people for their views as part of a genuine and open debate. Perhaps Richard Baker's previous allies in the former Administration were strangers to that concept.

I do not know whether Richard Baker picked up this point, but I said during my statement that there will be a break in the 10-year franchise after five years. Things may well change during that time. I am sure that Richard Baker will be aware that a number of different things will apply in 2019. For example, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will come into full effect then, and there are issues to do with the leasing of rolling stock. There could also be significant new constitutional opportunities for a Government of Scotland to take measures to improve the rail service. I would have thought that Richard Baker would welcome that point.

Richard Baker made the point that there will be fragmentation as a result of having two franchises. We were accused of the same thing in relation to the northern isles ferry service—it was said that unbundling the service would be a disaster. What do we have? The same operator operating both services quite happily. It is entirely possible that that could happen here.

This represents a very good deal for passengers across Scotland. It substantially improves the situation that we had under the Labour Party. Richard Baker should not chide us for not having pursued more vigorously the issue of the franchise constraints, because we have done that—we have written to UK ministers repeatedly, but they have not even bothered to give us the courtesy of a response, and they have not listened to us. We have to operate within those constraints. If he thinks that the features are constraining, then perhaps he will be voting yes in 2014 so that we can eliminate them.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement, which I read with a degree of relief after some of the tweets that have circulated in recent days. However, some of the answers that the minister has provided have raised more questions than the statement. What does the minister mean by a 10-year franchise with a five-year break? I believe that 10 years is the minimum that is required to encourage a new franchisee to make the investment that is necessary to achieve the passenger comfort levels that he mentions. However, in answer to the previous question, he appeared to make it clear that he can break that contract after five years, which would undermine any attempt to encourage a new franchisee to invest.

I also want to ask the minister about the decision to franchise the sleeper service separately. I understand why a long franchise on that service will be beneficial, but the franchise that it creates will be the smallest of its kind anywhere in the United Kingdom. Does he believe that it can maintain its stability beyond the period of that initial investment and across a full 15 years? I have concerns.

The minister says that he will look at indemnity clauses. I have always seen them as a protection for passengers against industrial relations upsets that could disturb the economy of our nation. Will he guarantee that, if he replaces them, the replacements that he brings in will again protect passengers?

There is a great deal more detail to emerge about the investment and infrastructure. One of the most important issues that are raised in the letters that I get in my mailbag and are raised elsewhere in the country is the desire to see new stations opened across the country. The most recent debate in the chamber on that matter was about Reston station in Berwickshire. Does the minister support that project and other similar ones?

Keith Brown: I have not seen the tweets to which Alex Johnstone referred. Obviously, he is a better twitterer than I am. What I announced was

that the 10-year franchise will have a break after five years; that is what the word “break” means—the franchise can be broken after five years.

I understand Alex Johnstone's point about the length of the franchise and the need to encourage investment. However, it is worth looking at the issue more widely. Some of the franchises that are held south of the border are extremely short. One is as short as one and half years, and there have been improvements to more than 50 stations on the line where that franchise is held, so there is no obvious or direct correlation between the length of a franchise and investment. Of course, the issue of rolling stock is dealt with almost separately—it was designed to be done that way so that it could then roll over to the next franchise holder. I do not deny that there is a relationship, but we believe that it is important to have that five-year break to take advantage of other opportunities that might exist.

The separate franchise for the sleeper will give it a real focus. The sleeper is a distinctive service, with a different customer base from the rest of the network. As we know, it is receiving its own capital investment of £100-plus million. It is important that we treat it differently, and the franchise holder has the opportunity to develop it over time. If the franchise holder does that, as I expect that it will, then the answer is yes, we believe that it will be a stable franchise in future.

I do not know why previous Governments introduced the indemnity clause. I understand the point that it protects passengers but, to our mind, there is an element of one-sidedness about it. There is no incentive for people to avoid the dispute if they know that it will not come at any cost to them—that is an issue that we want to bear in mind. As the member asked us to do, we will seek to protect passengers interests, but we will also want to listen to the workforce and the trade unions. That is the right thing to do.

I have mentioned that seven new stations have already been built, one of which is in my constituency. It has been tremendously successful, with more than 400,000 people using it in its first year, which was substantially in excess of the 80,000 predicted. As I said in my statement, we have made available around £30 million to encourage proposals for new station developments, but that will be in the hands of local communities and developers—they will have to come forward with those proposals. In many cases, they will want to contribute towards the cost of that station. We will have to assimilate the cost of the running of the services through the station, but we will work in tandem with local people, communities, and developers, who will also have responsibility for doing the necessary studies to prove that the option is viable. Given that, we will

wait to see what is brought to us rather than tell people where stations should be.

The Presiding Officer: Members who wish to ask a question should be aware that time is extremely tight. I recognise the importance of the statement and the fact that questions need to be asked. To allow me to get in as many members as possible, please ask only one question and do not give a preamble. Minister, I would also be grateful if your answers are succinct.

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank the minister for his statement and welcome what he said, particularly about the recently announced reduced rail fare pilot scheme in Stranraer. What progress has been made to ensure that adequate community transport links are co-ordinated with national services to allow rail passengers who visit the south-west of Scotland to take advantage of the Stranraer reduced rail fare pilot scheme? How will that scheme be promoted nationally as well as to other potential similar schemes as part of our next franchise?

Keith Brown: Local organisations are working with Transport Scotland to ensure that there is adequate co-ordination of community transport links in the Stranraer area to allow people, businesses and attractions to make the best use of the fares promotion. It goes in tandem with what I have said about buses, cyclists, and ferries, which I know are also important to the member. We want to have much more integration and to move towards a timetable that makes sense to people who have to use more than one mode of transport.

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): In his statement, the minister said that rail fares will be attractive and affordable and that he intends to expand regulation to protect some passengers from fare increases. How far will that regulation go, and what steps will be taken to protect passengers who are on low and fixed incomes?

Keith Brown: I have mentioned already that we want to look at rural areas in particular. If members look at the work that the cabinet secretary has already undertaken on the Stranraer pilot scheme, perhaps they can get an idea of our intentions. It is quite clear that there is substantial extra capacity on lightly used and off-peak services. We want to ensure that the fares are attractive enough to get more people on to those services, because that will increase funds coming in.

We have a very good record on regulating fares. We have had a substantially lower increase than south of the border by regulating those fares to a lower standard in relation to inflation. We will maintain that good record, but we will also look for

further opportunities, especially through pilots such as the one in Stranraer, to get more people on to the railways.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): How will any new franchise arrangements facilitate additional passenger services where there is capacity for them, as there is at stations in my constituency?

Keith Brown: The railway services that are provided for passengers will be based on the current level of service and the timetables that are in operation now. As I have said, we will specify the franchise in much more detail at the turn of the year. The contract will include the flexibility to provide new services as required, including in the member's constituency.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): The minister's statement mentions the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme. Is that project on track to be delivered by 2016? Will the electrification of the Cumbernauld line be completed in time for the Commonwealth games, as promised in the games bid document?

Keith Brown: On the specific issue of the electrification of the Cumbernauld line before the Commonwealth games, yes, we are proceeding with that.

On EGIP, it is right for us to take into account the possible implications of high-speed rail. We have to ensure that we have a credible and worked-out proposal to make to the UK Government. As I said in my statement, we will take some time and come back with a fuller explanation of what we are doing with EGIP.

The member can be assured that the electrification of the Cumbernauld line is going ahead.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): The minister has given a welcome commitment to offering real alternatives to road travel in rail travel and enabling travel connections for work services and leisure. With that in mind, can he say how those commitments might improve the situation that is being endured by my constituents in Monifieth who, as the minister knows, are served by only two trains a day on weekdays?

Keith Brown: The member will know that First ScotRail undertook a review of calling patterns between Dundee and Aberdeen in consultation with both the Tayside and central Scotland transport partnership and the north-east of Scotland transport partnership. However, the proposed changes from the 2011 review are still being worked through. We intend that railway services provided for passengers will provide roughly the same level of service to the same

timetables that are currently in operation. However, as I said to Jamie Hepburn, the contract will include the flexibility to provide new services as required.

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): It is important that fares remain affordable, but they are often too expensive and complicated. Can the minister confirm that intercity fares will not be deregulated to allow the new franchise holder to slap passengers with inflation-busting fares increases?

Keith Brown: The member should know that the vast bulk of intercity fares are regulated by the UK Government, not by the Scottish Government. There is a direct correlation between fare levels and the funding that is available. Had it not been for the substantial cut to our budget by the Government that he supports south of the border, I am sure that we would have gone even further on fares. As I said in my statement, the general philosophy is that we want to make the railways as attractive to people as possible. We want to get more people on the railways, thereby increasing the revenue that goes to the franchise holder. With that additional money, we can improve services further.

Paul Wheelhouse (South Scotland) (SNP): I very much welcome the statement and the support for community rail partnerships, in particular. Can the minister provide any further detail of the application process for the new station investment fund? Will the current scope of a Scottish transport appraisal guidance 2 study provide sufficient information for an application from, for example, Reston or East Linton?

Keith Brown: As I mentioned in my answer to Alex Johnstone, when the £30 million was announced it was made clear that it would start from April 2014 and go through to March 2019—the period that we are talking about just now.

I know that there are some well-developed proposals, including the one for East Linton, which the member mentioned. It is only right that, if people want to get on with undertaking a STAG 2 study to get more detail, they should do so, so that they are ready to go ahead with the proposal as soon as we are. Officials are working on exactly what the criteria for that should be, but it is likely that—as I have said before—well worked-out proposals with developer contributions and local authority contributions are most likely to succeed.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): Can the minister clarify that he intends to remove the outrageous indemnity clause, which uses public money to undermine workers and disrupt industrial relations? Does the fact that the Government welcomes not-for-profit bids mean

that there could be a restructuring of the railways on a public ownership model?

Keith Brown: I have made clear the restrictions that we currently have to operate under in terms of the franchise. It was surprising to find out that we cannot have a Government-controlled railway in this country but we can have a railway in Scotland that is controlled by the Governments of other countries. That is the result of the previous Labour and Conservative Governments' views.

The indemnity clause that the member finds objectionable—I understand the point that she makes—was a creation of former Administrations at Westminster and not of the Scottish Government. We think that there are possibilities for doing that in a way that is much better and fairer to the workforce. As I have said, we will review the situation to achieve that.

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I welcome the £10 million to accelerate the closure of level-crossings. When will the Ardrossan trials of mini-barriers on open level-crossings be completed and what are the roll-out plans for the Highland open level-crossings?

Keith Brown: Dave Thompson will know that the pilot that has been run by Railtrack will come to a conclusion shortly. I hope that the cabinet secretary or I will be able to join him at the Ardrossan pilot at that time. It is right that we are waiting for that. Network Rail is the expert in the area and, if the pilot provides us—as we hope that it will—with a cost-effective way of reducing the number of level-crossings and increasing the safety of our rail network, the £10 million to which he refers will, I imagine, be superbly used to do that. I know that the subject is of particular interest to the member because of the preponderance of level-crossings in the Highlands.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The minister tells us that there is too much fragmentation but then proposes more. He also tells us that we cannot expect wi-fi across the network until 2019 or smart ticketing until 2024. Is that a joke? Does he have the real statement in his other pocket, perhaps?

Keith Brown: I have explained the point about fragmentation. The “deeper alliance” to which I referred—typically, Patrick Harvie ignored that—is a way in which we can have much more integration in the network. There has already been a move towards an alliance, but we are proposing a deeper alliance. For example, when the franchise holder and Network Rail are working on stations, they can use one logo, which will make it straightforward for people to get the right information. They can also work more coherently together, which has not been happening since the

railways were privatised. I would have thought that Patrick Harvie would welcome those steps instead of, as usual, taking a pot shot on other issues. He should welcome the extent to which we are integrating our railways, as far as we are able—we would like to go further, but we are not allowed to do so by the Westminster Government. The move will be a vital step forward towards providing a much more joined-up service to the passenger and, in the case of the sleeper service, a much more focused and attractive service.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I welcome the minister's comments about the commitment to build new stations. Will the minister consider creating a new station or platform at Dalcross, which would provide welcome integration for air passengers and be a major boost to tourists visiting the Scottish open at the nearby, world-class Castle Stuart golf course?

Keith Brown: The member will realise that the issues of Dalcross and Kintore stations are being considered seriously, and we expect information to come back to us on those matters. Initially, at least, if such projects are embarked on, they would be outside the £30 million fund that I mentioned previously and would be dealt with as part of general line improvements.

Beyond that, if communities across Scotland believe that they should have a railway station—I can think of one or two such communities that have been mentioned in the past by a member who is sitting very close to me—we will listen seriously to them, provided the proposition is viable and, following a procedure such as the STAG process, it is felt that a rail service is needed there, rather than, for example, a bus service. We will be able to do more if other people contribute towards the necessary work. We are aware that some developers are willing to do so as part of a community gain provision that is attached to a larger development, and councils and regional transport partnerships can also contribute.

I confidently expect more new stations to be built in the course of the next franchise, just as we built seven new ones during the course of this franchise.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):

Constituency MSPs for Airdrie and Shotts, Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, Falkirk East and Falkirk West have all campaigned for new stations in Plains, Abronhill, Bonnybridge and Grangemouth. Can the minister advise whether any of the £30 million funding will go towards building those new stations to fulfil the promises that were made to communities across central Scotland?

Keith Brown: My previous answers make the point that funds will be available for those proposals if the proposals are genuinely

community based and well worked out and enjoy the support of councils, RTPs and developers to the extent that they will take on substantial elements of the cost, which I believe is the case in relation to Plains. If that is the case, there is more chance of their being successful.

All of the places that the member mentioned can of course put forward proposals, but decisions will be made on the basis of trying to get the best deal for the taxpayer and the passenger. To that end, fully worked-out proposals that enjoy local support—such as the support that North Lanarkshire Council has shown in relation to some of the stations that the member mentioned—will be supported.

Visitor Economy

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-03400, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on growing the visitor economy.

15:13

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): It is only 15 weeks since we last debated tourism in the chamber. As the minister with responsibility for tourism, I am delighted to be in a position so soon to report much progress.

