



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 24 October 2012

Session 4

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# Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 24 October 2012

[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

## Portfolio Question Time

### Education and Lifelong Learning

#### Regional Colleges (Outcomes)

**1. Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how the outcomes for the new regional colleges will be established, standardised and measured, and who will have responsibility for this. (S4O-01366)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** The reform of colleges is predicated on producing a sector that is more sharply attuned to the Government's priorities of jobs and growth. In order to measure better the sector's contribution to Government priorities, we have introduced new outcome agreements for colleges and universities, the negotiation and monitoring of which are the responsibility of the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council.

Outcome agreements have recently been concluded for each new region. The SFC is working closely with the sector to develop the new outcomes-based approach, recognising the ground-breaking change that it represents to our relationship with those institutions. To that end, the SFC has published guidance on outcome agreements for 2013-14, including a robust framework for measuring impacts. The next stage is to set up joint working groups with the sector to further develop the approach.

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Chic Murray. [*Laughter.*] I am sorry. Chic Brodie.

**Chic Brodie:** Presiding Officer—I think—I thank the cabinet secretary for his reply.

I attended the Ayr College graduation ceremony last week—other ceremonies are to come—and have had conversations with other colleges in South Scotland. The proposed structures appear to have been enthusiastically accepted. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is fair and in the interests of all stakeholders that clear and simple goals and outcomes also be established for each of the new boards and chief executives, and that they should be broadly comparable across Scotland?

**Michael Russell:** I suppose that I should say: "It's the way he tells them."

I agree with Chic Brodie. That is why we are developing a framework that clarifies what we will measure consistently across Scotland to demonstrate the sector's impact, and why we are trying to identify other measures to enable colleges to demonstrate a wider range of outcomes.

The reality is that we are moving forward positively and progressively with reform. In Ayrshire, for example—as Chic Brodie will know—the new regional lead, Steve Brannagan, is taking a very proactive role in ensuring that the colleges come together. Yesterday, I had a very productive discussion with Derek Little, who chairs James Watt College and is involved with the Kilwinning campus. A positive set of steps and reforms is being enthusiastically implemented, and I think that the stakeholders are excited by what lies ahead.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I never thought that I would have Chic Murray as my warm-up act.

How does the cabinet secretary envisage the outcome agreements securing quality of provision? He will be aware of the evidence that Scotland's Colleges gave to the Education and Culture Committee. It said:

"the strong downward trend for teaching funds is a concern in terms of retaining student numbers, breadth of curriculum and quality of teaching."

The National Union of Students Scotland reiterated that concern to me at the end of last week. How will the outcome agreements secure quality of provision across the college sector?

**Michael Russell:** I am absolutely certain that that process will, by ensuring that there is openness and transparency in the process of delivery, after the reforms are completed ensure that we have a more focused and targeted sector that is better able to deliver for Scotland's young people. This is about young people, not institutions, and I am confident—as many people in the colleges are—that what is being done is exactly what was required and, indeed, that it should have been done some time ago.

**Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab):** I have been contacted by students at James Watt College, Reid Kerr College and Clydebank College who are concerned about transport provision if courses are centralised in a specific location. Will the outcome agreements look at students' transport requirements to ensure that everyone can participate in places and courses that are on offer?

**Michael Russell:** Hugh Henry raises a good and important issue. I, too, have been contacted by those students and am absolutely clear that the outcome agreements should address access

issues. Those issues will be addressed as the outcome agreements develop. In any reorganisation of colleges, how to make it as easy as possible for people to access courses should be considered. There are imaginative solutions in many places in Scotland; Angus College, for example, already runs a system in which it transports students to the college for a variety of courses. I am absolutely certain that the reforms will benefit students—not hinder them.

### **Colleges (Waiting Lists)**

**2. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how many people are on waiting lists for college places. (S4O-01367)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** I hope that I can put an end once and for all to the inaccurate and misleading claims that every single application that does not lead to a college place somehow amounts to a person being denied a learning opportunity.

The facts of the matter are that many people who take up a college place make more than one course application, so it is quite wrong to claim that applications that do not proceed are automatically added to a waiting list.

We continue to fund colleges in a way that ensures that the level of teaching activity and the consequent number of full-time-equivalent college places that are on offer are being maintained. That is a significant achievement in the face of the swingeing reductions being made to Scotland's block grant by the Liberal and Tory United Kingdom Government cuts that were planned by the Labour Government.

**Neil Bibby:** I understand the minister's answer, and he is perfectly entitled to his perspective. However, we have seen newspaper reports of 10,000 people on waiting lists for college places. The question is a simple one. How many people are on waiting lists for college places?

**Michael Russell:** I have explained it to Mr Bibby on several occasions, but he does not wish to understand. I regret that, because he is creating a false view of what is happening. The suggestion that every learner who appears on a waiting list equates to one who has been turned away is palpably and completely false. Many successful applicants appear on waiting lists for other courses simply because they have made more than one application. Some courses are always popular; it has never been the case that every applicant is guaranteed their first choice. That does not mean that no alternative places are available.

Indeed—this is a highly significant fact—some colleges are still advertising vacancies. I therefore appeal to the member and those around him who

are cheering his flagging efforts on the matter to look at the facts and not to scaremonger, for our young people. Opportunities for all is a wonderful way of creating opportunities for all. It should be talked up and not talked down, as the Opposition always does.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** In the light of that answer, will the cabinet secretary tell us how many people in the 16 to 19-year-old group are on college waiting lists?

**Michael Russell:** I have explained to the Labour members, and I am happy to say it again to the other half of the unholy alliance that exists to talk down Scotland's young people. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Michael Russell:** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I am happy to explain again that the concept of waiting lists as presented by Neil Bibby and Liz Smith is utterly false. Opportunities for all is providing an offer of a suitable place in learning and training for every 16 to 19-year-old who cannot otherwise find education or employment. That is what is being done and it is very important. A fair-minded person would look at that and say that it is a major step forward. A fair-minded person would also look at the Scottish Government's budget and say that it is fantastic that we are doing so well when Liberals and Tories are slashing that budget and being aided and abetted by the Labour Party.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** With no preamble and no prejudgment, can I ask a simple question? How many people are on college waiting lists? We are asking for a number.

**Michael Russell:** The concept that Neil Findlay raises is a false concept and a false construct. There are no waiting lists of that nature. The reality is that places are still available in Scotland's colleges. That is a fact.

Yesterday, at the Education and Culture Committee, Neil Findlay talked about the reality in which he lives. The reality that I live in is that there are places in Scotland's colleges, that there are opportunities for young people, and that the enemy of opportunity is now the Labour Party, because it is attempting to scare young people out of training opportunities while backing Thatcherite reforms to the college sector that divided colleges, set them against each other, and Balkanised pay and conditions. That is the reality of the modern Labour Party.

### **Further Education (Access)**

**3. Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports access to further education for mature

female students, disabled people and those from low-income backgrounds. (S4O-01368)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** Colleges exist to help people towards employment and we have made it clear that that should include all people—whatever their background, needs or circumstances. Our colleges have a very strong record in that regard.

The Scottish Government is supporting colleges by ensuring that they are funded in a way that allows them to maintain their overall level of teaching activity and, consequently, the number of full-time-equivalent student places. Ultimately, colleges take the decisions on which courses to offer and whom to enrol.

**Siobhan McMahon:** The draft budget equality statement acknowledges that unless the process of restructuring Scotland's colleges is undertaken carefully, it may have a detrimental impact on the groups that I have highlighted. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give to those groups that their opportunities to attend college will not be vastly reduced, given that the draft budget reveals that the college, adult learning and further education budgets will be cut over the period of the spending review?

**Michael Russell:** I welcome Siobhan McMahon's confirmation that the equality statement says that the changes in Scotland's colleges—the regionalisation—should be undertaken carefully. She will therefore be assured—and reassured for all the people she speaks for—that it is being undertaken very carefully and thoughtfully in order to produce the results that we have set out to produce. I am glad that she welcomes that.

### Career Guidance (Young People)

**4. Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what importance it places on quality career guidance for all young people. (S4O-01369)

**The Minister for Youth Employment (Angela Constance):** The Government places a high priority on quality career services. That is why we published last year "Career Information, Advice and Guidance in Scotland—A Framework for Service Redesign and Improvement". We are committed to modernising services as a key element of our programme of reform to post-16 education.

**Drew Smith:** Can the minister confirm that she is aware that 100,000 young people are to be encouraged to miss out on a face-to-face meeting with a careers adviser as a result of a decision by Skills Development Scotland to introduce a traffic-light system that categorises most pupils as

"green", meaning that they need no assistance in planning for work and should log on to a website if they have any questions, with 35,000 young people who are deemed to be difficult being coded "amber" and allowed to see a careers adviser promptly, and around 300 of the most troubled pupils being labelled "red" and sent to charities such as the Prince's Trust? Clearly, pupils in different circumstances will need different levels of assistance, but does the minister honestly believe that it is correct that thousands and thousands of school pupils are to be told simply to log on to a machine or, at best, to have a web chat with a call centre, rather than receive face-to-face information, advice and support? If she does not, will she red-light that scheme now?

**Angela Constance:** It really saddens me that someone of Mr Smith's ability either misconstrues or misunderstands the important and imperative reforms of career guidance in this country. We are fortunate in Scotland that we have professional careers information, advice and guidance staff. What we need to do is to ensure that more of our young people—[*Interruption.*] Mr Smith should really listen to this. We need to ensure, particularly in the current climate, that more of our young people get a careers service that actually meets their needs. The purpose of the traffic-light system is to respond to the needs of different young people. Some young people need very intensive support, some young people have deep social problems that need to be addressed before we can get them on a journey to employability, and other young people need a more light-touch approach. Gone are the days when everybody should receive a 10-minute appointment with a professional careers guidance member of staff.

The important point is that, despite financial constraints, we are retaining access to a universal service in which any young person who wishes an appointment or face-to-face contact with a well-paid professional will receive that. However, now is the time for us to ensure that we meet the needs of all our young people, from those who are near the labour market to those who are very far away from it.

### Schools Building Programme (Artificial Sports Pitches)

**5. Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what provision has been made in the schools building programme for artificial full-sized sports pitches. (S4O-01370)

**The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan):** The provision of school sports facilities is important to the Government and education authorities. Consequently, high-quality sports facilities will

always feature as part of the consideration of any proposals for new schools.

**Tavish Scott:** Will the minister and the Government ensure that part of the provision for the new Anderson high school in Lerwick, which I welcome as both a parent and a former pupil, will be a full-size artificial sports pitch? Is he aware that I have spoken to the chief executive of sportscotland and that I understand that additional funds are available through a number of its programmes to ensure that such provision is available? Surely during the time leading up to the Commonwealth games and when Scotland has so many other positive sporting aspects, we should ensure that not just Anderson high school but schools across the country benefit from the kind of provision that is desperately needed?

**Dr Allan:** First, I congratulate Anderson high school and its rector, Valerie Nicolson, on the significant achievement of a new school building. Obviously, there is always negotiation between the Government's schools for the future programme and local authorities around such matters. However, within all the arrangements, the Government puts the interests of the sporting life of the school near the top of the agenda. That is a conversation that continues.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** In relation to the school building programme, I know that the minister will be aware that there is currently no statutory guidance in Scotland setting out minimum acoustic standards in new-build schools. In England and Wales, such standards exist and are a prerequisite for Government funding. When will the Government introduce such standards to bring Scottish acoustic standards up to the level of those in England and Wales, thus ensuring that all Scottish pupils can access the curriculum in the same way as their English and Welsh counterparts?

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** That supplementary question was a bit wide of the conversation about artificial full-size sports pitches. I do not know whether the minister wishes to respond.

**Dr Allan:** I am happy to get back to Neil Findlay, although I agree with your assessment, Presiding Officer.

#### **Dumfries and Galloway Council (Learning Town Consultation)**

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** I call Elaine Murray—I had to be careful there—to ask question 6.

**6. Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact its recent announcement regarding the schools for the future programme will have on Dumfries and

Galloway Council's learning town initiative consultation. (S4O-01371)

I am no relation to Chic Murray, Presiding Officer.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** The Government is fully committed to providing financial assistance to Dumfries and Galloway Council, through the third phase of the schools for the future programme, for its proposed new senior phase school at the Crichton campus. We support the council and its partners in exploring the opportunity to create a learning town in Dumfries by integrating on one site senior-phase schooling, further and higher education and research. However, the provision of funding under the programme is subject to a positive outcome to any statutory consultation that may be required for the project. That is a matter for the council and its local partners.

**Elaine Murray:** On 26 September, a Scottish Government press release announced that the Crichton 15-plus school "will be built" using non-profit distributing model revenue, despite Dumfries and Galloway Council's consultation on three options being in its early stages. Shortly afterwards, it was reported that the First Minister would pay a visit to the site. Is the cabinet secretary aware that those announcements by Scottish ministers have caused in the local community serious concern that the decision on the 15-plus school has already been taken, irrespective of the results of the consultation. As appeals under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 are to Scottish ministers, can he assure staff, parents and pupils that any appeal against the council's consultation process will be considered without prejudice?

**Michael Russell:** Of course I can make that commitment, which is exactly what is required under the law. I appeal to Elaine Murray, who—this might be the kiss of death—I regard as a friend, following the work that we have done together in Dumfries, to take a progressive rather than a partisan view of the issue. She is, after all, the Labour MSP with the highest majority in Scotland. That shows her good sense in judging such things.

It is important to have a debate about how the Crichton campus can serve the whole town—indeed, the whole region—in a unique and new way. Although I do not take a position on any of the individual options, they are progressive options. It is regrettable that one or two forces in Dumfries—certainly much less mature political forces than Elaine Murray—are treating this as an excuse to hit the Scottish National Party rather than as an opportunity to think about how this



progressive and positive set of proposals can be worked through by the whole community.

I appeal to everyone to consider the options and the ideas and to be ambitious rather than simply to retreat into a political laager and attempt to attack others for thinking new thoughts.

#### **Reading Bus (Aberdeen)**

**7. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what analysis it carries out of literacy initiatives such as the reading bus in Aberdeen. (S4O-01372)

**The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan):** This Government is committed to raising the literacy standards of all children and young people as part of our overall aim of improving the life chances of all.

I welcome literacy initiatives such as the reading bus in Aberdeen as an excellent example of our commitment to eradicating illiteracy. We want to capitalise on such initiatives, which is why we have set up five national literacy hubs within local authorities. Those will help to provide key evidence of the crucial components of success and to identify how we can work together to share those more widely and effectively across the country.

Within the literacy action plan, we have made a commitment to report to Parliament on progress on raising literacy standards by late 2013. Through the work of the standing literacy commission—which produced an interim progress report on our literacy action plan on 12 September—the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy, and the work of the literacy hubs, I am confident that we are already making an impact on raising literacy standards for all.

**Kevin Stewart:** Research on the reading bus's Apardion project shows evidence of cross-curricular engagement, including elements of history, heritage, culture and use of information technology in learning, as well as benefits for reading and writing. Will the minister look at that analysis and consider whether that good practice could be extended elsewhere?

**Dr Allan:** I am certainly happy to consider those issues further. I am aware of the cross-curricular nature of much of what is done in the project to which Kevin Stewart referred. Education Scotland has a key role in identifying and sharing innovative practice in a systematic fashion across the country. Education Scotland is already aware of the Apardion project, which is part of Aberdeen's reading bus project and was launched on Burns day this year. I will ask officials to consider ways in which the key findings on the project can be shared with other parts of the country.

#### **Rights of Children and Young People Bill (Consultation Responses)**

**8. Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the responses to the consultation on the rights of children and young people bill. (S4O-01373)

**The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell):** We published our analysis of responses to the consultation on the rights of children and young people bill on 11 May 2012. The 300 responses to the subsequent consultation on the proposed children and young people bill, which ran from 4 July until 25 September, are being analysed. All non-confidential consultation responses will be published on the Scottish Government website on 30 October.

**Annabelle Ewing:** I am pleased to hear about the number of responses that have been received. Will the minister confirm that, in the way forward on the bill, account will be taken of the basic tenets of the Scottish Government's getting it right for every child philosophy, with its key recognition of the importance of play in the early years?

**Aileen Campbell:** Absolutely. One key driver of the bill is to enshrine elements of the GIRFEC change programme in law so that our unique and distinctive Scottish approach that puts the child at the centre of service delivery is better co-ordinated around the needs of the child. Wellbeing is at the heart of the GIRFEC approach and of the children and young people bill, and play is a fundamental part of a child's wellbeing. The Scottish Government and I attach a great deal of importance to play, given how it can help with a child's learning and development. The importance can be illustrated by our successful play talk read campaign, which promotes positive interaction between parents and their little ones through more playing, talking and reading.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 10, in the name of Anne McTaggart, has not been lodged, and the Presiding Officers do not have an explanation.

**Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab):** Presiding Officer—

**The Presiding Officer:** My apologies. We are on question 9, from Duncan McNeil. I am having a bad day.

#### **Further Education (Access)**

**9. Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that people can access opportunities in further education. (S4O-01374)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** I welcome

the opportunity to respond to Duncan McNeil. We are the first ever Scottish Administration to ensure that every 16 to 19-year-old is guaranteed an offer of a suitable place in education or training through the opportunities for all scheme. I can think of no better way in which to ensure access to further education for young people throughout our country. Further, in the current academic year, we are funding the same volume of teaching activity as we did in 2011-12, and our draft budget makes provision for the same volume in 2013-14.

**Duncan McNeil:** As Audit Scotland has confirmed, colleges face major reforms and financial challenges, raising further concerns for the future of my local college, James Watt College, which, as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning will be aware, is in line for a further reduction in grant funding and is now expected to pay for a forced merger that it did not want. In that context, I ask again that access and opportunity for vulnerable students with complex needs be protected fully at this uncertain time. What specific measures are in place to ensure that vulnerable students will be taken into account and their needs will be acted on?

**Michael Russell:** I would be shocked and horrified if any college in Scotland did not wish to have and did not succeed in having the widest reach, to ensure that everyone who needs help, support and access gets that. To suggest anything other than that would be to defame the college sector, and I am sure that the member would not wish to do that.

The member raises the Audit Scotland report, which is entirely clear. I welcome the suggestion from Audit Scotland that there should continue to be complete openness and transparency in the process of change. I also welcome the fact that it sees the need for a strategic view of the delivery of further education, for the benefit not of institutions but of learners, whom I know Duncan McNeil will want to support.

