



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 26 September 2012

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 26 September 2012

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

Scottish Government Question Time

Health and Wellbeing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions. Question 1, in the name of John Park, has not been lodged. The member has provided no explanation or apology and therefore we are displeased. Question 2 was withdrawn for understandable reasons. Question 3 was not lodged for understandable reasons.

Obesity and Mental Health

4. George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what research it has conducted on whether there is a relationship between obesity and mental health. (S4O-01309)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): There is a well-established association between obesity and mental health problems that is supported by a body of research. Although the Scottish Government has not added directly to that work, we have acknowledged the importance of the link, most recently in the new mental health strategy, which was published in August. In the strategy we gave a commitment to work with national health service boards and other partners to support a range of measures to help people with severe and enduring mental illness to improve their physical ability levels.

George Adam: The minister seems to be aware of the Scottish Association for Mental Health's research, which shows that people with mental health problems are more likely to be less active and to be concerned about being judged when going out of their home. Does the minister agree that Renfrewshire mental health arts and film festival, which is being held in the first three weeks of October, is one way of engaging those with mental health issues and of not only helping them to get involved in the community, but giving them confidence—if needed—to attend public events.

Michael Matheson: Yes, I agree with George Adam. Engaging in the arts, whether through participation or appreciation, is a positive way of helping to support someone's recovery from mental illness. The Scottish Government provides funding to the Mental Health Foundation to help to support the Scottish mental health arts and film

festival, which is one of Scotland's most diverse cultural events and covers everything from music, film and the visual arts to theatre, dance and literature. The annual festival is about to start in October and will take place at venues throughout the country. I encourage members to consider participating in and attending some of the events.

Epilepsy

5. Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports people living with epilepsy. (S4O-01310)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that people with neurological conditions such as epilepsy can access safe, effective and person-centred care. We are therefore working with national health service boards, the third sector and patients to make sure that clinical standards for neurological conditions are implemented.

We have already helped NHS boards to improve local neurological services by providing £1.2 million of funding over the past two years. NHS boards have demonstrated a real desire and commitment to continue with local service improvement. We want to see NHS boards continue that work and work in partnership with the voluntary sector to build on the progress already made. We have therefore provided the Neurological Alliance of Scotland with funding of £40,000 to establish a national advisory group, which will oversee and support NHS boards to take forward the improvements that they have planned.

Bob Doris: I draw the minister's attention to an initiative in Glasgow that I have helped to secure to raise awareness of epilepsy among those working in the licensed trade. Epilepsy Scotland will now deliver training to all staff in Òran Mór licensed premises in Glasgow and other outlets that are run by the proprietor, Colin Beattie. Will the minister meet me and Epilepsy Scotland to discuss how this innovative approach to epilepsy awareness and training can be rolled out not just to licensed premises across Scotland, but in other areas such as justice and education, so that those who deal with people who may suffer from epileptic episodes can make informed choices and support those people in the best way possible?

Michael Matheson: That sounds like a worthwhile initiative and I will be more than happy to meet Bob Doris, Epilepsy Scotland and any other parties who would like to explore that particular project.

Further, I believe it is important that we ensure that various strands of Government policy work in a co-ordinated fashion across health, justice and

education, and the initiative strikes me as an example of how we can take that forward. I would be more than happy to explore what further work can be done to try to encourage the roll-out of such initiatives in other parts of the country.

Emergency Surgery (Rural Areas)

6. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of emergency surgery provision for rural communities. (S4O-01311)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): It is a matter for national health service boards to plan and provide such services to meet the assessed needs of their resident populations.

Liz Smith: The cabinet secretary will be aware that Perth royal infirmary has seen a loss of emergency service provision over the weekends, with no operations now taking place between 6 pm on a Friday and 8 am on a Monday. Given that Perth royal infirmary serves a large rural area, there is growing concern that more and more services are being centralised at Ninewells in Dundee, with the associated travel that is involved.

The Scottish National Party has made a specific commitment that rural medical care will not be diminished, so will the cabinet secretary give an assurance that we will not see any further loss of services at Perth royal infirmary?

Alex Neil: I have not received any proposals for any reduction in services at Perth royal infirmary. I am acutely aware of the particular needs of all our rural areas in respect of all aspects of the health service.

Care Homes (Psychotropic Medication)

7. Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to promote the safe and effective prescription of psychotropic medication to care home residents. (S4O-01312)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Campbell, as your microphone did not come on immediately, Mr Neil might not have heard the full question. I ask you to repeat it.

Roderick Campbell: To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to promote the safe and effective prescription of psychotropic medication to care home residents.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I actually read the question in the *Business Bulletin* this morning.

We made a commitment in the national dementia strategy to reduce inappropriate

prescribing of psychoactive medication to people with dementia. As part of that work, we commissioned research into prescribing, which has shown that, since 2009, there has been a decline in the initiation of new antipsychotics and, overall, a decreasing trend in antipsychotic use. The number of older people with dementia who were prescribed an antipsychotic in the first quarter of 2011 was the lowest number in the entire 2001 to 2011 study period.

The review of national health service pharmaceutical care of patients in the community in Scotland is considering evidence on the specific pharmaceutical care service needs of residents in care homes and how they can best be met, with a particular emphasis on the clinical role of pharmacists. That external review involves a wide range of stakeholders, including patients and patient groups, clinicians, the NHS, social care and voluntary organisations. The review will report to the Scottish Government in November and we will decide then what action to take.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. Of course, you will know that it is important for members of the public and the official report to hear the question as well.

Roderick Campbell: Has the cabinet secretary also considered the recommendation by researchers at the University of Dundee and NHS Fife of systematic medication reviews? That is particularly important as the study found that the majority of psychotropic drugs that are used by nursing home residents were started before the patient was admitted.

Alex Neil: All those recommendations will be considered as part of the review that I mentioned in my answer to the first question.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

I thank the cabinet secretary for the information that he has provided. Given that it remains the fact that people in care homes with dementia are significantly more likely to be on a psychoactive substance, will he consider, even before he receives the report that he mentioned, allowing those citizens to register with a pharmacist for chronic condition prescribing? Up to now, they have been barred from doing so. It is a right for every other citizen and it appears to me that residents in care homes should have that right as well.

Alex Neil: I am always willing to listen to constructive suggestions, whichever part of the chamber they come from. I will certainly take that matter into consideration in deciding policy for the future.

Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind): I endorse what Dr Simpson has just said. I suggest to the health secretary that a prior step that could be

taken to ensure the comfort and safety of such people in old people's homes is the training and registration of people who will work with them.

Alex Neil: Margo MacDonald has made another valid suggestion that I am prepared to take back and consider.

Monklands Hospital

8. Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what improvement plans it has for Monklands hospital. (S4O-01313)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): Both this Government and NHS Lanarkshire remain totally committed to the maintenance and development of Monklands hospital. NHS Lanarkshire is progressing an initial agreement to develop options for what will be very complex work—with a construction and capital value of £400 million—to upgrade the hospital to meet current standards. The £15 million that has made available in the board's capital plan for expenditure on Monklands over the three-year period from 2010-11 to 2012-13 is being spent on projects that prioritise backlog maintenance and statutory compliance to ensure not only that the building remains safe and functional but that investment is aligned to the site's clinical requirements.

Richard Lyle: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer and, as his former constituency chairman, I wish him well in his new job. Does he agree that mental health services at Monklands hospital should be improved?

Alex Neil: First of all, I thank Dick Lyle for welcoming me to my new job—it is much appreciated.

NHS Lanarkshire is looking at the future of mental health services throughout Lanarkshire and I believe that it is revising its original proposal for the mental health unit at Monklands with a view to retaining an acute mental health facility at the hospital.

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): The much-needed investment in Monklands hospital will be welcomed across the chamber but what plans are or have been in place to renovate the towers, which are in an extremely poor condition? Are they covered in the plans that the cabinet secretary mentioned?

Alex Neil: I am very much aware of the towers and, indeed, other physical problems at Monklands hospital, which, of course, was opened in the late 1970s. The £400 million capital spend that I have just mentioned will include modernisation—although I make it clear that I am not familiar with the final plans as they have not

been finally decided. They might well involve the towers' removal, but that is still to be confirmed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 9 has not been lodged for understandable reasons.

Cancer (Early Detection)

10. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent progress the detect cancer early initiative has made. (S4O-01315)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): The detect cancer early programme, which was launched in February with an initial focus on breast, lung and colorectal cancers, aims to improve cancer survival rates for people in Scotland to become among the best in Europe. The social marketing priming campaign ran through February and March, with the aim of tackling fear and negative attitudes towards cancer, and the first of the tumour-specific campaigns was launched on 4 September to increase awareness of breast cancer symptoms.

Early recognition and detection of cancer symptoms are key to the programme's success. To support that work, Healthcare Improvement Scotland is leading a review of the Scottish primary care cancer guidelines, commencing with those on breast, lung and colorectal cancer. We are working with NHS boards on modelling potential increases in demand to ensure adequate provision of diagnostic, screening and treatment capacity.

James Dornan: As the cabinet secretary said, the on-going advertising campaign fronted by Elaine C Smith gives women information and advice on how to check for early symptoms of breast cancer. Given that the expected upsurge in the number of women recognising and acting on early signs and symptoms will inevitably lead to more consultations at general practitioner surgeries, are there any plans to offer a renewal or review of GP training to reinforce the importance of early detection of breast cancer and to assist GPs in working with other health professionals such as practice nurses on detecting early signs of breast cancer as soon as possible?

Alex Neil: Every GP in Scotland has received supporting breast campaign literature and specific information on the current Scottish referral guidelines for breast cancer that will raise awareness of the campaign and the symptoms and signs of breast cancer on which they should act.

We are working in partnership with the Scottish cancer coalition and the Scottish primary care cancer group to develop a GP education programme. A parallel programme of work involves GPs in the review of the referral

guidelines for breast cancer. Once that has been completed, there will be an opportunity for further awareness raising with GPs based on the new guidance.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): At a conference organised by Bowel Cancer UK two weeks ago, we heard about the bowel cancer screening programme's great success. Will the cabinet secretary tell us whether there are any plans to develop that programme? Will he also tell us about any action that the Scottish Government is taking to reduce some of the unacceptably long waits for colonoscopy?

Alex Neil: I am examining in particular how quick the patient's journey is from the point at which there is a suspicion of bowel cancer to establishing whether cancer is present and how quickly it can be treated.

The bowel cancer screening programme has been enormously successful, although in some areas the rate of response—particularly from men of a certain age—could be improved. That would improve the programme's success even more.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): Given our ever-ageing population in Scotland and the importance of early detection, will the cabinet secretary tell us what steps he intends to take to raise awareness of the continuing risk of breast cancer among women over the age of 70, as routine breast screening stops at 70 and, with increasing life expectancy, more cases of breast cancer in older women are likely to occur?

Alex Neil: As Nanette Milne will be aware, we already have a range of programmes to make all women aware of the possibility of breast cancer. However, I take the point that she makes about women over 70. We are considering what additional work can be done to make that group particularly aware of breast cancer.

Accident and Emergency (Treatment Times)

11. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent progress has been made on achieving the HEAT target for accident and emergency treatment times. (S4O-01316)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): The Scottish Government continues to view the four-hour accident and emergency standard as an important measure of the quality of care provided to patients. It is the only Government in the United Kingdom that maintains a commitment to delivering and sustaining the challenging standard that 98 per cent of patients should be admitted, discharged or transferred within four hours of their arrival at an accident and emergency department.

The latest official figures show that, in June, 95.1 per cent of patients throughout Scotland were admitted, discharged or transferred within four hours. We continue to work with health boards to make progress to improve the quality of care provided to patients through that standard.

David Torrance: Will the cabinet secretary congratulate NHS Fife on its dramatic improvements on waiting times for emergency treatment? Newly released figures show that, during July and August 2012, it went from being one of the worst-performing health boards in Scotland in the past year to achieving a performance level in which 98 per cent of people waiting for treatment were seen in less than four hours.

Alex Neil: Even although those figures have not been officially released, I believe that they have appeared in a local newspaper. Therefore, I feel free to comment on them and to congratulate Fife NHS Board on that excellent performance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Hear, hear.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the progress on the four-hour waiting times targets in accident and emergency and join in congratulating the staff on their achievements. However, does the cabinet secretary share my concern that the number of patients waiting more than eight and more than 12 hours for admission and treatment has doubled? Will he advise members what he intends to do to address that?

Alex Neil: Although the numbers and percentage in that category are—to put the matter in context—extremely small, we are taking action across the board to ensure that it does not happen in future.

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): Two weeks ago, the cabinet secretary suggested that the rise in the longest waits in accident and emergency was simply due to circumstances in particular hospitals. I will ask him about the situation at one of those hospitals. Why does he seem so sure that the persistence of a 12-hour wait at Hairmyres has nothing to do with the staffing situation in NHS Lanarkshire that the previous health secretary left unresolved?

Alex Neil: We have undertaken a detailed analysis in every case in which the situation arises. I have been advised that staffing shortages are not the reason for the delays and that there are other reasons. I am happy to write to the member to give some more details of our analysis.

In all fairness, had Labour's plans to close the accident and emergency units at Monklands hospital and Ayr hospital gone ahead, waiting times at accident and emergency units in

Lanarkshire and Ayrshire would have been far longer than they are now.

Community Medical Services (Older People)

12. Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that older people receiving support in their own homes have regular access to community medical services. (S4O-01317)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): Providing high-quality care and support for older people is a fundamental principle of social justice and an important hallmark of a caring and compassionate society. Supporting and caring for older people is not only a health or social work responsibility. We all have a role to play: families; neighbours; communities; providers of services such as housing, transport, leisure and community safety; and others.

Health boards are required to ensure that care provided to older people by general practitioners is consistent with their contractual requirements and the General Medical Council's "Good Medical Practice". Under the quality and outcomes framework or enhanced services elements of the GP contract, health boards may also have identified specific pathways that detail care of the elderly. Any such pathways would be monitored as part of the contract review process.

Clare Adamson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is vital that the elderly and housebound have full and continued access not only to assessment and clinical medical services but to dental services, podiatry and a full range of routine checks and screening services? Such services ensure that appropriate prevention and early intervention can be planned for that group of patients. What is the cabinet secretary doing to ensure that appropriate transport arrangements and information about the arrangements are in place for that group of patients?

Alex Neil: I expect NHS boards to work with the Scottish Ambulance Service and a range of local private, public and voluntary transport providers to ensure that all patients have the support and information that they need to access transport.

The Scottish Ambulance Service is taking forward an extensive patient transport improvement programme, which includes a redesign of the service so that patients, regardless of their age, undertake a patient needs assessment. That direct engagement between the patient and the Ambulance Service ensures that ambulance transport is consistently available to those patients who require assistance or medical support to get to and from their appointments. Such engagement also ensures that the most

appropriate method of transport and level of care can be provided.

Drug Prescriptions (NHS Ayrshire and Arran)

13. Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how much NHS Ayrshire and Arran spent on drug prescriptions in 2011-12. (S4O-01318)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): The cost to NHS Ayrshire and Arran of dispensing prescriptions in the community in 2011-12 was approximately £74.4 million. The cost of secondary and tertiary prescriptions in the same year was approximately £28.6 million.

Chic Brodie: A major contributor to the expenditure is repeat prescriptions, which in many cases result in the non-use of the drugs so prescribed. It is estimated that that may cost a particular health board a sum in excess of £1.5 million per year, which might be better spent elsewhere in the service. The same applies to health boards across Scotland.

Will the cabinet secretary therefore initiate a full review across all GPs and health boards in Scotland to secure an organisation and process that ensures that a more rigorous view of the practice by those involved in medicine prescription and distribution will result in a fundamental change and that the process and actions adopted will be subject to a regular independent audit?

Alex Neil: We are already tackling the issue under our improving efficiency programmes. Our estimate is that, if every health board in the country adopts the best practice of the best health board in relation to prescriptions, there is the potential to save at least £30 million a year from the drugs bill. Repeat prescriptions are a significant element of that potential saving.

I assure the member that I will drive health boards the length and breadth of Scotland to get into the upper quartile of performance and to save that £30 million, so that it can be redeployed and redirected in the national health service to provide additional or better services in other areas.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I associate myself with Chic Brodie's comments, which were absolutely valid.

In 2011-12, the Scottish Government assumed a 5 per cent increase in the volume of prescriptions and allocated an additional £57 million to health boards for that purpose. What increase did the cabinet secretary allow for this year? Does he share my concern that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has identified a substantial overspend in its prescribing budget for

this year? What will he do to ensure that that has no negative impact on patient care?

Alex Neil: NHS Lothian is probably the most proficient health board in its ability to dispense drugs efficiently. I would like NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and all the other health boards to follow that example and to use Lothian as the benchmark. If we do that, we can make the savings that I described and ensure that everybody gets the drugs that they require while minimising wastage and freeing up resource for investment elsewhere.

Individual Patient Treatment Requests (Consistency)

14. John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that national health service boards have a consistent approach when making decisions regarding individual patient treatment requests. (S4O-01319)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): NHS boards are expected to maintain an overview of the effectiveness of their local arrangements for the introduction of new medicines, including NHS board management of IPTRs. NHS boards were reminded of their responsibilities on that in additional guidance that was published on 13 February this year under the cover of SGHD/CMO(2012)1, which recognised the benefits of NHS boards meeting at least annually to share good practice on IPTR management.

The guidance reflects recommendations that emanated from a clinically led short-life working group to consider the safe and effective use of new medicines in the national health service in Scotland. The Scottish Government will monitor progress on implementing its chief executive letter guidance on the introduction of new medicines, which took effect on 1 April 2011.

John Pentland: I recognise that the cabinet secretary inherited the problem from his predecessor, but the Scottish Government seems to be disengaged from the process. I have received written answers that show that health board policies are not monitored or compared, that decisions are not monitored, that panels and procedures for dealing with requests are not standardised, and that training for panel members is not standardised. Boards are supposed to have annual meetings, but none has occurred yet and no date is set for one. No details are available about contact between staff of different health boards. That is a recipe for a postcode lottery. How does the minister expect to ensure consistency when the Scottish Government is not even looking at those issues?