One benefit of bringing members back to the topic so early is that the key contributions of tourism are fresh in all our minds and I do not need to labour them. The visitor economy contributes over £4 billion of gross value added to the Scottish economy every year. It impacts on many sectors—food and drink, transport, agriculture and retail—and on all areas of the country, urban and rural. Tourism is truly a national industry. It enhances our reputation worldwide and helps us to attract inward investment. The opportunities over the next few years are unsurpassed, and we are hosting globally important events such as the 2014 Ryder cup and the Commonwealth games.

Since we last spoke on tourism much has been achieved. We have seen the full-year tourism figures for 2011. I commend tourism businesses across the country for achieving a 9 per cent increase in overnight visitor numbers in challenging economic circumstances. Overnight spend is at its highest since 2007. Day-visitor statistics also look good. Day-visitor data for Scotland was produced for the first time in 2011 and showed that 134 million day-tourist trips were taken in Scotland.

In March, recognising the contribution of business visitors, we launched the conference bid fund, which made £2 million available over three years to strengthen bids to bring major conferences to Scotland. In only four months the bid fund, which has received matching contributions from Glasgow City Council, has supported Glasgow City Marketing Bureau and its partners to the tune of £213,500 to compete successfully against other cities, including big hitters such as Tokyo and San Francisco, and bring seven new conferences to Scotland since March.

In all, 16,900 extra delegates will visit Scotland, which will bring an expected economic impact of £27 million. That is a return of £63 for every single pound invested from the bid fund. I hope that all members will pay tribute to all those involved in

Glasgow City Council, Glasgow City Marketing Bureau, the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre and to all their partners and colleagues and celebrate what appears to be the start of something quite exciting with the bid fund. I would be grateful for suggestions from members about how we can extend the benefits of that fund to all parts of Scotland. I would like to see all our cities and all parts of Scotland benefit. I have asked VisitScotland to work with all other destinations to ensure similar success across Scotland.

Since March, we have seen the winning years become a reality. Last week, huge crowds turned out to see the Olympic torch and stunning images of the torch in Scotland were broadcast far and wide.

On Monday, the world had its first opportunity to see Scotland as depicted in the Disney Pixar film “Brave”, when it premièred in Los Angeles. The First Minister was invited. I am not at all miffed that, as tourism minister, my invitation was not in the post.

The red carpet will be rolled out here in Edinburgh when the European première of “Brave” takes place at the end of the month. There will be screenings of the film at a special event in Inverness the following day, to which I have been invited. I hope that Rhoda Grant and David Stewart will also be invited. If not—

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I was going to say that I have been invited and that I would be happy to give my ticket to the minister in the event that he is not invited personally.

Fergus Ewing: There is universal generosity and courtesy. Of course, I hope that Mary Scanlon will also be able to attend. The First Minister yesterday said that my four-year-old daughter will thoroughly enjoy it but that I might find it scary in parts.

The chair of VisitScotland recently said that

“if VisitScotland were to commission a movie, we could not ask for more than Brave”.

I entirely endorse that statement. “Brave” showcases Scotland’s rich history and captures the beauty, nature, magic and humour of Scotland and it is simply the biggest ever film opportunity to get Scotland seen on the worldwide stage. “Brave” is being released in 72 countries and it is anticipated that it will be seen by 200 million people in the United Kingdom and Europe alone. The film has been translated into more than 30 languages, which means that Disney Pixar has had the interesting challenge of finding more than 30 Billy Connolly sound-alikes.

I recently visited VisitScotland’s offices in Leith, where I spoke to some of the staff and saw for

myself the efforts being made by VisitScotland to convert cinema-goers into visitors to Scotland. Through a combination of Disney's worldwide reach and VisitScotland's marketing expertise, we are confident that "Brave" will boost the Scottish economy by £140 million.

VisitScotland has also been busy launching a revitalised website promoting Scotland across the world. It has worked hard to iron out initial teething issues and the site has received positive feedback from many quarters.

Most important of all, this week I witnessed the tourism industry itself, through the tourism leadership group, launch a new tourism strategy for Scotland. It is a first: a strategy developed for the industry, by the industry. The strategy stresses the importance of industry leadership and participation, of strong leadership in businesses and of all businesses being actively involved in local tourism groups and working together to develop customers' overall experience.

As all members know, of course, many tourism businesses and business leaders are already community leaders, and perhaps they promote their areas with more vigour and enthusiasm than anybody else. The strategy celebrates what has already been done and invokes and invites colleagues to achieve even more.

The Scottish Tourism Alliance, which is the industry membership body, will bring all those groups together. It will provide leadership and support, and will monitor progress. The strategy shows how growth will come from turning our assets into top-quality experiences, and notes that all of us at the national, local and business levels must know our customers and their expectations, and act on that knowledge. It is relentlessly focused on the customer and the customer's needs so that they have a memorable and pleasant visit to this country.

I record my sincere thanks to the chair of the tourism leadership group, Stephen Leckie. I think that he is in the chamber somewhere, although I have not spotted him, which is unusual, as he is a person whom it is difficult not to spot.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): He is behind you.

Fergus Ewing: Excellent. I welcome him and thank him and all his colleagues on the tourism leadership group for their work on the strategy. The strategy was not devised in a few weeks; it is the result of thousands of hours of work and meetings throughout the country, and is a major step forward.

As the STA moves into the action planning and delivery phase, our agencies will collaborate closely to ensure that we are all working together.

As a starting point, VisitScotland and the enterprise agencies have updated the tourism intelligence Scotland "Knowing our Markets" guide to provide businesses with more information on the markets that are highlighted in the strategy. I will work with ministers on areas such as food and drink; route development, which the Conservatives raised, fairly, in their amendment; broadband infrastructure, which is important; and access to finance for investment. All those areas are highlighted in the strategy. I will also look to the enterprise agencies to do what they can to encourage and support investment in tourism, especially in the accommodation sector, although I acknowledge that that is difficult because of competition law.

The development of international trade is a top priority for the Scottish Government. Scottish Development International will continue to develop its overseas activity programme with VisitScotland and will use its extensive expertise and networks on the ground, especially in the international markets that are identified in the strategy. I will look to VisitScotland to further develop genuine partnerships with the tourism industry. That will mean building our campaigns and doing our work not only in the public sector, but with the industry fully engaged and involved in the formulation stage, as it should be if we are to achieve our potential.

Some of the levers that would support the industry are in the hands of the UK Government. The Scottish Government continues to make a strong case for the devolution of air passenger duty. Improving our air connectivity is vital for business and in-bound tourism. We wish to use the devolution of APD to better align aviation taxation to Scottish circumstances and incentivise links to Scotland.

We will continue to voice our concerns about the high VAT rate that the UK Government is maintaining on hospitality and tourism. The uncompetitive VAT rate compared with the rates of our European competitors places Scotland at a significant disadvantage. Some 24 of the 27 European Union countries have made reductions in their VAT rates for the hospitality and tourism sectors. With the existing burden of VAT and other taxes, the Scottish Government would not support the introduction of new taxes on tourism. I have had discussions with the leadership of the City of Edinburgh Council, which is, we understand, looking at a range of other options to increase revenues from tourism. We support the council in that, but the Scottish Government has been clear from the start that we have no plans to add any new tax burdens on the tourism sector.

The UK Government recently sought to impose 20 per cent VAT on the sale of new static

caravans, which were previously zero rated. After an excellent meeting with industry stakeholders in a committee room in the Parliament—people involved in the caravan sector throughout the country were involved in that meeting—I wrote to the UK chancellor to set out all the concerns that we heard at it. I am very pleased to say that, following the representations, the UK Government has stepped back from the change.

I express to my Conservative colleagues who are in the chamber my genuine appreciation that concerns were listened to and acted on, which are not easy things to do—I do not wish to make light of or play politics with the issue. The rate is now 5 per cent, which is a welcome reduction from 20 per cent.

I commend the industry for sustaining growth in difficult times and for its proactive and valuable work in defining a new strategy. We will work harder than ever to secure even greater success for our tourism sector. I urge destinations to make the most of the conference bid fund and I call on the UK Government to give further consideration to the competitiveness of our industry.

It is the people who work in the industry who make it succeed. I commend people in tourism all over Scotland for their success and I wish them success in future.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the achievements of tourism businesses across Scotland in achieving a 14% increase in overnight visitor revenues in 2011; welcomes the new tourism strategy prepared by the industry, for the industry, which focuses on the importance of industry leadership, the quality that visitors encounter across their whole journey in Scotland and using Scotland's assets to create the experiences that visitors are looking for; commends the efforts of the industry-led Tourism Leadership Group in developing the strategy and recognises the important role to be played by relevant agencies and non-departmental public bodies in supporting the industry's strategy; renews calls on the UK Government to play its part by devolving air passenger duty and to consider a reduction of VAT rates for the sector; recognises the enormous opportunity for tourism in Scotland presented by The Winning Years and the Disney/Pixar film, *Brave*, in particular; congratulates Glasgow on its success in winning several additional conferences with the support of the Conference Bid Fund announced in March 2012, and encourages other destinations in Scotland to use the fund to win further business for Scotland.

15:26

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I pay tribute to the tourism leadership group's work and its report, "Tourism Scotland 2020: The future of our industry, in our hands".

I will talk about a number of aspects of the report, but first I will talk about the Labour amendment. The Government motion rightly points to the report and highlights the opportunities

of the winning years, but it is silent on the target to increase tourism by 50 per cent by 2016. We think that it is right to reiterate the target at the outset of the winning years.

As we heard, this year is the year of creative Scotland, the London Olympics, the diamond jubilee and the release of "Brave". I am delighted that the minister is getting an invitation to the première in Inverness and I very much hope that he has embarrassed the organisers into inviting the rest of us—we might have to stand him some popcorn if that happens. There are huge opportunities this year, next year we will have the year of natural Scotland, and 2014 will be the year of homecoming, the Ryder cup and the Commonwealth games. The winning years present a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build our industry and achieve the 2016 target.

The warmth of the welcome that the Olympic torch received as it travelled through Scotland showed that there was the potential to make the most of the London Olympics, but I feel that we have missed that opportunity. The reception was amazing. In areas that I represent, people travelled a huge distance to see the torch. I seemed to be travelling after it for some time. I missed it in Inverness and I missed it in Orkney, but I eventually caught up with it outside the Parliament building. I arrived in Inverness about half an hour after it had left. Thousands of people had converged on the city and people were moving around for hours afterwards, so the torch's visit provided a much-needed and much-appreciated boost to the businesses around the event. We need to make a success of such opportunities if we are to achieve the 2016 target.

The tourism leadership group's report mentions other opportunities, such as Scotland's nature, heritage, destination towns and cities, events and festivals and business tourism. Scotland has much of which it can boast, given its scenery and natural and cultural heritage. Those are timeless attractions, on which we can build. We have the ability to grow green and eco-tourism, too. We have not fully capitalised on the opportunities in that regard, but the year of natural Scotland will provide the ideal opportunity to do so.

The report also mentions business tourism and the Government motion mentions Glasgow's success in winning additional conferences. I join the minister in congratulating the team that achieved that success. We need to ensure that business tourists have the opportunity to explore the hinterland and further afield. There is also an opportunity in a growing market to provide conference facilities in our smaller cities and towns, which could help to create year-round tourism in many areas.

The report talks about areas in which we could do better. Needless to say, infrastructure is one such area. Internet and mobile phone coverage is identified as an area that requires improvement. I agree. More and more people expect to keep up with work and with family while they are on holiday, using their mobile and internet connections. They are often astonished at the lack of coverage in our more rural areas. The Government has a role to play in that—it needs to ensure that coverage reaches all areas, otherwise we will be at a disadvantage. If people go somewhere and have a bad experience they will not return.

The report also identifies the quality of accommodation, eating out and travel as areas that require attention. We cannot drive up quality without training and the ability to attract the brightest and best to our industry. Despite Scotland's reputation as a tourist attraction, the hospitality industry does not seem to be a particularly good career choice. That has led to poor workforce retention, motivation and skills development.

We need to understand that tourism is everybody's business. We all need tourists. Even if it is just a case of someone being stopped and asked for directions, how they respond to tourists can actually make their holiday experience. Last week I visited First ScotRail's training academy in Glasgow. I heard about the emphasis that it puts on customer service, which is included in the training at all levels. It understands that the transport industry is part of the tourism industry and it takes that responsibility seriously. I met a class of apprentices in customer services in the Parliament last year. I was lucky enough to meet them again last week in the academy. I was absolutely amazed at how they have grown in confidence and at how they have really taken on board their learning experience. They completed their Duke of Edinburgh awards as part of the course, which really complemented their training. They are a group of young people who have the ability and skills to be ambassadors for our tourism industry.

The report also highlights leadership and collaboration, as well as marketing, as key to the step change that is required. In areas where collaboration works well, so does marketing. Take the example of the Cairngorms national park—I have spoken about it in the chamber before. The Cairngorms Business Partnership is a collaboration between the Cairngorms Chamber of Commerce, Cairngorms hostels and a destination management organisation. They work together to provide their own tourism offer. The involvement of the chamber of commerce means that all businesses—not just those that are recognised as tourism businesses—have a role to play. I was

really impressed by the way that such a wide range of businesses worked together to manage their market and market their industry. They were aware of their interdependence. The top-of-the-range hotel knew that the bunkhouse also had to provide quality and service so that people using those facilities would return to the area.

Their tourism offer also covers a range of activities from high intensity sport to wildlife tourism to leisurely breaks—something for all the family. The Cairngorms Business Partnership also includes retail as part of its organisation. We often forget that retail is hugely important to the visitor offer and that we have a lot to learn. It struck me that retailers probably need to do the same thing as the First ScotRail academy in terms of training to convince their own people that they are part of the tourism experience.

As touched upon in the Conservative amendment, the report talks about more direct air routes to and from our growing market. The route development fund would make a big difference—it was certainly successful in the past at attracting new routes to Scotland and to some of our more outlying areas.

The report also asks for improved transport infrastructure throughout Scotland—better roads, rail and ferry routes. We need to find ways of encouraging visitors to travel throughout Scotland. Our rural areas are not just for the intrepid traveller—they should be an enjoyable experience for all. Other countries do it so well—the plane meets the bus and everyone can find their way about without hunting for the connecting public transport.