**The Presiding Officer:** As I said, question 10 was not lodged.

#### **Employability Fund (Priorities for 2013-14)**

**11. Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what the priorities will be for the proposed employability fund in 2013-14. (S4O-01376)

**The Minister for Youth Employment (Angela Constance):** The development of an employability fund will mean that existing Scottish Government investment in pre-employment training through Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council is

brought together in 2013-14 through an integrated skills commissioning process. We are working with partners to finalise priorities for the fund in 2013-14.

**Patricia Ferguson:** Last year, the Scottish Government allocated additional money to Skills Development Scotland to allow SDS to fund a set amount of college places with a clear focus on employability. The minister's letter of guidance to the funding council this year indicates that the funding for that scheme in 2013-14 will consist of £24 million but, on this occasion, that will be transferred out of the college funding line. Does the minister plan to allocate any money directly to the scheme, or is she content to reduce further the funding that goes directly to already cash-strapped colleges?

**Angela Constance:** I reassure Ms Ferguson that there will not be a further reduction in the way that she outlines. The employability fund is an important development. She is right to identify that, as the draft budget says, £24 million will come from the Scottish funding council, which represents an increase of £6 million. We will ensure that a proportion is ring fenced for the use of colleges. On top of that, I will meet Skills Development Scotland to ensure that all its pre-employability funding comes together with the funding from the Scottish funding council. Via those means, we are augmenting provision to colleges.

#### **Further and Higher Education (Renewable Energy Sector Skills)**

**12. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it works with further and higher education institutions to develop skills relevant to the renewable energy sector. (S4O-01377)

**The Minister for Youth Employment (Angela Constance):** The key vehicle through which skills demand is articulated and addressed is the skills investment plan, which the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland jointly developed. The plan has the full support of industry and the energy advisory board. Creating opportunities for colleges and universities to meet the emerging needs of Scotland's renewable energy industry and its workforce is a high priority. The funding council and Skills Development Scotland are well positioned to fund opportunities and to respond to emerging needs.

**Rhoda Grant:** The minister is aware of the worrying skills shortage—a shortage of trained engineers—that could stall the Government's progress towards its renewable energy targets. Despite that, the Government has placed a cap on the number of students who can study engineering

in Scottish universities. What plans does the Government have to remove that cap, to ensure that we have an adequate supply of suitably qualified engineers?

**Angela Constance:** I understand that more than 25,000 students in the system are studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—subjects. Additional funding of £1.9 million in this academic year has been provided for an additional 300 STEM-related places. That funding and the number of places will increase over the next three years. The member should also be aware of initiatives such as the energy skills academy and our additional investment of £2 million in flexible training opportunities to deal with some of the skills shortages, which relate to industry looking for experienced mid-life engineers.

### **Mental Arithmetic Skills (Assessment of School Pupils)**

**13. Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what research is being undertaken into the acquisition of mental arithmetic skills by school students.(S4O-01378)

**The Presiding Officer:** That was not the exact question in the *Business Bulletin*, but I ask the minister, Alasdair Allan, to respond.

**The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan):** All pupils' mental arithmetic skills are assessed as part of on-going learning and teaching. Education Scotland supports teachers in that in a variety of ways, including through the recent publication of a professional learning resource on numeracy. Mental arithmetic skills are assessed at primary 4, primary 7 and secondary 2 as part of the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy in order to provide a picture of national performance. The first numeracy survey report was published on 28 March this year. In the senior phase, mental arithmetic skills are assessed as part of national qualifications.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I apologise, Presiding Officer. That was the question that I submitted. I forgot that the wording had been amended.

Is the minister aware of the Trachtenberg system or the 16 sutras of Vedic mathematics, both of which offer ways of extending mental arithmetic skills? Will he consider commissioning a report on the benefits of those systems in schools elsewhere with the objective of improving numeracy in Scotland?

**Members:** Hear, hear.

**Dr Allan:** Mr Stevenson rarely disappoints. I heard members saying, "Hear, hear." I hope that they understood what they were agreeing with.

I am aware of the member's interest in the area. I have established that the Trachtenberg system was invented during world war 2, not by a young Mr Stevenson but by a Russian Jew called Jakow Trachtenberg. I understand that it is sold as a software package and a range of books on the internet. The methods are quite detailed and, once learned, they are meant to enable learners to multiply any combination of numbers. The 16 sutras of Vedic mathematics, which were presented by a Hindu scholar and mathematician during the early part of the 20th century, do likewise.

I am sure that local authorities and Education Scotland will grapple with these issues, but I will not pretend to understand them any further.

### **Education Services (Children in Hospitals)**

**14. Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what guidance it issues to local authorities on the provision of education services for children in hospital.(S4O-01379)

**The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan):** The Scottish Government published "Guidance on Education of Children Absent from School through Ill-health" in 2001 to support education authorities and their partners in fulfilling their duty to make provision other than at a school for children and young people who are unable to attend school due to ill health. The guidance includes advice on education in hospitals.

**Alison McInnes:** As the guidance is now more than a decade old, I was pleased that the Government responded to Action for Sick Children's petition and agreed to review the guidance and set up a stakeholder group. The review group met for the first time in March 2012 with a view to producing revised draft guidance for consultation in September. I am disappointed that the group has not met since March.

Does the minister agree that the equitable provision of quality education services for children in hospital is important? Can he explain why the group's work has stalled? Does he still believe that the new guidance can be in place by January 2013? If not, will he advise us of the revised timetable?

**Dr Allan:** I can confirm that the stakeholder group will meet again before the end of the year. The Government takes seriously the need to ensure that it receives the group's full report. I think that we all agree that there is a need for revised guidance on the back of the 2001

guidance. Clearly, education authorities have a duty to provide education in these circumstances, but it is in everyone's interest that we update the guidance. As I said, with that in mind there will certainly be a meeting of the group before the end of the year.

### **Energy Sector (Subject Choices for Girls)**

**15. Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how the education system encourages girls to study subjects relevant to the energy sector. (S4O-01380)

**The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan):** The Government has committed £250,000 to careerwise Scotland, which is an initiative to encourage more girls to consider science, technology, engineering and mathematics careers, including in the energy sector. We will work closely with the Scottish Trades Union Congress, industry and our new science, technology, engineering and mathematics education committee to develop the way forward. In addition, Education Scotland promotes careers in the energy sector through its materials and online resources.

**Dennis Robertson:** The minister will be aware that in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire your future in energy modules are being taught to secondary 2 pupils. The modules help to address the gender balance issue and allow young children to study subjects relevant to their future in energy. Will the minister consider producing guidelines on the matter or encouraging other schools to teach the same modules?

**Dr Allan:** I know that the member has raised this extremely important issue in written questions. The Government is certainly aware of the your future in energy programme, which helps to raise young people's awareness of career options in the energy sector and to develop the relevant skills. It is vital that we engage with young people at a very early stage in their learning to ensure that they are informed of future career and other opportunities that are available, and subjects such as mathematics, science and technology, which support pathways into energy sector careers, play a very strong role in that respect. Education authorities and schools will make their own judgments about the most appropriate teaching resources but, as I have said, the Government is certainly convinced by the member's argument that, as with any other area of science and engineering, the energy sector should appeal as much to female as to male candidates for jobs.

### **Universities (Access)**

**16. Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent

discussions it has had with the National Union of Students Scotland on widening access to universities. (S4O-01381)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** Discussions on widening access are a regular feature of the Scottish Government's formal and informal engagements with NUS Scotland, which because of the student perspective it offers on this important topic is an important contributor in widening access to universities. That is why it is represented on the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council's access and inclusion committee, of which the Scottish Government is also a member, and why it has actively engaged with the Scottish funding council and universities on the development of widening access outcome agreements.

**Jim Eadie:** What opportunities exist in the post-16 education reform bill at least to consider placing an obligation on universities and the Scottish funding council to increase admissions of working-class youngsters from our most deprived communities and build on the positive results achieved by schemes such as the Lothian equal access programme for schools, which involves universities such as the University of Edinburgh?

**Michael Russell:** I am familiar with LEAPS, which I think is a very good scheme; indeed, good schemes are operating in other universities. For example, I visited the University of Glasgow's scheme some weeks ago, and I met two students from the St Andrews scheme at the Scottish National Party conference, where they were speaking at a Universities Scotland fringe event.

I agree with the member and confirm my intention to use the post-16 education reform bill to further this important work and implement the commitment in our manifesto to give widening access agreements statutory force. The proposals will be designed to allow Scottish ministers to require compliance with funding conditions on universities relating to any socioeconomic group that we reasonably consider to be underrepresented. That will be an important step forward. Of course, the situation will vary from university to university because, as LEAPS illustrates, many universities are already at work on the matter. Some are having greater success than others.

### **Colleges (Access)**

**17. James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it promotes access to college places. (S4O-01382)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** As I said in my answer to Duncan McNeil, our commitment to

young people through opportunities for all and to the college sector by continuing to fund the same volume of learning as we did in 2011-12 demonstrates this Government's strong commitment to promoting access to college places, despite the swingeing cuts being imposed on us from London.

**James Kelly:** Does the cabinet secretary understand that his attitude to the serious questions that were posed under question 2 about the crisis in waiting lists and the 80,000 reduction in college places are leading fair-minded people to conclude that this Scottish National Party Government is no longer trustworthy?

**Michael Russell:** It is tempting to respond to that question in the way that I feel it should be responded to by pointing out that there is no crisis in waiting lists and that the definition of Mr Kelly as a "fair-minded person" would stretch credibility. Not only is the college sector safe in this Government's hands, but it is being reformed to focus on young people. Unfortunately, the Labour Party continues to defend the Thatcherite Michael Forsyth reforms of the college sector that have been so destructive to Scotland and the prospects of Scotland's young people. That is the reality of James Kelly and his colleagues.

### Medical Students (Costs)

**18. Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what the average cost is of educating a medical school student. (S4O-01383)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council identifies that the average teaching resource for an undergraduate medical degree is £8,416 per year in the first two years of the course and £16,734 per year for the final three, clinical years.

**Dr Simpson:** I think that those costs probably do not include clinical lecturer costs, because I understand that medical students' full costs are much greater.

As the cabinet secretary knows, the number of medical students who were admitted to Scottish medical schools last year rose by 25, or 3 per cent, but the number of Scots who were admitted dropped by 40. Scots were replaced by fee-paying English and international students. As he is aware—I am grateful for his help on this matter—one of my constituents was refused access to Scottish medical schools but received an unconditional offer in England. Will the cabinet secretary undertake to investigate whether that case was unique? How many qualified Scots were turned down in favour of fee-paying English and

international students? Are we paying for non-Scottish students from the Scottish funding budget?

**Michael Russell:** My understanding is that clinical costs are met for all students by the national health service, just as when Scots students are south of the border the English NHS meets the costs. I would call that a useful and helpful reciprocal arrangement.

No Scottish student is refused entry to any faculty of any university because there is a preference for a fee-paying student. That does not happen, and the system does not allow it to happen, so it would not happen. Medicine is the most competitive course for university entrance. It requires not just a certain number of passes but the passing of a number of other tests, including the personal statement and the clinical aptitude test. The decision about admission lies with the university, and universities make the decision based on qualifications and all the other criteria.

I absolutely assure the member that I would not tolerate a system that preferred fee-paying students to Scottish students. It does not happen, it is not happening, and it will not happen.

## Winter Resilience

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-04518, in the name of Keith Brown, on winter resilience.

14:42

**The Minister for Transport and Veteran Affairs (Keith Brown):** Presiding Officer, thank you for the opportunity to update members on how Scotland is becoming more resilient, year on year, in the face of severe weather, and on the preparations that we have put in place for this winter.

As we all know, during the past three years Scotland has experienced some of the most prolonged and damaging severe weather that has been seen in modern times, mostly in the winter months but also at other times of the year. The one weather prediction that I can make with confidence is that Scotland will again experience severe weather, whether it is snow, a deep freeze, heavy rain or disruptive storms such as we had last winter.

As I said, severe weather does not happen just in winter. The summer flooding that affected neighbourhoods across Scotland—for example, in the Borders, Fife and Perthshire—is fresh in everyone's memory. The volcanic ash cloud also tested the country's resilience.

Only two fifths of the Scots who were questioned by the British Red Cross earlier this summer said that they were prepared for severe weather. They were most concerned about the loss of utilities—water, gas and electricity.

We cannot prevent the weather, but we can prepare for it. The Government's priority is to get the people of Scotland to think ahead and plan, and therefore to cope better with all kinds of severe weather. The changes that we are trying to bring about will not happen in a year or even in a few years. Our efforts represent a long-term investment in building a more resilient nation.

This year, the public sector across Scotland is more prepared for severe weather than ever before. Year on year, with the measures that the Government is putting in place, we become stronger in dealing with the challenges of severe weather.

On Monday, the Scottish Government began its second national resilience campaign in partnership with the British Red Cross. We are undertaking a range of activities to highlight to people that they can do relatively inexpensive but effective things to prepare themselves, their homes, their families, their communities, their places of work and their

businesses to withstand the worst effects of weather.

Our advice to the people of Scotland is that “taking a few small steps now can save a lot of trouble later.”

That is advice that we are promoting and that we are trying to ensure gets into the consciousness of people throughout Scotland.

We are engaging directly with the public and businesses on the high street. There will be 64 information roadshows visiting communities in each local authority area in Scotland and all 56 British Red Cross high street shops will become information and advice hubs. That takes the campaign out to more than 80 towns, cities and villages across Scotland.

We are also engaging directly with schools. Pupils from primary 5 through to secondary 3 will tomorrow tune in to an online glow meeting hosted by Education Scotland, where they will take part in a conversation about preparing for severe weather.

Young people can be particularly vulnerable—both physically and psychologically—in emergencies, so it is particularly important that they are prepared should they be caught in an emergency situation. However, they also have resources of creativity, energy and enthusiasm. It makes sense to build the foundations of the knowledge required through schools.

In June this year, the Scottish Government launched the ready for emergencies web resource, which gives teachers a range of suggested activities to select from to enable children and young people to develop resilience as part of curriculum for excellence.

The ready for emergencies resource was designed by Education Scotland, with a team of teachers, parents' representatives and resilience experts from the public and voluntary sectors, and it is already being well used in the classroom. To date it has been used by 3,300 people and has had 17,000 page views.

It is worth quoting the words of a teacher in a Scottish primary school that has been using ready for emergencies:

“It is great that whenever there is a major event in the news, we can follow it up with a meaningful activity, and think about what we would do if something similar happened here in the future”.

In my own constituency, that message was taken up by the pupils in Dunblane high school. In addition to ensuring that they were as well prepared for winter as possible, they took on the civic responsibility of trying to ensure that they

looked after older people in Dunblane during the winter. They should be commended for that.

One of the key priorities of the Scottish Government in preparing for severe weather is to keep Scotland moving. Transport Scotland delivers its winter service programme on Scotland's trunk road network from the start of October right through until mid-May.

Other measures that have been put in place ahead of winter include the purchase of two ice-breaking vehicles. I think that we can all remember the difficulties with trying to break down sheets of ice on the M8 after a prolonged period of very cold weather. We have made a commitment to have more salt stocked at the start of winter than was used across Scotland in the entire winter of 2010-11.

We also have a stock of more than 100,000 litres of alternative de-icers that will work in the severest of conditions when road salt becomes less effective—usually around 8° below freezing or below—and we are providing guidance for operating companies on when to use these de-icers.

We also have a strengthened network of weather stations and new cameras at 24 sites to improve decision making. We are publishing daily gritting plans to give the public and media more information about the treatments that are taking place. There is also a freight Scotland hotline for drivers to highlight network problems and provide guidance for heavy goods vehicle drivers. We also have a new YouTube video on winter service provision, which has been produced by key stakeholders and the public.

We will continue to alert the public to important information about travel conditions through a wide variety of communications channels including Twitter, Traffic Scotland internet radio and the Traffic Scotland website, variable message signs and mobile applications.

The multi-agency response team—MART—will continue to keep people informed and play a major part in the smooth running of the transport network this winter. Members may recall that it was an innovation two years ago that allowed all the key parties to be in the same place at Transport Scotland headquarters at the same time to aid decision making.

ScotRail has completed its £2.2m programme of investment, which includes reliability improvements to trains over the winter period through train modifications and the purchase of additional plant and equipment, enhanced facilities at stations and depots, and a significant upgrade to passenger information systems.

Network Rail has enhanced its infrastructure. For example, there is a new icebuster train, which costs between £1 million and £2 million and can quickly thaw out junctions and other key equipment. Network Rail also has many more four-by-four drive vehicles for operational and maintenance staff, and it deploys rail-mounted snowploughs at key locations across the network.

In addition, Network Rail, in conjunction with rail freight hauliers, has plans to maintain clear rail routes for critical freight train movements. That will ensure that sufficient priority is given to movement by rail of vital commodities, including fuel and food.

We recognise the serious implications for business and reflect airports' commitment to their passengers. Scotland's airports continue to devote significant resource to meeting the winter weather challenge, including investment in new equipment. For example, Aberdeen airport announced in August an investment of £1.3 million to upgrade its winter vehicle fleet to best deal with the worst conditions, and it has further investment plans for next year.

Severe weather can happen at any time and we have to be prepared for every eventuality. On 7 December last year the Met Office issued the highest level of warning—a red warning—for storm force winds across parts of Scotland. An Atlantic storm soon brought gusts of up to 164mph in some parts, with gusts of 77mph in Edinburgh. The advance information we received from the Met Office enabled us to take steps to prepare the people of Scotland for the disruption to travel that resulted.

The Met Office has done a lot of work since then to raise awareness of the meanings of its weather warnings. Red warnings are only issued when there is confidence that high levels of disruption will occur, and the public and responders must take action on those warnings to mitigate the effects of a potentially dangerous situation.

Farmers also have an important role during severe winter weather. In recognition of that, Transport Scotland, in partnership with the National Farmers Union and local authorities, has developed a code of practice to encourage and facilitate roads authorities and farmers to work more closely to get additional resources where they are most needed. I welcome Jim Hume's amendment in that regard.

The storms of last winter caused some of the worst disruption to electricity supplies in recent memory, with more than 170,000 customers across Scotland affected. That is a significant number, although it is far less than the number during the previous comparable boxing day storms of 1998, which cut off over a quarter of a million

users. With networks that are tens of thousands of kilometres long and which serve hundreds of thousands of customers over sparse geographical areas, there will be occasions when the power goes out. Scotland's two distribution network operators have made network improvements in recent years, invested millions and enhanced their emergency arrangements in partnership with local responders.