Alex Neil: We are looking at the issues. Once the Scottish Medicines Consortium has approved a drug for use, each health board has three months to submit its strategy in terms of the criteria for using that medicine. It is the case that a number of health boards have not submitted and agreed their strategies within those three months.

I do not accept all the specific points that the member made, but I agree with him in general terms that we need to improve performance in the area to ensure that every health board meets the three-month target for every new drug that is introduced and that we have greater consistency across Scotland. I am addressing the issue as one of my priorities in the new position that I hold.

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): My questions are in that spirit. As many potentially life-saving and spectacular new treatments are becoming available almost monthly by routine, does the cabinet secretary agree that patients' expectations for IPTRs probably cannot be realised? In those circumstances, will he agree to consider the Health and Sport Committee's examination of access to new medicines?

Were I minded to write to the cabinet secretary, would he be disposed to consider meeting representatives of all parties in the Parliament to see whether we could jointly agree on a route forward to ensure that we do not squander the opportunity that is afforded to us to tackle long-established ailments that have bedevilled society for generations in a way that allows as many people as possible rapid access to new medicines?

Alex Neil: First, I will take into consideration reports from the Health and Sport Committee not just on this subject but on every subject that it reports on that impacts on my portfolio. Secondly, I look forward to receiving more detailed observations from Jackson Carlaw, which I will take seriously. Thirdly, if there are areas of health policy in Scotland in which we can get greater consensus across the chamber, I am more than willing to work with other parties to ensure that that happens.

The national health service is one of the great treasures that we have in this country, and it is important that we all work together to improve the health service as best we can. If we can move forward on a consensual basis, I will be the first to sign up to that consensus.

Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind): In seeking to avoid a postcode lottery and to ensure a much more level playing field of policy among the health boards, has the cabinet secretary considered that we may have too many health boards in Scotland and that we could do with fewer?

Alex Neil: There are 22 health boards in Scotland, plus many other bodies such as the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland, the Scottish health council and others. Given the scarcity of resources that we all face because of the budget cuts, which will continue for a number of years yet, plus the increasing demands that the health service faces, we should find opportunities where we can to streamline the organisation of the health service to release resources that could be better spent on the front line. That is an area on which I will focus some attention in my time as the new health secretary, however short or long that may be.

World Health Organization

15. Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met representatives of the World Health Organization. (S4O-01320)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): A representative of the Scottish Government met Dr Shekhar Saxena, director, mental health and substance abuse, and Dr Matt Muijen, programme manager, mental health, of the World Health Organization, from 3 to 5 September 2012. That meeting was part of the WHO consultation on the European mental health strategy and the global mental health action plan. The Scottish Government has provided expert support to the development of the European mental health strategy.

Graeme Dey: The cabinet secretary may be aware that the World Health Organization's international agency for research on cancer has, in the past few months, classified diesel exhaust emissions as carcinogenic to humans, causing lung cancer and increased risk of bladder cancer. Dr Christopher Portier, the chairman of the IARC, has stated that the scientific evidence is "compelling". How does the Scottish Government view those findings and what steps is it taking to measure the impact of diesel emissions on the health and wellbeing of Scotland's people?

Alex Neil: Right across Government, whether in the transport function, in climate change or in health, we measure all the emissions because we must reach our climate change targets. We will and do take into consideration all the primary and secondary research that is produced by the World Health Organization, which is a first-class international body.

The points that Graeme Dey raises are extremely important; however, I place the following caveat on those comments. At the moment, regrettably, the measures required to deal directly with that problem touch on reserved matters rather than devolved responsibilities. Obviously, I hope

that, in the next four years, we will rectify that deficiency by not having reserved matters.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The cabinet secretary was doing so well until that last comment. When his representatives met the WHO individuals, did they discuss the issue of drug deaths, which is a major problem for Scotland? The number of drug deaths in Scotland is increasing, whereas the number in England is decreasing. Indeed, in France the number has been reduced by a considerable measure. Was there any discussion of what best practice might be of assistance to us in tackling that difficult problem, which has been growing for the past eight or nine years?

Alex Neil: I will make two points: first, my understanding is that the discussions with the WHO officials were wide ranging across a range of issues; secondly, I recognise that particular problem of the relatively higher rate of deaths.

We believe that a major contributing factor to that higher rate is the very high level of drug abuse relatively speaking a number of years ago—a generation ago. People who abused drugs then are now getting to an age when their bodies can no longer tolerate any further abuse, or indeed sometimes the challenges of modern living. As a result, we are seeing that spike in the number of drug-related deaths. We think that that is a major contributing factor and, because of its historical nature, it is difficult to see how any intervention from us, above and beyond what we are doing, could dramatically influence the figures. Obviously, where we can do something we will—I appreciate that it is a problem—but it is not necessarily a problem with an easy solution because of the historical context.

Psychological Therapies (Waiting Times)

16. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce waiting times for people who have been referred for psychological therapies. (S4O-01321)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government has established the health improvement, efficiency, access and treatment target to deliver faster access to mental health services by delivering 18 weeks referral to treatment for psychological therapies from December 2014. We have already made improvements in service performance across Scotland since the HEAT target was set.

We have published "The Matrix: a Guide to Delivering Evidence-based Psychological Therapies in Scotland"; it covers which treatments are effective for which conditions. The matrix emphasises that services must provide adequate

supervision for staff who deliver psychological interventions, to ensure patient safety and the delivery of evidence-based care.

Through NHS Education Scotland, we are working to assess and develop workforce capacity to ensure that a range of staff are equipped to deliver those therapies.

Rhoda Grant: Will the minister take specific action to target areas in which waiting times for psychological therapies are longer, such as in the Highlands, where an estimated 75,000 people suffer from mental illness? Health boards that cover large geographical areas with a sparse population need more staff time per patient to deliver those therapies. Will the minister take that into account when setting health board budgets?

Michael Matheson: In order to improve access to psychological therapies, the HEAT target is there to drive all boards—including NHS Highland—to ensure that they have processes, systems and data collection mechanisms in place to meet that HEAT standard. It is for local boards to respond with regard to how they can best effect that within their local areas.

I recognise that some of the boards that cover larger rural areas have particular circumstances around which they have to develop services in order to meet that target. I expect NHS Highland to consider those circumstances in its planning and in the implementation of its policy to ensure that it is making progress to achieve the target by December 2014.

Commonwealth Games 2014

17. Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what recent progress has been made with preparations for the 2014 Commonwealth games. (S4O-01322)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): Progress with our preparations for the 2014 games continues to be excellent. The great success of Scottish athletes in the Olympics and Paralympics has enthused our nation and raised the profile of the games. It is now just 665 days until the Glasgow games get under way.

In recent weeks we have seen the introduction to the world of Clyde, the games mascot—although a thistle called Clyde may receive an interesting reception among the Firhill faithful; the announcement of three high-profile games ambassadors; and new sponsors announcing their support for the games. Construction work on the athletes village is on schedule and we will shortly see the opening of one of the major new venues that will be used for the games—the Commonwealth arena and Sir Chis Hoy velodrome.

I am very confident that Glasgow and Scotland will be ready for the Commonwealth games in 2014. The next partner progress report will be published next month.

Hanzala Malik: I thank the minister for that full response.

Many members—including no fewer than 37 Scottish National Party back benchers, I am pleased to say—have expressed concerns about the work capability assessments for employment and support allowance that Atos Healthcare is carrying out and the company's role in denying ill and disabled people benefits. Given those legitimate concerns, does the minister consider Atos to be an appropriate sponsor for the 2014 Commonwealth games?

Michael Matheson: I am aware of the concerns that many members have about Atos; indeed, as a constituency member, I have also raised concerns about its work assessment programme. It is important that we recognise that, to a large extent, such matters are for the organising committee in Glasgow. I have no doubt that members will seek to make representations to that committee on areas about which they have concerns, but we should not distract ourselves from the fact that we are making very good progress in ensuring that the arrangements for the 2014 games are in place. More than anything, I think that the games will be remembered for the friendly welcome that they are assured from the people of Glasgow and the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Dave Thompson's question should be brief and relevant.

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Will the minister support proposals to have a 2014 Commonwealth highland games linked with the Commonwealth games? That will not only boost highland games, but will promote all of Scotland as a great place to visit.

Michael Matheson: It is my understanding that the Commonwealth Games Federation does not permit the staging of exhibit sports as part of the Commonwealth games. However, we have a long highland games tradition and given that 2014 is also the year of homecoming, I have no doubt that various organisations will wish to look at the possibility of hosting a major highland games event in that year. I encourage Dave Thompson and parties that are interested in taking that initiative forward to work with all the agencies that can offer support and assistance in making that a success in 2014.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That pushed things to the limit, but that concludes question time.

Green Bus Fund

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-04247, in the name of Keith Brown, on the green bus fund. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now and to organise their microphones, remembering that they are directional and that they should point at their mouths.

14:43

The Minister for Transport and Veteran Affairs (Keith Brown): The Government is committed, as its main purpose, to creating a more successful country, with opportunities for everybody to flourish through increasing sustainable economic growth. I remind members that the subject of the debate is the Scottish green bus fund, as it is not immediately obvious from the Labour amendment, for example, that the debate is about that. The Scottish green bus fund is an integral part of how we will deliver the commitment to a sustainable economic future for Scotland.

Our public transport services play a vital role in enabling access to employment, training, public services, leisure, and friends and family. They produce less carbon, pollution and congestion per passenger mile than private cars do. That is reflected in our commitments in our climate change agenda to encourage a modal shift towards more sustainable and active modes of travel and to support lower-carbon and more fuel-efficient options within modes.

The bus sector plays a particularly key role. In 2010-11, buses ran 354 million kilometres on local services in Scotland. Buses deliver 438 million passenger journeys a year and 80 per cent of all passenger journeys made by public transport. They carry some 12 per cent of the population to work every day. For many communities, they are the principal or the only means of public transport.

Over the past few years, the Government has worked closely with the bus industry to support the introduction of more environmentally friendly, low-carbon vehicles into the Scottish bus fleet. The debate will consider the importance of that continuing work for transport, the environment and bus users. Last month, I announced a further round of the Scottish green bus fund worth £3 million and, last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth announced further funding of £2.5 million for hybrid buses in 2013-14 as part of his budget statement.

I will start by setting the context for bus transport in delivering our climate change agenda. Our

environment is increasingly affected by the decisions that individuals make on a daily basis, transport being one of those decisions. Transport is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Greenhouse gas emissions by all transport, including freight, account for a quarter of all emissions in Scotland. Within that total, road transport accounts for 70 per cent. Bus transport produces 3 per cent of road emissions, but that figure is growing, partly because of increases in the weight of conventional diesel buses resulting from the equipment that is needed to ensure, rightly, that they are accessible to all passengers, and partly because of increasing improvements in the efficiency of other road transport modes, including cars and freight. Buses in urban areas also contribute to the particulate and other emissions that have a detrimental effect on the air quality in too many of our towns and cities.

As we see bus transport as an important and growing part of the transport mix, it is important that we take action to address those environmental impacts. That is why the Government has been incentivising the purchase and operation of low-carbon vehicles.

Part of our approach to doing that is the Scottish green bus fund, which has a number of potential benefits. It can reduce the direct impact of buses' carbon and other emissions on the environment and newer vehicles improve the quality of service, encouraging modal shift from car to bus. It can increase demand for low-carbon vehicles, benefiting bus manufacturers and allowing them to develop and invest in technology and achieve economies of scale. That is an important point because, although the Government's role is to incentivise the purchase of low-carbon vehicles, it is not the idea that we will continue to do that for ever more; we want to help the industry to move towards that and provide encouragement for operators.

The Scottish green bus fund can contribute over time to reductions in the overall cost of low-carbon vehicles, which will improve their commercial viability and encourage increasing investment by bus operators. In turn, that will create and sustain opportunities for Scottish businesses to develop expertise in innovation in bus manufacturing and operation.

So far, we have completed two rounds of the Scottish green bus fund. The first two rounds have already delivered 71 low-carbon hybrid vehicles to nine bus operators that provide services in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth, Dundee and Aberdeen. Last month, I announced a third round of £3 million, to run this year. As I said, last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth announced further funding for hybrid buses in 2013-14 of £2.5 million,

which will bring Scottish Government funding for green buses over four years to £11.3 million, which I believe represents a continuing and sustained commitment to lower-carbon bus services.

What are the practical benefits that we are achieving as a result of those investments? We have reduced the direct environmental impact that is made by vehicles, as each new bus delivers an average reduction in CO₂ of around 21 tonnes per year and 300 tonnes over its life cycle, which makes an important contribution to achieving our climate change targets. In parallel with reducing carbon use, those buses are also producing less exhaust gas, which helps to improve air quality. It is worth noting, in relation to the buses that we have funded in the Edinburgh area, that the initial estimate of a reduction in fuel consumption of around 40 per cent has been substantially exceeded; we are told by Lothian Buses that the reduction is around 60 per cent. Obviously, as well as using far less fuel, there are benefits to the environment and business benefits to the operators.

In some instances, the newer vehicles that are being supported are helping to encourage modal shift by delivering higher quality services that can encourage car drivers to go by bus rather than car.

An example of a successful operation, which has seen a growth in patronage, is the number 10 route that is run in Edinburgh by Lothian Buses. The operator took the opportunity of improving the overall specification of the vehicle and developed a specific marketing brand. That demonstrates that bus users respond to the provision of high quality green transport.

Central to the Government's approach to climate change is a sense that tackling climate change is not just a moral and practical imperative, but an economic opportunity. Green buses are a case in point.

Scotland is fortunate in having in Alexander Dennis Ltd a world class bus manufacturer that has been successful in developing diesel and electric hybrid buses.

The green bus fund is competitive and market driven. Operators receiving grants make their own commercial decisions about who to place their orders with. It is therefore commendable that Alexander Dennis has enjoyed such considerable success in winning orders from the first two rounds of the green bus fund in competition with other manufacturers, which has helped the company to invest further in hybrid bus technology.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I recognise the benefits that the minister has outlined, but is there not a danger that the approach simply gives opportunities for the bigger bus companies to

improve what they do—companies that are sometimes profitable globally—while the smaller companies, some of which run the least fuel-efficient and the most polluting vehicles, do not get the chance to improve the vehicles that they run?

Keith Brown: That is a fair concern, but the way in which the green bus fund has been distributed so far shows the benefit to small companies rather than the bigger ones to which Patrick Harvie refers. For example, Henderson Travel in Lanarkshire has benefited greatly from hybrid bus technology.

We are aware of the situation that Patrick Harvie described. Further development of the green bus fund will provide the possibility of doing some exciting things in the school bus transport system, which comprises a number of small operators as well. We are concerned to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises benefit. So far, as I said, that has been the picture with the green bus fund.

Alexander Dennis has won orders across the world and now has substantial investments in bus building in Australia. It continues to innovate and is looking at how hybrids can be made still more effective in operation. When I recently visited Alexander Dennis I discussed school buses, not least because some of the fleet comprises older and less environmentally friendly buses. I hope that that discussion will lead to further innovation.

Alexander Dennis can also provide examples of the delivery of other benefits that we have sought through the Scottish green bus fund: investing in technology, developing Scottish expertise and delivering real commercial benefits for operators as well as environmental ones. Given the recent history of Alexander Dennis, we should all be pleased about the turnaround that has taken place in that company and the vibrancy with which it approaches the future.

The green bus fund supports capital investment, but it is not the only way in which we incentivise low-carbon vehicles across Scotland's bus network. The bus service operators grant, which is mentioned in the Labour amendment, has been refocused so that we provide additional, continuing revenue incentives for the operation of low-carbon vehicles, including hybrids, which benefit from a doubling in grant compared with that for conventional vehicles. Members will remember that the rationale for the changes to the bus service operators grant that have taken place is to help more rural areas and to ensure that what we do rewards actual miles travelled by buses with passengers, which is important and was not the case before. We have doubled the incentives for operators to use environmentally friendly vehicles and the bus service operators grant is another means by which to improve the environment.

We must acknowledge, though, that operators take something of a risk when they purchase what is still a relatively new and unproven technology, albeit with the caveat that I mentioned previously about the experience in Lothian. The technology is increasingly less unproven and is becoming more known to more bus operators. However, such purchasing decisions can be difficult, given the technological and market uncertainties. The green bus fund and the low-carbon bus service operators grant try to help reduce the risks and shift the balance. In the long term, I believe that operators stand to reap considerable benefits. I referred previously to a 60 per cent reduction in fuel consumption in that regard. Fuel costs for the bus industry have gone up by 57 per cent in the past five years, so the ability to substantially reduce such costs—by more than half in the case that I mentioned—must be good news.

I applaud the way in which operators have used our support creatively as an opportunity to develop their services and not just their vehicles. If that is done well it makes a substantial difference for the user, with higher-specification vehicles. If anybody has not tried the number 10 vehicles in Edinburgh, I encourage them to do so—they have a higher spec and a different appearance so that everyone knows that they are on a hybrid vehicle. Such vehicles give a smoother ride, have strong branding and highlight the clear contribution that travelling by bus makes to helping the environment. That imaginative use of new technology has helped its early acceptance by the public and it offers a direction for future improvements in service quality.

Talking about the future, it is now clear that there are substantive benefits from the investment made through the green bus fund. However, there are 5,400 vehicles in the Scottish bus fleet, so we have more to do. I re-emphasise that we are trying to incentivise the move towards green buses. The benefit will be that, over time, the investments by operators and producers will start to make that easier. The third and future rounds of the fund will have their part to play. I look forward to continuing to work in partnership with bus operators and manufacturers to finish what we have started and to make a substantial centre of excellence in Scotland.

The Government considers the green bus fund to be a proven success. Despite the current financial difficulties, we will continue to take every opportunity to make the investment and to consider how to further that investment with the industry, to help with its drive to ensure that the cost reductions and other benefits from the technology that is there or coming are realised.

I have focused on hybrid buses and the green bus fund, but it is important to recognise that other

technologies offer similar benefits to our bus fleets and to other forms of road transport. For example, the Government supports the hydrogen bus project that is being led by Aberdeen City Council and SSE. That will result in 10 hydrogen buses operating on routes in central Aberdeen, which will be the largest fleet of hydrogen-powered buses anywhere in Europe.