We have seen visitor numbers increase because of staycations. That is due to problems with the economy—people are looking for shorter breaks closer to home. We need them to continue to holiday in Scotland, especially when the euro may provide cheap breaks abroad. We need to work on what has happened and build on those trends.

The report worryingly says that

"if the long-term trend in overnight visitor spend witnessed since 1973 was to continue, we would see ... no real growth in the coming decade".

We need to do more and learn from bodies such as the Scotch Whisky Association that provide a good tourist experience.

I welcome the tourism leadership group's strategy document. It is good that the industry is taking matters into its own hands, as that can only be a benefit. However, we need to ensure that the small businesses that form the backbone of our tourism industry are included in the strategy. We also need the Government to drive forward on the 2016 target. With an industry and Government

moving towards growth, there is an unprecedented opportunity provided by the winning years for our tourism industry to grow and make a contribution to our economy.

I move amendment S4M-03400.1, to insert at end:

“, and urges the Scottish Government to retain the target to grow tourism by 50% by 2016.”

15:35

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I, too, welcome the increase in tourism business that the minister outlined. I share other members' views on the Olympic torch relay, which has undoubtedly been a phenomenal success. I did not see the torch in the Highlands, but I saw it at the back door of the Parliament as I drove in early one morning. I will be at the première of Pixar's "Brave" in Inverness with my five-year-old granddaughter Alba, who is very much looking forward to it. Like the minister, I hope that the film will help us to achieve the 50 per cent target.

The Scottish Conservatives will always support initiatives to improve and increase tourism. In the Highlands, tourism accounts for 20 per cent of jobs, which is more than in the rest of Scotland, so tourism is even more significant in the area that I represent. The minister is right that the industry is about people. Last week, when I was staying in a hotel in Thurso, a guest came in who was unsure about what to drink. The experienced waitress said to him, "Well, you look like a Dark Island man to me," and that is exactly what he got. I am sure that that will increase sales of drink from Orkney. That is an example of somebody giving advice and knowing their job well.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

The member makes an important point about Scottish products being available in our hotels. I have sometimes been in hotels in which there has been a disappointing lack of Scottish real ales.

Mary Scanlon: I discovered this Dark Island ale, which looked like a pint of Guinness to me, but I am told on good authority that it is well worth trying.

On the point about workforce retention, skills and customer service, there is sometimes an attitude in the Highlands that is almost as if people are in service, when in fact they are public servants. Many people provide excellent customer service, but it is for hotel owners and others in the tourism industry to ensure that staff are well trained—as I know they do—and to value those staff.

I have one good story and a second one that is a could-do-better. The good news story is on the whisky industry, which I again commend for its

incredible contribution to the Scottish economy and in particular its contribution to tourism. More than half the distilleries in Scotland have visitor centres, the majority of which are four-star attractions. The distilleries attract 1.3 million visitors, 87 per cent of whom come from outside Scotland and 62 per cent from outside the UK. In 2010, £27 million was spent. Distilleries provide 640 jobs in the visitor centres and more than £30 million in value to our economy. On average, for every £100 million of Scotch whisky exports, there is an associated £20 million spend directly on tourism.

Starting in November, there will be an exhibition in the Parliament's main hall for almost three months to mark the 100th anniversary of the Scotch Whisky Association. At last week's meeting of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on Scotch whisky, which I was delighted to see was attended by many civil servants, we had a presentation from Ian Urquhart of Gordon and MacPhail in Elgin on the spirit of Speyside whisky festival.

Given that it has more than 50 per cent of malt distilleries, Moray is very well placed to host this four-day festival with 350 events that include wildlife and whisky walks, a "Dramble along the Spey" and "A Bacon Roll and Four Nips". There is something for everyone at all times of the day and night. Eighty per cent of visitors stay for at least four nights and the festival is an excellent example of local distilleries, local businesses and people working together.

The second issue that I want to raise is walkers in Scotland. I do not think that those particular visitors are valued as highly as they should be; in fact, climbers, cyclists and walkers have considerable spending power and prefer to see and experience Scotland by walking, climbing or cycling rather than through city breaks at our excellent hotels and other accommodation. That market has enormous potential and should not be overlooked.

However, when I was in Lairg at the weekend, I was told that they are taking bookings from walkers from various European countries, who were also asking about the accommodation and shops along the 70-mile Sutherland trail from Lochinver to Tongue. As the minister knows, there might be excellent accommodation in both Tongue and Lochinver, as well as Inchnadamph Lodge, which is less than a kilometre from the trail, but unlike the west Highland way and the Speyside way there are no shops, services, hotels or bed and breakfasts along the trail. I am also concerned at the way in which this stunning trail along the old drover roads, which is highlighted on many websites and has been developed by Cameron McNeish, does not even register on the

VisitScotland website. In fact, searching that website for the Sutherland trail brings up only two results, both to do with a flat in Talmine.

Moreover, anyone who starts the walk from Lairg has to get to Lochinver or Tongue first. When someone phones up the hotel in Lairg and asks for travel to Lochinver to be arranged, the people at the hotel have to tell them, "Well, there used to be a post bus, but it doesn't run anymore". There is now a post van, but I would not recommend huddling in the back among the letters. The councillor in north-west Sutherland also confirmed to me that all the community councils in the region are dissatisfied with the way in which VisitScotland constantly ignores the area.

The new Hebridean way will run 203 miles from the Butt of Lewis to Vatersay. Funding has been secured for that project, but I ask the minister to ensure that when these fabulous, stunning and amazing walks come on-stream in Scotland VisitScotland gets involved, helps to market them, provides advice about accommodation and so on. I am sorry to say that such support is not available at the moment.

Given that parts of the Highlands of Scotland remain the last areas of wilderness in Europe, we should be able to manage and support visitors—the hill walkers, the climbers and the cyclists who will use these huge new walks of 70 and 203 miles apiece—and make them feel welcome and safe as they enjoy our stunning scenery and hospitality. I ask the minister to ask VisitScotland to talk and listen to people in north-west Sutherland and to support the walks as well as the tourists, who do not all want to stay in four-star hotels.

I move amendment S4M-03400.3, to leave out from "renews" to end and insert:

"recognises the enormous opportunity for tourism in Scotland presented by The Winning Years and the Disney/Pixar film, *Brave*, in particular; congratulates Glasgow on its success in winning several additional conferences with the support of the Conference Bid Fund announced in March 2012; encourages other destinations in Scotland to use the fund to win further business for Scotland; calls on the Scottish Government to use the powers currently at its disposal to establish an air route development fund and to examine how the business rates system could be used in order to assist the tourist sector, and believes that there needs to be a substantial change to tackle the skills disconnect between employers and employees and help to ensure that tourism is seen as an attractive career."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): We move to the open debate and I ask for speeches of six minutes.

15:43

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): As a member of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, I am delighted to speak in this debate,

particularly as it comes on the back of yesterday's announcement that Royal Troon will once again host the open golf championship in 2016. Of course, I would say that as someone who comes from Ayr and is a golfer. When, at lunchtime, I attended a meeting of the cross-party group on golf, I was delighted to discover that golf itself, which generates £223 million in revenue and supports 4,000 jobs, is to become a specific business sector under the VisitScotland umbrella.

Not only are we hosting the open, but Scotland itself is open. Last year's figures show that although international visits are down, spend is up; that domestic and UK visitors and spend are up; and that, in 2011, there was a 9 per cent increase in overnight visitors and a 14 per cent increase in spend.

Although we are open now in the summer, we have big campaigns and focused seasonal campaigns, such as winter white, to increase trade in quiet months and show that Scotland is always open for visitor business, all year round.

Tourism—the visitor economy—is a major income sector for Scotland. If one has any doubts about that, I suggest they look at the briefing that we received today from the Scottish Sports Association—sport being a billion-pound industry in itself. The sector sits in the first division of our economy, along with food and drink, life sciences, renewables, oil and gas, and engineering and manufacturing. "Destination Scotland" it is and will be. While we continue to look at the continual improvement processes that allow us to consider our local structures for tourism, the quality of tourism and focused marketing, let there be no doubt that the new tourism strategy—which is, as has been said, a credit to the TLG—is a strategy of leadership and growth that shows signs of the inestimable success that we might expect of the sector. Tourism in Scotland, under that leadership strategy, is important because it is the creator of a current annual spend of £4 billion—a figure that is growing. Compared to tourism in the rest of the UK, tourism in Scotland is a disproportionate contributor that supports 200,000 jobs. It is the harbinger of a large number of jobs in our rural economies, as Mary Scanlon said.

The major international economic downturn could have set into turmoil our early aspiration—which was set in vastly different economic circumstances—to grow the sector by 50 per cent by 2016. However, we continue to succeed in racing to meet substantial growth in visitor business. There is little doubt that over recent years there has been a change in attitude in the sector; a change to a "can do, will do" approach. I applaud—as the minister did—the Scottish Tourism Alliance and VisitScotland for bringing about that change in attitude.

I have recently visited tourism organisations in South Scotland where I, too, received an invitation. I was excited to be invited to meet ABBA, until I found out that it was not Benny and the gang who sang “Waterloo”, but the Ayrshire Bed and Breakfast Association. It was exciting, just the same.

Let us welcome the 15.7 million trips to Scotland last year, the 63.1 million nights spent in Scotland and, as I mentioned, the £4 billion-worth of spend in 2011. Let us applaud—as the minister did—the leadership of Glasgow and other places in securing much-needed business and conference tourism.

As I flick through the spring edition of “EventScotland News” and look at the many positive headlines, I get somewhat excited; a feeling that is couched alongside pride in what Scotland is doing in the sector. Glasgow is to bid for the 2018 youth Olympic games, the Scottish open championship has announced a new title sponsor, and Glasgow is to host the 2015 international Paralympic swimming championships. We have had the Curtis cup and we will again have Celtic connections. We will also have the European 470 class boat championships at Largs. Today we will have the big concert at Stirling. There is much more going on in Scotland than we have ever seen. All those events are embroidery to the winning years tapestry, which is interwoven with individual, non-packaged holidays.

The TLG strategy is in place, the challenges and the aspirations have been drawn up and organisations are being improved to underpin them. However, one can imagine how much better all those achievements would be if we were to be released from the yoke of the excessive VAT charges that have been imposed on the sector, freed from the shackles of an antediluvian visa process and released from the pernicious and iniquitous air passenger duty, which is a bolted lock on air travel and a blight on the huge possibilities for airports such as Prestwick international.

Brand marketing is very important in the tourist industry—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask the member to draw to a close, please.

Chic Brodie: I am just about to finish.

Scotland is a brand. Brands that have stories have meaning, and brands that have meaning have impact and resonance. Our tourism industry has a big story to tell, and the way in which we tell it means that Scotland will have impact and resonance.

15:50

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): From the Falkirk wheel to Lanarkshire’s great country parks, there is a wide range of premier visitor attractions in my Central Scotland region, which I am only too happy to highlight. With the summer recess approaching, I hope that other members will recognise those attractions too.

However, today’s debate is about the visitor economy and the steps that we can take to grow tourism now and in the years ahead, with Labour restating the target of growing tourism in Scotland by 50 per cent by 2016.

Scotland is a great place to visit and to do business; the rise in revenue from overnight visits at a time of difficulty in the world economy is testament to that fact. Members all round the chamber share a desire to build on the successes, to develop the visitors’ welcome to Scotland and to secure our status as a world-class destination.

The World Economic Forum maintains a travel and tourism competitiveness index that examines different parts of the economy in three broad subject areas: the regulatory framework; infrastructure and the business environment; and resources including natural, cultural and human resources. I will address those three broad areas today, starting with regulation.

When we talk about regulation, we often talk about the pressures on industry, and we forget that more elemental types of regulation can be taken for granted. For example, visitors to Scotland can expect high standards of cleanliness and hygiene, with safeguards in place to protect public health and the environment. They can be confident that all staff who handle food will have a minimum Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland food-handler certificate and that all licensed premises employ a trained personal-license holder. If people travel from elsewhere in the European Union, they can apply for a European health insurance card, and people can also expect the authorities to take measures to prevent low-level crime in our public places.

The simple truth is that the high standards that we can provide in Scotland, backed by a regime of regulation and inspection, are not replicated in every part of the world, and so we have to maintain the good standards that we have set.

The second part of the part of the WEF index relates to infrastructure and the business environment. Tourism infrastructure in Scotland is well developed; we have a wealth of visitor attractions that are backed up with brown signage, local tourism partnerships and information offices.

We also have a dedicated Government agency that is committed to tourism, thereby reinforcing the broader growth agenda that is set out in the Scottish Government's economic strategy. There is widespread access to ATMs and our broadband network is being improved and expanded—although many of us would like much more progress to be made throughout more of the country.

However, I am concerned that our transport infrastructure is falling behind, and that our road and rail networks do not match those of our near neighbours and competitors. I welcome the investment in Central Scotland's motorways, which will improve the M8, M73 and M74, but I ask the Scottish Government to be much clearer about the timetable for completion of those works.

I agree with the Scottish Government that there should be a capital injection into the economy to support the recovery. However, if it was not for the decisions that were made in the previous session of Parliament about capital spending, we would today be investing in airport rail links in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will the member give way on that point?

Margaret McCulloch: No. I am tight for time. I am sorry. I will cover that point next.

The performance of our ground and air transport is vital to our competitiveness as a destination, and we must ensure that there are excellent connections between our major cities and airports.

The WEF index also assesses a country's natural, cultural and human resources. There is no doubt about Scotland's natural beauty and our rich culture. However, I stress the importance of our human resources—our people and their skills. The tourism and hospitality sector requires significant investment in skills and training, which must be more widely reflected in the pay, conditions and status of staff. In the current economic climate, the Government has geared the 25,000 modern apprenticeships that are contracted each year through Skills Development Scotland towards young people. However, the Government has said that it will continue to support adult apprenticeships in key sectors, and although tourism is a key sector, there is no funding for apprenticeships in tourism or hospitality for the 25-plus age group.

We must strengthen the welcome that visitors receive, not just from those who operate attractions or who work in the hospitality industry but in taxis, on trains, in shops and around the country, because we all have a duty to promote Scotland and all that it can offer.