In emergencies, the capacity to exchange information and provide direction and support through resilient telecommunications is vital. I will highlight two areas on which we have made progress in preparation for this winter.

First, we have acted to address issues that arose last winter regarding the Airwave network utilised by our emergency services. A tri-service group co-ordinated by the Scottish Government worked with Airwave Solutions Ltd to recommend appropriate action. Procedures have been improved to minimise site access problems during periods of intense and prolonged bad weather, generator maintenance scheduling has been enhanced, and engineering improvements have been delivered to improve electrical power reliability. Additionally, greater fuel, battery and electrical power generation has been provided to selected sites, to provide greater self-sufficiency in remote areas during prolonged periods of severe weather. We intend that a similar review of winter performance will be carried out in 2013 so that we can continue to learn lessons and improve reliability.

Second, we have installed a resilient telecommunications network—RTN—which, in the event of public network failures, should provide back-up capacity for strategic co-ordinating groups—SCGs—to communicate with each other and the Scottish Government. For the particularly challenging areas of Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute, we have added a new satellite communications service.

We have been making the most of new technology as well. The Scottish Government is introducing a new mobile phone application for iPhone and Android that is aimed at helping the public to cope during emergencies. By downloading and using the ready Scotland application, people will be able to gain quick and easy access—

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** Will the minister give way?

**Keith Brown:** I give way to Alison Johnstone.

**Alison Johnstone:** Speaking about new technologies—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):** Could we have Alison Johnstone's microphone on please? Please put your card in, Ms Johnstone.

**Alison Johnstone:** Speaking about new technologies, the minister may be aware that the Dutch are about to test heated cycle paths that will use heat that has been gathered during the summer. Finnish research shows that slippery roads rather than cold weather stop people cycling. Will the minister commit to making sure that cycle paths and footways receive the same attention that our roads will this winter?

**Keith Brown:** I made the point at the start of my speech that we want to keep Scotland moving. To the extent that they will help keep Scotland moving, I am more than willing to look at the issues that Alison Johnstone raised.

The new technologies that I have been talking about allow us to gain quick and easy access to essential information from ready Scotland as well as storing advice and emergency contact details offline. Individual users will be able to find out when a road was last gritted and when it is next to be gritted, and they will get more road-by-road detail of the effects of weather on individual route journeys that they intend to make. The app stores the contents of a household emergency plan, adding national and local emergency contacts so that everything is in one place. It stores personal emergency checklists for the home, travel and business, which can be easily customised, and it will also advise users on which radio station to listen to during emergencies and provide the frequency needed to tune in to it.

It is fair to say that we will learn something new each time that Scotland is beset by severe weather, which will not always be in the winter time. The Government and the responder community are doing all that we can to build Scotland's resilience to severe weather for the winter and all year round.

**Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind):** I thank the minister for giving way near the end of his speech. I was waiting for what I thought would be the crescendo. What is the Government going to do about the potholes that are left after the bad weather? They just get worse here.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, you must conclude, please.

**Keith Brown:** I think that Margo MacDonald has stolen Alex Johnstone's thunder. We have procedures in place to deal with potholes. My responsibility is for trunk roads, and I am confident in the procedures that we have to repair potholes quickly. Outside that, the responsibility lies with the relevant roads authority.



Our infrastructure and services stand ready, and we urge the people of Scotland to be ready for severe weather all year round. That will help us to build a safer, stronger and more resilient Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the 2012 Ready for Winter public awareness campaign launched on 22 October in collaboration with the Red Cross, responder agencies and a wide range of partners across the public, private and voluntary sectors; commends the partners for their continuing long-term commitment to ensuring that Scotland is as prepared for severe weather as it can possibly be, and supports the activities taking place during Resilience Week, which emphasise that preparedness is essential, not just for winter, but for all kinds of severe weather, and highlight the simple steps that individuals, families, businesses and communities can take to prepare for this and other emergencies, all of which contribute to a more resilient Scotland.

14:56

**Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab):** As the minister said, long-range weather forecasting is notoriously unreliable because weather patterns are influenced by many factors, including variations in sea currents. For example, the unusually southerly position of the jet stream earlier this year brought cold, wet weather to Scotland during a period in which we would usually hope to have at least a glimmer of sunshine, and the oscillations of El Niño and La Niña in the Pacific Ocean are creating unpredictable weather patterns across many parts of the globe. Indeed, we were told that this summer was due to be a barbecue summer to rival the summer of 2003, but I had only three barbecues this summer—which was still two more than the previous year—and for two of them we had to eat indoors.

Despite the unreliability of long-range weather forecasting, however, it is always better to be prepared, particularly in view of the predictions by Adrian Crocker of British Weather Services, who suggests that the coming winter will be colder than average and will follow a similar pattern to that of 2010. I hope that that prediction will be proved wrong, but we must be prepared.

We have to be ready when the weather does its worst. We experienced very cold winter weather conditions in 2009-10 and 2010-11 and, as the minister said, flooding events are becoming ever more common and more serious. We have also endured extreme high winds such as hurricane bawbag last year.

The two extreme winters prompted both the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments to assess whether resilience measures needed to be improved. The UK Government reviewed transport-related provision, including rail, while the Scottish winter review group took a wider

perspective that included local authority services, pressures on the national health service and the business community, and the contribution of the voluntary sector.

Government—both local and national—plays an important role in planning for problematic weather events, but responsibility also rests with communities and individuals to be prepared for the worst. I have logged on to the ready Scotland website, which has a number of useful suggestions for individuals and businesses. I registered for the draw for a home emergency pack and trust that, if I win it, it will come signed by the minister. The website is a good initiative, but not everybody is computer savvy or even has access to information technology. Some of our citizens who are most vulnerable to inclement weather are unlikely to be able to access information by that medium, which is why a hotline for older people, for example, could be vital in times of emergency.

When severe weather strikes, the first challenge is to keep transport routes open. HGVs often present problems when there is snow and ice on roads with even quite shallow gradients. Indeed, the M74 in my constituency is prone to closure under icy conditions due to the problems that HGVs encounter.

Getting up-to-date information to travellers is vital to prevent continual build-up of stationary traffic. We know that there were major problems with information during the first day of severe weather in December 2010. Indeed, I had personal experience of that because my daughter was stuck on the M73 in heavy snow. I found it difficult to find out what was happening or to get any information to her. Since that time, improvements to the Traffic Scotland information service have been made and, as the minister said, improvements in the provision of information to mobile devices have helped with some of the issues, too.

Resilience involves keeping public services functioning when possible and keeping the public informed when that is not possible. For example, schools may be closed at short notice because it is not safe for pupils and teachers to travel to school or because low temperatures have caused heating systems to fail. However, last-minute school closures create difficulties for working parents—and their employees—especially those in occupations that come under greater pressure during severe weather, such as the NHS.

In addition to local authorities organising methods to ensure that parents get information quickly by using texts, for example, parents should be encouraged to make plans with relatives, friends, and other parents about how they will cope with a sudden school closure and about

which of them may be able to take time off work perhaps to look after several children on a rota.

I also encourage workplaces to make arrangements to allow homeworking, where possible. That clearly assists people to cope with transport issues and sudden childcare problems.

Periods of prolonged low temperatures present problems for other services. During the 2010-11 Christmas and new year period, my constituency experienced less snowfall than other parts of the region but, because the ground was not insulated by heavy snow, there were a lot of problems with frozen pipes and tobies—in many cases, the latter had not been laid sufficiently far under the road surface—so many of my constituents ended up without water services for several days. There were situations in which, for example, one elderly gentleman took snow out of the garden to put in his kettle in order to have something to drink.

One problem was that Scottish Water's call centre could not cope with the volume of calls that were coming in, and that needs to be looked at. I must say that Scottish Water's senior management did a sterling job—they dealt with phone calls and texts right into the night during a public holiday. That was an excellent service so I have never criticised them for how they responded at that time.

People who are able to contribute to individual and community resilience should be encouraged to do so. During the previous severe winter, there was unfortunately a fair amount of disinformation around, such as the idea that, if someone cleared the snow on the footpath outside their home and somebody else then slipped and fell, the snow clearer might be held responsible and could be sued. That was a load of nonsense, but people need to be confident that if they make efforts to help themselves and their communities those efforts will not lead to unexpected prosecution.

More plentiful provision of community salt and grit bins increases community resilience so long as the contents are stored in such a way that they do not solidify. Access to the bins can be difficult, and sometimes when a person looks into the bins they can see that the salt is totally solid.

It appears that lessons have been learned from the two recent harsh winters and that additional equipment has been purchased. I saw in the *Daily Mail* a nice little picture showing the minister wearing a rather natty set of gloves and scarf and holding an umbrella. However, my concerns about that page are not about the sartorial elegance of the minister but about the article next to his picture.

The article indicates that, due to financial pressures, a number of local authorities are looking to cut their winter resilience programmes.

The Scottish Borders Council is reportedly hoping to save £170,000 by reducing the gritting priority for 100 miles of its road network. Last year, the Western Isles Council reduced the time interval during which gritting takes place by four hours a day. Six of our councils are cutting their gritting programme and three have reduced their salt reserves, although in some cases that is because councils believe that they can access additional salt more quickly if that is required.

**Keith Brown:** It is worth looking behind some of the figures that Elaine Murray cited. Last year, many local authorities had very high levels of salt but did not use it because of how the winter turned out. It is for local authorities to take decisions that are in their interest. We are conscious that across the country we have more than enough salt in place—we have more salt at the start of this winter than we used during the bad winter two years ago.

**Elaine Murray:** I thank the minister for that clarification of the issues in the article. However, councils are implementing cuts not because they do not take winter resilience seriously—I know that they do—but because they are under extreme financial pressures, which is worrying.

I believe that Margo MacDonald and Alex Johnstone will mention potholes. In Dumfries and Galloway, we still have miles of potholes from two years ago, when the ice got into the road surface and it cracked, which it has not yet been possible to repair. There is still a huge backlog of repair work that needs to be done but which councils do not have the finances to do, despite the extra £4 million that has been provided. If we experience further severe winters, the incidence of potholes will probably increase and councils will not be able to tackle the problem.

We are talking about a serious issue that is a consequence of decisions that were taken on the funding of local authorities. We cannot just say that it is down to the local authorities to do something. If they face serious pressures, they will not be able to address some of the problems. They are experiencing serious difficulties in doing so.

**Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):** It is my recollection from my time as a local councillor that the funding for repairs to the road network to deal with potholes, for example, came from councils' capital budgets and not their revenue budgets, so I am not entirely sure what point the member thinks that she is making.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You are in your final minute, Dr Murray.

**Elaine Murray:** Capital budgets are under huge pressure as well—it is not just revenue budgets that are under pressure. I did not mention revenue budgets specifically and, while some repairs might

be done using the revenue budget, some might be done through the capital budget. It does not matter which budget the money comes from; the important issue is the fact that funding is being constrained.

If the pessimistic forecasts turn out to be correct, there will be an effect on rail services, too. I have had a look at the temporary timetable that would have been implemented if there had been severe weather last year. It involved substantial reductions in network coverage, with no trains at all north and west of Inverness or on the west highland line, no service between Aberdeen and Inverness or south of Girvan, and none to commuter destinations such as Milngavie, Wemyss Bay and Shotts. That is not entirely the responsibility of Government but, if similar restrictions are planned in the event of severe weather this year, the public need to know about them, because we cannot have a situation in which people turn up at stations expecting trains to be running when, in fact, they have been cut back significantly.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must close now, Dr Murray.

**Elaine Murray:** That information needs to be put in the public domain in advance of any prolonged period of severe winter weather.

I move amendment S4M-04518.1, to insert at end:

“, but notes with concern reports that some councils are considering cutting back on winter resilience measures such as road gritting due to financial pressures caused by the Scottish Government’s poor financial settlement for local authorities”.

15:07

**Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):** I welcome the debate and thank the minister for bringing forward—for the second time, I believe, after last year’s debate—a debate on winter resilience at the beginning of the winter, when we can talk about things in the cold light of day, without getting involved in the heated type of discussion that we had two years ago at the expense of a minister.

The weather over the British isles is extremely unpredictable. Those of us who have made a study of climate change and the science behind it will realise that the one thing that will happen as a result of global warming is not that Britain will get any warmer but that our weather will become even less predictable. Some people might suspect that attempting to predict the weather and to improve winter resilience is a losing battle in the long term, but it is our duty to do all that we can to ensure that every lesson is learned and that mistakes that have been made in one incident are not repeated

in the next. That is why debates such as today’s are so valuable.

I want to cover a couple of issues, the first of which comes under the broad heading of transport. The worst experiences that I had during the winter period at the end of 2010 related to the unpredictability of rail services. I am well aware of why the rail services between here and my home in Stonehaven were as bad as they were—the weather was obviously the cause—but a serious problem at the time was the shortage of heated points on the east coast main line north of Edinburgh. Can the minister inform us whether more of the points on that route will be heated and will therefore not freeze as they did during that period?

My main problem with the rail system at the time was one that other members have highlighted—it was to do with the issue of information. The inaccuracy of the information about rail services that was available during that period was probably a bigger problem than the lack of rail services. My worst experience was one that I have told the chamber about before. When my wife phoned the national rail information line, she spoke to a very nice Indian lady who told her that there were no reported problems with rail services in Scotland, even though, as far as we could see, there were no trains at all running in Scotland that day. The importance of information can never be overstated. I am glad that the minister has already been able to say more about how information for travellers will be improved.

Another point about transport that I will make relates to roads—my amendment is about roads issues in particular. I share the concerns that are expressed in the Labour Party’s amendment about the danger that local authorities, for whatever reason, may have decided to save money on preparedness for the winter. I would like further reassurance from the minister that we do not have local authorities in Scotland that have failed to make adequate provision and that will be unable to provide the necessary support to keep roads open and clear of ice and snow should we suffer a bad period of snow and ice during the winter. It would be an extreme disappointment if the lessons of previous years have not been learned and if a single mild winter has been enough to encourage some councils to return to their old ways.

Another roads issue is the quality and maintenance of infrastructure. The lesson that I learned from 2010 was that many of the problems on our roads were associated with poor long-term maintenance. If there is a pothole and a man goes round to fill it with tar and roll it flat, the problem is that if there is snow, and it melts, and if a snowplough passes over the top of it, it is not long before the fill that was put in the pothole is thrown

back out. I saw individual potholes in my own backyard filled and refilled on up to four occasions during the six-week period at the end of 2010. For that reason, we need to take a long-term approach and encourage local authorities to be as responsible as possible in dealing with that issue.

**Mark McDonald:** Does the member agree that another issue that arises is when the road is dug up—by a utility company, for example—and then not properly filled in or patched up correctly, which allows ice to get into gaps, creating potholes? The issue is whose responsibility it is to pick up the tab for the repair work.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Johnstone, you are going into your last minute.

**Alex Johnstone:** Absolutely, I would not dispute that what the member describes is an issue.

I will have to move quickly to ensure that I cover some of the other points that I need to raise. Much has been said about those who are responsible for maintaining the electricity system, for example, but a key area that has not been raised so far is fuel poverty. For whatever reason, we have seen energy prices—particularly electricity prices—rise dramatically over the past two years. My concern is that, although some people will lose power as a result of grid failure, others will lose power because they simply cannot afford to pay for it. That is one area where our winter resilience may be lacking in the next year.

I will close on the issue of ensuring that individuals realise that it is their responsibility to make responsible decisions about how they handle themselves and their families during the course of bad weather. The worst disappointment is those who venture out in the worst of conditions and find themselves getting into difficulty, having failed to realise that they should have known better. In spite of what some speakers have said, I believe that the Met Office provides a reliable weather forecast over the two to six-day period and that people should know better than to put themselves in danger.

I move amendment S4M-04518.3, to insert at end:

“and seeks the Minister for Transport and Veterans’ assurance that Scotland’s trunk road operating companies and local authorities have achieved the state of preparation for winter road maintenance that is consistent with the recommendations in the 2004 Audit Scotland report, *Maintaining Scotland’s roads*, and its follow-up report in 2011.”

15:14

**Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD):** The last days of October are fast becoming characterised not by gaining an extra hour, or by Hallowe’en, but

by the annual winter resilience debate in the chamber. I welcome the fact that the Government has, once again, brought forward a debate on the matter before winter truly begins to bite so that we might question the minister on the Government’s level of preparedness. During the severe winter of 2010-11 we were denied this opportunity until after our infrastructure and transport networks had ground to a halt. It is not good enough to simply be reactive in such matters and it is right that we have the chance to debate the matter today.

I support the principles and content of the minister’s motion, but I thought it necessary that the plight of rural Scotland should be addressed. During wintry weather conditions, the disruption of the transport network in the central belt will inevitably command most attention, but the problems that extreme weather causes in rural and isolated communities are no less severe, and they are more common, of course. The isolation of those communities can make the problems that are caused by wintry weather much more difficult to contend with. A closed road in the central belt can often be passed off as a minor inconvenience, but if the Rest and Be Thankful section of the A83 is closed, that can add up to 50 miles to some journeys. If a bus service is disrupted in Edinburgh or Glasgow, another route or rail may be an option, but in a Highland or island community, it is likely that a single bus service will be the only means of passage into and out of the town for many people. That applies to those who are lucky enough to have public transport, of course. More often in the countryside, cars are the only mode of transport. People can therefore be isolated in their own rural homes when the weather gets tough.

A one-size-fits-all approach simply would not work, which is why innovative measures must be attempted to confront the challenges that rural Scotland faces in times of severe weather. Scottish Borders Council, which has already been mentioned, deserves praise for its initiative in producing its resilient communities plan, which seeks to ensure that volunteers in the Borders have the chance to work more closely with the council and emergency responders during periods of severe weather. In rural areas, there may be rare occasions when public services are temporarily unavailable, so developing a framework for the co-ordination of voluntary support on a community council basis is an intelligent response to the difficulties that many suffer in winter. The support in mind ranges from clearing pathways for the elderly and disabled to placing sandbags in areas that are at threat of flooding. I understand that, in the Borders alone, four community councils have signed up to the plan, and I hope that more will follow. Indeed, it sounds as if the idea is one whose time has come

and that it should be explored by other local authorities.