A local company in my constituency developed a hydrogen power unit that can be used in ferries. In fact, it is being used in a ferry in Bristol. Because the unit is so efficient and light, after it was fitted more ballast had to be put into the vessel. There is a difficulty with new technologies to do with ensuring that the regulatory framework is there. That project was, if you like, a pipe clearer for future projects.

We also support electric vehicle technology. In March, we launched our E-cosse initiative, which is a partnership between Government, industry, WWF Scotland and other key stakeholders to advance the adoption of electric vehicles in Scotland. The initiative aims to make Scotland an EV pioneer. We are producing a road map, to be published in early 2013, which will lead to a portfolio of projects to advance electric vehicle adoption.

I have set out the original environmental aims of the Scottish green bus fund, outlined the benefits to the environment, the economy and bus users that have been delivered so far through the introduction of low-carbon vehicles to the bus fleet and looked forward to our continuing programme of support for the take-up of new hybrid technologies. I am therefore happy to move the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament notes that the Scottish Green Bus Fund has already supported the delivery of 71 new low-carbon hybrid buses; welcomes the contribution that these are making toward reducing fuel consumption and Scotland's carbon emissions; urges the Scottish Government and the bus industry to continue to work together to improve the environmental performance of Scotland's bus fleet, and further welcomes the launch of the third round of the fund, worth £3 million in 2012-13, and the provision of an additional £2.5 million for hybrid buses in the draft budget for 2013-14.

14:57

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I am sorry that the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities is not here, as I wanted to welcome her formally to her new post. That pleasure will have to wait for another time.

In early 2010, more than 900 workers at Scotland's only bus manufacturer, Alexander Dennis Ltd in Falkirk, were on a three-day week. Their unions had met with members of the

Scottish Parliament and there were grave concerns about the future of the company. In March 2010, by which time ADL had, fortunately, returned to five-day working, my colleague and predecessor in the role of Labour's transport spokesperson, Charlie Gordon, brought a motion to the Parliament in Labour debating time that drew the Parliament's attention to the efficiency and flexibility of the five ALX300 buses that were built by Alexander Dennis and that operated in the Strathclyde partnership for transport area. Charlie Gordon also emphasised the environmental and economic case for increasing production of the new hybrid buses and called on the Scottish Government to fund grants for the acquisition of ADL buses as a matter of urgency.

Charlie Gordon's motion, with some amendments, was agreed to. I think that only the Conservatives abstained, which they did because they had objections to a Liberal Democrat amendment, rather than to the original premise. Although John Swinney did not commit in that debate to establishing a green bus fund, later in 2010, the Scottish Government announced the allocation of £4.4 million to a green bus fund, which, as we have heard, assisted in the purchase of 48 buses. Therefore, I believe that Charlie Gordon might take some credit for the establishment of the fund.

There was United Kingdom precedent. Following a review of support for the bus industry, the Labour UK Government launched its new green bus fund in 2009, through which it invested more than £30 million to enable the purchase of 349 green buses in the first tranche of grants. The UK and Scottish Governments have since supported grants for green buses. In 2010, the UK Government allocated a further £15 million, which assisted with the purchase of 169 buses. In 2011, the coalition Government provided a third allocation of more than £30 million, which enabled 434 additional green buses to be purchased by operators. For a change, all of us across the chamber agree with Westminster that a green bus fund is a good idea.

Although the Scottish Government was a little slower off the mark than the Labour UK Government, there has been welcome investment here, too, with another £1.8 million in a second phase at the beginning of this year. I understood that that had purchased a further 26 buses, in which case Mr Brown is underselling himself in his motion by three buses. Perhaps my figure is wrong, as it is highly unusual for this Government to undersell itself.

Last month, a further £3 million was announced, which is expected to fund 40 more buses. So far, the Scottish Government has invested 12 per cent of the funds that the UK Government put into its

green bus fund, and that has purchased about 12 per cent of the number of buses—which seems just about right in terms of the Barnett formula. I do not know whether there are any Barnett consequentialists for the green bus fund or whether that is how it has been funded, but it seems that we are in line with the rest of the UK.

I see from Mr Brown's motion and, indeed, from John Swinney's announcement last week, that the draft budget proposes an additional £2.5 million funding for next year. That is welcome, too.

As the minister said, Alexander Dennis is a world leader in green bus technology, and I am certain that the workers there will be pleased to learn that the Government will continue to make funding available to support low-carbon vehicles.

As we have heard, the process is competitive and there are other suppliers of green buses. Lothian Buses is supplied by Volvo. In the first two funding rounds, Lothian Buses secured funding for 25 buses to the value of £1.75 million. I vouch that I travelled along Princes Street on the number 10 bus a couple of months ago—it certainly is a fine bus and I am sure that Lothian Buses is proud of it.

MacEwans Coach Services, Deveron Coaches and Henderson Travel were granted subsidy for six buses in total in the second round, and those will be supplied by the Optare Group. Obviously, in Scotland, we hope that Alexander Dennis gets as much business as possible, but there are a number of other competitors in the area, too.

Although the 80 per cent subsidy is attractive to operators that are running busy, popular routes—this touches on Patrick Harvie's point—I have been advised by the south west of Scotland transport partnership that the significantly higher purchase cost of green buses has deterred operators on rural routes from applying, even at that level of subsidy. In the south of Scotland, we have seen only MacEwans Coach Services—it runs the Abington to Dumfries to Edinburgh route—and Henderson Travel being successful in obtaining an 80 per cent grant. I am advised that few other operators in my area have come forward to apply for the money.

MacEwans Coach Services is, of course, tendered by Strathclyde passenger transport but, unfortunately, that ran into problems this summer when the tender increased by 52 per cent above the previous contract—I think that the problems were more to do with the Disability Discrimination Act compliance requirements of the new buses—so that route is now being run on a temporary contract, although I hope that that issue will be resolved in a few months' time.

In welcoming the progress in providing funds to assist with the purchase of hybrid buses, I do not

intend to deceive members into believing that I have completely suspended my critical faculties. Our amendment refers to the wider issues of promoting bus transport. The amendment is competent—it would not have been accepted by the Presiding Officer if it was not—and the Minister for Transport and Veteran Affairs talked about the need for a modal shift from cars to buses in order to improve our carbon footprint. That must be done in the context of a wider sustainable transport policy, which is why we must look in the round to see what is happening to promote bus travel.

The Minister for Transport and Veteran Affairs is pleased to come to the Parliament with a 140 minute debate, congratulating himself on a proposed investment of up to £11.7 million, including what is in the draft budget for green buses. If he wanted to talk to the Parliament, why was he not prepared to come to the chamber to announce the reduction in the budget for the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme by a sum of £350 million, some thirty times the investment in the green bus project? It took Opposition Labour debating time for that saving to be aired in the chamber. Moreover, the minister did not come to the Parliament to advise it of the privatisation of the NorthLink Ferries route. Again, Labour had to request a statement on that.

Although the draft budget allocates £2.5 million to the green bus fund, the bus service operators grant, which last year was cut by 17 per cent, remains static, which is a real terms cut of 2.5 per cent if the Treasury's gross domestic product inflator is applied.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): In the spirit of honesty and hard choices that I know that Labour is espousing, will Elaine Murray therefore advise which budget she would reduce in order to fund the increases in BSOG and EGIP that she is clearly looking for?

Elaine Murray: We rehearsed the EGIP issue last week and I said at the time that it was about Network Rail borrowing and not part of the capital budget. I will not make up policy on the hoof about the bus service operators grant but, as my leader says, we must have an honest debate about our priorities and how we fund them, whether it be by funding, restriction, charging or increased taxation. It is unfortunate that the Scottish National Party is unable to engage in that type of honest debate.

Members: Oh!

Elaine Murray: It is true.

I will move on to concessionary bus fares and again I will tell you about the fears of bus service operators. They are concerned because, last year, the cap on that particular fund meant that there was no money left at the end of the year and they

had to run buses without being able to reclaim the concessionary fares. They are also worried that the review that is being undertaken will result in a further reduction from 67 pence in the pound to 54 pence in the pound. If that is just a rumour, it would be helpful for the minister to dispel it.

Keith Brown: We have representatives from the Confederation of Passenger Transport in the gallery and the member should be aware that we are in discussion with it on that very issue. It is right that we look at the rate of reimbursement because it is some time since it was set. However, I have sustained the concessionary travel scheme.

In the interests of the honest debate that the member is asking for, please say what you would do with concessionary travel and where you would get the money from. That is a reasonable question.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): You are in your final minute, Ms Murray.

Elaine Murray: As I said, we are asking for an honest debate about how we fund what we see as desirable priorities. That is the whole issue, and you have consistently run away from it since you came into office.

We welcome the investment in green buses. We will support the Tory amendment, unless Mr Johnstone says something totally outrageous during the debate and, although the Government will undoubtedly turn down our amendment, we are even prepared to support your motion because it is valid to say that green buses are a valuable investment. We should not be self-congratulatory and say how wonderful everything is in the garden. We need to appreciate that there are difficult choices to be made and we need to be grown up enough to have an honest debate about them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Alex Johnstone, I ask Elaine Murray to move her amendment.

Elaine Murray: I move amendment S4M-04247.2, to insert at end:

“; notes the concerns expressed by bus service operators, passengers and trade unions regarding the Scottish Government's decision to cut the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) and the consequential impact on fares and services; notes that the draft budget proposes a real-terms decrease in the BSOG for 2013-14, and, while recognising the importance of investing in green buses, believes that this must be part of a broader sustainable transport policy to encourage more people to travel by bus.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I also ask members to remember to speak through the chair, please.

15:07

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

When I first saw the motion I thought that the debate would be fairly anodyne. However, we have already seen that there are things to be said and I congratulate the Labour Party on having said some of them. I hope to say some of the other things that need to be said, although I will cover the same subjects.

Presiding Officer, I will ensure that I do not forget to move my amendment at the end of my speech.

The previous speaker need not be too worried, because the purpose of my amendment is not to introduce some alien concept that the Labour Party cannot bring itself to support. All that we want to do is to ensure that, as we go forward hand in hand with the priority of ensuring that we have more green buses, we take the opportunity of an increased marketplace to ensure that we can get value for money in the technology and begin to extend it over a wider range of operators and routes within Scotland. I do not have a solution to the problem, other than a faith that the marketplace will deliver as long as we deliver the on-going support that is necessary to ensure that that happens.

When I drafted my amendment, I thought that it might have been a step too far to introduce subjects such as the bus service operators grant. I am delighted that the Labour Party amendment has done so and I intend to address that issue and the issue of concessionary fares very briefly, in so far as they are related to the overall subject that we are discussing.

To return to the general subject, buses that have diesel engines are generally a fairly efficient way to transport people as long as we can persuade them to use the buses that are available. In terms of miles per gallon, they are probably still the most efficient way to move passengers. However, in terms of CO₂, they are rather less so and worries are beginning to arise about the effect of diesel fumes in the environment.

As recently as this afternoon, during health and wellbeing portfolio questions, Graeme Dey raised the fact that the World Health Organization now believes that diesel fumes are a carcinogen. As a consequence, we have to worry about how we deal with that problem in the longer term. Hybrid buses—particularly those that use novel fuels—have the effect of taking away much of the pollution. I remember travelling round Aberdeen, some years ago, on a demonstration bus that was one of the first hybrid buses to be tested in Scotland. That day, it was powered by chip fat. Although the bus was extremely efficient, the smell

resulted in me becoming very hungry before the trip was over.

We must start thinking about other changes in bus support and how they will affect the impact of the green bus fund. The BSOG and the concessionary fares scheme have been the basis of support for broader bus travel for some years. During the Scottish National Party Government's time in office, it would appear that concessionary fares have been the highest priority. It could be argued that the BSOG has been squeezed to an extent to protect the value of concessionary fares.

Recently, changes have been made to the BSOG, for many of which I have expressed my support, in principle, in the chamber. The refocusing of the scheme means that operators are encouraged to go for fuel efficiency when they replace their vehicles. Consequently, hybrid vehicles such as those that are supported by the green bus fund, which we are discussing, are becoming more attractive—although, as has been pointed out, the fact that they have a significantly higher purchase price is still deterring some potential customers. The changes mean that there is a shortage of funding in many of our city areas because, in some cases, city bus routes have been disadvantaged. That is why Conservative members believe that consideration must be given to how the total value of the support that is provided for bus travel is focused in the future.

I have said before and I will say again—I will go on undaunted—that we believe that the concessionary fares scheme must be aligned with the pension age. I am not suggesting that we should take concessionary fares away from anyone. We can make the change year on year and ensure that no one who has the entitlement loses it. By targeting the concessionary fares resources on people of pension age, we might be able to extend the scheme to some other, equally deserving groups and to release some resources to go into the BSOG or the green bus fund, thereby ensuring that we achieve greater change.

Keith Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: I am afraid that I am in my final minute, but I hope that that discussion will progress.

It is the case that, in principle, everyone in the chamber supports increasing the number of green buses in Scotland. I continue to support the green bus fund, but I realise that there is more to be done—the minister himself said that there was more to do—so let us do more.

I move amendment S4M-04247.3, to insert at end:

“, and believes that the Scottish Government should work

with the industry to drive down costs in order to accelerate the adoption of this technology in years to come.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate.

15:13

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Even for someone who is a climate change doubter, creating a cleaner and healthier environment for ourselves and our children must be a commendable goal. Likewise, we are all acutely aware of the fact that fossil fuels are not a long-term solution to our energy needs. The green bus fund is investing in public transport while delivering jobs for the green economy and lowering carbon emissions. The SNP has adopted an ambitious climate change target to reduce emissions by 42 per cent by 2020. That is not going to happen without investment in the industry, which is exactly what the green bus fund is achieving.

Low-carbon buses produce 30 per cent less greenhouse gas emissions than equivalent diesel buses do. Indeed, Lothian Buses confirms that the double-deck hybrids that it purchased using the fund are producing a 56.7 per cent improvement in fuel efficiency compared with the diesel vehicles that were previously used.

So far, the green bus fund has allowed for some 74 eco-friendly buses to be purchased by operators, and the third round of the fund will allow investment in a further 40. The third funding round of £3 million for the green bus fund was launched in August 2012.

The Government's support is enabling further developments and improvements to technology at Alexander Dennis Ltd, which is a world-class company that manufactures these vehicles. The current hybrid buses show fuel and CO₂ savings of around 60 per cent, but it is expected that the next generation of hybrid buses, which are scheduled to be introduced in 2013, will show fuel and CO₂ savings much nearer to 70 per cent. That is good news for the bus operators, whose overheads are reduced, good news for the environment and good news for jobs and the economy. It is also good news for commuters. Most of us have stood at bus stops, breathing in the fumes from diesel buses. Those fumes will now be reduced and our health—and our children's health—can only be improved. The good news for commuters also lies in the fact that new modern buses are being introduced to replace older, less comfortable and less efficient buses.

Road transport is one of the biggest producers of greenhouse gases and any initiatives that help to reduce its emissions must be a move in the right direction. The First Minister has stated that

the green economy will be the “source of Scotland's reindustrialisation” and it is clear to most that it is indeed being that. Some of the greatest opportunities are appearing as a result of developments in the green economy. Low-carbon and green jobs now number 77,700 in Scotland, which outstrips the motor trade and the telecommunications sector and challenges the leadership of the finance sector, which delivers 86,800 jobs. Scottish Enterprise has estimated that jobs in Scotland's low-carbon sector could grow by 4 per cent per annum between now and 2020, which would mean that the number of people employed in that industry would rise to 130,000. All of that is good news for Scotland.

The green bus fund fits well with other green initiatives and forms part of the larger green investment package, which will invest £30 million in energy efficiency to tackle fuel poverty. Perhaps at this point I can make the case for my old favourite, geothermal power, to form part of the green mix. I have previously raised the opportunities that we have to significantly increase the use of geothermal energy. Across much of Scotland we have flooded mine workings, which are regarded as a threat. In fact, they represent an opportunity in our old industrial communities to develop alternative energy sources, using a tried and tested process that needs little in the way of development to deliver benefits to local communities. I know that the Scottish Government is looking into those possibilities.

The transition into a low-carbon economy is absolutely necessary, but it can be painful, even when it is adopted with enthusiasm. In that, Scotland is already leading the way. We may be a small nation, but we are ambitious. In the grand scheme of things we may be a tiny producer of CO₂ and greenhouse gases—China, America and India, for example, dwarf us in production of polluting gases—but each and every one of us has a responsibility to work towards the low-carbon economy goal. To quote an old Scots saying, mony a mickle maks a muckle.

By taking the lead and tackling the challenge now, we are laying the foundation for Scotland as a competitive 21st century economy, which will be all the sounder and stronger for having taken hard decisions early and will gain the advantages of having done so while other nations catch up. The Scottish Government is to be congratulated on its progress and its commitment, as represented by the green bus fund.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that they have six minutes for their speeches, but there is a wee bit of time in hand if members wish to take interventions.

15:19

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The green bus fund is a welcome initiative. Of course, as Elaine Murray outlined, Labour initially called for it some years ago. Low-carbon buses, which the fund will help to buy, contribute in a small but welcome way to cutting carbon emissions.

The minister was also right to mention the opportunity that the green bus fund provides for a great Scottish manufacturing company, Alexander Dennis Ltd, which, like him, I have visited. Not only is Alexander Dennis demonstrating how innovation can lead to success, it is demonstrating that Scotland can still build some of the best light engineering products anywhere in the world. Indeed, the Enviro400 hybrid, which is produced by Alexander Dennis, is the United Kingdom's best-selling hybrid bus.

However, the core purpose of the work in this area is as part of our response to climate change and our endeavours to meet the carbon emission reduction targets that we have set ourselves, so it was disappointing news when we discovered in the summer that Scotland had missed its emissions target by the equivalent of more than 1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. In some ways, that is no surprise, because although emissions in general have fallen in the past 20 years, those from transport have edged up, and there are about 1 million more vehicles on Scotland's roads than there were 20 years ago. Decarbonising our bus fleet might be desirable, but that is not the real challenge. The real challenge is to decarbonise transport, which means getting people out of cars and on to those buses.