We are in an extremely good position relative to other countries in Europe and further afield, but we are not yet in as strong a position as many of us would like to be. That will take sustained investment in Scotland's infrastructure and a concerted effort to turn a warm Scottish welcome into a start-to-finish unforgettable experience for all who visit the country.

15:56

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I join the minister in welcoming the work that the Scottish Tourism Alliance has published in the past week, which was encouraging for me to read because the East Dunbartonshire tourism partnership that was established back in 2009 emphasises that business and community must co-operate with each other and that we have a partnership responsibility for delivering growth in tourism. That is exactly what we have heard from the Scottish Tourism Alliance. Of course, I am not saying that East Dunbartonshire got in there three years ahead of the alliance, but we are an exciting and vibrant area.

On that note, I would like to take members on a tour of my constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden. I know that many will ask why anyone would want to come as a tourist to a suburb of Glasgow. It is extremely important that Glasgow's strengths are realised. As well as being a top 10 European destination city and the third city in the UK for conferences, it is a place where the average stay of visitors is nine nights. Those strengths of Glasgow, my near neighbour, are something that Strathkelvin and Bearsden, its suburb, can benefit from.

Mary Scanlon: I, too, have been reading briefings. I remind the member that Glasgow is the UK's second-top retail destination.

Fiona McLeod: My credit card will attest to that, no problem.

As I was saying, Strathkelvin and Bearsden is just next door to the fantastic city of Glasgow. In fact, Strathkelvin and Bearsden now markets itself as a gateway to the great outdoors. We believe that we can benefit from all the tourism potential of Glasgow and invite folk to come to our area.

I will now tell members of the wonders of my constituency. Kirkintilloch is the canal capital of Scotland. It is also a walkers are welcome town. Bishopbriggs is one of the most cycle-friendly towns in Scotland. Last Sunday, I was honoured to open the third East Dunbartonshire cycle festival. One of the sponsors of the day, Samsung, said afterwards that it was one of the most successful days that it had had in its Olympic hope relay heroes campaign.

In Bearsden, we have the Antonine wall, which has been a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization world heritage site since 2008. I well remember studying Latin at school in the 1970s when the remains of the Roman baths at Bearsden Cross were discovered. I should, of course, point out that that is not in the constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden; it is across the road in the constituency of Clydebank and Milngavie.

I want to talk about the growth in tourism potential in East Dunbartonshire and Strathkelvin and Bearsden, where our businesses are taking things very seriously. In particular, I want to mention the rebound initiative in Lennoxton, which I am sure I have spoken about before in the chamber. It is a social enterprise initiative that not only encourages cyclists to come to the Lennox forest for a day's cycling but is aiming to build a purpose-built hotel. There will be cycle facilities for the people who come, but they will also be able to go out into Lennoxton and use the pubs, restaurants and other facilities there, which will help to build the local economy. We know from the evidence that cyclists want to come for two or three days to fully explore the paths.

I finish by commenting on something that is very personal to me. Radical historians and people who enjoy knowing the radical history of Scotland should come to my leafy suburb. They will not believe it. In Bishopbriggs, we have the Thomas Muir trail, and Lennoxton had the first co-op that gave a divvy, in 1812. In my home village, the Westerton garden suburb, which will be celebrating its centenary next year, was the first garden suburb in Scotland where everything was owned co-operatively.

I invite members to come with me in October, when I intend to have a staycation in my constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden. I am sure that a week will not be enough for me to get round all the delights.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. There is an invitation for everyone.

16:02

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I will now take my friend and colleague Fiona McLeod to the real outdoors of Aberdeenshire West.

I begin by thanking the minister for not dipping into my constituency in his opening speech. I know that he is probably waiting in anticipation for a tour round my constituency, as happened in our previous debate on the subject. I think that he put on a "Brave" face about not being at the opening of the film in Hollywood. I am sure that his daughter, little four-year-old Natasha, will protect

him during the scary bits when he goes to see it in Inverness.

I will now take members to my constituency. I was fortunate to be at Balmoral—that is, the real Balmoral, and Balmoral castle—when the Olympic torch went through my constituency. It was a wonderful event and the weather was kind to us. We went from Balmoral to Ballater, from Ballater to Aboyne, from Aboyne to Kincardine O'Neil, and from Kincardine O'Neil to Banchory. The streets were lined with people waving their saltires. There were a few union jacks, I must confess, but there you go. It was patriotic and well attended and it was a wonderful occasion.

Let me take members to my constituency and what it has for people to enjoy in the great outdoors. In and around my constituency, we have about 34 Munros. We have visitor centres throughout, including a wonderful one in Oyne, at the foot of Bennachie. We have the fantastic mountain bike trail at Pitfichie—that is another wonderful name in my constituency—near Monymusk. People who want to visit woodlands can go to Durrus, where there are wonderful woods and forests and people can go mountain biking and rambling or even do some small-hill walking.

My constituency is awash with tourist attractions. We have royal Deeside, with fantastic salmon and sea trout fishing, which is very good this year. I tell anglers who might wish to visit the constituency of Aberdeenshire West that people are making fantastic catches on Deeside. We have Strathdon, which is not to be outshone by its royal Deeside neighbour. It has lots to offer, such as forest walks, hill walks and fantastic scenery. The area is awash with outdoor activity.

We have stone circles from Banchory to Tarland, Aboyne and Echt—people can go round my constituency to see them. We are famous for the battle in which Macbeth was fatally wounded in 1057, at Lumphanan. He bore no resemblance to Shakespeare's Macbeth—it was the true Macbeth at the battle in 1057.

The Scotch Whisky Association is celebrating its centenary, and I was a guest at its centenary party in Edinburgh. To those who think that the whisky trade is just for the purist, I say that whisky cocktails have been introduced. My hand was shaking and the glass was full of ice and I am not a whisky drinker, but people told me that I would enjoy it: enjoy it, I did. I was advised at that event that, to celebrate the Queen's jubilee, Royal Lochnagar distillery—in my constituency at Balmoral—has produced 60 bottles of whisky that are priced at £100,000 each. I am sure that the Queen was gifted one to celebrate her royal jubilee.

My constituency has many attractions in the great outdoors. We have camping and caravan sites. I urge everyone in the chamber to think about getting in touch with their MPs and with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ask that VAT be brought down to 5 per cent for the tourism industry. We in Scotland need that. We need to inject money into and to support our tourism sector. The chancellor missed a great opportunity to inject investment into the economy.

Presiding Officer, I have taken you round some—but not all—of my constituency. If you are interested, I would be delighted to take you round my constituency any time.

I urge members to look at what is going on in my constituency in the summer—in particular, to look at the Echt show. The new Echt show song is a version of Take That's song "The Flood". I sincerely hope that the weather does not match the song and that the young farmers' intentions are achieved. The Echt show song has had 13,500 hits, and I encourage members to view it on YouTube and to encourage others to view it, so that it is a much bigger YouTube top hit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): I thank Mr Robertson for the kind invitation to visit his constituency this summer, which I may or may not take up. Nonetheless, I am sure that his constituency is enchanting.

I call Hanzala Malik, who has a generous six minutes.

16:08

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate, because tourism is a key part of the Scottish economy, as many members have said. A vibrant and thriving tourism industry is essential if we are to grow our economy in the years ahead.

The additional conferences that Glasgow has recently won, with the conference bid fund's support, are welcome. That underlines Glasgow's status as one of the best conference destinations in the UK. I congratulate Glasgow on that.

The Scottish Tourism Alliance recently published "Tourism Scotland 2020"—a strategy document that highlights the pressing need to increase the number of direct flights to and from Scotland. I have worked to reinstate the Pakistan International Airlines route between Glasgow and Lahore, which are twin cities, and I share the alliance's enthusiasm for new routes. I am very supportive of driving that element of our business aspirations.

Mr Ewing's motion refers to devolving air passenger duty, but it fails to mention that the Scottish Government scrapped the air route

development fund, which would have supported new air routes. Through that fund, the Scottish Government had the power to support new routes and grow our tourism. It is worth reconsidering the decision on that fund, and I look forward to the minister's comments on that point.

The Federation of Small Businesses estimates that 23 per cent of its Scottish members come from the tourism, hotel, restaurant and bar sectors. The Scottish Government refers in its motion to "industry leadership", but I am not fully convinced that the tourism leadership group is truly representative of the tourism sector. I implore the Scottish Government to use every effort to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises are properly represented at the top table when our tourism sector is being discussed, whether inside or outside the leadership group.

The quality of goods that are sold in Scotland is another issue that we must address. When visitors to Scotland purchase goods from our museums, visitor centres or shops such as those on the Royal Mile, we must ensure that they are of good quality. However, more important, we should encourage them to sell Scottish goods.

Dennis Robertson: I encourage Hanzala Malik to enjoy the taste of Grampian festival when he visits my constituency.

Hanzala Malik: Dennis Robertson is going to get me into trouble with my imams.

United Kingdom Border Agency immigration clearance officers have not been helpful with visa applications; they have refused many applications, which has offended our friends overseas. We need to address that situation, so I ask the Scottish Government to make representations in that regard. We must try to encourage tourism rather than discourage it.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): I think that all members in the chamber agree about the importance of tourism and treating our tourist guests with respect. Does Hanzala Malik believe that it would be better if the Scottish Parliament made the decisions in that regard, rather than another place?

Hanzala Malik: Again, a member is trying to get me into trouble.

The issue is the policy on immigration rather than who makes the decisions. Tourism is important for us because it is such a big part of our trade. However, the current policy means that we sometimes face the wrath of friends who have been here in the past and who we hope will return in the future. The refusal of visa applications offends families, which we should not be in the business of doing.

I have one or two other observations. I congratulate the Glasgow City Marketing Bureau, whose chair is Councillor Gordon Matheson and whose chief executive is Scott Taylor. They and their board have made great strides in that area of work. It has taken them many years of hard work to get to where they are. However, we need to recognise that they have got there. I hope that their achievement will encourage other cities to try to match their aspirations, which I think is important.

Glasgow welcomes many tourists and visitors from around the world, and it enjoys the luxury of having modern, up-to-date visitor attractions such as the Riverside museum and the Kelvingrove art gallery—recent figures show that they have both attracted around one million people. There is also the Glasgow gallery of modern art, which has attracted 600,000 people, the People's palace and the Burrell collection—the list goes on. The beauty is that all of those places are free to enter, but we sometimes do not tell our visitors about such places.

I am keen that the minister address three of the points that I have raised: the difficulties that some people face in coming to Scotland; how we can encourage new air routes to be established; and, last but not least, the issue of the quality of goods that people purchase when they are here. If we continue to sell to tourists goods of the quality that we currently peddle, it will reflect badly on our tourism industry.

16:15

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): It is a privilege to take part in the debate, and it has been great to hear examples of Scotland's offer for tourists.

The figures released by VisitScotland continue to provide encouragement for the Scottish economy. VisitScotland, the Scottish Tourism Alliance and all the other organisations that are involved in the tourist industry should be highly commended for their work in maintaining such a vibrant sector during really difficult times, in making the most of people who go on staycations, and in encouraging people from the rest of these isles, and further afield, to make Scotland their destination when money is tight. They have done very well.

It is great to hear about other parts of Scotland, but members will not be surprised to hear that I will spend some time talking about my constituency in Dundee. Dundee is a city in transformation; it is changing from jute, jam and journalism to a vibrant city that hopes to attract tourists to our culture and innovative industries, and to the offer in our neighbourhood.

The key to the city's transformation is very much the people of Dundee and their aspirations. That is encapsulated in the new V&A at Dundee, which will be one of the biggest tourist draws in Scotland and probably across Europe. However, when I talk about Dundee, and when Hanzala Malik talks about Glasgow, it is important that our various tourist offers should not be considered as individual attractions—they are much stronger if they are offered as a whole.

My colleague Graeme Dey talked about bringing tourists to see Glamis castle in his constituency on the back of the Disney Pixar film "Brave". I hope that Dundee, too, will benefit, with those tourists spending some time in my constituency. As I look around the chamber, I see colleagues from other areas in which there are tourist attractions that Dundee can benefit from. Rod Campbell's constituency contains some of the finest golf courses in Scotland; his constituents will benefit from the V&A, because people who come to get a bit of culture will also bring their golf clubs and head to St Andrews. Equally, when the V&A is established I hope that people who come to play golf at Scotland's oldest golf courses will decide to come to Dundee too to see our taste of tourism and what we have to offer.

In order for that to happen, of course, we must have connections—between our cities, and between our cities and our urban areas. Our vision for Dundee, in terms of the waterfront redevelopment, is to ensure that when people come to our city—whether they come specifically as tourists to Dundee or are passing through—they get the best possible offer. However, it is crucial that we have links not only with St Andrews, Carnoustie and the other areas around Dundee, but with Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Glasgow.

Whenever more tourists come to Dundee, I genuinely believe that the rest of Scotland will benefit, too. The Ryder cup and the Commonwealth games will be of particular advantage to the area in which the event takes place, but if we can get the connections right and ensure that the offer we provide is a holistic one for the whole of Scotland, we can encourage tourists to spend much more time in Scotland, and we will all be winners.

Dundee's transformation to ensure that it has an offer to compete with Edinburgh and Glasgow has been very much a partnership between Scottish National Party-led Dundee City Council, the Scottish Government and a host of local businesses that have worked to revitalise and revolutionise the heart of Dundee city centre. The important parts of that are not just the Victoria and Albert, but the transformation of the train station and so on. All that is very important.

It is a genuine shame that the same is not happening in Aberdeen, where the current Labour-Conservative coalition appears to be turning its back on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform that city. I hope that those councillors change their minds. Although I represent Dundee and it might seem that the proposals for Aberdeen would be very much to the advantage of Aberdeen city, a strong Aberdeen city is good for Dundee.

Kevin Stewart: If a son of Dundee offered £50 million for a project that was backed by the majority of Dundonians, what does the member think Dundee City Council's reaction would be?

Joe FitzPatrick: I think that Dundee City Council would stand up and make it absolutely clear that Dundee is open for business. I hope that the Labour-Conservative council in Aberdeen changes its mind, because Scotland's tourism offer will be stronger if it is connected Scotland-wide.

I congratulate VisitScotland on its efforts to ensure that Scotland's offer is advertised as widely as possible, particularly as part of the Disney Pixar film "Brave". It should be commended.