In last year's debate, I welcomed Perth and Kinross Council's initiative of adopting a farmer assistance scheme and called on the minister to engage with NFU Scotland to roll out such a scheme nationally. Such a partnership between Transport Scotland and NFU Scotland's membership would be an asset at times of extreme wintry weather for our more isolated communities. I congratulate the minister on taking my advice and reaching a tripartite agreement involving Transport Scotland, NFU Scotland and the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland. The code of practice that has been established to allow local authorities to draw on the support of farmers and rural businesses—not just farmers, of course—is to be welcomed, and I am optimistic that it will prove to be a success if it is called on this winter.

In the spirit of consensus that has been commonplace in Holyrood this week, the Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the motion and all the amendments.

I move amendment S4M-04518.2, to insert after “possibly be”:

“; recognises that rural communities and businesses are most vulnerable to bouts of extreme weather and can experience disproportionate levels of disruption in comparison to other areas of Scotland in the winter months; welcomes the tripartite agreement between Transport Scotland, NFU Scotland and the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland in establishing a code of practice for local authorities to call on the support of the farming community in remote areas of the country”.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We turn to the open debate. At this stage of the debate, we are tight for time and it is unlikely that I will be able to call all members to speak. Speeches should be six minutes, but shorter speeches would be appreciated.

15:18

**Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP):** I, too, welcome the debate and acknowledge the considerable work that the Minister for Transport and Veteran Affairs, his officials, the services and the Red Cross have done to minimise the problems that we might face should there be a severe winter. We are being told that it may well be severe, and I humbly suggest to the minister that, no matter how seductive they are, his Gene Kelly-lookalike photos in the national press may well be no palliative to that severity. The coming challenge may be immense, and I am sure that the minister will have the undiluted support of all of us to face it, whether in keeping our elderly and other dependants warm and safe or keeping open our

transport arteries, particularly our main arteries, to keep commerce and industry moving.

On Alex Johnstone's point about fuel poverty, health clinics and hospitals must be at the centre of attention should there be a severe winter. This morning, members of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee had a conversation with Energy Action Scotland in which that point was highlighted.

We also need to ensure that the physical links and communications with our rural areas and remote environments are open, as Jim Hume said. He also mentioned the national code of practice.

Those, and more, are crucial components of our national resilience programme.

**Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** I highlight the recent Citizens Advice Scotland energy briefing, which says that the Scottish Government and local authorities might be able to help with rural fuel poverty by looking at the crisis loans that are provided, particularly in view of off-grid issues, such as the fact that oil suppliers often want a £300 minimum order before they will deliver.

**Chic Brodie:** That point is well made and noted.

The resilience programme should be packaged under the two themes of communication and equipment availability. It is good news on the latter. For example, we now have two new Finnish Raiko icebreakers that are designed to cut through the hard-packed ice that we might face as we did in 2010, particularly on the M8. It is also good that Network Rail has the plans and equipment to keep points from freezing. Munters will be used to steam out frozen points. Network Rail will also use a helicopter that is equipped with thermal imaging cameras to identify any points heaters that are not working. It is also encouraging to hear that more salt will be stocked at the start of this winter than was used across Scotland during the winter of 2010-11, and that we also have something like 70,000 litres of alternative de-icers available for any emergency.

It is also encouraging to hear that the police and the multi-agency response teams are ready to advise the public about disruption. Jim Hume claimed that the minister took his advice on rural areas and it is encouraging to hear about the agreement that will ensure that the farmers get full support.

**Margo MacDonald:** Will the member give way?

**Chic Brodie:** No, I must finish.

We do not just have to deal with domestic issues. It is critical that airports and cross-border rail links continue to operate effectively. The

maintenance of aeroplanes and rail stock is critical, as is the availability of buses.

However, in these times, communication is the critical factor. I am not talking just about finding the no-so-hot spots that disrupt services but about determining the locus and status of people who might become prisoners in their own homes because of weather conditions, such as the elderly, the disabled and children. It is incumbent on us to give dependants in our society a hotline to an angel database before we get into a severe winter. We need to create a buddy programme that will get those in our society who can do so to adopt a granny, grandad or disabled neighbour for the winter, and to look in and see that they are okay. The combination of a harsh winter and excessive fuel bills declare that nothing less than such a buddy programme will be acceptable and effective.

In supporting the motion, commendable as it is, I say that nothing—whether it be keeping our main transport open or keeping our commerce and business alive—is more important than ensuring that we look after our dependants, and that they are embraced and kept warm. That should be a major priority.

15:24

**Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab):** First, I pay tribute to our winter heroes, such as the good neighbours who clear the snow in their streets and check on the elderly; the workers on the roads and the transport system who have sometimes dangerous but always vital jobs to do every winter; and the emergency services that serve our communities all year round. Without their efforts Scotland would simply not stay open and safe during periods of extreme weather and challenging weather conditions. I take this opportunity to put on record my appreciation of all of them.

For me, today's focus must be on how our economy, public services and national infrastructure cope with the range of adverse conditions that we can expect to face this winter. Businesses unable to open their doors, staff who cannot get to work and goods stuck on the transport network and not going anywhere all add up, such that it can be make or break for many small businesses. In addition, an extended period of cold weather can leave the elderly and vulnerable isolated and heightens risks associated with ill health by interrupting the provision of key services.

A resilient Scotland keeps moving through the winter but, when the weather overwhelms us, as it has on more than one occasion in recent years, the impact can be severe. We cannot control the

elements, but we can prepare for them and ensure that every year our response to bad weather is better planned, better informed and better understood.

**Margo MacDonald:** I agree with everything that the member has said and take issue with none of it; the only thing that worries me is that we are not talking about the money yet. It is the money that prevents the local authorities from putting into effect the plans that the member is talking about. Everybody knows how to do it, but what do we do it with?

**Margaret McCulloch:** I agree with that point and I will address it slightly later.

It was clear last year that lessons had been learned after the events of the two previous winters. Across government, the business community and the voluntary sector, people are more mindful of the need to invest in appropriate preventative measures. For example, First ScotRail invested in de-icing polytunnels and issued new equipment to station staff in response to the winter of 2010-11, which the company says cost it £7 million; Scotland's farmers are getting involved in clearing roads to help to keep the rural economy moving; and, in my area, South Lanarkshire Council now holds 35,000 tonnes of salt, which is up from 8,000 tonnes just four years ago. The council is also converting some of its existing fleet of vehicles into snowploughs, and last year it purchased 14 Scandinavian gritters.

I welcome the improvements in South Lanarkshire but, given the difficult nature of the budget settlement, not every council has been able to develop contingencies to the same extent. However, whatever the service and whoever the provider, everyone has to understand that, although the most severe winter conditions remain uncommon in much of Scotland, particularly in the central belt, they are by no means alien to our climate. As we have learned to our cost, if we are unprepared when heavy snow comes, the country can be brought to a standstill.

The strength of our resilience in harsh conditions depends on investment and prevention, but in many ways it also depends on the relationships that the Government can form with crucial strategic partners. In reflecting on last year's debate on this subject, the minister may recall another example from South Lanarkshire in which the council offered to assist contractors in clearing trunk roads on white Monday in December 2010 but was knocked back—to this day, I cannot understand why. South Lanarkshire Council and the contractors have come to an agreement that should prevent a repeat of that breakdown, but I would be interested to know what the Government is doing to help local authorities share resources with Transport Scotland and

contractors as part of a concerted response to the winter disruption.

I note from the motion and the minister's earlier comments that the Red Cross will be partners in resilience week after the success of its campaigning on the issue prior to the previous election. Everyone in the chamber values its contribution and involvement. I also highlight the often understated role of the Met Office, because good preparatory work has to be informed by the best expert advice, and the Met Office is a world leader in its field. We know that its advice assists the Government directly, but it also helps the NHS plan on-going care for patients with long-term conditions through the winter, and it is invaluable to key growth sectors such as the tourism industry and the oil and gas sector.

An additional £11 million has been released by the Treasury following pressure from the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee that will boost the predictive capacity of Met Office supercomputers by 20 per cent. I hope that ministers here agree that the Met Office should retain its world-leading position, with the best technology and the best scientific minds, and that Scotland should continue to benefit from access to its forecasts and analyses whatever the constitutional future of the United Kingdom.

I will conclude by saying that, although public awareness is crucial, our resilience will come down to more than self-reliance and communication. It takes proportionate preventative steps to keep Scotland moving and open for business whatever the weather, and it takes partnership, too.

Councils are the Government's most valuable partners when a winter crisis hits, and they have to be given the support that they need to get on with the job.

15:30

**Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** As someone who is involved in the motor trade, doing deliveries, I declare an interest.

One of the biggest challenges that we face with regard to winter resilience is the highly unpredictable nature of the weather in Scotland, which presents a particular problem for weather forecasters. Most other countries that have to deal with snow and ice are at an advantage, as they have historically had patterns of weather that are predictable and they have a more consistent experience, so that, even when weather is described as being severe, they are able to counter the problems by being better prepared.

In other words, in the Alps, say, when snow falls for a given period of time, forecasters are able to

state fairly accurately in advance the duration of the snowfall, the depth of the snow and roughly how long the snow will remain on the ground. Also, historically, whatever the amount of snowfall, the same conditions are likely to be around for a substantial time. Therefore, on the continent, whatever the treatment that might have been used, there is a good chance that it will be successful for a substantial number of days or, more probably, weeks.

That is in stark contrast to what our resilience teams have to deal with, which might involve spreading grit on roads and paths only to find that a thaw happens soon after and is quickly followed by a drop in temperature or, worse, by rain. That cycle can often take place within half a day.

The unpredictability of our weather brings a great deal of obstacles and challenges to our workforce. Indeed, if we brought over the workforce from the continent, who are highly skilled in their own backyard, and put them to work in Scotland, even with their own equipment, I am sure that they would give up in a week. In fairness, the same might happen with our teams—who are, in my opinion, just as competent and highly skilled—if we sent them over to those countries.

The differing conditions between our countries, as well as the different form of training and experiences of the workers, demonstrates the unique situation that Scotland is in during the winter months. However, what is done extremely well on the continent—something that we need to learn from and get better at—is ensuring that the driving public, both private and professional, are ready and better prepared for any eventuality. There is no doubt that, across the board, there is a cavalier attitude and a state of unreadiness on the part of drivers when it comes to bad weather.

As I already stated, I have been involved with the motor industry through my business, which my son now runs. The majority of our drivers are women. Contrary to the opinion of some, my opinion is that women, when given the chance, make some of the best and most careful drivers whilst, at the same time, getting the job done quickly.

**Members:** Hear, hear.

**Gil Paterson:** They get well paid, by the way—the same as the men. They know when to call a halt and when to alert our head office in the event of bad weather.

We have a no-drive policy that is based on up-to-date information, and we take our vehicles off the road for the duration of any extreme weather conditions. I cannot remember any of our motors or vans being marooned in bad weather. We have normally taken affirmative action sufficiently far in advance.

I encourage the Scottish Government and local authorities, which have a significant role in these matters, to do all that they can to educate the public and advise them as forcibly as possible when not to travel, particularly on motorways. If someone becomes stuck on a motorway, it is well-nigh impossible to get them off the road without significant rescue operations.

I appreciate the great difficulty in keeping the roads open and I appreciate even more the excellent work of the roads and clearing teams. If I could make a wish for them, it would be not for less snow or ice, but for the gift of informing them about where and when the weather will hit and for how long. If we give them the information, they will do the job well.

Government can do many things but, when it comes to dealing with mother earth, all that we can do is prepare for the worst and hope for the best. I am pleased that the Scottish Government is preparing in advance to deal with the weather this winter, whatever it is. I fully support the initiatives that are being taken.

15:35

**Brian Adam (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** We have had comparisons drawn between the continent and here. Of course, it is not just winter that causes problems. Thankfully, we do not have too many problems with earthquakes, but in Italy people who forecast such things have been banged up as a result of their forecasts. I hope that we do not get to the point at which we bang up some of our forecasters.

I am pleased that we are having this debate. Alex Johnstone identified that the issue is not just about the preparation that local authorities make in relation to transport, but about the preparations that others make, including us as individuals, and how we react to events that might or might not happen. Transport is important and knowledge about it, whether on road or rail, is particularly important. There is certainly evidence that steps have been taken to improve the information flow, particularly from ScotRail, and we hope that that will be successful. There is no doubt that many of our constituents are concerned about knowing what will happen and when.

It would be wonderful if we all had the foresight that Mr Paterson prayed for, but it is unlikely that that will happen. However, it is fair to say that people can take steps. As members of the Scottish Parliament, we can take steps. We can pay attention to the question of the money. As far as constituents are concerned, that is about the costs of energy and utility bills and their likely impact. How the situation will be managed is a matter of significant concern for constituents.

That is why, this weekend, Maureen Watt, Kevin Stewart and I are holding an energy advice surgery in Aberdeen, so that we can pass on tips from energy saving organisations such as SCARF—Save Cash & Reduce Fuel. Although that is not based exclusively in Aberdeen, it has certainly been around in the city for a long time and it exists to help folk make preparations so that they are resilient, not just in the winter, but throughout the year. I commend that type of activity to colleagues. Maureen Watt, Kevin Stewart and I look forward to engaging with constituents and providing them with tips on improving their lot financially and on preparing for eventualities. Those things are important.

I am delighted that we have all received many bits of advice in briefings from the private and public sectors on a range of topics. It is a pleasure to see that people in the private and public sectors have already made much effort to ensure that we are resilient this coming winter and that steps have been taken to ensure that we are prepared.

15:41

**Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am delighted to speak on the important subject of winter resilience and to have the opportunity to represent the many concerns of my constituents in Glasgow.

In recent years, we have seen at first hand the importance of having a strong and resilient transport network in challenging weather conditions and we have seen the need for effective management of the resources that are designed to deal with adverse circumstances. Slow and inefficient responses from the Scottish Government to severe weather lead not just to frustration and delay for commuters but to potential isolation and loneliness for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

For too many people, winter means taking difficult decisions about household incomes. It is unacceptable that any of my constituents should be forced to choose between heating their homes and putting food on the table but, tragically, that will be a daily reality for an increasing number of families.

If the Scottish Government fails to respond swiftly and effectively to failures in our transport network, we risk damaging any fragile economic recovery that our small businesses, employers and employees and their families across Scotland are counting on. The challenges for employers are great enough without the added financial pressure of vehicles that cannot be used, employees who cannot attend work and suppliers that cannot deliver. That is why the debate concerns much more than cancelled trains and delayed journeys.



Scotland needs a Government that recognises the huge range of issues that directly impact families over the winter months and a Government that adopts a proactive approach to supporting communities in that difficult period.

A key issue for many of my constituents in Glasgow is the increasingly high cost of energy bills at a time when many household incomes are overstretched. Many older people who are isolated and have low incomes are being exploited by the pricing structures of the big six energy companies that operate in the UK. Customers who remain with one company for long periods are being substantially overcharged for energy supplies in comparison with new customers who have moved from a competitor. Too often, vulnerable and older people suffer the most from that disgraceful business practice, as they are the least likely to have access to the information and support to make informed choices about their energy supply and costs.

I commend the action of many of my colleagues in the Labour Party in working to promote the switch together initiative, which is helping many overstretched families and vulnerable people in our communities. In Dundee, our Labour MSP Jenny Marra is championing a collective approach to rising energy costs, to drive down prices by negotiating tariffs on behalf of thousands of ordinary customers and achieve far more competitive pricing as a result. We in the Labour Party believe that

“by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone”,

and that opportunity allows ordinary people to have the kind of bargaining power that could make a real difference to household budgets over the difficult winter months.

It is time for the Scottish Government to learn a lesson from the Scottish Labour Party and work with us to deliver innovative and dynamic solutions to the tough realities of supporting Scotland in the current challenging economic circumstances.

My constituents in Glasgow deserve a consistent and effective response to severe winter weather and its effects on transport links and infrastructure. More fundamentally, they deserve a Scottish Government that fully addresses the wide range of issues that affect families and vulnerable people who live alone during the winter. I will continue to campaign for those who suffer from fuel poverty, who have to make the tragic choice on a daily basis between heating and eating.

Finally, I encourage the Scottish Government to invest in and work with organisations such as Energy Action Scotland in order to support families and individuals with ever-shrinking household incomes to make smart choices about their energy

supplies. Citizens Advice Scotland, which was mentioned earlier, is working with Scottish communities to provide useful and impartial advice on energy consumption and on how to find the best deals. In the past year alone, CAS has noted a rise in the number of people who struggle to make their payments during the winter. That is simply not good enough.

The Scottish Government should support the Scottish people in their struggles during the winter instead of cutting local government budgets, which are already so overstretched. It is only through the full and unqualified resourcing of voluntary organisations and community groups that we can minimise the effects of severe winter weather alongside our unfortunate economic reality.

15:47

**James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** Before I go on to say what I want to say, I will touch on the Labour amendment. I cannot speak for every local authority, but I can speak for the one that I used to help to represent, and Glasgow City Council cut the road maintenance budget for—I think—five years in a row until we had the bad winter. It is now reaping the consequences of its inaction during that time. It is a bit rich for Anne McTaggart and others to stand up and tell the Government that it should be supporting communities and ensuring that the roads are fit for purpose when, in her city, it was her Labour-run council that put the roads in their current condition in the first place.

**Anne McTaggart:** How much of a reduction does the Scottish Government grant to local authorities represent?

**James Dornan:** Local authorities have a bigger percentage of Government money than they have ever had. Labour members might not want to acknowledge that, but it is a fact.

Let me get on to business. I think that it was Brian Adam who talked about Italian weather forecasters getting the jail.

**Alex Johnstone:** Earthquake predictors.

**James Dornan:** That is right. I was just thinking that Michael Fish will be thinking, “I need to move.”

It has been said already—I am sure that it will be said again—that Scotland is famous for its variable weather. It is not uncommon for us to have four seasons in one day.

**Gil Paterson:** Or half a day.

**James Dornan:** I can beat that. Many years ago, I was at a Celtic v Falkirk game at Ibrox—it was a semi-final in the league cup—and we had four seasons in 90 minutes. It was a terrible day for me, and we were beaten in the replay.

However, the past few winters have seen us experience some pretty horrendous weather extremes, which have only highlighted how important it is that we do all that we can to ensure that we are as well prepared as we can be. We have realised that, in extreme weather, we cannot rely on the provision of normal services. That might be because workers cannot get to work or because, once they are there, they cannot get out to provide their services. That is why I am encouraged by the minister's comments about the additional two Raiko icebreakers, which will certainly help to keep important arterial routes open in the most extreme weather.

Nonetheless, the difficulty in moving from one place to another is why it is more important than ever that we build on the local community organisations that are often at the coalface in delivering services when we are faced with extreme weather that disrupts our normal services. That is why I welcome the steps that the Government has taken recently to help us all to become that much more prepared for the extreme weather conditions that we could face in the coming months.