Given that there were 438 million bus journeys in Scotland last year and only 81 million rail journeys, it is clear that it is buses that have to play the primary role in that modal shift. The minister said that the share of bus journeys is growing, but that is not what is happening. The number of bus journeys has slumped by 150 million in the past few years, while the number of rail journeys continues to rise. Perhaps one reason for that is that the Government provides £667 million in subsidies to rail each year but only £295 million to subsidise far more bus journeys that reach many more parts of Scotland. I applaud investment in our rail network and I know that that balance is not new or unique to the current Administration, but it needs to be examined.

In truth, Government funding for buses has been cut. There has been a cut in BSOG and the recompense for concessionary journeys is being squeezed. The result is that, for the first time since devolution, bus passenger numbers per head of population are lower in Scotland than they are in Great Britain as a whole. I warn members that the decline will not be gradual. In my constituency of

East Lothian and in West Lothian, First bus services, which had gradually become unreliable, irregular and expensive, were completely removed one day. Unless we act, that will happen more and more.

Green buses mean something else to me. For people of my age who grew up in the Lothians, there will always be red buses and green buses. The red buses were the corporation buses in the town and the green buses served the outlying areas. The green buses were run by the Scottish Bus Group. They were required by law to make 6 per cent profit every year, and that was reinvested in the services. They were regular, reliable, busy, profitable and lively. I know that, because I spent four summers as a bus conductor on those Eastern Scottish routes. In fact, they could get too lively. I remember one of my colleagues claiming that he had had a gun pulled on him on the last Dunbar service on a Saturday night. That was one fare that he did not collect.

Those routes in East Lothian were the best routes for the Scottish Bus Group. How can it be that we reached a point at which First, the successor company, simply removed them? Competition has not served us well in that part of Scotland. Competition crushed those First services at one end of my constituency, where the people are, and the company was left to try to serve those areas where there are far fewer people. The refocusing of BSOG has not helped my rural constituency. Our buses disappeared.

Nothing focuses our minds as much as an election. In East Lothian, when our bus services were removed, the local SNP councillors who were facing the electorate not only suddenly found additional money to subsidise bus routes but told the voters that they wanted to start their own council bus company, and the minister did not discourage them from that. However, they were not serious—and I have to say that the electorate saw through it all and did not believe them.

If we look at where buses are succeeding, surely the message is that it is time to change the industry's structure, not just the fuel used by its buses, if we are to give passengers the assurance of reliability, stable fares and high-quality vehicles. We need look only at London, where Transport for London is so confident and successful that it has ordered 600 hybrid buses to give to the companies, delivering popular affordable services in a regulated market; at Renfrew, where we have Scotland's only quality bus partnership, which is regularly lauded in the chamber by George Adam as a model that should be followed elsewhere; or at Edinburgh, where we have the nearest thing in Scotland to a publicly owned bus company running a near-monopoly of services across the

city at an incredible £1.40 flat fare, however far one goes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must ask you to come to a conclusion, Mr Gray.

Iain Gray: The truth is that low-emission buses are a good thing. However, if they are to serve more, not fewer, passengers, the time has come to go back to the kind of green buses I remember, which were regular, reliable and regulated.

15:26

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am glad to get up and speak in the debate, even though I have just lost half my speech. As I am used to speaking in quite controversial and combative debates, it is good to be able to talk about an issue that has general agreement in the chamber. [*Interruption.*] I thank my esteemed colleague Mr Hepburn for handing me back the half of my speech that I dropped. If anything, although we accept that more should be done, we all generally agree that progress has been made.

My constituency has benefited from bus services. Indeed, the number 10, which has already been aired quite a bit this afternoon, runs through Edinburgh Central. I personally benefit from the service, not in a registrable interest sense but because I live very close to the route. Most crucial of all for me as a constituency MSP is that my newsletter has benefited from a picture of me sitting in the driver's seat of a number 10 bus with a big cheesy grin. All of these things are important to me as an MSP.

My colleague Gordon MacDonald, who will speak later, will perhaps give a perspective on Lothian Buses that he has picked up from working with the company. However, as a customer and user, I certainly have a perspective on green buses and Lothian Buses. Unusually—or perhaps usually; we do not really compare transport habits in the chamber—I do not drive or cycle. Instead, I am one of those Edinburgh residents who are largely if not entirely dependent on either their own two feet or public transport to get around the city. Taking the bus to and from surgeries can be quite interesting, particularly when I get looks from the person whom I have just seen and who is probably thinking, “What? An MSP using the bus?” We need to get to a situation in our society where that sort of thing is not remarkable and is, indeed, perfectly normal. On the subject of perfectly normal, anyone who, after that admission, compares me with Stewart Stevenson will get an invitation to take it outside.

The introduction of the number 10 service has marked a step-change in quality as well as improving the environmental credentials of Lothian Buses. For a start, it has given the company an

opportunity to renew its vehicles. In London, which Iain Gray referred to, the bus fleet is of real quality. A lot of people have said that Edinburgh has the best bus service in Scotland—and it certainly has. Having dared to step on buses in Glasgow, I just do not think that the service in that city competes. I note, however, that buses in London provide crucial information for tourists. Anyone who has used public transport in cities abroad knows that it is all important to know where one is, and the number 10 service provides invaluable information about stops. Indeed, it reflects very well on the status of Lothian Buses as an essentially publicly owned company.

As anybody in Edinburgh would be proud to confirm, the company is viewed with great warmth as the people's buses, and it is perfectly in keeping with that tradition that it is so progressive in embracing the number 10—not only using the green bus fund, but leveraging that money so that it ends up with even greater investment.

I have seen the same progressiveness in other issues on which I have dealt with Lothian Buses, such as allowing buggies on to buses. There have been some difficulties with that—anybody in Edinburgh who has seen a parent with a buggy left at a bus stop will understand some of the deep difficulties that there had been with that—but the buses now have spaces for them and the policy across the whole system is that parents can get on. That is another example of the progressive attitude that Lothian Buses has taken.

The number 10's improvement in quality has generated not only local jobs at Alexander Dennis but at least one extra local job: that of the person whose job it was to confirm to the person who was recording the destinations that they had got the pronunciation right. However, Alexander Dennis is the great employment story. It has 1,000 employees, and its customers include New Zealand, Norwich and, on the Enviro400, Ottawa and Toronto.

Again, we see Scotland's success not only in manufacturing but in technology. It is important to remember that the battery technology for those buses is heavily dependent on Scottish research and development. Scotland is at the forefront of such development.

An interesting aspect of the debate is that, in the past, the Labour Party called for clever procurement, but the Government created a fair competition scheme in which a Scottish company was uniquely well placed to win. I must congratulate it on that little bit of enlightened mercantilism. If the minister will not tell Brussels, neither will I.

A 30 to 40 per cent reduction in emissions was promised and a 59 per cent reduction was

delivered. Thanks to the technology involved, once the batteries are upgraded—provided that the technology has moved on by then—the Lothian Buses hybrid buses will, I hope, be able to achieve a 100 per cent reduction in emissions and run entirely by battery.

We are starting to see that kind of future proofing in transport policy as changes are made to lever in action towards achieving the 2020 carbon targets. Public transport is the low-hanging fruit—it is the easiest policy area for us to influence directly—and I welcome what the Government has done. I would always welcome more.

15:32

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): As a non-driver and regular bus user, I am in the same position as Mr Biagi. Unfortunately, most of my bus journeys are in Aberdeen and, instead of the £1.40 fare that Edinburgh has, I have to fork out £2.40 for a journey, which is disgraceful. However, that is a debate for another day. I will not go on a rant about First Aberdeen.

I attended the unveiling of Aberdeen's new hybrid buses in July with the minister. I do not often agree with the city's current lord provost, George Adam, but he said that day:

"I'm very excited about the development of a greener, smarter bus network in Aberdeen. The introduction of the low-emission buses constitutes a welcome contribution to the environment in which we all live and breathe."

The buses are spectacular in other ways, too, because there is free wi-fi on many of them. What more do some folk need to attract them into getting on the bus than being able to do their work rather than sit in the car doing nothing?

The most exciting thing for me about what is happening in Aberdeen is not the hybrid buses—although I hope that there will be more of them—but the Aberdeen hydrogen project. I thank Jan Falconer of Aberdeen City Council for providing me with a wee briefing about that for today.

As part of the project, Aberdeen City Council is supporting two strategic Europe hydrogen transport projects. They represent the first major element of the Aberdeen hydrogen project and aim to introduce hydrogen buses to the north-east of Scotland. The buses will be fuelled using locally generated renewable hydrogen, and the production facilities that will be needed to generate the hydrogen will be created. There will also be additional hydrogen for other uses, which is the second element of the project.

The project has been made possible by some significant funding from various sources. The First Minister announced £3.3 million for the project—

£1.65 million is from the Scottish Government and £1.65 million is from Scottish Enterprise. The project has also secured a large amount of European money and there is, of course, interest from various private companies. It has often been very difficult for Aberdeen and the north-east, which were seen as being particularly rich, to access European funding in any shape or form. I therefore pay tribute to Yasa Ratnayake of Aberdeen City Council, who has secured £9.2 million of European Union money for the project. His effort should be praised by the Parliament as well as by Aberdonians.

Phase 1 of the project is the hydrogen buses and the fuelling station. As I have said, it consists of two European projects: High VLOCity and HyTransit. Ten hydrogen fuel cell buses will be deployed. First will operate four—I hope at a lower cost to the passenger than is currently the case for First in Aberdeen—and Stagecoach will operate the remaining six.

This is the first hydrogen bus deployment in Scotland and it is of international significance, as Aberdeen will have the largest hydrogen bus fleet of any European city. The buses will be refuelled at Scotland's first large hydrogen refuelling station, which will also be able to refuel passenger vehicles, as and when they become available. The buses will operate on routes into central Aberdeen, which guarantees a high profile for the project. New hydrogen-compatible maintenance bays will be prepared to allow maintenance of the vehicles by local technicians supported by international experts.

That is phase 1 of the project. I am sure that phase 2 will result in greater debate in the future, but I think that phase 1 is equally exciting, which is why I am so pleased that the Government has backed the project in the way that it has. If a significant regular demand for hydrogen emerges, it will justify the deployment of a hydrogen generation infrastructure on a scale that makes it practical for large energy companies to invest. As I said, many companies are already looking at the scheme and at the benefits that could arise in the future.

I will not go into the technologies that we are talking about, because I am not so technical in that regard. However, when somebody tells me that we can become a world leader and that the beginnings of our doing so lie in this project, if it grows in the way that it could, I will certainly grasp on to that, particularly when Aberdeen—that place that I do not mention very often—could be that world leader.

15:38

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the green bus initiative. Any investment—no matter how big or small—in public transport is welcome. I also welcome the sentiments behind the investment, because if we are to meet our climate change targets, it is important that we invest in green technologies across all the policy headings and, in particular, in transport.

Although there may not be a worldwide consensus on the need to cut CO₂ emissions, a significant majority of sane and rational people—I see that Alex Johnstone is leaving the chamber; I do not know whether I should include him in that description—agree that it is one of the world's greatest priorities. We need only look at recent weather patterns to see the impact. Only yesterday, we saw a new weather phenomenon called the Aberdeen foam—I previously thought that that was something that came from Kevin Stewart.

To hear that 71 low-carbon buses have already been built and that more will come from this new investment is therefore a positive development, especially as it will result in a reduction in fuel use and emissions. I am pleased to see the attempt to stimulate the manufacturing sector that is involved, which will have some local impact on the economy while helping our efforts to deal with climate change.

Alas, the Government should not be too self-congratulatory, and I should not give too much praise, because investment in transport is not what it could or should be. Despite subsidies, our bus operators are struggling. The budget that is allocated to concessionary travel on bus services has gradually reduced over the years.

Keith Brown: It might repay the member to look at the figures. The amount for concessionary travel has substantially increased year on year and will increase again next year.

Neil Findlay: I have looked at the figures, which decrease from £255 million in 2011-12 to £248 million, £242 million next year and £236 million in 2015.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): If that is the case, will the member explain why his party leader said yesterday that, in the budget,

"spending on concessionary fares increased by 19%"?

Neil Findlay: I have taken my information from the Scottish Parliament information centre, so the member can argue with it.

We should not forget that the investment in green buses comes against the backdrop of steady cuts to the overall buses budget. Within

that, 20 per cent of the cut was to the bus service operators grant. Let us be clear that that is having a significant impact on local bus services. However, that cut tells only one part of the story.

Bus operators are providing bus services at a time when fuel prices have risen dramatically and when oil companies are making record profits, but when their customers in our communities—our constituents—have in real terms much less money in their pockets. At my surgery on Monday night, I spoke to a constituent who has not had a wage rise in six years.

Kevin Stewart: I understand the impact that high fuel prices are having on Mr Findlay's constituents, as they are on my constituents. Does he support the SNP in its call for a fuel duty regulator to protect his constituents and mine?

Neil Findlay: I am afraid that I do not support the SNP on anything.

Local authorities that are starved of funds and are under pressure to implement the cuts that the Scottish Government has passed on are looking at saving money through retendering routes. That does not lead bus operators to compete on the basis of improved service quality. Instead, they win contracts because they pay staff less, have poor pension provision and have poorer working conditions. However, we need good-quality, reliable services that do not rely on a race to the bottom on terms and conditions to ensure that employers win contracts.

The reality is that fares are up, routes have been withdrawn and jobs have been lost. As Iain Gray said, in my region earlier this year, it was announced that the Dalkeith First depot in Midlothian was to close and that operations in Musselburgh would be significantly downsized. Those changes could mean that up to 200 jobs are lost. Just last week, Unite the Union lobbied the Parliament on bus services and cuts to jobs and services. Locally, it has lobbied me on potential cuts at the Deans depot in Livingston, although First has just avoided having to make them to date.

We should be under no illusions about why such changes are taking place. First's managing director, Paul Thomas, has made clear why they have happened. Back in April, he said:

"Over a number of years we have tried many marketing and pricing initiatives to change this, but the extra financial pressures put upon us by the current economic climate, high fuel prices and cuts in external funding mean that we simply have no option other than to discontinue the bulk of our operation in East Lothian and Midlothian."

Any green strategy must be predicated on an improved public transport system yet, only last week, we eventually got the transport minister to come kicking and screaming before Parliament to

admit finally that the budget that he drew up for the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme would be cut by £350 million. That cut will not encourage people in the affected areas to use more sustainable transport. It will not encourage people on to trains or buses, green or otherwise; instead, car use will continue and emissions will rise.

I welcome the green bus initiative, but that is tempered with a dose of reality. If we are to celebrate such plans, we must do so while understanding the wider context of the Government's transport policy, which appears to prioritise the car over public, sustainable and affordable transport.

I commend Iain Gray's speech, which effectively summarised the state of play in the Scottish bus sector.

15:45

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I was trying to do it subtly, so that it would not show up on the telly, but I say to Marco Biagi—who is no longer here—that I was only too happy to fetch his speech for him. Maybe he can return the favour if I ever run into such trouble.

I welcome the debate because I think that the Scottish Government has a very good story to tell about its investment in buses, not least through the green bus fund. Earlier this year the third funding round was announced by the minister, building on the investment that has already allowed nine bus operators to purchase 74 eco-friendly buses since 2010. We will see 40 buses join the green fleet as a result of the additional investment, joining the buses that are already serving communities throughout the country, including in my constituency. Early indications show that the vehicles are making substantial fuel savings for the companies involved, as well as reducing emissions. That is good news for the companies, which are saving money, and it is good for the environment. It is also good for the travelling public. We all get complaints about the poor-quality buses that some companies have been running, and it is good to see new buses coming into service. That demonstrates substantial support from the Scottish Government.

There was a suggestion that only the biggest companies will benefit, but John Henderson of Henderson Travel is on record as saying how good the scheme is. His company, which could not be described as one of the large players in the bus industry, has benefited from the funding, and some of those new buses are serving my constituents. If we look at the successful bidders in the second round of green bus funding, we see that five companies benefited. National Express

Dundee and Lothian Buses could be described as big players, but the other three—MacEwan's Coach Services, Deveron Coaches and Henderson Travel—could not. I hope that those three companies do not mind my saying that. It is not, therefore, fair to say that only the big companies are benefiting.

It is important to place the investment in a wider context, as it is part of an effort by the Scottish Government to invest in green technologies more generally. We have seen £30 million invested through the green investment package and £180 million has been announced for construction, skills and the green economy. The green bus fund fits well within that overall investment and with the ambition to make Scotland a greener place. As Colin Beattie said, the First Minister has talked about the green economy being the source of Scotland's reindustrialisation. In that regard, we are all very glad to see Alexander Dennis Ltd, which is based not far from my constituency, in Michael Matheson's constituency, benefiting through the green bus fund and building some of the new-generation hybrid buses. I hope—I am sure—that it will continue to do so.

The Labour amendment focuses on the bus service operators grant. Like Alex Johnstone, I was delighted to see that issue introduced into the debate, as the Scottish Government has a good story to tell about that grant and about bus funding more generally.

The Scottish Government is investing around £250 million each year in bus services throughout Scotland, but let us look specifically at the bus service operators grant. Whenever we hear criticism of it—we have heard it before—there is no recognition of the positive changes that have been made by the Scottish Government.

David Connolly, technical director of the MVA Consultancy—

Alex Johnstone: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: A brief one.

Alex Johnstone: Does the member accept that although the various structures and support for bus services in Scotland are, in their own way, very worthy, they are now stretched to their limit and that, although the bus service operators grant is structured in such a way that it has a genuine positive contribution to make, there is a danger that it is inadequately funded? Is it not important for us, at this stage, to consider bus funding in the round with the understanding that some change is needed in order to fund—

Jamie Hepburn: I will respond to that—I said I would take a brief intervention, Mr Johnstone, and I think that we get the message.

We should focus on the changes. I accept that Mr Johnstone spoke somewhat positively about them but otherwise they have not been talked about or acknowledged.

David Connolly, who gave evidence to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, said:

“Operators should be encouraged and funded on the basis of the number of passenger kilometres.”—[*Official Report, Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee*, 5 October 2011; c 177.]

That is an example of the changes that we have seen.