16:21

Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I, too, am pleased to take part in the debate and I have enjoyed many of the speeches, especially the lyrical one from Dennis Robertson.

Last night, I was delighted to see, at long last, Dalgety Bay on the real map of Scotland during the weather forecast. However, I did not like the look of the weather for any of us, especially now that we are at the weekend.

I am really pleased that my constituency has beaches, such as Aberdour, that have won blue flag awards. The Lochore meadows were transformed from the pit bings into a wonderful facility. For anyone who wishes to make a day visit to somewhere that is not far from the M9, I recommend Lochore meadows. This weekend, the Mille Alba will bring cyclists from across Europe to my part of Fife.

I am disappointed that Scottish Government ministers have not made any progress in re-establishing a passenger ferry between Rosyth and Zeebrugge. That was a great gateway for people from Europe coming to visit our part of Scotland. I urge the minister in the nicest possible tone to take that back to his colleagues and ask them to put some energy into that, because that service would be welcomed by many people across Scotland.

I note that the strategy—I read it very quickly last night after my colleague Rhoda Grant had sent it to me—contains VisitScotland's recognition

that it needs to ensure that the hotels in our capital city and elsewhere provide value for money. That is critical.

Members might like to do what I did last night. I checked the reviews for a number of hotels and was very disappointed to read that a number of Edinburgh hotels have "terrible" marked next to reviews that have been written by travellers to our country. That is simply not good enough. It means that the regulators that are responsible for assessing quality are simply not doing their job; they are letting Scotland down. I hope that the minister will challenge the regulators on that.

Among the comments were ones such as:

"Make sure your vaccinations are up to date!!...."

There are some fuller comments about that, which I will not go into. Another comment I read was:

"Everything fine but you must not be from eastern europe".

Another comment was:

"Accommodation ok, room small but clean. Nice bathroom. ... The only problem we noticed was the owners attitude. If you are e.g German they are ok for you".

The reviewer thought that the owners did not care much for eastern European people.

John Mason: Does the member accept that the comments on websites are not always entirely objective and that one bad experience can be overstated?

Helen Eadie: I accept that. It is always something to be warned about, but when more than 50 people condemn one hotel, the minister needs to have people who will investigate that. We rely on repeat business. Many moons ago, I did bed and breakfast and I know how important it is to get repeat business. My next-door neighbour who does bed and breakfast depends heavily on repeat business. The first tranche of hotels in Edinburgh are rated as excellent, but I ask the minister to look at the latter half of the hotels in that category.

I accept John Mason's point about the health warning that goes with online reviews, but we should not ignore them either. I travel regularly across Europe and I know that comments on value for money, standards of cleanliness, investment in the rooms and so on colour what I purchase.

Whenever I prepare a speech for a debate such as this, I pay heed to the needs of disabled people. The VisitScotland board minutes that I read reported that the accessible tourism initiative had identified staff attitude as the main barrier that is experienced here by visitors with disabilities. Businesses can make a difference, and I am pleased that VisitScotland is focusing on that and recommending that businesses improve staff

attitudes, improve customer service and address any physical barriers.

It was noted that visitors with disabilities require more information. I applaud the board for its proposal—which I hope that it will follow through—to introduce an accessible tourism category to the Scottish thistle awards. There will possibly be a separate award initially, with it being mainstreamed into the main awards in the longer term. The board's plan to consider an STA category for accessible tourism is also excellent.

I understand that an events programme has been developed to deliver the message to the industry, as the perception that accessible tourism initiatives will cost money remains one of the main objections to change. A film is being developed—we have heard a lot about films this week, but this is another good initiative by VisitScotland.

Fergus Ewing: I am extremely grateful to Helen Eadie for raising the matter. The work that VisitScotland is doing to allow people with a disability to enjoy a holiday is first class and we are determined to pursue it. I am in total agreement with everything that she has said in that respect.

Helen Eadie: Thank you very much, minister. I am grateful for that and hope that that work continues. I applaud VisitScotland and will support it to do what it can. In turn, I hope that the minister and others will support me in trying to get eastern European people to come to Scotland so that we can share our knowledge and experience with eastern European visitors here.

16:28

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I declare an interest as someone with a great many years' experience in the tourism and hospitality industry in the Highlands. I pay tribute to those who have spoken before me, who have highlighted a number of Scotland's attractions, taking us on a kind of verbal tour around the country.

Tourism is hugely important to Scotland as a whole, and comparatively it plays an even greater part in the mixed economy of the Highlands and Islands. That is a part of Scotland with natural beauty and an incredible landscape, which I am sure will feature strongly in the special promotion of the year of natural Scotland, next year.

Mary Scanlon has left the chamber, but I must take issue with some of the things that she said about the Sutherland way. We have to be respectful of the environment that we have in Scotland. We have to be smart about recognising the areas that need to have cafes or facilities, but we also have to recognise the special, wild nature

of the land that we have. There are three identified geoparks in Scotland, and they are all in the Highlands and Islands. All of them make specific requests in terms of relevant development. The idea that the north-west Sutherland way should have a string of facilities along it makes my—well, I will say simply that that is wild Scotland.

Scotland attracts visitors from across the world and, in the past couple of years, a growing number from across the United Kingdom. Those visitors help to maintain 25,000 jobs across 3,000 businesses in my region and bring £1.2 billion every year from the region into the economy, and it is the importance of the economy that we are talking about.

By talking about Glasgow attracting conferences, Hanzala Malik reminded me that, on 9 September 1997, which was only two days before the extraordinary vote for devolution, Glasgow hosted the annual congress of the American travel trade, with several thousand delegates. The keynote speaker was Mrs Thatcher, who took the time on "Newsnight" to tell Scots that they should vote no the following Thursday. However, we are grateful that Glasgow has the facilities to take that size of conference.

Scotland is famous for its hospitality and its friendly people. To combat some of Helen Eadie's comments, I should say that our reputation is deserved. There may be instances such as those that she talked about, but Scotland will never be perfect in everybody's eyes. It is too easy for someone to go out and find a place that they do not like, but they do not know that, the night before, other people have had a really good time there. The spit-and-sawdust pub can offer up as great a night's entertainment for some people as a five-star hotel can do for a different clientele, offering a different service. We have to be careful about how we decide on these matters. We also have to be helpful. Do we want to hammer a business that is probably suffering really badly? It, too, plays a part in the economy and needs help rather than poor recognition.

That people recognise our hospitality and the friendliness of our people is evidenced by the extraordinarily high levels of repeat business that we achieve in Scotland generally and in the Highlands and Islands in particular. The figures are there for everyone to see. Familiar faces of people who have become addicted to holidays here appear regularly. That is still a factor of our industry. I have been in the hotel trade so long that I know the grandchildren of folk who stayed many years before. That is the legacy that we can and should build on. It is ironic, in some ways, that the industry should be sustained by such levels of repeat visits, given that employment opportunities

in the industry often seem to be short-term and seasonal.

There have been many changes over the years and the recent festivals that the Highlands and Islands play host to are amazing. RockNess, Loopallu and the Insider festival that was held last weekend and was attended by 1,000 people, who stayed for three or four days, might seem like small beer compared with festivals such as T in the Park, but they are right for that part of Scotland and they are due recognition.

Anyone who has attended some of the smaller book festivals will know that they are hugely personal affairs, and contribute hugely to the economy. More and more are being organised outside what we choose to call the peak holiday period.

Although "Brave", the now-released Pixar animation, is clearly getting global attention, I would like to thank members who recently supported my motion on the Hansel of Film, which came from Shetland and takes the story of Shetland and small film-makers around the United Kingdom. It is perhaps not the same in terms of marketing, but it is just as important and such projects often capture the imagination of visitors when they come here.

Tourism is an industry that does not stand alone. Like steel making and shipbuilding, it depends on all other sectors in order to flourish. Local authorities have much to contribute by keeping the infrastructure and public facilities open and in good order. The education of our children, especially in music and language, has an enormous role to play. Crofting and fishing are among our main attractions and we should never forget that folk on holiday love to watch folk at work.

16:35

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): It has been quite a journey this afternoon. We managed to miss the Olympic torch in Inverness, went to regenerated Dundee, climbed a Munro in west Aberdeenshire, played some golf, went to the canal capital of Europe and ended up in the evening at Helen Eadie's bed and breakfast, which I hope will reopen sometime soon.

What has united all the contributions is that every member values the importance of tourism. It is important to Scotland as a whole and to every single constituency within Scotland. That has shone through, regardless of where the member comes from or which party they represent.

Tourism is vital to the Scottish economy, as it supports well over 200,000 jobs directly and probably a lot more than that indirectly. Moreover,

tourism is especially critical in some of our more vulnerable areas. Tourism is important for the whole of Scotland, but it is vital in some of our more vulnerable parts. Mary Scanlon talked about the Highlands, where tourism represents 20 per cent of jobs.

The tourism industry is one of the sectors that can help to create equity within Scotland. One of the beauties of the tourism industry is that it can spread wealth and business around the country instead of concentrating them in one or two parts.

Dennis Robertson: Does the member not agree that, given that tourism is so important to the economy of Scotland, the UK Government should reduce VAT on the hospitality industry to 5 per cent?

Gavin Brown: The minister made the same point, although he perhaps did not put it quite as robustly as Mr Robertson has. Everybody knows the state of the country, everybody knows that the books have to be balanced and everybody knows the level of debt that the country is carrying. It is very easy for Scottish National Party members to say that the UK Government has to reduce VAT on tourism, but they have also called for reductions in VAT in a number of other industries and for an overall reduction in VAT, as well as for reductions in almost every other tax. It is easy to call for such a reduction, but how serious the SNP is about it remains to be seen.

I say to Dennis Robertson that it would be better for the Scottish Government to use the powers that it has instead of complaining about those that it does not. The Scottish Government has complete control over business rates, so it can adopt any policy that it likes on them. If the Scottish Government wants to pursue a policy that helps the hospitality industry on business rates, let us hear its proposals and what it has to say about that. The Scottish Government seems to have a lot to say about taxes that it has no control over instead of telling us what it intends to do with those that it does have control over.

I did not particularly want to get political, as it has been a positive debate but, when one is challenged like that, such a challenge has to be responded to reasonably and fairly.

I will comment on the new tourism strategy, which is an excellent document. As the minister said, it has been pursued by the industry, for the industry. That will be key to its success. A refreshed or new strategy was definitely required. Tribute has rightly been paid to the tourism leadership group and to the Scottish Tourism Alliance, which will take responsibility for driving the strategy forward.

What I think is right in particular about the strategy is that it has a new focus on the visitor

experience across the entire journey instead of just part of it. It has a greater emphasis on leadership within and by the industry. By its nature, the tourism industry is potentially very fragmented. It is made up of an enormous number of small businesses, and we have seen it coming together over the past couple of years a lot better than it did five years ago, say. Given the strength of the strategy document and the leadership that the group has shown thus far, the industry can be less fragmented as it goes forward.

I think that it is also right to say that growth will come about by people having top quality experiences—with an emphasis on the word “quality”. As a country, we must compete on quality, not price. We are more Switzerland than Latvia in terms of the type of tourism that we are trying to promote. Quality does not have to be luxury, but the strategy quite rightly says that we must offer something that exceeds visitor expectations.

The other point that is worth making about the strategy document is that there are fewer key performance indicators, but we are looking at the indicators that matter—namely, overnight visitor spend and visitor satisfaction. Those two indicators will be looked at as the most important. There is a much sharper and finer focus than there has been in the past. The strategy also talks about progress being reviewed annually, with a more fundamental review after three years. Some of the risks that are faced in the tourism industry are acknowledged, and there will be a fundamental review after three years, once we start to get out of the downturn, as we all hope that we will.

I acknowledge what the minister said about the tourism statistics. The most recent statistics are definitely moving in the right direction, and the industry has to be applauded for that, particularly given the difficult year that 2011 was for just about every other industry. It is worth noting that our particular strength was in domestic tourism, in which spend was up by 16.4 per cent. International tourism spend was up by 2.4 per cent, but the number of trips was marginally down and the number of nights was down quite substantially. As things stand, the strength of the figures seems to have come from domestic tourism.

In looking forward, we must have one eye closely on what happens in the euro zone. Rhoda Grant touched on that in her opening speech. The pound is strengthening and the euro is weakening, which makes staycations more difficult to push. We must be very alert to that. As the pound strengthens, holidays in Europe become comparatively cheaper, and people may decide not to do staycations. We have to work hard to ensure that we keep getting the benefit of

staycations. If the pound is stronger, of course, tourists from Europe will find it more expensive to come here.

I applaud the strategy and most of the motion, other than the point that I mentioned right at the start.

16:43

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): A couple of weeks ago, the national media picked up on a story about thousands of Glaswegians being sent to a Disney-style charm school ahead of the Commonwealth games. “Have I Got News for You” and other programmes clearly enjoyed the idea of Rab C Nesbitt and the like reciting pledges such as, “I must learn about the Glasgow botanic gardens,” and, “I will smile more often.” In fact, I suspect that most Scots and most Glaswegians who heard the story liked it as well. Whatever other failings we have, we are not too po-faced to laugh at ourselves.

The story is particularly good for illuminating where we need to concentrate some of our efforts if we are to make Scotland a more attractive tourist destination and to grow the industry by 50 per cent by 2016. The visitor experience in Scotland is shaped more by the welcome that we give tourists than by the beauty of our scenery or the majesty of our historic castles and battlefields. Whether we are saying, “Have a nice day,” or “Gaun yersel,” it is the genuine warmth of the words that we offer to visitors that will bring them back to our country. That message rings out loud and clear in the strategy document. I will quote one passage:

“Growth will come about by

- Turning the country’s assets into top quality experiences. Everybody involved in tourism, whether an hotelier, a shop assistant, a self-caterer”,

those who work in

“a theatre, an attraction or a bus driver, will be challenged to ensure top-notch quality across all the services and places that make up a visitor’s experience. This doesn’t mean everyone has to have a luxury product, but it does mean that what is on offer has to exceed visitor expectations.”

I thought that Mary Scanlon made an excellent point when she said that the fact that many hillwalkers, climbers and cyclists who come to Scotland are not staying in 4-star hotels does not mean that they should not expect the best—quite the reverse. Quality and high standards are the watchwords in the report.