Two years ago, when we experienced one of the most extended cold spells in living memory, it was heartening to see local groups and organisations work together to ensure that the elderly and vulnerable members in our community were cared for. In my constituency, church groups arranged for volunteers to check on their neighbours and deliver groceries, meals and medicines to the elderly, infirm and other vulnerable people. Organisations such as the scouts and Boys' Brigade organised the shovelling of pathways to ensure that they were kept clear of ice and snow and would spread the salt from the bins, which the council replenished fairly regularly.

I am pleased to learn that more salt will be stocked at the start of this winter than there has been in previous years to ensure that it is available if and when needed.

**Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab):** The member should congratulate the council.

**James Dornan:** When it does it right, Hanzala, I will congratulate it.

The people at the Castlemilk Pensioners Action Centre in my constituency, including ex-lord provost of Glasgow the indomitable Pat Lally, ensured that otherwise housebound constituents were still able to visit the centre and take part in a number of activities that the centre runs or attends such as trips to the ballet or theatre, day trips, exercise classes and so on and that they were provided with a hot meal and company. Although that sort of thing happens all year round, it takes on even more importance in the winter because it

allows the elderly to get out during the dark months and minimises the feelings of isolation and despair that can occur in extreme weather. The centre also provides information on where people can receive help and assistance on fuel poverty and other issues.

The recently announced initiative that was mentioned by the minister will greatly benefit those church and community groups and will help them to help the local community by providing ready and simple information about how we can all make life that wee bit easier for ourselves, friends, family and neighbours. I will not list the many helpful things on the ready Scotland website, as we have received the briefings and know what they are. However, I just want to note that we cannot simply rely on local care and interventions and that a national approach must be taken. Who among us will not welcome the £65 million that has been allocated this year to tackle fuel poverty and improve energy efficiency? That money will be most beneficial to those most in need of support during these difficult months and will help to ensure that the elderly and vulnerable are able to stay warm in their homes.

Of course, some of the energy companies are doing much the same as the Government. Scottish Power, which has its headquarters in my Cathcart constituency, supplies electricity to more than 2 million people in the south and centre of Scotland. It produced an analysis of its response to last year's hurricane-like weather and has ensured that lessons have been learnt from it. During that bad weather, 850 additional field staff were mobilised and Scottish Power employees worked for 40,000 hours to restore supplies to the affected areas. Those dedicated and conscientious workers deserve a huge vote of thanks for being out in conditions that many of us would fear to leave the house to go into.

As has been said, fuel prices are of particular concern at winter time and Scottish Power has pledged to continue with its policy of no winter disconnections as well as continuing the warm home discount scheme, which gives a £130 rebate on fuel prices to all those eligible who are living in, or are at risk of, fuel poverty. That, coupled with the Deputy First Minister's welcome announcement at the weekend of an extra £200 million to tackle fuel poverty over the next few years, will help to make a real difference to the lives of many of our constituents.

As has been said and as we all know, Scotland's winters can be harsh, cold, wet and snowy, with weather unfit even for ducks. It is critical that we have a sustainable plan to ensure that we are as able as possible to deal with that weather and I am delighted that huge steps appear to have been taken towards ensuring that

such a plan is in place. It is incumbent on us all as parliamentarians to use whatever medium we can to make the public aware of available help and advice and I am sure that that is what we will do.

I ask the chamber to support the motion.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before we move on, I respectfully remind members to use full names when they address each other.

15:53

**Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP):** First, I agree with James Dornan: I, too, do not agree with what the Labour Party amendment says. My experience from my previous life on a local council is that councils have been steadily reducing the number of roads being gritted since the 1990s and well before this Government ever came to power. In most councils' roads gritting policy, primary routes are gritted first and only when those are clear do they grit other roads, streets in housing estates and so on. That is the fact of the matter.

I welcome the ready Scotland campaign, which the Red Cross and the Scottish Government launched on Monday to ensure that Scots are prepared for a severe winter. Investment has been made in technology—for a change—to ensure adequate planning and preparedness. Transport Scotland says that road users will have the most comprehensive and up-to-date travel information possible, so that they can plan ahead during bad weather. I hope that that works out.

The public awareness campaign, in partnership with the British Red Cross, is the second such campaign and will provide information on how to prepare for and cope with severe weather. Information will be distributed through television, radio, the press, social media and national roadshows.

I was stuck on the roads a couple of years ago, as other members were, and as I mentioned when we debated winter resilience last year. Like Jim Hume, I welcome the timing of this debate. Only yesterday, I drove to the Parliament, and as anyone who travels on the M8 knows, the fog always lies at Harthill. I am always amazed by the number of people who do not drive to the road conditions. People were doing 80 or 90mph and jumping in and out of their lane. I hope that as part of the campaign people will be urged to drive responsibly. I love people who tailgate me. I often think that I will ask them to come into my car and sit beside me, because they are right up at the back of the car. What will happen if they try to brake in severe weather? They will just bash into the car in front. I hope that what the minister said will come true.

The vast majority of car owners think that they have done enough to prepare for poor driving conditions when they have an ice scraper and some de-icer. I love it when I go into Asda and see people buying their de-icers and scrapers. They should prepare by ensuring that their car is fit and their tyres are inflated and road worthy and have tread. They should ensure that they drive to the conditions.

I welcome the investment in technology to ensure adequate planning and preparedness. I welcome the trialling of closed-circuit television cameras in gritter vehicles, to help to inform decision makers about real-time conditions. After being stuck on the brae in Motherwell a couple of years ago I made the point to the minister that councils should have grit bins on hills, because gritters cannot get by all the traffic that is stuck on the road. Some people nowadays have wonderful new cars that just cannot get up small hills—I just love it to bits when I see that.

**Keith Brown:** I agree with the member's point. He might remember that the six-point plan from 2010-11 included the placing of strategic supplies of salt on trunk roads. We do that at Harthill, which he mentioned and which is on a rise. There is also a procedure whereby we can take out the central reservation so that emergency vehicles can get in to grit.

**Richard Lyle:** I welcome that.

The Scottish National Party Government has made a commitment to have more salt stocked at the start of winter than was used across Scotland in the entire winter of 2010-11. I do not need to go into the figures; we have all got them.

Like Jim Hume, I welcome the code of practice between Transport Scotland, the NFUS and local authorities, which will enable farmers to offer better support in the clearing of roads. We had a situation in North Lanarkshire in which a farmer asked the council if he could help but the council rejected his offer. Falkirk Council got the farmer to do work, and when North Lanarkshire Council got back to him to ask for help he said, "Sorry, I'm tied up working for Falkirk." I am sure that farmers will help to clear the roads and I welcome their help.

Anne McTaggart mentioned fuel poverty. A household is in fuel poverty if it spends 10 per cent or more of its post-tax income on gas and electricity. For every 5 per cent increase in energy prices, 46,000 households are pushed into fuel poverty. Fuel poverty has risen steadily since 2002 and reached a peak of 33 per cent in 2009. Fuel costs have risen six times faster than household income since 2004. I am sure that Anne McTaggart agrees that the £65 million budget that the Scottish Government has allocated to tackling

fuel poverty is welcome. It is terrible that in the 21st century our people live in fuel poverty.

I welcome the debate. I welcome the minister's comments and I wish him well.

15:59

**Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am delighted to speak in the debate. I will focus on two main areas: our transport infrastructure and the impact on services for our elderly and vulnerable citizens.

As members will be aware, Transport Scotland is required to take steps to prevent snow and ice from endangering the safety of pedestrians and vehicles on our public roads. For trunk roads, Transport Scotland performs the duty by contracting companies to keep our key national routes open.

I have looked at the winter service plan for south-west Scotland, which includes the city of Glasgow. I am impressed by the level of detailed planning that appears to have taken place, to the extent that the contractor Amey is able to outline in great detail in the plan which vehicles will treat which routes and how long treatment will take.

Although I welcome that level of detail in the plan, Transport Scotland and its contractors were found wanting in the winter of 2010. As I see it, despite the impressive plans, one area in which we could fall short is that of co-operation between different contractors, agencies and local authorities. I would be interested to hear from the minister what is being done to encourage joint working. I am talking about in particular the deployment of plant and manpower from less affected areas to assist in other areas that are trying to cope with severe conditions. What systems are in place to encourage that?

I welcome the commitment made by ScotRail to give passengers faster and more accurate information regarding train service disruptions. I hope that ScotRail will also inform the Indian lady Alex Johnstone referred to so that if he calls, she will be able to give him that information.

Turning from land-based transport to water, members may be aware that great progress has been made in recent years in regenerating the Glasgow to Edinburgh canal. I would be interested to hear from the minister what steps are being taken to deal with the canal freezing over.

The canal is once again a great asset for the city of Glasgow, but I have concerns about the risk to children who might be tempted to wander on to the ice. There is more work to be done to inform our young people about the potential dangers of our waterways in the winter.

I will focus the remainder of my remarks on the impact of cold weather on the elderly and the vulnerable, particularly given the citizen's advice bureaux figures that show a rise over the past year in the number of people coming to them who are struggling to pay their energy bills.

The Government's cuts to the central heating and insulation budget, which is down to £48 million last year from £71 million the year before, will make it hard for many households to cope with the effects of a severe winter this year.

Last year two of my elderly constituents were denied a central heating system after the SNP Government moved the goalposts to make it harder for households to benefit from the scheme. Such cases should make all members of the Parliament ashamed.

I also have concerns about local authorities, which will be placed in a difficult position as a result of the year-in, year-out squeeze on their budgets. I would like the minister to assure the Parliament today that councils have sufficient funds to do the job.

I now come to roads and road safety. Our motorways and trunk roads are suffering because of a lack of maintenance and a lack of joined-up work between contractors. I give the example of the M8, where there are hardly any cat's eyes and white lines are missing or have been totally eroded, so it is in a dangerous state. I want the minister to explain why he has allowed that level of poor workmanship on the M8. I travel on that road frequently and I find it quite dangerous during the hours of darkness.

Last but not least, we have a responsibility to continue to build on the good practices that we have developed over our historic years. Resource will be a huge issue for service delivery. Many members have mentioned potholes. It is easy to say that potholes are local authorities' responsibility, but if we do not give local authorities money, they cannot do anything about them.

I would appreciate the minister's commitment to assisting councils around the country to achieve the goals that I have mentioned.

16:05

**Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP):** The actions of this Parliament are sometimes subject to forensic media scrutiny and, indeed, criticism. That is perhaps entirely as it should be in a democracy, even if we will, on occasion, feel that as an institution, or as the Government or the Opposition, we are being judged harshly. Generally, though, across the 13 years of its existence the Scottish Parliament has been considered to have impacted positively on the

lives of the people of Scotland. Although the various parties in this chamber will and do have their differences, more often than not when it has come to doing the right thing we have come together.

Compare and contrast that with recent events at Westminster, where a specific proposal was rather disappointingly not taken forward. I refer to the Winter Fuel Allowance Payments (Off Gas Grid Claimants) Bill of my SNP MP colleague Mike Weir. That private member's bill would have permitted new pensioner claimants who rely on off-grid sources of energy to register for the winter fuel allowance in late July rather than late September, allowing for payments to be accessible to that vulnerable group by no later than 30 September. That would have allowed them to fill their tanks ahead of the increased charging that inevitably arises as winter unfolds. To be clear, it was a cost-neutral measure that attracted cross-party support from Conservative, Labour, Lib Dem, Plaid, Social Democratic and Labour Party and Democratic Unionist Party members, yet it failed to proceed because of the Westminster system, under which such bills are, for the first reading, scheduled for consideration one after the other on a Friday.

The bill was never actually debated. Mike Weir's proposal was the second up for consideration but was not reached after coalition MPs talked out the bill ahead of it and Government whips objected to it and prevented it from automatically securing a second reading. Incidentally, it might interest members to learn that the talked-out bill was introduced by Labour MP Barbara Keeley and covered the responsibilities of a variety of bodies in England with regard to supporting carers.

I should acknowledge that the bill will have a second chance at progressing. It has been rescheduled for consideration, but not until next March. By that time, one imagines that the worst of the inclement weather will be behind us, and the bill is so far down the running order that it is highly unlikely to be reached.

There are 488,000 users of off-grid gas in Scotland, and it is estimated that 197,000 of those are rural households. In the Angus local authority area alone, there are more than 20,000 recipients of the winter fuel allowance. Arithmetic was never my strongest suit, but from those stats I think that it is fair to suggest that there are considerable numbers of my constituents for whom Mike Weir's bill would have provided a degree of relief. Indeed, I do not doubt that members who represent rural constituencies—indeed, those who represent most regions—have constituents who have lost out.

We are not talking only about older constituents who are deemed to live in fuel poverty, although clearly they have been the biggest losers. Being

able to fill the heating tank before prices climb would help out thousands of off-grid pensioners, in some cases significantly and in others by a little bit. Many who are faced with filling up their tanks at the beginning of winter—before they receive the winter fuel allowance—cannot do so. They may well choose to go for half a tank if that option is available to them. By the time the allowance comes through they will be in the depths of winter, by which point the price will have escalated.

An Office of Fair Trading review of the market found that there were many competing suppliers, but by definition many of those are small. Although some of the larger players offer greater payment flexibility, many smaller ones do not. Indeed, a citizen's advice bureau has reported a case in the north of Scotland where a client's heating oil supplier refuses to supply anything less than £300-worth at a time.

In general terms, as Dick Lyle noted, fuel costs have risen six times faster than household incomes over the past eight years. In so doing, they have undermined the Government's efforts to tackle fuel poverty through energy efficiency measures. If we break that statistic down it becomes evident that there is considerable disparity between on-grid and off-grid supply costs. The average cost of heating and providing hot water for a typical three-bedroom house using liquefied petroleum gas—LPG—is reckoned to be £2,300. The cost for heating oil is £1,700. That compares with a figure of £1,200 for gas.

Over the past four years, the cost of heating an average home with propane is estimated to have risen by £850 and with home fuel oil by £750, whereas the comparable rise in the figure for gas is estimated to be £400. Given the present economic situation, with pressures on fixed low-income households, whether they are in fuel poverty or not, any measure that alleviates the financial pressure on that vulnerable group would be welcomed.

I highlight the matter principally because it is relevant to the debate. The motion refers to the taking of "simple steps" to contribute to Scotland's being more resilient to the ravages of winter, and earlier access to the winter fuel allowance for off-grid customers surely falls under that heading. It is also worth pondering how this place might have reacted to such a commonsense proposal in whatever form and from whichever source it had come. I believe that it would have garnered widespread support and would have been implemented. Roll on the day when the Scottish Parliament has control over such matters.

However, we are where we are, so I will focus my closing remarks on welcoming the various discussions that have taken place between Calor Gas, local authorities, NFU Scotland, Transport

Scotland and the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation to ensure that hard-to-reach routes remain open and that off-grid customers can at least be got to during severe weather. Such households are often situated in remote locations along or off roads that are not necessarily priorities for gritting and snow clearance work. During the savage winter of 2010-11, when some rural households were running low on LPG, the problem was not a shortfall in supply but the difficulty in gaining access to that supply because of road conditions. I very much welcome the fact that attention is being paid to that issue, and I join others in acknowledging the formal and informal role that is played by Scotland's farmers in ensuring that less accessible routes are made passable, which will protect access to sources of heating for off-grid households.

16:11

**Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** The debate is a useful reminder of the measures that all citizens need to take in the run-up to winter—measures that we need to take as householders, as office tenants and as neighbours. It is to the Government's credit that winter resilience has risen up the agenda, and it is creditable that so many agencies are taking winter resilience seriously, as witnessed by the number of briefings that we have received from many of them in anticipation of the debate.

We all hope that our preparations will not be needed—especially this year, as we have had such a rotten summer with prolonged periods of rain, which have had a detrimental effect on our farmers among others. I contacted Alex Hill of the Met Office yesterday to see whether the long-range weather forecast would give us some cheer. In summary, he said that for October, November and December a whole range of forecasts favour lower than average rainfall for the period but slightly colder temperatures. There is no real cheer there and we must be prepared, although weather forecasters have become a lot more canny in recent years about what they say.

As someone who lives in a rural area where the roads are not maintained by the council, I know the importance of having shovels and salt-and-sand mix ready at the door and in the car. I am also aware that rural roads are not a priority if they are not bus routes. I understand that, as it is important that our councils make the best use of their equipment on arterial routes. Therefore, I welcome the fact that farmers are being involved in clearing rural roads. I am not sure that Jim Hume can claim the credit for that, as—I am sure that Alex Johnstone will back me up on this—Aberdeenshire Council has been involving farmers in clearing the roads for a number of winters.

It is vital that we keep our roads not only clear of snow, but gritted. As Graeme Dey said, companies such as LPG providers and heating oil suppliers must be able to access their customers in remote and rural locations. I therefore welcome the information that we have received from Calor Gas that it is working with local authorities and Transport Scotland to ensure that off-grid consumers can be accessed during severe weather.

Mention has been made of the railways, and I welcome the £2.2 million that ScotRail invested last year to ensure that it is better prepared for severe weather. Those preparations include providing pioneering de-icing equipment for our trains and real-time travel updates for customers. Updates are important because, for travellers, there is nothing worse than getting absolutely no information at all—people can take the bad information, but waiting around without any information is most distressing to customers.

During the debate, we have tended to focus on the preparedness for snow but, with climate change, we are as likely to experience high winds and extremely heavy rainfall. That is why it is vital that landowners clear—and keep clear—water courses and that councils keep drains clear. I am not sure that all councils have the best strategies and plans for clearing drains and water courses, especially in areas that are prone to flooding.

People who dump garden rubbish in burns and streams are totally irresponsible. I think that Keep Scotland Beautiful may be doing work in that area, but perhaps the minister will confirm that.

Similarly, preventative action may be useful, with landowners, councils and ScotRail removing weakened trees before they fall and cause disruption.

I put on record my thanks to all those public sector workers, including snow clearers, police, fire and ambulance personnel, social and care workers, and health and school staff, who go that extra mile to help our most vulnerable. I also want to thank the many volunteers who step up to the plate to help in adverse times—that even includes four-by-four drivers. I support the motion.

16:16

**Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab):** I welcome the Scottish Government's launch of its ready for winter campaign, which I am sure everyone in the chamber supports. I congratulate the Red Cross on its involvement in getting the message out.