The old system was designed in such a bizarre way. It was about the amount of fuel that was expended, which does not encourage green or environmentally friendly bus use. It was ridiculous, and the Scottish Government should be congratulated on changing it.

I will focus on the Labour Party, which always makes two big demands. The first is on regulation, and we heard it again from Iain Gray. I am quite relaxed to hear about more regulation for bus services, but what we never hear from the Labour Party is what it means by better regulation or where the funds would come from. The key point is that Labour never dealt with the matter when it was in government.

Iain Gray: When we were in government, we introduced a form of regulation—quality contracts—that I admit has not worked and which nobody has pursued. I intend to bring forward a bill for a franchising scheme. If the member is relaxed about more regulation, will he sign that bill so that we can bring it forward and debate it here in the Parliament?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give Jamie Hepburn a minute back for those long interventions.

Jamie Hepburn: I look forward to considering that particular proposal—at last we are hearing about some meat on the bones.

The other issue that we hear about from the Labour Party is that there should be more funding for the bus service operators grant. I have previously criticised the Labour Party because its members never say where the money for that should come from. However, yesterday, in Johann Lamont’s grand speech, we started to hear where the money might come from. What she said was interesting—this is the point that I quoted to Mr Findlay. In effect, she was criticising the increase in spend on concessionary fares. Just this morning, on “Call Kaye”, Kezia Dugdale said that Labour wants to change the nature of the concessionary travel scheme. It now seems clear—

Elaine Murray: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: Do I have time to give way to Ms Murray?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly, Dr Murray.

Elaine Murray: Ms Dugdale made it quite clear this morning that her comments were her personal views.

Mr Hepburn also misrepresents Ms Lamont. She was contrasting the increase in one budget with the decrease in another budget, both in policy areas where it would be desirable to encourage funding. This is about the necessary tensions that arise when we are having an honest debate about such issues.

Jamie Hepburn: We keep hearing about that honest debate, and we ask the Labour Party what it wants to do with the scheme in the future. Kezia Dugdale—a front-bench spokesperson for the Labour Party—went on the record, but we hear that she gave her personal views. I say to Ms Murray that, frankly, I do not think that any of us buy that.

Every time I have been out campaigning in the last few elections—

Neil Findlay: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member will have to come to a conclusion.

Jamie Hepburn: I have heard it said behind our backs that the SNP is going to cut the scheme. It is Ms Murray’s party that plans to cut the scheme. We now know the truth. We know that it is the SNP that can be trusted to take care of Scotland’s bus services.

15:53

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate, not least because the Alexander Dennis bus factory is in the neighbouring Falkirk West constituency of my colleague Michael Matheson and because a large number of my constituents who are employed at the Camelon factory have benefited from previous tranches of the green bus fund through orders for Alexander Dennis buses, as we have heard already from a number of speakers.

The Alexander Dennis story is indeed a success story. In recent years the bus construction industry has celebrated peaks and endured troughs. However, thanks to initiatives such as the green bus fund Alexander Dennis has gone from strength to strength in the past two to three years. It is currently supporting 900 jobs in Camelon and 2,000 in the vast supply chain.

I have had the pleasure of visiting the factory on a couple of occasions, most recently with the First Minister and Michael Matheson, the local MSP, and I have seen at first hand a dramatic change in the mood of the workforce.

Many of the workers I spoke to on the shop floor talked about the buzz and optimism in the factory now compared with the doom and despondency that prevailed just a few years ago. I cannot praise the workforce highly enough. Just a few years ago, it endured wage reductions, extended holiday periods and three-day working weeks, but now it can hardly keep up with the orders that are coming in. That is a fantastic good-news story, and the green bus fund has certainly helped.

Iain Gray: Alexander Dennis is indeed a great success story, as many Labour members have acknowledged. Most of the workers in the Alexander Dennis factory are members of the Unite trade union, and they are in no doubt that we need to reregulate our bus industry to support it. Will the member support that and the workers in the constituency next door to his?

Angus MacDonald: If Mr Gray can say where the £1 billion cost of reregulation would come from, perhaps the rest of us could consider the matter in more detail. Is he willing to do that?

I stress that the good results from Alexander Dennis are down to team work. The management is working closely with the workforce to compete against strong competition from other parts of the UK and the continent. Part of the success story is down to the hard work and perseverance of Alexander Dennis's chief executive officer, Colin Robertson, who joined the firm from Terex. He has transformed Alexander Dennis into a world-leading manufacturer of world-class buses that are marketed and sold globally. On 5 December last year, I lodged motion S4M-01490, which congratulated him

"on receiving the Entrepreneur of the Year award at the Entrepreneurial Exchange's annual dinner in Glasgow".

I thank all the members who supported that motion. Sadly, not one member from outside my party did, but we live in hope. The motion welcomed the fact that

"since Colin Robertson took charge at the ... company in 2007, the company turnover has doubled to £360 million and sales have expanded into countries around the world".

Another factor in that tremendous success story is the state-of-the-art hybrid buses that Alexander Dennis is producing, which have been mentioned a number of times. At the risk of being accused of being ever-so-slightly biased, I give my view that its hybrid buses, such as the Enviro300, the Enviro400 and the Enviro500, are the best in the world. Compared with conventional buses, the Enviro hybrid models demonstrate 60 per cent

savings in fuel and CO₂, and the company plans to introduce in 2013 next-generation hybrid buses with fuel and CO₂ savings of nearer 70 per cent, so that it continually keeps ahead of the competition.

On the service side of the industry, I visited my local FirstBus depot in Larbert on Monday this week and had discussions with the general manager, who is keen to improve his local fleet and who welcomed the latest announcement of a further £2.5 million funding for the green bus fund by the finance secretary just last week. The general manager clearly welcomed the investment that the green bus fund brings to public transport, as well as the reduction in CO₂ emissions and the stimulation of the green economy.

Since the scheme was launched in 2010, 74 eco-friendly buses have been purchased by nine operators. Of those buses, 63—the lion's share—were built in Camelon in Scotland. Around 40 green buses are due to join the green fleet as a result of the extra funding. The fund is delivering jobs for the green economy, lowering carbon emissions and helping Scotland to achieve its carbon reduction targets.

My colleague Kevin Stewart has spoken about the exciting hydrogen hub initiative in Aberdeen. With pledges to cut carbon dioxide emissions and a fossil fuel supply crisis fast approaching—if we are not in it already—there is a pressing need in Europe to rethink the way in which economic growth is fuelled. Using hydrogen as a transport fuel is many people's vision of the future.

I have followed the technology for some time, since I became aware that Iceland was actively looking into the use of hydrogen power, with a vision of the entire Icelandic transport system, including private cars and fishing boats, being totally converted to hydrogen fuel by 2050. That is a bold target, but it is certainly achievable.

The European Commission strongly supports the development of cleaner vehicles, especially heavy goods and public vehicles, and it sees hydrogen buses as part of a solution to the problems of town and city air pollution and rising oil prices. The trials in Iceland and Aberdeen will help us to bring forward a new generation of vehicles that are better and cheaper and which will bring us one step closer to the full commercialisation of hydrogen-powered vehicles. By following the example of our Nordic neighbours on green issues and politically, Scotland has an exciting future ahead of it—and not just in relation to green transport.

I support the motion.

15:59

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): I welcome this opportunity to debate the Government's green bus fund. Members will be well aware of Scotland's ambitious climate change targets, which have committed the Government—indeed, all of us—to reducing carbon emissions by 42 per cent by 2020. Attempts to meet that commitment must be tackled on many fronts, and the green bus fund is yet another modest but necessary step towards doing so.

However, the debate takes place in the aftermath of the Government failing the first test that was laid down by the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, as there were more emissions in 2010 than there were in 2009. With around a fifth of our emissions coming from transport, the decarbonisation of our vehicles is clearly a step in the right direction.

We should, of course, welcome the launch of the third round of bus fund awards by the transport minister, which, I understand, will result in the number of hybrid buses servicing our communities standing at just over 100 when the process is complete. It is important that the minister does not get complacent and that he maintains the momentum, like his counterparts at the Department for Transport have done. Total investment at the Department for Transport now stands at more than £75 million—largely thanks to the presence of the Liberal Democrat transport minister, Norman Baker.

Unfortunately, the Scottish Government has a less-than-stellar record when it comes to decarbonising vehicles. Members may recall the SNP's 2007 pledge to decarbonise the entire public sector fleet by 2020. As we know as a result of a freedom of information request that I lodged, after three and a half years, the figures stood at just 3.25 per cent, which led to the SNP dropping that pledge.

I welcome the £2.5 million that John Swinney has committed in order to maintain the programme into the next financial year, but I note that the funding is less than it was in the first and second award rounds. Despite that unfortunate downward trend, I hope that the minister will confirm that the Government is serious about financing the programme over the long term.

There are obvious long-term economic benefits from the proliferation of hybrid buses in terms of reduced emissions, but ADL in Falkirk has shown that we need not wait to see such benefits. It deserves praise for the expertise that it has built up and for the jobs that that expertise sustains.

The reduced emissions and greater fuel efficiency that are being displayed by the buses that have already been procured through the fund

clearly show the benefits of investment in hybrid vehicles. I have to admit that, in June, I bought one myself—not a bus, of course; just a car—and am now benefiting financially as well as helping the environment. I started to sound a bit like Stewart Stevenson there. I apologise for that.

We can all agree that we want many more such buses on our roads, but that will be possible only if bus operators are in a financial position to invest. With funding covering only the price differential, an operator still needs tens of thousands of pounds to purchase just one bus. The signs are that the bus industry is struggling. Many businesses are, of course, but the 4.8 per cent real-terms cut to the BSOG budget that was announced last week does not help. That change will result in support for bus services falling to around £51 million, at this year's prices, in 2014-15. Members should note that the spending level that was agreed between the Government and industry for this year was initially supposed to be £66.5 million.

Such actions have led to Transform Scotland labelling the Government's transport priorities as "perverse". It stated:

"Public transport fares are also rising ahead of the price of using a car, and the government's cuts to bus investment are likely to drive people away from public transport."

Against such a backdrop, it is perhaps understandable that, for many operators, updating their fleet may not be a priority. Indeed, one operator told me that its annual grant had been cut by £100,000, and two others told me that they feared for the future of their businesses due to reduced funding, with one of them even considering selling some of its existing fleet and using older vehicles from its garage to plug the gap.

Of course, that all has a knock-on effect. As Transform Scotland warns, the Government's decision to cut support for the bus industry will only drive people away from public transport and into private vehicles. Naturally, that will not assist us to reduce emissions, and I am afraid that 100 hybrid buses will not offset that completely.

I hope that we can continue to see more hybrid buses rolling out of garages across Scotland, with many of them being procured independently of the green bus fund in the future. The Government cannot keep cutting support for valuable bus services in other ways and expect no consequences.

I welcome any investment in green technology. The Lib Dems will support both the amendments and the Government's motion, amended or not.

16:05

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I refer colleagues to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Buses and coaches have a key role in relieving congestion, reducing the carbon footprint from transport and improving local air quality. That means maximising road space, reducing overall fuel consumption and helping the environment. Greener journeys, an alliance of UK bus and coach operating companies has estimated that

"If drivers switched just one car journey to bus ... a month, it would mean one billion fewer car journeys"

in the UK

"and a saving of 2m tonnes of CO₂"

per annum.

The local bus company in Edinburgh is Lothian Buses, of which I was an employee for 20 years. It has increased passenger numbers year on year for the past two decades, halting a decline in bus patronage that began in the 70s and 80s. In the past 10 years, passenger numbers have increased by 10 million to around 109 million passengers a year. In a 2011 survey, customer satisfaction levels were at 88 per cent; 93 per cent of customers rated punctuality as "excellent" or "very good"; and 89 per cent of passengers said that the company's fares are very good value for money.

However, although buses relieve congestion, there is a problem with the strategy. Most buses in Scotland use diesel and although they have lower average CO₂ emissions, unfortunately the microscopic particles of soot that are emitted by diesel engines can be harmful. The Environmental Transport Association estimated that in Britain 4,000 deaths are caused by air pollution every year, with people with respiratory problems most at risk.

Since 1970, total CO₂ emissions in the UK from buses and coaches have increased by 45 per cent. However, buses still produce only around 5 per cent of the total UK CO₂ emissions from domestic transport, while cars produce nearly 60 per cent. The ETA estimated in 2009 that 21 sites across Scotland were in breach of European air quality standards, of which three were here in Edinburgh.

As with the vast majority of bus fleets in the UK, the problem with the Lothian Buses fleet is that it is still overwhelmingly dependent on diesel engines. Lothian has invested in its fleet over many years and has the youngest fleet in the UK—the average age is six years. However, as each new generation of diesel engines has been introduced, fuel efficiency has fallen, at a time when rising fuel costs have become a huge challenge for bus operators. Over the past five

years the price of diesel has increased by 57 per cent. For more than a decade the SNP has been calling for the introduction of a fuel duty regulator to offer protection from fuel price hikes. UK Governments have taken 60 per cent of the cost of diesel—the highest fuel tax grab in Europe.

When companies face squeezed profits, it is difficult to justify the additional cost of more than £60,000 per bus for low-carbon vehicles. That is why the green bus fund offers to successful bidders up to 80 per cent of the price differential between a low-carbon vehicle and its diesel equivalent.

My old boss Ian Craig, managing director of Lothian Buses, has stated:

"This funding from the Scottish Government's Green Bus Fund will allow us to invest in a new fleet of greener buses that will help Scotland achieve its carbon reduction targets".

Lothian Buses in Edinburgh was the first Scottish bus operator to invest in double-deck hybrid buses as a result of a £1 million grant from the Scottish Government's green bus fund. In September 2011, 15 double-deck hybrid buses joined the fleet and were put into service on the number 10 route. I am happy to say that part of that route serves the Firhill, Colinton and Bonaly areas of my constituency.

The company was also successful in the second round of the fund. Thanks to a grant of £750,000, 10 single-deck buses will arrive at the start of 2013. Those new hybrid buses are likely to be deployed on the service 1 route, part of which covers the Stenhouse area of my constituency.

Investing in green public transport will help us to meet our world-leading climate change commitments to reduce carbon emissions by 42 per cent by 2020. It will also help us to support jobs in bus manufacturing companies such as Alexander Dennis in Falkirk and to help bus operating companies such as Lothian Buses to become more fuel efficient, which in turn will help to preserve low fares for passengers.

16:10

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate on the green bus fund, which is just one part of the complex jigsaw that is the strategy for our low-carbon economy. In a small way, the fund will help with emissions reductions and will contribute to the targets that were set in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. However, as members have highlighted, transport currently accounts for an estimated 25 per cent of emissions in Scotland, while buses contribute only 3 to 5 per cent of road transport emissions.

I understand that the fund is provided by the Scottish Government through the European state-aid framework. We hear that, in the recently announced third tranche of the fund, the grants to successful bidders will be for up to 80 per cent of the price differential between a hybrid bus and a conventional bus. Hybrid buses produce 30 per cent fewer emissions, so that will certainly help to deal with the rising emissions from buses and coaches, which I understand have increased by 45 per cent since 1970. The cut in fuel use should also be recognised.

In South Scotland, where distances are large, Henderson Travel has benefited and now has six hybrid buses out of a total fleet of 48. This week, John Henderson stated that the buses use about 30 per cent less fuel on suburban and rural routes and 50 per cent less on urban routes, thereby reducing CO₂ emissions and encouraging environmentally aware passengers out of cars and on to buses. Companies are making a contribution through appropriate company policies. John Henderson has said that

"To minimise fuel usage we operate smaller, more economical vehicles which are speed limited, we train drivers to drive efficiently."

Another reason why the fund is welcome is that it helps to cut air pollution. That is a particular issue in some of our cities, and it has a negative health impact, as the minister said and Gordon MacDonald stressed. The "East Ayrshire 4 business" web page tells us:

"The scheme will provide a fresh incentive to operators to purchase eco-friendly vehicles for their fleet, as well as help stimulate demand for green technology in Scotland."

However, as part of the determination to get travellers out of cars and on to public transport, we must recognise and act on the essence of the Labour amendment, which is that affordability and accessibility are essential. Early this morning, I crossed Edinburgh by bus for £1.40. However, I have had many letters from constituents in South Scotland about the expense of travelling by bus on rural routes. To give one example, the return fare on the bus from Law to Hamilton recently rose from £2.35 to £4.60. For a low-income family, that is a serious rise.

Also, to be blunt, in many places timetables are being pared. For instance, the service that goes from Lanark to Hamilton via Crossford, from where people will want to get to work in Lanark or Hamilton, has gone from an hourly service to a one-and-a-half-hourly service. As we all know, other rural places have no bus at all—hybrid or otherwise.

Last week, I supported a Unite rally against the Scottish Government cuts that are highlighted in

our amendment. In the words of Pat Rafferty of Unite, it is

"the public and workers who will pay the price"

for any cuts.

On a more positive note, I turn to manufacturing. The minister and others have highlighted the success of Alexander Dennis Ltd. I ask the minister to comment in his closing remarks on whether we are reaching a critical mass in low-carbon vehicle manufacture more generally. Given that we really need to get to grips with the 25 per cent of emissions from transport, what projects can the minister highlight and what research is the Scottish Government undertaking on that in the long term?

On modal shift there are, running parallel with the purchase of hybrid buses, a number of other initiatives and projects. At local authority level, South Lanarkshire Council has 13 electric road vehicles and two electric road sweepers, which has resulted in an 11 per cent reduction in fuel since 2007, and more than £900,000 in financial savings. In 2011, WWF Scotland issued the report "Powering ahead: how to put electric cars on Scotland's roads", and the Electric Vehicle Association, which is an owners organisation, showed the film, "The Revenge of the Electric Car" at its recent annual general meeting. I have not, however, had a chance to see it yet. Pete Ritchie, of Whitmuir Organics Ltd in West Linton in South Scotland, has announced the activation of two electric charging points, which were donated by Zero Carbon World.

The Scottish Government, working with the UK Government, is developing the plugged-in places initiative but, again, is there really a coherent and credible Scotland-wide strategy for bringing confidence to car-purchasing decisions?