Another key word in the tourism leadership group’s strategy is growth. Tourism is a key area of the economy in which the circumstances can still support growth if the partners, including the Scottish Government, work together. Many

members talked about the winning years—the year of creative Scotland in 2012, the year of natural Scotland in 2013, which is a chance to grow green or eco-tourism, and the second year of homecoming in 2014, which brings the Ryder cup and Commonwealth games to Scotland.

Economic growth should be the main goal of every level of government. That is why Labour's amendment reiterates the importance of retaining the target to grow tourism by 50 per cent. That goal is not just desirable but achievable, given the propitious circumstances, and vital. The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee pointed out that a question remains about the Government's commitment to the 50 per cent target. The chief executive of VisitScotland called it an ambition rather than a target, and we need clarity from the minister on whether the target is at the heart of his thinking.

A good start for the minister might be to provide further information on how he intends to measure progress. The Scottish Tourism Alliance talks about the importance of gathering performance indicators, which echoes a call by the EET committee. Will the minister say how he will work with the tourism industry to establish a monitoring and evaluation framework?

Sporting events figure largely in the list of events that will contribute to the winning years. I add my congratulations to those of Chic Brodie to everyone who was involved in winning the open championship for Royal Troon in 2016. Ahead of the debate, the Scottish Sports Association circulated a particularly helpful briefing on sport's contribution to the Scottish economy. Fishing and golf have long been huge attractions for high-spending visitors, but they have been joined in the past few years by new and exciting activities, such as mountain biking. When I was a kid, Fort William meant a place for wet games of shinty but, when we pass through the town now, we cannot help but notice all the cycle racks, bike shops and posters, which show what a difference mountain biking is making to the local economy.

So much more can be done to improve and expand facilities. Instead of lining up swimming pools for closure and bemoaning the lack of ice rinks in the country, we should be investing in those areas and providing activities that are not weather dependent and facilities that will not just be attractive to visitors but will be used all year round by locals.

I am optimistic that Scotland will make the most of the opportunities that are presented by the Commonwealth games in 2014, but the visit of the Olympic torch left me slightly anxious about the Scottish Government's approach. It has been difficult not to contrast some SNP ministers' rather grudging remarks about the so-called London

Olympics with the phenomenal welcome that the torch received in every Scottish community. I acknowledge what Dennis Robertson said about the welcome that the torch received in Aberdeenshire West but, like Rhoda Grant, I cannot help feeling that we missed a trick in Scotland and could have marketed the warmth of the Scottish welcome, rather than appearing as if we have a chip on our shoulder.

I heard the chef Marco Pierre White on the radio recently. He observed that the standard of food in our restaurants is now first class, for the most part. I am not sure that it is first class everywhere, but I certainly accept that we expect good food whenever we go out to eat. Marco Pierre White said that the key is not just to maintain the high standard of cuisine but to make the atmosphere and the experience of eating out enjoyable. He went on to say that good staff are the key to a good night out, and he talked about how he hires on personality and trains for the skills that he needs. I have heard the same approach described by other people who work in retail or hospitality.

Therefore, one of the most important tasks for the Scottish Government is to support better training and skills in the hospitality and retail sectors. We need to be able not just to attract the right people into the industry but to retain staff by offering the prospect of a full and rewarding career. Margaret McCulloch was right to highlight our on-going concern about pay, conditions and status in the sector.

The report that is at the centre of the debate was industry led and focused on a partnership approach. The minister rightly commended the approach, but that does not let the Government off the hook. I will not strike an overly critical note, but the motion is a little vague on the actions that the Government will take. The most specific point in it is the call to the UK Government to cut VAT and devolve air passenger duty. I simply mention that because I am disappointed that, by highlighting what other people should do rather than what the Scottish Government is doing, the motion reads more like an excuse than a call for action.

Fergus Ewing: While recognising that we always wish to do more, would Ken Macintosh agree that the bid fund that we launched in March, working with Glasgow City Council and others, has been a marked success thus far?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left.

Ken Macintosh: Indeed. I did not have time to do so, but I will take the opportunity now to add my congratulations to those involved in attracting businesses to Scotland, particularly with respect to the conferences that are now coming to Scotland.

I draw the minister's attention to Helen Eadie's comments, particularly the ones about the importance of maintaining standards in our hotels. She raised a serious point about the impressions of the eastern European visitors. On a similar but less serious note, my aunt runs a bed and breakfast in Skye. A few years ago, an Italian couple stayed there. They were making a bit of a racket—she said that it sounded as though they were playing football in the bedroom—so she went upstairs and gave them a row. She thought nothing of it. They wrote something Italian in the guest book and left. It was another year before she had another Italian visitor. She asked them to translate it and they laughed and said that it was a very famous Italian saying from Dante's "Inferno":

"Abandon hope all ye who enter here".

The Deputy Presiding Officer: On that note—
[Laughter.]

Ken Macintosh: Yes. I am just suggesting that one person's standards are not universally accepted.

16:51

Fergus Ewing: I am happy to move swiftly on from Dante's "Inferno"—not a place that I would like to go to on holiday. The debate has been unexpectedly revelatory—I did not realise, for example, that Dalgety Bay was not included on the weather map. What a disgraceful omission. I am pleased that we have Helen Eadie to make sure that such scandals are swiftly corrected. Nor did I realise until Fiona McLeod mentioned it—and therefore it must be true—that Strathkelvin and Bearsden is in fact a hotbed of radicals and troublemakers. Then we moved on to Dennis Robertson's speech, where we deradicalised somewhat as we visited Balmoral and the environs. I am pleased—having had the pleasure of hearing Dennis speak on a couple of previous occasions—that we managed to extend the term of this session of Parliament to five years so that there will be sufficient time for him to work his way through all of the manifold attractions in his constituency.

There have been great successes in Scotland attributable to the work of many across councils, Governments, parties, the private sector, the social sector and others. Just look at some of the investment that there has been in tourism facilities across Scotland of late.

Mr Malik mentioned additional conferences coming to Glasgow—the Scottish hydro arena at the Scottish exhibition and conference centre is a truly exciting development that paves the way for many new events to come to Glasgow. The Edinburgh international conference centre expansion that I had the pleasure of visiting in the

company of the redoubtable Hans Rissmann will double the capacity of the EICC and pave the way to even greater success. Then there are the Edinburgh military tattoo stands—my friend Brigadier David Allfrey is in charge now, and a finer, stronger leader you could not find. I am proud to be an ambassador for the tattoo and I hope that all members will take the time, if they can, to visit the tattoo this summer.

In addition, there are the Riverside museum—Glasgow's transport museum—which was also mentioned by Mr Malik; Stirling castle, where I will be dining this evening with the British-Irish Council; the Robert Burns Birthplace museum, which I have visited with my family; and the redevelopment of John o' Groats, which I had the pleasure of visiting on a ministerial visit and which will transform what has recently become a bit of an eyesore.

We have seen a huge amount of investment—I can go on—including investment in the Scottish national portrait gallery and in the national museum of Scotland. Gordon Rintoul was rightly honoured recently for making the national museum of Scotland the most visited tourism attraction in the whole of the UK outside London.

Members rightly pointed out that we must not be complacent. I will respond to some of members' points—I apologise if I do not respond to them all. Helen Eadie is right that we must always seek to have the highest standards and that we should not tolerate lower standards. Across society, we must strive towards that end. However, the visitor experience survey for 2011 showed that 94 per cent of people were satisfied with their visit in Scotland; that 72 per cent were very satisfied indeed; and that 88 per cent would recommend Scotland to others. We would like a 100 per cent rating, but the industry is plainly doing well and serving customers well.

Mary Scanlon is right about the importance of walking, hillwalking and climbing, which should not be omitted. I am pleased that VisitScotland has a dedicated walking section on its website as well as several other initiatives on the issue.

Rhoda Grant is right that we can do more on eco-tourism. Of the visitors surveyed in 2011, a sizeable number—11 per cent—said that they chose Scotland because it has a good reputation on sustainable tourism. One in 10 people chose to come here precisely because of that. Renewables can enhance the attractions of Scotland. The Cream o' Galloway visitor centre in Dumfries has 70,000 visitors. Members might have seen this week that Scottish Power has joined the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions in respect of the visitor attraction at Whitelee wind farm, which has attracted nearly a quarter of a million people, including children, who learn how

electricity is generated. I know, because I have visited it myself.

Several members went on about whisky quite a lot. I am not sure whether this is revelatory, but I have enjoyed the whisky experience quite a lot, although it was only earlier this month that I visited the Scotch Whisky Experience near Edinburgh castle. What a terrific asset for Scotland that is. For those who have not had the chance to go there, please do, enjoy the experience and wet your thrapple.

Mr Malik rightly pointed out concerns, which we share, about the difficulty with getting visas. Helen Eadie mentioned that in relation to east Europeans. On that issue, we are behind President Obama, who said—appropriately enough, it was in Orlando—that the visa application process for visitors from China would be made easier. If one of the most security-conscious countries in the world can recognise the value that the Chinese market offers, we challenge the UK Government to follow suit.

Fiona McLeod, Dennis Robertson and Ken Macintosh mentioned the importance of the mountain bike to tourism. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth recently attended the Union Cycliste Internationale world cup event at Aonach Mòr on 10 June, which was supported by EventScotland funding. I know that Mike Matheson participated and went on the course. I can tell members that people have to be a bit of a daredevil to do that, so we even have daredevils among the Scottish ministerial ranks. What a revelation the debate is proving to be.

All members have recognised the common sense, leadership and benefits in the recent piece of work by the Scottish Tourism Alliance. It recognises fresh focus and new goals and sets an ambition for the industry, which was devised following long consultation with the industry, to break from the status quo and to achieve an annual visitor spend of between £5.5 billion and £6.5 billion by 2020, which would be an extra £1 billion or more.

We cannot support the Conservative or Labour amendments, although that is more in sorrow than in anger, because the debate has been good.

Rhoda Grant: Will the minister give way?

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): He is in his last minute.

Fergus Ewing: I am just closing.

The Labour amendment unfortunately makes a mistake with the year—it says 2016 when it should be 2015. Unfortunately, that would see our ambitions slip, which we do not want to happen.

I commend the efforts of Stephen Leckie and his colleagues on the tourism leadership group. The work that Marc Crothall, the chief executive of the STA, will take forward will for the first time ever involve the public and private sectors working in tandem to achieve the enormous success that lies ahead, in the winning years, for this marvellous country of ours.

Decision Time

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are nine questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S4M-03394.1, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, which seeks to amend motion S4M-03394, in the name of Nanette Milne, on families, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-03394.2, in the name of Neil Bibby, which seeks to amend motion S4M-03394, in the name of Nanette Milne, on families, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-03394, in the name of Nanette Milne, on families, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises the importance of family members recovering in their own right from the effects that their loved-ones' drug misuse has on them; notes that family support groups provide a vital resource for families to get support for their own needs and to build relationships with others in similar circumstances; recognises the continuing challenges that small peer-led family support groups across Scotland face to sustain themselves; congratulates the Grampian Family Support Forum on its successful participation in the third phase of the Parliament's Community Partnership Project and notes the success of the forum's Recovery Happens event held in the Parliament on 1 March 2012 enabling the forum to further its support base on its campaign; further recognises the importance of these groups in breaking down barriers around stigma and discrimination related to substance misuse and addiction; understands that substance misuse and addiction do not discriminate in relation to who they affect and are important and destructive issues for families and Scottish society as a whole; encourages that the forum's vision is rolled out throughout Scotland so that communities across the country can learn from its example; further supports the direct investment of the Scottish Government in national organisations such as Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, the Scottish Recovery Consortium and the Scottish Drugs Forum, which support families in playing their vital role in building recovery communities across Scotland; endorses the role of the Road to Recovery in putting the individual at the centre of care, treatment and recovery services and, in doing so, promoting the essential role of families and communities in supporting sustained recovery across Scotland; recognises the contribution of Scottish Families Affected by Drugs, and believes that family support groups need to be given the support required to help their members and relatives through challenging periods in their lives.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, in relation to the debate on local government, if the amendment in the name of Derek Mackay is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Sarah Boyack falls.

The next question is, that amendment S4M-03397.1, in the name of Derek Mackay, which seeks to amend motion S4M-03397, in the name of Gavin Brown, on local government, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)

White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahan, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 60, Against 47, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Amendment S4M-03397.2, in the name of Sarah Boyack, therefore falls.

The next question is, that motion S4M-03397, in the name of Gavin Brown, on local government, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)

Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)

Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 60, Against 46, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the measures that the Scottish Government is taking to help tackle the prevalence of empty properties afflicting Scotland's high streets by creating a new incentive, which links to the Scottish Government's regeneration strategy and future town centre review, to bring these premises back into economic use; notes that, even after reform, empty property relief will remain significantly more generous than that available in England and, in particular, that Scotland will retain 100% relief for industrial properties; notes the considerably greater impact on Scottish business of the UK Government's VAT rise, which is expected to cost Scottish business £1 billion, and congratulates the Scottish Government on the wider package of business rate relief measures, worth over £500 million per annum, that has ensured that Scotland remains the most competitive place to do business in the UK.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-03400.1, in the name of Rhoda Grant, which seeks to amend motion S4M-03400, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on growing the visitor economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Abstentions

Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 45, Against 60, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-03400.3, in the name of Mary Scanlon, which seeks to amend motion S4M-03400, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on growing the visitor economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)

Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 45, Against 62, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-03400, in the name of Fergus Ewing, on growing the visitor economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

For

Adam, Brian (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)

Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)

Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Abstentions

McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 90, Against 15, Abstentions 2.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the achievements of tourism businesses across Scotland in achieving a 14% increase in overnight visitor revenues in 2011; welcomes the new tourism strategy prepared by the industry, for the industry, which focuses on the importance of industry leadership, the quality that visitors encounter across their whole journey in Scotland and using Scotland's assets to create the experiences that visitors are looking for; commends the efforts of the industry-led Tourism Leadership Group in developing the strategy and recognises the important role to be played by relevant agencies and non-departmental public bodies in supporting the industry's strategy; renews calls on the UK Government to play its part by devolving air passenger duty and to consider a reduction of VAT rates for the sector; recognises the enormous opportunity for tourism in Scotland presented by The Winning Years and the Disney/Pixar film, *Brave*, in particular; congratulates Glasgow on its success in winning several additional conferences with the support of the Conference Bid Fund announced in March 2012, and encourages other destinations in Scotland to use the fund to win further business for Scotland.