Winter weather conditions do not affect only our transport services. They can close schools, affect emergency response services, cut off power

supplies, affect the economy when people cannot get to work and lead to a loss of income for employees. They can also have a detrimental effect on people's health.

Severe weather means that those who routinely struggle will suffer disproportionately, because they must not only choose between eating and heating, but take into account keeping the house warm to avoid pipes freezing, and all the misery that burst pipes can bring.

For some children school closures can mean time for fun in the snow, but for children in deprived areas who rely on free school meals, it means that they will not get a proper meal until the school reopens.

Off-grid issues have been mentioned. What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the Westminster Government and other stakeholders about the 200,000-plus householders who are off-grid in rural locations and who depend on fuel supplies to keep the power running? Is there a co-ordinated effort to ensure that off-grid consumers have access to those vital supplies? What advice is being offered to them? The ready Scotland website seems sparse in its guidance on that. Those consumers consistently suffer problems in the cold months, so what is being done differently this year to alleviate that? All members recently received a briefing from Calor Gas, which explains that last year it had to prioritise the elderly and the vulnerable whose supplies were running dangerously low—not because Calor was running out of supplies, but because country road conditions were too dangerous to drive on as they were not priority roads for gritting.

Like others, I welcome the fact that the farmers will help more this year, but I stress that that must be well co-ordinated to ensure the best use of volunteers.

Although I am sure that all of us in the chamber understand that there needs to be a priority system for road gritting, we must remember that some rural roads are just as vital to communities as major road links are, and we cannot allow them to be forgotten. Of course that is not only a rural issue: because of budget cuts, councils in urban areas are being more selective about which roads and footpaths in our towns and cities are gritted.

Some councils have reduced their stockpiles of salt, while others, because of the cuts in funding that the Government has imposed, are looking at reducing the number of salt bins and considering gritting high-priority roads later in the day. Having to make such cuts can put people's lives at risk, so we must do all that we can to ensure that local authorities are fully resourced and fully prepared for whatever weather befalls us this winter. We

cannot afford to be taken by surprise and see our communities suffer because underfunding means that there is a lack of salt.

We tend to think of winter weather as being snow and ice, but what is the Government doing to ensure that local authorities are prepared to deal with the increasing number of floods, which Maureen Watt touched on? I appreciate that it is not easy to predict when and where floods might happen but, with climate change, I think that we can anticipate an increase in the incidence of flooding. If some councils are already stretched to their limits, winter flooding could further exacerbate the strain on resources. We have already had severe flooding in Fife and other areas this year. What support is being offered to tackle the issue?

We need to ensure that individuals and communities are prepared for whatever the weather brings this winter. I cannot stress enough the importance of promoting the need for people to check on their vulnerable or elderly neighbours this winter. Ensuring that they have power, heat and food supplies could save lives. People who are willing to help their neighbours to clear footpaths need to know that they can get salt or grit from their council, but that they will have to collect it from the depot, as is the case in North Ayrshire.

Scotland cannot afford to be taken by surprise, as it was in 2010. We need to ensure that councils are prepared and properly resourced to keep essential services to the elderly and the vulnerable operating, and to keep our communities safe. We also need to offer support to those consumers who live off the grid and who depend on fuel deliveries to keep the power running.

16:22

**Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):**

I say at the outset that I would like to be able to spend more money on everything, but the simple fact is that we operate within a fixed budget. Even if we were to decide to allocate more money from the Scottish Government budget to local authorities—which seems to be what the Labour Party would like us to do; it will be interesting to hear what its members say in the budget debate on that—there is no guarantee that those local authorities would choose to prioritise winter maintenance funding. The whole concept of local decision making is that it is for local authorities to decide their priorities. I have not heard any councillor from any party call seriously for us to go back to ring fencing specific local authority budgets. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has not called for that; indeed, COSLA welcomes the fact that councils can now take decisions on local priorities, rather than being told

how the money that they are allocated by central Government is to be spent.

**Elaine Murray:** If Mark McDonald believes that it is appropriate for councils to take decisions themselves, does he not think that, in future, it would be appropriate for councils to decide whether to freeze the council tax, rather than have that imposed on them by the Scottish Government?

**Mark McDonald:** Indeed—like Stirling Labour, which cut the council tax. I think that most people would accept that that was a rather irresponsible thing to do while complaining that councils are not funded properly. If councils are not being funded properly, why was Stirling Council able to cut the council tax?

It is clear from his speech that my colleague Richard Lyle is gunning for the Mercedes/BMW driver vote. I say to him that, although Mercedes and BMW are German, so, too, is *schadenfreude*. Perhaps we should encourage drivers of such vehicles to consider measures such as winter tyres, as well as pointing to the difficulties that they can experience in icy conditions.

The maintenance of our road and footpath networks is an important issue. Aberdeen City Council, as a member of which I served until May of this year, currently has 16,726 tonnes of salt in stock. That compares with a stock of 15,986 tonnes in the previous year. Interestingly, the salt usage in that year was only 8,088 tonnes. That is a significant fall compared to the usage the year before that, perhaps reflecting the milder winter that we had. Nonetheless, that also demonstrates a much better strategy for salt usage by the council than perhaps had been the case in previous years.

Another issue is whether there are other means by which roads and footpaths can be treated, rather than simply using salt. The council has purchased 24,000 litres of a substance called Eco-Thaw, which it intended to trial in 2011-12. The conditions under which Eco-Thaw is most effective in comparison with salt—hard-packed snow and ice—were not prevalent in 2011-12, but Eco-Thaw remains at the council's disposal.

Potholes are an important issue, on main routes and on side roads. I am glad that Alex Johnstone agreed with my earlier comment that it is not always the case that potholes are due to poorly maintained roads. Often utility companies or others dig up roads and do not repair them properly, which leads to gaps in the surface through which water ingress occurs. Ice then forms and we get potholes. We need to look at whether utility companies perhaps bear some of the responsibility on some occasions and whether there should be some discussion around the

possibility of their perhaps putting forward some funding towards repair, rather than it simply being the responsibility of local or central Government.

The other issue that we have to consider is how best to develop community resilience. I speak to a number of elderly residents in the north-east of Scotland and many of them go back to the days when neighbours looked out for one another and when people gritted their own paths and the areas outside their homes. We have gone back from that in a way. I live in a street that will frankly never be top of the priority list for the council, not just because I live on it, but because it is not an access route to anywhere. It is essentially a road where you come in at one end and leave at the other and it does not connect to anything. Therefore, in the past I have gone out and gritted areas on my street when necessary, particularly where there are elderly residents. We should look at encouraging the development of that kind of community resilience and that kind of neighbourly spirit.

My colleague Graeme Dey mentioned Mike Weir's bill. Compared with the frankly archaic, nonsensical system of members' bills in Westminster, where members have to go through a bizarre, byzantine lottery, our process in the Scottish Parliament much better enables back-bench members to involve themselves.

I mentioned driver behaviour and the use of winter tyres, but many of us will have noted, particularly as the mornings get darker, that there are many drivers who do not use their headlights when they should. When we get into more severe winter weather, that becomes a significant safety concern. I know that in Scandinavia, for example, there are rules and regulations on the use of headlights. Perhaps we need to reflect on that point, given the weather conditions that we often face in Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We now move to the closing speeches. Before we do, however, as there are several members who are absent I remind members that they should be in the debating chamber for the start of the closing speeches. Perhaps the whips would like to address that point. Jim Hume, six minutes, please.

16:28

**Jim Hume:** We can all agree that we have ploughed through a gritty debate. In last year's debate, I completed my speech by expressing my hope that those in the public, private and voluntary sectors who had worked so hard the previous winter would have an easier time of it. Thankfully, that turned out to be the case, as we experienced a far milder winter.



That does not mean that the Scottish Government's preparations were a wasted exercise. Nor does it mean that the Government has a licence to be complacent this year. We are an island nation and therefore the weather is difficult to forecast. That was mentioned by Elaine Murray, Gil Paterson and James Dornan—who is unfortunately not here. Also, I was glad that Margaret McCulloch acknowledged the extra funds that the UK Government has put in for the essential Met Office forecasting.

I am encouraged by some of the Government's measures for this winter, which suggest that it has learned some harsh lessons from the 2010-11 winter. The acquisition of icebreakers in Transport Scotland's fleet is welcome, although perhaps that was not timely for one of the minister's predecessors. It is clear that the review that provided a considered comparison of winter resilience strategies in other countries was a worthwhile exercise that probably should have been done some time ago. The news of a strengthening of the network of weather stations, which has been mentioned, the publication of daily gritting plans, and the commitment to stock more salt than ever before—or Eco-Thaw, which Mark McDonald mentioned—are similarly encouraging. Our hauliers and couriers were among those who were badly affected two years ago, so the proposals relating to heavy goods vehicles, which are often vulnerable in extreme weather and cause disruptions, are to be welcomed. After all, it is our HGVs and others that keep supplies going all year round and provide food and fuel to the vulnerable people whom Graeme Dey and Hanzala Malik mentioned.

Last summer, the Government, in conjunction with the Red Cross, published the emergency preparedness report, which revealed that 40 per cent of Scots felt prepared to deal with emergencies arising out of severe weather. I am pleased that the Government has again teamed up with the Red Cross this winter. Dick Lyle and Margaret McDougall acknowledged the Red Cross's valuable work. The Government can do only so much and the public need to take some responsibility for being prepared, but I imagine that it must be a source of disappointment for the minister that, as he mentioned, after last year's campaign the level of preparedness among Scots remains at just 40 per cent. Sixty per cent therefore feel unprepared. In his summing up, I would like the minister to tell us how he will seek to improve that preparedness with further measures.

Preparedness comes at a cost, of course—I think that Margo MacDonald and Brian Adam mentioned the budgets—as does, crucially, the aftermath of a severe winter. Members who have analysed the Government's spending plans for the

2013-14 financial year may have noted the marginal but welcome real-terms increase in the routine and winter maintenance budget, which could be well utilised should the worst be thrown at us again. The minister may point to the significant increase in the motorways and trunk roads budget as a whole, but that would represent an unclear picture, as most of that money is, in fact, intended for specific road projects. Many of those projects have been promised for years, but there has been some slow progress—I refer to the Dunragit bypass in the south-west, for example. However, we are getting there now.

Closer scrutiny of the spending plans reveals that the road improvements budget will be subject to a 27.8 per cent real-terms cut. When spring arrives, especially if it is on the back of a tough winter, there may be cause to undertake necessary remedial work on roads across the country. That will be made more difficult with such a drastic reduction in funds. I hope that the minister agrees that we cannot expect local authorities' transport budgets to foot the bill following a harsh winter such as we have had before, when they are continuing to feel the squeeze. We must avoid the spectre of two years ago, when local authorities were forced to raid their limited reserves. I look forward to the minister addressing that particular point in summing up.

It is true that even the best-laid plans can prove to be insufficient against the full force of extreme weather, but it is the job of Government to ensure that those plans are as robust as possible, and our job as parliamentarians is to ensure that the Government is doing everything in its power.

I wish the minister well for the forthcoming winter and look forward to monitoring his and Transport Scotland's progress.

I agree with Margaret McCulloch's acknowledgement of the council workers, emergency services and deliverers of supplies who deliver our resilience plans. I praise them all for doing so.

16:34

**Alex Johnstone:** The debate has been largely good natured, which is appropriate, given the range of essential issues that have been raised in it. I will go through one or two of them, but at the outset I congratulate Jim Hume on getting in the line:

“we have ploughed through a gritty debate.”

There is always something to be said for entertainment.

I also welcome his remark about this being an island nation—long may it stay that way. One or two members decided to be a little bit politically

motivated during the debate. Although I agree with much of what Graeme Dey said about the difficulties of those who live off-grid, his vociferous criticism of the mother of Parliaments to make his point was wholly unjustified.

I will go on to some of the issues that were discussed during the debate. Jim Hume and Maureen Watt are correct when they talk about how important it is to find new and more imaginative ways of clearing roads, particularly in rural areas. We should be doing all that we can with the use of farm machinery. It is ironic that some of the roads that get the deepest snow and suffer most from winter conditions are in areas in which heavy plant might be sitting around in sheds doing nothing because of the snow. They might as well be out there clearing the roads, and we should continue to pursue that idea wherever we can.

I liked Brian Adam's comparison with Italy, where scientists who were supposed to predict earthquakes recently received prison sentences for failing to do so. Not everyone would welcome the comparison with the failures of our weather forecasters or the potential threat of imprisonment, although I am sure that some might.

One of the key elements that has raised its head and been mentioned by a number of speakers during the debate is the cost of energy. Fuel poverty is a growing problem in Scotland, and we will discuss the reasons for that on other days. Today we have discussed the disastrous coincidence of increased fuel prices when we are going into what might well be another cold winter. James Dornan talked about the fact that several electricity companies in Scotland have given a commitment that there will be no winter disconnections, but my concern is about the potential for self-disconnection or denial by those who cannot afford to pay the bills and simply choose not to use the energy. It is essential that we all look at ways of cutting energy costs.

When energy costs are intrinsically high, and that is likely to continue, it is important for us to squeeze unnecessary costs out of the energy system. I therefore welcome the Prime Minister's announcement in Westminster, however controversial the circumstances were, that demonstrated the Government's intent that action will be taken to limit the increase in energy costs in future. I look forward to seeing how that will develop.

**Claudia Beamish:** Although I acknowledge the issues around the electricity companies, does the member agree that if the welfare reform process that is going through the Westminster Parliament recognised the benefits that people need, we would not have to deal with people who have to face making a choice between fuel and food?

**Alex Johnstone:** I understand why the member made that remark, but regardless of the situation in isolation, it is a good thing to keep energy costs as low as possible, and we have a duty to pursue that.

The final issue that I will talk about is something that I could have mentioned earlier, but did not have the opportunity to do so. It is an issue that raised its head when we had bad weather conditions at the end of 2010. At that time, supermarkets in some areas came close to being in danger of running out of food. During his time in office, has the minister had any opportunity to look at the difficulties that were experienced at that time? Admittedly, there was some panic buying, which cleared supermarket shelves, but the problem was that most of the supplies were either stuck out there on the roads, or simply could not make it on to the roads because of the bad weather. In recent years, we have become very dependent on the supermarket supply chain to ensure that our people are well fed and that food is available, but for the first time in a generation, we came very close to seeing empty supermarket shelves and supplies of essential raw materials drying up. I would like some reassurance that at least someone in Transport Scotland has that on their agenda so that we might avoid it in the future.

I thank in advance the people who will, in the course of bad weather during this winter, endure difficult conditions and hardship by going out and doing what is necessary to ensure that the country does not come to a standstill if it snows; and, given the record of his predecessor, I wish the minister good luck.

16:40

**Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** It has been a good debate on an important issue. No doubt in his summing up the minister will say that if Scotland separates from the rest of the UK our climate will suddenly be more temperate and our winters less severe. However, in the meantime, we will have to deal with winter under the current constitutional arrangements, and there is every chance of cold and snowy conditions, which will present many challenges; indeed, the current forecasts suggest a colder than average winter ahead.

We have had contributions from across the chamber on a wide range of issues, reflecting the fact that we all know all too well the difficulties that a severe winter can cause for the transport network, which a number of members have reflected on, and the delivery of lifeline services in our communities, and the impact that it can have on the most vulnerable households—too often, older people are still living in poorly heated homes.

A number of members have spoken about fuel poverty, which is very pertinent to this debate.

That is why it is vital that ministers, the Scottish Government and public sector agencies are properly prepared for severe weather if it occurs. Some eventualities are difficult to prepare for and we can rightly blame the weather for many things, but the minister who yesterday blamed poor weather for missing climate change targets perhaps took that a bit far. However, there is no excuse for failing to put in place the contingencies that we need for the problems that we know will occur if we have a period of severe weather this winter.

**Alex Johnstone:** Does the member accept that it is inevitable that, should we have a mild winter, it will be entirely the responsibility of Alex Salmond and our Scottish Government and that should the winter be severe, it will be entirely laid at the door of the evil Conservatives in London?

**Richard Baker:** I fear that that is unlikely, but let us see what advice Mr Salmond has received on the issue first, before we make any judgments on that.

Looking at where the Scottish Government is clearly responsible, I note that it was in the context of its failure to deal properly with the impact of the severe winter weather of 2010 that the minister came into office, following the resignation of his predecessor. There has been talk about people being jailed for mistakes at these times, but I think that the resignation of Stewart Stevenson was quite enough penitence on his part. I do not want to get into a situation in which forecasters are imprisoned for their mistakes. We should remember that, at the time, our forecasters got it right but, unfortunately, Government mistakes ensured that we did not have the response that was required. However, it is right that we look for a range of agencies—not just the Government but transport operators and others—to learn lessons from 2010 to ensure that we are better prepared this time.

If today's debate is an indication that ministers are being diligent in learning the lessons and making contingency plans for the future, we should welcome that. I am sure that that is the message that ministers want to promote through the debate. However, we must have not only the perception but the reality. Ministers must not only make plans but take the actions that are required.

That is why our amendment highlights our concerns about the impact of the budget settlement on local authorities' preparedness for wintry conditions. Elaine Murray and others have referred to the reduction in such budgets in a number of local authority areas. The minister said that there is enough salt and grit available

nationally. However, where there are any concerns about the provision of those resources and associated facilities because of budget pressures, I hope that he will work with local authorities to ensure that we have the national coverage that we need. I would like to hear more in his closing statement about the dialogue that he is having with local authorities on that important issue. We must ensure that appropriate preparations are made so that we do not have frozen, impassable roads. As others have said, we do not want to have frozen, impassable pavements either, particularly for the sake of our older people.

We cannot afford to take a silo approach to the issue, because it requires partnership. The motion rightly reflects the breadth of the collaboration that is required, which is what needs to happen. Joint working between the Scottish Government, councils and third sector organisations such as the Red Cross to that end is welcome and necessary. Further, as Hanzala Malik said, there must also be joint working with transport operators, road contractors and the various organisations that are involved in that.

Many members referred to the ScotRail briefing. It is encouraging to learn that ScotRail is investing and seeking to learn the lessons of previous winters as well. We can all agree that we cannot afford a repeat of the same level of disruption that we saw two years ago, with the rail network grinding to a halt and drivers stranded in their cars, as they were on the M8 that winter. We want an assurance from the minister and the Scottish Government that the preparations that are being made mean that we will be able to deal with those conditions better if they arise.