On the Scottish Government's enabling communities to take the initiative on transport modes, I will highlight one problem that occurred with the climate challenge fund. The Selkirk Regeneration Company tried to get the funds for a small electric minibus to link deprived areas of the town, but it was turned down on the basis that it would compete with the commercial diesel bus service. Will the minister look into that? The criteria appear to be out of sync with the aspirations of the Scottish Government on the low-carbon economy and support for communities.

Train travel, integrated timetables, and the modal shift from road to rail for freight are also key aspects of the low-carbon economy. Active travel should also be mentioned, because a much more significant contribution could be made than has so far been enabled. Safe urban and rural walking routes are also needed. As a member of the new cross-party group on cycling, I know how many

people—including myself—would dare to cycle more in urban settings if the infrastructure took us more seriously into account.

The green bus fund is just one part of the low-carbon jigsaw, and we still have a great deal to do to reduce emissions from transport and to make transport a safe and positive experience that is affordable and accessible for people in Scotland.

16:17

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

I welcome the green bus fund that the Government announced in its recent budget. It is fair to say that there clearly is support across the chamber for the initiative, given the speeches that we have heard today.

I want to say a little bit about the situation in Aberdeen. I, too, attended the hybrid bus launch, along with Kevin Stewart and the minister. It was great to see that work to deliver hybrid buses in Aberdeen. I agree with Kevin Stewart that they are fantastic vehicles, and I think that they are going to be extremely popular on the city routes that they serve. I hope that we will see more of them being rolled out in Aberdeen. I am also pleased to see Aberdeen City Council's work with partners on hydrogen buses.

My colleague, Kevin Stewart, did himself a little bit of a disservice in that he was, when he was deputy leader of the council, very much involved in the genesis of the moves towards unlocking the hydrogen bus funding, so he deserves credit and recognition for the work that he did behind the scenes, and for the lobbying work that he has done, since becoming the MSP for Aberdeen Central, to ensure that funding was provided from other agencies and organisations, including Scottish Enterprise.

We heard the criticism that the fund tends to benefit the larger operators, but we are seeing—especially through the second stage of the fund—small bus companies benefiting, too. I was happy to see Deveron Coaches of Macduff in the north-east of Scotland being one of the beneficiaries of round two of the green bus fund. It received almost £175,000. That is a sign that smaller bus companies and operators are able to access the fund. I am sure that the minister will join me in encouraging other bus operators, of whatever size, to access the fund to assist their business in the future.

The green bus fund has another role to play as part of a wider effort to shift attitudes in society. I congratulate Jim Hume on revealing his purchase of a hybrid car. I note that he made it quite clear that he has not bought a hybrid bus and I understand that the reason for that is that, these days, the Lib Dems need only a car for their day

trips. I will leave that to one side and say that Jim Hume deserves credit for taking that step.

The Government is putting up money through the green bus fund, but we also need to encourage private enterprise to look at what it can do with, for example, car manufacturers. Alex Johnstone made that point when he talked about what private businesses could do to drive down costs to ensure that we get a bigger bang for our buck.

Other areas of the transport network could look at the technologies that are being implemented and see whether they can play a role. Government money is finite and we are living in difficult economic times, so it would be unrealistic to assume that the Government can throw vast sums of money at every area of the transport network to develop technologies. That is an opportunity to say that this is the direction of travel—for want of a better pun—and that we want other sectors of the transport network to look at whether they can play a role in reducing emissions in the future.

I am sorry to say that I do not think that I will support the Labour amendment at decision time. Labour members do not seem to understand how a debate works. They keep calling for an honest debate, but for a debate to occur, there need to be two distinct positions. The Government is laying out its policy agenda and priorities as part of the budget. If the Labour Party wants to disagree with those, that is fine, but it needs to say what it would do differently and how it would do it. It is not enough for the Labour Party to say that it wants the Government to address the cut to BSOG and then, when it is asked what we should do in order to fund that, to say that it is not going to make up policy on the hoof. That is not an honest position. The Labour Party must come to the chamber and outline an alternative direction. If the Labour Party wants to have an honest debate, let us have it.

Neil Findlay: Mark McDonald talks about having two different positions. He would know about that because the SNP has two different positions; it wants to pretend that it can have both Scandinavian-type social services and Reaganomics taxation.

Mark McDonald: There will be a gold star winging its way from the Labour Party leadership to Mr Findlay for parroting the line that Johann Lamont was peddling on the television last night.

The Government is quite clear that it can afford to fund the concessionary travel scheme, the council tax freeze, free prescriptions and free university education for Scotland's young people. If the Labour Party disagrees with that and does not think that we should fund those things, or thinks that they should be funded differently, it should come to us and tell us what we should be

doing instead, and we will have that debate. To open up a debate that is going to consist of two years of whingeing before a policy document emerges is not honest. I would be happy to debate with Labour members any day of the week, but they have to have an articulate and coherent position. That would be a start to an honest debate.

16:24

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I will begin with self-deprecation. I say to Mark McDonald that as long as someone is willing to take a backie, it only takes a bicycle for a Green group day trip. I hope that members will agree that it does not stop us coming to the chamber and getting our point across by spending six minutes ranting about how wrong you all are. However, most members who have spoken in the debate are at least partly right, and there is a measure of agreement about the standard of service that we want to achieve, even if there is disagreement about how to get there.

The minister began by talking about the vital role of public transport. I have heard him speak before about the standard of service that he wants Scotland to enjoy: high-quality, reliable, affordable, and low-carbon. If that is what we want to achieve, the first thing that we must do is acknowledge quite how far away from having that standard of service we are at the moment, particularly when it comes to buses. As other members have done, I will start by offering a local perspective. In many parts of the country, we have highly expensive and unaffordable services—many people in Glasgow find it cheaper to get across the city in a taxi than in a bus. We have unreliable services and services that are often of poor quality.

I lay a lot of the blame for that problem at the door of the free-market approach. I agree with Iain Gray that, if we are to address the wider issues and the ability of bus services to meet carbon emission objectives, as well as social priorities across the country, we need to look at the structure of the industry. At a recent Confederation of Passenger Transport conference, Brian Souter—who will be known to members—said that the reason why the free-market approach is right is that it does not really matter whether a bus company tries a new service and it fails, because the company can scrap it. It really does matter that the industry has the power to set up services that people become reliant on, only to have them pulled like a rug from under them.

In relation to the disagreement between Mark McDonald and Elaine Murray about funding and how honest the debate about it is, I acknowledge that I would love to see bus services getting more subsidy; I do not think that “subsidy” is a dirty word. However, even if people do not want to get

into a debate about subsidy, they should consider the fact that, at the moment, the profitable parts of the industry are entirely in the hands of the private sector and the costs of the less profitable parts of it—the socially necessary services—are picked up by the public purse. Moreover, many of the ticket sales on those profitable routes are also being funded by the public purse, yet we leave the profitable parts of the industry in private sector hands.

There has been much talk about CO₂ emissions and particulate pollution. Just yesterday, there was another report from the European Environment Agency about NO₂ emissions from road transport in Glasgow. When I was elected in 2003, it was pretty clear that Glasgow’s air quality was among the worst in the United Kingdom. With this year’s report, it is clear that Glasgow’s air quality is among the worst in the whole of Europe. Another 10 years of drift will not fix that. If we look at pictures of Hope Street or Renfield Street at any busy time of day, we see buses and cars struggling to get through the same crowded road space and inching their way through the city.

Mark McDonald: I have suggested to Aberdeen City Council that it look at whether the current operating times for, and the locations of, bus lanes in the city are appropriate. Does Patrick Harvie believe that councils should constantly consider whether bus-lane provision is appropriate in dealing with the often changing times of rush-hour traffic?

Patrick Harvie: It is absolutely essential that bus lanes be looked at. I would go further and suggest that areas such as Hope Street and Renfield Street in Glasgow, and a few other busy bus routes, should be bus-only for at least an hour or so during the morning and evening rush hours, so that buses do not have to compete with other forms of traffic to get through the space.

I turn to what I like to call parasite services, which run around the city, but not to any timetable. They may have a timetable, but it is not publicised. Even at the best of times, First in Glasgow has what I would call an ambiguous relationship with timetables. Such parasite services hover about a stop ahead of the service that is run by First or whichever company is the dominant provider. They charge a bit less than the dominant provider, but the services are provided using vehicles of extremely poor quality. That is a hugely inefficient part of the industry. If we are to reduce carbon emissions, we must look at vehicle efficiency not just in terms of the number of vehicles that compete for particular routes, but in terms of how they are powered.

The Scottish Government’s response to yesterday’s figures has been contradictory. At one point, the statistics on NO₂ pollution were

dismissed, with the Government saying that it did not recognise them. Today, however, it is clear that the Government has asked for an extension to allow Scotland to achieve the targets.

The green bus fund is a step in the right direction, but in the context of there being more than 5,000 buses, it is a very wee step. We need to attract more passengers on to the services, which means that we need affordable fares, reliable good-quality services, and a public-service ethos for public transport. We also need measures such as car-free hours and we need to examine WWF's proposals for a congestion charge and other demand-management measures. We need a transformational approach to public transport policy, provision, and industry structure if the minister wants to make good his commitment to providing the standard of service that he wants.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Alex Johnstone has a minimum of seven minutes.

16:30

Alex Johnstone: We have got to the stage in the debate that usually leaves at a disadvantage those of us who make winding-up speeches. If all the spare time is used up for back benchers, those of us who wind up unfortunately find ourselves with no extra time at all. However, today we have managed to manufacture the luxury of extra time. I had better not be frivolous and get on by saying what I was going to say.

I need to say a couple of specific things. First, it would be very remiss of me not to do as many members have done in the debate—but which I failed to do in my opening remarks—and say a few words about Alexander Dennis Ltd. Many members have more knowledge of the company than I do, and it has been mentioned many times. Elaine Murray initially pointed out that Alexander Dennis was at one time discussed in the chamber as a company that was in danger of not surviving. It is wonderful to be able to talk—as we have previously and are doing again today—about a company that has a world-leading product and is promoting it and selling it in Scotland, the UK and many countries around the world.

Our having a world leader, in Alexander Dennis, is something that we should be proud of. Too often, when we talk about the need to spend in specific areas in order to achieve Government or political objectives, we make the mistake of spending money in foreign factories. The existence of Alexander Dennis means that we do not have to take that tough decision. We can support green buses and expect many of the orders to be fulfilled right here, in Scotland. We should welcome that privilege.

I will move on to the debate, in which there have been a number of interesting speeches. It would be remiss of me not to address some of them. I did not quite hear the remark that Neil Findlay was making as I left the chamber briefly at one point, but he has nothing to worry about from me, as far as the Labour Party's amendment goes. It will get my support, because it deserves it. The Conservatives will vote both for both amendments and for the Government motion, whether or not it is amended. This is not a subject on which we need party-political division.

I must get on and mention one or two other things from the debate. Not for the first time, Iain Gray used the opportunity to campaign for re-regulation of bus services. Without rehearsing the argument, I am afraid that I have to give him the news that he will find no support for that among Conservative members. However, he raised an issue that I want to address: he said that the primary purpose of the green bus fund is to deal with our climate change commitments. That may be a given for some people, but I am not entirely convinced that I believe it. I believe that the energy efficiency that modern hybrid buses provide and the clean air that energy efficiency generates in our cities are at least as important as the contribution that is made to Scotland's climate change commitments.

Taking that a little further forward, some members referred to a thing that exists in certain circles: the climate change denier. We do not have many of those in the Parliament, and I make it clear that I am not one of them. However, when we talk about buses, we must not make the mistake of thinking that the green bus fund is simply part of a broader green policy, because it is much more than that. We need to consider the green bus fund as part of our support for bus transport in the round, and to see it within that group of priorities. That is why, when we look at the changes to the bus service operators grant, there is a great deal of synergy between the objectives of that redesigned scheme and the contribution that is made by the green bus fund.

I said previously in the debate—I will say it again—that we must consider bus support in the round and prioritise within it. It is vital that we have the courage to question the current rules that govern concessionary fares and that we retarget support for buses within the other measures that are available. By doing that, we may succeed in kick-starting and accelerating the green bus industry in Scotland, which will generate all the advantages of a growing industry within a growing market, and of an enthusiastic Government that targets limited support at achieving those key objectives.

There were one or two more light-hearted contributions to the debate. I have to remark on Marco Biagi's concern about being compared to Stewart Stevenson; he threatened to take anybody who made that comparison outside. I do not know whether that was a threat of violence—perhaps we should not go into that—but I assure him that I will not do that.

We also heard at some length from Kevin Stewart about what is going on in Aberdeen. We heard not just about the existence of hybrid buses, although there are some there, but about the experiment—if I can call it that—with hydrogen fuel cell buses. That technology will perhaps come to fruition a few years down the road, but it can deliver a great deal, particularly for a Scotland that might find itself overburdened with wind turbines in the future. Perhaps on days when there is a little too much wind, as there has been in the past couple of days, we might use some of that surplus power to generate the hydrogen that will fuel that hydrogen economy.

I end with a comment on Patrick Harvie's speech. He is always slightly out on a limb, but he introduces vital ideas to such debates. He talked about the need to ensure that bus lanes are used properly and effectively. I agree that they have an important part to play, but sometimes people see them as being an example of an authoritarian attitude from Government, whether local or national. As far as bus lanes are concerned, I would be delighted to see more of them, as long as we took a much more liberal attitude to who is allowed to use them.

16:38

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): In essence, I think that Mr Johnstone means that cars should be allowed to use bus lanes at every moment of the day. I am not sure that Mr Harvie will run with him on that.

It has been a good debate and the speeches from members in all parts of the chamber have reflected the cross-party support for investment in more environmentally friendly buses for the Scottish bus network. As Elaine Murray said in opening for the Labour Party, we have called for such an initiative for some time. Back in 2010, Charlie Gordon, our then transport spokesman, urged the Scottish Government to provide investment in green buses, both as an important measure that would contribute to achieving our ambitious climate change targets, which a number of members described as a focus of the debate, and to ensure that Scotland could be a base for the construction of low-carbon vehicles through the work of the Alexander Dennis plant in Falkirk—again, a number of members mentioned that.

Unite the Union also played a key role in that campaign.

It is welcome that, through the green bus fund, we have seen the construction of new hybrid vehicles by Alexander Dennis, which has won contracts for Dundee and Edinburgh as well as other parts of the UK.

The minister has said that there is an important economic motivation as well as an environmental imperative behind this policy, and we wholeheartedly agree with such an ambition for the green fund. However, in a good speech, Patrick Harvie made a good point about ensuring that smaller firms, even community transport schemes, benefit from the use of environmentally friendly vehicles. After all, they will play an increasingly important role in the future of public transport and should be supported in this important agenda.

As a north-east MSP, I, like other members, have particular cause to welcome investment from the green bus fund and, in particular, the announcement in August that Aberdeen will benefit from the £3.3 million fund to enable the purchase of 10 hydrogen buses for the city. It is very appropriate that Aberdeen, Europe's energy capital, should be a pilot area for the deployment of such buses; as the base for FirstGroup, the city has a history of piloting the use of new bus designs.

Although important, Scottish Government investment is, of course, not the only funding that the project has received; it has also had funding from the European Commission—to remind us of the importance of our membership of the EU—and support from other partners, including the Aberdeen Renewable Energy Group and Aberdeen City Council. I congratulate the council, in both its previous and current forms, on supporting a very important project and I agree entirely with Kevin Stewart and Mark McDonald that we should welcome the scheme. Indeed, I very much welcome the sight of common cause being made at the launch of the green bus investment in Aberdeen with a cheery picture of the First Minister and Barney Crockett, Labour's leader in the city, sitting together in harmony on a new hybrid bus. It was right that that investment should receive the personal endorsement of someone who has given strong leadership on the issue—and nice that Alex Salmond, too, could be there.

I welcome the new buses in the north-east, not only those that are bound for Aberdeen but those that were announced in April for Banff, Buckie and Keith, and the new National Express buses that will be introduced in Dundee and which will be built by Alexander Dennis. Other members in other regions and constituencies have rightly welcomed investment in green buses in their areas. From

Edinburgh and Perth to Glasgow, Airdrie and Cumbernauld, and indeed throughout Scotland, communities and our environment are benefiting from the deployment of those new buses.

Of course, we can always do more. Patrick Harvie encouraged us to do just that and Transform Scotland has rightly encouraged members of all parties to be even more ambitious in introducing more low-carbon buses in fleets across Scotland. After all, investment in green transport solutions is crucial to Scotland's ability to play its part in tackling climate change and investment in our bus network will be a vital part of that. Claudia Beamish emphasised that in her speech, as did Iain Gray when he made it clear that we really need to have done better in key areas of carbon reduction targets. We have to do more to encourage more people to leave their cars behind and make greener choices about their travel.

I am sure that smart new energy-efficient buses will help to promote greater bus usage but, as members on this and other sides of the chamber have pointed out, we need a consistent approach from the Scottish Government to encouraging more people to use our buses. That means not only investing in green buses but ensuring that other areas of bus policy promote greater patronage of the bus network.

The minister is well aware of our deep concerns about the cuts to BSOG; Neil Findlay highlighted that issue in his speech. Such concerns have been expressed not only on these benches; they are shared by Unite, which just last week organised a lobby in Parliament. The lobby, which was attended by a number of bus drivers, highlighted the impact of the cuts, not least on Unite's members, and called for greater regulation of the bus industry. The same point has been made by Patrick Harvie and Iain Gray.

Keith Brown: Does the member acknowledge that the changes to BSOG affect fares by only 1 or 2 per cent and that the 57 per cent increase in the price of diesel is having a much bigger effect? If he wants to put more money into BSOG, can he tell us where that money will come from?

Richard Baker: I do not actually recognise the figures that the minister has set out; I do not think that the Confederation of Passenger Transport recognises them, either. In the conversations that I have had with operators who are dealing with an 8.5 per cent increase in Aberdeen—and more than that in other areas—they have said that the minister's claim of a 1 or 2 per cent increase is simply not consistent with the figures that they are working from.

That goes to the heart of the regulation of the industry, which Iain Gray was right to highlight.

The structure of the industry is important. Members have challenged us to make proposals on that. We did so in the previous session of Parliament, when Charlie Gordon proposed a bill on regulating the bus industry and introducing more quality partnerships and contracts. However, not one SNP member signed up to that proposal. We will continue to press that important point.