Arms Trade Treaty

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-02884, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on time for an international arms trade treaty. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that, in July 2012, the UN will begin negotiations on a treaty to better regulate the arms trade; notes that the process toward this was instigated in December 2006 when the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 61/89, Towards an Arms Trade Treaty: establishing common international standards for the import, export and transfer of conventional arms; understands that, although the trade in arms is not illegal, campaigning organisations, such as Amnesty International and Oxfam, have expressed concerns that such weapons are often used to violate human rights; considers that this view was echoed by Sergio de Queiroz Duarte who, in December 2010, in his then capacity as the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, told the Arms Trade Treaty Preparatory Committee that, "in all parts of the world, the ready availability of conventional weapons and ammunition has led to human suffering, repression, crime and terror among civilian populations"; notes that Amnesty International has estimated that more than 1,500 people die every day from armed violence and 85% of all of the killings it documents involve guns; further notes that Amnesty International claims that two out of three people killed as a result of armed violence die in countries that are not at war and 60% of all of the human rights abuses it reports involve the use of arms; notes what it understands to be the concerns of many Scots, including those in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, regarding the impact of such human rights breaches; welcomes the support that has been shown by many member states of the UN, such as the UK, France and Germany, to the concept of an arms trade treaty, but understands that these three countries are among the world's biggest arms exporters; further welcomes the change in stance of the US Government, under President Obama, indicating that it is now in favour of a treaty; would welcome a strong arms trade treaty that all member states of the UN can ratify, which restricts the trade of arms to regimes that are likely to use them to violate human rights, and believes that such a treaty is necessary to achieve a more human rights-centric international arms trade.

17:08

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I thank members who signed my motion to enable it to be debated this evening, and members who have remained in the chamber either to take part in the debate or to hear at least a bit of it.

I thank Amnesty International, Oxfam and the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund for the background information that they have provided in advance of tonight's debate. I declare my membership of Amnesty International and that my wife works for that organisation.

This Parliament does not, at this time, have any direct locus in the matter that we are debating this

evening, but that does not make the debate any less important. I suspect that all of us, despite our differences, entered politics to make the communities that we directly represent, Scotland as a whole and the world, better places. Despite our different starting points, I am sure that that is true.

We should make no mistake: a comprehensive, internationally agreed arms trade treaty is required to make our world a better place. I know that there is cross-party support for such a treaty. I was very pleased that my party agreed a resolution in favour of an arms trade treaty at its recent national council meeting just last Saturday, and I know that Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have made statements in support of such a treaty. That is, of course, as it should be on an issue that must concern all decent-minded individuals.

However, let me make it clear that an arms trade treaty is not in itself a criticism of the trade in arms per se; rather, it is recognition that such trade must be properly regulated, and that those who seek to violate the human rights of their own citizens should not be able to procure arms internationally to do so.

I have concerns about the fact that, globally, annual military spending is of the order of \$1.6 trillion and that it far outstrips our expenditure in supporting the developing world. It is perverse that, on a planet of 6 billion people, some 12 billion bullets are manufactured each year, as Oxfam has told me is the case. I think that those are legitimate concerns to raise in any debate about the international arms trade.

However, I doubt that anyone in the chamber is so naive as to imagine that the arms trade will not endure. On that basis, it is important to secure, through the international negotiations that will take place next month, the arms trade treaty that we are debating.

Amnesty International estimates that more than 1,500 people die every day from armed violence, while Oxfam estimates the figure to be more than 2,000. Eighty-five per cent of all killings that are documented by Amnesty International involve guns and 60 per cent of all the human rights abuses that the organisation reports involve arms. It also says that two out of three people who are killed as a result of armed violence die in countries that are not at war. Who, then, can disagree with the words of the then United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Sergio de Queiroz Duarte, who in December 2010 said:

"In all parts of the world, the ready availability of conventional weapons and ammunition has led to human suffering, repression, crime and terror among civilian populations?"

We see that today. My colleague Jim Eadie secured an extremely important debate on the appalling situation in Syria, where the regime is responsible for violating the human rights of so many of its citizens using arms that have been bought through the international arms trade. We were given a salient reminder of that just the other day, when arms from Russia that were bound for Syria were embargoed off our own shores.

The fact that there is currently no international arms trade treaty may come as a surprise to many, but even more surprising is the fact that there are international treaties to regulate the trade in dinosaur bones, postage stamps and bananas. How can it be that we, as human society, properly regulate such trade but not the trade in arms? In that regard, SCIAF told me that the Vatican's permanent observer to the United Nations, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, made the highly pertinent observation that

"arms cannot simply be compared with other goods exchanged in global or domestic markets."

It is right that we should have an effective arms trade treaty, which would be based on the simple principle that there should be no transfers of weapons that are likely to be used for violations of international law, including human rights law. The treaty should establish common binding standards to assess international weapons transfers, which would be based on existing international law, including international human rights and humanitarian law, and the UN charter.

An effective arms trade treaty is not in itself a weapons-ban treaty, but it must ensure that states rigorously control the export, import and international transfer of all types of conventional arms that have been designed, modified or adapted for the deployment of potentially lethal force. That is what Amnesty International is calling for, and I think that it is absolutely right. It is essential that we prevent such transfers from being used for serious human rights violations or from being diverted to the illicit trade, the illegal market or end users who would use the weapons to commit atrocities.

It is important that I welcome David Grimason to the public gallery. Members will recall that he tragically lost his son Alistair when he was shot and killed during a family holiday in Turkey. He is here with representatives from Amnesty International. David Grimason, along with Dr Mick North, who lost his daughter Sophie in the Dunblane tragedy, have been working with Oxfam and Amnesty International to demand global action on the arms trade. As a father, I cannot begin to imagine how, after the tragedies that befell them, they have gathered the strength to go on, let alone to campaign in this fashion. I think that we owe it to the memory of their children, and

to all the men, women and children who can be saved, to see that an international arms trade treaty is secured.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a number of requests from members who wish to speak, so I am afraid that I will have to keep speeches to a tight four minutes. I call Roderick Campbell, to be followed by Malcolm Chisholm.

17:15

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank Jamie Hepburn for bringing his motion to the chamber for debate. I declare an interest as a member of Amnesty International.

Last week, I attended a meeting of the cross-party group on human rights, where I heard David Grimason talk with great conviction about his son, who—as Jamie Hepburn said—was killed in Turkey by a stray bullet. I am delighted that David has been given the opportunity to meet Michael Moore, the Secretary of State for Scotland, to encourage the United Kingdom Government to take the issue very seriously indeed.

I hope that, in the days between 2 and 27 July, we will see a strong and robust arms trade treaty take shape during the negotiations in New York—one that has as a priority reduction of the human rights abuses that occur as a result of the arms transfers that go ahead regardless of the political climate.

There have been efforts in the past to control and measure the number of arms that are sold in the global market. The UN has gone to some lengths to prevent interstate conflict and reduce the stockpile of weapons. An instrumental tool that the UN has used in combating the problems is the UN register of conventional arms, which came into existence in 1991 and has, to date, received reports from more than 170 states. The register was created out of a desire to establish greater co-operation between states, but as the control arms campaign says, the UNRCA is a transparency mechanism and a recording tool, not a tool to control arms transfers. The campaign also points out that the classification of arms categories was created to satisfy a similar goal and it does not consider the kind of weapons that are found today in conflict zones where human rights violations take place.

The other registers that exist include the Wassenaar arrangement, which is used by 41 countries including the USA, the United Kingdom, France and Russia—four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and the largest exporters of arms in the global market—and the European Union consolidated military list. Those two lists perform a similar task to that of the UNRCA in allowing clarity in the recording of

armaments, but in contrast to the UNRCA they have a far greater scope with regard to weaponry and machinery. The main aim of those registers has been to create transparency in armaments and, as the UN explains, to avoid

“excessive or destabilising accumulations of arms taking place and to champion preventative diplomacy.”

However, despite their success in recording the vast majority of official transfers, they do not inhibit the transfer of arms, which could be more effectively checked by the proposed arms trade treaty. In addition, it seems that the UNRCA does not offer as efficient a role as alternative registers and it is now clear that there is a need for a humanitarian-based treaty to alleviate current and potential human suffering.

The arms trade treaty seeks to prevent the trade of arms in circumstances that would lead to the infringement of human rights, allow human rights abuses or war crimes to take place and allow poverty to grow. In order to do that, the treaty must have a broad spectrum and encompass not only conventional weapons and equipment but, as Amnesty International proposes, the technology to develop, maintain and produce them. I agree with Amnesty International that the arms trade treaty should also cover small arms, light weapons, ammunition and munitions of all kinds, and weapons that are used for internal security.

Many countries have national lists of controlled military equipment that correspond to the acceptable control lists that are suggested by the Wassenaar arrangement and the EU consolidated military list, but many countries do not. Accordingly, the arms trade treaty should aim to be comprehensive. We need as many states as possible to set a similar standard and not to accept the less-stringent UNRCA categorisations.

As Jamie Hepburn’s motion suggests, the arms trade treaty should aim to prevent civilian deaths and human rights abuses. That is a laudable aim and I hope that the Scottish Government will do all that it can to encourage the UK Government to be effective participants in the arms trade treaty negotiations.

17:19

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate Jamie Hepburn on bringing the issue to the chamber. I am sure that the debate will unite members across parties. We can be in no doubt that, at a time of great international unrest and conflict between nations and regions, the flow of arms needs to be monitored and controlled.

There has been a great deal of debate in recent months about how best to encourage countries to relinquish their nuclear weapons, particularly in the

light of recent developments in the middle east. However, when we see the human rights abuses that are caused by the unregulated and free trade of conventional weaponry across borders, we must acknowledge that the time to address that issue is now.

The flagrant disregard for the rights of citizens in favour of profiteering and strengthening economic ties cannot be allowed to continue. We have seen that situation most recently in the export of Russian arms to Syria through Cyprus. That is widely believed to have contributed to the escalation of civil unrest in Syria.

We must not forget that we are trying to achieve a safer and more secure world for our children to inherit. Some young people in Scotland have shown that the issue should not be confined to one generation or one elite group of decision makers.

A delegation of students from Scotland who are working with Amnesty International travelled to Westminster this week with the aim of lobbying the relevant Foreign Office minister to push for the most robust treaty within the realms of what is politically possible. Students from Paisley grammar school, the University of St Andrews, the University of Glasgow, the University of Stirling and Queen Margaret University will have a chance to learn more about the UK Government's stance in advance of the conference in July. They have shown enthusiasm and willingness to engage with the difficult questions that the treaty throws up, and we should adopt a similar approach. If we do not try, we do not progress.

As the UN conference prepares to meet at the end of July to discuss a route to a lasting and sustainable strategy, we must welcome the indications of support from many large member states, but we must also acknowledge that, as the global annual burden of armed violence stands at \$400 billion, the undertaking will be mammoth. However, it is a starting point for a long-overdue process.

Until now, there have been no internationally agreed standards to ensure that arms are "only transferred for appropriate use".

That phrase was used by the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs. I am sure that we would be interested to know exactly what "appropriate use" is determined to be when we refer to the transfer of conventional weaponry between ruling powers in nations. However, the arms trade treaty gives us cause for optimism, as signatories to it will begin to take a more proactive approach to regulating trade, in what it is hoped will be the first step towards far greater internationally enforced restrictions.

The arms trade treaty's overarching goal will be the creation of a standard set of guidelines for international arms transfers through requiring all states to abide by transfer controls, which will go some way towards increasing global security. I wanted to go into detail on that but, as I am restricted to four minutes, I had better not.

We should acknowledge the part that we have to play as residents of one of the main exporters of conventional arms among UN member states. Let us make the case for establishing a strong—or, as Amnesty terms it, a "bulletproof"—treaty. Let us realise that we have a part to play in encouraging representatives of the UK to approach the meetings next month with a proactive attitude, mindful of the immense political challenges that we face.

Before the debate, I tweeted:

"About to speak in Arms Trade debate in support of proposed UN treaty. Thinking of Dylan's great song Masters of War which goes a bit further".

Indeed it does, but the proposed treaty is an important step in the right direction. I congratulate Jamie Hepburn again on bringing the issue to Parliament.

17:23

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I was pleased to sign Jamie Hepburn's motion and I congratulate him on bringing the debate to the chamber. As I am interested in the work of the cross-party group on human rights, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the urgent need for a practical yet far-reaching arms trade treaty.

The panoply of statistics that my colleague Jamie Hepburn cited in his motion and his speech is truly harrowing. When we consider that my home town, Ullapool, has fewer inhabitants than the number of people who die every day from armed violence, one gets a sense of the enormity of this human crisis.

There is little regulation of the arms trade. It is ludicrous that weapons as devastating as grenade launchers and serious assault rifles are subject to lax control at best, while the trade in harmless commodities—such as the aforementioned bananas—is strictly regulated globally. That is madness. Those weapons are not used only by countries that are officially at war, but are in many cases used to suppress human rights within countries, with two out of every three people who are killed by armed violence dying in countries that are not at war.

That cycle of violence has obvious human costs, but what must also be borne in mind is the social cost of such needless conflict. Nations at war with

themselves, whether it be over territory, resources or another struggle, will never be able to heal and to develop. An unregulated arms trade perpetuates endemic poverty across the world, harms democratic debate and tears apart communities.

For many issues, the treatment can be worse than the disease, but Amnesty's proposals for an effective arms trade treaty are plausible. Instead of imposing a punitive weapons ban, it proposes a weapons transfer system that would prohibit the sale of weapons that are likely to be used for violations of human rights or international law. It defies belief that any nation could oppose a treaty with such laudable aims that, despite preconceptions, clearly does not call for an outright ban. The support of the UK Government and the defence community, one of the world's major arms exporters, for such a treaty shows the impact that the lobbying of MSPs and others across civil society can have on this issue.