Clearly, the collective effort goes beyond the organisations that will be involved. As many members said, there is a role for all of us. We have to be good neighbours in the circumstances that we are talking about. We have to do what we can to make pavements passable and be aware of the needs of the vulnerable and the isolated. The Scottish Pensioners Forum estimated that, in the winter of 2010, 200,000 older people were trapped in their homes. Of course, such conditions make hugely challenging not only the work of emergency services but also the work of care services. At that time, we said that there should be a national hotline that people in that situation can call because, in a number of circumstances, local agencies were unable to deal effectively with the calls. I would like to know whether further consideration has been given to that proposal and, indeed, to the sort of buddy scheme that Chic Brodie proposed—it would be interesting to see how that would work.

A number of members mentioned flooding, which is one of the features of the aftermath of severe winter weather. We have already seen instances of flooding this year, and my region—North East Scotland—has suffered particularly badly, with flooding in Aberdeen over the summer and in towns such as Stonehaven and Huntly. I ask the minister what work he is doing with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and local authorities to ensure that we are as prepared as we can be to deal with flooding and that, crucially, we put in place early warning systems, which can be a crucial element of dealing with the challenges that flooding presents.

We have heard that severe weather presents many challenges, and we all have a role to play. We in the Labour Party hope that resilience week is a success and raises awareness of the measures that individuals and organisations can take. We welcome the debate today and are glad that it has been brought forward early. However, ministers will be judged on the effectiveness of the response if the extreme situations occur. We hope for a mild winter but we must be prepared for the worst of conditions. The minister's intentions to deal with the potential problems of a severe winter are welcome, but they must be matched by the right actions to show that we are ready for any challenges.

The experience of 2010 shows the cost of getting the approach wrong. I hope that we can be confident that the Scottish Government will be better prepared in future and for the winter ahead.

16:48

**Keith Brown:** Earlier, I outlined many of the steps that Scotland is taking to prepare for severe weather, not only in winter but all year round.

I will try to address the points that have been raised. I do not think that I will get round to dealing with all of them, but if anyone wants to follow up any that I do not get to, I invite them to let me know and I will try to get back to them.

It has been a good debate. I was struck by the preponderance of councillors and ex-councillors who were speaking in the debate. I think that, at one point, everyone on the SNP benches either was a councillor or had been a councillor. That has contributed greatly to the quality of the debate. Unlike some people, I think that people's experience of local government stands them in good stead when they come to this chamber, and I welcome the contribution that those people made to the debate.

I should say that there were one or two good speeches by people who have not been councillors—that is also possible.

Exercise Arctic blast, which happens tomorrow, is a severe weather event training exercise that is an important part of our preparations. Responder organisations from across the Highlands and Islands will take part in the exercise, which will examine the detailed consequence management of a combination of emergencies, including prolonged loss of electricity and a shortage of basic supplies such as food as a result of severe snow and high winds.

In my experience, it is a feature of proper contingency and resilience planning that we consider not just the last thing that happened and how we might deal with it again but new events and the fact that some events are compounded by further complications as they proceed. The Highlands and Islands strategic co-ordinating group has identified the loss of the lifeline A9 as a high risk to the region and the fact that, to return to the point that Alex Johnstone made, severe weather elsewhere, such as in the north of England, could seriously impact on the provision of food and other consumables to the area.

I mentioned the resilient telecommunications network that we have installed. For the particularly challenging areas of Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute, we have added a new satellite communications service, which will have a degree of user testing during exercise Arctic blast.

On the point that Alex Johnstone raised, as much as two years ago, when I first had this job, there were substantial discussions with the supermarkets directly and with Scotland Food & Drink. Those discussions have continued through me and with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment.

Much mention has rightly been made of the need for partnership working. The ready for winter campaign is an overwhelming success for partnership working and exemplifies our approach. In addition to the highly productive partnership that we have forged with the British Red Cross, we are working with COSLA and a multitude of other partners from the public, voluntary and private sectors. For example, the support of the major supermarket chains is enabling us to take our road shows into high-footfall areas across the country; 545 libraries will display information; and, with the help of groups such as the Salvation Army and Citizens Advice Scotland, we hope to reach more vulnerable groups.

Specific mention has been made of councils and the Scottish Government working in partnership. That was a prominent feature of the national roads maintenance review, which concluded in July this year and which set out a framework for initiatives to maintain Scotland's roads more efficiently. By encouraging shared services, collaborative

working and innovation, the review's outcomes will make road maintenance more efficient and improve the condition of our roads.

In many instances in the south-west and north-east, council gritters grit trunk roads and trunk road gritters grit council roads. There already is a degree of collaborative working, but I agree that we should have more of that. We are trying to achieve that through the roads maintenance review and other measures. Mutual aid is a prominent aspect of the operating companies. For example, if a council is short of vehicles, vehicles can be made available from the trunk road stocks, as we offered to do many times last year. Partnership working is very much a feature of what we are doing. That underlines Anne McTaggart's point that we can achieve more by our common endeavours than we can alone. I certainly agree with that.

Mention was made of the fact that some people might not have access to advice on the internet. That is a fair point. We produce much of the advice in written form. One of the best pieces that I have seen is the advice on driving in bad weather, which seems common sense, but it is an excellent document that is produced by the police, the trunk road operating companies and Transport Scotland. It covers not only driving in ice and snow but driving in conditions such as very low sun, which can cause problems. I commend that document to everybody.

Community resilience has been mentioned. As we have all seen and as members have mentioned, one wonderful thing that happens when emergencies occur is that people and communities pull together to get one another through the experience. Resilient communities start first and foremost with resilient individuals, and many communities in Scotland are organising their own efforts through local community emergency plans.

To give just one example, this week, Howwood community council in Renfrewshire took its first steps towards that. Dozens of other communities around Scotland, in places such as Argyll and Bute, Stirling and the Borders, are further down that road. This is not about doing the work of the emergency services; it is about communities making sensible preparations that will enable them to work in support of the emergency services. For example, one rural community cleared snow from an access road to enable a fire engine to attend a house fire. The people knew not to tackle the fire, but their actions made it easier for the fire service to do so quickly.

Much has been said on flooding, not least by Richard Baker. No one in the Parliament can argue that it is a bad thing for communities to prepare for emergencies, and flooding is one

consequence of severe weather for which individuals can often prepare. Just last week, my colleague the Minister for Environment and Climate Change signed up for SEPA's floodline service when he visited its flood forecasting centre in Perth.

I am well aware of the serious effects that flooding can have on homes, businesses and health. SEPA's national flood risk assessment has identified 125,000 properties that are at risk of flooding. Never mind what the winter will bring—we have just had one of the wettest summers on record, and the people of Scotland share a responsibility to protect themselves from flooding. One thing that they can do to start to put protection in place is to sign up for floodline.

A number of other points were raised. Jim Hume said that 40 per cent or thereabouts of people feel that they are sufficiently prepared, which represents an 8 per cent increase on last year's figure. In my opening speech, I made the point that we must build up the position over a number of years and raise awareness, and we will continue to do that. Far fewer people—16 per cent fewer than last year—are very or quite concerned about the consequences of severe weather, so we are taking action.

Hanzala Malik mentioned white lines on the M8. A bigger proportion of the budget has been allocated to white lining, which is being prioritised where the need is greatest. Additional white line refresh has been programmed on sections of the M8 in this financial year, which I hope will address some of the member's concerns.

Two members mentioned the idea of a hotline for vulnerable people, which is being considered seriously. As many people know, services check on vulnerable people. Various agencies have lists of vulnerable people and are good at checking on them. The most sensible approach is to draw that activity together so that it is co-ordinated.

Many people are familiar with the existing hotlines, so it is important that they continue to be available. We will continue to look at that. In a crisis, people react by using something that is familiar, whether that is NHS 24, the traffic Scotland service or local social work services. It is important that familiar services are available. We have also developed vulnerable people protocols, to ensure that they are taken care of.

That also applies to people who depend on heating fuels—on off-grid energy supplies—which a number of members mentioned. A great deal of work was done 18 months ago to deal with the issue of the last mile in delivering heating fuels, which a number of members talked about. The companies that are concerned have invested a

great deal in four-wheel-drive vehicles and many other measures.

**Claudia Beamish:** Will the Scottish Government look at crisis loans for high energy costs, as suggested by Citizens Advice Scotland?

**Keith Brown:** I will come on to high energy costs. Of course, the Deputy First Minister recently made a statement that might interest Claudia Beamish in relation to the issue.

As I said, I am happy to accept the Lib Dem amendment, in Jim Hume's name. Of course, what it refers to was not his idea—as Maureen Watt said, such an initiative was developed in Aberdeenshire some years ago. I took up the issue when I came into my job two years ago, but the amendment is good and we are happy to accept it.

I cannot accept Alex Johnstone's amendment. I am sorry about that, because I see that he is often the only Tory on the Tory benches. I feel sorry for him and I would like to accept his amendment but, unfortunately, a number of the points in it are not exactly accurate. The reviews that he talked about are much more about general road maintenance. However, I give him the assurance that he seeks about the preparedness of the trunk road companies—we have ensured that they are prepared.

I cannot accept the Labour amendment, which brings me to perhaps the key point of the debate. The debate was good but, unfortunately, Labour members once again made a list of demands for more spending. They wanted more money for local government, even though we could not guarantee that it would be spent in the required areas, as one member pointed out. They asked for more money for local and trunk roads, more money for central heating, more money for trains and more money to deal with fuel poverty—I am genuinely unaware of whether the winter fuel allowance counts as “something for nothing” in that context. They also asked for more money for flood prevention.

As Mark McDonald said and as most people with a local authority background know, if more money is to be spent on something, it must be taken from something else. The position is not as it was in the days of Andy Kerr, when £700 million was left lying in the budget. We spend the money that we have, for good purposes.

I say to Labour Party members and others who genuinely suggested ideas that I have tried to address them. If someone has a genuine suggestion of a good idea for improving the situation and if a cost is attached to it—I am not saying that the cost must be definitive; we can help with that—I am more than willing to listen to it. However, members cannot continually ask for

more spending without identifying where the money would come from.

I repeat that, this winter, Scotland is better prepared than ever to deal with the effects of severe weather. We understand that we can always do more, because the weather will always carry a risk of disruption. This year, we ask the people of Scotland not to let the nasty weather that might happen turn into a nasty situation. I commend the motion in my name.

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** That was perfect timing, minister. That concludes the debate on winter resilience.

## Business Motion

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-04542, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Tuesday 30 October 2012

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Topical Questions (if selected)

*followed by* Scottish Labour Party Business

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Wednesday 31 October 2012

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions  
Finance, Employment and Sustainable  
Growth

*followed by* Stage 3 Proceedings: Local Government  
Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.)  
(Scotland) Bill

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 1 November 2012

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

12.30 pm Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Scottish Government Debate: Drink  
Driving

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 6 November 2012

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Topical Questions (if selected)

*followed by* Scottish Government Business

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Wednesday 7 November 2012

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions  
Rural Affairs and the Environment;  
Justice and the Law Officers

*followed by* Scottish Government Business

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 8 November 2012

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

12.30 pm Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Scottish Government Business

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time—[Joe FitzPatrick.]

*Motion agreed to.*

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Joe FitzPatrick to move S4M-04531, on the designation of a lead committee, and S4M-04532, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government and Regeneration Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the High Hedges (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 (Commencement No 3, Transitory, Transitional and Savings Provisions) Order 2012 [draft] be approved.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

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

## Decision Time

17:01

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-04518.1, in the name of Elaine Murray, which seeks to amend motion S4M-04518, in the name of Keith Brown, on winter resilience, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

**For**

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)  
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 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)  
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)  
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)  
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)  
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)  
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)  
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)  
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)  
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
 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)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)  
 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)  
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South 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)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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) (Ind)  
 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

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)

Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 McGregor, 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)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 43, Against 67, Abstentions 14.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S4M-04518.3, in the name of Alex Johnstone, which seeks to amend motion S4M-04518, in the name of Keith Brown, on winter resilience, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

#### For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (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)  
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 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)  
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)  
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)  
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)  
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)  
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 McMahan, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)  
 McMahan, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)  
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (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)  
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 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)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)  
 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)  
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South 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)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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) (Ind)  
 Walker, Bill (Dunfermline) (Ind)  
 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 56, Against 68, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S4M-04518.2, in the name of Jim Hume, which seeks to amend motion S4M-04518, in the name of Keith Brown, on winter resilience, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-04518, in the name of Keith Brown, on winter resilience, as amended, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to.*

That the Parliament welcomes the 2012 Ready for Winter public awareness campaign launched on 22 October in collaboration with the Red Cross, responder agencies and a wide range of partners across the public, private and voluntary sectors; commends the partners for their continuing long-term commitment to ensuring that Scotland is as prepared for severe weather as it can possibly be; recognises that rural communities and businesses are most vulnerable to bouts of extreme weather and can experience disproportionate levels of disruption in comparison to other areas of Scotland in the winter months; welcomes the tripartite agreement between Transport Scotland, NFU Scotland and the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland in establishing a code of practice for local authorities to call on the support of the farming community in remote areas of the country, and supports the activities taking place during Resilience Week, which emphasise that preparedness is essential, not just for winter, but for all kinds of severe weather, and highlight the simple steps that individuals, families, businesses and communities can take to prepare for this and other emergencies, all of which contribute to a more resilient Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-04531, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government and Regeneration Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the High Hedges (Scotland) Bill at Stage 1.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S4M-04532, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Parliament agrees that the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 (Commencement No 3, Transitory, Transitional and Savings Provisions) Order 2012 [draft] be approved.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time. I ask members who are leaving the chamber to do so quickly and quietly.

## Dyslexia

### **The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):**

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-4293, in the name of Margaret Mitchell, on dyslexia. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate could press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament welcomes the updated version of the online Dyslexia Toolkit created by Dyslexia Scotland that was launched on 19 September 2012 and aims to increase understanding of and to support the early identification of dyslexia, ensuring that those who need support are able to receive it; considers that the toolkit is a valuable resource that will help teachers and other professionals in Central Scotland and across the country identify, assess and meet the needs of the 1 in 10 children and young people in Scotland with dyslexia; considers that, since the toolkit was first launched in 2010, it has been a great success but understands that it will need to be updated regularly in order to take account of emerging best practice; believes that use of the toolkit and the definition of dyslexia that it contains will significantly improve the effective and consistent provision of support for dyslexic children and young people; agrees with findings in the report, *Teaching Scotland's Future: Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland*, that all teachers, including those newly trained, should be confident in their ability to address the additional support needs of children and young people with dyslexia; acknowledges that it is not only in schools where support for those with dyslexia is required and hopes that there may be scope for the development of similar toolkits to assist employers and service providers so that they can appreciate the needs of those with dyslexia in the workplace and the community, and welcomes support for the hard work of Dyslexia Scotland, which it considers Scotland's national dyslexia charity.

17:06

### **Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con):**

First of all, I welcome members of the cross-party group on dyslexia, who are in the gallery for the debate, and I thank MSP colleagues who have stayed behind for the debate and are wearing the dyslexia blue ribbon in support of dyslexia awareness week, which runs from 6-10 November. This year, Dyslexia Scotland's theme is "Spotlight on Dyslexia", and events in Edinburgh will concentrate on dyslexia in sport, literature and youth. As a result, it is a particular pleasure to welcome to the gallery Ellie Gordon-Woolgar, the 12-year-old pupil who not only came up with, but designed the dyslexia ribbon to promote dyslexia awareness week.

The motion highlights the launch of the updated dyslexia toolkit, which was made available online last month. The original toolkit, which was designed by Dyslexia Scotland with Scottish Government support, was launched in 2010 and has been a great success, and last year Dyslexia

Scotland received further funding from the Government to update it. That was welcome acknowledgement that the toolkit must continue to be updated regularly to take account of new best practice and to ensure that the information and guidance that it provides remain current.

The toolkit's objective is to provide guidance for all teachers and early years workers, regardless of their experience with dyslexia and/or their subject area, on how to identify and support individuals with dyslexia. I know that that is very important to Ellie; indeed, she made a point of telling the minister so when he met her earlier on.

The 2010 document "Teaching Scotland's Future: Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland" emphasises that teachers should be confident in understanding and addressing the consequences of barriers to children's learning and their needs for additional support. That requires teachers to understand how children, including those with additional support needs—dyslexia was mentioned specifically in the report—acquire and develop vital numeracy and literacy skills as they learn throughout their school life. The toolkit aims to ensure that teachers support dyslexic children to develop such skills.

However, although the emphasis is on teachers, the toolkit is most certainly not, in its use, limited to teachers. It is freely available online and is a valuable asset to parents and it provides information that is aimed directly at pupils and students. It is hoped that raising awareness of the toolkit will also lead employers to access it, which will be hugely important for those who are identified in later life as being dyslexic. After all, individuals do not outgrow dyslexia; it affects people of all ages and at all stages of their lives.

That is the background to the toolkit. If any member is in doubt about its importance for many people in Scotland, they should take a moment to consider that an estimated one in 10 people in Scotland has dyslexia, and that it is thought that one in four of those people is severely dyslexic. According to the 2011 Scottish Government pupil census, there are approximately 670,000 schoolchildren in Scotland, which means that a staggering 67,000 children have dyslexia and more than 16,000 children are severely dyslexic.

The 2011 census reported that more than 98,000 pupils in Scotland have additional support needs, but if there are 67,000 children with dyslexia, the official Government figure for pupils with dyslexia must be significantly underestimated. That is confirmed when the number of pupils who are reported to have dyslexia is broken down by primary and secondary school in each local authority area. The exercise reveals the considerable underreporting of cases, especially at primary school level.

A reason for the underreporting is the different definitions of dyslexia that local authorities use. One of the best aspects of the toolkit is the definition that it contains, which was developed by the cross-party group in conjunction with Dyslexia Scotland and the Scottish Government. Dyslexia exists on a spectrum from mild to severe, and encompasses a range of difficulties and strengths, so the lack of a universally-accepted definition leads to confusion and to disparity in the services that people with dyslexia can access. For example, South Lanarkshire Council, which works closely with Dyslexia Lanarkshire, uses the toolkit definition and provides free accommodation for meetings for teachers and parents, which are advertised. However, North Lanarkshire Council is not so proactive in working with Dyslexia Lanarkshire and does not always use the toolkit definition.

It is not difficult to see that the toolkit is crucial, in that it can provide teachers in Scotland with a uniform definition. If the debate does nothing else, I hope that it will identify the need for, and lead to the implementation of, a policy that provides that the toolkit and its definition of dyslexia must be used in all Scotland's 32 local authorities, in order to ensure that there is consistent and efficient provision of services for dyslexic children. That is essential.

Dyslexia Scotland and its president, Sir Jackie Stewart, do sterling work to support people with dyslexia in Scotland and to raise awareness of the many and complex issues to do with the condition. The forthcoming book, "Dyslexia and Us", contains moving and compelling contributions from a variety of people who are dyslexic, including household names such as Michelle Mone OBE, Sir Steve Redgrave and Kenny Logan, as well as other individuals from every walk of life. The stories in the book graphically demonstrate the huge impact that failure to identify and support dyslexia has in practical and emotional terms, and the pressure that can be put on public services as a result. Tackling dyslexia should be a priority and is a key example of the preventative spend that the Scottish Government wants to promote in order to alleviate pressure on our public services. In the age of austerity, the question is not whether we can afford adequately to resource and prioritise identification of and support for people with dyslexia, through the toolkit and other measures, but whether we can afford not to do so.

17:14

**Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP):** I congratulate Margaret Mitchell on securing the debate and I welcome members of the cross-party group to the public gallery. Dyslexia is an issue

about which Margaret Mitchell cares deeply, and I have no hesitation in supporting the motion.

I joined the cross-party group on dyslexia as a result of meeting positively dyslexic, which is the Inverclyde dyslexia support group. The group targets all adult learners with dyslexia, those who are affected by it or who work in the field, and anyone in Inverclyde who can help to raise awareness of the issues that surround dyslexia.

The group's members work towards raising awareness of dyslexia and the surrounding issues, and they support those who have it and inform local adult learning provision through the community learning and development partnership. The group's initial aim was to create awareness of dyslexia and to destigmatise it. It was challenging but inspirational to speak to some of the group's members and to hear their stories about how they have adapted to deal with the condition.

The online dyslexia toolkit was not available for those members as they were growing up, and it would have been advantageous for them. The key to any learning tool is its implementation and those who teach it.

Through the cross-party group, we have heard about instances of a lack of understanding of dyslexia in some educational establishments. However, whenever the issue has arisen in my discussions with constituents, the opposite has—thankfully—been the case. There has tended to be a great deal of understanding, and teaching staff have worked tremendously hard to help their students.

I hope that that good practice is being shared among our local authorities. I am sure that we would all agree that no person in Scotland should be left behind because of ignorance and lack of understanding of dyslexia.

I applaud Dyslexia Scotland's extraordinary efforts in ensuring that teachers, parents and students throughout Scotland are better able to address the needs of individuals with learning disabilities. Since its creation, Dyslexia Scotland has been committed to encouraging, enabling and inspiring individuals with dyslexia—regardless of their age or level of education—to reach their fullest potential, and it gives me great pleasure to see the organisation succeed in that goal once again.

Margaret Mitchell spoke about the book "Dyslexia and Us". I have read it myself, and some of the stories are heartwarming, life changing and inspirational.

Two years ago—as we have heard—Dyslexia Scotland unveiled the online dyslexia toolkit for educators throughout the country, and last month the organisation released an updated version of

that vital resource. The toolkit's primary purpose is to help teachers and those who work with young children to identify early signs of dyslexia, and in that regard it has been enormously successful over the past two years.

The value of the programme to our teachers and communities is certainly evident, and as a result the Scottish Government has this year funded an extension project, which I warmly welcome. I have no doubt that the extension programme will have the same positive impact that we have seen as a result of the original toolkit, and I hope that even more resources will be released in the future to assist people with dyslexia.

Dyslexia is a growing trend in Scottish society, and it is important now more than ever that we are informed and prepared to address it. Today—as we have already heard—one in 10 young people in Scotland is diagnosed with dyslexia, and it is likely that even more exhibit many of the symptoms but have yet to be identified.

I could go on, Presiding Officer, but I am conscious of time. I say in conclusion that Dyslexia Scotland is a leader in bringing awareness and understanding of dyslexia to our teachers, parents and students, and the recent release of the updated online toolkit is but a small example of the organisation's many successes.

I congratulate Dyslexia Scotland on that and on its years of great service to our communities. I look forward to seeing the great strides forward that I am confident Dyslexia Scotland will continue to make in the coming years. Once again, I congratulate Margaret Mitchell on bringing the debate to the chamber.

17:18

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** Today is an opportunity for us to recognise the importance of understanding dyslexia and to pay tribute to the excellent work of Dyslexia Scotland. The organisation's recent launch of its updated online dyslexia toolkit is a prime example of the excellent work that it continues to do.

That valuable resource assists in identifying and assessing the needs of the one in 10 children and young people in Scotland who are affected by dyslexia. I join Stuart McMillan in thanking Margaret Mitchell for bringing the debate to the chamber.

Dyslexia exists in all cultures and across the range of abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Dyslexia Scotland states:

"Unidentified, dyslexia is likely to result in low self esteem, high stress, atypical behaviour, and low achievement."

However, it is widely recognised that dyslexia does not need to be a barrier to achievement. A number of successful individuals have spoken publicly about their dyslexia, including household names such as Sir Richard Branson, Jamie Oliver and, as we have heard, Sir Jackie Stewart.

There is often a focus on the weaknesses that are associated with dyslexia, whereas people's strengths go unmentioned. As Stuart McMillan said, it is important that we use this opportunity to highlight the positive skills that many dyslexic people possess. People with dyslexia are often particularly creative and have strong visual thinking skills, verbal skills and problem-solving skills. Those are qualities that many dyslexic people often use to ensure that they achieve a level playing field so that they can excel in early years and later life.

Learners with dyslexia will benefit from early, appropriate intervention and targeted, effective teaching. The dyslexia toolkit is central to meeting those crucial aims. As has been said, the dyslexia toolkit was formally launched in June 2010. I welcome last month's relaunch under the title "Addressing Dyslexia". As Margaret Mitchell said, it is important that those resources do not stand still and instead continue to develop and incorporate best practice, in order to provide the best possible assistance.

The addressing dyslexia toolkit for teachers and early years workers will help those people to identify literacy difficulties and dyslexia early and to support pupils once they have been identified. I was pleased to see that it now has a section specifically for parents. Parents are often the first to recognise that a child is struggling, but many often have no previous experience of dyslexia. Gaining initial recognition of their child's literacy difficulties and obtaining the support needed can seem a daunting prospect. The toolkit offers parents a wide range of advice on such things as understanding dyslexia, approaching a child's school and finding support groups where parents can speak to others in the same situation.

It is clear that challenges remain. A lack of consistency of support across local authorities remains an issue. I hope that the Scottish Government will take action to improve that. From speaking to parents I have also heard reports of differences in the level of support that is available between schools in the same local authority area. We must ensure that schools have the required resources at a time when local authority budgets are being squeezed and the numbers of classroom assistants and teachers have been reduced.

Another crucial area is support in employment, for both the individual affected by dyslexia and the employer. It is essential, therefore, that Skills

Development Scotland takes a leading role in providing support measures for particularly challenged young people.

I acknowledge the importance of the individuals and organisations involved in increasing the understanding of dyslexia and supporting the people who are affected by it. It is essential that we work together to continue to provide the best possible support for them.

17:23

**Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):** I am pleased to speak in this debate at the start of Scotland's dyslexia week.

I congratulate my colleague, Margaret Mitchell, on securing debating time for her motion on dyslexia and Scotland's dyslexia toolkit, the updated version of which was launched just last month. I also commend her for her tireless work with the cross-party group on dyslexia, which I have found stimulating on the few occasions that I have been able to attend it. Through that group, much has been done to raise awareness of dyslexia, which as we know is a common condition that was little understood and rarely diagnosed just a few years ago.

Dyslexia Scotland has done an excellent job on launching the toolkit, which is a really good source of help and guidance on dyslexia for parents, carers and teachers. It increases their understanding of the disability and shows them how to help children in their care to overcome it.

Dyslexia is a condition that can be very upsetting for a child who is struggling with reading and writing when their peers are coping easily. Early recognition of and appropriate help with dyslexia can not only enable children to catch up but help to prevent the loss of self-esteem that they may experience as a result of their difficulties. Once they realise that every individual is different, that we all have our own problems, and that having dyslexia does not mean that they are less bright than their peers, they can begin to cope. In fact, the diagnosis can bring relief to the affected child and his or her parents or carers.

I well recall the frustrations of watching a young relative struggle with spelling, driving his mother to distraction as he spelled the same simple words in three or four different ways on the same page of homework. The lad himself became more and more frustrated and angry until, eventually, his mum went to his school and said that she was convinced that he was brighter than he appeared to be on paper. On investigation, at the age of nine he was found to have a reading age of 11 while his spelling was like that of an eight-year-old.

In those days, the lad was labelled not as having dyslexia but as having hand-eye co-ordination problems. With help from his teachers, the use of a computer—which was quite an innovation at the time—and a tutor for English, he got through his higher exams without a scribe, achieved a university degree and now runs his own small information technology business. As an adult, he diagnosed himself as being dyslexic and learned exercises to help with spelling. His co-ordination has also improved enormously. From being a young lad who could not kick a football, he has gone to being an accomplished skier, teaching his own and other children the skills of the sport.

Dyslexia is now recognised as being quite prevalent in the community, with one in 10 adults thought to have some form of it, and a number of celebrities are now coming forward and admitting that they suffer from it. Probably the most notable of those in Scotland is Sir Jackie Stewart, who has done a great deal to raise awareness and remove any stigma from it.

Today in the public gallery we have our own celebrity. We are all delighted to join in welcoming Ellie to the Parliament and to wear the blue ribbon that she has presented to the minister and MSPs, which will be distributed to schools and libraries all over Scotland. Ellie and young people like her are real ambassadors who are helping to pave the way for dyslexic people throughout the country. I say well done to Ellie for her efforts in raising awareness of dyslexia and the impact that it can have on people's lives.

I welcome the success of the dyslexia toolkit in letting people know what dyslexia is and in giving advice to teachers and parents on how to help children who suffer from it. I congratulate Dyslexia Scotland and those who developed the toolkit, which has already helped many young people throughout Scotland and which will help many more in years to come as it evolves to take account of best practice. I hope that, as the motion suggests, similar toolkits will be developed in the future to assist employers and providers in giving appropriate support to people with dyslexia in the workplace and in the community. Finally, I thank Margaret Mitchell for leading an extremely interesting and important members' business debate.

17:27

**Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):** I congratulate Margaret Mitchell on securing the debate. I also welcome the members of the cross-party group on dyslexia who have attended the debate, and I pay tribute to young Ellie Gordon-Woolgar.

I was involved in the debate in the chamber this afternoon and saw many of my colleagues arriving wearing the ribbon. I thought that I had missed my opportunity and had to run out, get my ribbon and run back in. Luckily, I made it back in time for voting; otherwise, although I would have been wearing a very nice ribbon, the whips would not have been very happy with me.

Even since I was at school—which was more recently than some other members in the chamber—a great distance has been travelled. I remember the difficulties that some of my peers at school faced in relation to dyslexia, not just in getting it diagnosed but in the tolerance of some teachers towards dyslexic pupils. We have travelled some distance since then. I am not going to argue that there is not still more work to be done, but even in that short space of time there has been welcome progress.

It was interesting to hear Nanette Milne and Margaret Mitchell mention some dyslexia sufferers who are prominent in Scottish public life. Sir Jackie Stewart's story has always fascinated me. I have been a formula 1 fan for many years and I remember watching a documentary about Sir Jackie's struggle with dyslexia. His tale of his experience at school was quite harrowing, as he was made to feel almost inadequate as a student simply because of his challenges with dyslexia. In an article, he is quoted as saying:

"I can still remember every braking distance and gear change I needed to get around the Nürburgring circuit in Germany—and there were 187 corners when I raced there—but I can't get through my alphabet."

That remarkable quote sets in context the challenge that is often faced by individuals with dyslexia.

The other point is that Sir Jackie's experience demonstrates that there is no limit to what can be achieved by someone with dyslexia. People such as Sir Jackie and the other prominent Scots that Margaret Mitchell mentioned stand testament to the fact that dyslexia ought not to be a barrier to going on to great success in childhood or adulthood.

**Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mark McDonald:** I will take a very brief intervention.

**Claudia Beamish:** In the context of adults challenged by dyslexia, I want to highlight that the motion refers to an employer's toolkit. I very much hope that Mark McDonald agrees with me that it would be helpful were the Scottish Government to look at that.

I also want briefly to praise the Scottish Parliament—for once—in that it leads by example

and has processes in place to support employees with dyslexia, of which there are indeed some in the Parliament.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will give Mark McDonald that time back.

**Mark McDonald:** Thank you, Presiding Office. I was about to ask for that.

I associate myself entirely with Claudia Beamish's remarks. I represent North East Scotland and prior to entering Parliament I was a member of Aberdeen City Council. In Aberdeen, a specialist dyslexic unit at Kaimhill primary school has existed since 1991. Thanks to the fantastic three Rs school programme, that unit now sits in a fantastic building where an excellent educational experience is provided to children. That demonstrates that a lot of work has been done over time in relation to dyslexia.

The council noted that there were variations in assessment and intervention across the city. In September 2011, it therefore launched new dyslexia practice guidelines following collaborative work with Aberdeen College, Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen. That collaborative approach is welcome.

An interesting thing about the guidelines—this perhaps links to Claudia Beamish's point—is that they also cover the transition to post-school education. We often focus on dyslexia at school education level, but there are often difficulties in the transition to further or higher education or to the workplace. I hope that the minister will set out in his summing up how the Government intends to help individuals with dyslexia to cope with those transitions and how it will help organisations to support that process.

17:32

**The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan):** As others have done, I thank Margaret Mitchell for lodging the motion that we are debating. As Nanette Milne rightly mentioned, Margaret Mitchell, as convener of the cross-party group on dyslexia, is a passionate advocate for raising public awareness and understanding about dyslexia and for ensuring that those affected receive the support that they need.

I share that passion. Every pupil in Scotland should experience the broad general education that they are entitled to under curriculum for excellence. However, without appropriate support, many of our children and young people face barriers to learning that could prevent them from realising their true potential.

As others have mentioned, unidentified, dyslexia can cause frustration among parents, teachers

and, most important, pupils. I heard about that directly today from Ellie Gordon-Woolgar who, as others have mentioned, is a 12-year-old pupil at Edinburgh academy. She presented me with a blue dyslexia awareness ribbon that I intend to wear during dyslexia awareness week. For those who are looking for the ribbons, there are some at the door at the back of the gallery.

As Neil Bibby mentioned, dyslexia brings strengths to many people, such as creativity and abstract thinking, as ably demonstrated by Ellie and her campaign. However, dyslexia also brings real challenges. As members have recognised, the ability to read and to communicate ideas in writing is critical if everyone is to access the full range of available educational opportunities.

Without appropriate support, a pupil with dyslexia may fall behind their peers, lose confidence in their abilities, and potentially disengage from learning altogether. That individual tragedy can become a collective national loss. In response to Mark McDonald's points, it is vital that we ensure that people with dyslexia who are moving on from school—to work or to further or higher education—receive the support that they need to avoid that loss of potential.

Scotland has real strength in the most vital factor for modern economies—the human capital that is afforded by our greatest asset, Scotland's people. If we are to continue to grow and develop, we need to build on that strength and create a Scotland where everyone is given the opportunity to succeed. Therefore, it is our responsibility to ensure that we have an education system that lives up to those aspirations and unlocks the true potential of our pupils.

As a Parliament, through the additional support for learning legislation, we set a clear expectation that every child and young person in Scotland should have any additional support needs identified and met. Mark McDonald rightly mentioned that we have come a long way. Although we have certainly made substantial progress in provision for pupils with dyslexia, we should all acknowledge that more needs to be done.

Across Scotland, 1.8 per cent of pupils receive additional support as a result of having dyslexia, but organisations such as Dyslexia Scotland estimate that the true figure could be as high as 10 per cent. As Margaret Mitchell said, we see substantial variations among local authorities in recorded support rates. For example, while 2.8 per cent of primary pupils in Inverclyde receive support for dyslexia, the equivalent figure for North Lanarkshire is 0.2 per cent. In the secondary schools of Aberdeenshire the figure is 6.1 per cent, while only 0.6 per cent of secondary pupils in North Lanarkshire receive similar support. I do not



mean to single out North Lanarkshire Council; I merely point out that the picture across the country is extremely varied.

Early identification of dyslexia needs to be a priority for all our schools. Those figures suggest that the needs of too many pupils in our classrooms are going unrecognised and unmet. Our statistics also indicate that pupils with dyslexia are not yet achieving parity with their peers in academic attainment or access to higher education. If we compare the outcomes last year for pupils with dyslexia with those for pupils with no additional support needs, we find that 25 per cent of those with dyslexia achieved at least five qualifications at standard grade credit level or equivalent, 13 per cent achieved at least three highers at grades A to C and 13 per cent went on to higher education, whereas the equivalent figures for those with no additional support needs were 59, 40 and 38 per cent.

Being diagnosed with dyslexia does not diminish a pupil's potential, and I will not accept any limits being placed on people's ambitions. The example of Jackie Stewart that was mentioned earlier is instructive in that regard. I have asked Education Scotland to investigate why those disparities exist and to identify and share the good practice that I know exists across Scotland.

**Margaret Mitchell:** Does the minister accept that one of the reasons for the disparity is the lack of a uniform definition? There would not be such a disparity if everyone used the definition that is contained in the toolkit that was agreed on by the Scottish Government and Dyslexia Scotland.

**Dr Allan:** I cannot compel local authorities to use the excellent material in the toolkit, but I would certainly encourage them to do so, because it plays a valuable role in identifying people with dyslexia at an early age.

I will visit Kyle academy in Ayr next month to see for myself how teachers and pupils there are destigmatising dyslexia through school assemblies. That is part of a wider dyslexia-friendly schools model that South Ayrshire Council has adopted to improve dyslexia provision across its schools. I will be accompanied by Education Scotland, which will begin reviewing provision in schools following the Easter break.

I was delighted to launch the new and enhanced addressing dyslexia toolkit at the Scottish learning festival last month. I believe that, if they are adopted, the approaches that are described in the new online toolkit will lead to significant improvements in identification rates and attainment.

I want to put an end to the days when pupils with dyslexia disengaged from learning as a result of a lack of support. There is no reason why every

pupil in Scotland with dyslexia should not be identified early and receive the help and support that they need. That is their entitlement, and this Government will do everything in its power to make that a consistent reality across Scotland. In that spirit, I commend the motion to the chamber.

*Meeting closed at 17:39.*



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