Iain Gray also said that he preferred green buses to maroon ones. I know exactly where he is coming from on that, but we do not agree on it.

As I mentioned in my response to the minister's intervention, the cuts in BSOG have resulted in higher fares. That has had an impact on bus usage. The briefing that I received from Unite states that recent Transport Scotland data show that bus passenger levels in Scotland declined by 6 per cent in 2010-11. However, the picture in the regional breakdowns is even more depressing: passenger numbers in the north-east, Tayside and central Scotland are down 23 per cent; in the Highlands and Islands and the Shetlands, they are down 27 per cent; and in the south-west and Strathclyde, they are down 12 per cent.

Those figures paint an extremely concerning picture of bus patronage in Scotland. When the effect of changing the formula for BSOG, which Jamie Hepburn mentioned, is higher fares and fewer people using public transport, it is an entirely counter-productive measure. Alex Johnstone referred to the impact of that change in cities, which must be considered carefully.

Labour members have made the case that fare increases and the withdrawal of services particularly affect those on lower incomes and are an important issue of social justice. We want the new green buses to play an important role in a thriving bus industry. That requires ministers to take a different approach on issues such as BSOG.

We welcome investment in green buses to reduce the carbon footprint of the bus industry, just as we support investment in bus services to reduce Scotland's overall transport carbon footprint. We look forward to the Scottish Government working with bus operators, the European Commission, our local authorities and all those who want to be part of providing more green buses throughout Scotland.

We hope that that important and exciting aspect of bus policy will go hand in hand with other policy approaches from ministers. We will continue to press for that to ensure that our bus services are green and affordable, meet the needs of our communities and are used by increasing numbers of people in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I call Keith Brown to wind up the debate. Minister, I would be obliged if you would continue until 4.59 pm.

16:47

Keith Brown: Thank you very much for that opportunity, Presiding Officer.

This has been, at least in large part, an interesting and positive debate. The funding of the services—an issue to which I will return—has been less consensual, but the points that have been made on the green bus fund have been well received and well supported around the chamber.

For the avoidance of doubt, I intend to support Alex Johnstone's amendment and not to support the Labour amendment. During the debate, I tried to intervene on Alex Johnstone to say that I intended to support his amendment, but he refused to accept any intervention from me. I thought that I would at least have a chance when one of his back benchers spoke, but there were no Tory back benchers.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): No, there is one here.

Keith Brown: There is now, but there were none earlier.

As we have said, low-carbon vehicles deliver benefits. A range of different figures has been given: such vehicles make at least 30 per cent carbon savings over the diesel equivalents, and we heard that such buses in the Lothians have achieved savings of between 56.7—a very precise figure—and 60 per cent in fuel consumption.

A number of members spoke about the reduced impact on the environment and the ability of low-carbon vehicles to improve air quality and, of course, drive down carbon emissions. Of course, the point was also made that carbon is still used in electric and hybrid buses. The real boon would be hydrogen buses, which a number of members mentioned and which would enable us to drive down carbon emissions even further.

By providing funds to incentivise a new bus fleet, we create an opportunity to help to improve patronage and widen the appeal of bus travel to more people.

A number of members made the point that we can achieve economies of scale. Claudia Beamish mentioned something along those lines and asked about the extent to which the funding that we have already made available is driving improvement. We are seeing that. I mentioned the plans to expand green buses into other areas, specifically school buses; Alexander Dennis told me about that when I visited the company. The member will be aware that some school bus contracts have

some of the oldest elements of the bus fleet in Scotland.

The funding is developing expertise. A number of members pointed out the extent to which Scotland has achieved a real lead in relation to not only hybrid buses, but batteries that provide power for buses and other vehicles. We should both celebrate and encourage that.

Nothing in the motion is self-congratulatory, but it is important that we acknowledge what has been achieved to date. We have had two rounds of the Scottish green bus fund—the third round has been announced—and 71 vehicles have been delivered. We have said that so far the buses will run in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth, Dundee, Aberdeen and Lanarkshire. A fourth round of £2.5 million was confirmed in the budget announcement. The funding rounds represent major contributions to helping to achieve the climate change target, not only in themselves but as a result of what they will encourage bus operators and some manufacturers to do.

I return to some of the points that were made in the debate, which started with Elaine Murray's appeal for an honest debate. We have had an awful lot of conversations about that. However, the Labour Party says consistently—as we heard last week—that we should spend £350 million more on EGIP and that we should spend more money on BSOG and on concessionary travel. There have also been demands from the Labour Party for more money to be spent on housing and on colleges. If the Labour Party genuinely wants an honest debate, it must specify exactly what it would ditch and what it would do differently. It is perfectly legitimate for an Opposition party to say those things, but if we are to have an honest debate—I am sure that Elaine Murray genuinely wants to have such a debate—we must have more clarity about what the Labour Party would do.

Patrick Harvie: I would be happy to give the minister a list of the road projects—many of which are being funded by a raid from revenue to capital—that I would like him to scrap. However, before we even talk about where additional funding could come from, will he address the issue that a great deal of the profitability of the profitable parts of the bus industry is being stacked up by public sector spending through taxpayers' money being used to pay for tickets and to subsidise socially necessary routes? Is there not a need to rebalance that?

Keith Brown: Patrick Harvie refers to the profitability of the companies. To be honest, it is not a bad thing if companies are profitable. However, it is true that the fact that many hundreds of thousands of people—pensioners and others—make journeys using concessionary travel schemes has contributed to that profitability. I do

not think that that is a bad thing. If the member wants to spend more money on buses, perhaps he can explain why he had us spend £776 million on a tram scheme in Edinburgh when we could otherwise have given further support to the bus industry.

In relation to the different demands, we require more clarity if we are to have an honest debate. Neil Findlay was perhaps unfortunate, in that his argument collapsed as a result of his starting off with the wrong facts. He said that the budget for the concessionary travel scheme has been reduced. If I am wrong, I will come to the chamber and apologise the next chance that I get. I ask him to do the same. The fact is that this year £187 million will be given to the concessionary travel scheme—that is up £7 million from last year. If Neil Findlay finds out that he is wrong, as I think that he will, perhaps he will come back and apologise.

Elaine Murray: I think that my colleague Neil Findlay was probably referring to page 117 of the budget document, which shows that the concessionary fares budget for 2012-13 is £192 million and the budget for the next year is also £192 million, so if the gross domestic product deflator is applied, that is a cut of 2.5 per cent.

Keith Brown: That is not what he said, but we will wait and find out whether he comes back with an apology for what he said.

Having constructed his argument based on the wrong facts, Neil Findlay got himself into real trouble. I wondered where he was going with his argument, but we got the answer that we have always suspected would explain Neil Findlay's position. His words were, "I do not support anything that the SNP does." Whatever this Government says, instead of having a rational, mature and honest debate Neil Findlay and others in the Labour Party will decide to do something different. Perhaps that approach has got the Labour Party into the situation that it is in now.

Iain Gray made a relatively positive contribution. He talked about red buses and green buses, which Richard Baker also mentioned. Like Iain Gray, I certainly favoured the green buses. I have to say that nostalgia is not what it used to be and that, having been born here and having grown up in the Lothians and Edinburgh, I do not have the same memories that he has of the bus services running in the idyllic way that he described. However, I take his point about the Eastern Scottish and Lothian Regional Transport buses being very well used.

Iain Gray talked about reregulation. If the debate is to be honest, what that regulation would involve must be spelled out. Would it mean the things for which Strathclyde partnership for transport has

asked, which we have agreed to look at and on which we have said that we are willing to listen? Today and when Charlie Gordon brought the idea to the chamber, no price tag was put on it. Unless at least an indicative price tag can be put on proposals, nobody will take them seriously.

Charlie Gordon was mentioned in relation to how we started talking about the green bus fund. I remember Michael Matheson talking about it long before Charlie Gordon got round to it, not least because of the interest in Michael Matheson's constituency.

I was waiting for Jim Hume to mention Alan Sugar, but he was not mentioned. Nick Clegg has said that the Liberal Democrats want to look at the concessionary travel scheme in England, because they do not like the idea that Alan Sugar gets a bus pass. They should have checked their facts first—I think that everybody knows that Alan Sugar does not use buses, and he does not have a bus pass. There is coalescence between the Labour Party, which wants to look at the concessionary travel scheme in Scotland, and the coalition parties, which seem to share an agenda of cutting vital public services.

Kezia Dugdale, who is often called the future of the Labour Party, was mentioned. According to her, the future will involve looking at the concessionary travel scheme with a view to rolling it back. In her defence, we heard that she was speaking only in a personal capacity, although she is a front bencher. We also heard that Johann Lamont spoke yesterday about the idea of cutting back on concessionary travel, although that was quickly changed afterwards.

Elaine Murray: Is the minister unable to accept that Labour members are capable of thinking for themselves and are not simply sheep?

Keith Brown: I am certainly aware that Labour members are capable of thinking for themselves; it is the speaking part that seems to be a problem.

Patrick Harvie made a number of points. He started by saying that most people who had spoken were partly right—the implication was that he was wholly right. He mentioned the need to do more, but I have talked already about the contribution that we have made to public transport, not least to a project that he supported—the trams, the current cost of which is £776 million.

BSOG was mentioned frequently. Of bus service providers, 75 per cent have had a beneficial impact from BSOG since the changes were introduced last year to incentivise rural travel and to de incentivise the use of more fuel.

Claudia Beamish, Angus MacDonald, Gordon MacDonald and Mark McDonald made good speeches. Apart from the obvious points about the

green bus fund, a point that Mark McDonald made was the centrepiece of the debate. Repeated demands have been made in the chamber for increased spending on concessionary travel, as with housing, colleges, ferries and, last week, railways. Previously, £750 million was demanded for trams. What has been said in the chamber stands in stark contrast to what Johann Lamont said yesterday.

Labour members cannot face both ways at the same time. They cannot demand, every day in the Parliament, additional spending in virtually every area of Government activity and then say that they want to have a sensible and mature debate about Government spending. They will find that people will not take their proposals seriously if people know that no money is attached and that the real agenda is to cut back on what the Government does.

The Labour, Lib Dem and Tory parties have coalesced around a cuts agenda. They do not just think that they are better together or that we are all in this together.

Iain Gray rose—

Richard Baker: Will the minister take an intervention?

Keith Brown: No—I am in my final minute

Whether it is going after our prescriptions, the council tax freeze or people's bus passes, we now know that the Labour Party—in common with the Conservative Party and the Lib Dem party—is in the business of cutting benefits. We will stay in the business of cutting emissions through our Scottish green bus fund.

Business Motions

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-04258, 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 2 October 2012

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee Debate: Standing Order Rule Changes

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Women's Employment Summit

followed by Scottish Government Debate: National Gaelic Plan 2012-2015

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 3 October 2012

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Infrastructure, Investment and Cities;
Culture and External Affairs

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 4 October 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: Employability

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 23 October 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 24 October 2012

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Education and Lifelong Learning

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 25 October 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.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-04259, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a stage 2 timetable.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Bill at Stage 2 be completed by 9 November 2012.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Property Factors (Scotland) Act 2011 (Modification) Order 2012 [draft] be approved.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The first question is, that amendment S4M-04247.2, in the name of Elaine Murray, which seeks to amend motion S4M-04247, in the name of Keith Brown, on the green bus fund, 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)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 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)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, 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)
 Park, John (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 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) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 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)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 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 52, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-04247.3, in the name of Alex Johnstone, which seeks to amend motion S4M-04247, in the name of Keith Brown, on the green bus fund, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-04247, in the name of Keith Brown, on the green bus fund, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that the Scottish Green Bus Fund has already supported the delivery of 71 new low-carbon hybrid buses; welcomes the contribution that these are making toward reducing fuel consumption and Scotland's carbon emissions; urges the Scottish Government and the bus industry to continue to work together to improve the environmental performance of Scotland's bus fleet; further welcomes the launch of the third round of the fund, worth £3 million in 2012-13, and the provision of an additional £2.5 million for hybrid buses in the draft budget for 2013-14, and believes that the Scottish Government should work with the industry to drive down costs in order to accelerate the adoption of this technology in years to come.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-04260, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Property Factors (Scotland) Act 2011 (Modification) Order 2012 [draft] be approved.

Work Capability Assessments

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-04043, in the name of Kevin Stewart, on work capability assessments. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that there are ever-increasing concerns in Aberdeen and across Scotland regarding the work capability assessments for Employment and Support Allowance that are being carried out by Atos; notes the reported fears of stakeholder organisations and individuals that similar concerns will be reproduced with assessments for Personal Independence Payments, and understands that members are receiving significant casework from constituents regarding negative experiences of work capability assessments.

17:03

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I thank all the organisations and individuals who have supplied us with information and briefings for today's debate. I apologise in advance if I do not mention all the organisations during my speech—I am sure that colleagues will mention those organisations that have made submissions. I thank them very much indeed.

The headlines in today's *Daily Record* read "Heartless Tests Leave Disabled Penniless" and "The Atos Scandal". Although I am no cheerleader for Atos, the reality is that its contract has been laid down by the Department for Work and Pensions. It is Westminster that is to blame for the situation and, although Atos is doing its bidding, it is doing so under the contract that has been written by the DWP in London.

I am sure that work capability assessments have featured in the postbag of every single member of late. I am sure that many members will have had people coming to their surgeries with their tales of woe. From my own perspective, some of the stories that I have heard are absolutely heart wrenching—it is an absolute disgrace.

Unfortunately, some folk are unwilling to have their individual cases told in Parliament, because there is a fear about going on the record. However, last week in this Parliament, at the Welfare Reform Committee meeting, three very brave individuals gave evidence. I am sure that their evidence will feature in later speeches.

The Crisis report "Single homeless people's experience of the Work Capability Assessments" notes that almost a quarter of single homeless people have to wait more than six weeks to receive the outcome of their assessment. Given

that the overall assessment process can be daunting, frightening and incredibly stressful for claimants with mental health issues, it is imperative that the time between the assessment and communication with the claimant is kept to a minimum. I agree with Crisis in that regard.

For many, work capability assessments are a frightening experience. In my opinion, assessments should be as easy and as flexible as possible in order to take into account fluctuating conditions and extenuating circumstances, but they most certainly are not like that at present. It is most concerning that service providers and advice agencies are being significantly affected due to the nature of the assessment, with citizens advice bureaux in Scotland dealing with almost 20,000 new employment and support allowance issues in 2010-11. The Consultation and Advocacy Promotion Service individual independent advocacy service has reported an increase of more than 75 per cent in the number of cases relating to ESA from October 2010 to March 2011. It is clear from those statistics that the work capability assessment process needs to be made clearer and easier for those completing the assessment. That trend is echoed in many other agencies.

We know that 76 per cent of claimants appealed the outcome of their WCA and more than 50 per cent of those people have been successful and given a higher score on appeal. Those are concerning statistics. They show that few claimants trust the decision made by their assessor, and the fact that more than half are successful in an appeal shows that the decisions were incorrect. Appealing a decision, in what can be a stressful assessment for many with mental health conditions, can lead to further health conditions caused by stress, which can trigger depression and other fluctuating conditions.

The decisions of healthcare professionals at an assessment need to be trustworthy and free from error to result in fewer appeals and an easier process. The questions and point system of the assessment need to become relevant and fit for purpose when dealing with all conditions, and healthcare professionals should be given some discretion when discussing work capability with claimants.

There are significant issues around certain illnesses. For example, the treatment of claimants with blood-borne viruses is often misunderstood. Many of those claimants feel that the healthcare professional who is assessing them has no understanding of blood-borne viruses, the treatment for them and the side effects of that treatment. Terrence Higgins Trust has offered the Department for Work and Pensions free training

on blood-borne viruses, which it has not taken up. That is a disgrace.

Today, I received a letter from the Royal College of General Practitioners Scotland, which says:

"With specific reference to people living with Hepatitis C, we would argue that patients undergoing eradication therapy for Hepatitis C should be viewed in a similar capacity to patients undergoing chemotherapy treatment. Hepatitis C can be lengthy and involve debilitating side effects. Indeed patients with Hepatitis C who are in employment are often reluctant to embark on an extensive course of eradication treatment as this might necessitate being off work for a long period as treatment can be arduous and not without side effects. The same can be true of HIV positive patients who have developed complications from their disease."

RCGP Scotland argues that those folk are in the same position as those "undergoing cancer therapy" and I agree with that.

The Atos contract needs to be looked at very carefully. A new contract with a value of £206,703,507 has been awarded to undertake assessments for personal independence payments for Scotland and north England. I have received a copy of the tender for that, which was redacted. I cannot go into any depth on it. The redaction was not done particularly well, and I managed to access information that I probably should not have accessed. I will reveal that at a later date.

Finally, the DWP report in today's *Daily Record* says that

"HALF of people stripped of disability benefits after being ruled 'fit for work' by Atos were left unemployed and without income";

that

"55 per cent of people who lost benefits ... had failed to find work";

and that only 15 per cent are in jobs and 35 per cent are on other benefits.

The paper also says:

"Atos have assessed patients with terminal illnesses as 'fit for work'. And thousands of victims of genuine, chronic conditions have complained of being humiliated by the company's tests."

That is absolutely disgraceful. The only way to deal with the matter is by the Parliament taking full control of welfare. I hope that that will happen sooner rather than later so that folk do not have to put up with those situations any longer.

17:11

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (SNP)): I am sure that all members will congratulate Kevin Stewart on securing the debate and that I will be only the first to do so. I apologise to him, the Presiding Officer and other members,

as I may have to leave before the end of the debate to get back to my constituency.

Like Kevin Stewart, I am a member of the Welfare Reform Committee. It is clear that the committee is receiving evidence of the enormous damage that has been done to people's lives through the United Kingdom Government's wider welfare reform agenda. We have become particularly aware of the concern about work capability assessments; indeed, we received evidence about that last week. Mr Stewart referred to that, and I will try to pick up on it later.

All of us will be aware of the concern that exists as a result of constituents who have brought cases to us. It is clear that campaigning organisations are similarly concerned. Citizens Advice Scotland provided a very good briefing for members in which it gave a number of instances in which its clients have reported concerns. It informed us:

"A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client whose GP is 'astonished' that she has been declared fit for work in her work capability assessment. The client had spinal surgery which has led to chronic back pain and irritable bowel syndrome. The client is also asthmatic and has borderline personality disorder involving mood swings and considerable medication."

The briefing also states:

"An East of Scotland CAB reports of a client who ... has long-term substance abuse issues and mental health problems ... The client's GP states that the client is definitely not fit for work as she has been assessed as 'psychotic' and a danger to others."

That person was assessed as being fit for work.

Kevin Stewart referred to the evidence that the committee has taken. I refer to the *Official Report*, as it is important that members hear some of the evidence. We have taken some very good evidence and, as Mr Stewart said, the witnesses were very brave to give it.

One of those witnesses was Henry Sherlock, who became blind at 31. He told us about his work capability assessment:

"I was asked whether I could pick up an empty cardboard box. In what job does someone pick up an empty cardboard box? That is not even work capability assessment. I said that physically, yes, I could pick up an empty cardboard box but that I would not know where the cardboard box was. I would have to have someone show me where the box was. Then, when I picked up the box, if I needed two hands I would become immobile—my mobility would be gone because I would not be able to use a cane or a dog to get around. I gave a full explanation of why that would be difficult, but I asked for the medical report to be sent to me and that was missing completely from the report."—[*Official Report, Welfare Reform Committee*, 18 September 2012; c 253.]

Janice Scott, whose husband was injured in a traffic accident, had a stroke and subsequently could not work any longer, made a similar point. She spoke about the evidence that her husband

gave during his work capability assessment. She took down in shorthand everything that her husband said but, when they requested the report, they saw that it did not reflect what he said. That is a damning indictment of the work capability assessment process.

We heard from the witnesses that it would often be noted in reports that they arrived at the interview on time and were well dressed. That is a completely anodyne point. How could a disabled person be assessed as being fit for work because they turned up at the appointment time and were well dressed? That might lead us to assume that it would have been better if they had adopted a more tardy and slovenly attitude, which highlights the ridiculous nature of much of the work capability assessment system, as do the wider experiences of people going through the system.

It is absolutely right that the Scottish Parliament has a chance to report and highlight those concerns. Once again, I congratulate Kevin Stewart on providing us with that opportunity.

17:15

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I congratulate Kevin Stewart on securing this debate and on shining a light on the practice of work capability assessments. He is absolutely right to say that they are having a deeply disturbing impact on people in our constituencies. I join him in thanking the organisations that have provided briefings for this debate.

When discussing welfare reform, I always remember that David Cameron promised that the cuts would fall on those with the broadest shoulders, which I assumed would mean people such as his Cabinet of millionaires. However, the hardest hit are not those with the broadest shoulders; they are those who are among some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

I recall that, when work capability assessments and employment and support allowance were first introduced, there was broad support for the principles underlying the policy. We would all agree that the principle of helping someone to secure employment is reasonable. I am in no doubt about the benefits of work for the individual, for families and for society, and therefore I believe that, if someone is able to work, we should help them to do so. However, those who genuinely cannot work should not have to endure a chaotic shambles of a system that denies them dignity and makes them out to be scroungers, because nothing could be further from the truth. However, on that issue, we have a battle of hearts and minds to win in Scotland.

The system is so incompetent that, I understand, half of the decisions that are made

are overturned on appeal. That alone tells me that the system is not fit for purpose. Like Kevin Stewart, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the *Daily Record* on its campaign to highlight the problems that have been experienced by people across the country such as Crawford Leask, Tom Meikle, Janice Mills and Margaret Monaghan, whose stories demonstrate the indignity of the process and the incompetence of Atos, which is charged with carrying out the assessments. That is campaigning journalism at its best.

There are many people in my area who want to work, but they are not given the opportunity to do so or the support that they need in order to do so. I know of one young man with a learning disability whose dearest wish is to work but who is unlikely to be able to do so without a huge amount of support, given the nature of his condition. The work capability assessment would probably say that he is fit for work, because it is not very good at identifying those with disabilities that are not obvious. It focuses on physical disability and mobility but fails to recognise the real problems that are associated with things such as mental health, learning disabilities or autism. The systems are more about information technology than people. They do not recognise that someone who is disabled might have a progressive condition that means that they will have good days and bad days.

All of that is putting a huge strain on the voluntary sector and the advice services in particular. We know that Citizens Advice Scotland has reported a huge increase in case load and that it is struggling to meet the demand. I ask the Scottish Government to ensure, if it is at all possible, that the formula consequentialists that it has for this area are released to the voluntary sector as quickly as possible, because it is struggling to cope with the demand that is out there.

A postcode lottery is emerging, poverty is leading to destitution, some people are giving up because they are depressed and others are contemplating suicide, which I find quite distressing.

I know that the pilots that were run identified that there were problems and that a cross-party select committee highlighted those problems. Unfortunately, the coalition Government rolled out the contract in 2010 without taking on board those issues. It has also failed to apply financial penalties against Atos in 90 per cent of the cases in which it could have done so, for which it has been criticised by the National Audit Office. I understand what Kevin Stewart says, and I know that he is not a cheerleader for Atos, but there is a

problem with the contract and with the methods that are used.

The Scottish Government needs to review whether it is appropriate for it always to co-operate with Atos. I know that lots of disabled people were genuinely concerned when Nicola Sturgeon welcomed its sponsorship of the Commonwealth games, because they could not understand why she had done that.

This issue is not about independence. People are suffering now and I think that it is incumbent on this Parliament to alleviate that suffering if we can.

17:20

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I, too, congratulate my fellow SNP MSP Kevin Stewart on securing this debate on the important subject of the London Government's work capability assessment.

The box-ticking approach to the determination of disability was indeed, as Jackie Baillie rightly remembered, introduced under Labour when Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were in charge and it was they, of course, who awarded the contract for the assessments to Atos.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Annabelle Ewing: I want to make progress, not least because Ms Baillie overran her time by some 30 seconds.

The UK Tory-Liberal Government—I note that we do not have the benefit of any Liberal members for this debate but that we do have one Tory—has extended the Atos contract. It is a matter of fact that, via the DWP, the UK Government calls the shots on the parameters of the contract within which Atos is required to work, in terms of both the policy and the criteria to be employed. The DWP is of course the decision taker in respect of disability benefit claims. That is where the problem lies, because it is clear beyond any doubt that the system of box-ticking assessments to which successive Labour and Tory-Liberal London Governments have been so thirled is fundamentally flawed.

Sadly, this is not a mere arcane discussion of what appear to be very odd contracts indeed; rather, it is a debate that serves to highlight the deeply damaging impact on some of the most vulnerable members of society that the work capability assessments have already had in relation to Labour's ESA and will continue to have in relation to the new Tory-Liberal PIP, which is to be introduced next year.

We have heard in the debate of the experiences of some individuals. I, too, have received a number of inquiries, as I suspect every other member has, from constituents who are worried about the new welfare cuts. I cannot refer to the individuals in any detail because of issues concerning confidentiality, but for a detailed examination of all that is wrong with the current approach one need only read the *Official Report* of the Welfare Reform Committee's meeting of Tuesday 18 September, which has already been referred to. Committee members heard the powerful testimonies of Mr Norman Gray about his son, Mrs Janice Scott about her husband and Mr Henry Sherlock about his own situation.

I respectfully suggest that that should be essential reading for all members of the Parliament, for it is quite clear that no account is taken of the individual situation. Indeed, it is claimed that, in many instances, the individual is not even listened to and medical orthodoxies are turned on their head. That that approach is fundamentally flawed is witnessed by the fact that some 40 per cent of ESA appeals are successful, which is an astonishingly high figure.

In a speech of four minutes, it is impossible to convey the truly abhorrent nature of what is going on, but what is clear to me is that this inhumane system simply cannot be allowed to continue, for it misses the fundamental issue as far as disabled people are concerned. Mrs Scott said in evidence to our committee:

"Lots of disabled people can do lots of things, but they cannot do them consistently. They did not ask about anything like that at all."—[*Official Report, Welfare Reform Committee*, 18 September 2012; c 254.]

That says it all to me. The sooner we in Scotland take control over the welfare of our citizens, the better, so that we can restore dignity and fairness to the system. Roll on the 2014 referendum and a yes vote to end Tory rule over welfare in Scotland.

17:24

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I sincerely welcome the fact that Kevin Stewart has brought the matter of work capability assessments to the chamber. I enjoy my role on the Welfare Reform Committee although, as many members will realise, my role is slightly different from that of other members, as I am a representative of one of the governing parties at Westminster.

The specific issue before us is work capability assessments. Like other members of the committee, I have sat through many heart-wrenching stories. Nobody could fail to be moved by some of the stories that have been brought to the committee. However, it is important that we

address the issues regarding Atos in a specific way. Many of the stories that we have heard are what I would describe as anecdotal. I do not wish to use that word in a way that undermines the authenticity of or honesty behind the stories, but at present it is difficult to find empirical or statistical figures that allow us to say exactly what the problems are.

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: I will continue.

We are aware that there is a series of inconsistencies as well as a significant burden on the appeals process and a growing burden on the medical professionals who are required to support that process.

I believe that assessment is necessary. It is vital that we have an effective assessment process that is functional and can be relied on to produce evidence. At this stage, I am not convinced that the process that Atos is running is the relevant and fit process that is necessary. It is important that adequate support is provided for those who are in the process and that effective, reliable and quality advice is available to all those who are caught up in it. We need to assess whether that level of support is currently available.

We must have an assessment process, but we must have confidence in it. At this stage, confidence in the process has been undermined. The Scottish Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee has a key role in the current circumstances. We must take an objective and evidence-based approach and we must not repeat some of the mistakes that Atos has made, but simply in reverse. The Welfare Reform Committee has the opportunity to deliver the empirical evidence that is necessary to achieve the change that we all have as an objective.

I look forward to working with members of the committee and the Parliament to come to the appropriate conclusion and produce evidence that can be used to change the process from one in which few people, if any, have confidence to one that can continue with the confidence of all who are reliant on it.

17:28

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I join other members in thanking Kevin Stewart for bringing the incredibly important matter of work capability assessments before Parliament so that we can debate it and put some facts and figures on the record to show that there is evidence behind what we are saying.

I begin by echoing something that Kevin Stewart said. I remind members that we are talking about the work capability assessment as undertaken by Atos but that it is being done on behalf of the United Kingdom Department for Work and Pensions and on the basis of that department's contract, which was let in 2005 by the Labour Government. Atos is also working towards the Liberal Democrat-Conservative coalition's stated intention to cut the budget for welfare such as DLA by 20 per cent.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Fiona McLeod: I will not take Ms Baillie's intervention, as she did not take mine. That sounds a bit petty, does it not?

To remind members about the contract and Atos's position, I will quote an Atos spokesperson, who has said:

"Our trained doctors, nurses and physiotherapists use their clinical knowledge and apply the government's policy and criteria to each assessment."

That means the UK Government's policy and criteria.

When I read that, I thought, "That could not possibly happen here in Scotland, could it?" Well, I perhaps thought that until yesterday, before which I thought that the Scottish political consensus was for social justice for those in need of welfare reform.

To answer Alex Johnstone's claim that the stories about assessments are anecdotal and that evidence is needed, I will use some facts and figures from the evidence that was heard at the Health and Sport Committee when we first looked at welfare reform—members know that, as a former librarian, I like my facts and figures and evidence. We found that, in general, 40 per cent of appeals against an assessment are successful and that 69 per cent of those appeals are successful when someone is represented by, for example, a citizens advice bureau worker or a welfare rights officer. Clearly, if only 30 per cent of refusals stand on appeal, the system does not work.

If Alex Johnstone is looking for more evidence, he need look no further than the evidence that was presented last year to the Health and Sport Committee by organisations such as Citizens Advice Scotland and act now for autism. As a little extra, the former health librarian in me wants to remind members that case studies build towards an evidence base; evidence does not always have to be empirical. Case study is another term for anecdotal evidence.

We have talked about whether we can reveal certain peoples' experiences. I have 1,280

constituents who are in receipt of ESA, but there is one person that I can talk about quite happily and without breaking any confidences—that person is me.

I have been through the assessment process and I was found fit for work. I appealed the decision and my appeal was upheld. I was assessed because I was unable to work due to depression. Some of the things that happened in that assessment included being asked to pick up a pen. Jamie Hepburn used other examples, but that was mine. My mental health and depression did not prevent me from picking up a pen. I then had my stomach examined—I am not quite sure what that had to do with my mental health.

Jackie Baillie said that the systems are more about IT than people. My assessment was all about IT: the medic sitting behind the computer was only interested in the fact that his computer did not work.

The system is profoundly unfair and philosophically flawed, and it must be challenged by individuals and, collectively, by society. Ultimately, however, it is a political matter. If we want a socially just Scotland where such obscenities do not continue, then, as Annabelle Ewing said, there is a referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 and we can take charge of welfare in this country.

17:33

The Minister for Youth Employment (Angela Constance): I add my thanks to Kevin Stewart for bringing the motion to the chamber for debate. He gave a powerful and punchy contribution. All of us who know him know that he is never a man to mince his words.

Other members, including Jackie Baillie, Jamie Hepburn, Annabel Ewing and, most evocatively, Fiona McLeod brought more personal accounts; I say to Alex Johnstone that, yes, many of them are heart-wrenching.

We have heard the personal testimonies of those who are being unjustly and unfairly treated by the work capability assessment process. The process is clearly flawed when the DWP's own figures show that 40 per cent of appeals against being found fit for work are overturned—a figure that increases to 70 per cent when an individual is represented by an organisation such as Citizens Advice Scotland.

We also know that disabled people and their representatives are concerned about the reforms to the disability living allowance and the introduction of its replacement, the personal independence payment, and the potential knock-on effect on carers' allowances. Those concerns

about the proposals and the lack of detail about the changes have—understandably—caused a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty among many of our most vulnerable people, yet the UK Government continues to pursue the sick and the vulnerable and to take no account, it seems, of the reality for people who live with health conditions or disabilities.

The Scottish Government has made it clear that it wants a welfare system that is simpler, that makes work pay, and that lifts people out of poverty—a system that reflects Scotland's values. We must acknowledge that being in some sort of meaningful employment is good for the long-term health of most people of working age. Conversely, being out of work for prolonged periods has been shown to be harmful. Jackie Baillie made that point.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): Does the minister accept that it is the preferred choice of disabled people to work if they have the ability to work?

Angela Constance: I accept that 100 per cent. We should recognise that many people who have long-term health conditions or disabilities can and do continue to work, but those who are unable to work should be supported to enable them to lead dignified lives.

Professor Malcolm Harrington's independent reviews of the work capability assessment process have identified many failings. The DWP has accepted the findings and has said that it is committed to addressing them. However, despite implementing recommendations to improve the process, it is still not meeting its aims of providing a fair and effective assessment. I am advised that Professor Harrington had been commissioned to continue his work and that he issued a call for evidence, which would have been an ideal opportunity to look at those case studies—nothing is more powerful than the real-life testimonies of real people in real communities—but I am told that Professor Harrington has stepped down and that the DWP is considering options for his replacement and the terms of reference. I urge the DWP to pick up the pace, because the situation needs to be sorted out now.

Processes for reassessing people who are currently on benefits, such as the work capability assessment, need to be fair and transparent and must treat the individual with respect. They must also be able to distinguish between those who are genuinely disabled to the point of being unable to work, and those who might genuinely believe that they cannot work, but could if they had the right support. Those latter people might have been out of work for a long time and might need significant support if they are to adjust to the prospect of working again. They should not be punished for

that, but it is difficult to see how such people will not be punished given the massive £2.5 billion cuts in welfare that will come our way by 2015. Housing benefit will be cut by £100 million to £150 million annually, and the changes that will happen when DLA becomes PIP could result in £250 million being taken from some of our most vulnerable people.

Jackie Baillie: We are all aware that advice services are critical at times of substantial change. I know that the Government could provide budget consequential to advice services. Could it do that quickly?

Angela Constance: I am sure that Mr Swinney looks at everything in the round, and it is important to recognise that the Scottish Government funds programmes such as making justice work and citizens advice direct. Next week, we will debate the employability refresh: we want to put people who have disabilities or who might need additional support at the heart of that.

I know that time is pressing, but I want to focus on Atos. The Scottish Government shares concerns about the work capability assessments as they are administered by Atos on behalf of the DWP, but we need to be clear that Atos delivers within the terms and conditions of a contract with the DWP. It is not making decisions about benefits eligibility and it is not making policy decisions.

Atos is, however, responsible for the technology and the assessments. As a former mental health officer, I am quite appalled by the quality of assessment that some personal testimonies have revealed. It is quite clear to me that it is not possible to contract for such work on the cheap, and that we need a range of suitably qualified professionals who have the skills and expertise that are necessary for dealing with all the varied needs of people who receive health-related benefits.

Kevin Stewart: In the tender documents, it says that Atos employees should have seven and a half days' training before they start doing assessments. Does the minister agree that seven and a half days' training is certainly not enough to allow those people to deal with some of the complex cases that they face day to day?

Angela Constance: As a former mental health officer and front-line social worker, I have some insight through knowing how long it took me to get to grips with the vast array of mental health problems—never mind learning disabilities. A high proportion of people who claim DLA are learning disabled. The many vulnerable people who turn up for work capability assessments and express their desire and willingness to work—particularly those who are learning-disabled citizens—need particular understanding, support and coaching to

allow them to progress towards and into work. There is no point in setting vulnerable individuals up to fail.

I know that time is marching on, so I will close by saying that I am very grateful for members' contributions. I commend the work of the Welfare Reform Committee, CAS, all the disability organisations and even the *Daily Record* for shining a light on people's personal testimonies, which should never be dismissed for being anecdotal, given how difficult it is for vulnerable individuals to step forward.

I am deeply worried that the Scottish Government's good work in supporting vulnerable individuals through our social wage initiatives will be undermined by the scale of UK Government cuts, austerity and welfare reforms. We need all the levers of tax and benefits if we are to realise the ambition that we have of having a welfare state that is simple and fair, and which lifts people out of poverty.

Meeting closed at 17:42.

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