I urge everybody in the chamber to continue to press the UK Government to hold firm to its line on this first step towards minimising the human cost of armed conflict. This is not some esoteric debate, but a subject on which lives and communities depend, and we must never lose sight of that.

17:26

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Congratulations to Jamie Hepburn on getting this important debate.

As some will know, my usual line in matters to do with armaments is in opposition to nuclear weapons and in favour of non-proliferation and eventual disarmament. In the debate on conventional weaponry, I tend towards the non-proliferation element of the argument as I feel that pursuing achievable major reductions in the small-arms trade in particular will make a major difference to the lives of millions of people across the world.

I have spoken to the former UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Sergio Duarte, about the issue on a number of occasions and I know that his comments on the suffering of so many from the effects of both the legal and the illegal arms trade come from his in-depth discussions with politicians and non-governmental organisations over many years.

For many people, the threat of crime, violence and Government repression is a big part of their everyday lives. That is helped along no end by the extreme availability of weapons. For instance, despite a review of its arms transfer policies in 2011 following the Arab spring, the USA remains a major supplier of arms to both Tunisia and Egypt.

Last year, the Americans delivered 45 M1A1 tanks to Egypt and it has an agreement to deliver another 125. On the other side of the coin is Russia, which supplied 78 per cent of Syria's arms imports from 2007 until 2011. Such deliveries continue despite the political repression going on there. With surface-to-air and coastal defence missile systems and an order for 36 Yak-130 combat aircraft accounting for a 580 per cent increase in the volume of Syrian arms imports over a five-year period, the large countries in the world that manufacture most of those weapons have nothing to sit on their laurels about.

In sub-Saharan Africa the blight of the small-arms trade goes on, unhindered by the humanitarian catastrophes of drought and starvation. There, as Ghana's national commission on small arms and light weapons stated just yesterday, the result of the unregulated trade in those guns accounts for the diversion of arms into illegal markets and thence into the hands of criminals, gangsters, drug barons, warlords and terrorists. The Ghana national commission wants sanctions, an arms embargo and other international obligations aimed at preventing armed conflict, the displacement of peoples and transnational crime. It also wants a major international effort put into victim assistance for those affected by that untrammelled trade in misery.

This truly is an international problem that, to the greatest extent, affects women and children. Highlighting that, earlier this week in the Philippines around 80 women dressed in black gathered in front of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila to call on the Philippine Government to support a strong gender-responsive arms trade treaty. In support of their case they handed in not only a letter to President Aquino but, as was pointed out earlier, a bunch of bananas in order to highlight the fact that as there are global rules regulating the trade in bananas there must also be a treaty regulating the trade in weapons that at present sees 2,000 people die from armed violence in both conflict and non-conflict situations every day.

Guns and other weapons will not disappear from our world any time soon, but we need all developed and under-developed nations to sign up to regulation and to halting the cynical manufacture of such weapons without adequate concern for where they end up and the carnage that they cause. It is time for a bullet-proof arms trade treaty.

17:30

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I, too, thank Jamie Hepburn for giving us the opportunity to debate this important issue.

In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, as part of the international bill of human rights, it has entered into our international law. It provides a universal standard of dignity that all human beings can expect, and a universal bottom line for all nations and states to be judged by.

It is a truly historic document and a set of ideals on which we are making progress. Education in many parts of the world has been transformed and extended to more and more children. We have recognised gender inequalities too, and women around the world are fighting for their rights. Of course, there remain vast problems with incredible leaps and bounds still to be taken—our economic system remains hardwired for inequality and necessitates grinding poverty for some—but we are standing on the verge of a potentially historic breakthrough in human rights: an international arms trade treaty that will ban the trade of weapons where they are likely to be used to kill, to harm, to terrorise and to oppress.

In 2006, we took a big step forward when 153 governments formally voted to work together on such a treaty. The notable absence was the United States, which continued to stand in the way. With the election of President Obama, the US has agreed to engage. In only 11 days' time, the treaty conference will begin four weeks of negotiation. My hope, and the hope of millions of people around the world, is that in the end we will have a strong, binding treaty that bans the trade of arms—large and small—by states and by arms brokers, where those arms are likely to be used to violate a person's human rights.

I am sure that that is the UK Government's hope, too, and to realise the hope I am calling for it to remain resolute in the face of challenges to water down and weaken the proposals. We must remain resolute that a bullet-proof treaty is all that we shall settle for.

The treaty must retain the obligation on states to refuse to authorise the transfer of weapons where there is a substantial risk of human rights violations. If the treaty does anything less than that, I believe, along with Amnesty International and others, that it is better to walk away to negotiate another day than to sign away a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to stop some 1,500 people being killed every day as a result of armed violence.

As has been mentioned, women and children are uniquely affected by this violence. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom is campaigning for the treaty to recognise the role that gender plays: weapons facilitate trafficking, forced prostitution and sexual violence, and arms are used to kill, threaten, or

intimidate women and children in their homes and communities.

What can be done to ensure that we deal with the reality that two bullets for every person on the planet are produced each year? The groundwork has been done. It is now up to our political leadership at the highest level, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, to make a strong public statement for a bullet-proof treaty. I sincerely hope that he will take the floor this week.

17:34

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

I congratulate my colleague, Jamie Hepburn, on securing this extremely important debate. Like Jamie Hepburn, I wear the hat of a parent when I speak in the chamber and I commend the courage shown by David Grimason and Mick North in channelling their grief positively. It is a testament to the strength of both men.

We should also note the work that is being done by the control arms campaign, which was nominated for a Nobel peace prize this year, and the work that it has done to bring together a range of organisations to campaign for much more stringent controls on the arms trade.

As the situation stands, the problem is that regulation is essentially the responsibility of individual states. Therein lies a conflict. The aggressive lobbying of arms companies often leads countries into a conflict situation. There are nations out there that have questionable foreign and domestic policies, and we cannot necessarily rely on those nations always to act in the best possible way in relation to the arms trade.

I am keen to see an arms trade treaty because I would like to see the prevention of human rights abuses. We have discussed how the countries that were involved in the Arab spring saw the state using weapons against peaceful protesters. Under an arms trade treaty, such states would not be able to import arms and other nations would not be able to continue to trade arms with them, as Russia does with Syria. There is no indication that Russia has changed its policy on the arms trade treaty and, indeed, it is one of the nations that is backing it, but Russia would be in breach of such a treaty if it continued to supply Syria with weapons, as it is doing.

Embargoes are ineffective. Oxfam has estimated that £2.2 billion of arms were imported by countries that were under embargoes. As countries are necessarily forewarned of an embargo, one often sees a spike in arms trading in advance of an embargo coming into force, as happened in Côte d'Ivoire, for example. Embargoes are also ambiguous. Huge loopholes give arms dealers the opportunity to claim that

they are unaware of the fact that the nations with which they are trading will use those weapons against their civilian population, as is the case in Syria and was the case in Libya, despite the fact that there is plenty of documented evidence to suggest the contrary.

A key consideration for companies and countries is that they will have to start to think in the long term when it comes to the trading of arms. They need to think about who they are trading with and where those arms might end up. They need to think about the security situation of their trading partner and who else their trading partner does business with.

The arms trade treaty is an important treaty that needs to be passed. I congratulate my colleague Jamie Hepburn on bringing the subject to the chamber. It is important that members of the Scottish Parliament have the opportunity to put our views on the record. I look forward to the treaty being passed and to a much better way of dealing with the international arms trade.

17:37

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Jamie Hepburn on bringing such an important debate to the Parliament and on the compelling case that he made for an arms trade treaty. I join him in paying tribute to organisations such as Oxfam, Amnesty International and the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund for their work in highlighting the issue.

As Jamie Hepburn and others have said, later this year at the United Nations, the international community will have an exceptional opportunity to reduce violence and suffering in our world by agreeing an international arms trade treaty. It is therefore vital that we seize this opportunity to secure agreement and for the world to unite behind it. A strong treaty would reduce the number of arms that are going to countries across the world where they are used by Governments, such as the Assad regime in Syria, to repress and kill their own people in violation of fundamental human rights and in breach of international law.

The problem of the international arms trade is hugely significant, but it seems to have been overlooked. Although we have strict global laws on many products, such as bananas, we have failed to properly regulate the trading of tanks, machine guns and bullets. Every minute, at least one person dies from armed violence. Two bullets are produced for each person on the planet every year. The irresponsible transfer of weapons is often responsible for the prolonged violence in many countries, exacerbating poverty and pushing developing nations backwards.

In March, I had the privilege of introducing a debate in the Parliament on the violence in Syria, which, in recent days, has thrown the need for an arms trade treaty directly into the media spotlight. As Jamie Hepburn reminded us, on Tuesday a ship was stopped off the coast of Scotland on its way to Syria. It was found to contain attack helicopters and other weapons thought to be from Russia and intended to be used in violence and repression against civilians in Syria. Dr Mounir Atassi of Scotland4Syria has stated:

“These kind of helicopters are used against civilians—they target innocent people who are being killed every day.”

As Bill Kidd detailed in his speech, Russia has continued to supply weapons to Syria despite the EU arms embargo.

The international community needs to take decisive action, but we must ensure—as Alison Johnstone said—that the treaty that is agreed is effective and comprehensive. It must not be weakened but must be strong enough to protect civilians and uphold human rights. It should be based on the principal of no trading of weapons that would be used to violate human rights and international law. If that principal were upheld in the treaty, it would be not only strong but just.

A strong treaty is essential. First and foremost, it would save many lives and prevent millions of people from having to flee their homes. Secondly, 2,000 people die every day as a result of armed violence and Africa as a whole spends \$18 billion a year on armed violence and conflict, which is about the same amount as it receives in aid from the rest of the world. Africa desperately needs to lift itself out of poverty, and we can only reflect on what an extra \$18 billion could do to ensure that people in African countries could live free from poverty and increase their standard of living. Thirdly, such a treaty would prevent developing countries from being pressured into spending money on arms that they do not need.

The time for us to act has arrived. There is unity of purpose from individuals to national leaders and from local campaign groups to international non-governmental organisations. As I recalled in the debate on Syria, the UN has declared that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. Here is a golden opportunity to give real and significant backing to that ideal, to preserve life and to nurture security. Let us make sure that we grasp it with both hands.

17:42

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): I, too, congratulate Jamie Hepburn on obtaining the debate. The issues that are highlighted in his motion are not abstract issues for

“far-off countries of which we know little”—

to quote Neville Chamberlain’s infamous phrase. Today’s world is global and interconnected, and no one can profess ignorance. Scotland has its role to play as a respected and responsible nation within the global community.

I pay tribute to David Grimson and the work that he has been doing in conjunction with Amnesty International and Oxfam to raise awareness of the human consequences of the unregulated international trade in weapons. Today’s debate is testament to his efforts to date, and I hope that it serves as both recognition of and encouragement for his efforts and those of the many others who are campaigning for change at the international level. Jamie Hepburn has explained how David’s campaign arose out of the heartbreak of personal tragedy and the loss of his young son, Alistair. The impact of such a crime on a family is difficult to comprehend, but David has sought to connect the private and the political, the local and the global, and to shine a light on the human impact of inadequate gun control and the terrible consequences that the unregulated trade in arms has for many innocent people worldwide. His campaign is a reminder that the arms trade is also about small arms, although a lot of the media focus tends to concentrate on the larger items of military hardware.

The shocking fact is that, worldwide, there are an estimated 750,000 victims of armed violence every year. The unregulated trade of weapons destroys not only lives but livelihoods, communities and human dignity. All too often, the arms trade puts tools of oppression into the hands of unsavoury regimes that are implicated in the abuse of human rights. Where controls are inadequate, even legitimately traded weapons can cascade downwards to militias, local warlords and criminals. The people who pay the heaviest price are invariably the vulnerable and the powerless: women and children, the young and the elderly, and non-combatants of all kinds including those who, like David Grimson’s son, have the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Behind the faceless statistics lie personal tragedies, lives lost and lives ruined.

Effective international control of the arms trade is now long overdue. In Scotland and the United Kingdom we have good reason to be conscious of the need for effective controls on guns and other weaponry. The Dunblane massacre horrified us all and we took action to confront the threat that was posed by legally held guns in the wrong hands. However, similar horrors are visited on innocent people around the world and we should remember that uncontrolled international transfers of arms are not a problem only for the so-called third world.

There is genuine cross-party consensus in this chamber and across the UK on the need for a treaty to regulate the international arms trade. People such as Malcolm Chisholm, Jean Urquhart, Bill Kidd, Alison Johnstone, Jim Eadie and Mark McDonald have spoken eloquently today on the issue. Fortunately, it is an issue on which the Scottish Government sees eye to eye with the UK Government. We fully support the efforts that the UK has been making to negotiate an effective arms trade treaty. That initiative has been eight years in the making and has gathered momentum and widespread support.

Next month’s negotiations in New York have the capacity to deliver real change and to provide the kind of international framework of controls that are desperately needed. Roderick Campbell and others discussed some of what is required. However, the negotiations will succeed only if they can proceed with the support of a wide coalition of nations. As has been said, we need an obligation to be placed on UN members to refuse to allow arms shipments where the risk exists that the weapons will be used to violate human rights and international humanitarian law. There is, of course, no more fundamental human right than the right to life.

This is, of course, a sector in which Scotland has a direct stake, particularly with regard to the naval and aerospace sectors. Governments and non-governmental organisations recognise that states have a right and sometimes a pressing need to acquire armaments for defence and security purposes, but legitimate trade should be transparent and it must be properly monitored.

In line with other UN treaties and conventions, every state should be accountable for its record and for the credibility of its arms control measures. The hope must be that objections can now be overcome and that a substantial arms trade treaty will be concluded this year.

In closing, I note Jamie Hepburn’s proposals that the Scottish Government write to the UK Government to express its support for the current initiative and to relay the views of members of this Parliament. David Grimson and Amnesty International will meet the First Minister next week to talk about the current campaign. That campaign, and David’s story, serve to remind us all of the reality of the arms trade.

This is a debate not about abstract claims and faceless statistics but about the rights and hopes of real people. It concerns the right to a life free from fear and heartbreak and from threats, poverty and injustice. That is the ultimate reality of the current situation, and it is long past time for the international community to take a stand.

Meeting closed at 17:48.

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e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-4061-9148-6

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-4061-9165-3

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland
